

First-Century Jews and Twentieth-Century Muslims

For the last twelve years we have been observing what God is doing among Muslims at the close of the twentieth century. We have been amazed at the parallels between the emerging Muslim believing community of today and the believing Jewish community of the first century. These parallels are very instructive as we wrestle with how Muslim background believers desire to express their faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior.

by Richard Jameson and Nick Scalevich

Dawud lifted his eyes and examined the group gathered in his home. Ordinary! That was the only word to describe these men. None of them could be called wealthy or brilliant. Yet, when they gathered together to pray, to study the teachings of Jesus, and to share a simple meal together, they sensed a power that surpassed explanation.

Each of these men had been raised in religious Muslim families. The idea that Jesus could be God or that the Messiah could be crucified had been unthinkable to them. However, each of them had come face to face with Jesus' claims about himself. They and their families had decided to become his followers.

It never occurred to Dawud and his friends that they were "changing religions." They continued to be proud of their religious heritage. When the men of their village gathered for prayer, they joined them. They fasted and gave to the poor. In fact, Dawud and his friends thought of themselves as the true adherents of their religion. Little did they know that their expression of faith would be at the center of a missiological controversy.

Was Dawud a first-century Jew or a twentieth-century Muslim? Is it appropriate for a Muslim background believer to follow the example of his first-century Jewish brothers in Christ? May a Muslim background believer express his faith in the Messiah in the context of the Islamic religion? Is it acceptable for him to continue to join the Muslim community in prayers at the mosque? Is it legitimate for him to continue calling himself a "Muslim"?

For the last twelve years we have been observing what God is doing among Muslims at the close of the twentieth century. We have been amazed at the parallels between the emerging Muslim believing community of today and the Palestinian believing Jewish community of the first century. These parallels are very instructive as we wrestle with how Muslim background believers express their faith in Christ.

A Narrow Legalistic Perversion of Truth

Some argue, "How can you compare Judaism of the first century with Islam of the twentieth century? The former was a religion received from the true God, whereas the latter is not."

The New Testament reveals great similarities between Judaism as practiced in the first century and modern Islam. The pillars of Islamic religion and the pillars of Islamic faith parallel basic tenets of first-century Judaism. For example, Jesus speaks directly about three of the five pillars in the sermon on the mount: giving, zakat (Mt. 6:2-4); prayers, salat (Mt. 6:5-7); and fasting, sawm (Mt. 6:16-18). The first half of the Islamic confession echoes the Jewish Shema (Deut. 6:4). Jews also made regular pilgrimages to their Holy City (Acts 5:11), as do Muslims today to theirs. The basic tenets of faith are also common to both religions: Belief in One God, angels, Holy Writings, prophets, and final judgment based on a man's deeds. Furthermore, in Judaism, as in Islam today, the religion had often degenerated into either an arrogant legalism or a tool for maintaining political control.

Jesus gave the following commentary on first-century Jews,

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.
—Jn. 8:44 (NIV)

This commentary is equally appropriate for twentieth-century Islam. Yet the Eternal Word of God found it necessary to be made like His brothers in all things, but without sin (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). He entered the world as a light in the darkness. To the twentieth-century Muslim who has become his follower, he also says, “As the Father has sent me, in the same manner I send you” (Jn. 20:21).

As followers of Jesus, Jewish believers created a new identity for themselves within their old religious identity. The Palestinian believers clearly perceived themselves to be Jews both ethnically and religiously. Some thirty-five years after Pentecost, James reports that “thousands of Jews have believed, and

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all of them are zealous for the law” (Acts 21:30). Various sects of Judaism interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures in a variety of ways. In spite of their heterodoxy, obedience to the Law produced a certain orthopraxy that united all Jews in a common religion. The Jewish followers of Jesus, who zealously kept the law, maintained their right to be called Jews both ethnically and religiously.

As Jewish believers, they adopted for themselves a new self-identity within Judaism. They called themselves, “The Way.” Although Jewish leaders perceived this to be an heretical cult, they did not perceive it to be another religion. Paul’s defense before Felix is instructive. He stated,

However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets. —Acts 24:14

Paul is identifying himself as a Jew to other Jews. He will not even concede that he is a part of “a sect,” though he acknowledges Jewish leaders think of Jesus’ followers in this way. It would be more accurate to say that Paul and his Jewish background believing friends saw themselves as the only proper expression of Judaism.

Similarly, twentieth-century Muslims are forging an identity for themselves within Islam. Over thirty Muslim families, in two strongly Islamic areas, have become “followers of *Isa* (Jesus).” Some call themselves “followers of the Straight Way.” They feel, live, and experience a new power. The power of the gospel has gripped their lives, making them very different from their Muslim neighbors. They have believed that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and rose from the dead. They now view Jesus as the incarnate eternal Word of Allah who became man. Not only is their theology different, their lives are different. They experience and demonstrate a new and vibrant love, joy, peace, and patience. They have become “new creations.” However, most of them never considered changing their religion. Some of their leaders, who also became followers of the Straight Way, taught them to remain in their Islamic heritage. After all, the Qur’an teaches that followers of *Isa* are Muslim (5:111). They are new creations within their old religious environment.

New Faith Within Traditional Forms

Early believers continued to worship the Lord as Jews. Peter and John went “to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon”(Acts 3:1). Acts 10:9 shows Peter going to the roof to pray at the time of noon prayers. It appears that the early believers continued to observe the times of prayer as practiced by the Jewish community at large.

They also worshiped in their usual place of prayer, “day by day continuing with one mind *in the temple*” (Acts 2:46). Peter and John also went “to the temple” (Acts 3:1). In this very same temple priests were daily offering “up sacrifices first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people” (Heb. 7:27).

Jewish believers knew they were saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as Gentiles were (Acts 15:11). Imagine the confusion their worshiping in the temple could have caused. Believers who had trusted in Jesus’ one and final sacri-

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rice for sins were worshiping alongside Jews who were still trusting in daily temple sacrifices for their atonement. They worshipped God in the same place where the blood of these daily sacrifices was being offered.

Could such a practice lead to syncretism? In some cases it must have. Indeed, the book of Hebrews was written in part to address such syncretistic belief (Heb. 10:1-18). However, twenty-five years after Pentecost, the community of Jewish believers was still maintaining their place in the temple. Their leadership actually requested Paul, the great missionary to Gentiles, to make offerings in the temple as a testimony to the Jews of Jerusalem (Acts 21:23-26). It is safe to assume that the benefit of maintaining a testimony to Jews from within the Jewish community outweighed the danger of syncretism in their minds.

Mr. Ali, an *imam* (priest), has become a follower of the Straight Way. His new faith and character is now vibrant with the Spirit of Christ. Daily he attends his duties at the mosque and leads those who come to perform *salat* (ritual prayer). When Mr. Ali preaches, he often quotes from the *Injil* (New Testament). Many who come to the mosque are not yet followers of the Straight Way, but at least fourteen families have confessed faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and many others are very interested in understanding these new teachings from Mr. Ali. All of these new followers still worship Allah through *salat*, but as one of the new believers stated, "Now I truly enjoy my times in *salat*. These times of prayer and worship are no longer an obligation but a joyful time with my Savior."

All fourteen families continue to participate in Muslim holidays and activities. Is there a danger of syncretism? Certainly! But like Jewish believers of the first century, these twentieth-century Muslim believers feel that the opportunity to be lights amidst the darkness outweighs this risk.

One Body, Two Communities

In order for Jewish believers to maintain their position within Judaism, they lived under the Jewish law and apart from Gentiles. James reports that they were "zealous for the Law." As such, they had to keep their distance from "unclean" Gentiles. In so doing, the early Jewish believers were following the example of Jesus. As far as we know, Jesus never entered a Gentile home. He never violated the Jewish dietary laws. He lived his life as member of a people who had by and large separated them-

selves from Gentiles.

Paul's writings reveal two distinct categories for the body of Christ: First the Jews, then the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16; 3:29; 9:24). Paul clearly perceived that the single Body of Christ was made up of members from both groups when they put their faith in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). However, to maintain a credible witness to unbelievers from their respective communities, many chose to be one in Spirit yet separate in almost all aspects of everyday life. To reach those living under the Law, the Jewish background believer lived as though he was under the Law, all the while knowing Christ had freed him from the Law (1 Cor. 9:19,20; cf. Fisher 1985). Paul wrote,

Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised [i.e. a Jew] when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised [i.e. a Gentile]. Was a man uncircumcised [i.e. a Gentile] when he was called? He should not be circumcised [i.e. a Jew]. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. —1 Cor. 7:17-20 [comments mine.]

In order for a Palestinian Jew to “retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God had called him,” he had to separate himself from “unclean” Gentiles, at least to some degree. Similarly, many twentieth-century Muslim believers are finding it necessary to maintain their distance from the traditional Christian community in order to stay within their Muslim context. Christian dietary practices, dress, and worship styles make it difficult for Muslim believers to freely fellowship with them. To do so would destroy their credibility in their own community, as it would have for first-century Jewish believers.

Ahmed, a leader of a Muslim community of believers, begged a Christian pastor not to tell other Christians about his movement: “We are seeing new people join us on a regular basis. If the [traditional] church finds out about us, they will want to come see. That will destroy everything we’ve built. Please stay away.”

Muslim background believers are forming the vanguard of a new evangelistic thrust into the Muslim world. How will we respond? Will we affirm them? Will we encourage them as they strive to be and do to what God has called them to be and do?

Sharing the Gospel

Among both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth, we observe a boldness to proclaim the gospel, beginning with the testimony of the writings held to be authoritative by the unbelieving community, and progressing to a fuller proclamation of the person and work of Christ. In Acts 2, Peter preaches Christ’s death and resurrection with quotations from the prophet Joel and Psalms. In Acts 3, he preaches repentance based on Deuteronomy 18 and Genesis 22.

Paul followed this pattern of ministry to the Gentiles. As long as his audience was primarily Jewish, he relied heavily on the Old Testament Scriptures. However, as soon as he found himself in a context where the Jewish Scriptures were not thought to be authoritative, he laid his scrolls aside. In Lystra Paul based his message upon God’s revelation of himself in creation, seasons, rainfall, and growing crops (Acts 14:14-18). When standing before the philosophers of the Areopagus, he quotes not from the Old Testament but from two poet-philosophers (Bruce, pg 357)

In many different villages, Muslim “followers of the Straight Way” often sit and share their faith in Christ with friends in the market place, mosque or neighborhood. Most of these men have never been trained in any methods of outreach, they just share what they have read in the *Injil* (New Testament) or experienced in their lives since believing in Christ. Mr. Yusuf visits relatives in a strong Muslim area once a month. Shortly after he placed his faith in Jesus, the Straight Way, he visited relatives and began sharing the new power he had through Christ. After many hours of discussion and many visits from Mr. Yusuf, four men have also trusted Christ and are now studying *the Injil*. One of these men in turn started his own study group with five others.

Reinterpretation of the Holy Writings

Both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth defend their faith with their traditional Holy Book. Moreover, both communities radically reinterpret these writings based upon their knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. The teachings of the apostles contain hundreds of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. Rarely, if ever, would their interpretations of these passages have met with the approval of the Jewish religious leadership of their day. Ironically, New Testament writers often used the same hermeneutical methodology, *midrash*, as did the Jewish leadership of their day (Ellis 1978:151-162), but they arrived at some very different conclusions. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they found Jesus and his church prophesied throughout the Old Testament. Most Jewish rabbis did not see the same fulfillment of Joel 2 in the events of Pentecost. Similarly, most scribes did not agree with Peter’s use of Psalm 16 to prove the Messiah had to be raised from the dead. If Jesus or the early disciples ascribed to the practice of only allowing the religious elite to determine the meaning of their Holy Scriptures, much of what we call the New Testament would not have been written.

Rashid was responsible for preparing the sermons preached in all the mosques in his region. At first he was shocked to hear Rahmat and his friends teaching new ideas from the Qur’an. Rahmat taught Jesus was the eternal Word of Allah (Qu’ran 4:171), born of a virgin, killed and raised again. They quoted Surah 19:33 from the

Qur'an, "So Peace is on me the day I was born the day that I die and the Day that I shall be raised up to life (again)"! These "common, uneducated men" now called themselves "followers of the Straight Way," the very "Way" Rashid was obligated to seek in prayer seventeen times a day! They explained to Rashid that according to the Qur'an (5:68), they are not of the true religion even a little bit unless they "stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord." They explained that this verse was referring to the Bible. Also, these men boldly declared, "The *Injil* (New Testament) was not falsified as taught in the mosque since ' . . . In the life of the present and in the hereafter: No change can there be in the words of Allah' (Qur'an 10:64; 6:115)." Many dozens of verses from the Qur'an were interpreted in a new light to Rashid. Looking at the Qur'an through the lens of the *Injil* was a new experience. These verses prompted Rashid to begin reading the *Injil* until he too trusted Christ as his sacrifice.

Persecution of Muslim Believers

It would have been naïve for Jewish believers to assume they could have avoided persecution by remaining Jewish. Jewish believers faced two types of persecution. The first involved arrests, interrogation, and floggings (Acts 4,5). This opposition came because Jewish leadership perceived the apostles to be teaching an aberrant form of Judaism. The apostles were claiming that the crucified Christ had risen from the dead and as such had demonstrated that he was the promised Messiah. Jewish leaders warned and flogged the apostles, but then let them go (Acts 5:40). Though persecuted, the Palestinian believing community was able to stay within the Jewish fold primarily because it continued to worship at the Jewish temple, thereby honoring what was sacred to Jewish leadership. The fact that thousands of Jewish believers remained zealous for the law twenty-five years after Pentecost (Acts 21:20) testifies to their success in maintaining their place within Judaism. When believers began to face this type of persecution, their first and foremost prayer request was not that they would be protected from harm, but that they would be bold to speak the Word (Acts 4:29).

It wasn't the first time Mr. Alim had come to the house physically beaten for the sake of his Savior. However, this was the worst beating he had taken. Black and blue, the whole left side of his face was swollen from the pummeling. Mr. Alim had once again paid the price for sharing his faith with a group of Muslim men. It all started a few months earlier, when a few seekers had gathered with him to study about Jesus from the Qur'an. After a few meetings, he began teaching from the Holy *Injil* (New Testament). Through the *Injil* they were coming to understand more fully the person who they called the Word of Allah. During one of these meetings, suddenly a man burst in to the room, accused Mr. Alim of being the anti-Christ, and began to beat him mercilessly. They chased him from the village and told him never to return.

A few weeks later Mr. Alim came to the house again. His face mostly healed, he excitedly shared about another group of seekers he had found. Over the next few weeks he shared the gospel with the local witch doctor, a man known for his powerful black magic. This man became a follower of Jesus and renounced his black power. Seeing the dramatic change in the witch doctor's life, two village mosque leaders

decided to accept the great sacrifice provided by Allah. Many continue to come from surrounding villages to learn from these three men about *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah), and the number of believers continues to increase.

In the early church, the second level of persecution began with Stephen and was characterized by imprisonment and martyrdom. F. F. Bruce contends that the intense Jewish persecution against the church was focused on the Hellenistic believing community, primarily due to their separation from and criticism of the temple (1985:648, 649). In contrast to the Hebraic Jewish believers, the teachings of Hellenistic Jewish believers was a cancer to be cut out and destroyed. Stephen was stoned to death. Saul organized raids on towns throughout Palestine, attempting to eliminate their heresy.

In our context, Muslim followers of Jesus who continue to honor their religious traditions, the mosque, prayers, fasting, and the Muslim holidays are still called to give an account for their teaching about Jesus. In most cases they have been able to defend themselves from the Qur'an and were released to continue their witness in the community. However, Muslims who have left the Islamic fold to "become Christians" face persecution at a different level. Some have been

killed. Most are evicted from their homes, divorced by spouses, and fired from their jobs. Most flee to a large city, become members of churches and marry Christian background spouses. They grow in the Lord but have virtually no witness to their own people.

Building Each Other Up in Small Group Settings

As members of a new community within an older established community, healthy interpersonal relations quickly emerge as essential for the life of the group. In Acts 2 and 4 we see small groups gathered for prayer and mutual encouragement; they learned from each other and shared meals together. Within a few years, James, the Lord's brother, emerged as the leader of this community (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). James begins his letter admonishing Jewish readers to receive trials and persecutions as the building blocks of faith. He then devotes the bulk of his epistle to building and maintaining a community of mutual love and compassion. The extraordinary unity of these believers was attractive to the community at large (Acts 2:47; 5:13b,14).

Mr. Nur became a follower of Christ, the Straight Way. He shared the testimony of the Qur'an concerning the *Taurat*, *Zabur* and *Injil* (Bible) with his good friend Latif, who had seen a remarkable change in his life. This, along with the verses from the Qur'an, convinced Latif to begin studying the Bible. They invited four Muslim friends to join them. Almost daily they studied the Bible together, and soon all six were following Christ. The group grew to almost forty, then broke into five groups that met at different times of the week for prayer and Bible study. These "cell groups" decided to meet at times that did not compete with

mosque activities. Deep love, concern, and mutual support typify each one of these groups.

Miracles in the Name of *Isa*

Both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth gained credibility through miracles. From the linguistic miracle of Pentecost to healings and angelic jail breaks, the miraculous placed a hedge of protection around the early Jewish believers (Acts 3:6-8; 5:12, 17-20). Even the Sanhedrin found it difficult to argue with the miracles that accompanied the faith of early Jewish believers, "But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say" (Acts 4:14).

Asgar had long been involved in black magic. He had become crazy over the last few months, possessed by evil spirits. His friends brought him to four Muslim shamans to free Asgar from the spirits, but his condition only worsened. Finally, one Muslim man said in desperation, "Let's bring him to Mr. Ghafur. He is part of the new sect, the followers of *al-Masih* (the Christ)." As a last resort, they brought Asgar to Mr. Ghafur, who casts out the demons in the name of *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). Asgar was miraculously freed. To this day, he is "clothed and in his right mind." Three other demon-possessed men were then brought to Mr. Ghafur, who prayed for them and saw them released from bondage as well. This so impressed the leader of the mosque in Mr. Ghafur's village, he too put his faith in Christ's sacrifice.

Conclusion

The faith of Palestinian Jewish believers described in the book of Acts has given twentieth-century Muslim believers a newfound freedom in the way they express their faith in Jesus. Like early Jewish believers, they are forming their own communities within Islam, and learning to love one another in small home fellowships. They are boldly proclaiming the gospel by beginning with a radical reinterpretation of the Qur'an as it bears witness to Christ, and then moving to a fuller testimony of the person and work of Christ from the Bible. Although they continue to face persecution from the Muslim majority, they have maintained their witness as religious insiders by righteous living accompanied by demonstrations of God's miraculous power. These Muslim background believers are forming the vanguard of a new evangelistic thrust into the Muslim world. How will we respond? Will we pray for them? Will we support them in love? Will we affirm the unique place in life that the

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Lord assigned to them in His Kingdom, encouraging them as they strive to remain where God has called them? Or will we brand them as syncretistic heretics, and demand that they conform to the ranks of more traditional and Western Christianity?

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Richard Jameson and Nick Scalevich have been helping to develop communities of Muslim background followers of Jesus in various Asian countries over the last twelve years.

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