

Jesus the Jew

By David Feddes

The Christmas season is a joyous time for many people, but if you're Jewish, Christmas may feel awkward. It may feel like someone else's holiday, not yours. Christmas is all around you; you can't avoid it; and yet you don't feel part of it. You're in a minority. You're surrounded by a majority of people who make a big deal of something which may mean very little to you.

At the heart of Christmas is the birth of Jesus, and many Jewish people see Jesus as the founder of somebody else's religion—a religion for *goyim*, non-Jews, Gentiles. What's more, at certain points of history, some of those Gentiles have done bad things to Jewish people in the name of Jesus. So if you're Jewish, how could you possibly feel positive about Jesus' birth? Wouldn't it be a betrayal of your identity to celebrate the founder of a religion for Gentiles? And wouldn't it be an insult to your own Jewish heritage to adopt the same beliefs as those who have sometimes been brutal to Jews in the past?

The very idea of Jewish Christmas might seem ridiculous. It's understandable that as a Jewish person you might feel this way about Christmas and Jesus. Ironically, though, this is a complete reversal of the situation at the original Christmas. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus was born, it was easier for Jews than for Gentiles to come to him. It wasn't a matter of Jews giving up their heritage to honor the founder of a Gentile religion; it was a matter of Gentiles leaving their homes and journeying to the land of Israel to honor a Jewish infant.

One of the most famous Christmas stories in the Bible is the story of the Magi, or wise men. These wise men were Gentiles who saw a special star and traveled far from eastern lands until they came to the land of Judah. When they arrived in Jerusalem, the first thing the wise men said was, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2). This newborn child had significance for people of all nations, but the wise men knew that this child had a special place in the Jewish nation. It's ironic, then, that 2,000 years after Gentile wise men traveled so far to honor a Jewish baby and spoke of Jesus as "King of the Jews," it would now seem odd to speak of Jewish Christmas.

King of the Jews

What is Christmas if not Jewish? Jesus wasn't born into a Gentile family; he was born into a Jewish family. He was the son of a Jewish mother, he was circumcised as a Jew when he was eight days old, he was raised in a Jewish home, he grew up in a Jewish town, he attended a Jewish synagogue, and he celebrated festivals at the Jewish temple of God in Jerusalem. Jesus was Jewish through and through.

When the wise men went looking for the newborn baby, they didn't set out for a Gentile nation; they headed for the land of Israel. They didn't travel to the city of Rome or Lagos or Beijing or New York; they traveled to the city of Jerusalem and then to the village of Bethlehem. They didn't ask the whereabouts of the king of the British or the king of the Armenians or the king of the Ibo or the king of the Russians. They asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?"

Today we could ask that same question: "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" Most paintings of Jesus don't look very Jewish. Much talk about Jesus does not indicate his Jewishness. In some people's minds, a Jewish Christmas sounds like an oxymoron. Jesus' birth is thought to be something for Gentiles to celebrate, not Jews. Many Gentiles

overlook Jesus' Jewish identity, and many Jews think Jesus isn't for Jews at all. But Christmas marks the birth of a Jewish baby into a Jewish family, fulfilling promises God made to the Jewish people.

How could Christmas come to be thought of as a totally non-Jewish event? How did we lose the King of the Jews? How could Jesus become non-Jewish in the eyes of so many? When Gentiles don't see the Jewishness of Jesus, they are missing a vital reality. When Jews don't think Jesus is one of them and that his birth ought to be ignored by them, they are missing out on the greatest Jew of all. We need to ask with renewed urgency, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?"

Back when Jesus was born, Jewish shepherds only had to go to a nearby stable to find Jesus, while Gentile wise men had to travel an enormous distance to the land of Judah in order to see him. Going to Jesus was easier for Jews than for Gentiles. Today, though, the situation seems to be reversed. Many Jewish people feel awkward at Christmas time and feel Jesus is foreign to them, while Gentiles think of Jesus as one of them and may not see any significance in the fact that Jesus was born Jewish.

The Bible, however, strongly emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus. When Jesus was born, the wise men called him the "King of the Jews." When Jesus was nailed to a cross by Roman soldiers, "above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Matthew 27:37). Jesus was called "King of the Jews" at his birth and at his death, and between his birth and his death, Jesus lived as a Jew among Jews.

Jesus was born in the Jewish town of Bethlehem and grew up in the Jewish town of Nazareth. All of Jesus' early followers were Jewish. All twelve apostles were Jewish. The women who assisted Jesus and the apostles were Jewish. Jesus did much of his teaching in Jewish synagogues and in the Jewish temple. People often addressed Jesus as "Rabbi," the Jewish term for a religious teacher or mentor. One of Jesus' first followers said to him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel" (John 1:49). Jesus' Jewishness is not a minor footnote; it is a major emphasis in the Bible's portrait of him.

A Jew For Gentiles

Why make such a big deal of Jesus' Jewishness? Well, it's important for Jewish people to know that Jesus is one of them, rather than being blocked from him by a barrier of misunderstanding. It's also important for Gentiles to take seriously the Jewishness of Jesus.

If you're a Gentile Christian, you might say, "I'm not Jewish. Why should the Jewishness of Jesus matter to me? What really matters is that he was human like me and that he came to save people of all nationalities. The fact that he was Jewish is just a footnote." But it's not just a minor matter. It's very important for the way you relate to Jewish people as well as for the way you relate to Jesus.

Historically, some Gentiles ignored the fact that Jesus and all his first followers were Jews, and the result was horrible: persecution of Jewish people and even mass murder. They spoke of Jews as Christ killers and claimed God wanted Jews to be killed. If the persecutors of Jews had focused less on the fact that some Jews helped to kill Jesus and had focused instead on the fact that Jesus himself was Jewish, they would have been less bigoted against Jews and less likely to mistreat them. If they had kept emphasizing that the first Christians and apostles and New Testament writers were Jewish, they would have seen that God's blessing to the Gentiles came by way of the Jews, and they would have prayed for God's ancient people rather than

persecuting them. If they had taken Hebrew Scripture as seriously as Jesus did—he said “Scripture cannot be broken”—they would have taken to heart God’s words to Israel, “Whoever touches you touches the apple of my eye” (Zechariah 2:8), and they would have trembled to harm a people chosen and precious to God.

Some say the New Testament itself is anti-Semitic, but that’s nonsense. The New Testament is written by Jewish people and much of it is addressed to Jewish readers—it’s pro-Jewish, not anti-Semitic. Some say the New Testament is anti-Semitic because it says Jewish people helped crucify Jesus, but that’s just a historical fact. The New Testament also says that Roman officials and soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross, but that doesn’t make the New Testament anti-Italian. It is simply saying what happened. Is the film *Braveheart* anti-Scottish because it shows some cowardly Scottish officials betraying William Wallace? Of course not. Wallace himself was Scottish. Likewise, the New Testament shows some Jewish officials arranging Jesus’ death, but Jesus himself was Jewish. A book written by Jews and about Jews is going to have some Jewish villains, but all the heroes are also Jewish, including the main hero, Jesus himself. A book which portrays a Jew as the Son of God and Savior of the world is hardly anti-Jewish. Indeed, it is a powerful remedy against anti-Semitism. Taking to heart the Jewishness of Jesus is important for the way Gentile Christians relate to Jews.

It’s also important for the way Gentiles relate to the Lord. The most basic Jewish statement of faith, the Shema, declares, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). There is not one God for Jews and another for non-Jews. There are not many different gods but just one Creator and Lord of heaven and earth. The God of the Israelites, the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who worked through Moses and Deborah, David and Esther, is the only God there is. This God singled out the Israelite people and revealed himself to them in special and miraculous ways that were unlike his dealings with any other nation. The one and only God set Israel apart to be the people through whom he would bring blessing and salvation to all the nations of the earth. When Jesus came, he did not represent a new god; he came among the Jews representing the God of Israel, the one true God.

This one God has a plan for history and for the world that is one continuous, unfolding program, not a jumbled assortment of fits and starts. The fact that Jesus was Jewish and not of some other nationality shows the continuity of God’s plan. Once God chose the Jews as the focus of his special revelation, he also determined that his ultimate revelation and salvation would be born among the Jews and not in some other nation. As Jesus himself once put it, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). It was only fitting that the one whose name means salvation would be born Jewish. The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua, or Joshua, which mean *the Lord saves*. Yeshua’s—that is, Jesus’—birth into a Jewish family was in keeping with the unified, continuous work of God in unfolding his plan of salvation among the Jewish people.

Jesus’ Jewishness is also important in maintaining the continuity between Scripture written before Jesus’ coming and Scripture written after his coming. Followers of Jesus often speak of the Bible in two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament consists of the books of Moses and the prophets and other sacred writings from before the time of Jesus. The New Testament consists of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and of letters written by Jesus’ apostles to further explain the significance of Jesus.

When followers of Jesus speak of Old Testament and New Testament, the word “old” does not mean that the Old Testament part of the Bible is outdated or obsolete. Jesus’ followers

do not reject the Hebrew Scriptures which God gave the Jews before Jesus was born; they embrace these Old Testament Scriptures, as Jesus himself did. Jesus gave the strongest possible endorsement of Old Testament Scripture when he said, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). He said of the Old Testament, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

In the first few decades after Jesus returned to heaven, the Lord inspired the apostles to produce additional sacred writings, which eventually became the New Testament, but these new books did not contradict the older Scriptures or make them obsolete. The New Testament books brought Holy Scripture to completion and showed the fullness of God’s plan which had begun to unfold in the older writings. Certain ceremonies and sacrifices and ritual practices of the Old Testament are no longer required since Jesus has fulfilled them in the sacrifice of himself on the cross, but reading about these things is instructive still today for understanding what Jesus has done on behalf of Jews and Gentiles.

Gentiles who ignore Jesus’ Jewishness tend to make the huge mistake of paying too little attention to God’s indispensable revelation in the Old Testament. They also misunderstand much in the New Testament if they forget that those writings were all produced by Jewish authors and portray Jesus as King of the Jews and the fulfillment of God’s promises to his chosen people. In order to know God’s oneness, God’s ways, and God’s Word better, Gentile readers of the Bible must be willing to ask as they study Scripture, “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?”

A Jew for Jews

By the same token, Jewish people must be willing to ask the same question. Some Jews are serious about Moses, the prophets, and the writings, and they expect God to send a Messiah to rescue and rule his people. If you’re a Jewish person who thinks this way, won’t you at least ask the question whether Jesus--Yeshua, the child born in Bethlehem, the rabbi from Nazareth--just might be the promised Messiah of the Jews?

Maybe you’re a Jewish person who doesn’t have much religious interest at all. Your ethnic Jewishness may be more important to your identity than Scripture or God. Don’t you think it might be wise to find out what the ancient Scripture says? Isn’t it narrowminded just to assume that these writings are obsolete or that God is irrelevant? And if you do start to take an interest in Scripture and in God, won’t you at least think about the possibility that someone who was called King of the Jews at birth and was called the King of the Jews at his death just might be of significance for Jews still today?

I know, this can be hard for a Jewish person even to consider. How can you see Jesus as anything but the founder of a religion for Gentiles? The real, historic Jesus was so very Jewish, but 2,000 years of history have made him seem utterly alien to many Jews. At times people calling themselves followers of Jesus have viciously persecuted Jewish people. This grim history has made many Jewish people feel that Jesus is utterly foreign to them and that Jesus is not good news but bad news.

Along with that history of persecution, there has developed a hardening and an almost irrational resistance to Jesus within some Jewish communities. In some Jewish families and communities, you can be an agnostic or an atheist and still be considered Jewish, but if you believe in Jesus as your Messiah, you will be denounced as one who has rejected your Jewishness. What sense does that make? How can a person reject the God of Israel and the

Scriptures and remain Jewish, while another person trusts the God of Israel and the Scriptures and believes in the Jewish rabbi Jesus--Yeshua--as the Messiah, and yet is considered non-Jewish?

It may be claimed that if a Jew believes in Jesus, he is giving up his Jewishness to become a Gentile, but that's not true. It would be more accurate to say that whenever a Gentile believes in Jesus, he becomes part of God's Israel. Jesus is King of the Jews. According to Romans 11:17-24 (written by Rabbi Paul, who had been a pupil of Rabbi Gamaliel), God established the Jewish people as the root and trunk of his chosen community, and everyone else is a branch grafted by faith onto God's Israel.

Despite the historical and social obstacles that have arisen between Jews and Jesus, there is no sound reason why Jewish people should not consider the possibility that Jesus is indeed their Messiah, and there is no sound reason why followers of Jesus should stop asking Jewish friends to consider that possibility. Certain churches (either from sensitivity to Jews and regret for past persecutions, or else because of a loss of confidence in Jesus as the one and only Savior) have decided that it's unnecessary and perhaps even wrong to invite Jewish people to follow Jesus. They don't want to offend their Jewish friends, and they assume Jews can have a good relationship to God without Jesus. But that is a terrible mistake. Jesus is for Jews, not just for Gentiles, and it is important for followers of Jesus to keep making that clear. Saying that Jews don't need Jesus denigrates the King of the Jews and deprives Jews of the chance to know their rightful ruler.

God told Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (Genesis 28:14, see also 12:3, 26:4). Salvation would come through the Jews, and especially through a promised King of the Jews. In the prophecy of Jeremiah, God said, "I will raise up ... a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety." When the angel Gabriel told a Jewish girl named Miriam, or Mary, that she would give birth to the Messiah, Mary responded with a beautiful song of praise to God. Her song ended with these words: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (Luke 1:54-55). Mary's baby, the King of the Jews, was God's way of keeping his ancient promises to the patriarchs and prophets of the Jewish nation.

The King Enthroned

The God of Israel is a promise-keeping God, and he is also a holy, just, and almighty God. Some who ignore Jesus' Jewishness end up thinking that although the God of the Old Testament commands obedience and punishes sin, the God of Jesus is nothing but niceness and sentimental good feelings. But Jesus, as King of the Jews, upholds the holiness and justice of the God of Israel.

Jesus was born into the human family and died in the place of disobedient sinners so that we could be saved through faith in him. His love and forgiveness are wonderful, but that does not mean that those who remain unrepentant and unchanged can just go along merrily in their sin. Jesus rose from the dead in power, and he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. The King of the Jews came the first time to bring forgiveness, and the king is coming again to judge the world in justice. The New Testament teaching of Jesus' second coming and the final judgment are in line with Old Testament prophecies to Israel of a king who would reign in justice.

Do you find all of this hard to believe? It may seem strange that just one person, born into a Jewish family and executed near Jerusalem, could hold the key to the future of the world and the future of every individual. Then again, it may also seem strange that God would choose one wanderer named Abraham and his offspring to be his channel of spiritual blessing for all other nations? As someone once put it, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” But, odd or not, that’s what God did. God also chose to make a Jewish infant the key to the salvation of the world. God’s ways are not our ways. He is a sovereign, electing God, making his own choices for his own reasons. He chose the Jews out of all nations; he chose Jesus out of all the Jews to be King of the Jews and Savior of the world; and he chooses to give salvation to people by uniting them to Jesus through faith.

The infant Jesus was adored by Jewish shepherds and by Gentile wise men alike. Still today the one who was born King of the Jews brings blessing and eternal life to Gentiles and Jews alike. Boys and girls, men and women from every part of the globe and from every sort of nation and language and race and tribe have found salvation in the King of the Jews. Even many Jewish people, whose history includes much suffering and whose community leaders are sometimes hostile to Jesus—even many Jews are trusting Jesus as their Messiah.

Throughout history the Lord has always insured that at least some of the children of Israel would follow Jesus, and that number is increasing. The Savior who has brought blessing to so many Gentiles also gives forgiveness, joy, and eternal life to his fellow Jews who recognize him as their king. These Jewish believers in Jesus are finding eternal riches in their Messiah, and they are enriching Gentile followers of Jesus with fresh insight into the King of the Jews.

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” He is enthroned over the universe, and he is enthroned in the hearts of his people. Is the King of the Jews on the throne of your heart?