

# First Century Jewish Identity as a Model

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## Introduction:

Every person has a variety of identities, particularly their personal and national identities. Neither of the two offers a lot of room for maneuvering, despite the fact that since the Enlightenment in Europe and the Declaration of Independence in the United States, there is a strong feeling in the West that identity is a private issue, open to free choice any time of the day or night. In fact, a person's identity is primarily determined by his national, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and faith affiliations. Most of these affiliations are attributed to a person, regardless of his personal preferences, before he ever draws his first breath.

Imagine a tall, blond, blue-eyed man enters this auditorium and in a perfectly clear voice declares: "I am a black African." I have no doubt that all the eyes in the room will raise their eyebrows in bewilderment and interpretations will begin to circulate, such as: "He only thinks that he is black!" "Maybe he was born in Africa and his parents gave him the name 'Black.'" "Perhaps he's impersonating a black person?" "He's only teasing us!" However, it would be clear to all of us that regarding the question of identity, here we are talking about something peculiar and irregular.

## Every person has different types of identity:

- a) His national identity, which is usually not acquired: a child who is taken from his parents in infancy and raised by strangers acquires the identity of his adoptive parents and the place where he is raised.
- b) One's personal identity is given to acquisition and change. For example, a person may study a profession and add another characteristic to his identity. A son is born to a man and he becomes a father, thus acquiring another characteristic of his identity and even a new name. A person receives a doctorate from university and his identity changes, etc.

## An individual's personal identity derives from the following sources:

- a) The history that a person shares in common with his environment, including culture, language, and national and personal vision.
- b) The public opinion that shapes the character and behavioral patterns of the individual.
- c) The willingness of a person to live in society and participate in community life and the personal sacrifice of the group to which he belongs. This might be the Lutheran, Methodist or Catholic Church or perhaps Islam, Buddhism or Judaism. A person's professional association, his guild, also attributes identity to a person; at times even the clothes that he wears are part of his identity.

## The National Identity of the People of God in the Holy Scriptures

The Bible recognizes the identity of the people of Israel as the people of God. In no place in the Old or New Covenants is there a divesting of the Israeli nation from their position as the people of God – in the past, the present, or the future. The same principle applies to all of the Land of Israel, and particularly to Jerusalem.

The national identity of “God’s people” is always Israel. It remains Israel in the New Covenant and also at the second coming of the Messiah. According to the prophecies, the return of the Messiah is a return to Israel, the people of Israel and to Jerusalem. The Gentiles join the people of Israel. In the parable of the olive tree, the Gentiles are grafted on to the natural, cultivated tree, but not in place of the pruned and burnt branches.

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Jewish identity should be defined by the Jewish People and not by a group of Gentile missionaries disguising themselves as Jews. A person cannot say that he is a “carpenter” if he has never held a hammer, nail, saw or awl in his life. If a person has never in his life made a bureau or wardrobe or table or door or any other thing that carpenters make in their daily labor, he cannot call himself a “carpenter.” The Apostle Shaul, in a biting argument with his opponents, said: “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Messiah. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Messiah Yeshua my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Messiah” (Philippians 3:7-8). But at the same time, he knew who he was and his identity: “I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; concerning the Torah, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the Torah, blameless” (Philippians 3:5-6).

I am not opposed to my Gentile brothers having their own identity, their own culture, and a style of worship that differs from mine, and even that they be Pentecostals, Lutherans, Baptists, or Afro-Americans. But as for me, the most important thing is the fact that the first congregation in Jerusalem, as described in the pages of the New Covenant, was a Messianic Jewish congregation, which was 100% faithful to our Lord Yeshua and 100% faithful to the Torah of Israel. By the same measure, Shaul the apostle was totally faithful to the Lord Yeshua, who revealed Himself to him on the road to Damascus, and also 100% faithful to the Torah of Moses and Israel.

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**Please refer to the following selections from the New Covenant Scriptures:**

1. Matthew 5:17-20: *"Do not think that I came to destroy the Torah or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the Torah till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."*
  
2. 1 Corinthians 7:17-20: *"But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the congregations. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called."*
  
3. Acts 21: 17-24: *"And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Torah; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor walk according to the customs.*  
  
*What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the Torah."*
  
4. Acts 24: 14-18: *"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Torah and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. Now after many years, I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation, in the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with a mob nor with tumult."*
  
5. Acts 28: 17: *"And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: 'Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans."*