

WHAT IS NAZARENE (NETZARIM) JUDAISM?

In these last days of constant and important changes in people's understanding of our relationship to the Almighty, there will naturally be some confusion about a movement such as "Nazarene Judaism."

The most important part of this understanding is that our focus is to reestablish the faith, practice, and lifestyle of the original Netzarim. So who were they?

Well, as we know, the public ministry of Yahshua of Natzaret was about three years long. He went around teaching about the Kingdom of Elohim, and He acquired many followers who responded to his teachings. His followers included members of the P'rushim (Pharisees) and the Essenes - a group living in the wilderness of which Yokhahan the Immerser probably belonged. These followers of Yahshua gave rise to a new branch of Judaism -- the Sect of the Netzarim.

After the resurrection of Yahshua, He instructed his disciples to go and preach teshuvah (repentance) and Torah to all nations in His name, which means according to His teachings. He established a Nazarene Beit Din (Rabbi's Court, literally "House of Judgment")) and gave them the authority to "bind and loose" (make halachic rulings) on issues of Torah.

The number of Netzarim grew into the thousands, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Because of Yahshua's teaching, their contribution to Judaism as a whole was huge. Although most did not realize it, Yahshua and his disciples gave post-temple Judaism quite a bit of structure and continuity after the destruction of the (second) Holy Temple in 70 C.E.

After the destruction of the Temple, only two "Judaisms" survived: the Pharisees and the Nazarenes. In Yahweh, the followers of the Pharisaic halacha (Jewish Law, literally "The Way To Walk") gathered under the leadership of Yokhahan Ben-Zakkai and reorganized the Sanhedrin. In Yerushalayim (Jerusalem), the followers of the Nazarene halacha gathered under the leadership of Simeon, who replaced Ya'acov HaTzaddik ("James the Just"), brother of Yahshua, in 63 CE.

We know a little about the Nazarenes from Jewish Rabbinic writings, but the more important description of them, although negative, can be found in the writings of the Early "Church Fathers." You see, just as now, the Nazarenes were misunderstood and hated by both the "Church" and Pharisaic Judaism. The fourth century "Church Father" Jerome, described the Nazarenes as "those who accept Messiah in such a way that they do not cease to observe the Old Law" (Jerome; On. Is. 8:14).

Another fourth century Church Father, Epiphanius, gave a more detailed description of how the Netzarim were viewed:

"We shall now especially consider heretics who... call themselves Nazarenes; they are mainly Jews and nothing else. They make use not only of the New Testament, but they also use in a way

the Old Testament of the Jews; for they do not forbid the books of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings... so that they are approved of by the Jews, from whom the Nazarenes do not differ in anything, and they profess all the dogmas pertaining to the prescriptions of the Law and to the customs of the Jews, except they believe in [Messiah]... They preach that there is but one [Elohim], and his son [Yahshua the Messiah]. But they are very learned in the Hebrew language; for they, like the Jews, read the whole Law, then the Prophets... They differ from the Jews because they believe in Messiah, and from the Christians in that they are to this day bound to the Jewish rites, such as circumcision, the Sabbath, and other ceremonies." (Epiphanius; Panarion 29; translated from the Greek). Although it's hard for some to accept, the fact is that those being described here were the direct disciples and followers of Yahshua. So obviously, this is what He taught! This is what He taught! These are the direct followers of Yahshua, and yet there are so many who claim to be his followers and who follow a different Gospel, teachings of someone other than those of Yahshua from Nazaret. There is evidence that the Nazarene Sect continued to exist until at least the 13th century. The writings of the Catholic teacher, Bonacursus, entitled "Against the Heretics," refer to the Nazarenes, who were also called "Pasagini." Bonacursus wrote:

"Let those who are not yet acquainted with them, please note how perverse their belief and doctrine are. First, they teach that we should obey the Law of Moses according to the letter - the Sabbath, and circumcision, and the legal precepts still being in force. Furthermore, to increase their error, they condemn and reject all the Church Fathers, and the whole Roman Church." Does this sound eerily similar to some of the political shenanigans that have been going on recently in the Presidential race? On one side you have conservatives, who are guided by the rule of law. The followers of Yahshua were guided by the rule of law. They had in their possession the teachings of the Creator of Eternity, and they saw no good reason to stop following them! They had direct commands of YHVH which were being ignored by some in favor of man-made interpolations of things that were misunderstood in Yahshua's teachings.

On the other hand we have the liberals, who are guided by what "feels good." It feels good to be able to do whatever you want, eat whatever you want, ignore the direct commands of the Creator. It feels good to give human beings offices in a "church" which makes up its own rules as it goes along. This is the legacy of the lies of Satan that were introduced into the world by a man named Constantine.

With the rise of Constantinian Christianity in the third century C.E., it is apparent that the Netzarim could not have possibly assimilated into the Church. The Church Fathers made it clear that the Nazarenes were "nothing but Jews." Most Jewish historians recognize that the Nazarene Jews were a valid Sect in Second Temple Judaism and for several centuries later.

Now, we have heard many discussions recently about the role of the Talmud in Nazarene Judaism. And although the Talmud refers to the Nazarenes as "heretics," it would seem that this opinion was only formed in the later Talmudic writings, that is, after the inception of, the incursion of, the deception of, and the hatred from Christianity. The anti-Yahshua parts of the

Talmud, although hard to read, are to be expected, taking into consideration what has happened in history.

Some of the Pharisaic leaders equated the Nazarenes with the Christians. However, as you can see by the Church's view of them, they were not accepted, because they were considered "mere Jews," not Christians.

Why did this change in relationship between the Jewish community and the Netzarim happen? The year 70 C.E. was a very important year to the Nazarenes. In this year the Romans laid siege to Yerushalayim and after five months, invaded the city. This event had many profound effects on the Nazarenes and their relationship to the rest of the Jewish community. When the city was brought under siege, the Nazarenes remembered the words of Yahshua:

And when you see Yerushalayim surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains...(Luke 21:20-21a). The Nazarenes heeded these words and fled to Pella, most likely dwelling in the caves of the wilderness outside of Pella. Naturally the Pharisees and other Jews resented the Nazarene flight to Pella as an act of cowardice. The flight to Pella itself also had a profound effect on the Nazarenes. A great deal of confusion resulted and the coalition fell apart. It was at Pella that the Ebionites first emerged as a separate sect.

This naturally led to much hatred and distrust between the Jewish Community and the Netzarim, and in 90 C.E. "Samuel the Lesser" was commissioned to add to the synagogue prayers of the emerging Temple-less Rabbinic Judaism what came to be called the Birkat haMinim to the Eighteen Benedictions of the Amidah. The Talmud records the event this way:

Our Rabbis taught: Simeon ha-Pakuli arranged the eighteen benedictions in order before Rabban Gamaliel in Yavneh. Said Rabban Gamaliel to the Sages: "Can any one among you frame a benediction relating to the Minim [sectarians]?" Samuel the Lesser arose and composed it. (b.Berakot 29a).

The Birkat haMinim as it appears today reads: And for slanderers let there be no hope, and let all wickedness perish as in a moment; let all thine enemies be speedily cut off, and the dominion of arrogance do you uproot and crush, cast down and humble speedily in our days. Blessed are you, YHVH, who breakest the enemies and humbles the arrogant. But an old copy of the Birkat haMinim found at the Cairo Genizah reads:

For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the Netzarim and the Minim perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed. Blessed are you, YHVH, who humbles the arrogant. This benediction was in the form of a curse on the Netzarim, which obviously had the effect of casting them out of the synagogues (Jn. 16:2) since Nazarenes who attended would be expected to recite a curse upon themselves. As Epiphanius records in the fourth century:

Not only do Jewish people have a hatred of [Netzarim]; they even stand up at dawn, at midday, and toward evening, three times a day when they recite their prayers in the synagogues, and curse and anathemize them. Three times a day they say, "Elohim curse the Nazarenes." For they harbor an extra grudge against them, if you please, because despite their Jewishness, they proclaim that [Yahshua] is [Messiah]...(Epiphanius Panarion 29).

132 C.E. The Bar Kokhba Revolt

In 132 a second Jewish revolt against Rome began. The Emperor Hadrian banned circumcision. In reaction, the Jews, Nazarenes and Pharisees alike, took up arms. During the revolt, Akiva, a leading Pharisaic Rabbi at the time, declared the leading Jewish general known as Bar Kosiba to be the Messiah. Bar Kosiba was renamed Bar Kochba, which means "son of the star," and was declared the Messiah based on Num. 24:17:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not soon -- a star will step forth from Ya'acov, a scepter will arise from Israel, to crush the corners of Mo'av and destroy all descendants of Shet.

Of course, the Netzarim could not accept Bar Kokhba as the Messiah and so we had another problem between the Netzarim and the P'rushim. So they left the army. From this time forward Nazarenes were labeled "meshumedim" (traitors). Though the Pharisees later admitted that Bar Kokhba was not the Messiah, their resentment toward the Nazarenes for refusing to follow him continued.

After the Romans defeated the Jews around 132 C.E. Y'hudah, the last recorded Nazarene Nasi [head of the Beit Din] was exiled with the rest of the Jews from Yerushalayim. A Gentile Christian named Markus was made Bishop of Yerushalayim in his place.

The Council of Nicea

In 325 C.E. A Pagan Gentile named Constantine conquered Rome and made himself emperor. Constantine, although a Pagan himself, declared his brand of "Christianity" to be the Catholic (universal) religion, thus making Christianity the enforced state religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine, who was an anti-Semite, called the council of Nicea in 325 C.E. to standardize Christianity.

Netzarim were excluded from the meeting. Jewish practices were banned. The "Day of the Sun" was substituted for the Biblical Sabbath. For the first time Gentile Christianity officially labeled the Nazarenes as apostates. From this time forward Nazarenes begin to be listed in the catalogs of apostate movements (the first of these to include the Nazarenes was Epiphanius's "Panarion" around 370 C.E.).

The Assimilation

By the fourth century the Nazarenes had communities in Beorea near Colesyria, in the Decapolis near Pella, and at Bashanitis at the place called Kokhba. (Epiphanius; Pan. 29). However, the Nazarenes by this time were a small sect which Epiphanius described as "small like an insect." (ibid)

According to a tradition preserved by the Assyrian Christians known as Nestorians, these Nazarenes escaped the Roman empire into the Parthian Empire to its east. Here they either assimilated into the Nestorian Church of the East, finding fellowship with their fellow Semite Assyrians, or they were wiped out by the rise of Islam.

So, what is the point of all this? The Writings of the Nazarenes, or "New Testament" teaches us that in order to follow Yahshua, in order to "walk in His footsteps" down the narrow path, we need to look beyond the deceptions of the centuries, beyond the lies of the enemies that created a religion which can honestly be described as the "whore of Babylon." We need to look back at the faith and practice of Yahshua and His disciples. The only way to do that is to know about, and understand, and be part of the followers of Yahshua from Nazaret, to be Netzarim not only in name, but in life.

Yahshua of Natzaret was a Torah observant Jew and a recognized teacher and authority among the Jewish people. The Christian Church has clouded, indeed distorted, the true identity of Messiah, clothing him in pagan theology and ritual and giving him a foreign name. To put it bluntly, to follow Yahshua you must first be able to recognize the real Messiah.

It is our goal not only to teach about the true Yahshua, not only to take the responsibility of the "watchman at the gate" to spread the Good News of Yahshua to every person we come in contact with, but to restore Netzarim Judaism and work toward recreating the first century community of Yahshua's followers. In doing so, we must, as Yahshua and His disciples did, find our identification in Judaism and Israel. Also please read our statement of beliefs for further details of doctrine of the Nazarenes.

Shalom ... Moreh ben Friedman