

# The Spiritual Debt of Muslim-background Christians to the Jewish People

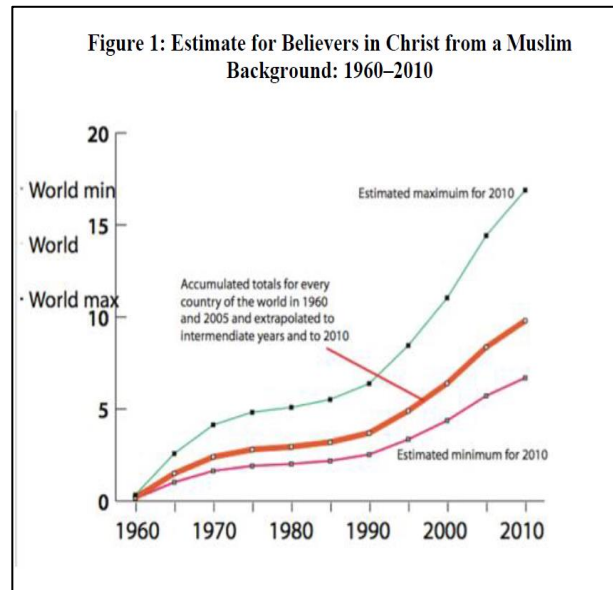
By Fred Farrokh<sup>1</sup>

© 2022

I was born a Muslim on the Christian holiday of Good Friday. My life journey pivoted nearly four decades ago when I read through the entire Bible. In its pages, I discovered Jesus as not only a prophet, but also my Lord and Savior. This inquiry concluded with me becoming a Christian in 1983.

Patrick Johnstone and Duane Miller conducted a global study of Muslim-background Christians (MBCs)<sup>2</sup> in 2010. They estimated at that time there were 5 - 15 million MBCs in the world and that the number was growing rapidly.<sup>3</sup> The trend is remarkable for two reasons. First, Johnstone and Miller note that the global number of MBCs was statistically near zero as recently as 1960.<sup>4</sup>

Second, Islam, as a religion, takes a harsh theological position against apostates. Muhammad famously stated regarding Muslims, “*Man baddala dīnahu, fāqtulūhu.*” (“Whoever exchanges his religion, kill him.”<sup>5</sup>) Operation World’s annual top 50 “Persecution Watch List” typically includes 35 to 40 Muslim nations among the leading persecutors of Christians.<sup>6</sup>



This article considers the spiritual debt of this MBC movement to the Jewish people. Four main pillars undergird this spiritual indebtedness. The role that the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish covenants play in the new belief system of MBCs constitutes the first pillar. Second, and perhaps most prominent, is the faith of MBCs in Jesus as a Jewish Messiah, the Incarnate Savior. Third, the Jewish disciples of the Lord Jesus initiated an apostolic movement which ultimately brought

<sup>1</sup> Fred Farrokh is a Muslim-background Christian of Iranian-American ethnicity. He holds an MA in Public Policy Analysis and Administration from Binghamton University, NY, and a PhD in Intercultural Studies from Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. He serves as an International Trainer with Global Initiative: Reaching Muslim Peoples.

<sup>2</sup> Though this article utilizes “Muslim-background Christians,” converts from Islam to Christ are known by a number of acronyms, such as MBBs (Muslim background believers), and others.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Patrick Johnstone and Duane Miller, “Believers in Christ from a Muslim background: A Global Census.” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 2015. Vol 11, Article 10, page 11.

<sup>4</sup> Johnstone and Miller, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol 4, Book 52, Hadith 260. [https://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari\\_4\\_52.php](https://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_4_52.php)

<sup>6</sup> Open Doors. <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>

a messianic faith to Gentiles, including many Muslims today. Fourth, God's preserving hand on the Jewish people during their many seasons of persecution, as well as Jewish perseverance in the face of such persecution, provides encouragement to MBCs whenever they may face persecution.

These sentiments are not mine alone. I have based them in part on prolonged personal spiritual reflection but also on my travels over the past four decades to over 50 countries, including all regions of the Muslim world. In those travels, and in the various ministry positions I have held, I have spoken with numerous MBCs. I have personally met nearly all the MBCs I cite below.

Many MBCs exhibit a marked reversal from a default Islamic position of antisemitism or suspicion of Jews, to embrace an attitude of blessing and positive regard. In general, these sentiments do not exist primarily as political manifestations, but rather as good will from the heart related to a sense of a faith which is at some level is shared. Furthermore, the spiritual appreciation detailed below does not constitute a zero-sum game. An attitude of thanksgiving toward the Jewish people constitutes neither a slight against Palestinians nor against Muslims. MBCs by definition have been born and raised as Muslims. Normally, and naturally, they hope the best for their Muslim families, communities, and nations. One does not forfeit one's ethnic identity because of a change in spiritual conviction or belief.

### **Islamic Antipathy toward the Jews and Israel**

Paradigms prove helpful in explaining human behavior. Naturally, exceptions exist for every rule. This caveat also attends the topic of Islamic antipathy toward the Jewish people. Not all Muslims share the antipathies. Many Muslims have Jewish friends, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, the Islamic paradigm of antipathy towards Jews is deep-seated. Muhammad institutionalized a spiritual climate of hostility toward the Jews. Three Jewish tribes resided in Medina (Yathrib) after the Islamic *hijra* (emigration) to that city in 622 AD. Muhammad had hoped these Jewish tribes would receive him as a bona fide prophet, in the mold of the biblical prophets familiar to them. Yet, they did not. In response to this rejection, Muhammad had the Jews of Medina exiled or executed. No Jews reside there today. Biographer of Muhammad, Tor Andrae, explains:

One must see Mohammed's cruelty toward the Jews against the background of the fact that their scorn and rejection was the greatest disappointment of his life, and for a time they threatened to completely destroy his prophetic authority. For him, therefore, it was a fixed axiom that the Jews were the sworn enemies of Allah and his revelation. And mercy toward them was out of the question.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of the nation of Israel in 1948 provided a modern locus for this ancient anti-Jewish antipathy.

---

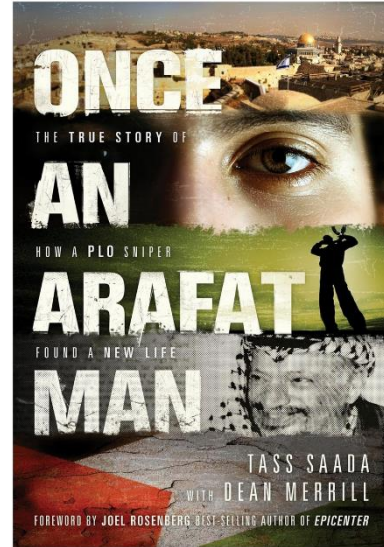
<sup>7</sup> Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith* (New York: Scribner, 1955), p. 166

We will unpack the four pillars of MBCs positive regard for Jews, but first we will consider one man's biography which provides a notable contextual illustration.

### **“Once an Arafat Man”: An Exemplary MBC**

Taysir Abu Saada is a Gaza-born Palestinian MBC. As a young man, he joined Yasser Arafat's newfound PLO movement. “Tass” served as a Fatah sniper and participated in the March 1968 Battle of al-Karamah.<sup>8</sup> His *nom de guerre* was “The Butcher.” Abu Saada was an enemy of the Jewish people and had battled the IDF, even killing some of their soldiers.

Abu Saada's life story took a remarkable turn after his Muslim family, from whom he hid his enlistment under Arafat, whisked him out of the Fatah movement, insisting he finish his education. Later, after studies abroad, he came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A business colleague introduced him to the Bible and the Christian gospel message. Abu Saada describes his newfound perspective on Jewish people in his biography, *Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a PLO Sniper Found a New Life*:



The Jew, Jesus Christ, had drained out of me my long-standing hatred for all other Jews. These people were no longer my foes. They were instead my cousins, going back to Abraham. I began to see that the closer we all got to Jesus, the Messiah, the more reconciled we could become to one another. My heart had been cleansed of its anger.<sup>9</sup>

Later, Abu Saada founded a non-profit organization, “Hope for Ishmael,” serving the poor of Gaza. In his travels, Abu Saada also came face-to-face with former IDF soldiers, with whom he exchanged mutual forgiveness for previous hatred and hostilities.

Such public statements of forgiveness provide fountains of hope for the future. Though few MBCs will have previously taken up arms against Israel as Abu Saada did, any who engage with MBCs will likely notice that any previous antipathy has largely dissipated, or at least it is being seriously reconsidered.

### **MBC Spiritual Indebtedness to the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish Covenants**

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Brady. *New York Times*. March 23, 1968. “Guerrillas Back at Jordan Camp; Attack by Israelis Failed to Destroy Base at Karamah or Wipe Out Commandos.” <https://www.nytimes.com/1968/03/23/archives/guerrillas-back-at-jordan-camp-attack-by-israelis-failed-to-destroy.html>

<sup>9</sup> Tass Saada. *Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a PLO Sniper Found a New Life* (Grand Rapids: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010), p. 118.

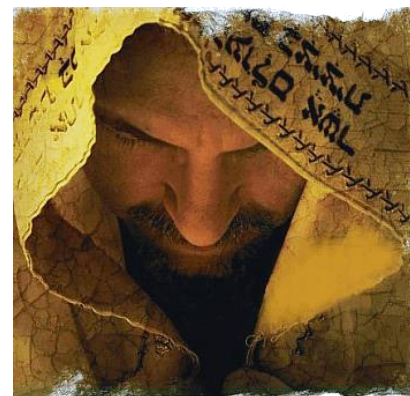
The Jewish foundations of the Christian faith constitute the first major locus of MBC spiritual appreciation of Jews. Muslim-background Christians, as believers in the Bible, recognize the Jewishness of the book. Although the Qur'an mentions many Hebrew biblical figures, the Islamic theological narrative lacks any commensurate Hebraic undergirding. With the Bible, in both Testaments, such an undergirding is unmistakable. It is all there: the patriarchs; the covenants; the promises; the Levitical sacrificial system; as well as Old Testament typology, foreshadowing, and prophecy. Saint Paul, also known as the Apostle to the Gentiles, described his own Jewish people as:

Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever.<sup>10</sup>

The foundations of the Christian faith embraced by many MBCs possess a uniquely Jewish flavor, something which is very clear to MBCs themselves and appreciated by them. Thus I have found it personally spiritually uplifting to interact with Messianic Jews and participate in messianic Jewish worship services. Such services typically include commemoration of the schedule of Jewish feasts. Recently, I published a spiritual devotional<sup>11</sup> based on the “Psalms of Ascent” (120-134) which were traditionally sung by ancient Hebrew worshippers during their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Interestingly, Psalm 120:5 begins at the “tents of Kedar.” Kedar is the second son of Ishmael, through whom Muhammad traces his descent, according to Islamic genealogies.<sup>12</sup>

### **MBCs and the Jewish Messiah Jesus**

Islam teaches that Jesus was a noble prophet, but not more than a mortal human being, despite their belief in his miraculous birth. For Muslims inquiring about the Christian faith, the concept of God incarnating himself as a human may construe the biggest theological bridge to cross. Muslims commonly memorize and recite the 112<sup>th</sup> Sura, *al-Ikhlās*, which states regarding the Almighty, “*lam yalid wa lam yūlad.*” (“He neither begets nor is begotten.”)<sup>13</sup>



Yet, as Johnstone and Miller have chronicled, millions of Muslims are crossing this bridge of rejection of Christian

---

<sup>10</sup> The Epistle to the Romans 9:4-5. *New American Standard Bible* throughout.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Farrokh, *Journey with Jesus: A Spiritual Pilgrimage through the Psalms of Ascent*. (Springfield, MO: Global Initiative, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> MuhammadEncyclopedia.com, “Lineage of Prophet Muhammad.” <https://muhammadencyclopedia.com/Article/6304ab1d4e36d70626f5514b>

<sup>13</sup> Saheeh International, <https://quran.com/112>

dogma to establish a spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. MBCs share a common experience of embracing a Jewish Messiah Jesus, who lived as a Jewish man, and, according to Christian belief, is alive today. To love this Jewish Savior while simultaneously holding on to antipathy to the Jewish people from whom Jesus came appears to most MBCs to be spiritually inconsistent and untenable.

Islam presents Jesus as the prophet of the Christians,<sup>14</sup> and Moses as the primary prophet to the Jews. In this respect Islam obscures the Jewishness of Jesus. In reading the Bible, however, the Jewishness of Jesus emerges center stage. For example in Luke's gospel Simeon declares the baby Jesus to be "the glory of Your people Israel."<sup>15</sup>

Abu Saada recounts the conversation he had with his business colleague who led him in prayer to accept faith in Jesus Christ:

"Tell me, is Jesus a Jew?"

"Yes, he is!" came the boisterous reply through the phone.

That was the last thing I wanted to hear. I started getting upset. What was happening to my identity as a Jew-hating Palestinian? But I had come to love Jesus. So where did that leave me in relation to his Jewishness? "I have an awful lot to learn, don't I?" I said to myself.<sup>16</sup>

For Abu Saada, an internal metamorphosis was underway. That transformation birthed within him a love both for Jesus and for Jewish people.

Several languages spoken by Muslims, such as Arabic and Urdu, feature alternate names for Jesus—a Christian name as well as a Muslim name. In Arabic, Christians refer to Jesus as *Yasua*, which is ultimately derived from Jesus' Hebrew name *Yēshūa*. Arabic-speaking Muslims use *'Isa*. In the Persian language, however, only one name for Jesus is in common use: *'Isa* is used both by Persian-speaking Muslims and Christians. Persian Bibles use *'Isa*, spelled and pronounced as in Qur'anic Arabic. Interestingly, a well-known Persian Christian worship group recently released a worship song titled "Yeshua," utilizing the Aramaic name of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> This creative initiative indicates appreciation of the Jewishness of the Christian Messiah worshipped by MBCs.

### **MBC Appreciation for the Apostolic Ministry of Jesus' Jewish Disciples**

The movement we now know as Christianity sprang from a form of Messianic Judaism. The Jewish apostles who were trained by Jesus initially spread the faith to Near Eastern Jews. Yet, the movement quickly crossed over into Gentile contexts. At the Jerusalem Council in

---

<sup>14</sup> This is so although the Qur'an states that Jesus was originally sent to the "Children of Israel" (Q61:6).

<sup>15</sup> Luke 2:42.

<sup>16</sup> Saada, *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup> Elam TV, "Yeshua—Farsi Version." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyQwkN3bbDY>

approximately AD 50, as chronicled in Chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' Jewish apostles considered how to manage the entry of Gentiles into their messianic movement. They famously concluded that Gentiles could follow Jesus without keeping kosher or practicing circumcision.

Jews constituted a small fraction of the world population and the followers of Jesus from Gentile backgrounds came to outnumber Jewish background believers. The original witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ were Jews. Had these Jews not sacrificially carried this message abroad, then Gentiles would not have received the Christian gospel. Muslims today would have remained outside the reach of this message. Yet, from the earliest times, Jesus' Jewish apostles carried the message over remarkable distances. Thomas, known as Doubting Thomas, is reputed to have gone the farthest for his Lord, traveling all the way to India. According to Christian tradition he was martyred near Chennai, and Christianity has been present in India for two millennia, and the ancient Indian church known as "Mar Thoma (Saint Thomas) Christians."<sup>18</sup>

My wife and I have a friend in ministry who is a native Arabic speaker, an MBC from the Middle East. Although she came to the United States as a pro-Palestinian firebrand, she was introduced to Jesus Christ by Messianic Jewish believers. She became a Christian and is now in full-time Christian ministry.

Many MBCs are encouraged when they realize they have been grafted into the Christian Church, which predates Islam by six centuries. In Romans 11, Paul describes the "grafting in" process of the Gentiles into the Jewish olive tree. MBCs recognize Jesus as the Vine who was willing to receive the ingrafting of Gentile branches. They understand that the taproot of their Christian faith is Jewish.

Increasingly, MBCs are becoming messengers of the gospel to their own people. "Brother Rachid," a Moroccan MBC, provides satellite and online Christian programming in Arabic to receptive audiences.<sup>19</sup> Rachid remains unafraid even to wade into political waters, having publicly challenged both President Obama and ISIS.<sup>20</sup> "Al Fadi" is a Saudi Arabian MBC with a ministry known as CIRA International. He is a colleague of Brother Rachid and preaches the Christian message to Muslims.<sup>21</sup> They represent two among many.

### **MBCs Solace in the Jewish Example of Enduring Persecution**

The persecution of the Jewish people constitutes a long historical phenomenon which predates their Exodus from Egyptian bondage. Its tragic history includes the horrific Nazi Holocaust of

---

<sup>18</sup> The New World Encyclopedia Online. "Saint Thomas Christians."  
[https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Saint\\_Thomas\\_Christians](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Saint_Thomas_Christians)

<sup>19</sup> Brother Rachid TV. <https://www.youtube.com/c/BrotherRachidTV>

<sup>20</sup> "Former Muslim, Brother Rachid, Schools President Obama on Islam and ISIS." September 13, 2014.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnkPmeF3fSY>

<sup>21</sup> [www.CIRAInternational.com](http://www.CIRAInternational.com).

last century, as well as the recent Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. Jewish perseverance in the face of persecution provides inspiration to all persecuted peoples, including MBCs. As persecuted Jewish communities have done, MBCs look to God for assistance.

The Iranian church has lost several of its leaders to martyrdom in recent decades. One such martyr, Rev. Hossein Soodmand, was also an MBC. He was hanged for his faith in 1990 by the regime, which more recently added insult to injury by bulldozing his grave.<sup>22</sup> Rev. Hossein's daughter Rashin made the difficult decision to follow her father into ministry. Rather than giving up, she and others hand copied Bible portions to distribute in Mashhad, Iran.<sup>23</sup> Her tale of perseverance recalls the faith of biblical heroes.

The noble Jewish reaction to persecution proves instructive to MBCs. As Syrian-American psychologist Wafa Sultan stated to Islamist Ibrahim al-Khouli during their debate on al-Jazeera: "The Jews have come through the tragedy of the Holocaust, and forced the world to respect them with their knowledge, not with terror.... We have not seen a single Jew blow himself up in a German restaurant."<sup>24</sup> Though Sultan has identified as an ex-Muslim secularist, not as an MBC, her bravery and objectivity in publicly honoring Jews are instructive to MBCs, and reflects the transformation of attitudes which many have undergone.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Antisemitism appears to be on the rise in various contexts. The United States, once considered a refuge for the world's persecuted Jews, has witnessed the emergence of a congressional political "Squad" which does not seek to hide its antisemitic views. Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib publicly and unreservedly add to an ever-growing list of antisemitic statements.<sup>25</sup>

While it may be comforting to have help in high places, and while Jewish observers may regretfully observe the waning of such support, other sources of empathy and blessing should not be discounted. MBCs are joining a 2,000-year movement which is Jewish in its spiritual origins. They feel connected to their Messiah, Jesus Christ, whom they service. Their Jesus will always be Jewish.

A few years ago I was travelling in Eastern Cuba in Christian ministry. The church that was hosting us sent a bus to pick us up. We were interested to see that the local Christians had displayed the Magen David next to the flag of Cuba, above the driver's mirror. Though believers

---

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Weinthal, "Iran Bulldozes Grave of Reverend Hanged by the Regime." *The Jerusalem Post*, January 15, 2020. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/iran-bulldozes-grave-of-christian-pastor-hanged-by-regime-614259>

<sup>23</sup> Elam TV. "Why I Wrote out the Gospel of John: Rashin Soodmand." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zru\\_MPIVyc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zru_MPIVyc)

<sup>24</sup> Khouli, Ibrahim al-Khouli. February 21, 2006. "Al-Jazeera Wafa Sultan Discussion on Muslim Belief and Clash of Civilizations." English subtitling by Memritv.org. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISNpOkpcWqg>

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, <https://www.newsweek.com/ilhan-omar-has-problem-jews-opinion-1605824>, and, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/13/politics/rashida-tlaib-holocaust-comments/index.html>

expressing such sentiments may not know the name of Naftali Bennett, Israel's former prime minister, they certainly know the name of the tribe of Naftali from the Bible. Importantly, this empathy and an orientation to bless and honor exists unconditionally and arises existentially. It is stronger than political orientations, which cannot dislodge it.

Given the many antisemitic pages in the history of Christianity, including Hitler's "German Christian" movement, Jewish people may be understandably hesitant to trust in statements of solidarity offered by Christians. A key factor is biblical faithfulness. Hitler's movement, for example, sought to expunge from the Bible the entire Old Testament and the Pauline Epistles, as well as to recast Jesus as a Gentile. Those who remained faithful to the Bible, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other participants in the German Confessing Church, never accepted the apostasy of rejecting the Jewish foundations of their Christian biblical faith.

MBCs are a biblically observant and Christo-centric movement. It will continue to grow in an appreciation and indeed love for the Jewish people due to the undeniable and obvious Jewish roots of the Christian faith. In some contexts, MBCs may be unable to publicly state such support, for in so doing they will be branded as double-traitors. Nevertheless, such a sense of empathy exists among converts to Christianity from Islam. And it is growing.

Abu Saada participated a conference held for Arab and Israeli Christians. He recounts:

... at that moment, the moderator of the meeting called everyone to form small prayer circles. I found myself with Schmuël [a former IDF soldier, a pseudonym], two [Arab] Jordanians, and a Jewish rabbi. God came down into the circle that day. I prayed with tears for the peace of Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>

Such heartfelt sentiments provide much hope for the future.

---

<sup>26</sup> Saada, *ibid*, pp. 152-153.