

משיח MASHIACH

Apostolic
Writings
Messiah
Hebrew Bible
Second Temple
Judaism



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New Testament scholars have long held that the Jerusalem community headed by Ya'akov (James) was (1) primarily composed of Jewish believers in Yeshua who (2) remained within the symbolic universe of Second Temple Judaism, and (3) strictly lived according to the Torah,

with some members observing Pharisaic halakhah (Acts 15:4–5; 21:20–21). However, going back as far as Jerome, exegetes and ecclesial leaders have evaluated the Jerusalem congregation negatively because it retained its social identity within Judaism. As Craig Hill puts it:

In the first instance, the Jerusalem church is regarded as having been too Christian to be Jewish; in the second, it is thought too Jewish to be Christian. *The assumption in either case is that one could have been truly Christian only to the extent that one was not authentically Jewish.* On a popular level, it is the first approach that dominates. Christians such as

James and Peter, both leaders of the Jerusalem church, are thought to have thrown off the shackles of their Jewish past. It is not difficult to see this view as an uncritical retrojection of modern Gentile Christianity onto the primitive church. Issues more characteristic of Judaism, such as the restoration of Israel (a concern repeatedly mentioned in the description of the Jerusalem church in Acts 1–3), are therefore ignored. The opposite approach, more common in scholarly circles, is to regard figures such as Peter and, especially, James as *too* Jewish, and therefore sub- or pre-Christian. Christianity instead is the product of the Hellenistic church (ironically, those who did not have the benefit—or, apparently,

the distraction—of having known Jesus), especially the apostle Paul. Hence, “Jewish Christianity” becomes secondary, problematic, and largely dismissible—except, that is, as a foil, the source of whatever one finds distasteful in early Christianity.¹

Darrell Bock, Robert Tannehill, Michael Fuller, and Jacob Jervell are among the growing number of New Testament scholars who have rejected the popular view and the traditional scholarly approach. They maintain instead that the Jerusalem congregation represented the nucleus of the ekklesia, even as it viewed itself as the nucleus of a restored Israel, led by twelve apostles representing the twelve tribes of *kol Yisrael* (all Israel) (Acts 1:6–7, 26; 3:19–21). Their mission, these scholars maintain, was to spark a Jewish renewal movement for Yeshua the Son of David *within* the house of Israel (Gal 2:7–10; Acts 21:17–26).

This *intra muros* social identity is reflected in Luke’s account of Peter’s speech in Acts 2 to Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem. Peter addresses them as “Men of Israel . . . Brothers” (Acts 2:22, 29) and concludes by referring to them as representative of *kol Yisrael*. He says, “Therefore let *the whole house of Israel* know beyond doubt that God has made him [Yeshua] both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36).

Something of a literary parallel to Peter’s address is found in the encyclical letter that Ya’akov, the Jerusalem congregation’s *nasi* (head), writes to “the Twelve Tribes in the Diaspora” (Jas 1:1). Richard Bauckham, Dale Allison, Peter Davids, Darian Lockett, Luke Cheung, and a long list of commentators now believe that Ya’akov wrote to Yeshua-believing Jews in the Diaspora. Douglas Moo describes this as the present “scholarly consensus.”²

- 1 Craig C. Hill, “The Jerusalem Church,” in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 41–42. Italics mine.
- 2 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 23.