

Can we Talk about Jews?

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Definition of Jews

Picture the Jewish people in your mind's eye. I'm wondering who the people are, who you are imagining. How have you determined who is classed as a Jew and who isn't? I'm also wondering how you feel about these Jews. Our community has a long-standing fascination with the Jewish Community. Have you ever wondered what impact our fascination has – on Jews?

As a Bible-focused community, seeing prophecy fulfilled is exciting. But do we stop and think about how those whom we are watching feel? I'd like to explain why I believe much of what we say is both wrong and a cause of distress to Jews. To do this we need to start by honing our skills in identifying Jews.

Some people use the term Jews, to refer to an ethnic group. Other people use the term Jews, to define a religious group. Neither is right. Jews are an ethno-religious group. However, you don't have to have both the ethnic and the religious facet of Jewishness to be Jewish. The terms Jew or Jewish can refer to just the religion, or just the ethnicity, or both. This can cause confusion. The term Judaism refers to the religion only so it is the right word to use in that context.

Let's go back to the beginning. Jews come from the Hebrews of the past, a group with a distinct ethnic origin and religion. They were called The Children of Israel. This name still refers to those with a genetic link to this group, so it does not include all Jews. It is not an appropriate term for modern Jews.

Unlike Christadelphians, there is no single way of becoming a Jew. It is generally accepted that you are Jewish if your mother is Jewish. I think it's appropriate for me to explain here that my mother was Jewish. It's called the Matrilineal Rule of Inheritance, or the Law of Matrilineal Descent. There is no Biblical law clearly stating this, although there are a few verses which could be said to imply it.

Christadelphians tend to follow the tradition of defining Jews as those with a Jewish mother – I’m generally considered to be Jewish by Christadelphians – despite the lack of a Biblical basis for this. So it’s possible that those whom you think of as Jewish, are not whom God was thinking of when Biblical prophecies were written about the Jews.

There is a growing tendency (especially in America) for children with just a Jewish father to also be accepted as Jews. Some people presume those with only a Jewish father are “half-Jewish” but Jews tend to dismiss that as impossible!

You can convert to Judaism but not all religious Jews have the same beliefs about how this is done. For example, a convert to Reform Judaism may not be considered to have converted by Orthodox Jews. A convert to Orthodox Judaism may not be considered to have converted by Ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Let’s try a thought experiment...

A woman meets a Jewish man and they wish to marry. His family will only accept this if she converts to Judaism, so she does. It is a big commitment to studying Jewish law and culture but once the rabbinate is convinced, she understands, it just involves a bath. The couple marries. They conceive. Sadly, they separate before the birth. The woman does not continue to follow Judaism or Jewish culture. Twins are born, a boy and a girl. The father is not involved in the children’s upbringing. Are those children Jewish? The answer, by the law of matrilineal inheritance, is yes, because their mother was Jewish when they were conceived.

The children grow up without experiencing Judaism or Jewish culture. Genetically, they may be half- Jewish but that presumes that the father is 100% genetically Jewish, and it's naïve to presume that. The two children grow up and they marry non-Jews, and each has both a son and a daughter. Are these new-born children Jewish? By matrilineal inheritance the children of the son are not Jewish. By genetics, they may be up to 25% Jewish. By matrilineal inheritance the children of the daughter are Jewish. By genetics, they may be up to 25% Jewish.

These four cousins grow up and each conceives a son and daughter by a non-Jew. Eight children are born. How many are Jewish? None of them experiences Jewish religion or culture. They all have a Jewish great-grandfather. There are some religious Jews who would say none of them were Jewish because they don’t keep the faith. By following the law of matrilineal inheritance only two are Jewish. There are geneticists who would say they were all partly Jewish. There are those who say people should be able to self-define as Jewish, if they wish to and they

have a link to the Jewish community. There are others who would only agree to that if the children were also participating in Jewish culture. For others, these children fall into the category we jokingly call Jew-“ish.”

You see, there are many ways of understanding what it means to be Jewish. Not all Jews are the same. This is why I feel that many of our talks are wrong. If we don't specify which Jews we are speaking about there is a high risk of misinformation.

Terms for groups of Jews

It is common for people to use the term Jews to refer to the victims of the Holocaust / Shoah. This is wrong in two ways. Firstly, because many other groups of people were persecuted and murdered; Poles, Soviets, Gypsies, Homosexuals, POW's, the disabled, Free Masons, JW's and anyone else who was causing a problem. Secondly, because lots of Jews were unaffected by the Shoah.

Ashkenazi Jews arrived in Europe in the Middle Ages and mostly stayed there. They were the group of Jews affected. Please don't talk about “Jews” if you mean the group of people who were the victims of the Holocaust. Firstly, you need to make it clear whether you are talking about all of the victims, or just those who were Jewish. The non-Jews should not be dismissed without a mention. They were persecuted and murdered too. Their suffering should also be explained. Ashkenazi Jews or European Jews are appropriate terms to describe the Jewish victims of the Shoah.

Please don't talk about “Jews” if you mean Religious Jews. Don't talk about “Religious Jews” if you only mean Orthodox Religious Jews. Don't talk about “Orthodox Religious Jews” if you only mean Ultra-Orthodox Religious Jews. Don't talk about “Ultra-Orthodox Religious Jews” if you only mean Ultra-Orthodox Religious Jewish men. If you don't make these distinctions, you risk both misrepresenting the majority of Jews who are secular, and offending religious Jews. When discussing “Religious Jews”, you should also bear in mind that some religious Jews are Christians.

Please don't talk about “Jews” if you mean Israelis. Not all Israelis are Jews – there is a significant minority group of Arabs and others. Israeli should only be used to mean Israeli citizens, whereas Jewish Israelis means the Jewish Israeli citizens. It should also be noted that Israeli law offers citizenship to “every Jew.” The legal definition of who this includes was refined

in 1970 to include all those born with at least one Jewish grandparent, anyone married to a Jew, and anyone who has converted to Judaism. The state does not limit itself to the law of matrilineal inheritance. Because of this, Israeli Jews are a group of people who may actually be a lot less Jewish, than you imagine.

Please don't talk about "Jews" if you mean people who engage in Jewish culture. Many Jews are assimilated and don't engage with Jewish Culture. Many partners of Jews engage in Jewish culture but are not Jewish themselves. You can use the term "Culturally Jewish" for this group.

Hopefully you can now understand why you need to specify which Jews you mean when you give a talk about Jews. If you don't do this, it is most likely that you will be giving out misinformation and causing offence. If you are not sure which group of Jews you are talking about then I politely suggest, you are not yet in a position to talk about Jews.

Language

Once you know which Jews your talk is about you also need to ensure your language is appropriate.

"Jewess" is an offensive word. We wouldn't describe a sister as a Christadelphianess. Women in our community have full status as Christadelphians and are not labelled as a subgroup. To do so would be sure to offend. In the same way the word Jewess should never be used. It is a Biblical word but modern translations tend to render it, "A Jewish woman." People may think it is no worse than headmistress, or actress, but it is. Women have called themselves by those words but Jewish women don't refer to themselves as Jewesses, so it is not appropriate for us to either.

"Holocaust" comes from the word meaning burnt offering, and so implies a sacrifice to God. This is problematic because of the implication that it was what God wanted. Whilst many people are more familiar with the word Holocaust, Jews tend to refer to the Shoah¹, which means the calamity. Some Jews are offended by the word Holocaust so it is more respectful to refer to it as the "Holocaust or Shoah" at least on the first occasion.

"Gentile" is a Biblical word for those who are not Jewish. However, it is an archaic word not in common usage today. A general rule for usage of language which defines groups of people is

¹ Yad Vashem, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206419.pdf

to use the word which the group uses themselves. Gentile may be appropriate, when discussing Bible characters, but not for people alive today who are unlikely to relate to it. If your audience are neither Jews or regular Bible readers, referring to them as Gentiles may alienate them.

“Synagogue” is not the word that Jews normally use to define their place of worship. They refer to it as Shul or Temple. This is similar to the way that I was brought up going to The Hall or The Meeting Room. I understood that I was going to church, but it is a word we never used. Whilst it is correct to use the word Synagogue, only using this word when discussing modern day Jews portrays a lack of understanding. If someone gave a talk about Christadelphians and always referred to our meeting places as churches, we may feel that they were misrepresenting our community.

There is a similar issue with the term “skullcap”, which is rarely used by Jews. A Jewish man’s prayer hat is known as a yarmulke or kippah.

If you wish to use Hebrew words in talks and are not sure if you are pronouncing them properly be open and honest about it. Better still, type the word into a search engine followed by pronunciation, and listen.

All of these are small ways of preventing disrespect.

Attitudes Which Cause Offence

It’s not just words which can cause a problem. It’s attitudes too.

“Jews argue about everything” is a comment I have heard, jokily, as part of an exhortation. Perpetuating the idea that certain characteristics are prevalent in one ethnic group is stereotyping. Whilst each ethnic group is likely to have its own habits and cultures, statements like this are racial slurs and can be harmful. It could be said that Christadelphians argue about everything – I have been to a number of business meetings where that was the case! It could also be said that the British like to argue – Brexit is a good example of something we really disagree about. The “Argumentative Jews” stereotype is damaging. If Jews disagree with something, their concerns should be taken as seriously as anyone else’s. If people think, “Typical Jew, always argues about everything,” their concerns may not be taken seriously.

Stereotyping is damaging for any group of people. You can help to prevent stereotypes by precisely defining who you are talking about.

Photographs can also promote stereotypes. When we use images of Jews they tend to be of Orthodox male Jews. Only about 10% of Jews are Orthodox, so repeated use of these images does not accurately portray Jews. Not only that, but half of the Jewish community is female! So, the images we tend to use only represent about 5% of Jews. How can that be acceptable? The reason we tend not to promote images of non-religious Jewish men or any Jewish women is because they don't look distinctly different, and we like to think of Jews as other – not like us. You can help to promote the idea that Jews are like everyone else by choosing to show that in images. It is another way that you can break down stereotypes. If you want to show that Jews are different from everyone else, I question why.

“Jewishness is wonderful.” This is a message I have repeatedly received from Christadelphians. The reality is that, from infancy, I understood that I had to look after my mother and do everything I could to protect her delicate mental balance. After my father died, her mental health deteriorated dramatically. Mum suffered from a long list of mental illnesses directly resulting from her childhood Holocaust-related trauma. Not only did she suffer, but the emotional distress her illness caused for the rest of the family was immense. Mum was often paranoid and believed that people were looking for her because they wanted to kill her. She loved to soak in a hot bath but would not do so because she believed the water was poisoned. She would often buy enough food for a week, then throw it all away the next day believing someone had poisoned it overnight.

Are you willing to accept that there could be a downside to being Jewish?

On a number of occasions I have tried to explain the realities of my life and I've been told that I can't possibly be right. My experiences do not seem to fit with expectations. People have been angry with me because they can only think of Jewishness as an additional blessing. My family is always supportive, and we do have a small group of Christadelphian friends who understand our situation and are compassionate, but it has often felt difficult to talk about our ongoing family crisis. Many Christadelphians do not want to hear what being Jewish is really like.

It is common for Shoah survivors not to know who to trust, and they can find it hard even to trust themselves. My mother developed a belief in divination. It saved her from having to make any decisions herself. I did not feel this was something that I could discuss within the Christadelphian community.

Another common experience is that survivors become so paranoid they do not trust their relatives and refuse to associate with them. This happened in our cousin's family. An elderly relative moved away and changed his name so that he could not be traced. He would not consent to anyone contacting his relatives. We lived in fear that our mother would also do this. Thankfully, it did not happen, but during psychotic episodes she sometimes became cross with us, and the additional stress of worrying that she might cast us off was hard to bear.

I'm not telling you any of this because I want you to feel sorry for me. I'm telling you this because I want you to accept that Jews are human and experience emotions just as you do.

Christadelphians tend to be excited about signs of prophecy fulfilled. This can include hearing of a rise in anti-Semitism. Jewish families are distressed by news of anti-Semitism. Incidents which may bring joy to Bible students, bring fear to others.

The Jewish community has been dehumanised in the past. If we talk about Jews now, without acknowledging Jewish suffering, without accepting Jews have the same emotions as the rest of humanity, then we continue to dehumanise Jews. If we talk about anti-Semitism without saying that anti-Semitism is wrong, we run the risk of implying it is right.

Some members of our community have a disconnect from the emotional realities of anyone whose suffering is perceived as prophecy fulfilled. I appeal to you to think about how we should respond to suffering.

So I'm asking you to re-examine your thoughts and feelings about the Jewish community. I'm asking you to be cautious of discussing Jews without defining exactly who you mean. I'm asking you to use respectful and appropriate language. But my main plea is that you respond to Jews – and anyone else who is suffering – with compassion.

If you can do all of those things then, Yes! We can talk about Jews.

Extra notes

Matrilineal descent.

Anyone familiar with their Bible will be aware that lineage was recorded by the father far more often than by the mother. This doesn't fit with the idea that Jewishness is passed on by the mother. The Bible does not record the law of Matrilineal descent but, not everything that ever happened between God and man can have been recorded in the Bible, so it may be God-ordained.

In Ezra 10, we read that those who married non-Jewish women had to separate from their wives. This may have been because their children were not Jewish. If you follow that argument through you also have to ask about the offspring of Jewish women who married non-Jewish men. Either there were none, which seems unlikely, or there were some but their offspring did not need to be reunited with the rest of the tribe. If they were classed as Jewish this seems odd.

An advantage of the law of matrilineal descent is that however a Jewish woman conceives she is the mother of a Jew. In cases of adultery, incest or rape both the mother and the child, maintain some status within the community.

Messianic Jews

Some Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah and they are known as Messianic Jews. They straddle both religions. However, religious Jews and the Israeli authorities may not accept them as Jewish. Some people presume that any Christadelphian who is Jewish is a Messianic Jew. The term could be used in that way but it is a bit like thinking any Christian who is English belongs to the Church of England. Christadelphian Jews may wish to define as Messianic Jews but most Messianic churches are Trinitarian.