BIBLE BACKGROUND

THE USE OF THE WORD "JEW" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

HOW MANY TIMES?

It is interesting to note that the New Testament records the word "Jew" or "Jews" no less than 185 times. Of its four Gospel writers John is by far the most prolific in his usage of the word - some 70 times in all; whilst the other three only use the word 16 times between them, 12 of which are in reference to Jesus as "King of the Jews".

The book of Acts refers almost 80 times to "the Jew"; whilst it comes some 27 time in the Pauline letters, chiefly in his Epistle to the Romans. Elsewhere in the New Testament the word "Jew" is only mentioned twice and that is in the Book of Revelation.

WHAT IS MEANT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT BY A "JEW"?

Whenever the term "Jew" is used, it always refers to someone belonging to the people racially known today, as in early New Testament times, as "the Jewish people" who are the physical descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Quite clearly the word also is used to refer to a certain section of the Jewish people: for example to the Jews of a certain place (Acts 17:13), to Jewish leaders (Luke 7:3), to religious Jews (Acts:13:43) or to Jews of a particular cultural background (6:1).

There is one New Testament book however whose use of the phrase, "the Jews" needs to be clearly understood, and that is the Gospel of John. This is because commencing with his very first reference to the "the Jews" also frequently uses the term to describe the Jewish hierarchy (John 1:19 "the Jews sent priests and Levites...").

This is similar to the manner in which in the New Testament "the Romans" can refer to the Roman administration and/or soldiers rather than to the entire nation or empire (John 11:48, Acts 28:17).

A modern example would be the way some speak of "the Americans" when they mean only those in the White House, or "the Russians" when they mean only those in the Politbureau.

The apparent failure within Christianity to understand this point has tragically resulted in John's writings being either ignorantly or mischievously used by some people to foster their own innate prejudice against the entire Jewish race.

On no occasion whatsoever can the word "Jew" be said to refer to a Gentile. By definition (both biblical and secular) they are opposites, for a Gentile is someone from any of the nations other than from the Jewish nation (dictionary definition "not of Jewish race"!).

Therefore the Scriptures speak of "believing Jews" (John 8:31; Acts 21:20) and of "unbelieving Jews" (John 9:18; Acts 14:2); of "believing Gentiles" (Acts 21:25) and clearly by inference,

"unbelieving Gentiles" since unless Gentiles are declared to be believers they are generally assumed to be unbelievers (1 Thess 4:5; Eph 4:17). Even a Gentile who converts to Judaism is not declared to be a Jew but a proselyte (Acts 2:11).

IS THE BELIEVING GENTILE A JEW?

In accordance with the other New Testament writers, the Apostle Paul consistently distinguishes between "Jew" and "Gentile". Like John he also on occasion means by "the Jews", the Jewish religious hierarchy (Acts 28:19; 1 Thess 2:14-15).

There is a statement by Paul which has been used to support the contention that the believing Christian is the true Jew. This is Rom 2:28-29: "he is not a Jew who is one outwardly...but who is one inwardly". Now it is incorrect to deduce from this particular statement that Paul has redefined the meaning of the word "Jew". First we must be clear that at this point in his letter, Paul is speaking of those who are Jewish (see v. 17 of the same chapter) and who furthermore rely on the Law and boast in God.

It is to such that Paul declares that to be truly Jewish it is necessary to practise all that one believes. He is reminding them that to be Jewish and to hold to the tenets of Judaism is not enough.

In this he was saying what the rabbis say to this day - something must also be going on in the heart. Paul in his letter makes abundantly clear what exactly the "goings on in the heart" must be if anyone - particularly if one is Jewish - is to please God, namely a righteousness that comes through faith.

It is therefore quite consistent with New Testament terminology to describe as a "true Jew" a Jewish person who has saving faith in Jesus the Messiah. At the same time it would be inconsistent and misleading to describe a Gentile who believes in Jesus as a "true Jew". He or she may, as a Gentile, become an heir of the faith of Abraham, and by that token also a "son of Abraham",..."the father of many nations" (*nations = goyim = Gentiles*).

However, this does not make the believing Gentile a Jew, however much he or she may wish to be so defined.

For this reason Abraham is referred to as the "Father of all who believe...both from the circumcision (Jews) and from the uncircumcision (Gentiles)", and God is spoken of not only as the God of the Jews but also as the God of the Gentiles (Rom 4:11-12; Rom 3:29

Paul Skaife