

Seven Myths About Christ Church Jerusalem

Myth #1: Christ Church was built by "The Mission". If by "The Mission" one means a monolithic and coordinated effort to "convert" Jews to Christianity -- no such thing has ever existed. Instead, there have been "missionaries" from various groups and churches throughout the centuries who have shared the Good News about Jesus of Nazareth throughout the world. Due to differing ideologies and approaches, more often than not these groups did not work together. One of the first organizations dedicated to telling this Good News to the Jewish people in Britain was the London Jews Society (LJS), started in 1809 by Joseph Frey, a Jewish believer in Jesus. It was this society (today known as CMJ) that built Christ Church. CMJ is an independent, self-supporting organization within the Anglican Church.

Myth #2: Christ Church was only interested in "converting" Jews. For well over 160 years the message of Christ Church has been directed to Gentiles as well as to the Jews. It can be summed up in the words of Simeon the Righteous when he saw the infant Jesus in the Temple, "The glory of Israel and a light to the Gentiles. [Luke 2:32]. Over the years we have reminded the Christian world of the Jewishness of Jesus and the importance of understanding the New Testament in its Jewish context. Many of the scholars associated with Christ Church were prominent in this trend that started in the early 19th century. For example, the first Anglican bishop in Jerusalem, Michael Solomon Alexander, was a Jewish believer and a pioneer in helping Christians appreciate rabbinic literature as a means of better understanding Jesus and the Gospels. Also, from its inception Christ Church has consistently condemned anti-Semitism, from the Damascus Affair to the rise of Nazism. We continue to speak out against anti-Semitism which at times takes the form of unjustified criticism against the state of Israel. Equally, we oppose any racism against and demonization of Palestinians and Arabs in general.

Myth #3: Christ Church was only interested in the return to Zion in order to bring about the coming of Jesus. It is well known that British Christians (including some associated with Christ Church) provided political support for the Jewish return to the Land of Israel even before the rise of political Zionism. (It is lesser known that with the emergence of Jewish nationalism in the late 19th century some at Christ Church had misgivings about this movement because of its secular nature.) But it is too simplistic to think that wide-spread Christian interest in Jews and Zionism is based merely on Bible prophecy. Instead, much of this support has its origins in a love for the Biblical text. When Church tradition places a strong emphasis on Bible reading and study, Christians often develop a deep sympathy for the characters of the Bible and identify with the people of Israel. Also, many saw the Return to Zion as a way to prove the reliability of Scripture in response to the growing 19th century scientific critique of the Biblical text. They reasoned that if the Jews were actually returning to the Land of Israel then the Bible just might be more trustworthy than its critics claimed.

Myth #4: Christ Church only helps Jewish people. Muslims, Arab Christians, Druze and refugees from around the world have benefited from the spiritual support, hospitals, clinics, vocational training and schools that were built by Christ Church. Alongside European Christians and Jewish believers, Arabs were hired as staff, including doctors and evangelists. After 1948, while Jewish refugees from East Jerusalem were housed on our property in West Jerusalem, Christ Church was home to Arab Christian refugees up until as late as 1986. Today at Christ Church we not only have both an English and a Hebrew congregation, but we host an Arabic fellowship as well. Palestinians at our school on Prophets Street (the Anglican International School) make up a good part of the student body. Our staff at Christ Church is comprised of Jews, Arabs and expatriates dedicated to working out that reconciliation promised through the Messiah.

Myth #5: Christ Church was built to dupe Jewish people. The history of Christ Church is fascinating—and complicated. The Church was built by "low church" Evangelicals - Protestant Christians who emphasized simplicity in their worship and buildings. They often mistrusted anything that reminded them of the Roman Catholic Church. Like many other Evangelical Anglican churches, they built a structure that was simple, unadorned and without a cross. Only in 1948 when Jordanian soldiers were destroying synagogues in the Old City, an olive wood cross was placed on the communion table in order to prevent it from being mistaken as a synagogue. Today this cross is used on the communion table during the Sunday service.

There was another reason that having a church on "Mount Zion" with Jewish symbols and Hebrew inscriptions appealed to Evangelical Anglicans. Due to the historical circumstances in which Anglicanism emerged there were questions about its legitimacy and identity, especially in relation to the older Christian denominations. Christ Church Jerusalem gave them a sense of ideological satisfaction as they were "jumping over the heads" of Rome and Constantinople and returning to the birthplace and Jewish origins of the Church. And just as Rome and Constantinople had European powers to protect their local co-religionists, British Anglicans did the same by pressuring their government to open a consulate in Jerusalem to protect the interests of Protestants and the Jewish people.

Myth #6: Christ Church "bribed" Jewish people to become Christians. Although this is a popular misconception, there are two reasons that Christ Church and the London Jews Society built hospitals, schools, clinics and established agricultural projects, none of which had anything to do with "buying souls."

- Most of the supporters of the LJS were overwhelmingly sympathetic to the plight of the Jewish people - their poverty, persecution and social stigma - and wanted to help Jews as an expression of the great spiritual debt they owed to Israel. (Fundamentally, all Christian belief and practice developed out of the Judaism of the Second Temple Period.) Schools, hospitals, clinics and workshops were built to demonstrate a practical concern for the Jewish people.
- By providing needed services, LJS institutions gave Christ Church workers an opportunity to meet the Jewish people of the Old Yishuv. Visiting an LJS hospital or clinic would give a Jewish person the opportunity to hear the messianic claims of Jesus for himself. But medical help or education was never dependent upon anyone becoming a follower of Jesus. For one notable example, Christ Church gave food, clothing and shelter to hundreds of desperate and starving Russian Jewish refugees in 1882-4 with no strings attached.

A search through the archives at Christ Church will reveal that on the whole, Christ Church workers were aware of the possibility that some might want to become followers of Jesus for financial reasons. As it was popularly known that baptism was an "entrance ticket" into European society, Christ Church attempted to ascertain the motive of anyone desiring baptism. Those Jews interested in the way of Jesus often lived at the "Inquirers Home" for a period before their acceptance into the Messianic community. Moreover, Christ Church encouraged Jewish believers to be proud of their Jewishness and not discard their identity. Because Jews who became believers in Jesus were cut off from haluka, many were taught trades at the Christ Church House of Industry and were expected to earn their living.

Myth #7: Christ Church was a "failure". While those on location in Jerusalem certainly knew better, it is true that some in Britain naively believed that by establishing Christ Church many Jewish people would quickly become followers of Jesus. It is often pointed out that only 600 Jews were baptized despite the vast effort and great expense. Yet, the many Jewish believers who worked for the LJS (and Christ Church in particular) were instrumental in the creation of the messianic Jewish movement, a framework that allowed them to be followers of Jesus while retaining Jewish identity and practice. That movement is now independent and does not rely on any Christian church or organization. Today, hundreds of thousands of Jews around the world are committed disciples of Jesus while retaining a Jewish identity and connection to Israel. Considering this, it may be somewhat hasty to declare the work of Christ Church a failure.