

4-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Nahman, Alf (2004) "What Happened When I Searched For My Roots," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 9 : No. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol9/iss2/20>

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WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I SEARCHED FOR MY ROOTS

“Could you get me an Old Testament, please?”

My hitchhiking companion, an Anglican priest, said, “I’ll do my best.” But, he added, “Old Testaments don’t come by themselves. They’re bound with the New Testament.”

I didn’t want to even touch the New Testament. I knew that to be the book of the Christians—the persecutors of Jews throughout history. Jews like me!

A few weeks earlier, someone had given me Merlin Neff’s *Faith of Our Fathers*. Since I was bored, I started reading the book. It soon kindled my curiosity. For the first time, I found a Christian book that spoke of Jews

with respect. No mention of Christ-killers. No curse hanging upon Jewish necks. Rather, the author pointed out how much Christianity owes to the Jews and the Torah.

Neff’s book created an intense desire to know my own roots in what Christians call the “Old Testa-

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“Searching for My Roots, I Found the Messiah,” appeared in Dialogue 12:3 (2000). Reprinted with permission.

ment”—to discover for myself what the faith of my ancestors was all about. I eagerly awaited the Anglican priest’s fulfillment of his promise.

Having been born a Jew, I had reason to hate Christians. Often I wished I could set fire to a church or two as payback for all the abominable things Christians had done to the Jews through the centuries, beginning with A.D. 70, when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Things didn’t go badly for us Jews until the Christians linked up with the state. Then came relentless harassment and persecution.

In 1492, Christians expelled all Jews from their homes who refused to convert. This after they had been robbed of their money and property. No “Christian” country would receive them. The only place that welcomed them was the Ottoman Empire, where through the years, they prospered and multiplied.

When the 20th century dawned, many Spanish (Sephardic) Jews like our family migrated to different parts of the world. My parents moved to the Island of Rhodes, just off the coast of Turkey, which at that time belonged to Italy.

I was born on Rhodes. My formal education began at a Hebrew school. I loved going to the synagogue. Our favorite day of the week was Sabbath, and we knew how to celebrate it. Life seemed happy and the future

promising. Then came the distant thunder of war in Europe, and with it the horrors of Hitler’s Holocaust. Even the Rhodes ghetto could not hide us from evil hands, and our family had to flee.

Overnight we became stateless. Where could we go? Who would take us in? Fortunately, we had relatives in the Belgian Congo. My father left first, bribing his way out. As soon as he was established, he sent for us. But it was no easy task to get travel documents for my mother and us five children. With Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen looming in our future, again the answer was bribery. It’s amazing how human greed can open doors as quickly as it can shut them. We joined my father in the Belgian Congo.

Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) became our home for almost two years. We moved again to northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). There I learned English, and one year before the war was over, I completed grade nine. With further education ruled out because of limited family finances, I took an apprenticeship in the Zambian copperbelt. Lonely, I would hitchhike the 35 miles home every weekend. On one such weekend, I was accompanied by the Anglican priest.

Finding My Roots

My traveling companion kept his promise—partially. Since he could not find an Old Testament, he gave

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me a complete Bible. “Never mind,” I told myself. “I can keep to the Old Testament. I won’t even peek into the New. It’s full of lies.”

Thus began my journey back to my roots. Genesis fascinated me. Although my family revered the Torah, we never read it at home. In Zambia, we were no longer observing the Sabbath. Sometimes we did go to the synagogue on Friday nights to open the Sabbath, and we observed the High Festivals, but it was not the same as in Rhodes, where we had fellowshiped with a close-knit Jewish community.

Now, alone in my room and away from home, I spent a lot of time exploring my new treasure. The story of Creation, the origin of the Sabbath, the meaning of the covenant—all spoke to this lonely Jew. The patriarchs and the prophets, the psalms and the proverbs, the heroes and the villains all leaped out at me. One common thread seemed to run through the entire Old Testament: the hope of the Messiah. And now that hope began to nourish my roots.

Then, one day, an ad in the local paper caught my attention: a free Bible course from something called “the Voice of Prophecy.” I sent in my name, and soon the lessons captured my interest. The study on the Sabbath elicited an immediate response in my Jewish heart. After all, a Jew knew, wherever, whenever, that Saturday is the Sabbath of the Lord. But what of

the bold assertion that Jesus was the Messiah? How could that be? Was it not in his name that millions of Jews had been massacred? Was not the Christian Church the prime motivator of Jewish persecutions through the centuries of what, fittingly, was called “the Christian Era”? What about the clergy who had hounded Jews as if they were wild animals throughout “Christian” Europe? Surely the Jesus of Christians could not be the Messiah of the Jews!

My spiritual struggle continued for many months through many lessons. Before the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah, my resistance slowly crumbled, and I accepted Jesus as my Messiah.

Living My Faith

How to break the news to my parents? Certainly not in person! I wrote them of my conviction that I had found the longed-for Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ. I told them that I had become a fulfilled Jew rather than a Gentile. But Dad wasn’t buying. He showed up at my apartment with the news that my employers had agreed to give me some leave; my mother, he had said, was seriously ill and wanted to see me. I was, of course, deeply concerned. Dad and I exchanged hardly a word on the way home.

When we arrived, I found that Mother was at the movies! And when she returned, I quickly learned

that she had no affliction of the larynx. She screamed and threatened and demanded. How could I be a traitor to my family and people?

When she calmed down, the promises came. I could return home. My father would find me employment locally. Then the threats: If I did not give up my foolish ideas, I would be disinherited. The family would conduct a funeral service for me, with a real coffin and regular burial rituals.

Bedtime couldn't come soon enough. And the morning, too soon. I was required to visit all prominent Jews in the community. They sought to persuade me to change my mind. When this inquisition was over, and unsuccessful, my parents made a final attempt. As long as I believed in Jesus as the Messiah, I would no longer be their son. My father and I had been close, and this threat hurt me deeply.

I returned to my apartment. I spoke to my employer about my newfound faith. I would need to have my Sabbaths off. "My dear fellow," he replied, "I am a Christian, and I have to work on Sundays. I am very sorry. I can't let you have Saturdays off."

"In that case, sir," I answered, "I have no choice but to resign."

"Don't be a fool!" my manager admonished with genuine concern. "Do you know that you're throwing away a wonderful career? In a few years you'll be an electrical engineer.

You will be a rich man. Don't be so hasty and stupid!"

"Sorry, sir," I replied, "but I must obey my conscience. If I can't have Sabbaths off, I'll have to resign."

And I did, only to find that I could not find any job with Sabbaths off. Gradually my savings evaporated. I hardly had enough to eat. My landlord threatened to evict me if I didn't come up with the rent. I begged him to let me stay for just a few days. As I was coming to the end of my tether, a registered letter arrived. It contained just enough money to care for my immediate needs! Someone had felt impressed to come to my rescue.

Soon I joined the literature ministry, even though I was shy and stuttered badly. And the Lord did show me the way—out of the ghettos of Rhodes, from the claws of history's worst tyranny, from the copper belts of Africa—to be a teacher in church schools. From the discovery of my roots to the achievement of joy, my life has been one of finding life's true meaning in God's Word.

What's more, I was not alone in this process. Years after the Messiah became my Saviour and friend, my father moved to Houston, Texas, where in 1998 he met some Hispanic Christians. My dad loved to speak the Spanish he had learned in his youth. And his friends loved to tell him about Jesus, the Messiah. Before he died, at 90, he became a believer. □