

TESTIMONIES

MAURICE MOSHE MAURICE

“Yes, Jesus is the Messiah”

(a compilation of articles written by Steve Cooper, San Bernardino, Ca Sun Newspaper staff
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Maurice Levy: Sephardic-born Jew from Morocco; Hebrew and French teacher; speaks 6 languages

“Yes, Jesus is the Messiah”

Maurice Moshe Maurice picked up a crisp, greasy, slice of bacon and nibbled at it with a gourmet’s delight. “You know this is very good. Very good.” he said, smiling across the breakfast table. “And ham? Oh, ham is wonderful. A very wonderful thing. I am working hard to catch up on what I was missing for 59 years.”

During those years, Maurice disdained pork as unclean, as any Jew would. But no more. At the age of 61, this Hebrew teacher accepted Jesus as the Christ, his Messiah. He does not see this event as a conversion, but rather as the completion of his Jewish belief and heritage.

“I am still a Jew. Just a completed one combining the old and the new. I have opened my mind and seen it is time to end the differences. God is a united one for both Christian and Jew,” he said during an interview last week.

But not everyone sees it that way. Some in the Jewish community reluctantly agree Maurice is still a Jew – though he is condemned to burial outside a Jewish cemetery. Other Jews are adamant that he is not a Jew at all, but a traitor.

Maurice says it makes no difference what they think. He is of neither the disposition nor the age to lock horns over the issue.

“I have stood through all the hatred and the killing. As a Jew, I know what those things are. But it is enough. It is time we met together as friends, as brothers and set all that aside,” he said.

But there is an awful lot of “all that” to set aside, as any student of history knows, Maurice included.

Because of his situation, it is impossible in any practical sense for there to be a friendly embrace between Maurice and the area’s Jewish community. Foremost among these is his claim in the past to the title “rabbi.”

But to understand the depth of those controversies, it is best to look at Maurice’s beginnings. He was born a Sephardic Jew. (During the Spanish Inquisition 500 years ago, the Sephardim refused at sword point to convert to Christianity. Instead, they fled to places like Morocco in North Africa.)

The son of a rabbi and fifth among 13 children, Maurice grew up in a Moroccan seaport. The nation was controlled by the French during his boyhood, then the Germans during the early years of World War II.

Before the war, Maurice enjoyed a peaceful life, he said. There were 44,000 residents in his community, half of them French, 5,000 Jews and the rest Arabs. “I was in scouts and organized sports with Arabs and there was a good relationship in those days,” he said.

Together with other Jewish boys in his Moroccan village, Maurice started at age four to attend a synagogue school. For two hours a day a rabbi taught the young boys of the school Hebrew language, culture and prayers. He continued formal studies through the war years and was teaching languages as a young man.

As the war ground to a halt, Jews the world over were pushing into reality their age-old vision of a homeland. Like other young Jews, Maurice longed to see the rebirth of Israel.

“You must understand, this was a universal hope – to have a nation of our own. I could never understand why we had no place. No country. This I could not understand,” he said.

Swept forward by the tide of Zionism, great numbers of Jews began returning to their ancient homeland in Palestine beginning in the early 1900s. First they went with the cooperation of the occupying British and later without it. No matter. Each year brought more pioneers to the sliver of land in the Middle East.

Maurice was one of the few allowed to legally emigrate by the British in 1945. After passing a test of his knowledge of Hebrew, the Bible and geography, he was granted papers for the trip – one of only six Moroccans to get permission to leave that year.

“I had never left Morocco before. I had never before flown on an airplane. I went with nothing but the mind of the pioneer. And it opened my eyes very much to the world,” he said, his English accented by his training in French and Hebrew.

Along the route he suffered minor indignities and abuses, but made it to Haifa. “It was unique. It was like arriving on another planet. And when we got to the kibbutz where we would live, the welcome was terrific,” he said.

He first lived on a collective farm called Kibbutz Beit Hachitah, the House of the Oak, south of Haifa, where he learned the practical side of his pioneering venture. He lived in a tent, worked in fields and milked cows.

Learning how to farm was as important as learning to live with people who had come from vastly different cultures. All were Jews. But not all spoke the same language, held the same interests or even agreed on what Judaism was.

“For those of us who were religious, we were given a cabin to use as a synagogue. But if you didn’t want to participate, you didn’t have to. If at Passover you wanted to eat matzo (unleavened bread), you could. But you were also free to eat any bread you wanted,” he said.

Maurice looks upon those years on the kibbutz as he best of his life. “There was no fighting among us, no jealousy. There were not all the evil things that money can create because we had no money. We would all eat the same things, wear the same clothes. Life was just ideal,” he said.

While at the kibbutz he also served in the Haganah, the underground Jewish defense force. When Israel gained independence in May 1948, Maurice fought in the War of Liberation as a commander of a small, captured, British tank. Hand-grenade shrapnel from that war is still lodged in his neck.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Maurice held jobs on the farms, with the government and as a factory manager. He also was wounded three times defending his country. In the 1967 war in the Sinai, Maurice served as a lieutenant guarding a prisoner-of-war camp. For 91 days he was the primary officer over 244 prisoners.

It was also during those early years in Israel that Maurice continued training in the Torah, Talmud and the wealth of rabbinic writings making up Jewish thought. Where that training finally led is a matter of controversy.

Maurice said he was consecrated as a rabbi by another Sephardic rabbi in Israel in the early 1950s. However, Rabbi Philip Posner, of Riverside’s Temple Beth El, questioned the legitimacy of

Maurice's claim to the title "rabbi," particularly if he is presented as a rabbi within the Christian community.

In the broadest sense, a rabbi is a teacher. But it has largely come to mean something more specific. In America, a rabbi is the ordained clergyman who ministers through the local synagogue.

"I have never claimed that I am a rabbi within the American system," said Maurice. "I am not saying I am a rabbi in the way that Rabbi Posner is a rabbi. I did not attend a seminary. In fact, I would rather not be called rabbi at all because of this misunderstanding. I am a teacher of Hebrew. Call me that."

In April 1969 Maurice emigrated to the United States and settled in Southern California. There he began his work as a teacher and developed the contacts that subsequently led to him coming to know his Messiah. Since he came to the U.S. in 1969, Maurice has been teaching both Hebrew and French. He said he came here because of family needs. He became a citizen in 1974.

With his business background, he was able to work as an accountant and it was through a former boss that he began to consider the claims of Christianity.

In 1973, Maurice took an accounting job with the Lockman Foundation in La Habra, which was working on translating and distributing a modern English version of the Old and New Testaments. At the foundation, Maurice was working under the late Dewey Lockman. At the time, Lockman was in his 70s and Maurice describes him as a true saint.

"It was there that I started to know about Christianity. In the beginning, I was a little stunned by the people who worked there. All of them were Christians and so I wondered why do they all love me? Why are they so good to me, a Jew?"

There was no hard sell of the Christian faith by Lockman's staff. But there were gentle challenges to Maurice to read the New Testament, something he had never done. At that time, Maurice began to read and study the New Testament. Growing up in a Moroccan seaport and being the son of a rabbi, he had no previous personal contact with the New Testament or believers in the Messiah.

He had always believed Christians hated Jews and was completely disarmed by those he met who, instead, were anxious to hear about Judaism. They made me wonder why I never had the courage to read the New Testament. I felt that to touch it was some kind of sin. I felt something bad will happen to me if I do. At that time, I barely knew the name of Jesus. But I am a curious man."

Through more than a decade, he was slowly drawn toward Christianity. He spoke with amazed wonder about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. "When I first read that sermon, I was perplexed. I was stunned. It was the most marvelous teaching and explanation of Judaic ethics I had ever seen," he said.

Even as he was teaching Hebrew and participating in the Shabbat services within the Jewish community in Riverside and Corona in the 1970s, he was occasionally looking at the New Testament. During those years, he also went through a divorce.

In June 1982, Mike Perl (founder and director of the Hebrew Christian Witness) began to study Biblical and modern Hebrew privately for two or three hours weekly with Maurice. Over a period of months their conversation and study extended beyond an analysis of Hebrew grammar and syntax to the subject of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah.

Mike posed a series of questions to Maurice. Why does Genesis speak of God as Elohim, in the plural form? Who is the prophet Isaiah describing and writing about in Isaiah 53? In the solitude of his study Maurice began seriously to contemplate these and numerous other questions. He finally reached the point where he "could no longer deny what God was clearly saying in His Word." He

accepted Jesus. “Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, the only begotten Son of God,” said Maurice, who was later baptized at the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in San Bernardino.

Within normative Judaism, Maurice’s acceptance of Jesus is repugnant and his description of Jesus as the son of God is blasphemy, area rabbis said. “I know what I said is difficult for them. In fact, Judaism is fractured into denominations very much like Christianity. There are the Orthodox and the Reform and the Conservatives and many in between. The only way you can unite them all is to say you are a Christian. Then they will join as one to oppose you,” he said.

But Maurice does not view his Christian commitment as an end to his Jewishness. It is an outgrowth of it. He said studying the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews demonstrated clearly to him that Jesus’ life and mission was rooted deeply in his identity as a Jew.

While he expressed dismay that Jews don’t appreciate Christianity, Maurice also strongly believes Christians don’t understand enough about Judaism. “I love the Torah and the Talmud and the Midrash (authoritative Jewish writings). They contain the ethics and teachings that Jesus himself understood. Christians should not ignore these things,” he said.

Maurice does not regard his faith in Jesus as a conversion away from Judaism but rather as the completions of his firmly held Jewish beliefs and heritage. “I am still a Jew, but a completed one, combining the old and the new. “I have opened my mind and have seen it is time to end the differences. God is One for both Christians and Jews. My commitment to Jesus is not the end of my Judaism; it is an outgrowth of it. **Yes, Jesus is the Messiah.**”