

History of Jewish Believers in Jesus – report on progress and plans

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The work is presently planned as a five-volumes series, the series title being *Jewish Believers in Jesus*.

This comprehensive history of Jewish Believers in Jesus will be the first since Hugh J. Schonfield's *The History of Jewish Christianity: From the First to the Twentieth Century* (in two volumes, London: Duckworth, 1936). Schonfield covered the whole history in 250 pages, and his book is no more than a summary overview, sometimes flawed by errors of fact and judgement. It is therefore fair to say that *Jewish Believers in Jesus* will be the first ever of its kind.

The first volume, Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, was published by Hendrickson in 2007. In addition to the two editors, 14 other top-rate scholars in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, England, USA and Canada covered the subject for the period 30 C.E. until ca. 500 C.E. in 930 pages. The book received many favorable reviews by scholars, but more importantly, I received many mails and letters from Jewish Believers who told me how important the volume was to them personally in molding their own Jewish identity as believers in Jesus, and in knowing they were not the first to do so.

Work on the second volume is presently progressing at good speed, projected deadline for print-ready manuscript is 2017. The provisional title is Skarsaune, Hvalvik eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early and High Middle Ages* (ca. 500 – 1300 C.E). There will be four or possibly five contributors in this volume, including myself as chief editor and main author.

Since the title of all five volumes is Jewish Believers in Jesus, the special challenge of the medieval period is the new phenomenon of forced baptisms. Can Jews who were baptized under threat of exile or death be counted as believers in Jesus? Let me just make the following comments: First of all, forced conversions were not the order of the day during the medieval period. In the centuries covered by the second volume, we have mainly to do with the forced baptisms of the seventh century in Visigothic Spain, and the baptisms that took place under the Rhineland massacres of Jews during the first year of the first crusade, 1096. In both cases, most forced converts were allowed to return to Judaism when the rounds of persecution came to an

end. There is no way of knowing how many of those forcefully baptized who chose to remain Christians in spite of this license to return to Judaism, but we are probably not speaking of very large numbers. Occasional use of force happened elsewhere and at different times, but not on the large scale of the Spanish and Rhineland persecutions.

Most converts during the period covered in the second volume were voluntary converts, and thus qualify as Jewish Believers in Jesus. The forcefully converted who chose to remain Christians are a special case, and recent scholarship has shown that they should not only be seen as pitiable victims, but as interesting people who forged a new bi-cultural identity for themselves.

In the projected third volume this category will take on even greater significance, especially with regard to the Spanish and Portuguese Marranos. The more I have seen into this history, the more interesting it becomes.

The third volume is projected to cover the period ca. 1300 – 1600 C.E. Around the turn to the fourteenth century the Jews had been expelled from England, and there had been significant expulsions from France and Germany as well. The Jewish history in Spain came to a dramatic climax with the expulsions from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1494. On the other hand, new cities and countries were opened for Jewish settlement, and the three centuries treated in this volume saw much Jewish expansion, creativity and renewal.

At the present stage of planning, the fourth volume will cover the 17th and 18th centuries, and the fifth will cover the 19th and 20th centuries. Being 69 years of age, I foresee that the completion of this large project will be realized by others than myself.

With warm greetings to you all,

Oskar Skarsaune