1. **Jewish Christianity in apostolic times: A native Jewish Church in discord with the Gentiles**
   - The first community of the Church was (obviously) Jewish, headed by the apostle St. James as bishop of Jerusalem.
   - According to Epiphanius (AD 315-403, bishop of Cyprus) and Eusebius, the Jewish church – whom he calls the Nazarenes – left Jerusalem for Pella (in Galilee, in present-day Jordan) just before the Jewish war and the destruction of the Temple.
   - In the meantime, Paul and his associates worked to build Christian communities all along the Mediterranean basin.
   - The leaders of Judaism, the rabbis, condemned the Nazarenes – indeed, they introduced an additional “blessing” into the litany of blessings recited thrice a day in the synagogue, which was really a curse upon the Nazarenes.
   - From Pella, according to Epiphanius, the Nazarenes moved to the area of modern-day Aleppo in Syria. St. Jerome encountered them there in the fifth century.
   - Syrian Christians from the Aleppo area – descendants of Nazarenes, who likely intermarried with the local Christian population – fled Muslim Arab persecution in the seventh century to the mountains in the west (where previous generations had also fled from pagan Roman persecution).
     - i. This area today is called in Arabic Jabel al-Nusayriya (Valley of the Nazarenes), and Aramaic is used in worship there by the Syrian Orthodox Church.
   - There is evidence that the Jewish Christians diverged into two sects – the Ebionites, who did not accept the divinity of Christ, and the Nazarenes, who used both the Old and the New Testament and believed Christ to be the Son of God. According to Epiphanius and Origen, both sects were considered heretical because they followed the Mosaic law.
   - Were the Nazarenes heretical?
     - i. The Bible: Acts 15 permits the Gentiles to enter the Church without observing Jewish law, but does not call upon Jews to discontinue observing it.
     - ii. The Fathers: St. Justin Martyr (2nd century), in his debates with Trypho in Antioch, states clearly that a Jewish person who believes in Christ but observes the Mosaic Law can be saved as long as he does not seek to induce non-Jews to follow the Law.
     - iii. And: St. Jerome (331-419), who interacted with Nazarenes in Aleppo and obtained several copies of Hebrew Scriptures from them, wrote to St. Augustine that the Nazarenes “believe in Christ, the Son of God, born of Mary the Virgin” and “accept Christ in such a way that they do not cease to observe the old Law.”
     - iv. However: St. Augustine (354-430) condemned the Nazarenes for continuing the practice of “carnal” circumcision.

2. **Jews in Byzantium: A competition with Judaism sets the scene for later conflict**
   - After the disappearance of the Nazarenes, there is no longer a distinct Jewish Christian community – only individual Jewish conversions.
• In the early centuries of Christianity, in Byzantine cities such as Antioch, Jewish communities were influential and may have rivaled Christianity for converts.
  i. As a response, several Church fathers, such as Ignatius of Antioch, engaged in anti-Jewish polemics. Canon laws were written prohibiting all forms of business or social contact with Jews.
  ii. This laid the foundation for treatment of Jews in Orthodox countries throughout history.

3. Jews in the Russian Empire: Increased contact between Jews and Orthodox Christianity amidst national and Church anti-Semitism
• As a result of persecutions in Western Europe, the majority of Europe’s Jewish population had moved to Eastern European territories by the 18th century. With the division of the Polish kingdom between 1772 and 1795, half of the world’s Jewish population was living on the territory of the Russian empire by the turn of the 20th century.
• Jews lived in self-enclosed, self-governing communities. They were restricted from land ownership, many professions, and higher education. They were prevented from residing outside of certain areas, and required to pay a double tax compared to the rest of the population. They were subject to a much higher quota for the military draft and for much longer terms of service than the rest of the population, with children as young as 8 years old often forcibly recruited to the military.
• Already prior to this, there was in Russia a general sense that Jewish presence was a danger to the Orthodox population.
  i. Tzar Ivan the Terrible, 1550: “It is not convenient to let the Jews come with their goods to Russia, since many evils result from them. For they import poisonous herbs into our region, and lead the Russians astray from Christianity.”
  ii. Byzantine tradition (see above)
  iii. Fear of a return of the Judaizing heresy (influential in the 15th century, spreading from Novgorod; allegedly begun in 1470 by the Jewish merchant Zechariah, but actual origins unknown).
• St. Philaret of Moscow (1782-1867) – interested in the conversion of the Jews. To promote the missionary effort, he supported Jewish rights and preached that the Jewish people as a whole was not to be blamed for the Crucifixion.
• The 1860s, under the reign of Alexander II, Jews were given more civil rights and permitted to receive secular education. As a result, many Russian Jews were discovering Russian culture – including Orthodoxy – and joining Russian intellectual circles.
• Late 19th and early 20th century: A troubled relationship.
  i. An end to the missionary effort among Jews. (!)
  ii. A surge in Slavophilia and a specifically Russian understanding of Orthodoxy.
     This paved a path from anti-Judaism to more modern, racially based anti-Semitic
views. Theologians and religious writers, such as Fedor Dostoevsky, were among those articulating them.

iii. As anti-monarchic moods and rioting increase in Russia, the Jewish population is scapegoated by the Tzar’s government as the cause of Russia’s economic and social problems. Rioting crowds are deflected by police departments and government officials into pogroms, led by a monarchist group called the Black Hundred. Several blood libel trials, most famously that of Mendel Beilis in 1911, take place. Clergy were known to participate in Black Hundred anti-Semitic demonstrations that called for pogroms and blood libel trials.

- At the same time...
  i. Several notable Orthodox figures become defenders of the Jews: St. Theophan the Recluse wrote an influential interpretation of Romans 11 arguing that the Jews remain God’s chosen people, and prayed for their conversion; St. John of Kronstadt condemned pogrom violence; Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky was known to persuade crowds bent on a pogrom to turn back.
  ii. Vladimir Soloviev, noted Russian theologian (1853-1900) was a prominent philo-Semitic voice, who influenced several generations of thinkers – including Father Alexander Men’ (about whom more below). He became deeply acquainted with Jewish theological literature and built friendships with Jewish thinkers; affirms the chosenness of the Jews; and supports Jewish converts to Christianity regardless of denomination. He condemns Russian Orthodox anti-Semitism and argues that Jews have no reason to convert to Christianity until Russian Christians’ behavior toward Jews is worthy of the Gospel. As a result of the relationship between Judaism and Orthodoxy, Soloviev was known to say that he himself was a Jew (though ethnically that was not the case). He was beloved and mourned by the Jewish community.

- Active debate in Russian intellectual circles as to the proper role of Jews in Russian society and the relationship between Orthodoxy, Judaism, and Jewish identity.
  i. Friendship and dialogue between the religious philosopher Lev Karsavin and the Jewish philosopher Aaron Steinberg before and after the Revolution.

4. Jewish converts in the Russian Empire: No place for Jewish Christianity

- Jews are treated, effectively, as citizens of a separate (and mobile) nation. Jews and Russians live under different legal regimes. A convert obtains not only a new faith, but a new name, new set of legal rights, new marriage prospects, new tax responsibilities. He can no longer make a living in the Jewish community. Laws often severely punished apostasy back to Judaism and prohibited converts from socializing with other Jews.
- As a result, it is virtually impossible to speak of a “Jewish Christianity.” A Jewish convert was no longer legally a Jew. He was cut off from the Jewish community, often cursed by his former co-religionists. At the same time, he would often experience discrimination from Gentile Christians, even though he was technically one of them.
Forced conversions to Orthodoxy, while prohibited by church and civil law, were common, especially in the military. Voluntary conversions were often pursued by those who were already well-connected in Gentile society and sought to further improve their position. Several converts became known anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic polemicists.

i. Many Jews were convinced that a voluntary conversion was a betrayal of the Jewish community done for the sake of social benefits.

An unusual convert:

i. Mikhail Polyanovski, a general in the 1870s, was drafted away from his family at the age of seven. Like many child military recruits, he was likely forcibly baptized; however, he later became a sincere Christian. He expressed hope for the founding of an Orthodox Jewish Church, so that Jews could retain their culture and identity upon conversion to Christianity – clearly identifying an important need.

5. Jewish Christianity in 20th century Russia: A wave of conversions

- Both Orthodox Christianity and Judaism are effectively prohibited. Most Jews become culturally Russian. They have a strong sense of Jewish identity, but it is not informed by religion. Rather, it is shaped by political and social anti-Semitism.
  
i. Strong group identity, but a spiritual void.

- Into that void steps Father Alexander Men’.

- Born in 1935 in a Jewish family. Baptized secretly as an infant together with his mother. Incredibly charismatic, immensely popular priest, preacher, father of many spiritual children. A powerful speaker, at times compared to Billy Graham, but also beloved as a pastor and personal counselor. Described as a “missionary to the wild tribe of the Russian intelligentsia.” Built a vibrant community at his parish outside of Moscow, heavily Jewish. Baptized a number of well-known individuals (singers, poets, etc.).

- Powerful theological writer, important force behind the Christian “samizdat” (underground network for the publication of forbidden literature). A huge influence for Russian Orthodoxy under the Soviet regime, not just for Jews.
  
i. The writings of Vladimir Soloviev (see above) were an important influence for Men’ and his flock

- Deeply attached to his Jewish roots.
  
i. When he was thirteen (age of mitzvah!), the state of Israel was created. Men’ “wanted to do something for the Jewish people,” so – in his own words – he decided to become a priest. Later also very concerned for Israel’s fate.

  ii. Strong message that Jews belong within the Orthodox Church – that the Orthodox Church is not a Russian entity. Taught that to practice Orthodoxy is to connect closer with the Jewish tradition.

  iii. Dreaming of creating a “Judeo-Christian” community.

- Father Men’ was brutally murdered with an axe in 1990 on his way to church.
6. Jewish converts within Orthodoxy today: A troubled relationship, but a sustained presence

- Today probably the vast majority of Jewish-Christian converts to Orthodoxy have recent roots in the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Many of them have emigrated to the United States and to Israel.
- Still a troubled relationship with Russian Orthodoxy:
  - Father Men’, a beacon of Orthodoxy for Jews (and non-Jews), was never accepted by the majority of the Russian Church hierarchy of his time. His murder is still unresolved, and many speculate that the hierarchy’s dislike of him directly or indirectly inspired the murder. Of course the hierarchy at the time was Communist, effectively run by the KGB, and that partly explains their resentment of a priest who truly shepherded his flock. But even ten years after his death:
    i. He was repeatedly accused by Metropolitan Anthony of St. Petersburg of being a Zionist spy and a destructive, Judaizing influence within Orthodoxy. In reality, Father Men’ repeatedly called his spiritual children to loyalty and obedience to the Russian Orthodox Church, even in the face of its weakness and internal corruption.
    ii. Deacon Andrey Kuraev, well-read theological author, claims that Men’ was effectively a Catholic; Kuraev has said of Men that “it was time for him to go” (!). In reality, though Father Men’ was of an ecumenical bent, he discouraged conversion to Catholicism.
- Continuing anti-Semitism within the Russian church – you can find the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in church bookstores. Gregory Benevich, Russian Jewish convert to Orthodoxy and professor of theology, points out that:
  i. Many Jews participated in the Revolution, motivated by the hope to win civil rights for Russia’s Jews. Russian theologians, such as Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky, blamed ethnic Jews for Communism and the subsequent persecution of the Church. There is thus a perception that the Orthodox Church is still at war with the Jews.
  ii. Canonization of the Romanoffs – Nicholas II and his family. Nicholas II repeatedly vetoed legislation put forth in the Russian Parliament that would allow for greater civil rights for Jews. Moreover, there is strong evidence that his government knowingly encouraged pogrom violence against Jews in an attempt to avert a revolution. (E.g. the memoirs of one of his ministers reveal a conscious policy to this effect.)
    i. A turn-off for many Jews considering Orthodoxy today.
- At the same time, a vibrant community of the spiritual descendants of Father Alexander Men’ – Fr. Yakov Krotov in Russia, Fr. Michael Meerson in the US.
- In other countries: Father Alexander Winogradsky and Father James Bernstein – both with family roots in the former Russian Empire.
  i. In Israel – Father Alexander Winogradsky: Building a contemporary community for Hebrew-speaking Orthodox Christians, of both Jewish and non-Jewish background. Mission to normalize the role of the Church in Israeli society.
ii. In the US – Father James Bernstein: Originally a convert to Protestantism and a co-founder of the Jews for Jesus movement, he has made a meaningful contribution to the defense of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis Protestantism. In particular, he offers a vision of Orthodoxy as the natural historical home of Jews, vis-à-vis Protestantism and Catholicism. While similar defenses rely upon similarities in worship and reliance on the Old Testament, Father Bernstein emphasizes also the fact that the original Jewish Church was absorbed into Middle Eastern Orthodoxy. (Thanks to Father Bernstein for the research that informed the first part of the discussion.)

7. Summary: Jewish Christianity in the Orthodox Church
- A consistent Jewish presence within the Orthodox Church, from its very inception and to our days. This presence has taken different forms:
  i. From the majority-Jewish Church in Jerusalem, most of whose members observed the Mosaic Law,
  ii. To individual converts in the Russian Empire, forced to break off not only religious but also legal and social ties with their communities of origin
  iii. To the flock of Father Alexander Men’ in Russia and other Jewish converts – including in the US and in Israel – who have been thinking about the possibility of retaining a sense of Jewish Christian identity within the Church, even recreating Jewish-Christian community.
- A persistent “nervousness” within the Church about the Jews – a sense that they are dangerously competitive with Christianity – often manifesting as racial anti-Semitism:
  i. The labeling of the Nazarenes as heretics for observing the Mosaic Law, despite Biblical and some patristic argument to the contrary
  ii. Persistent fear of Judaizing heresies, in Russia and elsewhere
  iii. Anti-Jewish canon laws in Byzantium and restrictions on Jewish civil rights in the Russian Empire – fueled by a fear of Jewish influence, an obstacle to Jewish conversion.
  iv. Unlike the Western Church, Orthodoxy has not formally reckoned with the Holocaust. While there is probably truth to the claims of some theologians that Vatican II may have overcompensated for historical Catholic anti-Semitism, coming close to asserting the equal validity of Judaism and Christianity, the Orthodox Church has not owned up to its own historical animus against the Jews.
  v. Instead of reckoning with the Holocaust, the Russian Church is attempting to reckon with the Communist Revolution – and blaming the Jews is part of that effort. Suspicion and unjustified criticism of Father Alexander Men’ as a Zionist agent, and canonization of the anti-Semitic Nicholas II, are probably due to this.
- Some concluding thoughts:
i. Jews are a people chosen by God – chosen for His glory in Christ, not for rabbinical Judaism. Their chosenness – what Fr. Elias Friedman called “The Election Factor” – remains in force when they become Christian; their Judaism does not. A separation between Jewish identity and Judaism – between the Election and the Law – is needed.

ii. Replacement theology – the idea that the Church is not only the New Israel but also the replacement of the original Israel; that Israel has been “unchosen” by God because of their unbelief – has made it impossible for the Church to separate Jews from Judaism, even historically treating converts as inferior to Gentile Christians.

iii. The Jews as a people, and in particular Christian Jews, should be viewed by the Church in light of their choice by God, the responsibility given to them by God – not in light of their Judaism.

iv. Developing such a view would enable fostering a sense of Jewish Christian identity.

v. It would also enable the Orthodox Church to think of Jews, both in the Church and outside it, through a different paradigm – not as enemies of the Church or a Judaizing threat, but as members of the physical family of Christ.

8. Optional section: Why does Jewish Christianity matter?

- Many argue that this is unnecessary and even harmful – that Jews who become Christians should simply dissolve into the Church, and there is no need to seek for ways to honor one’s Jewish identity while being a Christian.

- Are there reasons to think otherwise?
  
i. “Neither Jew nor Greek.” All are united in salvation. The Orthodox Church today understands that, in becoming Orthodox, there is no need for Greeks to cease being Greek, or for Romanians to cease being Romanian – indeed, there is wealth to be gained from the mixing of ethnic identities in the Church. The Church has historically encouraged liturgy in the vernacular, rather than in any single “sacred” language. Is it any different for Jews?
  
ii. Prevention of Christian anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism within the Church, both historical and current, is a persecution of Jesus Christ’s physical family and has been described as a “mental illness” afflicting the Church. Cardinal Jean-Marie-Baptiste Lustiger (a Jewish convert; d. 2007) has argued that reactionary anti-Semitic forces within Christendom have always sought to distance Christianity from its Jewish roots, presenting it instead as a native religion of one or another Gentile ethnic group. He believes this to be a pagan influence within the Church. A vibrant Jewish-Christian presence in the Church can be a force working against this tendency.

iii. Conversion of the Jews. In Matthew 23:37-39, Christ weeps for the separation of the Jewish people from God; elsewhere he predicts that the Jewish people will be regathered to God (“And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the
times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” – Luke 21:24; some interpret the large-scale apostasy of what was formerly Christendom as a prophetic sign of the end of these “times of the Gentiles”). St. Paul, in Romans 11, emphasizes that the promise of God to the Jewish people is never forgotten (“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not!” etc.). If the conversion of the Jews is seen as important, it’s worth noting, as Father Elias Friedman does, that the perceived loss of Jewish identity and community ties upon becoming Christian is a major obstacle – and probably a needless one – for Jews considering the faith.