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THE LIFE AND CONVERSION OF A JEW
Compiled By Duane V. Maxey

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INTRODUCTION

This publication was compiled from the November and December, 1794 issues of "The Arminian Magazine." The first portion of the article was titled as follows: "The Life and Conversion of John Christopher Leberecht, a Jew, who died in the faith of the Son of God, November 13, 1776, at Konigsberg in Prussia. Translated from the German." A footnote stated: "The relation [of the story] was taken from the deceased's own lips, and his own phrase has, as much as possible, been preserved throughout the narrative."

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THE LIFE AND CONVERSION OF JOHN CHRISTOPHER LEBERECHEIT,
a Jew, who died in the faith of the Son of God, November 13, 1776,
at Konigsberg in Prussia. Translated from the German.

My name among the Jews, was Abraham Hertz. I was born in 1706, at Glogau in Silesia. My father Moses, of the tribe of Levi, was a man of learning.

I was brought up in my father's house till I was eighteen years old, at which time my parents died, within one month of each other -- upon which my relations sent me to the famous Jewish university at Prague in Bohemia. Here I pursued my studies for five years, when the Rabbi procured me a place at Nicholsburg in Moravia, as tutor of the children of Mr. Moshe Eohen, a wealthy Jew, in whose family I continued three years. My term in this family being expired, I went in the same capacity to Presburg in Hungary, and entered as tutor into the family of Mr. Jacob Rachmetz, with whom I likewise stayed three years, and then went, with his consent, to his brother at Belgrade, on the confines of Turkey, and was employed in the same occupation till the year 1739.

At this period, the city of Belgrade was ceded to the Turks, when about eight thousand of the inhabitants, Christians and Jews, were made slaves, and I, with the whole family in which I lived, sharing the same fate, we were all carried to the Turkish fortress Nissa. Here I was sold to a Turk, who had already purchased another of the unhappy captives, a young man, and a Christian of the Lutheran persuasion. We were both chained together, and taken by our master to Serras in Greece.

The name of this young Christian was Neuman. The Turk, our master, required this unfortunate man to submit to a very heinous sin [Somehow, this sounds like it might have been sodomy. -- DVM]; but not being able to persuade him to it, he ordered him to be whipped in so cruel a manner, that the poor Christian had not a sound spot left on his whole body, but was covered all over with wounds and sores, and I, his fellow-slave, had to wash his wounds, the stench of which was intolerable. I took great care not to come too near him in my sleep, lest I should touch him, and thereby increase the anguish of his pains.

Soon after, the Turk made me his interpreter, to signify his abominable desires to Neuman. And as I once, in the folly and ignorance of my heart, was advising him rather to submit than expose himself to the barbarous treatment of the Turk, he remained not only immovable, but declared, he could by no means bear the thoughts of thus offending his Lord Jesus, and that he would rather die, than commit sin. He then reproved me, saying: "Art thou one of God's people, of the Jews, who boast of their being a peculiar people of God, and darest thou to advise me to commit sin?"

These words went to my very heart, nor could I, from that hour, be easy in my mind, but became deeply concerned for my salvation. My poor, wounded, fellow captive continually called upon the name of Jesus, which used formerly to be odious to me as a Jew, and prayed to him so fervently, that my inmost soul was often moved at it, and by degrees, I got a hearty love for this Christian.

One time, as he was speaking to me very feelingly of redemption, I could not but acknowledge his religion to be the true one, giving him my hand upon it, and promising to embrace the Christian faith and to be baptized, as soon as I should again come into a Christian country.

Poor Neuman died soon after of his sufferings with his chains on. Notwithstanding the barbarous treatment he suffered, there was something uncommonly striking in the aspect of his lifeless body. Far from filling me with the horror which the sight of a corpse is apt to excite, there appeared something so lovely in this corpse, that I could not behold it without pleasure; nor could I ever afterwards think of him without tender sensibility, or forget his image. -- It was as if the form of this happy man were constantly present to me and hovering before my eyes.

My deceased friend had told me that he was the undutiful son of a Lutheran clergyman in Saxony; and had learned the business of a stocking-weaver; but that, disregarding the admonitions of his parents, which he since often lamented, he left them, and went into Silesia. Being taken by the Imperial troops, he entered into the army, and was sent as a soldier to Belgrade, where he was made a slave by the Turks.

According to a promise I had given him, I now attempted to have his body decently buried, a business which the Christians here, as well as the Turks, were afraid to undertake. But before I could do it, the Turk, my master, hearing of the unexpected death of his slave, which happened in the night, fell into such a fury, that he ordered me to receive an hundred and fifty lashes on the bare soles of my feet, pretending that I had killed Neuman in the night.

I complained of this outrage to the Cadi, a Turkish magistrate, who found, upon examination, that the deceased had died of his wounds and the barbarous usage of his master. I was acquitted, and the judge obliged the merciless tyrant to dispose of me to another Turk, called Hadshi Mustapha, who carried me from Serras, to a place in the neighborhood of Smyrna, where he was settled.

This Turk was a very good-natured man, and showed me much kindness all the time I was with him, which was above two years, viz., till 1741. But all his mild treatment was not sufficient to lessen the unhappiness and distress of my mind. The decease of the late Neuman, and all his discourses, presented themselves continually to my spirit. I now resolved to write to a Jew at Smyrna, requesting that I might be ransomed by my nation and delivered from slavery. This letter had the wished for effect. I was immediately ransomed though my new master was very reluctant to part with me, and when he at length consented to it, he had the goodness to make me a present of sixteen zechins, [about seven guineas,] toward the expenses of my journey, and kindly entreated me to call at his house, if ever I should come again into those parts.

From Smyrna the Jews sent me to Constantinople, where they endeavored to persuade me to settle. But, such was my uneasiness, that I could not think of staying there. Declining therefore every proposal, I expressed a desire to travel farther, and to visit the graves of my relations in Silesia, which is agreeable to the custom among the Jews. Upon this I obtained the necessary testimonials from the Chacam, or Chief Rabbi, and was forwarded by sea, to Bender, from thence, by way of Jaffy, to Hungary, and at last to Breslaw and Glogau in Silesia, where, being arrived at the graves of my parents, my conductors left me.

In consequence of what I promised my friend Neuman, I determined to go in quest of his worthy father, to acquaint him, if he should be living, how his son had died. I traveled on foot to Saxony, where I heard that the Rev. Mr Neuman was deceased, but learned at the same time, that his widow lived at Naumburg. I went thither, and having found out Mrs. Neuman, gave her an account of the painful, and yet happy departure of her late son, which the good woman heard with all the emotions and tears a tender parent feels on such occasions.

My inward distress continuing still, I much wished to find people of the same religious sentiments as the late Neuman was. With this restless desire, I left Naumburg, and traveled about in Prussia and Brandenburg, mingling alternately with the Jews and with the Christians. In one place of my wanderings a Christian gentlewoman received me kindly, and introduced me to a clergyman, who endeavored to persuade me to turn Christian, but my restlessness soon made me quit that place.

In 1742, at the time of the Jew's Easter, four weeks before the Christian's, the Jews were still obliged to receive me, to keep the feast with them. Amid the troubles and concern of mind,

which pursued me everywhere, I still kept to my purpose of seeking Neuman's religion, as I had promised him to do before he died.

I went next to Pomerania, where seeing no hope of being saved and obtaining that happiness which I had seen Neuman possessed of, I grew weary of life, thinking it impossible to bear my existence any longer. Despair and horror seized me, and finding myself upon a crossroads, I bared my breast, and took out my knife, with a design either to subscribe myself to Satan with my blood, or to make away with myself, and thus to rid the earth of a most wretched and condemned being.

In this attitude, with my bare knife in my hand, a black Hussar, or Lighthorse, came riding briskly up to me. Having never seen such black regimentals, and just then wished for Satan to come, I was most terribly affrighted. The Hussar accosted me, and said: "God bless you, Jew, whither are you going?" But I was so terrified, that I could not answer a word. To my great astonishment he began to speak of the Thola, a name by which the Jews call the Lord Jesus, and told me how he died for our sins upon the cross, wishing me, in a very feeling manner to experience the benefit of Christ's death in my heart.

This soon opened my heart and mouth, and I asked him, whether these things were really so, and whether it was possible to experience it in the manner he said? The Hussar replied that he could stake his soul for the truth of what he asserted. I was exceedingly struck, and, giving him my hand, I declared:-- If the crucified Jesus would approve himself to me as the exalted Thola, and give rest to my soul, that I would then adore him as the true God, and receive baptism. For three days we traveled together, as far as Dantzic, talking, as we went on, upon this important subject.

My fellow traveler had promised to take me with him to Gumbinnen, and there to introduce me to a friend of his, a clergyman, who was a pious minister; but we lost one another in Dantzic, where being an entire stranger, and neither knowing his name nor place of abode, I never could find him again. I learned however some time after, that this gentleman was an adjutant of a regiment of black Hussars; that he truly feared God, and had been formerly quartered at Gumbinnen.

I had taken good notice of the name of that town, and now inquired, how I might get thither. Being informed I was to go by way of Konigsberg, I set out directly for that city. At an inn on the road I met with a pious, awakened innkeeper, who directly discerned the uneasy state of my troubled mind, and as he had just then been reading the 46th chapter of Isaiah, he talked to me of the Redeemer promised to Israel, in so hearty a manner, that I soon conceived a love and confidence to him.

He then made me acquainted with the Rev. Mr. Shuman of Balga. The first question I asked this clergyman was, "whether he thought it possible that I might yet be saved?" To which he answered: "Yes, if you will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."

It being Sunday morning, the minister was preparing to go to church, to which I also went after him. He preached on the gospel of the day, treating of the Lord's appearing to his disciples, after his resurrection. But such was my confusion, and the distress and agitation of my mind, that

my gestures even frightened several persons in the church, who were near me, nor did I comprehend any thing of the sermon, except what related to Thomas the apostle.

On the following day Mr. Shuman sent me to a clergyman in the neighborhood, Rev. Froshall, who showing me in the Hebrew Bible the words, Deuteronomy 27:26 -- "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this Law, to do them," -- it so deeply affected me, that I was very near fainting with terror. This gentleman advised the minister of Balga to have nothing to do with me, but Mr. Shuman affirmed he could not think of turning me away, and kindly received me into his house, where he kept me above a year and an half, teaching me to read German, and instructing me in the truths of the Christian religion.

Notwithstanding this, my distress still continued, and believing there was no hope of salvation for me, I again conceived the dark design of attempting [to take] my life. For this purpose, being alone in my room, I put a rope about my neck and mounted upon a stool, to hang myself on a beam. But my wicked intention was happily frustrated a second time, partly by an inward check of conscience, and partly by Mr. Shuman's hearing the noise of the stool in his apartment and suddenly coming up to mine.

But how was the good man terrified, when he saw me with the rope about my neck! He fell immediately upon his knees with me, and prayed to the Lord with many tears that he would have mercy on this lost sheep of the House of Israel. Among the rest, he made use of the following expression: "Lord Jesus! I cannot rise from this spot except thou hear me." When he had finished prayer, he sang part of an hymn, applying it to a miserable sinner, viz.

Lord, grant him now thy Spirit's power,
And heal him with thy precious blood, &c.

While he was praying and singing, a sweet calm overspread my weary mind, and a dawn of hope and assurance of grace arose in my heart. But, being still afraid of my restless and unsteady disposition I resolved not to be baptized till I should find myself more settled in mind, and perceive less frequent changes of rest and disquietude. For as yet these changes full disturbed me at times, because the sense of my sinfulness rather vexed, than humbled me.

In Whitsuntide 1744, Mr. Shuman preached on a Acts 3:15, showing that, though the Jews killed the Prince of Life, yet still the word of salvation was sent unto them, and God was able to save them. By this time my mind was more settled and I found freedom to receive baptism. The minister had, from the beginning of our acquaintance, often represented to me, how wretchedly most baptized Jews did commonly turn out. But I declared that truth was all that I wanted, and therefore expressly entreated him to admit no Godfathers and Godmothers at my baptism, it being customary for such to make handsome presents to newly baptized converts, which I was desirous to avoid. I was baptized in the name of the Triune God, and called John Christopher Leberecht. I enjoyed unspeakable happiness during the transaction, and could also afterwards believe that I was sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ.

I now learned the mason's business and wool-combing, in order to employ myself both in summer and in winter. Several pious persons at Konigsberg having heard of my baptism, and that I

had received it with sincerity of heart, one of them came to see me, and invited me to come to that city. Some time after, I went, but the person who had invited me not being at home, I waited for him at his house; and taking up a pamphlet that lay on the table, I found, among other things, it contained an account of the life and departure of a young nobleman, the reading of which affected me uncommonly, and made me very desirous of obtaining the acquaintance of other children of God, than those I had seen hitherto.

With this intention I resolved to travel, and set out in 1747. On this journey, I became acquainted with many serious souls, and among the rest with the Rev. Augusti, minister of Eshenberg, in the dutchy of Gotha, who had formerly also been a Jew.

The manner in which this acquaintance began was rather singular. I was walking on my way through a field, singing a hymn as I went on, when this clergyman came closely after me, without being observed. When I had done singing, he accosted me, and asked who I was, and whence I came? judging probably from my accent, that I was a Jew.

Though it appeared a little strange to me to be thus accosted, yet I owned that I was a baptized Jew; upon which he begged that I would go with him to his house. He conducted me to his study, where we went to prayer, when he revealed by his prayer that he also was a baptized Jew, commending himself and me most fervently to the Lord, on whom we believed.

I likewise became acquainted with that celebrated preacher of the gospel, Rev. Frostman, of Sohlingen. At length I came to the Hague in Holland, where the acquaintance of sundry upright Christians was of great service and edification to me.

But I must confess, that I did not always run well. My depraved heart went astray, nor did I keep my integrity, and about the year 1755, I declined much from the which is good. I returned to Prussia and came again to Balga, where I had been baptized. But as I concealed my unfaithfulness by a disingenuous reserve, I brought myself again into an unhappy condition. Remorse of conscience and self-condemnation pursued me everywhere for a considerable time, till I came to myself, and into a state of calmness, when I threw myself at the feet of the merciful Saviour, confessing my sins, and imploring him to forgive them, and to gather me with his chosen people.

After this, I resolved to marry, and the Lord was pleased to point out a person to me, who was as much concerned as myself to seek a full salvation in the merits of Christ.

Though I was by this time more composed than before, yet upon feeling evil desires of the flesh still stirring in me, I was very apprehensive lest I should yet lie under a curse. In this dilemma I wrote my case to some upright and experienced Christians, telling them of my concern, and requesting their advice. Their answer was that the best advice they could give me was, to look for the cleansing from sin to the blood of the crucified Immanuel, with such disposition as was expressed in a certain Lutheran hymn:

"O that my heart, which open stands,
May catch each drop, that torturing pain,
Arm'd by my sins, wrung from thy hands,

Thy feet, thy head, thy every vein.
That still my breast may heave with sighs,
Still tears of love o'erflow my eyes."

Thus encouraged, I turned unto Jesus confessing my state to him with many tears, and humbly suing for grace and mercy. I found what I sought, and devoted myself wholly to my dear Redeemer, fervently entreating him to keep me from ever falling again from the grace he had purchased by his blood, by which he gained the victory, and paid the ransom for us, and to grant me a renewed assurance, that he had made an atonement for my curse also.

After the death of Mr. Shuman, I went to settle at Konigsberg. Here I informed those, with whom I had acquaintance in the Lord, that I had again found favor in the sight of my Redeemer. They rejoiced and praised with me the good Shepherd of souls, who had found and delivered his lost sheep of the house of Israel, and advised me to cleave closely and faithfully to Christ alone.

From that time I have experienced many proofs of the Lord's love and goodness to me, in inward as well as in outward concerns. My wife often used to say to me, "The Saviour is the guardian of the simple; let us cast ourselves into his bleeding arms as poor and needy ... and seek for grace to abide in him, till the times of eternal refreshing shall come."

I will just mention one instance of his providential care over me. Being one time in real want of the necessaries of life, and in the greatest distress for my family, the gracious God wrought, in a manner, a miracle to relieve me, his poor, unworthy creature. For in this distress a man, otherwise notoriously wicked and ill-natured, came to me, and asked whether six bushels of corn would be of any service to me, saying, he had felt an impulse in his mind to come and offer them to me. I received it with deep bowedness of heart, as from the hand of God, thanking and praising my Redeemer, who is in truth Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today, and forever. And here I found his divine promise fulfilled: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." By this instance of his providence, my weak faith was greatly strengthened.

Thus far the account of his life, as he has related and partly dictated it to others. Various other things, which occurred to him, might have been inserted in this narrative, which, for the sake of brevity, are omitted. We will, however, take notice of the following:

Being one day unexpectedly sent for to the house of a gentleman in office who knew him, he went, and found there another gentleman with the former, who was an entire stranger to him. He was closely questioned by them concerning the truth of the Christian religion, and strongly pressed to declare whether he really believed, without any mixture of a doubt, that Jesus the crucified was the true God? On which he broke out in these words:

"I do confess, if any created being could have been found able to remove the anguish and distress I felt on account of my sins, and to secure me from the loss of my soul, would have worshipped that creature; but, as no created being could do this for me, except this crucified Jesus; and as, by doing it, he evidenced his Godhead, I consequently worship Him with the highest justice, as my true God and my Saviour!"

Whereupon the master of the house said to the other gentleman, "Now, sir, you have heard a Jew tell you, what you would not believe on the credit of a Christian."

This gentleman, it seems, was one of those, who affect to amuse themselves with doubts about the eternal divinity of Christ, and the authenticity of the Holy Scriptures.

In the latter part of his life our convert being sickly, and not able to work as hard as usual, opened a school for a few children, whom he instructed very faithfully, endeavoring particularly to lead them to the knowledge of Christ. For some time past he labored under a dropsy, which was not very painful at first; but within a few weeks before his death, he endured much pain, and was hardly able to lie down.

Perceiving the rapid approach of his dissolution, he desired to receive the holy communion once more before he died, which was accordingly administered to him. As Jesus Christ and him crucified, had for a long time been all in all to his soul, he now particularly laid hold of Him by faith, in the communion of his body and blood.

Previous to this he took a retrospective view of his whole past life, spreading it before his Redeemer with tears of love and gratitude, and thanking God for delivering him out of darkness, and giving him no rest till he had found and learned to know his dear Redeemer, who had taken away all his sins. He at last called out, "Oh, how cordially do I embrace those dolorous stripes and wounds of my Saviour, by which we are healed."

He took an affectionate leave of the ministers, who attended him, till they should meet again in eternity, and thus he fell softly and happily asleep in the Lord, in the 70th year of his age, and entered into the company of the spirits of just men, made perfect, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

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THE END