

Franz Delitzsch, a fighter for the authority of the Bible and creator of the Hebrew New Testament

There are people who demonstrate, even years after their deaths, how God continues to use their ministry as a blessing for many. One such man was Franz Julius Delitzsch.

Franz Delitzsch was born on 23 February 1813 in Leipzig. His father was Johann Gottfried Delitzsch, a merchant who traded in used clothes. Along with his parents, his godfather Franz Julius Hirsch was very formative in Franz Delitzsch's life. Hirsch, whose first name was originally Levy, was a Jewish antiquarian bookseller who lived in the house with the Delitzsch family. All his life Hirsch was Franz's friend, supporter, sponsor and benefactor. Hirsch covered Franz's tuition costs at university—fees that his parents could never have afforded.

As a young adult Franz Delitzsch commenced his studies of language, literature and philosophy and eventually completed a doctorate in philosophy. Influenced by missionaries of the London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to the Jews, and especially by the Jewish Christian Johann Peter Goldberg, he came to a living faith in Jesus Christ. From then on he turned to theology. He also began to intercede for Jews and supported them, and through Franz's ministry his godfather Levy Hirsch came eventually to the conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah. Apart from theology Franz did research in the entire body of Jewish-religious literature, accompanied by studies of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, plus Oriental studies.

Franz's outstanding literary achievement is the *Berit HaChadasha*, the translation of the New Testament into the Hebrew language, edited in 1877. During more than fifty-one years of labour he poured his efforts into this work. Even on his deathbed in 1890 he hardly slept because he was still revising his magnum opus. His Hebrew New Testament is still being read to this very day—in Israel and

throughout the entire world. His primary concern was not just with translating the letters of the Greek New Testament into Hebrew—as was being done in England from 1817 on—but also to clothe the letters with the Hebrew spirit of the Hebrew Bible. It was this characteristic quality of his translation that has made it so popular.

Franz Delitzsch became a remarkable figure in the area of evangelism to the Jewish people. Following his conversion as a student, he originally intended to become a missionary to the Jewish people, a wish that was not fulfilled. This however did not prevent him from looking out for Jews in the streets and markets of Leipzig, and witnessing to them with self-made tracts. He also sought opportunities to talk to Jewish students and academics, visited sick and poor Jews and fed them, and worked with travelling proselytes as well.

Due to his connections to the missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to the Jews, he came to the conclusion that a better understanding of rabbinical Judaism is a precondition for evangelism to the Jewish people. And thus all his Judaistic studies and Bible expositions were not just aiming at understanding rabbinical Judaism, but also at witnessing for Jesus as the Messiah.

Initiated by Delitzsch himself, the Evangelical-Lutheran Central Agency for Mission among Israel (called *Zentralverein*) was launched in 1871, with Delitzsch himself as its director. This was a joint venture of the already cooperating evangelical Lutheran agencies for Jewish missions which were based in Bavaria, Saxony and Norway. The Norwegian agency was founded in 1865, and particularly with its founder Carl Paul Caspari (1814–1882) Delitzsch shared a deep friendship. Many smaller and larger institutions joined the *Zentralverein*, which resulted in the launch of mission stations in

many German-speaking countries, all of them promoting evangelism among the Jewish people.

On 3 November 1886, educational programs of the Institutum Judaicum started, launched by Delitzsch himself. That is why *Delitzschianum* was later added to the institute's name. This institute became the most prominent of the Jewish evangelism institutes in Europe. Its primary concern was meeting the Zentralverein's need for qualified missionaries among the Jewish people by in-depth teaching of the Hebrew language, Jewish literature, Jewish thinking and practical life. This seminary was to become unique in ministering to the Jewish people in Europe. It sent out renowned graduates and was soon able to employ its own lecturers. It was able to minister until 12 November 1939 when it was closed by the Gestapo.

The main organ of the Zentralverein was its magazine, called *Seeds of Hope*, with its subtitle *Magazine for the church's mission to Israel*. Between 1874 and 1888 Delitzsch functioned as its editor. This magazine became the most important source of information for Jewish missions.

The extraordinary impact of his life and ministry was due to the fact that Franz Julius Delitzsch was actually listened to. For opponents and proponents alike he continued throughout his lifetime being the 'critical conscience' who challenged others to listen to the Word of God anew, and through that Word to fulfil the will of God. A very important part of God's revealed will is that loving your neighbour includes loving Jesus's blood relatives.

Delitzsch himself said it best: 'The anchor of our hope is the prophetic-apostolic word that is about to be fulfilled'.