



The Jewish Roots of Christianity

Isaiah 51:1,2

*1 "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness,
You who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.*

*2 Look to Abraham your father, And to Sarah who bore you;
For I called him alone, And blessed him and increased him."*

As Christians, what are our roots? How were they established? Did our history begin 2,000 years ago? As Christians our faith in Jesus Christ and the efficacy of the finished work of the cross is the bedrock of all that we believe. Jesus became the way, the truth and the life for all who call upon His name. But before Jesus and the cross, before the Law given to Moses, there was Abraham.

Messianic apostle and teacher, Asher Intrater, writes; "A true born-again Christian has a covenant with God through Yeshua (Jesus). That covenant provided forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Yet over 1,000 years before the cross, that same Yeshua cut covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The new covenant to maintain its integrity, it must remain faithful to the previous commitments given in the Old Covenant. The New Covenant promises to the Church require God's faithfulness to the Old Covenant promises made to the people of Israel."¹ Therefore, as New Covenant people we cannot view ourselves as separate and apart from the Old Covenant. We are forever connected.

The Old Testament tells us that Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. His faith contained a promise of what was yet to be; a promise that was fulfilled in Jesus.. "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:4). Through Christ we become joint heirs to all the promises God gave to Abraham, in whom our spiritual roots are founded. It was God's sovereign choice to choose Abraham and his descendants to be the lineage through which the Messiah would ultimately come.

To fully understand Jesus, as well as the way of life that he established for us to follow, we must see him in context to his Jewish identity. Born to Jewish parents, raised as an observant Jew following the law and traditions, he lived his life within the context of the Jewish community. Later in his life he was called a Rabbi by his followers. Dr. Marvin R. Wilson, professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College and a leading scholar on Christian-Jewish relations writes "Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian of gentile origin. His teachings, like those of his followers, reflect a distinct ethnicity and culture. The evidence found in the New Testament is abundantly clear: as a mother gives birth and

¹ Intrater, Asher, *Who Ate Lunch With Abraham*, (Intermedia Publishing Group, Inc. Peoria, Arizona) p. 19, 20

nourishes a child, so Hebrew culture and language gave birth to and nourishes Christianity.”²

Jesus came to earth as a Jew and still maintains his Jewish identity. In the first verse of the New Testament book of Matthew two characters, Abraham and David, are listed in the Jewish genealogy of Jesus, linking him to his roots and establishing ours as well. In Revelation 5:2 it is Jesus who is able to open the scroll and he is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” re-emphasizing the image of his Jewishness.

The Church: An Ancient History

Throughout the ages, much of the Church has established her collective identity within the framework of a two thousand year old history. However, in truth, the Church is a branch from a wild olive tree grafted into the good olive tree, as Paul described in Romans 11:24, and has ancient roots firmly set in a rich Hebraic soil first established through the Old Testament patriarch, Abraham. It is the Olive tree, Israel, as described in Jeremiah 11:16 that feeds, supports and sustains the branches, the Church (Romans 11:18.) Clearly, there is no evidence in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) that Jesus ever promoted a Church that would exist “separate from and at daggers drawn with God’s chosen people Israel.”³ “We cannot separate ourselves from Israel or from our Hebraic heritage. “The bedrock upon which the New Testament faith rests securely is the Hebrew Bible.”⁴

God’s plan was to establish His covenant through Abraham. The Jews, as the lineal descendants of Abraham, were the inheritors of the promised blessings. The New Testament established believing gentiles as Abraham’s spiritual sons and daughters who then became entitled to the full covenant blessing as well. Because of this adoption (Romans 4:16) the history of Israel and of the Jewish people has become the foundational family history of the Church, as well.

Dr. Jack Hayford states, “Our place in God’s present order inextricably links us with the Jews as a people and thereby the land of Israel, according to the Word.”

In addressing the largely gentile church at Corinth, Paul reminded them that “*the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body.*” (Ephesians 3:6 NIV) Our spiritual identity can never be separated from our Jewish roots. “If one desires to be radically Christian, a thorough understanding of the Jewish origin of the Church is, by no means, optional; it is foundational,” says Dr. Marvin Wilson.⁵

² Wilson, Marvin, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan) p. 12

³ G.A.F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd), 1953) p.2

⁴ Wilson, *op.cit.*, p. 107

⁵ Mosely, Ron. *Yeshua: A Guide to the real Jesus and the Original Church* (Clarksville, Maryland: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 1996) p.xii, forward by Marvin Wilson, PhD.

“Though the Hebrew heritage of the Church is rich and extensive, many Christians are regrettably uniformed about it,” laments Wilson. “Most of it has been treated either passively and superficially, or more often, it has simply been left unexplored.”⁶

Abraham: Our Common Forefather

“The Lord our God is One” is a central tenet of faith to both Judaism and Christianity. This was proclaimed through the first Jew (or Hebrew) Abraham. In an ancient world of polytheism (many gods) God made Himself known to one man, and through that one man, Abraham, the first Gospel message of righteousness by faith was established.

“The nations of the world have worshipped their many gods, but only Israel and righteous faith born out of Jewish roots have maintained ‘The Lord our God, the Lord is One,’” says author and pastor Don Finto.⁷

Just as Abraham was made righteous by faith in this one God, so too have Gentiles, been given right standing before God by faith in Jesus Christ. The Jewish people and the Church come from the same seed.

Galatians 3:29 *“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*

Gen. 12:3, Gal 3:8 (AMP) *“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify—declare righteous, put in right standing with Himself—the Gentiles in consequence of faith, proclaimed the Gospel [foretelling the glad tidings of a Savior long beforehand] to Abraham in the promise, saying, ‘In you shall all nations [of the earth] be blessed.’”*

The Old Testament: Our common foundation

The Old Testament, which is common to the Christian Bible and the Jewish Tenach (“Bible”), was authored by Hebrew writers and reflective of a Semitic style and culture. All of the New Testament books, with the exception of Luke, were also written by Jews. Rooted in the New Testament are the teachings and theology of the Old Testament. New Testament authors refer to approximately sixteen hundred scriptures in the Old Testament in their writings. Jesus’ own teachings reflect His intimate knowledge of both the oral and written Law. The Old Testament is the foundation upon which the revelation of the New Covenant is built. The Old and New are interdependent and part of the same Book!

The Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, declares in Acts 21:39, *“I am a Jew . . .”* In Acts 23:6, he tells the Sanhedrin, *“I am a Pharisee . . .”* In Acts 24:14, he tells

⁶ Wilson, *op.cit.*, p. xv, preface.

⁷ Finto, Don, *Your People Shall Be My People*, (Regal Books, Ventura, CA) 2001.

Governor Felix, *"I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets."* To King Festus he declared, *"I have done nothing wrong against the Jews or against the temple"* (Acts 25:8) And in Acts 28:17 he said to the Jews in Rome, *"I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors."*

Christianity: Birthed from Judaism

The early Church did not embrace an identity apart from Judaism. The twelve apostles, followers of Jesus, the Rabbi from Nazareth, were known as the sect of the Nazarenes. (Acts 24:5) Tertullian, when accusing Paul before Governor Felix, called him a "ringleader of the Nazarene sect." It was viewed at that time as one of the more than twenty sects that existed within first century Judaism.

Paul and other leaders observed the Jewish rituals, taught in the synagogues, honored the Sabbath and the feasts. They continued to bring offerings to the Temple and took Nazarite vows. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that the disciples intended to break from Judaism, or lose their Jewish identity. The Gospel was to be preached to the Jew first, then to the Greek. Gentiles were invited to be partakers of the covenant relationship. It was only later, in Antioch in 42CE, that the term "Christian" was first used to refer to the followers of Jesus. (Acts 11:26)

To The Jew: Much is Owed

Addressing the Samaritan woman in John 4:22 Jesus declares, *"You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews."* It was the Israelites *"to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternal blessed God."* (Romans 9:4,5)

God declared in Genesis 12:3 that through Abraham all the nations of earth would be blessed. Indeed, the Jews have been a blessing to the world. It is through Abraham and his descendents, the Jews, that we have the patriarchs, the prophets, the Scriptures, the promises and the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2: 12 *"(Remember) that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought nearby the blood of Christ."*

Ephesians 3:6 Amplified. *[It is this:] that the Gentiles are now to be fellow heirs [with the Jews], members of the same body and joint partakers [sharing] in the same divine promises of Christ through [their acceptance of] glad tidings (the Gospel).*

Dr. Jack Hayford, in his booklet, **“Why Stand With Israel?”** states, “When we put our faith in the Redeemer who came through the Jews, we enter into a line of those who have trusted God according to His revealed grace and redemptive purpose. Scripture declares that, spiritually speaking, when you receive the Lord, you become a Jew (Romans 2:28, 29). If you are a believer, you cannot be consistent with the whole of Scripture and take a position that is passive toward the Jews and Israel.”

Paul, a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee, speaking to Gentile believers regarding the Jews exhorts, *“Again I ask, did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgressions, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel jealous . . . For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! . . . If some of the branches have been ‘broken off’, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others, and now share the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches . . .”* (Romans 1:11,15,17,18)

Jesus: Did Not Abolish, But Fulfilled The Law

Jesus was born into a Jewish family, followed Jewish tradition and lived and taught as a faithful Torah-observant Jew. He never intended to abrogate the Law, and made that clear in Matthew 5:17, 18: *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass away from the law till all is fulfilled.”*

Romans 10:4 says, *“Christ is the end of the Law . . .”* Don Finto asks, “What did Paul mean? Perhaps David Stern, a Messianic Jewish scholar, makes it clearer in his translation of this verse. Stern points out that the Greek word *telos*, here translated ‘end,’ can equally well be translated ‘completion, aim, purpose, goal, outcome, or consummation.’ Writes Stern, ‘For the goal for which the Torah aims is the Messiah. Christ is the completion, the goal, the purpose, the aim, the consummation of the law!’”⁸

The Great Disconnect

The disconnect to our Jewish roots began to be legitimized by the mid second century. After some of the most severe persecution in the three hundred year history of the Church, the 4th century conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine would eventually lead to the greatest disconnect from the Church’s Hebraic roots. The seat of influence shifted from Jerusalem to Gentile Rome and with it a change in world view that helped to redefine Christianity in form and substance.

As Christianity was legitimized in the western world, church buildings were erected, formalizing a new style of worship. Observance of the Jewish Biblical feasts were prohibited. The Sabbath was changed to Sunday. Many Christian days of observance were taken out of context from the Biblical calendar and synchronized with more secular (some

⁸ Ibid. P. 82

refer to them as pagan) observances based on the Gregorian calendar. For example, Easter was no longer part of the Passover weekend, but was forever to be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon of the vernal equinox. These and other changes within the early Church continue to lead to discussion as to the effect of the pagan culture upon Christianity.

While various councils, beginning with the Council of Nicea in 324CE, worked to establish Church doctrine, they also authenticated a world view that moved the Church further away from its roots. The influence of the Hebraic world view was replaced by a Greek world view. To the Hebrews, learning and seeking knowledge was the means by which one prepared oneself for a life of worship, service and obedience to God as found in the Torah (the sacred and secular life were one in the same). To the Greeks, seeking knowledge itself was the goal. This opened the door to a new way of viewing Scripture that ultimately made way for differing doctrines that have impacted the Church today.

“An over-Hellenized, over-Latinized Christianity needs a re-humanizing process to bring it back to its founding Jewish roots and renew it more in keeping with its own inherent ideals,” writes Edward Flannery.⁹

As Christians we must recognize and give honor to our Hebraic roots. We must not give place to the disconnect and disassociation from our rich Hebraic foundation. It is a disconnect that infected the second century church, was codified by Church councils, strengthened by attacks against Jews and legitimized by early church fathers. Denial of our Hebraic roots ultimately provided the fertile soil for one of the great false teachings of the Church: Replacement Theology, which forever excludes Israel and the Jewish people from the promises of God and their prophetic destiny. May it never be!

As we walk in renewed revelation and appreciation of all that we owe the Jews we will more deeply love the people God loves, the land that he made covenant and the city in which he placed his glory forever.

Note: All scriptural references and quotes are taken from the NKJV except where noted.

⁹ Flannery, Edward, Catholic scholar, *The Anguish of the Jews—Twenty-Three Centuries of Anti-Semitism*, 1965