



Digging Up  
Hebrew  
Roots

Is This the  
Faith Once Delivered?

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# Prologue

*This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them might war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck (1 Timothy 1:18-19).*

For a long time now, there has been a small but growing movement of Jewish people who accept Jesus as the Messiah promised to Israel. For many of them, this has meant abandoning their cultural Jewish identity and religious customs, and accepting a “Gentile” version of Christianity for themselves. But others have instead retained their “Jewishness” and merely added belief in Jesus as Savior and Messiah to their lifelong customs and traditions. They commonly refer to themselves as Messianic Jews.

This book is not about them. It is instead about a surprising counter-phenomenon that has risen in the past 30 years—the pursuit by many non-Jewish Christians to find and embrace what is often referred to as their “Hebrew Roots.”<sup>1</sup> After all, Jesus and his 12 Apostles were all Jewish. Jesus preached the Gospel all his life to Jewish audiences. Surely, many have come to believe, understanding the customs and concepts of first century Judaism could help Christians understand Jesus’ message more clearly. Starting with this assumption, many folks have gone on to wonder if perhaps the only way to recapture “authentic first century Christianity” in their own lives is to create a new hybrid that might be referred to as Christian Judaism.

This trend is no longer just an obscure development at the fringe

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the terms *Hebrew Roots*, *Messianic Jews*, and related concepts, see the Appendix.

of the religious landscape. Even the charismatic Trinity Broadcasting Network has several television programs in its lineup that promote aspects of the Hebrew Roots movement. In the Deep South of the U.S., former Baptist and Methodist men with names like Joe Bob Brown or Billy Ray Smith are taking on Jewish-sounding names like Mordechai Ben Abraham, giving themselves the title “Rabbi,” and starting synagogues.

What most of these people don’t seem to realize is that the religion of Judaism, whether as it was practiced in the first century or as it is practiced in the 21st century, is not “the religion of the Bible.” It does, indeed, incorporate many elements from the teachings of the Old Testament, such as reverence for observance of the Ten Commandments. But those simple biblical principles have been deeply encrusted over millennia with human-devised additions, interpretations, traditions, customs, and embellishments. Judaism isn’t the religion of the Old Testament. It is, more aptly, the accumulated *response* of the Jewish people throughout their history to those Scriptures and to their experiences as a people.

Those Christians who become attracted to various branches of the Hebrew Roots movement are usually unaware that attempting to create a Christian Judaism has led many down some very dark paths. The problem isn’t the appealing, lively Jewish-style music that can be found in many Hebrew Roots and Messianic settings. It isn’t in the quaint decorations or pleasant customs for the annual Feasts. Nor is it in the often fanciful interpretations of some obscure passages in the Old or New Testament. These may, indeed, all be ultimately harmless. The problem is in some of the unspoken assumptions underlying the idea that true Christianity has its roots firmly in, not just the Bible, but first century Judaism. The purpose of this book is to examine this idea and some of those assumptions, and point out where they have led for too many sincere Christians— Christians who were seeking only to have a closer relationship with Jesus Christ through understanding his “Jewish roots.”

And beyond just an examination, this book is a warning. It is not merely casual information about a harmless fringe movement. It is about some who have made shipwreck of the faith of many, from the first century to the present. Even a casual reader of the Bible has to realize that heresies quickly sprouted up like so many weeds. Luke

records many of them in the Book of Acts. Paul wrestles with them in his letters, as do Peter and John. And, thanks to their writings, we know where the mainstream of early Christian doctrine flowed.

What is surprising, though, is the remarkable persistence of some heretical ideas. Whether they be attempts at creating a Christian version of Judaism, Gnosticism, or a denial of Christ altogether, those old heresies sprout again and again. Like seeds carried by birds, they show up in the strangest places and with a persistence that is astonishing.

There is a reason for this. Viktor Frankl insisted that man has a “will to meaning.”<sup>2</sup> If meaning is not present, he embarks on a search for it or creates it out of nothing. Man cannot stand the loss of meaning any more than he can stand hunger or thirst.

In the first century, when the Christian faith was populated solely by Jews, the loss of the meaning and traditions of Judaism created a crisis in some of those 3000 who were baptized on that first Christian Pentecost. Even now, when people become disillusioned with this or that church, they go abroad searching for meaning to replace what they lost. It is a shame that people become disillusioned, but to whatever extent they have illusions, they have to give them up.

We pass many dead-end byways in life. This little book is about one of them. It is a signpost to let you know the meaning of one road you might travel, the byway you may have taken, the pitfalls that lie in the road, and the snare that lies at the end of that road.

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<sup>2</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Simon and Schuster, 1984.



## Christian Judaism

*For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it (Galatians 1:13 NIV).*

Imagine that you could sit for one afternoon listening to Jesus teach. You can see the man, the color of his eyes, the color of his beard, the cut of his clothes. You can hear the timbre of his voice. You can feel the power, the charisma of the Master. You are seated before the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, healer of the sick, and comforter of the afflicted. A gentle man, a kind man, but one obviously head and shoulders above any teacher you have ever heard.

Of all the questions you might ask him on this day, what would be at the top of your list? What would you want to know? Mind, this may be the only chance you will ever have to speak to him, and you will want to make the most of it. What would be number one on your list of priorities? Would it be a real question or hypothetical? Would it be on doctrine, or about life?

As it happens, we know what one group asked him when they had the chance, and it is more than a little revealing. Jesus and his disciples had crossed the Sea of Galilee and had come to the land of Gennesaret. Word spread and people began to bring the sick and diseased. Anyone who touched Jesus was made perfectly whole. Matthew tells the story this way to put some perspective on what happened next.

A group of Pharisees and sages from Jerusalem came to Jesus with their question: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” (Matthew 15:2). Of all the things they might have asked him, they focused on something so trivial it’s startling. What was going on in their minds?

Actually, there was more at stake here than a mere question of

hygiene. These may seem to have been petty, small-minded men, but it happens that they were custodians of the heart and core of an important school of Judaism. The NIV calls these men “teachers of the law,” while the King James version calls them scribes. Jewish literature calls them “sages.” They were the teachers and custodians of the Oral Law and many, if not most, were Pharisees.

## Who Were the Pharisees?

Before we go on, we need to clarify just who the Pharisees and scribes were. It is all but impossible to understand what became the single most divisive element among the early Christians without understanding who these people were and what they stood for.

If the New Testament was all we had to go on, we might assume that the term Pharisee is just a synonym for “hypocrite.” But the Greek word, *Pharisaios*, is derived directly from the Hebrew and means “separatist.”<sup>3</sup>

The Gospel accounts do not explain who these people were and how they came to the position of influence they held at that time and place. Fortunately, other sources fill in the blanks. Most serious Bible readers know that the Babylonians conquered Judah, destroyed the first Temple, and carried almost all of the Jews captive to the Euphrates. The Babylonians themselves were later conquered by the Persians<sup>4</sup> and, a mere two years later, Cyrus the Great began the repatriation of the Jews to Palestine. He allowed the Temple to be rebuilt<sup>5</sup> but did not permit the restoration of the monarchy. With no king to control civil society, the primary authority focused on the Temple and thus on the priests.

Since the second Temple had been authorized by a foreign power, there were lingering questions about its legitimacy. “This provided the condition for the development of various sects, each of which claimed exclusive authority to represent ‘Judaism,’ and typically shunned social intercourse, especially marriage, with members of other sects.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrew, *parash*, to separate.

<sup>4</sup> 539 BCE.

<sup>5</sup> Completed in 515 BCE.

<sup>6</sup> See Wikipedia article “Pharisees.”

Early in this period the Hebrew Scriptures were canonized by the Great Assembly.<sup>7</sup> This was acknowledged by the Apostle Paul who wrote: “What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2).

From the days of the Great Assembly, there arose generations of men called the *hasidim*, Hebrew for “pious ones.” They strove to be scrupulous in their own observance of the Law, and urged their fellow Jews to be obedient to the Covenant and resist the pressures of the culture of the time to become “Hellenized”—i.e., to adopt the ways of the Greeks. It was the *hasidim* who gave rise to the Maccabees, who led the revolt in the second century BCE against the dominion of Antiochus Epiphanes, memorialized in the holiday of Hanukkah.

The *hasidim* faded as a recognizable force in Judaism in the final two centuries before Christ, but they gave rise to a number of other groups with a similar purpose. The most notable of these were the Pharisees. By the beginning of the first century CE, the Pharisees were the most prominent of the spiritual inheritors of the role of the *hasidim* as the protectors of the Law.

During the centuries after the return of the Jews from Babylon, a tradition had grown that the precepts of the Law recorded by Moses at Mt. Sinai were accompanied by an “Oral Law” or “Oral Torah,” spoken by God himself to Moses, transmitted verbally by Moses to Joshua, and handed down from generation to generation by the sages of Israel in a tradition of “receiving and passing on.” The Pharisees took on themselves the role of guardians of the combined Oral and Written Law. In addition, no doubt out of concern that the Jewish nation might ever get even close to condemnation by God again, the Pharisees continued a tradition of building a hedge around these Written and Oral Laws. They created rules to cover every situation that might cause or tempt someone to step outside the Law. The Written Law told the people to do no work on the Sabbath. The Oral Law tradition defined the specifics of just what was “work” in various aspects of life. And then hedges were built by later sages to avoid any possibility of infringing on any of those specifics. The

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<sup>7</sup> The Great Assembly is seen as the bridge between the last of the prophets and the era of the Rabbis.



sages of Jesus' time were the experts in all of these Laws.<sup>8</sup>

The first historical reference we have to the Pharisees outside of the Bible is in the writings of the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus. Josephus wrote in the first century, not long after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. His works describe the history of the Jews and give details of their lifestyle as it would have been in Israel during the time of Christ and the Apostles. Josephus presents the Pharisees as one of three primary influential religious movements into which first century Jewish thought was divided: Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees.

The Essenes were a very small, religiously devout sect that practiced communal living and celibacy. Some scholars believe that the Qumran sect that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls were part of the Essenes.<sup>9</sup>

The Sadducees were wealthy and powerful, the social elite of the first century, and were linked closely with the Temple. It appears from historical accounts that most of the priesthood and the leaders of the Jewish Sanhedrin (the religious counterpart of a "Supreme Court") were Sadducees. The Sadducees had a number of beliefs that were drastically different from the Pharisees. In particular, they did not believe in a resurrection of the dead, they did not believe in angels, and *they did not accept the Oral Law*, three cornerstones of the Judaism of the Pharisees. In fact, because the Sadducees scrupulously held only to the Written Law of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), they had a narrow view of its interpretation, taking the most literal meaning wherever possible. Thus, for instance, the Pharisees were convinced by the Oral Law that the provision of "an eye for an eye" had *never* been intended to mean that someone who severely injured another's eye should have his own eye put out. It was to be interpreted that the monetary value of an eye should be paid by the one who inflicted the injury. The Sadducees insisted, instead, that only actual physical retribution would satisfy this command.

Although the Sadducees had actual physical control of the Temple worship, it was the Pharisees who had the hearts of the people, and this gave them a powerful influence in the society.

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<sup>8</sup> In the nature of things, the sages were Pharisees, but not all Pharisees were sages.

<sup>9</sup> Naturally, other scholars disagree. One theory has Qumran as a mere pottery factory.

It is clear from descriptions in the Gospels that many of the Pharisees of Jesus' time had drifted into a dry legalism that worried more about rules than about love of God and neighbor. Some were hypocritical, demanding of all others a standard of behavior that they themselves did not follow. Both John the Baptist and Jesus had harsh words for those who fell into these categories. But this was not necessarily true of all individual Pharisees. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and confessed that he and his fellows knew that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, and who later stood up for Jesus in a meeting of the chief priests and Pharisees, was himself a Pharisee. This same Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathaea in burying Jesus after His crucifixion. Although other specific Pharisees are not named, it should not be assumed that every last one was a hypocrite and/or a heartless legalist.

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, a number of Pharisees accepted Jesus as Messiah and became part of the fledgling Church. But this did not instantly strip them of their identity as Pharisees! They were Pharisees who had come to accept that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but many did not abandon their unique worldview. They became *Christian* Pharisees. And from the earliest days they were an influential faction in that church. Paul, a man who had himself been a devout Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee, found himself at odds with them very soon after his own conversion. His worldview had changed, theirs had not.

This had far-reaching implications for what would follow, particularly in relation to what the Pharisees assumed about the concept of the “Oral Torah” or “Oral Law.”

Some are under the mistaken impression that the Hebrew term *torah* means “law,” and refers specifically and only to the collection of the first five books of the Bible. This is only one meaning of the term. Each Jewish synagogue has a *sefer torah*—a scroll of the Torah—which contains those five books. Reading from this scroll is a central feature of synagogue worship gatherings everywhere.

But *torah* has a much broader implication among observant Jews. A more accurate rendering of the term would be “instruction.” And as mentioned above, what many do not realize is that this “instruction” from God is viewed by Orthodox Jews as having been provided in two media—oral and written:

*Hashem* [God<sup>10</sup>] would recite a paragraph of the Written Torah to Moses, telling him what to write, letter by letter. *Hashem* would then teach Moses the details of that Law, along with the deeper meanings, the applications of that Law, and all concepts related to it.<sup>11</sup>

There is no hint of the process of handing down such an Oral Law recorded in the writings of the Old Testament. But the Pharisees of Jesus' time firmly believed that the teachings of the Jewish sages were more than mere traditions of how to apply the Laws of God to specific situations. They saw them as a reflection of a faithful oral transmission of a type of law just as binding as what was written in the *torah* scrolls—perhaps even more so. The New Testament refers to this Oral Law as the “*traditions* of the elders.”<sup>12</sup>

After the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, there was a fear among the leaders of Judaism at the time that the Oral Torah might be lost. So it was then that it was decided to commit that Oral Torah to writing for the first time in history. This process took many years, and yielded a document called the *Mishnah*, a collection of the teachings of the eminent Rabbis, believed to accurately represent the details Moses was taught on Mt. Sinai about exactly how to obey the Laws of God. Eventually a collection of commentary and clarifications of this material, called the *Gemara*, was added to the *Mishnah*. Together these documents are known as the *Talmud*.

Most Christians, including many who are involved in the Hebrew Roots movement, are unaware of the nature of the Oral Torah and its centrality to Orthodox Judaism. They mistakenly assume that the Talmud is viewed as a mere *commentary* on the Written Law, based on scholarship. This is not true among Orthodox Jews. They view it as not only equal to, but *superior* to, the Written Law as having come directly from God Himself. To Orthodox Jews:

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<sup>10</sup> *Hashem* is Hebrew for “The Name.” It arises in common use from the tradition of not speaking the name *Yahweh* aloud.

<sup>11</sup> “Scripture Only Please: Asking Questions”: <http://www.beingjewish.com/mesorah/howtoask.html>.

<sup>12</sup> See Matthew 15:1 ff.

It is impossible to fulfill the Commandments of the Torah without the Oral Torah, because we need to know those details. On the other hand, they claim that if we had only the Oral Torah, it *would* be possible to fulfill the Commandments. The Written Torah's function is primarily to prevent the Oral Torah from being forgotten.

Questions often arise from people who insist on proof from "Scripture." Christians, and those who follow their example, will accept only what is found in the *Written* Torah. They would be surprised to learn that in Judaism, quoting Scripture is not necessary. If it is in the Oral Torah, it is Torah, and that's a good enough source. If neither the Written *nor* the Oral Torah mention something, then it is not Torah. But if the Talmud teaches something, it is Torah, and therefore it is Judaism.

. . . When we seek answers in depth, it is to the Oral Torah that we turn, supported as it is by the Written Torah. . . The Oral Torah is pivotal and vital to Judaism. So to ask us to ignore the Oral Torah is completely unacceptable. It would be like trying to use a computer without a monitor.<sup>13</sup>

If you are still not clear on the centrality of the Oral Law in Orthodox Judaism, consider the following dogmatic statement by the author of the material quoted above [emphasis added].

What is the source of our wisdom? The Torah tells us—the Torah is the source! It is amazing that so few people take the time to think about what this really means. Consider: The Christians claim that they now have the Torah. Yet no one calls the Christians a wise people. What do we have that they don't? The answer is obvious to anyone who has ever learned the Torah. We have the Oral Law, which is the Traditional

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<sup>13</sup> "Scripture Only Please: Asking Questions," op. cit.

accompaniment to the Written Tradition many refer to as the Bible. Anyone who has ever tried to learn the Scriptures alone knows that they are a closed book, full of confusing and difficult-to-understand statements. The Torah is generally briefly worded, and lacks detailed directions. Obviously, commentary is necessary. This commentary is the Oral Tradition, also known as the Oral Law, or the Oral Torah. *The Written Bible is completely incomprehensible without the Oral Tradition.*<sup>14</sup>

It may sound almost blasphemous to insist that the Bible is an insufficient guide to salvation. Unfortunately, though, some who dabble in the Hebrew Roots movement eventually take an almost identical position. They claim that English translations of the Bible are virtually incomprehensible without viewing the content through the filter of first century Judaism. Some may not be convinced that the oral traditions of the first century Rabbis were really an Oral Law that went straight back to Moses. They may study the *Talmud*, and try to glean interesting tidbits from it. But they are not convinced that it has the authority of the Written Torah, nor do they believe that Jesus observed the Oral Law (which, indeed, he did not). Unfortunately, a growing number of Hebrew Roots teachers have changed their minds. An example:

. . . It is even more startling to note that not only was Jesus Jewish and a Jewish rabbi, but that he was orthodox and observant of the Law, both oral and written. It is evident that Jesus kept the whole of the written Law, for the New Testament testifies that having been born “under the Law,” he nevertheless committed no sin. Jesus was never charged by his opponents with breaking any part of the written Law.

Yet Jesus also kept the oral law of his day. An interesting example of this is Jesus’ adherence to the

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<sup>14</sup> “The Indispensable Oral Law”; <http://www.beingjewish.com/mesorah/oral-imperative.html>.

rabbinic prohibition against using the unutterable name of God. The divine name, the Tetragrammaton, yod hay vav hay (YHVH), was probably pronounced freely in the time of David, but by the time of Jesus it was forbidden to pronounce this name in reading Scripture or speech, and the divine name had been replaced by Adonai (Lord). The most common substitute term for the name of God used by Jesus was “Heaven.” This occurs in the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” which Jesus used frequently. Jesus similarly used the euphemism “the Power” when interrogated by the High Priest (Matthew 26:64).<sup>15</sup>

It is a real leap from noting that Jesus is not recorded as publicly speaking the name of God, to assuming that he thus “kept the oral law of his day.” Unless he was prepared to risk being immediately stoned for blasphemy, of course he didn’t publicly step over the line of uttering the Hebrew name of God! This could be accounted for by mere common sense and expediency. It does not prove in any way that he respected, followed, or taught his disciples all of the other aspects of that Oral Law. In fact, it is clear that he didn’t, from the passage in Mark 7 that speaks of his disciples not following the Oral Law’s requirements of hand washing. Nor did he accept the commands of the Oral Law that defined proper Sabbath observance—for which the Pharisees attacked him when his disciples plucked grain to eat from a field on the Sabbath as described in Matthew 12. Continuing:

Finally, as regards the dress of Jesus, it is clear from the New Testament that Jesus, like all observant Jews of the first century, wore tzitziyot—the tassels or fringes which hung from the four corners of the outer garment or robe of a first century Jew. This is commanded in Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12. That Jesus wore the tzitziyot is illustrated by the story in Matthew 9:20 of the woman who touched

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<sup>15</sup> Derrick C White, Restoration Fellowship website, “The Jewishness of Jesus,” <http://www.restorationfoundation.org/6336.htm>

the fringe of his garment.<sup>16</sup>

If this example is intended to prove anything about Jesus' approach to the Oral Law, it fails. This commandment is in the *Written Law*, which Jesus scrupulously obeyed, lest he be justly accused of failing to observe that Law.

Failure to understand the role of the Oral Law in Orthodox Judaism can lead to many areas of confusion when evaluating the importance of understanding the so-called Hebrew Roots of Christianity.

Take special note of the idea of “receiving and passing on” because this lies at the heart of Rabbinical Judaism. It crops up in something Paul said in his letter to the Galatians: “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not *receive* it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12 NIV).

This is a more important statement than it first appears to be. To a Jewish reader, the language was unmistakable. The Gospel, Paul said, was not *received* from Judaism, nor any chain of sages and Rabbis. Paul received it, right enough, but he received it from Christ himself. *The Gospel, then, is not merely another kind of Judaism.*

## **How Jesus Viewed Judaism**

We still haven't clarified entirely what was going on in the minds of those sages who questioned Jesus about hand washing. A little earlier, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath, and the disciples, being hungry, plucked some heads of grain and began to eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:2).

The problem is that there is no law recorded in Scripture to say it is wrong to pluck an ear of grain to eat or perhaps a cluster of grapes off a vine on the Sabbath day. The law they were talking about was *Jewish Law*. As noted above, what today is called “Jewish Law” is a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



combination of Scripture and oral teaching about the Law. In the New Testament, what today is called the Oral Law is universally referred to as *tradition*, in particular, the *tradition of the elders*. Jesus, in his answer, ignores tradition and goes straight to Scripture:

He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent?” (Matthew 12:3-5 NIV).

These two examples are drawn, not from tradition but from Scripture, the Written Law. But even in the Written Law, men who had done unlawful things could be deemed innocent. This was unthinkable to the scribes. Jesus went on to say: “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (v. 7).

At this point, Mark’s Gospel adds this: “Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27-28 NIV). Based on the context, we can say the same thing about the entire Law. Man was not made for the Law, the Law was made for man. Matthew continues with what happened next.

Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees





went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus (Matthew 12:9-14 NIV).

Something was dreadfully wrong with these men, but they were blind to it. Legalism and self-righteousness led these men from being merely annoying to being murderers.

But we need to go back to the hand washers we started with. When Jesus heard their question, he replied “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3). Now the fundamental issue of the conflict between Scripture and tradition is laid on the table for all to see.<sup>17</sup> Jesus went on:

For God said, “Honor your father and mother” and “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.” But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God, he is not to “honor his father” with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men”(Matthew 15:4-9 NIV).

Then Jesus explained the issue to the crowd, but later, his disciples came to him and said, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” (v. 12).

Jesus’ reply was blunt: “Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (v. 13 NIV).

There are three things we can take away from this encounter.

1. The Judaism practiced by these men was not planted by God.
2. They and their disciples were blind as bats.
3. The disciples were cautioned to *leave them*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> One could even fairly call it the conflict between Scripture and Judaism.

<sup>18</sup> Several follow the KJV here and render the last phrase, “Leave them alone.” A simple word search will quickly reveal that the NIV gets the sense of the Greek *aphiemi*

On another occasion, Jesus was having dinner at the home of Levi, and many of Levi's colleagues, tax collectors all, "sinners" joined him at table. When the teachers of the Law who were Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16 NIV).

Jesus answered the question, but they persisted with another, pointing out that the disciples of the Pharisees fasted often but Jesus' disciples did not. Jesus replied to the issue, and then added this:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins" (vv. 21-22).

It seems clear enough that, to Jesus, the Judaism practiced by the sages was the old wineskin. Jesus was not bringing a better vintage of the old wine. It was new, and it could not be contained by the old. The Christian faith was not a patch sewn onto a worn out Judaism. It was new wine in new wineskins—it was a new garment altogether.

One writer with a Hebrew Roots emphasis, Brad Young, offered an unusual interpretation of this parable of the new and old wine. In his book *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, he suggests that the old wine is emblematic of the old practices, the old ways of the Law of Moses, with a fast only on the Day of Atonement. The new wine, he concludes, was the new fasts introduced by various sects in an attempt to become more spiritual. Jesus, he concluded, wanted people to revitalize their faith in God.

"New fast days," Mr. Young said, "may not be the best way to pursue the path leading back to the old wine. [Jesus] wanted to see fresh wineskins for old wine." He quotes Jesus as saying, "The old wine is better."

But Jesus did not suggest new wineskins for old wine, although

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correct. In the vernacular, Jesus tells his disciples to "stay away from them."

that would fit better with Mr. Young's thesis. What Jesus said doesn't fit it at all. Jesus said, "New wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved."

A rereading of the account makes it plain enough that the Pharisees were challenging Jesus because his disciples were not following the old tradition. The old wine and the old wineskins have to represent Jewish tradition.

Although Jesus and his disciples followed the Law of Moses well enough, Jesus brought an entirely new interpretation of that Law. We can argue that it was a restoration of the right approach to the Law, but it was certainly new to the Pharisees. Jesus' teaching was new wine, and it would surely burst the old wineskins of Pharisaic tradition.

Mr. Young quotes Jesus directly, though, as saying, "The old wine is better." But Jesus does not quite say that. Here is the quote: "No man also having drunk old wine straightway desires new: for he says, The old is better."

Jesus' point in the parable is not the relative quality of wine but the obvious fact that we do not change our tastes readily.

"I understand," Jesus said, "that you are not going to initially prefer the new wine. It won't taste like the old wine, and it can't be put in your old wineskins. We have to make a fresh start."

Brad Young makes an important contribution when he says we need to break with the Western mind set and listen to the words of Jesus in a Jewish context. Some light can be shed on the Gospels from understanding Jewish tradition and culture, and there is no doubt that the Law of Moses formed the basis for all of Jesus' teaching.

But Jesus did not found his teachings on Jewish tradition. Jewish tradition, the Oral Law of the first century, was old wine in old wineskins. Jesus brought new wine and new wineskins, an entirely new tradition for applying the Law of God to life.

On another occasion, Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." This statement is important in ways that aren't always understood. Jesus speaks of building his assembly, his congregation, in the future tense. It would not be remodeled Judaism or a new wing on the old structure of Judaism. It would be a new building entirely, founded on himself.

This may be a good place to note Paul's statement about the foundation of Jesus' church: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Christ would not found his church on Judaism, but upon himself, the Rock.

Moreover, to speak of "Hebrew Roots" is to miss an important distinction. The Christian faith is not rooted in a language, a culture, a tribe. Scripture makes it very clear that our Root is not Israel, the Jews or the Hebrews, it is Christ. In Revelation, Jesus makes it plain that he is both Root and offspring of David (22:16). He is called the Lion of Judah and the Root of David (5:5). Paul cites Isaiah, saying "There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust" (Romans 15:12).<sup>19</sup>

Those looking for Hebrew or Jewish roots to the Christian faith are looking in the wrong place. The faith is firmly grounded on Jesus Christ as Foundation and Root. Christ honored Scripture but he rejected the man-made rules of the Jewish religious establishment.

### **The First Christians and Judaism**

The man who came walking up the hill of Golgotha on this day was not the same man who had come here once before. His name was Saul. He had, in fact, visited every place in Jerusalem where Jesus had done anything significant. He had gone there collecting evidence against the Christians.

To Saul, in those days, these people were *not* just another sect of Judaism. They were a threat to the very foundations of Judaism. If their differences had merely been matters of doctrine, such as the differences between the Pharisees and Saducees, or even the despised Essenes, that could have been tolerated. If they had merely believed that Jesus was the Messiah, that might have led to an amused dismissal. But Jesus, in his first major address, had sharply disagreed with the "traditions of the elders," what had come to be called the Oral Law. More than that. Jesus had claimed to be God's Son which made him truly God in the eyes of his followers. Moreover, the people were believing him. His disciples had baptized 3000 people in one day.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Isaiah 11:1-10.

Saul set out to destroy this cult, but something happened to him on the road to Damascus. He was returning from Damascus a changed man. He had encountered the living Christ, the Son of God. Now he had to go back to every one of those places and see them with new eyes. What had happened on this hill on that day when the Son of God died? What did it mean? Saul went back to the tomb where Jesus had lain for three days and three nights. He had been there before, buying the story that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body. Now he knew that was a lie. He knew that Jesus came alive in that tomb and walked out in his body.

Things that had been important to him as a practicing Jew, were now just so much dog food. Forgive the crudity, but that is precisely how Paul described it in his own words. Writing to the Philippians, the church that supported him more than any other, he said:

Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinks that he has whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but *skuballon*, that I may win Christ (Philippians 3:4-8).

The Greek word, *skuballon*, literally means that which is thrown to the dogs. This was written to a Greek church, and it would not have hit them as hard as it might have a group of believing Pharisees. But by the time Paul wrote this, he had come to thoroughly despise what those “believing Pharisees” had done to confuse the fledgling church. In a letter to Titus, he gave instructions for establishing elders in every city and every church, laying out what was required of them in a set of qualifications. Among them:

Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the opposition. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, *specially they of the circumcision*: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake (Titus 1:9-11).

“Subvert whole houses” probably refers to house churches. But what does he mean by “they of the circumcision”? He isn’t talking about those who were circumcised. Every Jew was circumcised. It is a plain reference to the circumcision *party*, primarily the believing Pharisees who were his opposition at the Jerusalem conference.

Their mouths must be stopped, wrote Paul: “Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth” (v. 14).

There is little question what Paul meant. One of the myths<sup>20</sup> of Judaism is that their traditions were handed down orally by God at Sinai. It may well be that this is what Paul had in mind, because he characterizes Jewish tradition as “the commandments of men.” Jesus used the same language referring to the doctrines of the Pharisees.<sup>21</sup>

The story of how the first Christians shed this idea is imbedded in the Book of Acts. As a result of persecution, the disciples in Jerusalem were scattered all over the region and took the Gospel with them. A handful of these men ended up in Syrian Antioch and taught many of the Greek men and women who, though not Jewish, nevertheless believed in and obeyed the God of Israel. Paul and Barnabas found themselves there with this very active church.

In the course of time, the Holy Spirit led them to send Paul and Barnabas out on what is often called their first “missionary journey.” Everywhere they went, they first visited the synagogue—with mixed results. But the Gentile believers they encountered were enthusiastic and converted to the new faith in large numbers.

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<sup>20</sup> Myth: a traditional story of unknown authorship, ostensibly with a historical basis, but serving usually to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of man, or the customs, institutions, religious rites, etc. of a people.

<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 15:9.

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch where much celebration greeted the news that God was calling Gentiles into the faith. They should not have been surprised, given Peter's experience with Cornelius.

But then, a fly appeared in the ointment. Some men arrived from Judea and taught the brethren saying, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:2).

It should have surprised no one that there would be various beliefs among the first Christians, but this one was especially pernicious. Paul and Barnabas argued vigorously against them and, in the end, the church decided to send a deputation to the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem to settle the issue. The unity of the church was at stake.

## **The Jerusalem Conference**

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, and the church being assembled, Paul and Barnabas rehearsed all that God had done with them. So far, so good. But immediately, "some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:5 NIV).

The modern Christian reader encounters a problem right here in the beginning of the story. It is the definition of the "Law of Moses." To most of us, the expression refers to the Law given at Mt. Sinai and *written down* by Moses. But to the Pharisees, the Law of Moses was both written and oral. In other words, they wanted to impose on the new believers the customs which Jesus himself had long since rejected outright.

What the believing Pharisees were assuming was that Christianity was a new sect of Judaism, a new patch on an old garment. This misunderstanding has dogged our steps for a long time.

It is painful to realize that there were different parties right there in the home church of all Christendom. But, when you think about it, it was inevitable that it should be so. People don't shed their worldview like snakes shed their skin. They have an image of God and his way in their minds, and they tack their Christianity over that.

The disciples baptized 3000 people in one day, and so brought 3000 new problems into the church. There were believing Pharisees, believing Sadducees, believing Essenes, believing fishermen and merchants. Everyone brought a comprehensive worldview with them.

What most don't realize is that these believing Pharisees also believed that the Oral Law was part and parcel with the Law of Moses. That, we now know, is a Jewish myth. But on this occasion, they had to work their way through this issue. Peter, we learn, stood and slammed the door on the question by citing his special mission to Cornelius.<sup>22</sup>

The believing Pharisees had said, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." Peter's reply: "Oh yes you can, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."

Then everyone became silent and listened to Barnabas and Saul as they recounted the events of their journey. It was by all accounts an orderly debate, and finally James summed up with a recommended conclusion.

Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, *being read in the synagogues every sabbath day* (Acts 15:18-21).

There are two remarkably persistent, and remarkably wrong ideas that have come from this. One, that the four things mentioned were the only things from the Written Law that the Gentiles needed to be concerned with. Two, that the reference to the Law of Moses being read is something that the Gentiles needed to be warned against. Understanding what the Pharisees believed clears up a lot.

James was saying: First, there are four particular dangers to

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<sup>22</sup> See Acts 15:7-11.



Gentile Christians living in the Greek world. We want them to be warned off these things. Second, we don't need to tell them the rest, because they can hear the Law *read* in any synagogue any Sabbath. That he refers to the Law being read is important. That means he is talking about *Scripture*. The Oral Law was not read, it was recited and passed on by memorization.

It is also worth knowing that the Gentiles being converted at this stage of history were nearly all "God Fearers," and well acquainted with synagogue and the Law. The church did not begin to encounter "raw" Gentiles in any numbers for another 80 years.

After James had offered this summary and recommendation, it pleased the entire assembly, including the Apostles, the elders, and the whole church to grant their approval to the letter setting this forward for all the churches. The preamble to that letter is important.

The apostles and elders *and brethren* send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment (Acts 15:23-24).

Note well, *everyone* was involved in the decision. And what the heretics had done was not merely a harmless difference of opinion, but a subversion of souls. You would think that this settled the issue for everyone, but you would be wrong. Paul's letter to Titus cited above and dated some 14 years later made that clear enough.

For the Christian, the Written Law of God has never been abolished. It requires interpretation, but it was not set aside. Many Christians to this day thus observe the weekly Sabbath of the Ten Commandments, the annual biblical holy days, and other aspects of Scripture. But among some who understand this, there has been a temptation to look to Judaism and to assume that many of its *traditions* had divine sanction.

What the Jerusalem conference decided was, that Judaism, per se, was not binding on the disciples of Christ, *Jew or Gentile*. It was in no way a denial of the Written Law contained in Scripture, but rather

a laying aside of the Oral Law, the “traditions of the elders.”

It is disappointing that not everyone saw it that way. After the conference, Paul and Silas went back to all the churches they had established and passed on the decisions of the conference. Sadly, they were followed by some of the Christian Pharisees who argued to the contrary.

## **Paul versus Judaism**

You can hear echoes of this in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. It may not be the first letter Paul ever wrote, but it is the first one we have on record. And there is little doubt that Peter had it in mind when he characterized Paul’s writing as hard to understand.

The Book of Galatians is of special interest, because it comes so early in one of the most fundamental conflicts ever to trouble the fledgling church. In the end, the conflict has to do with the identity of the church. What is the Christian Church? Is it merely an outgrowth of Judaism, a logical progression of the traditions of Judaism, a reformed Judaism, or something altogether different?

Jews and Christians have been conflicted about one another ever since Christianity began. Even today there is an argument about “supersessionism,” the belief that the Christian New Covenant replaces or supersedes the Sinai covenant made with the Israelites. Christians and Jews may continue to argue about supersessionism, and whether the early church rejected Judaism whole cloth. But as noted earlier, there is one irrefutable fact that emerges from the pages of the New Testament: *Judaism rejected Christ*.

Why? From the very beginning, Jesus challenged the dominant Judaism of his day. Judaism was sectarian in the first century, perhaps even more so than today. Jesus in no way challenged the *Scripture* of Judaism, and he made that clear in the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law

until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18 NIV).

By that, he did not mean the Oral Law of the Pharisees. The reference to “the Law or the Prophets” is a reference to *Scripture*, and the letters and strokes of the pen refer to the *Written Law*. This is important, because he will shortly begin to challenge the traditions of the Oral Law. This is a distinction that tends to get lost in discussions of Jesus and the Jews. The Pharisees placed tradition on a par with Scripture. The Sadducees did not, but they had other problems with Jesus. For Jesus and later for Paul, Scripture, including the Law, ruled. Tradition could be set aside. This lies at the core of the letter to the Galatians.

Paul wrote to the Galatians: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”<sup>23</sup> Paul would never have referred to Scripture or the Written Law in those terms. He is writing about Judaism as practiced by Christian Pharisees—otherwise referred to as the circumcision party.

This was a remarkably persistent and disruptive idea. Apparently, the heretics from Jerusalem followed Paul shortly to Galatia. The letter to the Galatians followed this conference by no more than three years, and is the first letter of Paul’s that we have.

We don’t know with any clarity what happened, but we can develop a picture by reading between the lines. Take Paul’s introduction, for example: “Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. . .)” (Galatians 1:1).

Some have thought that Paul was distancing himself from the Jerusalem Apostles. But in the broad context of the argument, he is more likely distancing himself from a premise of Judaism and the traditions of the elders. We have seen that the idea of receiving from one man and passing on to another was central to Pharisaic Judaism. His later wording plainly denies any such approach:

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<sup>23</sup> Galatians 5:1.

But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

The language would be recognized as a reference to the oral transmission of tradition. Next, Paul places Judaism firmly in his past.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (vv. 13-14 NIV).

For Paul, the Christian faith is not just another sect of Judaism, but reaches past Judaism, past the Sinai covenant, to the covenant with Abraham. Galatians is valuable, because it fleshes out the conflict between Paul and the Christian Pharisees.

That old ideas die hard is illustrated by a conflict Paul had with Peter at Antioch. Peter understood well enough that it was not wrong to eat with Gentiles, but when a group of the circumcision party arrived from Jerusalem, Peter separated himself from the Gentiles like a good Pharisee. In Paul's words, Peter feared the visitors who were "of the circumcision" (see Galatians 2:11-12).

The expression "of the circumcision" does not merely refer to those who were circumcised, because half the Antioch church were circumcised Jews. It is referring directly to the circumcision party, the Christian Pharisees. The other Jews in the Antioch church followed Peter's example, and it led to an open rebuke by Paul. What follows is the speech that Paul gave on that occasion, and it is important enough to include it all:

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to

follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:14-16 NIV).

How clear does Paul have to make this? Salvation is by Grace, not the Law. “We Jews should know this,” he said. There aren’t two ways to salvation, one by the Law (Old Testament), the other by Grace (New Testament). No, it is by Grace, in all of sacred history.

What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise (Galatians 3:17-18 NIV).

Some confusion arises at this point from the assumption that the Ten Commandments and the moral Law didn’t appear until Moses, 430 years after Abraham. That assumption flies in the face of what God said to Isaac about the reason he was inheriting the promise. It was: “because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws” (Genesis 26:5 NIV). Not only were the Ten Commandments in effect long before Moses, there was an entire system of Law.

It is unfortunate that Paul uses the term “law” with so much ambiguity, but it becomes apparent that the later law, called the Law of Moses, introduced a broad variety of administrative laws for governing the community; i.e., because people would break the law, there needed to be a system of law for reconciling them to the community—and to God. So, Paul continues:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the

promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law (vv. 19-21).

That last sentence serves to underline the issue, and the connection between the heresy of the Christian Pharisees and what was happening in Galatia. Galatians is a difficult book, but when you understand the basics, it is not all that hard. Later, Paul focuses on circumcision—the core issue of the Jerusalem conference:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:1-4 NIV).

It is hard to imagine that, after the Jerusalem conference, people who styled themselves believers in Jesus were still advocating, and apparently practicing, adult circumcision. And Paul identifies the doctrine that is at issue: Justification by the Law—any law.

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been

crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation (Galatians 6:12-15 NIV).

The issue in Galatia and Crete, and in a number of locations, including Rome, was a persistent effort to inject Judaism into the faith—in particular, self justification by means of law.

The odd thing is that this idea persists all the way to our own generation. A great deal of the confusion may be traceable to a failure to distinguish between Scripture and Jewish tradition.

### **The Integrity of the New Testament**

For those who are inclined toward Judaism at any level, Paul naturally becomes a problem. One theory gaining acceptance in some Hebrew Roots circles is that, since the Greek New Testament doesn't support a particular doctrine that they may hold dear, then the New Testament must have been written in Hebrew. The Hebrew books were then suppressed and replaced with Greek versions which changed some of the meaning. By whom? By the wicked Catholic Church.

There are so many problems with this theory that one hardly knows where to start. The first thing you should know is that God has miraculously preserved the Bible for us, and the method by which he appears to have done this is by redundancy. The New Testament is not one book, but 27 books, Gospels and letters. By all accounts, these books were written in as many as 20 different locations. From the time of their writing, they were copied and sent all over the known world.

For any one powerful entity to get hold of them all and suppress them would have been impossible. Fragments of old manuscripts still turn up from time to time. Every single one of these manuscripts is written in Koine Greek. There is not one early Hebrew manuscript of any book of the New Testament. Then there is this: According to Josephus, many Jews did not read Hebrew or Aramaic. (See the second chapter of Acts to understand why the gift of tongues was so important.)

If even many Jews couldn't read Hebrew, why would Paul have written to the Philippians and Thessalonians in Hebrew, when he himself was fluent in Greek? He said plainly that he spoke in many languages, and Greek was the language most widely used. Here is another problem: The Catholic Church did not exist as an organized whole for more than 200 years after all the books of the New Testament were written. So, not only were the books scattered all over the empire, so was the authority of whatever church there was. No one ever had the New Testament under his exclusive control. It would have been impossible to suppress a Hebrew New Testament. There should be fragments of many of the books dating back to the earliest centuries. There are none.

If the theory that the New Testament was originally in Hebrew, and that the hated Roman Catholic church suppressed it and gave us a Greek New Testament were true, then we have no authoritative New Testament. If they could change one word, they could change them all. We couldn't be sure that Jesus rose from the dead. Even Paul might be a complete fiction.

So it happens that some, holding this or that peculiar doctrine, have decided that they can't trust Paul. The end result is that they make shipwreck concerning the faith, because the same rationale that leads them to reject Paul eventually leads them to reject the New Testament in its entirety. And the rationale that leads them to reject the New Testament will eat away at what's left and will lead to a rejection of the Old Testament in time—as it has done to others who have traveled this road.

That said, it is possible to empathize with the Christian Pharisees of the first century. They had grown up in a religious system that gave meaning to everything. As noted earlier, Viktor Frankl argues that man has a will to “meaning.” When a man's universe is complete with meaning, he is at rest.

But, as an atom when you knock off one of its electrons, when man loses some part of his sense of meaning, he becomes an ion, unstable, and cannot rest until the number of electrons is restored. The poor Christian Pharisees were unable to deny the resurrection of Jesus, and thus were unable to deny what he said. This punched a giant hole in their universe of meaning, and they were trying hard to patch it back up.



One of the hardest things for man to learn is that there is a time to let go of the past and look to the future. We can't abandon our search for meaning. But we must find that meaning in Christ, in the words and acts of Jesus.

Here is how Paul summarized it to the Galatians, and it is clear who he was talking about:

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be *justified by law* have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:2-6 NIV).

Understand this. God did not reveal the Law to man for God's own benefit. It was for our sakes, to keep us from hurting ourselves and others. We are firm believers in the Law of God, but not in trivial nitpicking. We are believers in the *meaning* of the Law. I suppose an argument can be made that Jesus and Paul did not totally reject Judaism. But one thing is beyond dispute. Judaism, per se, rejected Christ, and "Christian Judaism" is an oxymoron.

Don't misunderstand. We are not adopting an anti-Judaic philosophy. We respect Judaism as the response of the Jewish people to the revelation of God. But respect and agreement are two entirely different things. In the pursuit of justification by the Law, Judaism is alienated from Christian doctrine.

With all this as background, consider this segment from Paul's first letter to Timothy:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to

devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith (1 Timothy 3-4 NIV).

Paul does not pussyfoot around the issue. He calls it false doctrine. “Myths” could mean any number of things, but “endless genealogies” is almost certainly a reference to the practice of the Pharisees. It is also likely that Paul considered the Pharisaic idea of the Oral Law to be a myth.

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm (vv. 5-7).

There can be no doubt that he is referring to the sect of Christian Judaism and its endless citation of Rabbis and sages. They did indeed desire to be teachers of the Law, but Jesus identified them as teachers of their own rules. Finally, Paul summarizes. The Law, used correctly, involves attention to *the meaning of the Written Law*.

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (vv. 8-11).

Now, cut to the 21<sup>st</sup> century to see how this ancient error manifests itself in our modern world, within some groups which identify with the modern Hebrew Roots movement.

## Assorted Flavors of Hebrew Roots

There is a wide variety of ministries which have what they term a Hebrew Roots emphasis. Most can be grouped on a continuum from those which promote the simplicity in Jesus to those which, at best, distract from it and, at worst, totally undermine belief in Jesus at all. The following list of the various types of groups is presented from the least problematic to the greatest.<sup>24</sup>

1. Some Hebrew Roots ministries honestly seem to be convinced that not enough emphasis is made by the average Bible teacher regarding the Hebrew/Jewish background of Jesus and the culture of the first century, and the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Thus they direct their teaching to “consciousness raising” on this topic. They may point out in their writings how often Paul or the Gospel writers quote Old Testament passages. Or they may emphasize how difficult it is to get any sort of grip on New Testament prophecies, such as the Book of Revelation, without having a background in the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel. This type of ministry is not harmful and may actually be helpful to those who enjoy detailed Bible study.

2. Some Hebrew Roots ministries seem convinced that the material in most commonly used Bible-helps is just not detailed enough when it comes to first century customs. It may seem important to understand Jewish theology to the extent that it may have affected the New Testament writers. Or they may see possible foreshadows of the ministry of Christ in Old Testament events, objects, and activities.

Thus they may embark on their own detailed research in Jewish writings such as the *Talmud* in order to discover more information which they believe will shed light on Christian life and belief. The approach of this type of ministry can be misleading, because the writings of the *Talmud* and other Jewish literature may be as riddled with non-Biblical material as Gentile pagan sources. The speculations of the Rabbis through the centuries are just that—speculations. They

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<sup>24</sup>Adapted from a list at <http://isitso.org/guide/hebroot.html>.

may have no more insight into Old Testament times, the ancient religion of Israel, or in first century Judaism than Protestant commentators who have equal access to the same ancient documents. Jumping to conclusions based on speculation may not cause great spiritual harm. But, if dabbling in speculation leads to an obsession with wanting to know more and more obscure information—it can be a major distraction for a Christian.

3. Yet another type of Hebrew Roots ministry may encourage Christians to not only study Jewish customs of the first century (about which extra-biblical sources of information are very scanty), but to study and regularly participate in Jewish customs of the *present* in order to be more authentically “Christian.” They may imply that this sort of study and participation will lead to “deeper spiritual understanding” which will bring one “closer to God.” This approach can very easily distract Christians from the simplicity which is in Jesus. There is absolutely no documentation to establish that most modern Jewish customs were inspired by God, nor that they were even in place in the first century. Many customs have obviously evolved over the centuries, in the same way many Protestant and Catholic customs have evolved. Those who are trying to avoid superstitious customs in Christian settings by adopting Jewish customs may find that they are exchanging one set of man-made superstitions for another. In addition, many elements of modern Jewish ritual and thought have obvious mystical and/or occultic roots.

4. Some Hebrew Roots ministries go beyond suggesting that Christians “try out” religious practices and customs of the Jews. They actually teach that the only way to be an authentic disciple of Yahshua (Jesus) is to become a Jewish believer in the Messiah. This includes adoption of most Orthodox Jewish practices such as wearing prayer shawls for worship, wearing tassels on the bottom of a special garment worn at all times, using the traditional Jewish “blessings” throughout the day, and, for some males, even undergoing circumcision. All of these things are adopted in order to be more “spiritual” and to be more acceptable to God. The approach of this type of ministry is completely distracting from the simplicity that is in Christ, and leads away from true spiritual faith and practice rather

than toward it.

5. There is one final type of Hebrew Roots ministry which has begun to develop out of number four above. This ministry poses as one which offers to help Christians explore the Hebrew Roots of Jesus and the Hebrew Roots of the New Testament faith. But, under this benign surface, its goal is to totally undermine the faith of believers in both Jesus and the New Testament. One type of this branch of the Hebrew Roots movement downplays the role of Jesus in salvation, implying strongly that he was just a good Jewish Rabbi of the first century rather than the unique Son of God. They teach that the New Testament, while containing some inspirational material, is unreliable as the written Word of God. But, all too often, this type of ministry morphs into one even more radical, which attempts to draw Christians to such conclusions as:

- The New Testament was a forgery of the Roman Catholic Church;
- The Apostle Paul sought to undermine the teachings of Jesus, and created a false religion;
- Jesus of Nazareth didn't exist at all—or, even worse, represents not the Son of God but Satan, the Devil himself.

Obviously, this final type of Hebrew Roots ministry is not just distracting to Christians, but is, in fact, anti-Christ.

## Epilogue

Pam Dewey's *Field Guide to the Wild World of Religion* website features an extensive profile of the Hebrew Roots movement.<sup>25</sup> Below are excerpts from two recent emails which site visitors sent [italic emphasis added].

I've been prayerfully asking God to show me the light as I belong to [a Hebrew Roots synagogue]. Here lately they've been downplaying Jesus and referring to the New Testament as "The Addendum." God led me to your website today. It was like you have been sitting in our temple because you have addressed all of my concerns. I have now resigned from the temple along with another couple who have been feeling the same as I have. Like we were being smothered.

God Bless you so much for putting this on the web. I feel free again. . . like a huge weight has been lifted off of my shoulders. *My desire for wanting to learn more about Jesus was actually leading me away from his arms.* Please keep this site up for others as it saved me from false teachers.

Just wanted to give you thanks and blessings for the great overview of the Hebrew Roots movement. My husband and I were leaders of such a group for almost 4 years until God opened our eyes to the path we were on about a year and a half ago. We had to leave the group we started because the other elder would not agree to recognize the New Covenant as we believed

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<sup>25</sup> *Op cit*

the Bible proclaimed. . .

I found your outline of groups from harmless to the most dangerous kind [see list above] interesting because this was a progression our group followed—beginning well, and finding ourselves eventually in a very dark place.

The spiritual agony for me was like death, and I cried out to God. If this was all supposed to be a blessing and a way to “draw near” to God as we taught, why were we so dead? *I then saw the countless ways we had diminished Christ in our teaching and practice. We recognized the anti-christ spirit that had taken over the minds of people, and which we almost fell under ourselves. My husband went through a valley of doubts about Jesus as the Messiah and thankfully came out. We knew others who did not. . .*

We have such joy in Christ now—after a season of sorrow and repentance for our wayward hearts. We realized we had been feeding our pride and wanting to be special rather than truly seeking the truth. We realized in the end, the glory that Christ deserves we were diverting to many different places and no one could have found Him through our testimony.

Thank you for raising awareness about this movement. So few people realize what it is and it’s picking people off like flies. . .

We do not mean to imply, by sharing these comments, that all individuals who become involved in the various branches of the Hebrew Roots movement will end up like these people. But we have been watching the movement for over a decade, and found that their experiences have become more and more common, and should give cause for serious consideration of the foundational assumptions upon which many branches of the movement are built. There are signs that

can help you evaluate whether a particular ministry may help you to draw closer to Jesus, or ultimately lead you away from him. We are convinced that any ministry or group that identifies itself with Hebrew Roots interests and which promotes any of the following ideas is undermining the simplicity that is in Jesus:

- Any claim that insists that adopting customs or traditions of Judaism is necessary to “get closer to God” or “understand the deep things of God.”
- Any claim that such a ministry or group is revealing astounding information, unavailable to the average Bible reader, that will “transform your spiritual life.” (Only Jesus truly transforms lives.)
- Any claim that insists that Christians must study the writings of the historical Jewish Rabbis, such as those in the *Talmud*, in order to understand the Bible and live godly lives.
- Any subtle hint or overt claim that the Apostle Paul attempted to undermine the teachings of Jesus.
- Any subtle hint or overt claim that the New Testament is inferior to the Old Testament as inspired by God.
- Any subtle hint or overt claim that Jesus of Nazareth was just a really pious first century Rabbi.

If you notice any of the red flags above in some ministry, we urge you to remove yourself from its influence.



# APPENDIX

## Getting Our Terms Straight: Who's Who in Christian Judaism

### Messianic

A certain segment of those who believe in Jesus as Savior wish to emphasize his Jewish origins, and his fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. So they prefer to use the term Messiah rather than Christ (even though the words mean the same thing—anointed). And because of this they refer to themselves as Messianics; i.e., “followers of the Messiah,” rather than Christians, followers of Christ.

Messianics vary widely in their beliefs and teachings about the Bible and about Jesus, so it is not correct to assume that the term Messianic refers to a single, homogeneous movement. There are two main strains of Messianic groups—Messianic Jews and non-Jewish Messianics—with many variations within these two strains.

### Messianic Jews

For well over a century, organized groups of ethnic Jewish people, born into families that have practiced the religion of Judaism, have come to conclude that Jesus was actually the Messiah promised by God. They have created their own synagogues, where they maintain many of the customs of their heritage, but have added the belief in Jesus as Savior. Such Messianic Jews come in two main flavors.

One is, for all practical purposes, a branch of Protestantism. It accepts all standard orthodox Protestant doctrines such as the Trinity, and perhaps even totally non-Jewish customs, practices, and choices such as eating pork and shellfish, and observing Christmas and Easter.

Although they may keep a few of the trappings of Jewish custom such as the men wearing the *yarmulke* (skull cap), and families holding ceremonial Passover *seder* meals in the home, these are viewed primarily as cultural artifacts and not a spiritual necessity.

At the other end of the spectrum are groups that carefully maintain their Jewish identity, avoid overtly traditional Christian customs, and live a life that emphasizes the importance of scrupulously lining up with all of the words of the Torah. Many typically also observe the customs and traditions of Judaism that are not found in the Bible, but are part of the Oral Torah and its outgrowth.

### **Non-Jewish Messianics**

In the past few decades, an increasing number of non-Jewish people who believe in Jesus, have become fascinated with Jewish culture, traditions, and biblical interpretation. Some have identified themselves with Jewish tradition to the point of adopting the term Messianic for themselves rather than Christian. These groups also vary in how much they incorporate the trappings and beliefs of traditional Judaism into their own beliefs and practices. Some merely add Jewish customs to their worship and fellowship gatherings, such as holding a *seder* meal in their homes or fellowship sites for Passover, and using Jewish-flavored music and dance in their celebrations. Others try to imitate Orthodox Jewish customs as closely as possible, including wearing a traditional prayer shawl (Hebrew: *tallit*) or another garment with special tassels (Hebrew: *tzitzit*) on the four corners. They may learn to read and speak Hebrew, organize their weekly meetings around the traditional Jewish liturgy of weekly *Torah* readings, and regularly study the writings of the Jewish sages in the *Talmud* and other ancient writings.

### **Hebrew Roots**

The term Hebrew Roots (sometimes referred to as Jewish Roots) is a phrase that indicates that those involved take a special interest in what they believe to be the roots of Christianity in the faith of Judaism. They have a particular focus on the fact that Jesus was born in a Jewish culture and family. And thus his audience consisted almost entirely of Jewish people steeped in Jewish tradition, practices, and theology. Those who are involved with Hebrew Roots ministries therefore emphasize that it is necessary to understand the

tradition, practices, and theology of the Jews of the first century in order to fully understand the teachings of Jesus. This way the reader can comprehend the context in which Jesus spoke and how his audience would have understood Him.

Again, those who use this term vary widely in belief and practice. It is a mistake to assume that all Hebrew Roots groups are part of a monolithic movement in which everyone believes and speaks the same thing. This is decidedly not so. Just as with Messianics, the spectrum varies from those who just emphasize studying the culture of the first century in order to correctly interpret the New Testament, to those who insist that true mature spirituality is only available to those who immerse themselves in following the customs, practices, and beliefs of what they believe to have been first century Judaism. In some cases, there seems to be an assumption that the Judaism of the 21st century is little changed from what it was 2,000 years ago. Thus the trappings of *modern* Judaism are taken as a model for some Hebrew Roots groups. This is an inaccurate assumption regarding many practices.

Many Messianic groups share at least some mutual interests with Hebrew Roots groups, even if they do not directly use the term “Hebrew Roots” to describe themselves. And many individuals who belong to groups which consider themselves a branch of the Hebrew Roots movement also refer to themselves as Messianics.





