

# WHY STUDY OUR HEBREW ROOTS?

**Why should Christians pay any attention Jews have to say about anything?  
After all, aren't they "Christ-killers" who rejected Yeshua as their Messiah?  
Shouldn't we therefore reject all things Jewish from Christian theology?  
Haven't the Jews been replaced by the Church in the divine economy?**

**by Brian Knowles**

**N**ot long ago, I had an electronic conversation with a friend who was inquiring about my views on various Hebrew roots issues. At one point in the conversation, he said to me, "...just because some Jewish sages said something doesn't seem to me to be that significant."

Why should we Christians pay attention to anything said or written by Jewish sages centuries ago? It's an excellent question. Let's address it.

## **Scholars Meet to Discuss Hebrew Roots**

At the joint annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, the American Academy of Religion and the American Schools of Oriental Research, some 8000 scholars and archaeologists met November 18-21, 1995, to either deliver or listen to more than 1000 lectures. According to *Biblical Archaeology Review* (March/April 1996), "...the hottest topics continue to be the historical Jesus and, a closely aligned topic, **the relationship between Judaism and Christianity during the early centuries of the Common Era**. Most of the sessions on these topics were filled to overflowing. The floors and aisles, as well as the seats were filled; people at the doorway bent with cupped ears in the hope of hearing scholars...**If I detect a theme,**" wrote Hershel Shanks, author of this report, **"it is that if we are to better understand Jesus, we must better understand the Judaism of his times."** (emphasis mine).

The study of the Jewish roots of the Church is a hot topic among scholars these days. It has been for some years, and not without good reason.

## **The Original Blueprint**

When Jesus, himself a Jewish sage, said to Peter, "I will build my church..." he was not referring to the kind of institutional, politicized Christianity that has arisen in the centuries since he walked the earth. He had in mind something quite different. If we

study the first decade of the "church's" existence, we can see more clearly what he envisioned.

Jesus spoke and taught in the Hebrew language. When he made that statement to Peter, the word he used that has been translated as "church" was either *edah* or *qahal*. If he used *edah*, it would be better translated "witnessing body." If *qahal*, "assembly" or "congregation." In the days before the "church" became dominated by the gentiles, the movement was known simply as "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). The word translated "sect" is *airesis*, meaning a sect, a party or a school. It is used the same way of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5) and of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17). It was simply another Jewish school of thought like the Pharisees, Saduccees or Essenes. The same word was used of the various schools of philosophy that grew up around particular Greek philosophers. So the sect or school of the Nazarenes was the Jewish group that adhered to the teachings of Yeshua of Nazareth.

### **Yeshua the Jewish Sage**

Jesus himself was a rabbi, a Jewish theologian, and a sage. He taught within the milieu of 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism. For his own Jewish disciples (*talmidim*), Jesus endorsed the doctrine of the Scribes and Pharisees. He said to them, "...*the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do...*" (Matthew 23:2-3, NKJV).

By looking into the findings of archaeology, and into Jewish literature, we can also learn the meaning of the term "Moses' seat." In the ruins of a synagogue in Chorazim, north of the Sea of Galilee, archaeologists have found a chair carved out of basalt (igneous, or volcanic rock) labeled "Moses' seat." In Judaism, it was customary to sit when teaching. The great sages of the day were usually invited to sit in these "seats of Moses" when they taught in the synagogue.

In a homiletical *midrash* (commentary) *Pesikta Derav Kahana*, we learn that the great sage, R. Eleazar, also taught from a stone chair. Apparently, many synagogues included such a chair. It represented teaching authority in the tradition of Moses. Those who taught from it were believed to represent the continuity of Torah from Moses forward. Of course whether or not there was a literal chair is not the most important thing. What is important is that Jesus endorsed the essential teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees for his own rabbinic students.

We know also that Jesus criticized these two groups on occasion. Interestingly, we find the same kind of criticism of Pharisees *by* Pharisees in rabbinic literature. In one instance, there appears a list of seven kinds of Pharisees - two of them are positive role models, five of them are not. But Jesus' relationship with the scribes and the Pharisees is not the topic of our discussion here. The reason for studying the Hebrew roots of Scripture and the Church is. So let's return to that. Let's go back to the first decade of the existence of what we now call "The Church."

### **The Jewish Church**

Jesus was not a Christian - he was a Jew who practiced the religion of Judaism. Jesus' rabbinic students were all Jewish. His initial following was entirely Jewish. He said

that he had been sent to the "lost sheep of the House of Israel" - not the gentiles. (Obviously these people were not lost from view or he couldn't have gone to them. They were lost in the sense that they had no reliable shepherd - cf. Ezekiel 34:4-6)

Jesus spoke to his Jewish audience in a Jewish way. He used Jewish idioms, and Jewish methods of communicating. Let's look at some of them.

Everything Jesus and his *talmidim* did they did in a Jewish manner. They were Jews through and through. Christianity, as we know and experience it today, was a much later, gentile invention.

Jesus' apostles, and all of the thousands of Jews that came into the *edah* or *qahal* of *Yeshua* simply added to their Jewish understanding more Jewish understanding - as they were taught by Jesus the rabbi.

Because of its anti-Judaic origins, modern Christianity embraces many misconceptions about Judaism, and about the faith of Jesus and his disciples. Not of the least of these is the notion that Jesus came to do away with "his Father's" law. Yet Jesus said, "*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*" (Matthew 5:17). This verse has been widely misunderstood.

First, he is not speaking merely about the "Law of Moses" here, but of the whole of Scripture as it existed in his day. The term "Torah and Nevi'im" is a shorthand way of referring to what we call the Old Testament. It is a reference to the three-fold division of the Hebrew Scriptures: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim - expressed by the acronym *TaNakh*.

The term "I have not come" means "It is not my intent or purpose..." "Abolish" is a reference to destroying through misinterpretation. In Hebrew usage at that time, a person who misinterpreted *Torah*, or Scripture, was said to be "destroying" or "abolishing" it.

"Fulfill" is from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *kayem*. Its root means "cause to stand, uphold, observe, place on a firmer footing."

Jesus is saying, in effect, "It is not my intention to abolish or destroy Scripture through misinterpretation. Rather, I am here to place it on an even firmer footing through correct interpretation."

## **The First Generation of Believers**

The first generation of "Christians" was not called Christian. It was entirely Jewish. Its religion was Judaism. The teachings of Jesus were viewed as his interpretation of Judaism. Among Jews, they were referred to as the "Nazarene Sect" or "The Way" (Acts 24:5,14). They were Jews who followed a Jew - *Yeshua* of Nazareth. Like the schools of Hillel and Shammai, there was a school of *Yeshua*. Like the sects of the Pharisees and the Saducees, there was a sect of the Nazarene.

It never occurred to the Jewish apostles and their followers to be anything but Jews.

When Paul was accused of anti-nominianism - teaching Jews against the Law of Moses - he set the record straight by carrying out a Jewish ritual at the behest of the Jerusalem apostles. In the discussions surrounding this event, the Jerusalem apostles said to Paul, "*You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all are zealous of the law*" (Acts 21:20). The word "thousands" is from the Greek word *urias*, which means "myriad" -- that is, tens of thousands. The original apostles nowhere taught the Jewish believers in *Yeshua* to abandon their Judaism. They, and their Jewish followers, were observant Jews until the day they died.

Paul did not teach against the Law of Moses, nor did he replace it with anything. He did not expect his Jewish followers to abandon their Judaism in order to be "Christians" - as some erroneously taught. Paul taught that if one was called into the movement as a Jew, he should remain a Jew. "*Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called. He should not be circumcised...Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him*" (I Corinthians 7:18,20).

Jews did not have to abandon their Judaism to become "Christians," and gentiles did not have to become Jews to become "Christians."

For at least the first decade of its existence, Jesus' movement was entirely Jewish. There were no gentiles involved. Though they practiced Judaism, they interpreted it through the prism of the teachings of Rabbi *Yeshua* (pronounced *Yeshu* by the Galileans).

When gentiles began to join the movement, the Jewish apostles and leaders had to address the issue of what to do with these non-Jews in terms of Torah observance. This was the first great "theological" issue of the First Century Church. As author Dan Gruber writes, "In the first century, the most heated, controversial, doctrinal issue of all that the Church faced was, 'How do the Gentiles fit into all this?'"

Once the number of gentiles in the Church grew to the point where they dominated the Church, everything changed. As gentile leaders emerged, the Church became increasingly "gentilized." As the new gentile church emerged, the forces of anti-Judaism gained ground. As these elements gained authority, all things Jewish were cast out of the Church. The Church Fathers, beginning with Origen, began to develop what has since become known as "replacement theology." That is, the idea that the Jews have been replaced by the gentile Church in the divine economy. Now, nearly 2000 years later, Gruber says, "Today, the most heated, controversial, doctrinal issue that the Church faces is: 'How do the Jews fit into all this?'" (ibid.).

To comprehend the original, Apostolic era of the Church, and the writings that emerged from it, we must come to understand the Jewish roots of the Church. If we do not, we will be viewing it backward through history, and through the distorting lens of subsequent, anti-Judaic, gentile theology.

As we saw at the beginning of this article, Hebrew roots studies are exciting the scholarly world. They should be exciting the ministerial and church worlds as well. In some circles, they are. But conveying to the Church at large the exciting insights of

these studies is an uphill battle at best. There are several reasons for this, all of which represent obstacles to understanding:

- Hidebound tradition
- Anti-Judaism & anti-Semitism
- Fear of Judaizing
- Fear of loss (i.e. of status quo)
- Replacement theology
  
- Catholic & Protestant theology

Speaking of the Jews, the apostle Paul asks the question, "*Did God reject his people? By no means!*" (Romans 11:1). Why then does the Church act as though they had been rejected?

Should the Church be arrogant toward the Jewish people? Paul says, "*...do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you...Do not be arrogant, but be afraid*" (Romans 11:18-20). The Church has disobeyed the apostle Paul. It has become arrogant, anti-Semitic, complacent, and self-satisfied.

Christians have much to learn from the Jewish religious community and from 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism. What we now call the Christian faith was born in the womb of Judaism. Its roots go back to "our father Abraham." It is time for the Church to return to those roots and reestablish the foundations of its very existence.

On these pages, we will seek to help zealous Hebrew roots students mine the rich nuggets of understanding that are to be found there. **Please watch these pages for additional articles and study materials.**