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# BRIDGES FOR PEACE

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# HEBRAIC ROOTS

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**WHAT EXACTLY ARE THESE HEBRAIC ROOTS** that so many in the Church seem to be talking about today? A small interest group with comparatively few adherents that existed two decades ago is mushrooming into one of the significant movements of modern Christianity with millions of devotees across the globe. But what exactly do people mean when they say, “Hebraic roots” or “Jewish roots”? Google either term and you’ll find a myriad of sites, some with a very positive approach and educational resources to help get their point across. Others, however, are negative, calling the Hebraic roots movement a cult. Some Christians are expressing grave concern over the threat they believe it poses to Christianity and are working to expose what they call a dangerous heresy.

So which is it? For many, it is incomprehensible that so much controversy could be engendered by something they have found so encouraging and faith-strengthening. But for others, confusion reigns. I believe it is time for a good, hard look at this phenomenon, combined with a heartfelt prayer that the Lord will reveal His truth and restore unity to His body.

## A Variety of Definitions

Since a basic tenet of this movement is a root connection between Jews and Christians, it might help to look at the various definitions of the word “root.” Its most commonly accepted meaning is that of an organic vehicle through which nutrients are passed from the soil into a plant. This is the imagery used in Romans 11:16–24, where we read that Christians have been grafted in to the olive tree that is Israel, both communities receiving their nourishing sap from the same root system.

But the word means others things as well. “Origin” is another definition, meaning source. To “get back to the root” can mean to go back to where it all began. A third definition is “anchor.” If





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something is firmly rooted, it is strongly, even immovably, attached. To “put down roots” means to anchor oneself for the long haul. As we will see later, all three of these definitions have application with regard to the Hebraic roots of Christianity.

The Internet also provides a variety of explanations for the broader term Hebraic or Jewish roots. One site defined it as a movement of modern-day Christians who are returning to the perspectives and beliefs of the first-century Church. Another called it a broad term for those who place their emphasis on the need to study the Scriptures from the perspective of ancient Hebrew or Middle Eastern thought. Still another says the term refers to those who emphasize a return to the original Jewishness of the Christian faith.

In his book *Our Father Abraham*, Dr. Marvin Wilson uses the term Hebraic “heritage” instead. This, Dr. Wilson says, implies something which has been handed down from generation to generation. It means the transference of a legacy, in this case our Judeo-Christian legacy. In order to benefit from this inheritance, however, it is important to understand not only what our predecessors in the faith have delivered over to us but how we are to apply this bequest in our modern world.

For some, this might mean the adoption of Jewish customs or ritual items into their Christian worship. Often, I encounter Christians who have decided to wear a *kippah* (small Jewish head covering), lay on *tefillin* (phylacteries), or wrap themselves in a prayer shawl. Some have learned to speak Hebrew and even adopted Hebrew names. Others are keeping *Shabbat* (Sabbath on Saturdays) and celebrating the biblical holidays as described in Leviticus 23. Still others are expressing their Hebraic roots through Davidic worship dance.

But God’s desire goes well beyond these external symbols. He is longing to find those who would become passionate disciples the likes of Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, and the many other biblical giants, whose lives were consumed with love for the Lord and determination

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to follow Him, even unto death. Regardless of any outward custom or ritual, their hearts were unreservedly His, and their lives were examples of ardent love, fervent obedience, and guileless humility. This is the real message of Hebraic roots, and context is the key.

I think, perhaps, the most appropriate definition might read as follows: **a movement whose objective is discovering the proper biblical, historical, and cultural context in which the Scriptures were written and out of which Christianity grew in order to increase our understanding of God's character and impact the way we live our 21st-century lives.** The dictionary defines "context" as the surroundings, circumstances, environment, background, or settings which determine, specify, or clarify the meaning of an event. Let's see how each of our contextual categories fulfills that definition.

## Biblical Context

If the Bible were simply a book of philosophy or theology or perhaps a theoretical treatise on human behavior, there would be no need to delve into the historical and cultural milieu in which its various sections were written. But it is much more than that. It is the story of a real relationship between God and His people, recorded for posterity, so that every succeeding generation would have a clear invitation to enter that same kind of relationship and a blueprint to follow as they did so.

Like the layers of an onion, various books of the Bible provide context for others. And like the rich tales of a family's history, the Old Testament provides context for the New. From the genealogy that begins the book of Matthew to the hundreds of Old Testament quotations throughout, the New Testament clearly finds its meaning in the Hebrew Scriptures.

For the follower of Hebraic roots, as for any student of the Bible, biblical context is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, the Bible provides its own context. The Scriptures come alive as the background and setting of familiar biblical stories are uncovered; deeper understanding is achieved as the Old Testament is allowed to clarify the New; the heart of God is richly revealed as the narrative is woven together chronologically with each period providing the background and foundation for the next. But the Bible must also be allowed to provide the context for the rest of Hebraic roots study as well. Any concept, idea, or teaching must be examined in the light of the Scriptures. No matter

*Biblical  
Historical  
Cultural*



how compelling it might be, if it is not rooted and grounded in the Scriptures, it has no place in the Christian life.

## Historical Context

Unfortunately, Christians sometimes read the various stories told in the Bible as though they happened in a vacuum. Often, there is little or no understanding of the historical period in which the events occurred and, beyond that, what else was happening at the time. Throughout the history of Israel, God has used nations and armies, enemies and allies to position His people where He wanted them. The interaction between Israel and her neighbors is critical to the biblical narrative and can't really be understood without knowledge of historical context. That awareness not only illuminates the Bible, but it provides a framework for understanding the times in which we live today.

It is important for Christians to recognize that the history of the early Church is, in fact, the history of Israel. The early believers were Jews to whom nothing was more important than the study of the Scriptures. That wasn't, however, strictly a spiritual exercise. It was a study of their own history that shaped their world view and helped to make the early Church the courageous and committed body that it was. I suggest that the New Testament can't really be understood and appreciated to its fullest depth without allowing its historical underpinnings to provide background and context for its pages.

Today, as doors are opening for dialogue and friendship between the Jewish and Christian communities, historical context becomes even more important for Christians. By necessity, the Jewish people have studied their history well, and each generation is steeped in the stories of their collective past. Christians, however, are often unaware of their own history and how it has affected the Jewish people. In this case, post-biblical Christian history, painful as it is, must provide the context for relationship-building.

## Cultural Context

Yeshua's parables were wonderful stories that people understood and related to because He used objects from daily life to tell sometimes complicated tales. For us, however, 2,000 years later, those parables become so much more interesting and impactful as we come to understand the culture of the day. The rest of Scripture comes to life as well when verses are placed in their proper cultural context. Let's look at a few examples.

### —*The Vine and the Branches*

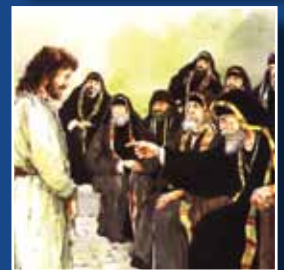
In John 15, Yeshua (Jesus) calls Himself the "vine." This imagery was not news to His followers who would have been very familiar with the concept. Grapevines were everywhere in ancient Israel, and the writers of the Old Testament had used the same imagery. The psalmist wrote that God brought a "vine out of Egypt" (80:8), referring to Israel. Hosea used the same picture (10:1), as did Isaiah (5:1–7) and Ezekiel (15:6). Jeremiah said, "I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock" (2:21, NLT).

For Yeshua to use this same imagery would have surprised no one. Their knowledge of the Scriptures would have insured their recognition of the symbolic meaning of the vine. Yeshua angered the religious leaders when He told the parable of the wicked tenants (Luke 20:9–19). The symbolism made so vivid by the Old Testament writers was by no means lost on them. They knew Israel was the vine, but He spoke of them as the wicked vine dressers.

### —*The Prodigal Son*

Here, an understanding of the laws of inheritance in ancient Israel is helpful in grasping the depth of the message. It was unusual for a son to ask for his inheritance while his father was still living. Actually, such an act should have been an affront to his father as well as his community. From sources such as the *Talmud* (rabbinic commentary on Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures), we know that standard behavior required that a father hold his estate until his death, when it would be distributed by his heirs. Paul mentions these laws more than once, making it clear that a father was expected to have complete control over his property during his lifetime. He could draft a will

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instructing his heirs on the disposition of his possessions, but that disposition should not happen until his death.

So the prodigal son's behavior went far outside the norm and sent a message that he cared nothing for his family or traditions but only for himself. Yet, his father's reaction displays a heart of tremendous generosity and tenderness. The son's callous selfishness deserved to be met with anger and disinheritance. Instead, we see a father who loved his son so much, he watched daily for his return, even after such inexcusable behavior.

### —*Eating with Tax Collectors and Sinners*

This accusation was leveled against Yeshua by the Pharisees in Matthew 9:11. A little cultural context will again shed additional light on the Scriptures. In first-century Israel, there were economic and class divisions within the society as there are today in most parts of the world. A very small upper class existed, inhabited by wealthy and aristocratic families as well as the high priests and landowners. The small middle class consisted of professional people such as shopkeepers, tradesmen, and the well educated such as the Pharisees. But the majority of the people of the day fell into the lower class. Here we find the hardworking but poor, widows and orphans, the handicapped, and those that were deemed outcasts.

Outcasts were unique in that they may well not have been poor in an economic sense but had been cast out for other reasons. Tax collectors, who were Jewish men who collected taxes from fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman Empire, fell into this category. Many of them became wealthy at the expense of their brethren. They were considered traitors and Roman collaborators.

"Sinners," in this case, were also specific members of society. These were people who deliberately transgressed the requirements of the law such as money-lenders who charged interest on loans given to fellow Jews even though it was expressly forbidden.

It is no surprise then that the Pharisees were appalled at Yeshua's interaction with this group of people. They were not sinners in the ordinary sense; these were traitors, intentionally betraying their own people and profiting by expressly transgressing the *Torah* (Gen.-Deut.). Yet, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, Yeshua was not incensed. By eating with Israel's outcasts, He sent them the message that His forgiveness was theirs for the taking; they were not outcasts to Him. Certainly, the Pharisees would have believed that forgiveness was available for these outcasts, but only after they had changed their lifestyle and begun to follow the dictates of *Torah*. However, Yeshua met the outcasts where they were and brought them the message of the love and forgiveness of God—*while* they were yet sinners.

These are a few of the hundreds of examples throughout the Bible where an understanding of cultural context enlightens the Scriptures and brings a new level of understanding to familiar stories. It brings the Bible to life and for followers of the New Testament, it is enlightening and sometimes surprising that the culture that provides the context is entirely Jewish.



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## Why the Controversy?

If the intent of the Hebrew roots movement is to bring clarity to Scripture, strengthen believers, and create ardent, passionate disciples, what's the problem? Why are accusations of heresy, arrogance, and divisiveness being thrown at a movement with such noble goals? Unfortunately, every movement within the Church, from its very beginning, has been fraught with excess, and this movement is no exception. As God has moved throughout history, gifting His people with times of revival and renewal, Satan has managed repeatedly to create difficulty and division.

After teaching the first session of a day-long seminar for Christian leaders on Israel and the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith, I was eager to answer questions during our break time. When a young pastor approached the front of the room, I smiled broadly and extended my hand. I was surprised when he didn't take it and even more surprised at his first comment. "I am sorry to say this," he said warily, "but I just hate it when you people come to town." He went on to explain his frustration and confusion when Hebraic roots ministries held meetings in his community, often followed by a few of his congregants coming to church the next Sunday "wrapped in prayer shawls, blowing horns [shofars] and demanding that we start worshipping on Saturday, or we are headed for hell!"

My heart went out to him as I realized the very difficult position these over-zealous disciples had placed him in. As the day went on, I watched the recognition of the importance of Hebraic context dawn on him and his heart soften toward the message of "getting back to our roots." But it was clear that the actions of some in his congregation, although certainly sincere, had been a stumbling block to him.

Unfortunately, that story has been repeated to me all over the world. How interesting that many in this movement find it a privilege to extend a hand of unconditional friendship to the Jewish people, meeting them with humility, sensitivity, and patience as relationships are built; yet, within their own communities, these attributes seem to disappear and are replaced by an impatient demand for immediate adherence to a whole new set of often very difficult to understand parameters.

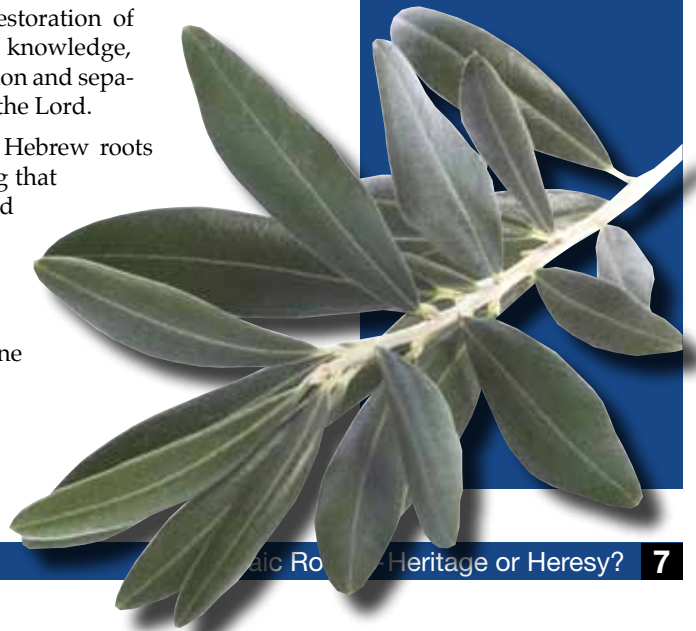
For those outside the Church looking in, this growing division is becoming a stumbling block as well. While speaking on behalf of Bridges for Peace in one of our nations, I was invited out to lunch by a group of women involved in the Hebraic roots movement. After our meal, I walked to the counter with one of the women as she paid for the meal. The girl at the cash register listened with open interest as we discussed various concepts while the transaction was made, and as we walked away, she called, "Merry Christmas!" My hostess turned to her with icy eyes and replied, "My dear, we are REAL Christians. We don't celebrate Christmas." The look of confusion and embarrassment on that young woman's face will remain with me for a long time.

Earlier in the article, we mentioned Christians who have chosen to adopt Jewish ritual items, Hebrew names, and the Jewish festival cycle. Many today are part of a growing "Torah-observant" Christian community who even keep kosher (eating *Torah*-specified foods). The difficulty here is one of attitude. Certainly, the choice of how and when to worship is a very individual one, and though the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 states clearly what Gentile believers are required to do, nothing in Scripture prohibits Christian participation in such a lifestyle.

Here a patient and humble demeanor is of the essence. The restoration of the Church's Hebraic heritage is a gift from the Lord meant to bring knowledge, strength, and unity to His body. An arrogant attitude will cause confusion and separation, and, regardless of your theology, division in the body is not of the Lord.

To further complicate matters, there are some connected to the Hebrew roots movement who, though few in number, are creating a furor by stating that those who are not involved in the movement are not really saved and salvation will not be theirs until they follow every one of the 613 commandments in *Torah* and selected teachings of the rabbis as well. Another fringe group within the movement has declared that Yeshua was not, in fact, the son of God, denying His deity and declaring Him a human like everybody else. This is contrary to basic Christian doctrine and is the genesis of accusations of heresy.

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## So What Are We to Do?

How then should we as Bible believers respond to this growing movement and to the controversy it is engendering? If you are a Christian and reading this letter, it is probably safe to assume that God has already touched your heart with a love for the nation and people of Israel and may well have opened your eyes to the importance of Hebraic context. In Luke 12:48, we are told, *“everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required...”* As we mentioned earlier, the restoration of the Hebraic foundations of the Church is a blessing from the Lord meant to strengthen and encourage His people and prepare them for what lies ahead. But with that revelation comes responsibility:

—To the Jewish community: Certainly an understanding of our Hebraic foundation should provoke a sense of gratitude in the hearts of Christians, and as relationships are built with the Jewish community today, it is critical that we recognize the need for sensitivity toward those God has called His special treasure. Throughout history, the Church has disgracefully abused the Jewish people, co-opting their religious traditions and symbols. We must proceed wisely and cautiously, making sure that our zeal to get back to our roots doesn’t result in a disastrous repetition of that history.

—To the body of believers: Throughout both Testaments, the Bible stresses the importance of unity among believers. For Christians, that unity needs to be cultivated and carefully protected. We must guard against arrogance and exclusivity, remembering that any insight we have is a gift from the Lord and not to our own credit. We must learn to recognize the attempts of Satan to sabotage the Church through disunity, and we must deal with each other with patience and humility. Remember, they will know we are disciples, not by our sound doctrine or whether or not we keep kosher, but by our love for one another.

—To God Himself: It is our responsibility to praise and thank the Lord for His revelation regarding the Hebraic foundations of Christianity and embrace the opportunity to become passionate disciples, more in love with Him than ever. It is the responsibility of the Church as a whole to recognize His voice and His clarion call today to get back to our roots. But it is also our responsibility to proceed with caution, checking every teaching against His Word and remaining true to the doctrines of the Bible. Above all else, it our responsibility to be instruments of love, humbly serving one another, and bringing glory to the name of our magnificent God.

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer, *International Development Director*

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