

Importance of Jewish Roots

For many Christians, the Jews and Judaism seem like the last place to learn anything about Christianity. Christianity and Judaism appear to be opposites. It sounds heretical even to suggest that Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John were Jews.

Yet they were! And that's the catch: Christianity worships a Jewish Savior, whose Jewish disciples founded a Jewish religion in Israel. They spoke the Jewish language (Hebrew), they read the Jewish scriptures, they attended Jewish synagogues, they taught using the teaching techniques of the Jewish religious teachers of their day (the rabbis). These are the same people that wrote (for the most part) our Christian scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments. Jesus was a Jew of the line of David (Matt. 1:6)! Paul was a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)!

What's important about the Jewish Roots of Christianity? Everything. Because without the Jews and Judaism there would be no Christianity. And since Christianity started among the Jews, we must understand our Jewish Roots to understand our Bibles correctly. Without them we are liable to misunderstand much of what the Christian faith is about!

Christian Anti-Semitism

Why is it that Christians know so little about their Jewish Roots? I know it sounds crazy, but in the early years of the Christian faith, Gentile Christians rejected Jewish Christians, calling them heretics (after about the mid-2nd cent. AD). Why? Because they continued to live as Jews, just like Jesus, Peter, and Paul had done. Think about that for a minute: Gentile Christians rejected their Jewish brothers in the faith, the spiritual and physical descendants of the apostles, because they continued to live just as Jesus and the apostles had done.

Why did they consider it wrong that they lived as Jews? In part it was a misunderstanding of the Bible's teachings about Jews and Gentiles in relation to the Law of Moses. But it was also because of anti-Semitic beliefs brought by Gentiles into the Church.

These anti-Semitic beliefs and the actions that followed polarized Christians and Jews for centuries. Horrible persecutions and atrocities were done, mostly by Christians against Jews. The most horrible of all took place just a few years ago: the destruction of 6,000,000 Jews in Europe--the Holocaust. These were not military casualties. They were ordinary men, women, and children sent to the gas chambers to be killed. Who did this horrible thing? The Nazis. And who were the Nazis? Mostly Germans. Germany was one of the most Christian nations in the world: home of Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation. Why did a Christian nation do something so horrible? In part, because of what pastors and priests had been preaching in the churches: hatred of the Jews.

It's one thing to recognize that a person or a group of people are sinners: The Bible says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). But to call for the destruction of an entire ethnic group because of the sin of a few of their ancestors is something completely different, and a direct contradiction of the Bible, which says that each man is responsible for his own sin (Deut. 24:16, 2 Chron. 25:4, Ez. 18:20). Jesus commanded us to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44): how much more should we love the Jewish people, through whom our faith came to us (John 4:22)? The recognition of sin and disobedience in a person or group should inspire the desire to lead them into God's grace and forgiveness, not to destroy them. Yet the church often took the opposite point of view: it counseled, or at least condoned, the destruction of the Jews.

Martin Luther himself wrote:

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?... I shall give you my sincere advice: First, to set fire to their synagogues...in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians.... I advise that their houses also be...destroyed..... I advise that their prayer books and Talmudic writings...be taken from them.... I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.... (On the Jews and Their Lies, 1543)

Who Killed Jesus?

These cruel attitudes were encouraged by the popular teaching that "the Jews killed Christ." But this is not what the New Testament says. According to the Bible, it was not the Jews, but *Roman* soldiers who killed Jesus (John 19:23). They did this in obedience to the orders of Pontius Pilate, the Roman (non-Jewish) governor of Judea (Mark 15:15). Yes, Pilate washed his hands. But if I wash my hands, does that make me innocent of a crime? Pilate could easily have spared Jesus if he wanted to. But he ordered his soldiers to crucify him. It was not the Jews who killed Jesus. It was the Gentile Romans! (For more on this topic, see our Question and Answer category [Crucifixion](#).)



Yes, the Jewish leadership participated in this crime: they brought Jesus to Pilate. And there were Jews in the crowd that day shouting, "Crucify him!" Neither of these are commendable actions. But they hardly count as grounds for a charge of murder. Nor does the cry that came from the crowd, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt. 27:25).

The Jews could have killed Jesus. They almost did several times: once in Nazareth by pushing him off a cliff (Luke 4:29, see our teaching [The Messianic Judge](#)), twice in Judea by stoning (John 8:59, 10:31). But they never actually brought themselves to do it. The Gentiles had no such reservations. They

killed Jesus the same morning he was delivered to them, and they have killed many hundreds of thousands, in fact, many millions of Jews since.

Pagan Influences

Anti-Semitism corrupted not only the Church's morality, but also its beliefs. Pagan ideas quickly replaced Jewish and Biblical ones in the Church's teaching and practice--and the original Biblical ideas were forgotten. Many of these "Gentilizations" of the faith can still be found both in traditional churches and in many Protestant churches, too.

For example: In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church taught (and still teaches today) that something called the *Beatific Vision* will be the reward of the righteous in heaven: that they will eternally contemplate this "beautiful vision" of God. This is a completely spiritual, that is to say, a completely non-physical eternity with God. And it sounds suspiciously similar to the *pagan* Roman belief of a heavenly eternity for those that are worthy. Similar ideas have been advocated by many Protestant groups.

So why is this a problem? Because the original Jewish and Biblical view of eternity is quite different, in fact you could say just the opposite. For the Bible teaches an actual, physical resurrection of the body: a body that will be just as physically real as the bodies we live in today. Not only that, a physical resurrection implies a physical place to live in--first the earth of the millennial kingdom (Rev. 20), then a completely new earth with a new heavens (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21,22). Both of these were originally understood to be real, physical places, in which the fullness of life, including physical life, will be restored to us.

This idea of an actual physical resurrection was laughed at by Gentiles in the time of the apostles (Acts 17:32), and is still widely rejected by their descendants today. But among the Jews, it was so important that to deny it was to become a heretic, denied a place in the world to come (Mishnah Sanh. 10:1). Jesus and the apostles accepted and taught this doctrine as a central belief, which was greatly strengthened when Jesus himself rose physically from the dead (Luke 24:36-43; 1 Cor. 15).

For centuries, the beautiful, Biblical vision of a resurrected future was rejected by the Church because it was "too Jewish." Yet it's the only way to make sense of the Bible's insistence on a real, physical resurrection. What need will there be for physical, resurrected bodies if we're just going to float around in an immaterial heaven? Most Christian groups say they believe in the resurrection. But do we understand it the way Jesus and his Jewish disciples did? (For other examples of paganism in the Church, see our [Jewish Roots of Christianity Seminar](#); for more on the prophetic future, see our [Revelation Seminar](#) and the Question and Answer topic [Prophecy](#).)

Israel's Prophetic Destiny

Being in touch with our Jewish Roots is not just a matter of accurate understanding. It's also a matter of prophetic destiny. Israel is not just another nation: Israel is God's plan for

the nations. Israel is God's answer to a sinful and fallen world: a holy people, raised up by God as a testimony to the nations; a lighthouse pointing the way to the one true God.

As the apostle Paul put it:

"Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise [made with Israel], having no hope and in the world without God. But now, in Christ Jesus, you [non-Jews] who once were far away were made near by the blood of Christ.... So, therefore, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow-citizens [of Israel] with the holy ones and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:12,13,19).

Through Christ, we who are Gentiles (non-Jews) have been added to the nation of Israel: as Paul puts it, we the wild olive branches have been grafted into its rich root (Romans 11:17-24). Yes, other branches--many of them--have been broken off because of unbelief. Physical Israel (the Jewish people) is largely in rejection of its Messiah. But God's plan and purpose—Israel's destiny—are unchanged.

Faith does not just bring us to a particular religious philosophy, or even to the right God. It brings us into a specific relationship of obedience--a covenant--with God, which incorporates us into a nation--the nation of Israel, with all the loyalties and interrelationships that this implies.

This spiritual nation is not limited to the modern nation of Israel in the Middle East, nor even to the Jewish people, but includes those from every nation, people, and language that willingly submit themselves to Israel's Messiah (Rev. 5:9). Yet at the same time, it is essentially a Jewish nation, built on the foundation of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all those that have followed them in faith (John 4:22). We need to align ourselves spiritually with Israel—the saved Israel that is to come (Rom. 11:26), and by faith in that coming change with Israel and the Jewish people today.

This does not imply, as some incorrectly suppose, that we must all become Jewish. Within the spiritual nation of Israel there are many callings (1 Cor. 7:18-20). As in the United States, those in different states fall under different jurisdictions with different requirements. The kingdom of Messiah is analogous to the historical kingdom of David, in which King David ruled over many Gentile nations in addition to Judah and Israel. These Gentiles were not brought under the jurisdiction of the Jewish regions of the kingdom to live like Jews, yet all were subject to the rulings of the king.

So too, Messiah Jesus rules a "greater Israel" over many kinds of sheep, not all of which live as Jews, but are from every tribe, language, and nation (John 10:16). This was the decision of the apostles and the Holy Spirit in the Council of Acts 15, and is, in fact, the teaching of the Old Testament Law itself: that Jews and Gentiles have distinct callings within the plan of God and within the kingdom of Israel's Messiah. This is another crucial Jewish and Biblical concept that the Church is in danger of forgetting. (For more on the complex topic of Gentiles and the Law of Moses, see our teaching on the [Laws of Noah](#) and the Question and Answer category [Gentile Christians](#).)

This is just a small taste of why the Jewish Roots of Christianity are so important. Without them, without an accurate historical understanding of our Jewish origins, Christianity is less than Christian. How can we get back to our Jewish Roots? It isn't easy. We must be willing to confront centuries of tradition and modern misunderstandings. But it's the only way to recapture the original clear light of the gospel.

See this Seminar about this topic:

[The Jewish Roots of Christianity](#)

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