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Why Look for the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith?

For me personally, the answer is quite simple — or at least it started out to be simple. Just like Alex Haley, it began as a search for my *family* “roots.”

I was born and raised in a Gentile Christian home. My father, William Leavitt Sawyer (my middle name is also Leavitt), was an Elder in our home church as long ago as I can remember, and he began serving as a bi-vocational Pastor in about 1951 or 1952. He was able to enter full-time pastoral ministry in about 1968, and continued until he medically retired shortly before his death in 1983. I cannot remember a time when we were not actively involved in the Church, and my own role in church leadership began when I started helping teach the “little kids” when I was about 10 years old. I have been in some form of church leadership ever since. Evangelical Gentile Christianity is all that I had known [rather, I should say “participated in”] up until sometime early in 2000, or thereabouts.

But I’m getting a bit ahead of myself. My father’s mother, Jane “Jenny” Leavitt died when Dad was in his early teens, and as I was growing up, he could tell me almost nothing about her or her parents. When I was in my late twenties or early thirties my mother discovered a book of genealogical records titled *The Descendants of Israel Leavitt* in which she found my father’s name, his parents’ names, and my grandmother Jenny’s ancestors listed back to John Leavitt (1608-1691) who was born in Yorkshire, England, and immigrated to Massachusetts Bay Colony sometime before 1634. The list of Leavitt names included given names like Joseph, Issachar, Jacob, Solomon, and Israel, and additional research has now traced this family back to John Levett, who was born in 1316 in Lewes, East Sussex, England.

These ancestral records also contained variant spellings which included Levitt, Levit, Levett, and Lovett. I found it extremely interesting that when King Edward I expelled most of the Jews—about 16,000 altogether—from England in 1290, many Jews managed to stay in England by hiding their identity (by changing the spelling of their names?) and religion (by joining the Church?). The Leavitt family name (with all the variant spellings) traces its ancestry back to the ancient Levites, who were the priestly family of Israel. Could it be that I had the honor of being part of that family?

The Rabbis of Israel, under Israel’s Law of Return, have decreed that “a Jew is any person whose mother is a Jew, or who has been converted to Judaism by an Orthodox Rabbi.” But the genealogies in the Bible trace ancestry (in most cases) through the father’s line and not the mother’s line. And the genealogies of Yeshua presented in the Apostolic Writings (B’rit Chadashah or New Testament) are

unique in that they present both his mother's line (Matthew) and his father's line (Luke). But common sense and an understanding of basic genetics dictate that all human beings are the product of the genetic material of *both* parents. Thus, if either of one's parents is a physical descendant of Avraham, Yitzakh, and Ya'acov, science dictates that that person is a physical descendant of Avraham, Yitzakh, and Ya'acov, which makes that one a Jew, regardless of the "official" position of the Rabbis.

The question of my physical descent from the Patriarchs is far from settled to my satisfaction (though I am clearly not halachically¹ Jewish), my own personal quest for my Jewish roots was seriously compounded by my simultaneous search for "Biblical Truth." During that process, the idea occurred to me that just as an untold number of Jews have changed their names, practices, and sometimes their outward appearance to be perceived as Gentiles, so has the Church changed its appearance and practices to be perceived as a Gentile faith. That thought sent me on a quest to discover for myself the Jewish source of the Christian faith.

Having grown up in the Church and then having earned three graduate and post-graduate degrees from conservative, evangelical seminaries, I have often been exposed to traditional Gentile Christian teachings like these:

- The Church is "spiritual Israel."
- Because Israel rejected their Messiah, God has now rejected Israel (or any number of variations on that theme, such as "God has shifted His attention to the Church until the 'fullness of the Gentiles' have come in").
- Christians are "under Grace," not "under Law."
- Jesus "nailed the Law" to His cross; "the Law" is therefore now void.
- Attempting to be obedient to "the Law" is futile legalism and an insult to Jesus since it rejects His atoning work.
- As a result of Peter's Pentecost sermon, 3,000 Jews became Christians.
- Peter's vision in Acts 10 proves that God has cancelled the Old Testament dietary laws.
- "The Church Age" is a great mystery that has been "inserted" into the flow of history between "the Age of Law" and "the Kingdom Age."
- Sunday is the proper "Christian Sabbath."

These (and other) things that I was being taught in church and in my seminary classes simply did not square with what I was reading in the Bible. The more I read my Bible, the more it became clear to me is that "the Church" has replaced the clear teaching of the Scriptures with the traditions of Roman Church councils, departing from God's command and holding onto human tradition (Mark 7:6-13).

God had called me to be a teacher of His word, not a teacher of the words of other men, so more than ever I began diligently searching the Scriptures to find out what the Bible said, not just what I had been taught in church and seminary. As I began to study the Scriptures with a more critical eye, some serious questions

¹ That is, according to Jewish law.

began to appear that required far better answers than those I had been given by my seminary professors. For example:

1. All the writers² of every book of the Bible, with the sole *possible* exception of Dr. Luke (who was in all probability a Proselyte to Judaism long before becoming a Messianic Believer³) were born and lived their entire lives as Torah-observant Jews. At what point does the Scripture say they stopped living like Jews and started living like Gentiles?
2. If the writers of the Apostolic Writings were all Jews, writing to a primarily Jewish audience about the Jewish Messiah, why would they have written in a foreign Gentile language (Koine Greek) instead of in their native Hebrew/Aramaic? Every single text book and reference book that I used in seminary claims that the Apostolic Writings were written in Koine Greek, but within just the last few years many scholars are now claiming that the original autographs (the documents actually written and/or dictated by the Scripture writers) were actually written in Hebrew or Aramaic and then translated into Greek for distribution throughout the Diaspora.
3. At what point in the Apostolic Writings did God set aside the Sabbath and replace it with Sunday?
4. Why is the Hebrew name “Ya’acov” translated as “Jacob” every place in the entire Bible except in the book written by the Lord’s brother, Ya’acov, which is translated in that book as “James”?
5. Come to think of it, why do *all* the Jews in the “Old Testament” have Hebrew names, but in the “New Testament” *none* of them have Hebrew names?
6. History tells us that the first-century followers of Messiah were considered just another sect of Judaism until the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE). Why do most Bible teachers claim that it was not?
7. How is it possible that for nearly 2,000 years the Gentile Church has so violently persecuted the Jews in the name of the King of the Jews?
8. If the Jewish Messiah was born a Jew, lived His entire life as a Jew, died as a Jew, and is coming back to establish a world-wide Jewish Kingdom which He will rule from the throne of His father David in Jerusalem, why is it that His followers don’t look at least a little bit “Jewish” in their worship of Him and in their obedience to His teachings?
9. If God made an “everlasting” covenant with Israel, how can it be possible that he has cancelled that covenant and transferred the benefits of that covenant to “the Church”? And if He lied to Israel about their “everlasting” covenant, what makes Christians think that He has not also lied to “the Church” about “everlasting” life?
10. If Yeshua (Jesus) is in fact God, then it was He who gave the Torah (generally mistranslated as “the Law”) to Moshe at Mount Sinai. The Torah therefore

² Except Moses, who was born before the Torah was given at Sinai.

³ Luke records activities which took place within the Temple grounds. Had he not been Jewish, he would not have been allowed beyond the Court of the Gentiles.

consists of commandments given to Israel by the pre-incarnate Yeshua. When He told His disciples, “If you love Me, keep My commandments,” that statement of necessity included observing those commandments that He gave at Sinai. This is confirmed by the fact that Yeshua also told His disciples that not even the smallest letter (jot, yod) or even the smallest part of a letter (tittle, stroke) “shall pass from the Law till all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). Why, then, does the Church teach that obedience to the Torah is “legalism” and “an insult to Jesus”? And why do some people in the Messianic Jewish Restoration movement claim that for a Gentile to follow the Commandments of Yeshua is a threat to, or misappropriation of, their Jewish cultural or ethnic identity?

11. Yeshua taught that the most important proof that would be offered of His Messiahship would be the fulfillment of what He called “the sign of Yonah” — “For just as Yonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea-monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the depths of the earth.” I don’t care how you manipulate either the words or the numbers, there is no way possible to pack “three days and three nights” into the period between a “Good Friday” afternoon execution and an “Easter Sunday” morning resurrection! From sunset Friday to sunrise Sunday is only 36 hours at best—a literal fulfillment of “the sign of Yonah” requires nearly 72 hours! If the Gentile Church is correct on this issue, then “accepted history” proves that Yeshua was in fact *not* Israel’s Messiah because He failed to fulfill the one sign that He would give as Messiah—“the sign of Yonah”!
12. Why is it that the holiest day on the Christian calendar bears the name of the pagan goddess Ishtar? In the Babylon mystery religion, Ishtar (also known as Semiramis, Aphrodite, Asherah, Ashtoreth, Astarte, Anath, Athtar, and Venus) was the both the mother and wife of Tammuz (also known as Nimrod, Ba’al, Bel, Jupiter, and Saturn), the Roman sun god whose weekly day of worship was Sun Day, and whose birthday feast (Saturnalia) was celebrated on December 25. (In the Roman version, Venus descended to earth in an egg which was hatched by bunnies!)
13. Why do Gentile Christians complacently accept the decrees of the pagan emperor Constantine (who only pretended to convert to “Christianity” while simultaneously retaining his role as *Pontifex Maximus*, high priest of the Babylonian mystery religion in Rome), that:
 - (a) the only permitted day of worship in the empire would be that day set aside for the worship of Saturn, the sun god — setting aside the decree of God that the day of worship He ordained would be Shabbat, the seventh day of the week; and
 - (b) the day on which the birthday of Jesus would be celebrated would be Saturnalia, the birthday of the sun god Saturn?
14. If Rabbi Sha’ul (Paul) taught that Torah (“the Law”) and the sacrificial system had been set aside by the death and resurrection of the Messiah, why did he return to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey (approx. 58-59

C.E., or about 25-30 years after the resurrection) to offer sacrifice in the Temple to specifically demonstrate that he had *not* taught that Torah had been set aside? (Acts 21:17-27)

15. If “the Jews” rejected Yeshua as their Messiah as the Gentile Church usually teaches, why does the book of Acts tell us that between 25 and 30 years after the resurrection there were *multiple tens of thousands* of Torah-observant Jewish Believers in Messiah in Jerusalem alone? The Greek word *muriades* in Acts 21:20 is literally “ten thousand,” and the text says that there were many *muriades* of Messianic Believers in Jerusalem, all of whom were zealously observing the teachings of the Torah. Some authorities estimate that as many as 20-25% of the entire population of Jerusalem were Messianic Believers. Though this number is suspiciously high, a literal rendering of the text would demand *at least* 20,000-30,000 Messianic Believers. It should be obvious to the most casual observer that not *all* “the Jews” rejected Yeshua as Messiah.

This list only begins to scratch the surface of the conflicts between what is historically taught by the Gentile Church and what is taught in the Bible. If we are ever going to actually understand what is taught in the Bible, that which was taught by Yeshua and His emissaries, then we are going to have to either discard or wade through nearly 3,000 years of man’s traditions (that is, *both* the traditions of the Sages and Rabbis *and* those of the “Church fathers”) and return to the only reliable source of Truth, the Bible, as it was originally written and as it was originally intended by the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) to be understood by God’s elect people.

Conclusions

1. The complete Bible, including both the Tanakh and the Apostolic Writings, when properly understood, is a thoroughly Jewish book. It was written to Jews, by Jews, from Jewish places, in the Jewish language, about the unique covenant relationship of the Jewish people to their God and to the Jewish Messiah, the God Who created a personal relationship with one man, Avraham, and through Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’acov, to all their descendants.
2. This unique relationship with God, according to the Bible (both the Tanakh and the Apostolic Writings), is made available to those outside of the physical lineage of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’acov. The Bible spells out the conditions under which those who are born as outsiders (“Goyim” or “Gentiles”) may be “adopted” into the family of Avraham, and thereby permitted to participate in the blessings of God’s covenants with Israel.
3. The God who revealed Himself to Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya’acov, Moshe, and the rest of the Prophets “just happens” to be the *only* deity in all the religions of the world Who has ever actually revealed Himself to His creation. All other deities are either the fabric of men’s imagination or are fallen “an-

gels”⁴ posing as gods (Allah, for example). Of all the writings of all the world’s religions, only the Bible claims to be the literal Word of God, only the Bible provides the proof of fulfilled prophecy, and only the Bible claims for itself that it either stands or falls on its being 100% completely accurate in all respects.

4. Since the Bible is a thoroughly Jewish book, to be properly understood, it must be understood from the historical and cultural perspective of Israel. Trying to interpret the Bible in any other context is the same as trying to interpret the Constitution of the United States apart from its historical and cultural perspective — it becomes misunderstood at best and meaningless at worst.
5. If we wish to participate in all that God has made available for us, we must diligently try to understand His Word from its proper Jewish perspective and in its proper Jewish context.

Therefore, I urge every serious student of Scripture not to dismiss these questions as mere curiosity, controversy, or nostalgia for ancient customs, but to receive them as an invitation to search more deeply for the foundations of the faith we profess. If the God of Israel has chosen to reveal Himself through the Hebrew people, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Hebrew Messiah, and the Hebrew covenants, then wisdom demands that we seek to understand Him within that setting rather than apart from it. To search out the Hebrew sources of the Judeo-Christian faith is not to abandon Messiah, but to draw nearer to the world in which He lived, taught, died, rose again, and will return. May the reader, therefore, prayerfully and seriously consider that search—not for the sake of tradition, argument, or identity, but for the sake of truth.

⁴ There are *at least* four major classes of spirit beings described in Scripture: בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, *benéi Elohim* (sometimes simply *elohim*, gods); כְּרוּבִים, *cherubim*; שֶׁרָפִים, *seraphim*; and מַלְאָכִים, *malakim* (messengers, angels). Other names for spirit beings include watchers, powers, principalities, authorities, spiritual forces of wickedness, and ministering spirits. When the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) was translated into the Septuagint, due to a lack of the necessary vocabulary, all the “white hat” spirit beings were classified as “angels,” and all the “black hat” spirit beings were classified as “demons.”

For more information, see https://messianiclearning.org/theology/spirit_beings/index.html.