

and the mindset of His hearers. “*Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*” sets us on the road to doing this.

All evangelicals agree that Jesus is central to Christian faith and life. The basic aim of Jewish Roots studies is to understand and know Jesus and His teaching more fully. Where this is not achieved, then the work has failed in its major objective. On a wider front, there is today a major assault by the powers of darkness against the Judeo-Christian world-view and heritage. Since the most grievous loss of the Church was her severance, largely deliberate, from her Jewish connection, it is imperative that we encourage Christians to return to the point of departure and recover the riches which were thereby lost.

We are convinced, therefore, that the restoration of the Church to an understanding and appreciation of her Jewish Roots, as outlined above, is one of the major movements of God in this present time. It is for the wider restoration of the Church, both as regards her own spiritual maturity and life style, and also as part of her restoration to her divinely appointed relationship with Israel and the Jewish people.

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## **RECOVERING OUR JEWISH HERITAGE**

*One of the most significant movements in the Church in recent decades has been a realisation of the rich Jewish heritage out of which Christianity sprang, coupled with a desire to explore and to recover those first century Jewish roots for the edification of the Church.*

Biblical faith is rooted in God’s covenant with Abraham, in God’s progressive revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and ultimately in the Person of the Messiah Jesus and the New Testament witness to Him. On this basis we can properly speak of the Biblical roots of the Christian faith.

The central message of the Bible, including the New Testament, is accessible to any reader who comes to it with a hungry heart. However, we need to remember that Jesus was born a Jew of the first century into a particular land and culture, and into the religious world of His day characterised by the sages, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Hasidim, Zealots, etc. A moment’s reflection should also indicate that the study of the life and teaching of Jesus in particular, as well as of the New Testament in general, through the eyes of the Western world, influenced as it is by Greek and Roman philosophy, cannot but give a partly distorted picture of His message. The Hebraic mindset – that of the time of Jesus – and the Western mindset in which we have grown up are in many respects poles apart.

It is to our advantage, therefore, to study the Scripture from a Hebraic viewpoint, rather than our own cultural (Western) viewpoint. In more technical language, we need a Hebrew hermeneutic (interpretation).

If we want truly to sit at the feet of Jesus we must recognise the vital contribution made to the framework and style of His teaching by the religious Jewish world of His day, which was that of Second Temple Judaism (400 BC to 70 AD). The fact is that the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is highly Hebraic.

In spite of the fact that portions of the New Testament were communicated in Greek, the background is still thoroughly Hebraic. The writers are Hebraic, the culture is Hebraic, the religion is Hebraic, the traditions are Hebraic, and the

concepts are Hebraic. Unfortunately, this movement of rediscovering the Jewish heritage of the Church – like other renewal movements in Church history – has attracted some unbalanced notions and practices. It has also been misunderstood and misinterpreted, and sometimes attracted strong criticism.

CFI-UK cannot speak for other groups and individuals, but we believe it is helpful to delineate where we stand on this vital aspect of the restoration of the Church to Biblical reality and experience.

## **JEWISH ROOTS**

Various terms have been used to describe this restoration: Jewish Roots, Hebraic Roots, Biblical Roots, or our Judaic-Christian Heritage. None are fully adequate, but the term Jewish Roots seems as meaningful as any.

By Jewish Roots we refer to the Judaism of the Second Temple period in which Jesus and His followers lived and taught. This was the cultural/religious framework within which they read and understood the Scriptures, and in which Jesus taught and was heard.

Our roots are in Messiah Jesus and in His finished atoning work on the cross. At the same time, Jesus' teaching was rooted in the scriptures, culture and world-view of first century Judaism, itself a development of the previous 400 years, as was also the life and practice of the early Church. "The whole complex of Judaism... as well as the Old Testament, constitutes the heritage of Christianity." (W.D.Davies, quoted by Marvin Wilson in *Our Father Abraham*, p.31). This statement is helpfully developed and explained in *Our Father Abraham* p.29-34.

What about later rabbinic Judaism? Even here Christians and Western society have a great deal to learn, as historic Judaism has preserved the basic Biblical values of family, prayer, devotion to God, etc. Judaism has in particular preserved for us a Biblical/Hebraic world-view which has been almost, if not entirely, lost by the Church as a result of the influence of Greek philosophy. "The widespread influence of Plato upon the history of Christian thought can hardly be over-estimated" (Wilson, p.168). "No school of Greek philosophy was unaffected by Plato. In Alexandria, Jewish thinkers fell under his fascination, and Christian theology is largely Platonic." (*Chambers Encyclopaedia*, 1901).

We are, indeed, deeply indebted to historic Judaism. Most importantly, Christian scholars are beginning to understand that much of what Judaism has preserved is

what Jesus would have known. It may be that a fifth or sixth century rabbinic Midrash (legend) perpetuates a tradition that Jesus would have taken for granted, and even a rabbinic legend that survives in a tenth-century manuscript may have been known, assumed, or even alluded to by Jesus.

It is unfortunate that some aspects of present day Judaism have prejudiced Christians, who otherwise honour the Jewish people, and made them wary of Jewish Roots. Some, in order to preserve evangelical faith and doctrine as they understand it, have 'thrown the baby out with the bath water', thus denying themselves the riches of the Church's Jewish heritage.

We do not encourage or support attempts by Gentile Christians to mimic Judaism, and do not suggest that Gentile Christians are required to keep those laws or observe those ceremonies which may well have a clear-cut application to Jewish people. Moreover, CFI does not wish to legislate on such matters for Jewish Christians who need to work out their own relationship as Jews with the ceremonial law, within the context of the Messianic community.

Finally, it should be pointed out that in appreciating the value of such Jewish studies, we do not wish to minimise the great value and historic contribution made to our understanding of the New Testament and the life and teaching of Jesus by the Church throughout the ages, and none of this contribution should be rejected without good reason.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

The book "*Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*" by David Bivin and Roy Blizzard (1983) has made a major contribution to an awareness of the Hebraic background to the teaching of Jesus. Its popular style has in places made it vulnerable to criticism, and indeed it was not intended to bear the hard scrutiny which it has had to endure. However, its basic thesis is worthy of serious consideration.

Some see its proposal (which is backed by solid research) that a Hebrew original lies behind the Greek text of the Synoptic Gospels, as a threat to the 'inspiration' and 'infallibility' of that Greek text. This seems to place a somewhat strange limitation on the sovereignty of God in transmitting His word to us. If Jesus did indeed teach in Hebrew within the Jewish religious culture of His day, then certainly we need to hear Him speak in Hebrew, and understand the terms He used