

The Jewish Roots of the Early Church's Spiritual Life*

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INTRODUCTION

This evening our topic is the Jewish roots of Christian spirituality. When we initially ponder this particular subject, we might think our roots really start with the Reformation. Indeed, there are a lot of Christians today who will say "I'm a product of Wesley," "I'm a product of Luther," or "I'm a product of Calvin." Or maybe they are primarily indebted to some of the church fathers — Augustine, Origen, Tertullian, or someone else. I would like to challenge us during this conference with the concept that the roots of our faith as believers in Jesus go right back to the biblical text itself. If we want to be radically biblical about our faith we must accept this fact. To be sure, we should thank God for the insights He gave to the reformers, but the real question is, "Did the reformers correctly hear all of the faith?" We indeed may be children of the Reformation, but we must remember that there is something prior to that — are we children of Abraham? That is really the bottom line issue. I have been profoundly influenced by the reformers. They have provided the Church with many wonderful insights. They have touched all of us. But where does our deepest loyalty lie? I think our Christian view of reality and spirituality certainly finds its deepest roots in the biblical text. Here is the primary source for our faith.

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To some people it comes as a surprise that the roots of Christianity run so very deep into the soil of Judaism. It seems they believe the Church was invented out of whole cloth. No, it was born in a Jewish cradle in Jerusalem, on a Jewish holiday, and the forebears of our faith were Jews. Our debt as Christians to the Jewish people is immense. Seventy-seven percent of the Bible is the Jewish Scriptures or the Hebrew Bible, and the remaining 23 percent, the New Testament, essentially consists of Hebraic theological concepts in Greek dress. So the theology of the New Testament is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed Christianity is very, very Jewish.

Abraham is father of us all, as Paul wrote to the Romans (Rom. 4:16). He is father of believing Jews, and he is father of believing Gentiles (Rom. 4:11, 12). So if we belong to Christ, we are Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:29). We have that wonderful Abrahamic connection.

Gentiles are grafted into Israel. Israel is the root that supports us and so we have a new history as believers. It is Israel's history. There is not a new way of salvation in the New Testament, different from that in the Old. No, Paul says to the Romans that they have to get right with God the same way Abraham did (Rom. 4:3). Genesis 15:6: "He believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness." We get saved the Abrahamic way. So every Christian has a Jerusalem connection. The Bible indeed is a Jewish book. It cannot be read and understood and expounded, as Karl Barth reminds us, until we are prepared to become Jews with the Jews.

I think the stronger a person's Christian faith, the more Jewish will that person regard himself or herself. I think one of the reasons the Holocaust was allowed to happen in a very cultured country like Germany was that the Church had forgotten its Jewish roots. One might ask, "How could the greatest heist in history happen in a country of the Mozarts, the Beethovens, the great philosophers, the great theologians?" Well, the seeds of anti-Semitism had been sown for centuries there. It was an "us and them" kind of dichotomy. If the Church had spoken with appreciation and indebtedness concerning Jewish people, if Hitler had been challenged in the 1920s when he began to demonize the Jewish people (he said they were of Satan), then it might have been a different story. We have to be careful how we speak concerning our heritage and the people of that heritage. The Church had forgotten its Jewish roots.

In order to have a correct perception of biblical Christianity, we have to be able to humbly accept a Jewish book. We have to be able to believe in a Jewish Lord, and we have to accept the reality that we are grafted into

a Jewish people, Israel (Rom. 11), thereby taking on in some way their likeness in this commonly shared stalk of the olive tree, the metaphor that Paul uses for this Jewish connection. I, as a wild olive branch, and you as other wild olive branches, share in the stalk of the olive tree.

How did the Jewish people of Bible times approach their world? How did they go about their tasks every day? How did they understand spirituality? What was their relationship to God? Practically speaking, what does it mean to be grafted into Israel and in some sense partake of that rich spiritual legacy which had been handed down for centuries and centuries before the New Testament was even born? I now come to the heart of my presentation. I wish to focus on some of the spiritual dimensions of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith that I think were vital in the earliest Church.

1. Hebrew Spirituality Professes the Oneness of God

I think first that the faith of Israel, and that of the early Church, was a faith that espoused belief in the oneness of God. Let us look at the importance of the *shema*. Jesus was asked by a religious inquirer, what is the first and the greatest commandment of all. Jesus took that person back to the *shema*: "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad*" ("Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God the LORD is one").

Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy, which was one of the three "best sellers" in his day. We know from the sheer number of quotes in the New Testament that Deuteronomy was the most widely read book in Jesus' day among the books of the Law. Seventeen of the 27 books in the New Testament have citations from Deuteronomy, and 96 times the book of Deuteronomy is quoted from in the New Testament. We know Isaiah is the most Messianic of the prophets. Fifty-seven of the 66 chapters in Isaiah are quoted from in the New Testament. The third book that was very popular in Jesus' day was the Psalms. Twenty percent of the New Testament material from the Old Testament is from the Psalms. These three books — Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Psalms — constitute a representative selection of the books in the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible, the law, the prophets, and the writings. A second line of evidence to support the importance of the above books is the number of scrolls found in the Qumran community. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were uncovered, more copies of Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Psalms were found than any other biblical books. This seems to indicate that before the time of Jesus and during the first century these were three very important

theological documents. Knowledge of this may encourage you to reorder your Bible reading priorities and study habits, since those books appear to have had the greatest influence on the earliest Church.

Jesus quotes from one of those documents, the book of Deuteronomy, 6:4. It is a confession of faith, or a creed, and Jesus links it with the first commandment of the Ten Commandments. The Jewish people do not have as the first of the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me." They follow a different order of the Ten Commandments than we who are Protestant Christians. The first commandment for Jews is, "I am the Lord your God." It is a statement of monotheism. It is a proclamation of who God is. Jews combine the next two statements, dealing with other gods and graven images, and make one commandment concerning idolatry. That is how they end up with ten. So Jesus quotes this text as the first of the great commandments. In truth, his inquirer faced Jesus with a multiple-choice question; he had 613 possibilities. Rabbi Simlai, a third-century rabbi, counted the commandments — 365 negative ones, one for each day of the year, and 248 positive ones, one for each member of the human body. If you want a list of all 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, you'll find them in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* listed by the commands and their references.

So Jesus honed in on the first commandment, which includes *theology* — belief in the teaching of God's oneness, His uniqueness — which leads to *action* — to love God. It is interesting that Paul said "the greatest of these is love" just as Jesus stands on the shoulders of Moses, speaking of the oneness of God and linking it with loving God with all one has. This is important in understanding spirituality because in the biblical world there were those who said God was none. "The fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God'" — the practical atheist. There were others in the biblical world who said God was two — the Zoroastrians from the area of Persia or modern-day Iran. There were others who said God was many. Take the Canaanite world where there was a god who controlled every aspect of nature. There was Baal, the god of fertility, Anat, goddess of war, Asherah, goddess of fertility, Mot, the god of death, Yareach, the moon god, Shamesh, the sun god, Hadad, the god of thunder, Resheph, the god of plagues, and Yam, the god of the sea. In Canaanite religion there were many gods, but in ancient Israel there was but one God, and spirituality begins with the affirming of this one God.

Rabbi Akiba was probably the most influential rabbi at the beginning of the second century. He proclaimed that Bar Kochba was the Messiah

during the second Jewish revolt against Rome (132-135). It is told that at Akiba's death, as he saw the Romans coming to strip his flesh with iron claws, he recited the *shema*, prolonging that last word *echad*, "one." It is a very interesting thing to study the history of the *shema* in Judaism. Many Jewish martyrs went to their death affirming, even from the gas chambers of Dachau and Auschwitz, this text which is the very basic beginning point of Jewish spirituality.

The Talmud, the oral law of the Jewish people, which has 6,000 folio pages, is divided into two main parts — the Mishna edited by Rabbi Judah the Prince around the year 200 and the Gemara, the debate and discussion on the Mishna, which was finalized around the year 500. So it is Mishna and Gemara, the oral law and the commentary on that law, which is now called the Talmud. The first of the 63 tractates is tractate *Berachot*, which begins with a discussion of the *shema* — "Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one" — and it talks about the appropriate time to recite the *shema*, an indication of how central this passage is in the teaching of the Jewish people. As far as we can tell from our study of early rabbinic literature this was the first verse that Jesus committed to memory. It says in *Sukkah* 42A that as soon as a child can speak one is to teach the child this particular text: "Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." So the *shema* underscores a very fundamental point of Hebrew spirituality. Hebrew spirituality is predicated upon the oneness of God.

2. Hebrew Spirituality is a Walk of Faith

A second point about Hebrew spirituality that was further articulated in the New Testament is simply this: Life, to the ancient Hebrews, was a journey with God — a walk of faith. In Bible times, the spiritually healthy were those who walked in a close relationship with the living God. Relationship has always taken priority over theological creeds, teachings, and dogmas. Let me remind you that Abraham lived before the Law was given but he had a relationship with the living God and he journeyed with that God; he knew what faith was like because he stepped out in faith and walked with God. But he was not the first one to do it. Enoch walked with God according to Genesis 5:24.

Some people today define religion as a system of ethics, a code of conduct, an ideology, a creed, or a theological system. Such has its place; we all know the importance of theology. But to the Hebrews the life of faith was mainly thought of as a pilgrimage. It was a journey. This is the imagery and the language that we get from the Hebrew Bible. Religion

was the way in which one chose to walk. To have fellowship with God meant to have a relationship with the living God on the pathway of life. I would like to underscore the importance of this point. The essence of biblical faith and life is summed up in that one word "relationship." That is what Abraham had. He was in love, not with a creed, but with his God. God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees. After God had Abraham's life He could instruct Abraham in the way in which Abraham was to go.

So the prophets of Israel say, "Yes, act justly. Love mercy, but walk humbly with your God." Psalm 1 says there are two ways, the way of the righteous and the way of the ungodly. In the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, all 176 verses speak of the fact that God's Word is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path. The imagery relates to walking somewhere. What does the word Torah mean? Torah comes from the Hebrew root *yarah* which means to direct, to guide. Hence, Torah means guidance, instruction, direction for living. We've got it wrong if we think Torah simply means law in the sense of legislation. The Jews saw the Torah of God as a gift because it was the road map for living. It was to keep one on the pathway of life in that relationship with God. Sin was "to become misguided." It was to fall away from the pathway. It was to miss the aim or the mark.

One of the main words for sin in the Hebrew Bible *chatah* means "to go astray." It is taken from the world of archery where one misses the target. This is what happens when we deviate from the pathway, we must then engage in what the Hebrew Bible calls *teshuvah* — repentance — which means to do a spiritual about-face — to turn from your sin and to return in faith to the living God for renewal, and to keep on walking.

So we see that the imagery from the Hebrew Bible about spirituality, about direction for living — the Torah giving us that direction — and about the need for repentance, impacts New Testament thought. Jesus did not invent the theology which states that broad is the way and many there be that find it, which leads to destruction, but narrow is the way that leads to life. When he said "I am the way, the truth, and the life," he was building upon spiritual imageries from the Hebrew Bible. The early Christians called their movement the Way. In the book of Acts they taught God's revealed way to salvation and life.

So in Bible times one's faith commitment was described as a journey, a pilgrimage with God. And I would like to challenge you with the idea that we put relationship with the living God above everything else. If He has us, then we are going to come to His Word and value His Word as a

gift. The Jew never saw the Law as a millstone because he received it as it was intended to be received, as a gracious gift to those already committed to God within that covenant relationship. So we walk and walking is gradual and progressive. We have new experiences along the pathway of life. But it is encouraging how the Hebrew Bible reminds us that even when we walk through the fire we will not be burned. God says to His children that they can be renewed on the journey. They will run and not be weary and they will walk and not faint. In the New Testament, Paul says, "Walk as children of the light" (Eph. 5:8). Walk, walk — this is the imagery. The Scripture gives us guidance for living.

To sum up the second point, the essence of Hebraic spirituality centers upon relationship, not rules, not law. Life was a journey of faith; it was a walk in fellowship with the living God, and to love Him was first and foremost, as the *shema* reminds us. Augustine once said, "Love God first, and then do as you wish." He reminds us that if we've got our love for Him straight the rest of it is going to fall into line. Obedience to God's Torah made you wise and kept you on the pathway of life.

3. Hebrew Spirituality Is to Be Alive to God

The third point I want to make about Hebraic spirituality, and how it relates to us as biblical Christians, is this: to the Jew of Bible times spirituality meant to be alive unto God in every action. Spirituality was much larger than what happened at the temple.

The Gnostics and the Platonists got hold of Christianity and redefined it with a kind of dualism — they said spirituality is really a kind of heavenly minded activity, for what you do on this earth is not really spiritual. Out of that kind of dualistic theological thinking came the popular belief in Christianity that to be spiritual meant to be ascetic, life denying, to have an other-worldly piety, to reject the things of this world. You have your inner eyes cast heavenward in prayer and contemplation of the life to come. Such describes a truly spiritual person according to some people. To them spirituality involves a kind of passive detachment from this world, focusing on a heavenly world to come, and so a truly spiritual person has purely the winning of souls to the kingdom of heaven in mind. All other activity, if it has anything to do with the socio-material or physical world or universe, is inferior. That is not how the Hebrews thought about spirituality. That view of spirituality derives more from Athens than it does from Jerusalem. The old Greek mystics said *soma sema esti* — "the body is a tomb." It needs to be released from that tomb

in which it is incarcerated; the soul has to escape the body at death and fly to the eternal world of reality. If you hold this view you might very well deprecate this world or the things of this world or even the physical body because the soul or spirit is in conflict with the physical realm.

What does the word spirit, or spiritual, mean in the Hebrew Bible? *Ruach* is a powerful word because that word, translated spirit, properly means wind, breath; it refers to what makes someone alive. It is air in motion. *Ruach* conveys the idea of animation, vivaciousness, vigor. Spirituality is the opposite of deadness. It refers to those who are fully alive in passionate, inspired service to the God of the universe. That is what spirituality was in Hebraic biblical terms. For Old Testament saints, spirituality was not to turn inward or to turn heavenward but to be fully human, energized in the whole person to serve God in the here and the now. The function of the spirit was to bring life, energy, wholeness, and affirmation, the quickening of all that was within and without.

How do the Old Testament saints define spirituality? "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Ecc. 9:10). It does not say, the things over here are spiritual, and the things over there non-spiritual. It just says whatever your hand does, do it with all that God has given to you. The spirit energizes and makes alive. There was no separation of the sacred and the secular according to Hebraic spirituality. That is what Paul builds on in Colossians 3:23 when he says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart." This teaching is not simply found in the Old Testament, it is also a New Testament definition of spirituality. A spiritual person, then, could celebrate the presence of God in the here and the now.

How does this apply to us if this is what spirituality is? We will see the holy breaking into every domain of life, and be energized in inspired service for God as those who are alive. We have got it wrong if we say we do spiritual things during these hours of the week and the rest of the week we carve into our business life, our social life, our study life, or whatever it is. That just does not play, biblically speaking. All of life has something sacred at stake and something spiritual at stake. If not then what does Colossians 3:23 mean when it says, whatever you do, work at it with all your heart and do it to the glory of God? That is spirituality. It refers to who we are.

Believers, then, must live as if they are alive. That is a tell-tale sign that you are spiritual. We are not among the dead. One of the best claims for Christianity is to broker life to people. I think that is vital in the basic meaning of that word "spirit." We have to minister life to people.

Christianity must not be defined by negativity, by passivity. Spirituality is more than a list of negatives: "I don't do this and I don't do that and I refrain from this." No, it has a positive side. What was the proof that Israel's God was real? The proof was in His acts, not His claims. The appeal was always, "This is the God who opened the waters of the Red Sea." "This is the God who brought manna in the wilderness." "This is the God who acted in history, who allowed men to emerge from the fiery furnace without even the smell of smoke on their clothing." "This is the God who acted in history." These were not philosophical arguments that were given to prove the reality of God. The proof of Israel's God was in His acts. He was alive. God is that infinite and perfect spirit, as one definition puts it, in whom all things have their source, support, and end. He is the author of life. He gives life and He takes life. First John says, "Do the truth"; that is a very Jewish statement. Not "think the truth"; that is orthodoxy, "straight thinking." This is "orthopraxy": "do the truth." That would play very well in the ancient Jewish biblical world.

4. Hebrew Spirituality Sees Work as Worship

A fourth point I want to make about spirituality from the Hebrew Scriptures is that the Hebrews saw work as worship. Physical labor was held in disdain in the ancient world. Slaves did it and therefore it was, for the most part, considered degrading. The upper classes tended to look down their nose on those who earned their living by manual labor. But the Bible pronounces a God-given dignity to those who work with their hands. There was no distinction between the sacred and the secular areas of life. All of life was God's domain of activity.

Every fall I teach Old Testament to 190 college freshmen. We have about 30 different liberal arts majors at our institution, so I like to say to these new students, "If you're not going into full-time work for Christ, for whom do you plan on working?" We are all called unto the Almighty and whatever we do, whether we are journalists, computer specialists, housewives caring for children, business people, or high priests in the temple, whatever we do, we do to the glory of God. Every area of life has something sacred at stake.

Work indeed is worship, and one of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew Bible is the word *abodah*. *Abodah* means both work and worship. The word is used of physical labor, even slavery. An *ebed* is a servant or a slave in the Hebrew Bible, and *abodah* comes from the same root. *Abodah* refers to what you do with your hands, work. But the same term

(*abodah*) is used of the service of God at the temple. The Hebrews made no distinction between work and worship. They were one, and the rabbis taught that study was one of the highest forms of worship because it led to good deeds. You did not study just for an ego trip, or an intellectual exercise, but study always led to a practical, pragmatic outcome. How you lived mattered. It would make a difference in this world. All of life, then, was to be seen as an act of worship.

Most of the rabbis certainly had secular occupations, even in Jesus' day. Jesus himself was a stone mason and possibly did some work as a carpenter, according to Mark 6:3. He was a construction worker, that is the meaning of the particular word used there. There was very little wood in Jesus' day so most of his work was in home construction, wall construction, building construction, building with rocks, adobe type structures and so forth. Paul was a worker in leather goods. The two greatest Jewish voices just before Jesus was born, the great Hillel, and Shammai, his opponent in many debates, were, respectively, a wood chopper and a surveyor. People worked with their hands. Indeed Paul refused money for preaching, in II Corinthians 11:7, probably based on the principle we read in the Talmud which says not to use the Torah as a spade to dig with.

My point here is simply this: we live in a college-bound profession-oriented society where the occupational status symbol tends to be cerebral rather than digital, working with one's hands. Let us never forget our Hebrew roots — there is a God-given dignity to manual labor, and what we do with our hands, what we do vocationally and occupationally, should also be done to the glory of God. Indeed the same word used for the worship of God at the temple is what one does with one's hands.

5. Hebrew Spirituality Involves Vocal Meditation

Another point I want to make about spirituality is that the Hebrews practiced meditation, their daily time for focus on the Word. Christians did not invent this notion of a daily quiet time or daily reflection upon the Word of God.

Let's go back to biblical times for a moment. Remember that the first Bible did not roll off the printing press until the 1400s. It was the clumsy Gutenberg Bible in ecclesiastical Latin. Everything up until the late Middle Ages had to be laboriously copied by hand. Today, if you commission the copying of a new Torah scroll, it takes over nine months to produce and it costs over \$30,000. There were not enough copies of Scripture to go around so it was very important that Scripture be

memorized from the teachers. The teacher would repeat the lesson to the students. Each student would then repeat it back to the teacher. One of the tractates of the Talmud says, "Who is the best scholar? Not the one who can repeat back the lesson 100 times to his teacher but the one who can repeat it back 101 times." This was the repeated and reflected-upon teaching from God's Word.

To be admitted to the highest order of clergy by the year 400 A.D., you had to commit to memory all 150 Psalms. When you get a group of 100 Christians together and say, "How many of you can recite Psalms?" you will get quite a few takers for Psalm 23, some for Psalm 1, and maybe a few for Psalm 100, but then it dies out quite rapidly. Never mind, for openers, Psalm 119!

My students and I annually put on programs in synagogues. These last for an hour and a half. We usually call it something like "Christian Appreciation of Jewish Heritage Night." Every one of these programs is different. One year I mentioned in class that this night was coming up in a few weeks and I said, "If any of you would like to do something from the Old Testament, let me know." A couple of weeks before that I had said in class that memorization of the Psalms was a very, very important thing in the earliest Church because the hymn book of the earliest Church was the book of Psalms. I Corinthians 14:26 tells us that: "When you come together each of you has a *psalmon*," which is a direct transliteration from the Greek. This student was listening so, on his own, he started memorizing Psalms (in English, not in Hebrew.) When I started putting together the program, he sheepishly came up to me after class and said "Well, I'd like to take part in the program." I said, "What can you offer, John?" and he said, "Well, I've been working on the Psalms." I said "I suppose you're going to quote Psalm 119 to the synagogue." He said, "I can, I have memorized that. In fact I've memorized 15 different Psalms since you threw that challenge out in class." I wouldn't have believed it but when we put the program on in the synagogue John got up and I said "Well, John, what verses do you want to quote from Psalm 119?" He said, "It doesn't matter, you can just tell me where to begin." So I said, "John is going to recite for us Psalm 119, verses 50-100." He did it. I was absolutely amazed.

That's a dying tradition in the Church today because after World War II educators started saying that we don't need to memorize anymore. We should talk about concepts, they said, relationships and values, we shouldn't have to learn things by rote anymore, that went out with the

Middle Ages. We all know that children resist memorization now. My mother who is 97 can recite poetry to me that she learned as a child. It's part of a former heritage which is now becoming, more and more, a lost art — but it was there in Bible times.

Meditation is the lynchpin that holds the entire Old Testament together. Meditation involved daily focus on the Word of God. It is a key theme in the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah of Moses ends with the end of Deuteronomy. The prophets begin with the first chapter of Joshua. The former prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The latter prophets are Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and "the 12." Then starts the third main division of the Hebrew Bible, the *ketubim* or the writings. The first book of the 11, in the *ketubim*, is the book of Psalms. Those who arranged the books in the Hebrew Bible did so around this theme of meditation. For what do you read in the opening verses of the first chapter of Joshua? The mantle of Moses is now upon Joshua. Hands have been laid upon him and there is the challenge that this book of the Law that Moses received on Mt. Sinai should not depart from his mouth but he should meditate on it day and night in order to prosper. That was the challenge to Joshua and his people. Why was Psalm 1 chosen to begin the collection and not another Psalm? Because of the same theme of meditation. For the righteous man's delight is in the law of God and in that law he meditates day and night, says Psalm 1. The theme of meditation binds the Old Testament together. The first chapter of Joshua, the first of the prophets, calls people back to meditate on the Law of Moses. The beginning of the third division of the Hebrew Bible also emphasizes the need to meditate day and night.

This interesting word, meditate, is quite different in meaning in the modern world. When we hear the word meditate today we tend to think of doing things silently, but biblical meditation was always noisy. The verb for "meditate" is *hagah*. It means to speak in an undertone, to mutter, to murmur, to articulate or verbalize your thoughts, to emit a sound. It is used in Isaiah of a lion and is there translated "growl," something very audible. It is also used in Isaiah of a bird that "moans" like a dove.

To memorize foreign vocabulary words it helps if you go to language labs. There you can speak those words out, for this helps to learn them. This is how people memorized the Bible. They spoke those words and so did not miss the assonance or the onomatopoeic expressions. Often we miss the power of biblical poetry when we read the Bible in translation. When we speak it out, however, it's a wonderful thing. For example the

word for "fly" in Hebrew is *zebug*. It is onomatopoeic. The word *baalzebug* means lord of the flies. That was Satan, as we know from the New Testament. Some of these words, just by hearing them, make an impact.

When we hear the word meditation in Scripture, it often implies a regular activity. Day and night the righteous man allows God's Word to be on his lips. Spirituality, we are reminded once again, is not something we do one day a week on a holy day, but God's Word is constantly going through our minds and we are speaking it out. Meditation means to articulate the Word aloud; it means to verbalize our thoughts before God. Now today we have Bibles and we can read things silently. We are not forced to do this verbally. But we must remind ourselves of Psalm 19:14: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight." That is synonymous poetry. If you ask the average Christian, "What does that verse mean?" he or she will say "May the words of my mouth — (what I speak with my lips) — and the meditations of my heart — (that's what I think silently from inside me) — be acceptable." That's not what it says! This verse is synonymous parallelism in the Hebrew Bible. It says therefore, may what I articulate with my mouth, and the meditations (what I verbalize from the thoughts in my heart), be acceptable. It is saying the same thing with two different words. If you have ever been to the Western Wall in Jerusalem you understand Hebraic meditation. Prayer is always noisy in the synagogue because Jews have been taught to pore over God's Word and to speak forth their thoughts to Him. That is meditation, biblically speaking.

6. Hebrew Spirituality Involves Giving Thanks in Everything

Prayer, to the Jew of Old Testament times, was the ability to give thanks in everything. This is something I think the Anglican Church has right. As an Anglican congregation comes to the Eucharist everything focuses on a line which says, "It is indeed right. It is our duty and our joy at all times and in all places to give thanks and praise." That's right out of the Hebrew Bible. It is our duty at all times and all places to give thanks. What does Psalm 34:1 say? "I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise will always be on my lips." What does Ephesians 5:20 say? In all things we are to give thanks. This was prayer as the Hebrew understood prayer. "In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths" (Prov. 3:6). Paul says to the Corinthians, "Whether you eat, whether you drink, do all to the

glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). First Peter 4:11: "That in all things God may be praised."

There is no distinction, then, between the sacred and the secular. To the Jews of Bible times, everything was theological. That's why you had to pray at all times in all places. Are you aware that pious Jewish people today pray a prayer to thank God they can urinate? There is a prayer to thank God before they eat food and after they eat food. There is a prayer to praise God before they have sex. Literally there is a prayer for everything. The first tractate of the Mishna, tractate *berachot*, says that upon seeing a comet there is a prayer of thanks, upon seeing the presence of a dwarf, upon smelling a flower, upon hearing an ocean, upon seeing lightning. "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe," and the one praying fills in the blank for which one blesses the Almighty.

The Jew was to be a person of praise and prayer. What does Yehudah mean, (the term from which the word Jew derives)? It means to sing, to praise, to chant, to give thanks. It is very basic then to be a people of praise. God is blessed for all things. His name is continually to be on the lips of His people.

This Hebraic concept of prayer has radically revised my own prayer life. I find myself much more prone to throw out one-liners to God at many different places throughout the waking day, to bless God for this and for that, whatever comes across the pathway of life. This has opened me up to understand what I believe Paul was getting at in I Thessalonians 5:17 and 18. He says, "Pray continually" (v. 17), and then he says, "in everything give thanks." He was writing that out of his own Jewish background. He was reflecting on the Psalmist, for whom there was a prayer of praise for everything. It's easy to give thanks for the good things but tractate *berachot* says to give thanks upon the hearing of good news and upon the hearing of bad news, which is sort of an early rabbinic version of Romans 8:28: "knowing that in all things God is working His plan for good." Prayer then, to the Hebrews, was the acknowledgment that everything in life is theological and so you gave thanks for all things.

7. Hebrew Spirituality Recognizes God's Forgiveness

Finally, in Old Testament times, the Jewish people knew something of the radical power of God's forgiveness. Isaiah 1:18 is a great text to underscore this fact. It is a familiar passage, but to hear this against the everyday life of Old Testament times is illuminating. Here is a picture of

radical deliverance: "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet they will be as white as snow," as white as the snowdrifts glistening on the top of Mt. Hermon, which crowns the land of Israel. "And though they are red as crimson they shall be like wool." The word crimson is the word *tola*, a term I wish to focus on. *Tola* has two meanings. Meaning number one — a worm that existed in Old Testament times, a highly prized worm because of meaning number two — the color that was derived from the worm. *Tola* is the word translated "crimson" in Isaiah 1:18. "Though your sins are red as *tola*, as crimson, they shall be like wool." Now the reason this little worm was so much in demand and sought after was the fact that it produced a colorfast, indelible substance. It was brilliant red. The color was used for the curtains of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:1). Because it was an indelible, permanent dye it could not wash out. This word picture illustrates the power of God's forgiveness. It is one of the most powerful theological figures in the Hebrew Bible. The message is this: Despite the stain of sin — though Israel's transgressions were colorfast, and indelible, and could not be eradicated — yet Israel could be set free through God's forgiveness. Israel might feel like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, that "all the perfumes of Arabia can't sweeten this little hand," yet this is the power of God's good news in ancient Israel. The God of Israel has that wonderful ability of removing the stain of sin, cleansing His people so that they stand before Him totally in the clear.

CONCLUSION

In this address I have tried to remind us of a number of different areas where Hebrew spirituality directly relates to New Testament spirituality. May God grant to each of you great joy and spiritual reward as you keep on exploring and discovering the richness of your Jewish roots. It is an exciting experience to enter this Semitic world that gave us our Bible, that gave us our Lord, and that gave us the roots of our spiritual life. Amen.