

The Relevance of Jewish Roots for Our Times *

MARVIN WILSON, PhD, MA

For today's Christian the search for and discovery of Jewish roots is an exciting and richly rewarding experience. My life as a Christian has been greatly enriched by my interaction with the Jewish community and the study of Judaism. The Bible cannot be properly read, understood and interpreted apart from its original Hebraic setting. Indeed, the Bible of the earliest Church was the Jewish Scriptures. If we want to radically come to grips with the origins of our faith we must give central place to the book which the earliest Church used. Christians today use the New Testament, but they sometimes fail to realize that the New Testament Church of the first century had no collection of 27 books as we have. It took several centuries for all these inspired writings to be collected into one complete corpus. The Old Testament Scriptures — whether in Hebrew or in Greek — composed the main Scriptures of the first-century Church. Thus, study of Jewish roots leads us to understand and appreciate our Jewish Lord and His followers with greater depth and accuracy. Also, the search for Jewish roots will lead us to the land of Israel where the biblical text will come alive through geographical, historical, and archaeological studies.

Unfortunately, with every good thing God brings to us in life, Satan (the word is Hebrew and means adversary, opponent, opposition) works hard to destroy, counterfeit, or distort it. Accordingly, though I am convinced that discovery of our Jewish roots as believers in Jesus is

* Originally delivered as a speech on April 30, 1994, during the fourth annual Theological Conference at Atlanta Bible College.

essential, I think we have to be aware of potential dangers, pitfalls and challenges we may well face as we seek to become reconnected to our roots. How far should one go to get reconnected? Should one emigrate to Israel and convert to Judaism? Must every Christian become fluent in Hebrew? What is a responsible position for believers who seek to uncover their Hebraic heritage? I do not intend to give a specific answer to this question. Each Christian must struggle with that for himself as I do for myself. At the outset of this presentation, however, I want to comment briefly on some of the challenges and cautions to be aware of in any pursuit of Jewish roots. I will then address some of the areas where a study of Jewish roots can be very useful and relevant in this hour in which we live.

I. SOME CHALLENGES AND CAUTIONS WE FACE

1. The reality of our Jewish connection must be born of the Spirit; it cannot be forced.

We must remember that, ultimately, these things concerning the study of our Hebraic heritage, Jewish roots and Israel have to be born in a person's heart by the Spirit of God. They cannot be imposed on others. Some Christians are crusaders for Judaism, Jewish studies and the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. Their over-zealousness at times creates a real burden and a hindrance. I think we have to plant seeds and let the Spirit of God water those seeds. It may take some time for them to grow. After all, we have seen nineteen hundred years of a de-Judaized Church. The Church became arrogant and proud and never heeded what Paul said in Romans 11: "Do not be arrogant but be afraid." "You do not support the root [of the olive tree, which represents Israel] but the root supports you." Now the Church really never understood this admonition. The Church became more and more de-Judaized and Grecianized. As it moved west, it forgot that the Church to which you and I are connected — our mother Church — was born on a Jewish holiday in a Jewish city, Jerusalem. In that mother Church, as Eusebius notes, during the first two centuries 15 successive pastors were Jews. These are the Jewish beginnings of the Church. It is a quirk of history that the Church today is predominantly Gentile rather than Jewish. Sometimes we look at the mainly non-Jewish Church today and very superficially get the impression that it was always this way. Well, it was not. I think sometimes there is an over-zealousness

to bring it back to the way it was, but God has to do this in a gradual way. You cannot recover the understanding and appreciation and richness of this Hebrew heritage overnight — it has taken nineteen hundred years to get rid of most of it. If a church has an appreciation for Jewish music, preaching and teaching a base has already been established. In the end, however, God must impress people with the importance of getting restored to Jewish roots.

2. We need a deep appreciation of biblical Judaism and must reject superficial and popular substitutes.

We should discourage faddism and superficial, sensational ways of getting into the study of the Jewish people and our Jewish roots. Our search for roots should be something which is very natural and not forced. I sometimes see people all excited about "cosmetic trappings." Jewish roots to them amount to little more than blowing the shofar, attending services with skullcaps on and learning a few Jewish dances. At the end of the day these activities seem fairly cosmetic. When you get down to it, what do these individuals know about their faith? What do they know about the life-changing, concrete theological concepts that ought to impact our spirituality, our families, and living the life God wants us to live? That deeper understanding of Jewish roots will result in solid relationships and center on lasting values deeply rooted in the Word of God. These emphases are often lacking in the lives of those who are more excited about the frills than the substance. If you get into a study of Jewish roots, let me encourage you to focus on areas of substance. In my work *Our Father Abraham* I have tried to spell out what I believe some of these areas are.¹

3. We must not fall into the trap of loving Jewishness more than Jesus.

Be wary of any you may meet in this Jewish roots movement who are more in love with Jewishness than they are in love with Jesus. Here is often a tell-tale sign that somebody is flirting with the edge or has already gone over it. Do we have in our lives as Christians theological non-negotiables? I hope so. I spend a lot of time lecturing in the Jewish community. As an evangelical Christian, I have certain theological boundaries established. I know that if I cross over these I will place myself

¹ *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

outside the historic boundaries of the Christian faith. Indeed, after all, when the theological dust settles, Judaism and Christianity are two different religions.

When Christians enter this very rich and wonderful world of Jewishness — getting informed about the Jewishness of their Lord and the earliest Church — they have to be very careful. It is an exciting and stimulating world. Because of so many centuries of de-Judaization many of these concepts are appealing. If being more like Jesus makes one more Jewish (and I think that it just might) so be it; but the Church must not distort its priorities. I know of Christians who absolutize or idolize the land of Israel. This is wrong. The Lord alone is sovereign. He alone is Lord of life and Lord of land. Nothing should be more important than or take priority over our relationship with Him. To Him alone belongs our highest allegiance, and to live for Him is our highest calling.

If our highest calling is seeing how Jewish we can become, we have a misplaced priority. If, on the other hand, our study of Jewishness, Judaism, the Hebraic text and the world of the Jewish people enables us to understand the Bible and the life of our Lord better, then we are not allowing the tail to wag the dog.

4. We must seek to root out neo-Marcionism from today's Church.

Today's Church must be wary of the heresy of Marcionism in its modern expression. The Church in general has become so de-Judaized that it is subject to a modern form of Marcionism. Marcion was a man who lived at Sinope on the shores of the Black Sea, in the region of what is modern-day Turkey. He was absolutely convinced that the God of the Old Testament was a God of bloody battles, one created by a demiurge. He argued that the Old Testament Scriptures were inferior to the New Testament, and he set out on a course to jettison the Hebrew Scriptures from the canon of the Church. He went to Rome in the year 138 to argue his position. He has numerous followers wanting to dispel the Jewish emphases of Scripture. Marcion's hero in the New Testament was Paul because in several passages Paul seemed to say that the Law has come to an end. Eventually, Marcion was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated from the Church in 144. Justin Martyr, around the year 160, said that Marcionism was the most dangerous heresy of his day.

The result of all of this is what we might call neo-Marcionism in the Church today. We have people who describe themselves as New Testament believers. This is misleading and wrong. Christians are "whole

Bible" believers. The Bible is one book with two parts. Again, the earliest Church never made any distinction about the Scriptures; they only had one set of Scriptures, and that was the first 77% of the Bible that we have today. When we call ourselves "New Testament believers," semantically we are pre-conditioning ourselves to accept the position of Marcionism, or neo-Marcionism. We are in effect saying the Old is inferior to the New; we have got the true *crème de la crème* in the New Testament, the best that the Bible can offer. The New Testament, in my opinion (and I think in the life of the Church of the first few centuries), is simply the fullest theological flowering of what God had been doing for hundreds of years through His people. The theology of the New Testament is really Old Testament theology brought to its richest and fullest maturity through the coming of Jesus.

In my opinion, neo-Marcionism is seen in the Church today in displacement theology, the idea that God is done with the Jewish people. The Church is the second stage of the salvation rocket and the first stage of that salvation rocket has been discarded. God is forever done with the Jew. Arnold Toynbee said in one of his works: "The Jew is nothing more than the vestigial remains of a dead civilization." And yet the curious thing is, unlike the Egyptians and the Canaanites and the Mesopotamians, whom we study at the Oriental Institute in Chicago or the Harvard Semitic Museum, Israel continues to live. Voltaire once said that the Jew is simply an insignificant pimple, but he couldn't understand how the whole world can rotate around that insignificant pimple. We who believe the Word of God know the Jew is important to God. In Genesis chapter 12 God makes an eternal covenant with His people, a covenant with a land component as part of it. God has not abrogated that covenant. But there are plenty of Christians who have dealt the Jew out of that inheritance; they say that there will be no turning of the Jewish people in faith, as described in Romans 11, resulting in the salvation of all Israel.

I think there is a linguistic anti-Jewishness in the Church today which has contributed to this problem as well. People have equated the word "Pharisee" with "hypocrite." In any religious tradition there are good, consistent, upright examples as well as those who do not practice what that particular religious group teaches. I think we can say that of the Pharisees. There were those who sincerely practiced their religion and there were those who did not. But please avoid doing what an Oxford dictionary of the English language did up until the early 1900's — define

“Jew” as “a cheapskate.” Likewise we must not make “Pharisee” synonymous with “hypocrite.” I can show you some wonderful examples of Jews who practice their faith, who are loving and kind, consistent in their religious commitment, and I can show you some who are dishonest in business. I can show you some Pharisees, such as Paul the Apostle, who are good, upright, outstanding people who walk faithfully before God, and I can show you some bad examples. Indeed, certain Christians want to point a finger at the Jewish community with a kind of neo-Marcionistic snobbery, but I can show you people who darken the door of church today yet who have business ethics during the week that are abominable. These people do not live out the faith that they profess by their church attendance. There is plenty of inconsistency in the Church today; why do Christians need to point a finger at the Jewish community?

We also manifest linguistic anti-Jewishness in the Church today when we refer to the first part of the Bible as the Old Testament. I tell my students when I introduce them to the Old Testament that we have to start to clean up our vocabulary and, occasionally at least, refer to the Old Testament as the Older Testament, the First Testament, or the Original Testament. Why? Because as soon as we call it the Old Testament many Christians think new must mean superior to the old and the old is therefore antiquated, outdated; it has been superseded. The message is all too easily conveyed: we don't really need the old; at best it is optional. And yet to the earliest Church it was foundational, not optional. So we have to contend with this semantic pre-conditioning when it comes to the Hebrew Scriptures.

The word “new” in New Testament really means “renewed.” This is the testament, the covenant, which began with Abraham, was renewed under Moses, and further renewed under David. It was a covenant of grace brought to its fullest level of meaning through the coming of the Messiah, the coming of Jesus (cf. Luke 1:72, 73). So the announcement in the Gospels does not pertain to a totally different or new covenant but rather the fullest expression of God's grace as He renews what He began with Abraham and brings it to its fullest expression through the coming of Christ. Many Bible scholars teach that there are two covenants — one covenant God made with the Jewish people, and a separate, new covenant God made for Gentiles, a covenant involving Jesus which has nothing to do with the covenant that God made with Jewish people. That does not play theologically if one accepts the whole New Testament. The New

Testament does not teach that the new covenant is a separate covenant intended exclusively for Gentile Christians, one totally unrelated to the Abrahamic covenant.

Look at the de-Judaization in *The Last Supper*: Da Vinci has people propped up at a table rather than reclining at a traditional Jewish Passover meal. One may also observe in the history of art examples of an uncircumcised Jesus. These are examples of neo-Marcionism. I also believe that anti-Zionism, the denial of the right of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, may in many situations be nothing more than neo-Marcionism in disguise.

5. We must distinguish Judaizing from rediscovering Jewish roots.

People obviously have a lot of concern about Judaizing whenever Jewish roots are brought up in the Church. Christians should not be Judaizers. I think the earliest Church has spoken clearly on that issue. Frankly, I'm not too worried today about Judaizing after 1900 years of de-Judaizing. Judaizing means that Christians are trying to impose or obligate a Jewish agenda upon other people, making them follow certain customs and practices of Judaism. I think when believers seek to compel non-Jews to observe the Sabbath, the celebration of Jewish festivals, circumcision, dietary laws or other things which were uniquely part of Jewish ritual law in Bible times, that compulsion may be interpreted as Judaizing. Paul the Apostle was opposed to Judaizing because it had the potential of distorting salvation by grace alone and at the same time becoming an argument for having two separate assemblies in the earliest Church — one for Jews, who did those things, and one for Gentiles, who did not. But Jesus has broken down the middle wall of partition between us. We are one body, Jews and Gentiles, one body with a great range of ethnic diversity. In the earliest Church there were Palestinian Jews close to the temple and Hellenistic Jews who were very much at home in the Graeco-Roman world with their customs and dress. They could probably handle the Septuagint much better than the Hebrew text of the Jewish Scriptures. In addition, there were Gentiles from pagan backgrounds in the earliest Church. In short, there was one body. Each believer had to respect the different backgrounds from which other believers came.

We may be blessed by voluntarily following various Jewish practices and celebrating certain holidays. But no one is cursed if they do not do these things. But indeed we can be greatly enriched if we do. If we are going to understand the Scriptures, what it means to be grafted into Israel,

it seems to me we ought to know about Jews and Judaism and what that life was about. If we were around in the first century, we would know it. Who were the leaders in the earliest churches which Paul visited? Most of these people were God-fearers. Who were the God-fearers? They were the people who stayed close to the Jewish community, studied Jewish laws and knew the Hebrew Scriptures. The only thing they did not do was to become proselytes, which would have meant circumcision and perhaps ritual baptism. But God-fearers understood Judaism. So when Paul established churches on his missionary journeys, he used God-fearers as leaders. They were very sympathetic to the Jewish people; they were being taught by them. Paul used God-fearers to found churches in the Gentile world because they knew the Gentile world; they also knew the Jewish mentality, the Jewish Scriptures and its teachings. Does this send a message to us today? Those who founded the churches in the diaspora, as the Church moved westward, were people not indifferent to their Jewish heritage. They understood the Jewish community and clung close to it.

II. THE PERTINENCE OF JEWISH ROOTS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

The rediscovery of our Jewish roots will allow us to enter into a number of areas which are relevant to our times. Let us consider some of the areas where a study of Jewish roots can be very useful in the Church today as we seek to follow spiritual lifestyles which are profoundly biblical.

1. Rediscovery of our Jewish roots allows us to learn to seize life and celebrate it with great emotion and passion.

Since it is the Jewish people into whom we wild olive branches have been grafted, we must understand their lifestyle. We find that the Jewish people of Bible times are a people who love life, who seize it and celebrate it and rejoice in it, often with great emotion. Their style of worship had certain features closely akin to modern pentecostalism. In the book of Psalms they clap hands and dance. Miriam emerges from the miracle of crossing the Red Sea, timbrel in hand, dancing with other women in celebration of the Almighty. There was an emotional, celebratory, joyful expression of the faith which was very spontaneous in Hebrew worship. The end of the collection of the psalter, Psalm 150, which is intended to serve as the great doxological climax to all of the Psalms, calls God's

people to pull out all of the stops by using all kinds of musical instruments in praise to the Almighty. "Hallelujah" is profoundly Hebraic and it became the terminology of early Christian music — praising the LORD. For the Jew, praise was a basic token of being alive.

Jews of Bible times were not afraid of their emotions. The Stoics, who were around several centuries before the Church was born, in general were indifferent to pleasure or to pain. They never submitted or yielded; they had one motto: "Come weal or woe, our status is quo." They were resolved to overcome their emotions. In general, in the Greek mentality, the ordering of life was very rational, cogent, and logical. The Hebrews, however, had an unpredictability about them; they went with the flow of life, and allowed their emotions to go with the mood swings of life. Their motto was not, "Grin and bear it" like the Stoics' might have been.

In the Bible the Hebrews affirmed their emotions; they were a people with feelings. Jesus wept at Lazarus' funeral. In the mindset of the western world, however, men are supposed to be macho; they are not supposed to show their emotions. And yet the greatest man who ever lived could freely weep. In II Samuel 6 David danced before the Lord as the Ark was brought to Jerusalem. He danced so enthusiastically that his clothes fell off. In the lost and found department of the New Testament, Luke chapter 15, there is a story about a lost son. What happens when he comes back? His arrival at home is celebrated by the gracious father with dancing, feasting, singing. "My son was lost, and now he is found."

David was a skillful musician, and let his emotions flow with the mood swings of life. In the Psalms we have an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, as John Calvin reminds us. There we can peer into the hearts of the saints. Psalm 51, a Psalm of David, is set against his double sin of adultery and murder recorded in II Samuel 11, 12. In this passage David weeps on the ground before God for seven days, concerning the life of his child with Bathsheba, and God takes that child just hours before that child's circumcision. We will not understand the emotions of David until we understand the oldest rite in Judaism, circumcision, which goes back to our father Abraham.

In the various festivals of Israel we also see this outward affirming of emotions as these community events re-enact many of the values of Judaism. The Passover celebrates freedom. I always tell my students when I take them to a Seder celebration to be prepared for fun and games. When Christians first attend a Seder led by Jewish people they tend to bring with them their experience of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or

Holy Communion and then impose this on the Passover Seder. This does not work because a Seder is far more joyful than it is solemn or introspective. "We were in bondage for 400 years." The liturgy of the *Haggadah*, the story of coming out of Egypt, is a very thankful and happy type of thing. All of the foods there relive this experience. A person "eats history" at a Passover, and one has to see himself as personally coming out of Egypt. So the mood is very festive, a fact which bothers some Christians. But to the Jewish community, this is taking an abstract value — freedom — and reliving and celebrating it; it is redemption re-enacted.

The theme of redemption, which runs like a crimson cord through both Testaments, is a pivotal theological truth. Jesus chose his moment when he wanted to teach about redemption. The idea of redeeming God's people from Egypt is mentioned 125 times in the Hebrew Bible. This act of the deliverance or redemption of Israel is the greatest miracle God performed for the Jewish people. It is closely linked with the covenant at Sinai some 50 days later. In the upper room, Jesus takes these themes of redemption and covenant and builds on them. Instead of the wine being a symbol of joy celebrating the emancipation from Egypt, Jesus brings new meaning to the fruit of the vine by speaking of his own passion which is about to happen. He also links it to covenant: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). So festivals like Passover teach profound theological truths — God's deliverance of His people, anticipating an even greater worldwide deliverance to come at the end of the age.

Consider the festival of weeks, or Pentecost, the day the Church was born. Christians typically call it Pentecost from its Greek name, but in the Hebrew Bible it was called *shavuot*, which is simply "weeks." It was a time of singing and dancing 50 days after Passover. On this occasion, the grain had ripened in Israel and the first fruits were brought to the temple. An offering was made of two loaves of unleavened bread, freshly baked from the new grain. *Shavuot* was a time of great celebration, a festival for rejoicing as it was the season of the year for the major harvest. That is why the book of Ruth is read in the synagogue during Pentecost — it centers around the time of barley harvest. It was a time of great joy, for God was faithful in bringing the staff of life, bread, once again to His people.

Or take *Sukkoth*, the Feast of Tabernacles (or huts), which dramatically depicted the coming of the rainy season. In many parts of the world today people curse rain; in ancient Israel, one blessed God for sending the rain. Almost all of the rain came in six months of the year, between mid-October and mid-April. *Sukkoth* commemorated the forty years Israel

lived in the wilderness, dwelling in huts or booths. Recently I was in Jerusalem speaking at a conference during *Sukkoth*. While I was there I took time to go through the neighborhoods of the Orthodox community to see how they celebrated *Sukkoth*. Jewish families basically moved outside for a week, taking their meals and sleeping in their own private *Sukkah*. Thus they remembered the wilderness wanderings of their ancestors and the end of the harvest season, the final in-gathering of grapes and other late summer fruits. *Sukkoth* was a time of great rejoicing because it coincided with the coming of rain after the annual summer drought. The rain was needed to break up the sun-drenched, hard-packed land, so that the plowing and the sowing could begin again.

In John 7:37, 38 Jesus says, "If any one is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me . . . streams of living water will flow from within him." He said this in Jerusalem, where the pool of Siloam is. At *Sukkoth*, the priests would go down to the pool of Siloam with their gold and silver vessels and bring that water up into the temple area and pour it out to dramatize the coming of rain. It is abundantly clear, therefore, why Jesus gave his sermon on living water when he did, on the last, great day of that week-long feast. He taught about the slaking of spiritual thirst at a time when people were thinking rain, indeed, praying for rain. This passage in John 7 is a great illustration of why Christians need to be in touch with their Jewish roots — to enter into the richness of following their Lord's teaching in such a way as to know why he gave his theological emphasis on "living water" where he did.

To sum up this first point then, the Hebrews seized life and celebrated it with great gusto and passion. They were in touch with their emotions. Their religion was very much a this-worldly religion, in which they learned to celebrate the presence of God in their daily lives. It is of more than passing interest that the first miracle Jesus performs is that of making wine to celebrate a wedding feast. In doing so he endorsed the first of the 613 commandments in the Bible, one centering on marriage: "Be fruitful and increase." When the Church has understood its Hebraic heritage it has never taken a negative view toward marriage and the family. What we see in the early history of the Church, when people were thought to live closer to God because they renounced marriage and headed for the cloister to live ascetic lives, finds little or no support in terms of biblical Hebraic heritage.

There is something radically this-worldly about the faith that we read of in the Hebrew Bible. These people were very much connected with this

life, and they celebrated it robustly. Indeed the Talmud says that in the age to come every person will have to give an account for every good thing God created for His people to enjoy which they failed to enjoy. He is the Creator; He has given us a wonderful world filled with resources. That is why the celebration of life is a major theme in the Bible. The Church has always found its deepest meaning in the context of community, not isolation from one another to bring a higher spirituality.

2. Serious pursuit of our Jewish roots will lead us to a lifetime commitment of study.

A lifelong commitment to study is at the very heart of our Hebrew heritage. A sage in ancient Israel recorded a proverb: "Take fast hold of instruction; don't let her go. Keep her, for she is your life" (Prov. 4:13). Learning and teaching were concerns of every dedicated believer in Bible times. Indeed, it was a lifelong commitment.

A rabbi friend of mine has, more than once, bemoaned to me the fact that there is a disease rampant in his congregation — pediatric Judaism. The first time he said this I asked what he meant by "pediatric Judaism." He replied, "Well, it's the notion that parents can shlep their kids in here for instruction and preparation for bar mitzah. But when they get to the end of their junior high years, eighth grade roughly, and have completed this rite of passage, instead of assuming their place formally in the life of the congregation, they usually drop out. Pediatric Judaism sends the message that religious study is for kids, not adults." Perhaps we should recognize that the Church has a parallel problem with "pediatric Christianity." We lose more than fifty percent of our young people from Sunday School once they hit their early teens.

In Jewish biblical tradition learning is a lifelong commitment. Today we have graduation ceremonies, but "commencement" means beginning. When Jesus left this world, the so-called "Great Commission" was to make *talmidim*, learners, of all nations. The word disciple appears 250 times in the New Testament. Isaiah's picture of the final outworking of this is all of the nations streaming to Jerusalem, coming to learn of the Torah of God (Isaiah 2:2, 3). The Torah has a teaching component. Just as Jesus said to "make learners of all nations" he left a command to teach them all that he had commanded. That is represented in Paul's teaching in II Timothy 2:2. Here Paul instructs Timothy that good teaching produces a chain reaction. Says Paul, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also

be qualified to teach others." This is the sense of the New Testament term *paradosis*. It means what is "handed over," "passed on," "delivered." It is often translated "tradition."

Tradition is not the dead faith of the living, it is the living faith of the dead. Today's Church exists because there are those who passed down from generation to generation the living faith of the dead. Tradition is a nasty word in some Protestant circles, but it is a very healthy word if you understand it in its biblical context. The Massoretes were a group of Jewish scholars who preserved the words of the Hebrew Bible from 600 to 900 A.D. They counted the words and inserted the verse numbers. These people bore the title Massoretes, a Hebrew term equivalent to *paradosis*, for the Massoretes were the preservers of the Hebrew text. "Teach them to your children and to their children after them" (Deut. 4:9). There is a special gift of teaching given to some in the church. For example, there is the office of pastor-teacher, two parts to one office (Eph. 4:11). To be a pastor you had to be able to transmit a heritage of faith to your people. Why is study important on an ongoing and permanent basis? I can think of no better answer than a rabbi once gave to that question. He said, "When I pray I talk to God, but when I study God talks to me." There is no reason more important than this for being a student of the Word.

3. Our Jewish roots also teach us to focus on community and commitment to one another.

Another relevant area concerning Jewish roots stresses the need for the church to practice solidarity, a mutual dependence on and accountability of one to the other. Here is a profoundly Hebraic concept: the need to renew our sense of community and be a people who care. This idea of corporate solidarity in a "me first" generation is something very needful. Paul touches on this coming from his Jewish background in I Corinthians 12. He admonishes that when one rejoices we all ought to rejoice; when one suffers adversity or pain we all ought to feel that pain. Why? Because we are linked to one another.

In ancient Israel it was one for all and all for one; all Hebrews were considered one Hebrew, and each Hebrew was considered to be part of them all. This is connection to a community — God's people are corporately linked. Yet often the church seems to stress rugged individualism. The word "church" is an organic concept; it is not an edifice; it is people. *Ecclesia* refers to a redeemed community, people who have been called out. It was translated "assembly" in classical Greek, an assembly

of citizens who were called out for a particular purpose. The church is people, a living organism; it is not bricks and mortar. We are the church. In the church, the individual incorporates himself into a group.

To be a Jew first and foremost means to belong to a people; it is a group concept. Study Jewish prayers. They often use the term "we." Note the prayers in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement: "We have sinned" — it is the cry of the whole community. Judaism teaches that when Moses received the Law at Mount Sinai not just Moses was present. Every Jew was present at Mount Sinai. The covenant was made not only with those who were present but with every future generation (Deut. 29:15). They were all standing there at Sinai; all Jews are incorporated seminally in Moses' covenant.

Judaism teaches that when one destroys a single life it is as though that one destroys an entire world. And when one saves a life it is as though that person has saved an entire world. Little wonder why so many Jewish people today are propelled into "helping professions" like psychiatry, medicine, education and social work. The reason is that they are saving life and that is one of the highest virtues in Judaism.

There is a wonderful story in the Talmud of three men who are in a boat, which demonstrates this corporate connectedness concept of early Christianity. One of the three men in this boat out on the water starts to drill a hole under his seat. One of the others says, "Stop! What do you think you are doing?" The man drilling the hole says, "Relax, what are you worried about? I'm only drilling under *my* seat." The rabbis used that story to make profoundly clear that what we do often affects everyone else. We cannot afford the luxury of thinking that we operate in a vacuum. We are interconnected. No man is an island. Every time one of the books of the Torah is finished in the synagogue the entire congregation exclaims, "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another." It is a call to community. That is a very important part of our Judaic heritage as Christians.

4. The Hebraic view of marriage and the family holds pertinence for today's Church.

Let us consider the issue of love in relation to marriage. Love, according to Jewish tradition, comes after marriage, not simply before. In the western world, where we Americans live, people typically marry for love and for romance. The eastern culture of the Semites of Bible times, however, was totally different. For the most part marriages were arranged.

Romance and emotions had little opportunity to develop prior to marriage.

We see this depicted in the play "Fiddler on the Roof." It is set in 1905, in a little town in Czarist Russia called Anatevka. There lives a dairy man named Tevye, seeking to raise his daughters according to what the Good Book says, although he constantly misquotes it. Near the end of the story there is a great musical duet in which Tevye poses the question to Golde, his wife, "Do you love me?" And she responds, "Do I love you?" and she goes on to explain, "Well, for 25 years I've milked the cow and cleaned the house. Why talk about love right now? The first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was nervous, I was shy, I was scared." "So was I. But my father and my mother said we'd *learn* to love each other, and so I'm asking you Golde, do you love me?" "I'm your wife." "I know, but do you love me?" That duet ends, "It doesn't change a thing, but after 25 years it's nice to know."

In the Bible love is more of a commitment than a feeling. Love was a pledge rather than an emotional high. Love was a promise to make the marriage work. One of the key words in the Hebrew Bible in this connection is the word *davar*, which often translates as "word," but which also means "promise." Biblical Hebrew has no other word for promise. When you gave your word (*davar*) it was considered to be a pledge or a promise. The biblical text to which the Jewish community goes back to establish this concept of love coming after marriage, not simply before, is Genesis 24:67: "Issac brought Rebecca into the tent and took her and she became his wife; and he loved her." In the western world you are supposed to marry the girl you love. In the eastern, Hebraic world you learn to love the girl you marry. Obviously, both of these are important dimensions. In this modern world we hear about love before marriage, but we hear little in the Church today about the need for love to mature after marriage. That is an emphasis that comes out of the Hebrew Scriptures. The western society puts the emphasis on love before marriage, with love often fizzling out. The Bible describes love developing after marriage. It had to — especially if the first day you met was your wedding day.

5. Recovery of our Jewish roots will lead to hope for tomorrow.

Knowledge of our Jewish roots is necessary to face the future and give us hope for tomorrow. The Jewish Scriptures provide great encouragement when we consult them in order to construct a biblical concept of time and history.

The Canaanites in the ancient world, and the Greeks for the most part, had a very cyclical view of history. It was wed to the seasons of the year, to nature. Others in the ancient world looked at events as being fated by the gods. But the Hebrews had a different view of history, one which becomes our view of history by reason of our in-grafting as Gentile believers into Israel. Their view was a progressive, linear, durative view of history. History was en route to a great future.

The Jewish view of history reminds us that no matter what world conditions may be, God has His hand on history; it is going somewhere. History is moving toward a glorious goal and climax at the end of this age. This age, the *olam ha-zeh*, as the Hebrew Bible puts it, will give way to the age to come, the *olam ha-ba*. The Bible is a theological interpretation of history. It records events, but also sets forth the meaning which those events had for the life of the community. There were other ancient philosophies of history. Some were written to glorify rulers. Hebrew history, however, is written to glorify God. Hence the notion of suicide was really never a live option in ancient Israel, because the Hebrews were called to sanctify time, not to kill time.

The reason that Christians and Jews today have something profoundly in common concerning the future is that they both share a Messianic hope. Although we nuance that hope differently, and understand it differently, Christians and Jews today are partners in waiting. That is, the consummation of God's kingly reign on this earth awaits us in the future. No matter how depressing this world may be there is yet future hope of redemption. Around the world Passover Seders end every year: "Next year in Jerusalem." There is also a reminder that Elijah the prophet is yet going to come as a forerunner to the Messiah. At the Seder someone goes to the door to look for Elijah. So even the Passover is a dramatic reminder that history is under God's control, and is moving progressively toward a brilliant future.

When the Redeemer comes to finalize the redemption he has inaugurated, swords will be converted into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and nations will not learn the knowledge of war again. As Israel's prophets foretold, the knowledge of the Lord will cover the world as the waters cover the sea, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and ultimately in Messiah's day the Lord will be king over all the earth. King Messiah will reign and his name will be One. He will be *sar shalom*, prince of peace. "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over David's kingdom, establishing

and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (Isaiah 9:7). The prophets paint an encouraging picture. They remind us that the kingdom of God is more than something we spiritually enter into now. God's power and His reign *are* experienced now, but this world is yet sinful. This world has not yet realized the perfect achievement of that kingdom, an event which will come only when the king comes to this earth at the end of this age.

Recently, I engaged an Hasidic Jewish scholar in an extended formal discussion on the Messiah at a theological forum. This rabbi and professor unabashedly told his audience the following:

The Jewish people are now coming back to Israel in preparation for the Messiah's coming. The Messiah's coming may be at any moment. We should wait for it, we should long for it, the time is short. Accompanied with the Messiah's coming will be the resurrection of the dead, and the establishment of Messiah's righteous reign through one from the Davidic line. The Messiah will be a Jew.

In regard to the above, this Jewish scholar and I differed only on the name of that Jew.

The Hebrew Bible ends on an upbeat note, and I think that is purposeful. The Old Testament in our English Bible ends (in the Book of Malachi) with a curse, not a word of hope. But the last verse of the Hebrew Bible, II Chronicles 36:23, ends with the word *ya'al*, "let him go up." It refers to going back to Israel, back to the land. Religious Jews today of course see this return to Zion as preparation for the coming Messiah. Thus, the Hebrew Bible ends with a word of hope, a call to return to Jerusalem, to go back to Zion. The city of Zion is where the Church began and, from the Jewish Scriptures, it is also a place central to the climax of history.

The ultimate hope for the future is the Messiah. No matter how depressing or despairing things are around us we cannot lose hope, because in the end God will be the winner. History is going somewhere, and ultimately it will come to that great and glorious climax when the kingdom of God is perfected, achieved in its ultimate form on this earth through Messiah's coming. If this dimension of the Church's Jewish roots holds no pertinence for this hour, the Church will fall.