The Jewish Nature of the First Century Church

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Introduction: Of all of the things to study, why pick out a subject concerning the Jewish nature of the Church, Christ, etc.? Paul write to Timothy the words “Study to show yourself approved unto God. A workman that needs not be ashamed. One that knows how to correctly interpret the word of truth.” 2 Tim. 2:15

For years I was brought up to have a mind that accepted but did little original research. I listened to the arguments given for certain standard beliefs and accepted them with little or no question. Of course our outlook on life depends on where we have been raised and what religious group colored how we look on religion in general. But a few years ago, I was introduced to some material that struck me as not only correct but as life and spirit transforming. This teaching concerned the Jewishness of Jesus. When I realize the implications I began to do substantial research into the writings of the Talmud, Mishnah, etc., the Herodian Temple period, the many facts of Judaism and the teachings of Jesus and epistles of Paul in this light. Too my surprise many things that hadn’t made a lot of sense did make sense once it was put in its correct historical, cultural and contextual climate. This is the research that I want to share with you in this brief treatise.

I’d like to begin with a few quotes from “Our Father Abraham”, by Marvin Wilson, concerning study in General and the great need for it in our personal lives today.

“When men realized that the teaching of God was no heritage that one accepts passively but rather a heritage that has to be won, they began to see this relationship to the Bible as a religious obligation. It became a supreme commandment to “study”, to explore the Scriptures. To explore means to consider the Bible as a challenge rather than a gift…..The duty to “explore” requires further rethinking: each end becomes a new beginning and each solution a new problem…Once Today’s Church is fully aware of the vast importance of learning, it too will realize that it cannot afford to be passive about the matter. Each new generation of Christians must renew its commitment in action to personal rediscovery of the great historical sources of the faith.” P. 302

“In order to change our attitude, we must examine our theological views and change those which are faulty. Unlike God’s immutable word, theology is a human and fallible discipline. Thus it is always open to fresh statement and revision; one must be prepared to write theology with pencil and eraser, not indelible ink. Theology may change or mature as one grows to perceive God’s teachings and his work in history more clearly. Furthermore, no single theologian or theological tradition has all truth contained within a distinct system. The body of believers is diverse, and we just must learn from one another. God still has more insight and correction to bring to his people from his word.” p. 323

“Every Christian should desire a greater knowledge and strengthening of the Jewish roots of his faith. In this lifelong search and endeavor, loving concern for Jewish people is not
optional. Indeed, Christians are commanded, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; Gal. 5:14). Passive love is not enough, however. A person cannot claim to love his neighbor if he has not yet made a sincere effort to reach out to get to know and understand his neighbor. And so, Hillel again compels us to reply by asking, “If not now...when?” p. 335

“As child is bound to mother, Christianity could not exist without Judaism. In the words of W.D. Davies, “the very matrix of Christianity is Judaism: Christianity is the very bone of Judaism...Indeed, the more biblical one becomes, the more Semitic one will be. It is impossible to be anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic and take the Bible seriously: otherwise, one engages in a form of self-hatred. For the Christian, the Old and New Testaments are simply divisions of the same Book.” (Our Father Abraham, pp. 19, 20)

“It is unfortunate that modern Christianity has too often laid claim to a vast heritage form the past about which it has remained largely ignorant. In this vein, Stuart Rosenberg poignantly reminds the Christian community that before one can be “fully Christian,” one must also “know what it means to be a Jew.” Furthermore, he points out that “the stronger a man’s Christian faith, the more Jewish will he regard himself.” (Our Father Abraham, pp. 24, 25)

“The Bible is a Hebrew book, telling the story of the Hebrew people. Jesus was a Hebrew Lord. We, on the other hand, are Western people sharing a very diverse and sometimes controversial heritage that comes from many sources. He concludes incisively: “If the Bible is going to be understood in our day, we must develop ‘Hebrew eyes’ and ‘Hebrew attitudes’ toward life. Western eyes must be replaced by Eastern eyes if modern Christians intend to read the Bible the way it was written. The Bible can make sense only when it is viewed and studied in the light of its own distinctive Near Eastern setting and cultural context. Such a challenge to today’s Church has been issued nowhere more emphatically than in the words of the late Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth: “The Bible...is a Jewish book. It cannot be read and understood and expounded unless we are prepared to become Jews with the Jews.” (Our Father Abraham, p. 24)

Thus, this series of lessons will be one of reinvestigation into our historical past, Judaism, and in so doing lead us to appreciate further and look in a different light into the words and actions of our Savior and the community that followed him.

I. The Bible is highly Hebraic

A. In its entirety the Bible is highly Hebraic.

1. In spite of the fact that portions of the N.T. were communicated in Greek, the background is thoroughly Hebrew.

2. The writers are Hebrew, the culture is Hebrew, the religion is Hebrew, the traditions are Hebrew, and the concepts are Hebrew.

B. We tend to forget that the O.T. comprises approximately 78% of the Biblical text, and the N.T. only 22%.
1. When we add the highly Hebraic portions of the N.T. (Matt., Mark, Luke, and Acts 1:1-15; 35-) this section deals with events in Jerusalem and are recounted in a Hebrew context as well as showing the same textual evidence and the synoptic Gospels of being originally communicated in Hebrew) to the Old Testament, the percentage of biblical material originally written in Hebrew rises to 88%.

2. Not more than 12% of the entire Bible was originally written in Greek.

3. When we subtract from that 12% the 176 quotes from the Old Testament (14 O.T. quotes in John and 162 from acts 15:36 to the end of the N.T.)

C. With this emphasis it is not surprising that the community of believers in Jerusalem should have a strong Jewish influence that would be glaring in light of historical and cultural evidence not to mention the textual evidence itself.

II. Early Christian Writings and their Relationship to Judaism

A. The Early Christian writings reflect ideas, beliefs, views and trends in Second Temple Judaism.

1. They reflect the world of the Sages, including the Sages’ Biblical exegesis, their parables, and even their own uncertainties.

2. One also finds expressions of the hope for redemption and of the Messianic beliefs current in Judaism during that period. (Flusser, Jewish Sources in Early Christianity, p. 9)

B. Early Christian literature thus reflects the world of the Sages at an earlier stage than its reflection in the Jewish sources.

1. It reflects Jewish life in the Hellenistic diaspora, details of which we otherwise know chiefly from the writings of Philo of Alexandria.

2. We can also learn from it about other Jewish diasporas and about Jewish customs which have not been recorded in early Jewish sources.

   a. Take an example: The Jewish custom of giving a boy his name during his circumcision ceremony is not known in our Talmudic literature, but in one of the gospels (Luke 1:59-64).

   b. We are told that John the Baptist’s father gave him his name during this ceremony.

   c. Or another example: the custom of passing around the glass of wine during the Kiddush (the blessing on the wine ushering in Sabbath and Holy Day meals) is unknown in the Talmudic sources, but the N.T. tells us that during the Last Supper Jesus asked that this cup should be passed among his Apostles. (Luke 22:17 and parallel passages) (Flusser, David, Jewish sources in Early Christianity, p. 10)
C. The celestial biography found in the New Testament consists entirely of Jewish motifs: Jesus the Messiah had existed before the creation of the world; he entered the world, or even created it; he became flesh- and then brought about redemption; he is the Messiah – Bar Enosh, the Last Adam; and he atones for sins just like those who had atoned for the sins of Israel and then comes back to life. (Flusser, David. Jewish Sources in Early Christianity, p. 59)

D. It is difficult to imagine the N.T. without such key words or concepts as:
   1. Sabbath
   2. Passover
   3. Messiah
   4. Rabbi
   5. Israel
   6. Hosanna
   7. Hallelujah
   8. Amen, which occurs 31 times in Matthew alone.

E. Nor could the N.T. be imagines without it’s numerous Old Testament quotations or its key Hebrew concepts such as the:
   1. Kingdom of heaven
   2. Redeemer
   3. The Passover meal
   4. Covenant with God
   5. The End times
   6. Atonement
   7. Eternal Life
   8. Election
   9. Love of neighbor
   10. The Grace of God
   11. Or words such as salvation, worship, the fall of man
   12. or such names as Jacob, Judah (Jehuda), Simon, Joseph, John (Yohanan), Mary (Miriam), and Elizabeth (Elisheva) born by 18 of Jesus’ companions. (Lapide, Hebrew in the Church, p. 1)

III. Jesus the Jew and His Jewish Community
   A. Jesus was a faithful Jew, his personal disciples and their followers who resided n Palestine were Jews who had studied the Torah and were strict in their observance of the commandments. (Flusser, Jewish Sources in Early Christianity, p. 81)
   B. A cursory look at the beginnings of Christianity reveals a Church that as made up exclusively of JEWS!
1. Indeed, the Church was viewed as a sect within Judaism, as the book of Acts makes clear in referring to early followers of Jesus as “the sect of Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5).
2. They seemed to function easily within Judaism in that they were described as “enjoying the favor of all the people.” (2:47)
3. The church was born in Jerusalem, King David’s royal abode, the focus of Jewish religious life for over a millennium.
   b. Jesus had instructed them to stay in Jerusalem to await the coming of the spirit (Acts 1:4, 5).
   c. A group of about a hundred and twenty Jewish believers came together in an upper room for prayer (1:14, 15).
   d. Among them are the 12 from Galilee (1:11, 13).
   e. The early church was closely tied with the synagogue.
   f. The Acts 15 council met in Jerusalem!
   g. And it was stated that the apostles had filled Jerusalem with their teaching (Acts 5:28).
      a. Jews from Jerusalem and from regions near and far had assembled to celebrate Shabout.
      b. This late spring festival occurred fifty days after Passover.
         i. Shabu’ot was the Jewish Feast of Weeks (“Weeks is the meaning of Hebrew shabu’ot; Deut. 16:10), or Feast of Harvest (Ex. 23:16).
         ii. After New Testament times, the Jewish community came to associate this holiday with the anniversary of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai.
         iii. This great revelation at Sinai occurred in the third month after the Israelites left Egypt (cf. Ex. 19:1).
         iv. A special feature of Shabuot was the offering of two loaves of leavened, salted bread, baked from the freshly ripened grain (Lev. 23:16-21; Num. 28:26).
         v. Throughout Bible times Shabout was a required pilgrim festival (Ex. 23:14-17).
vi. Annually, it brought thousands of Jews to dwell in Jerusalem at the time when the fields were ready for harvest (note the spring ingathering of barley in the book of Ruth).

vii. In Jesus’ day, they came “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5).


ix. In his first sermon, delivered on the day of Pentecost (Shabout), Peter addressed his audience as “fellow Jews” (2:14) and “men of Israel” (2:22). And he quoted to them from Joel, their own Hebrew prophet (Acts 2:17-21).

2. In Peter’s second sermon (Acts 3), he referred to “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers” (v. 13). He also said to his Jewish hearers, “You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers” (v. 25).

   a. In a style reminiscent of the ancient Hebrew prophets (cf. Ezek. 19:30,32), he called upon his Jerusalem audience to “repent” (Acts 3:19).

   b. This term has a rich background in biblical Judaism.

      i. In the Hebrew bible, the verb often used to express “repent” is shub, which means “to turn around, return, renounce.”

      ii. It suggests a spiritual about-face.

      iii. A person turns away from his sin and goes back to the living God of Israel.” (Wilson, Marvin. Our Father Abraham, p. 42)

IV. Paul the Jew

A. Paul was proud of being a Jew (2 Cor. 11:22).

   1. A Hebrew of Hebrew ancestry (Phil. 3:5).

   2. The voice that he heard from heaven called to him in Hebrew (Acts 26:14).

   (Lapide, Hebrew in the church, p. 1)

B. Paul felt at liberty to adhere to the regulations of the Mosaic Law in matters such as:

   1. circumcision (Acts 16:3)

   2. the Nazarite vow (18:18)

   3. purification ritual (21:20-26) (Our Father Abraham, p. 29)

C. Toward the end of his third missionary journey, Paul, still faithful to Judaism, wanted to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16).

D. Paul adhered personally to such Jewish practices as the above apparently to show the people that by become a Christian he had not forsaken the Law bur remained a faithful Jew, firmly committed to his ancestral Scriptures and traditions.
E. Paul seems to have no objection in his writings to Jewish Christian continuing to keep various ceremonies of the Law, since this was a way of demonstrating their solidarity with their kinsmen in the Jewish community at large. (Our Father Abraham, p. 29)

F. It’s interesting that in the Gentile cities that he entered he would seek out the synagogue and would be allowed to address the assembly, something that no Gentile would have been allowed to do or a Jew who was considered a turn coat.

G. The Jews of the Hebrew-speaking diaspora were a factor which exercised some influence on the transformation of Christianity into a religion of the Gentiles.

1. These Jews spoke Greek, and their literary creation was in Greek.
2. In those days a sense of the emptiness of polytheistic beliefs and of the moral corruption of mankind was widespread through the world, and there was a growing sympathy for the Jews and for their attitude to religion.
3. Many people joined Judaism as full proselytes, and others, who were called “God-fearing,” did not take upon themselves the full yoke of the commandments, but undertook to keep some of the obligations of Judaism.
4. Such men were the first to join Christianity as a result of the preaching of Paul and his sect (Flusser, Jewish Sources in Early Christianity, p. 73).

Conclusion: A profound and abiding Christian appreciation for Jewish culture and the Jewish people comes from sensing inwardly that one’s deepest spiritual identity is with a Jewish Lord, and that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

It is the existential realization that spiritually one is grafted into Israel, a Jewish people. It is to recognize that through father Abraham one enters a new family and new world of relationships (Gal. 3:29). This personal perception is particularly fed by a consciousness that one owes an enormous debt of appreciation to the Jewish people.