

# Hebrew Roots Movement

By Dr. Craig A. Dunning

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**Key Figures:** Monte Judah, Douglas Nicholson, Michael Rood, Dean and Susan Wheelock, Joseph Good, Tim Hegg, William F. Dankenbring, Mark Biltz, Brad Scott, Ed Chumney

**Organizational Structure:** Numerous independent groups.

**Group Names:** Hebrew Roots, Hebraic Roots, Jewish Roots, Nazarene Judaism, and others

## BACKGROUND

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The Hebrew Roots Movement (HRM) began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and can be difficult to define. One Hebrew Roots (HR) congregation has defined the movement as follows:

Hebrew Roots is a movement emerging around the world that advocates returning to the understanding of the Scriptures, perspectives, and beliefs of first-century faith. We are removed from Protestant Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, and Messianic Judaism because of core belief differences.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, this definition does not explain the beliefs or practices of the movement, and thus illustrates the difficulty in clearly and succinctly defining the HRM.

Without a binding doctrinal statement, membership and affiliations within the HRM are self-determined. Members go by a variety of labels – e.g., *Hebrew Roots*, *Hebraic Roots*, *Jewish Roots* – each having a nuanced emphasis in their system. Some Hebraic Roots congregations present a fairly evangelical doctrinal statement, modified with certain Hebrew words and usually a statement about the obligation to observe the seventh-day Sabbath and other Old Testament (OT) laws. Other congregations may include a much more “Hebraic” statement of faith that also includes a condemnation of the alleged pagan roots of Christian churches evidenced by their observance of Christmas and Easter. Some draw from the Sacred Name movement.<sup>2</sup> Others do not *require* the use of the Hebrew form of Jesus’ name. And, while there is a distinction between the two, many HR groups utilize some beliefs/practices of Messianic Judaism.

As a result of these various emphases, there is overlap between HR and non-HR groups, and there may also be a difference in beliefs/practices between HR groups. Recognizing the above caveat, Stephen Katz summarizes HR’s common beliefs this way:

The Hebraic Roots or Jewish Roots movement refers to various organizations with a common emphasis on recovering the original Jewishness of Christianity. This recovery comes through studying the Bible in its Jewish context, observing the Torah, keeping the Sabbath and festivals, avoiding the “paganism” of Christianity, affirming the existence of original Hebrew language gospels and, in some cases, denigrating the Greek text of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

The movement seems to have borrowed key beliefs from the Sacred Name Movement, which was based primarily on the theories of A. B. Traina; various sabbatarian groups, especially the Worldwide Church of God;<sup>4</sup> Messianic Judaism; and think-tanks like the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-1980s, Hebrew Roots adherents had coalesced into a distinct movement.

Dean and Susan Wheelock trademarked the name Hebrew Roots® in 1994. By 1998, they had published the first edition of *Hebrew Roots Magazine*, and Joseph Good<sup>6</sup> had been teaching Hebrew Roots concepts for two decades. The growing awareness of Messianic Judaism and its promotion of Jewish Roots of the faith during the 1980s and 1990s also aided the Hebrew Roots teachers in gaining teaching venues on television stations like God’s Learning Channel; on radio stations in the Midwest and Southwest; and in churches and home groups who had become interested in the Jewish Roots of the faith. Perhaps the most important vehicle for the movement’s growth, then and now, is the Internet, which provided a good way to propagate their message and to network with likeminded groups/individuals.

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## DOCTRINES

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Many HR ministries “seek to inspire believers in Yeshua (Jesus) to study the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, and thus make God number one in their lives and to be fully equipped with the whole armor of God . . .”<sup>7</sup> Many who have been drawn to the HRM were raised in Christian churches. Perhaps in some cases, they had lost their passion or had grown bored with traditional Christianity before finding new energy and motivation to study the “deeper truths” presented by HRM.

The cultural context of a passage can aid in better understanding a passage. Good commentaries rely on cultural, religious, geographical and linguistic information as tools to more fully explain a specific text. However, critics note that, one must not become more focused on the tools than the text, which may be the overarching danger of the HRM. In addition to the criticism of misplaced emphasis, a greater criticism has been that the HRM confuses “may” with “must.” Below are three examples of doctrines/practices found in some expressions of the HRM.

**The Use of Hebrew and Elevation of Hebrew Cultural Forms:** All HR groups use Jesus’ Hebrew “birth name,” Yeshua, even while speaking English. Some go as far as *requiring* the use of “Yeshua.”<sup>8</sup>

“2) We believe that the only true eternal personal Names of the Father and the Son are Yahweh-Yahveh and the Son Yahshua, Yeshua or Yehoshua. 3) While the spelling is not important, the usage is.”<sup>9</sup>

The general rationale for using “Yeshua” rather than “Jesus” falls along two lines: 1) Hebrew names have meanings that are not communicated in translation; and 2) the English word Jesus comes from the compound Greek word *Ie-Sous*, meaning “hail Zeus,” which was a pagan attempt to undermine Yeshua’s identity or an effort to entice pagans to embrace Christianity. Many HR groups use Hebrew cultural forms in their meetings: “We worship in a distinctly Hebraic style in music, dance, keeping the Shabbat [Sabbath] and the biblical Holiday’s [sic] and Hebraic liturgy, . . .”<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on Hebraic cultural forms usually includes Hebrew terminology, “messianic” music, and Jewish symbols.

**The Obligation of Gentile Believers to Observe the OT Laws:** Most HR groups are quick to concede “no one can be saved nor made righteous by works of the law.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, Gentiles are required to keep the OT laws for the purpose of fellowship with God:

“We believe that Moshiach Yahshua taught all His true followers both Jew and non-Jew that all the precepts of written Torah are eternally binding. Moshiach Yahshua, never negated Torah, but expects and commands us to follow Torah (Matthew-Mattityahu 5:17-19), so as to continually express and renew our love for Him by our obedience.”<sup>12</sup>

For some, the explanation is that while the Law is manifest in new ways, the eternal precepts behind the previous manifestations remains because God and the Law are eternal. Others say the law “nailed to the cross” was the “*Oral Traditions*...”<sup>13</sup>

The other primary ways HR groups obligate Gentiles to keep the Law is through two theological constructs: the One Law theory and Two House theology. **One Law** teaches that there is one law (Torah), and “that all Jews and Gentiles under the new covenant are called to keep the same Torah in all regards.”<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> The primary argument of One Law is that since believing Gentiles (wild branches) are grafted into the natural branches of the olive tree (i.e., Israel) the Law (except for circumcision) applies to both, thus “One people, One Messiah, One Torah.”<sup>16</sup>

**Two House Theology**<sup>17</sup> similarly places Gentile believers under the law, but with a twist. Many Two House proponents teach that the Assyrian captivity caused the Northern Kingdom (i.e., Ten Tribes) to lose their identity, and later dispersions caused these people to assimilate and take on a Gentile identity in their new lands. Thus, many who are coming to the Lord, are unwittingly members of the “Lost Ten Tribes.” This return, they suggest, is the restoration of the Two Houses of ancient Israel: Judah and Ephraim. Evidence of this theory is the large number of “Gentiles” who have been drawn to the Hebrew Roots and Messianic Jewish movements.

**Emphasis on Biblical Holydays, especially Sabbath:** Among HR groups the biblical calendar is important, particularly the holydays and the Sabbath outlined in Leviticus 23. The holydays are presented as both obligation (for Jew and Gentile) and prophetic teaching points. The days that are typically emphasized are: the seventh-day Sabbath, Passover, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

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## CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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**The Use of Hebrew and Elevation of Hebrew Culture:** Using “Yeshua” rather than “Jesus” is not inherently wrong. Within traditional Christianity it would be viewed as wrong when it is a matter of pride or becomes an obligation, and not doing so is deemed sinful. It is true that the meaning of Hebrew names

usually is not conveyed in English. A good example is Zachariah, which means “Yahweh remembered.” However, the need to explain the meaning of Hebrew names is not alleviated by transliterating into English letters (e.g., Zachariyah). In an English context, whether the Hebrew birth names appear in transliteration or in English form, the original meaning has to be explained. Thus, using the Hebrew form does not accomplish its stated purpose.

The attempt to connect the English word Jesus to Zeus seems to be dependent on the work of Traina, a pioneer in the Sacred Name Movement. Among the other conspiracies in his *The Origin of Christianity*, he says, “They had worshipped Zeus, or Jupiter, as the supreme deity, so now they were told the new name was Theos, or Dios, or God. There [sic] savior was Zeus, so now they were to accept Jesus (Iesous).”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the suggestion that “the meaning of Jesus is Yah=Zeus.” However; Traina’s assertion offers: no historical evidence; and an examination of the Septuagint (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC), the earliest translation of the OT into Greek, demonstrates that Jesus is an acceptable translation. Since Yeshua is the shortened form of Joshua, one only needs to see what the translators used for Joshua. They used Ἰησοῦς (*Iesous*) to translate the Hebrew name Joshua into Greek<sup>19</sup> from which came the Latin and subsequently the English form “Jesus.” There is no indication the translators intended to connect Joshua to Zeus or to draw pagan Greeks to follow Joshua by using Ἰησοῦς (*Iesous*).

Utilizing Hebrew cultural forms can provide a beautiful worship experience. However, suggesting that the Bible can be properly understood *only* through these forms or that worship is properly done only in the cultural forms of the first century denies the cross-cultural applicability of the Scriptures. More importantly, there is no hint in the New Testament (NT) that Hebrew forms are necessary for understanding or maturing in the faith.

**The Obligation of Gentile Believers to Observe the OT Laws:** While the OT provides only a few specific circumstances that require Gentile obligation to certain elements of the Law, the NT is completely void of any *command* that Gentiles are generally subject to the Torah commandments. In fact, as demonstrated by the sample of verses below, the opposite is what is found in the NT.

Perhaps the most instructive text is Acts 15. Having encountered “Judaizers” in Antioch, Paul, Barnabas, and others were sent to Jerusalem to get clarification from the apostles regarding the claim that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:5). Having heard the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, the apostles responded (28-29): “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.” Although there is some overlap between these instructions and some OT laws, it is clear that Gentiles are not required to “keep the law of Moses” as presented to the Israelites in the Torah. Notice that this decision is not simply that of the elders, the Holy Spirit also consents.

Colossians 2:16-17 instructs Gentiles, “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day - things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” Although some suggest this means “be so precise in your observance of the Law that no one can judge you as guilty,” Paul clearly says these issues – food, drink, and holydays - are not the main objective, Christ is. In Galatians 3:1-7, Paul rebuked the Galatians for trying to mature in the faith by works of the flesh rather than maturing in the way they were redeemed, which was by faith. He continues in 3:23-26 to say the Law was intended as a tutor to bring people to faith in Christ, after which, “we are no longer under a tutor.”

1 Corinthians 7:17-18 – Here, Paul is adamant that Gentiles should not get circumcised. Rather, “... each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.”

Based on the Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 7 verses above, HR groups typically exclude circumcision as a requirement for Gentiles while still insisting the rest of the Law is a requirement. Clearly, if circumcision is excluded, then “the Law” has changed in some way, which is what Hebrews 7:12 says: “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” Thus, in consideration of the change in the Law and the lack of a NT command for Gentiles to obligate themselves to the Law, it is reasonable to conclude they are not obligated to “the Law of Moses.”

The primary failure of the One Law movement is a disregard of any distinction between Jews and Gentiles in terms of function and responsibilities. Also, there seems to be a disregard of the target audience identified throughout the Torah. Deuteronomy 4:44 for example states: “This is the law Moses set *before the Israelites*” (emphasis added). It was not a law set before Gentiles. Another mistake made by One Law teachers is to regard laws given for specific circumstances as generally applicable for all circumstances and peoples. Foreigners were expected to keep only *certain* aspects of the Law when they desired to dwell amongst the covenant people. For example, the “alien within your gates” was, according

to Deuteronomy 5:14, not allowed to work on the Sabbath. However, there is no indication this was applicable everywhere and by everyone.

The primary problem with the Two House movement is the latent *British Israelism*. They dismiss the distinction between Jew and Gentile by identifying all believers as Israelites. If Two House theology is true, surely gathering the "Lost Ten Tribes" would have been an obvious part of Paul's missionary message. A better approach is to recognize, as Paul does in Ephesians 2, that in Christ, God is taking Jews and Gentiles and making one new man. He is not making Gentiles into better Jews.

Although the HRM has, to some degree, conceded a change in the Law, they have failed to clearly explain which laws Gentiles are obligated to observe and why those? Thus, HR proponents make generic statements of obligation to keep the Torah with an emphasis on the biblical Holydays and kosher food. What about the other parts of the Torah like family purity and thank offerings and lepers? The Law as given to the Israelites was much more comprehensive than typically conveyed in the HRM.

**Emphasis on Biblical Calendar and Holydays:** While there are instructive benefits of studying the Jewish holydays, that Gentiles are *obligated* to observe them is refuted by the NT verses presented above. Additionally, since the destruction of the Temple (AD 70), it is impossible to obey the Law of Moses. For example, one of the requirements for Passover, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles is a "meat sacrifice" or "an offering made by fire unto the LORD" (Lev. 23:8, 16, 25, 27, 36). Hebrew Roots teacher, James King, recognizes this problem: "...we should study His Word from a Hebraic perspective and *do our best* to live in obedience to His instructions in the Torah"<sup>20</sup> (italics added). However, the Torah never says Jews and Gentiles should "do their best to obey;" neither does the NT. Rather, "... whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "What is Hebrew Roots exactly?" accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.houseofdauidfellowship.com/qanda.htm>.
- <sup>2</sup> "A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Philip Arn, "Assemblies of Yahweh," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2014). A complete collection of Profiles (over 400 pages) is available at [www.watchman.org/notebook](http://www.watchman.org/notebook). This Profile is available at: [www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/assembliesofyahwehprofile.pdf](http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/assembliesofyahwehprofile.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Stephen Katz, "The Jewish Roots Movement: Flowers and Thorns." *Havurah* 4, no. 1, accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/havurah/v04-n01/jewishroots>.
- <sup>4</sup> A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Philip Arn, "Armstrongism," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2014). A complete collection of Profiles (over 400 pages) is available at [www.watchman.org/notebook](http://www.watchman.org/notebook). This Profile is available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/armstrongismprofile.pdf>.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Jerusalem Perspective*, available at: <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com>.
- <sup>6</sup> Joseph Good is a pioneer in the HRM. More information about him can be found through *Hatikva Ministries*; <http://www.hatikva.org>.
- <sup>7</sup> Shofar Ministries. "Our Purpose." Hebraic Roots. Accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.shofarministries.net/index.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> A few alternative spellings are used: Yeshua, Y'shua, Yahshua, Yehoshua, Jahshuwa, among others.
- <sup>9</sup> B'nai Israel Messianic Assembly. "About Yahweh." Beliefs. Accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.bnaiisraelmessianicassembly.com/beliefs>.
- <sup>10</sup> Etz Chayim: Tree of Life Messianic Ministries. "Our Beliefs." Accessed April 29, 2014, <http://www.etz-chayim.org/who-we-are/our-beliefs>.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Somerville, "Is the Law of God Illegal?" Accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.awarenessministry.org/lawofgodtorahinstruction.htm>.
- <sup>12</sup> B'nai Israel Messianic Assembly. "Beliefs."
- <sup>13</sup> Dean Wheelock and Susan Wheelock, *Which Law?* (Lakewood, WI: Hebrew Roots, 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Daniel Juster and Russ Resnick, *One Law Movements: A Challenge to the Messianic Jewish Community* (2005), 7, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/OneLawMovement.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> For a response to Juster and Resnick, see: Tim Hegg, *One Law Movements: A Response to Russ Resnick & Daniel Juster*, (TorahResource, May 2005) available at, <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/OLMResponse.pdf>.
- <sup>16</sup> Juster and Resnick, *One Law Movements*, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> For a more complete description of Two House Theology, see: Tim Hegg, *The Two-House Theory: Three Fatal Flaws* (TorahResource, 2002) available at, <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/Two%20House%20Fatal%20Errors.pdf>.
- <sup>18</sup> A.B. Traina, *The Origin of Christianity*, accessed April 25, 2014, [http://www.meguiar.addr.com/origin\\_of\\_christianity.htm](http://www.meguiar.addr.com/origin_of_christianity.htm).
- <sup>19</sup> John J. Parsons, *Codex Sinaiticus: Nomina Sacra and the Name Ἰησοῦς*, accessed April 25, 2014, [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names\\_of\\_G-d/Sinaiticus/sinaiticus.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/Sinaiticus/sinaiticus.html).
- <sup>20</sup> James King, "Gospel Roots Radio," accessed April 25, 2014, <http://www.gospelrootsradio.com>.



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