

# “What About Hebrew Roots?”

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Some people, especially Gentiles, end up in Messianic Jewish communities through their discovery of the Hebrew Roots of Christianity. You may be interested to know that while the Hebrew Roots movement and Messianic Judaism share some similar practices, our approaches to our faith also have some major differences.

## **The History of Hebrew Roots:**

In the modern era, many people (both Jew and Gentile) have been drawn by God to a more Torah-centric way of walking out their faith. When Messianic Judaism arose as its own faith practice in the 1960s-70s, it was focused primarily on the Jewish people, to give ethnic Jews a way to worship Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel while remaining in the framework of Jewish culture and practice.

In the midst of this, many Gentile believers were also being drawn to this lifestyle, seeing what have been historically considered “Jewish practices” as an extension of God’s plan for all of humanity. Some joined Messianic congregations, but as modern Messianic Judaism was still in its infancy, its treatment of Gentile believers (in some Messianic synagogues) was still being worked out and Gentiles didn’t always feel fully included.

In the background, the Worldwide Church of God, founded in the 1930s and considered by many to be a cult, promoted the keeping of Torah by Gentile Christians. It fragmented in the late 1980s, but some of its members continued to keep its practices. Also, in the late 1980s, the writings of Batya Wootten introduced the idea that Gentile believers are part of the “lost tribes” of Israel, as well as a lot of other unorthodox ideas regarding Israel and Scripture.

As the partial exclusion of Gentiles in Messianic Judaism intersected with these influences teaching Torah observance for Gentiles, the Hebrew Roots movement began developing. By the 1990s and early 2000s, many Gentile believers formed their own fellowships, looking for communities that would give them a space to honor their convictions. These spaces exploded in growth due to the advent of the internet and the passion of those following this lifestyle, giving many Gentiles a place to explore the Jewish roots of the Christian faith and the beauty of the Torah in a safe environment.

## **The “Sacred Name” Teaching:**

The “Sacred Name” teaching exists within the broader Hebrew Roots community. Its central belief is that believers should use the supposed “original” Hebrew names for God.

This teaching emphasizes the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton (the 4-letter name of God in the Torah, usually spelled YHWH), some going so far as to say that God doesn’t hear or honor prayers not prayed to this name. They also teach the pronunciation of Yeshua as “Yahshua,” trying to incorporate the name of God into Yeshua.

There are a few problems with this teaching:

1. Scholars of ancient Hebrew have said that the original pronunciation of God’s holy name has not been preserved. Any attempts to pronounce this word are guesses, at best.
2. Yeshua Himself chose to use circumlocutions (substitutes) for the name of God in every use given in Scripture. His favorite title for God was “Father.” We should keep His example.
3. The mispronunciation of Yeshua’s name has no actual meaning or history in Hebrew, whereas the name Yeshua means salvation and was a well-loved name in 1st century Judaism.
4. Judaism has been keeping the sacred name of God as holy by not pronouncing it for over 2000 years. To go against this sets us against the root which supports us. (Romans 11:18) Most Messianic Jewish congregations keep in unity with greater Judaism by not attempting to pronounce the sacred name of God.

## **The “Two-House” Teaching:**

Another teaching within the Hebrew Roots movement is the “Two-House” teaching. This is based on the split of Israel into the northern and southern kingdoms. The southern kingdom (Judah) became the Jewish people, but the destiny of the northern kingdom (Israel) was much more convoluted.

The central claim of “Two-House” is that the Gentiles coming to faith in Yeshua — especially those drawn to Torah — are actually biological or spiritual descendants of the house of Israel (Ephraim), though they don’t know it. They’re seen as part of the prophetic regathering of Israel that Scripture teaches the Messiah would accomplish.

The idea that the Ten Lost Tribes migrated into Europe goes back to British Israelism in the 1800s. That view was nationalistic and often linked to Anglo-Saxon identity (with some problematic racial implications). In more modern times, this idea was made popular by teachers like Batya Wootten. It quickly gained momentum among Gentile Torah-keeping believers who didn't feel like they belonged in Messianic Judaism.

There are also problems with this teaching:

1. There is no DNA evidence to support this claim. However, there is a visible move of God drawing those who are ethnically-Jewish back to a Jewish practice of faith in Messiah Yeshua.
2. It is based on a idolatry of Jewish identity. God created both Jew and Gentile and we are all equal before Him.
3. Scripture teaches the importance of both Jews and Gentiles in God's plan for humanity through to the end times. They must remain identifiably different in order for this to happen.

## **A Different Approach:**

While those in the Hebrew Roots movement have spread a love of the Torah amongst many in mainstream Christianity, there are a few major differences in the approaches of Hebrew Roots and Messianic Judaism to the Scriptures and practice. *(Please note that these are all more broad generalizations – each community is going to look a bit different in their own practice.)*

1. **Accountability.** While most Messianic congregations are nested under the oversight of one or more umbrella organizations (such as the MJAA or UMJC), most Hebrew Roots fellowships are freestanding and not accountable to anyone. In addition, most Hebrew Roots teachers online are not accountable to anyone. This lends itself to a wide spectrum of beliefs that can be hard to navigate.
2. **Attitude.** While there is a love of the Torah in the Hebrew Roots movement, it also tends towards being more rigidly-focused on Torah observance and can become legalistic. There is a lot of attention given to how certain commandments are to be lived out. In Messianic communities, there tends to be more flexibility and grace. In addition, this rigidity often causes a schism between those in the Hebrew Roots movement and the greater body of Messiah, causing relational difficulties that can be very hard to overcome.

3. **Connection to Israel.** One of the markers that clearly differentiates Messianic Judaism from Hebrew Roots is the connection to greater Israel and Judaism. Most Messianic communities consider themselves part of the greater body of Judaism, honoring Yom HaShoah, Tisha b'Av, and other important events in Jewish history. They are intimately concerned with the well-being of the Jewish people worldwide and the nation of Israel as a whole. This love of Israel is usually not found in Hebrew Roots fellowships.

### **Gentiles in Messianic Judaism Now:**

As Messianic Judaism has developed into the 21st century, it has become more welcoming of Gentiles into Messianic congregations. While there isn't a rule across all congregations, most allow Gentiles into their membership and many allow them into their leadership, as long as they are there because of a genuine calling to walk in faith alongside the Jewish people. This is still a topic of discussion as modern Messianic Judaism continues to develop and grow.

### **In Conclusion:**

As we explore the roots of our faith, it's important to walk in both truth and humility, recognizing the beauty in our shared desire to follow God more closely. While the Hebrew Roots movement and Messianic Judaism may overlap in certain expressions — like observing Shabbat or celebrating the biblical festivals — our foundational differences lie in our approach to identity, community, and continuity with Israel. Messianic Judaism seeks to honor the calling of the Jewish people while embracing Gentiles who are drawn to walk alongside them in unity. Our prayer is that all believers would pursue a deeper understanding of Scripture while remaining grounded in love, accountability, and respect for the people and covenants God has established throughout history.

### **Resources for Further Study:**

The IAMCS is the oldest congregational arm of Messianic Judaism. The paper referred to below was written by the IAMCS Steering Committee in 2014 and takes a very thorough look into the details of the Hebrew Roots movement. 60 pages.

[iamcs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/One\\_Law\\_Two\\_Sticks.pdf](https://iamcs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/One_Law_Two_Sticks.pdf)

Another paper was released by the Gateway Center for Israel, written by Messianic Jewish scholar David Rudolph in 2021. Approx. 48 pages.

[centerforisrael.com/papers/one-law-theology/](https://centerforisrael.com/papers/one-law-theology/)