

Jesus Was A Jew: Understanding Jesus and the New Testament

by Steve Ray

Jesus was a Jew. This fact may escape the casual reader of the New Testament, but it is crucial to understanding Jesus and the book written about him—the Bible. Unhappily, in 21st century America we are far removed from the land of Israel and the ancient culture of Jesus and his Jewish ancestors. Let me ask you a few questions. Were you born and raised in Israel? Did you study the Torah with the rabbis from an early age? Have you traversed the rocky hills and dusty paths to celebrate the mandatory feasts in Jerusalem? Do you speak Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic? I haven't found anyone in my Catholic parish who has these credentials. Without this background, we are at a great disadvantage when studying the Bible and its central character.

When we open the pages of our English Bible, we find a Jewish book! The setting revolves around Israel and the worship of Yahweh. With one exception, the more than forty biblical writers were all Jews, and the exception was most likely a Jewish proselyte. (Do you know who the only non-Jewish author in the Bible is? I'll give you a few hints: he was a physician, one of St. Paul's co-workers, and he wrote the first history of the Church.)

The point is, how can we understand the Bible and the teaching surrounding our Lord Jesus and salvation without understanding his people, his culture, and his Jewish identity?

David H. Stern, a Messianic Jew writes, "The Messiah's vicarious atonement is rooted in the Jewish sacrificial system; the Lord's Supper is rooted in the Jewish Passover traditions; baptism is a Jewish practice; and indeed the entire New Testament is built on the Hebrew Bible, with its prophecies and its promise of a New Covenant, so that the New Testament without the Old is as impossible as the second floor of a house without the first. Moreover, much of what is written in the New Testament is incomprehensible apart from Judaism" (*Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel* [Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1988], 62). Even if a skeptic ignores the importance of the Jews in God's plan of salvation, which would be ridiculous, it would not change the fact that the Bible is Jewish and Christianity sprouts from thoroughly Jewish roots.

Studying the Bible comes alive when the fresh breeze of Jewish understanding wafts over the pages. When reading any good book, it is difficult to reap the benefits without immersing ourselves in the world and spirit of the "story". When reading *Gone with the Wind*, the reader benefits from immersing themselves in the "feeling" of the story and soaking in the culture and surroundings of the characters. One doesn't start the novel in the middle, for that would cut them off from the foundation and beginning of the story and make it impossible to gain a full appreciation of the setting, plot, mood, and characters. Too often the New Testament is read without a familiarity with the first "chapters" of God's Jewish story which begins several millennia earlier in the covenants and life of the Old Testament.

Let's take an example which is dear to the heart of any Catholic. St. Matthew records

profound words between Jesus and Simon the fisherman. He actually changes the disciples' name, from Simon to Rock, which in Jewish tradition signifies a change of status. For us Westerners two millennia removed, without understanding the Semitic importance of a name, this means very little. But, to Jesus' cadre of disciples from the stock of Abraham, the name change was profound and earth shattering. Abraham himself had received a name change from God which corresponded to the ratification of the Old Covenant. Abram's name (meaning "father") was changed to Abraham (meaning "father of nations") which signified Abraham's new status or standing before God.

Simon's name change was significant. But what it was changed to was even more important. A Jew would instantly notice what most English readers miss. The name Peter is an English rendering of the Greek word for "Rock". Jesus spoke Aramaic and the word he used to rename Simon was the Aramaic word for Rock: Kepha. This is why we find Simon referred to as Cephas throughout the New Testament (e.g., Jn 1:42; 1 Cor 15:5; Gal 1:18). No one but God alone (and Abraham) had previously been referred to as Rock. Abraham was the rock from which the Jews had been hewn (Is 51:1). But, God was the only one with the name of Rock. Peter now shares that title. What would a Jew think about such a name for a mere man?

Another striking example of the necessity of understanding the Jewish ambience of the Bible comes from the same passage. This involves the phrase in Matthew 16:19 which mentions the "keys of the Kingdom". Due in part to an ignorance of Jewish culture, this passage is frequently truncated, reducing the "keys of the kingdom" merely to Peter's preaching on Pentecost (another word unknown outside the Jewish religion) "unlocking the doors of heaven". Many Protestants make this mistake in trying to understand this passage without the benefit of a "Jewish background". What did "keys" represent to the Jews who actually heard Jesus? What would a Jew understand from the image of the keys given to Peter by King Jesus?

The Pharisees had large portions of the Old Testament memorized, if not the whole Tanakh. The average Jew was intimately familiar with the Scriptures. When Jesus told Peter he would receive the "keys of the kingdom of heaven", the Jews would immediately be drawn back to Isaiah 22 and the monarchical office of the Royal Steward who ruled over the house of the King.

Read Isaiah 22 yourself and consider the royal office of Steward "over the house" in the Davidic kingdom. For those Jews who first believed in Yeshua the Messiah, who was soon to be seated on the Throne of his Father David and given an eternal kingdom (Dan 7:13-14; Lk 1:26-33) these were profound words. When the new king is enthroned, wouldn't the Jewish subjects expect the king to appoint his Royal Steward?

Alleluia! Simon is renamed Rock, the Israelite name for the strength of God and he is then delegated the keys of the Royal Steward's to govern the domain of King Jesus.

Ah, the Jews understood! What about 21st century men and women? This should not discourage us from reading the Bible; rather, it should inspire us to excel in our

knowledge of Scripture, its background, and the world of the Jewish people. The Church is growing from a Jewish root; the Church and the Scriptures are Jewish. May the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob enlighten us and give us a love for the Jewish People and for the word of God as contained in the Scriptures and the Sacred Tradition of the Church.

1) During the Nazi holocaust, to demonstrate solidarity with the Jews, Pope Pius XII connected the Catholic faith with the faith of “our Father Abraham,” and in an address said pointedly, “Spiritually we are Semites.” “Pius XII’s statement that ‘we are all spiritual Semites’ goes much further than one ordinarily thinks. Again, there is nothing in the fundamental, permanent, constitutive institutions of the Church which is not Jewish in its source. Just as the Christian ‘apostle’ comes directly from the Jewish shaliah, the Christian ‘bishop’ is heir of the meqaber of Qumran and Jerusalem’s ‘high priest.’ The Christian ‘presbyter’ comes from the Jewish presbyter (elder), the Christian ‘deacon’ from the ‘levite’ and hyperetes of the synagogues, and the Christian ‘layman’ himself from the Aaronic ‘priesthood’ “ (Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God* [Electronic Media: *Welcome to the Catholic Church*, produced by Harmony Media, Inc., 1996]).

2) Romans 9:3-5 “For I [Paul] could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.”

3) Catechism #129: “The New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old [Testament]. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament. As an old saying put it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.”

Recommended Resources for the Jewish background to the Bible:

[*St. John’s Gospel: a Bible Study Guide and Commentary*](#) by Steve Ray (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002).

Jewish New Testament Commentary, David H. Stern (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publ., 1992).

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, Craig Keener (Downer’s Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Christianity is Jewish, Edith Schaeffer (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, Publ., 1981).

Ancient Israel: It’s Life and Institutions, Fr. Roland De Vaux (Grand Rapids, Mich., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.).

Daily Life in the Times of Jesus, Henri Daniel-Rops (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962).

Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica, in four volumes, John Lightfoot (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publ., 1995).

For more recommendations on books for Bible study see the “Bible Study” page on my website at <http://www.catholic-convert.com>