

What's In a Name?

Searching for Identity

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
Loving favor rather than silver and gold.

Proverbs 22:1

Frequently we are asked: "What church do you belong to? Our usual answer; "We do not belong to any church or denomination."

Then people usually ask: "What do you call yourselves?" Most of the time we answer; "We are *Messianic Believers*." This answer is sometimes misunderstood. Even when the words are understood, it is often not satisfying to those who ask, because they do not really know what it means.

People love understandable labels because, once they have labeled you, they can put you into a box (in their mind) where they hold their own special beliefs about your religion. Whether or not those beliefs are correct is usually not an issue for them, as long as they have that "box" in which to place you. Such an attitude can lead to religious prejudice, because the "box" in which they have placed you may contain misunderstandings about your true beliefs. The history books are full of persecutions, and even wars, which have been fought in the name of religion, many of them because people believed something about their "enemy" which was not true. (Today is no exception.)

Several years ago we received e-mails from a man who always closed them with the phrase "Labels are for soup cans." We fully concur with his sentiment, however, to give an answer such as that simply would not satisfy the average person who is accustomed to putting religious labels on people in an attempt to understand what they believe.

~ Jewish? ~

Sometimes people will ask; "Are you Jewish?" What does this question mean? Are they sincerely asking if we are descended from one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, or from one of those tribes which make up the House of Judah? Maybe there is some Jewish (or Israelite) blood in our ancestral trees, but it cannot be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, and it really does not make any difference within the Believing Community. No matter what one's ethnic origin, through Messiah *Y'shua* we all have the same status before God:

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus [*Messiah Y'shua*].²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ [*Messiah*] have put on Christ [*Messiah*].²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus [*Messiah Y'shua*]." (Gal. 3:26-28)

Of course, there are still differences in the flesh, for men are still men and women are still women. Nevertheless, in the sight of God we all stand shoulder to shoulder, not one behind the other. Likewise, there are differences in background and culture between Jews and Greeks (Gentiles). Traditions that are held dear by certain ethnic groups need not be abandoned, unless they violate *Written Torah*. If that is the case, those traditions need to be swept up into the dustbin and burned in the furnace.

Through His death and resurrection, and the resulting grafting in of the Gentiles, Messiah *Y'shua* destroyed the walls that men have erected to separate themselves from one another:

"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,¹⁵ having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances [Gk. *dogma, or manmade decrees*], so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace,¹⁶ and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity."¹⁷
(Eph. 2:14-16)

Through faith in Messiah *Y'shua*, all *Messianic Believers* can trace their spiritual ancestry back to Abraham:

"And if you are Christ's [Messiah's], then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."
(Gal. 3:29)

~ Christian? ~

After being asked if we are Jewish, usually the next question is, "Are you Christian?"
"And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." (Acts 11:26)

Well, we are followers of the Messiah (which is translated Christ in English from the Greek *Christos*), so one could call us "Christian." However, there is baggage that comes with that word in the 21st century. By this we mean that we do not share many of the non-Scriptural doctrines which are commonly associated with the term "Christian."

Many Jews, when they hear the word "Christian," think, in their minds, "Pagan," because that is what they have been taught. This is not necessarily an extreme view, for the Church, has adopted some pagan practices and holidays into "Christian" worship. One example would be the use of the word "Easter" (from *Ishtar*, an ancient goddess of war and sexual love) as a designation for the celebration of the resurrection.

~ The Origins of "Christian" ~

When the term "Christian" was first used, it was probably meant to be a derogatory slur. Some scholars believe the Gentile mobs at Antioch were the ones who tagged the *Messianic Believers* with this moniker and that it was used to taunt the Believers by calling them *Christianos*, which they interpreted to mean "the oily ones." This connection derived from the fact that both the Hebrew word *Mashiach* (Mah-she'-ackh) and the Greek word *Christos* have the meaning of being anointed with oil:

**"It is like the precious oil upon
the head,
Running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his
garments." (Psalm 133:2)**

That the term "Christian" was not a label which the *Messianic Believers* placed upon themselves, is apparent from Peter's indication that it was indeed used in an effort to shame the followers of *Y'shua*. However, Peter indicated that it could be turned into a blessing:

"Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."
(1 Pet. 4:16)

In other words, if people persecute you for your beliefs, and in the process call you a derogatory name, do not be ashamed of what they call you, rather use it as an opportunity to glorify your Father in heaven. For today's *Messianic Believers*, the most common derogatory term would in some way imply Jewish ancestry. While such a remark would be intended as an insult, modern Believers can also accept it as a badge of honor. Doing so would indicate that we are willing to suffer persecution on behalf of our brother Judah, whom God still loves, not because they all believe that *Y'shua* is the Messiah (for most do not), but because they are descended from the Patriarchs:
"Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Rom. 11:28-29)

~ Another Possibility ~

The *Hastings Bible Dictionary* points out another possibility as to the origin of the label "Christian." It shows that the Greek word thus translated is *christianoí*, and that the ending (*anoi*) of this word is of Latin rather than Greek origin. Therefore, *Hastings* concludes that the name "Christian" was attached to the *Messianic Believers* by the Roman authorities at Antioch and not by the Greek citizens. They speculate that this may have been done in an effort, by the Roman authorities, to identify this particular sect as being separate from traditional Judaism.

This could be true, since in many of the areas where Paul taught, disagreements arose with traditional Judaism (i.e. over the need of Gentiles to keep the *Oral Torah*). Many of Paul's Epistles reflect these disagreements, so it should not be considered unusual that such matters would come to the attention of the local Roman authorities, since they had their bureaucratic finger in almost every aspect of social and religious life in the Empire.

Hastings Bible Dictionary goes on to explain how the Roman authorities used "Christian" as a legal term: "Furthermore the verb *chrematizein* used by Luke in Ac 11:26 is a legal term, and the correct rendering would not be 'the disciples were called Christians' (RSV) but rather 'the disciples received the legal designation "Christians".' Similarly the temporal adverb *protos* belongs to legal language and indicates a legal precedent. Thus the statement in Luke-Acts points to a contact which followers of Jesus had with the Roman authorities, probably on account of a litigation, in the course of which it was established that these people had an identity of their own and did not belong to the Jewish commonwealth, and that therefore while no longer subject to Jewish jurisdiction they had no share in the Jewish religious privileges, either." (p. 138, underlining ours)

This is an important point, for if the Roman authorities at Antioch no longer identified the *Messianic Believers* as a part of Judaism, that left them out on a legal limb, for they would then be required to perform the obligatory pagan worship of that city, as well as annual homage to the Emperor. Throughout the entire Empire, only the Jews had an exemption from those pagan religious obligations.

Paul did not try to establish a "new religion," as many Christians claim. What he did teach that was different from the Jewish norm, was that uncircumcised Gentiles, who had accepted the blood of *Y'shua* by faith, were grafted into the Olive Tree of Israel; that they were no longer pagan outsiders, even though they had not received physical circumcision and had not been accepted into the Jewish community as full Proselytes who were expected to keep the *Oral Torah* of the *Pharisees*:

"And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you."

(Rom. 11:17-18)

"Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh -- who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands -- ¹² that at that time you were without Christ [*Messiah*], being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus [*Messiah Y'shua*] you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ [*Messiah*]." (Eph. 2:11-13)

While Paul and the *Messianic Community* understood that the acceptance of Gentiles into the Commonwealth of Israel, through faith in Messiah *Y'shua*, was God's will, that opinion was evidently not shared by the leadership of the non-*Messianic* Jews.

(This topic will be dealt with in-depth in a forthcoming article in the *Gentiles and the Law* series, when we cover the book of *Galatians*.)

~ Later Usage ~

As time went on, the term "Christian" came into common usage in other parts of the Roman Empire. In 64 CE, when the crazed Emperor *Nero* burned the city of Rome so he could rebuild it in a more attractive fashion, he was able to blame the conflagration on the "Christians," and everyone seemed to understand whom he meant, even though the Believers still did not refer to themselves by that name.

However, if someone calls you a name long enough, it usually sticks, and by the early years of the 2nd century the Gentile *Messianic Believers* began to adopt the label "Christian" as a badge of honor. Historical writings show that *Ignatius* (a "Church Father"), in one of his letters (c. 110-115 CE), proudly called himself a "Christian."

According to *Hastings*, the term "Christian" was generally accepted within the Believing community by the end of the 2nd century. This, of course, was a good while after the Roman Church began to distance themselves from Judaism by abandoning the seventh day Sabbath in favor of first day (Sunday) worship.

~ Soup Can Religion ~

This gives us some background as to how the "Christian" "soup can label" came into common usage. Over the centuries, as the Church drifted even further from the "faith once delivered," the name "Christian" began to take on more and more non-Scriptural and even pagan baggage.

So then, what should we call ourselves today? To date, we have not come up with a really good response that explains, in an understandable manner, in a few words, what we believe, the way so many modern denominations have explained their beliefs. For example:

- { Roman Catholic. The word Catholic means Universal. Therefore, this denomination prides themselves on being the "Universal Church, Headquartered at Rome." Of course, like most large denominations (and many more smaller ones), they believe they are the "one true church," with the right to change times and laws (see Dan. 7:25).
- { Lutherans. This name designates those who follow the teachings of Martin Luther, the Priest who defected from the Roman Catholic Church in 1517 when he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, which set in motion the Protestant Reformation.
- { Baptist. These folks agree with most mainstream Protestant theology, but accept the Biblical injunction which says that Believers must be baptized by full immersion in water, rather than just being sprinkled with "holy water."
- { Eastern Orthodox. These are the churches of the East which believed they had a more correct version of the Christian Faith, and therefore split from the Roman Catholic Church. While differences between Rome and the East were apparent for many decades (if not centuries), the final division did not occur until the 4th century.
- { Methodist. A number of churches, which carry the Methodist name, are descended from the teachings of John Wesley, an 18th century dissenter from the Church of England. Wesley and his associates were derisively called Methodists, because of their methodical approach to Bible study and devotion.
- { Seventh Day Adventists. A denomination of seventh day Sabbath keepers who were a part of a nineteenth century split that also spawned the *Seventh Day Baptists*, and the *Church of God, 7th Day*. The Adventists took their name because they kept the seventh day holy and they looked forward to the advent (return or appearance) of Christ.

These are just a few of the labels which modern denominations have accepted as descriptive of their beliefs.

~ Current Hebraic Labels ~

There are a number of labels currently being used by various *Hebraic* roots organizations. The most common is *Messianic Judaism*. While this label clearly designates those of Jewish descent (from the House of Judah) who are Believers in *Y'shua* the Messiah, it does not adequately identify those who are not Jewish. Many Gentiles attend these congregations and the term *Messianic Jew* does not fit them. Should those Believers be called *Messianic Gentiles*? Would this title imply they are second class members? Such a distinction caused numerous problems in the 1st century and is causing similar problems today. As Paul said:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus [Messiah Y'shua]." (Gal. 3:28)

Another term, which is currently in use, is *Messianic Israel*. This label is intended to include people from all of the twelve tribes of Israel, not just those from the House of Judah, or the Jews. While we believe this designation is more accurate in terms of what is taking place in the *Messianic* world today, because of the hostility which some *Messianic Jews* have towards the "two-house"* concept, *Messianic Israel* does not appear to be a term that will be universally accepted.

[Footnote: * In "two-house" teaching, the northern ten tribes of the House of Israel are understood to have been scattered throughout the world, and their descendants may constitute many of those who have accepted *Y'shua* as their personal Savior. Meanwhile, the House of Judah has always been identified as Jews, and they have kept the *Torah* intact. According to Ezekiel 37 (and other passages) these two Houses will be reunited just prior to Messiah *Y'shua's* return to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.]

Two other terms that are currently being used include: *Nazarene Judaism* and *Nazarene Israel*. The term *Nazarene* is a good one, for it (like "Christian") comes from Scripture, although it also may have negative origins: **"For we have found this man [Paul] a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes."** (Acts 24:5)

Connecting the title *Nazarene* with either *Judaism* or *Israel*, again implies there is a division between those two groups. We believe what is needed is a designation which unifies, not divides. However, if we were to use only

the single word *Nazarene* to depict this movement, it could be confused with those First Day Christians who are already identified by that name.

Sometimes, people use the term *Hebraic Roots Movement* or *Hebrew Roots Movement*. To those of us involved in this movement, these are very descriptive of what is currently taking place. However, to outsiders they can sound very "Jewish." For many "Christians," sounding "Jewish" can be a problem, for the negative connotations which go with the word "Jew" or "Jewish" is still strong as evidenced by continued Jewish persecutions.

~ First Century Self Labels ~

It might be profitable to examine what the first century followers of *Y'shua* called themselves. The most common term was *Disciple[s]*. This term is used a total of 274 times in the Gospels and Acts:

"Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7)

Brethren is another frequently used term to designate those who have come together in a close relationship through their common belief in the Messiah *Y'shua*. It is used 193 times, although not all those usage's are in the context of *Messianic Believers*:

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Rom. 8:29)

The term *saints* is used 62 times:

"To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: ..." (Rom. 1:7)

Believer[s] is used only four times in the Greek Scriptures, nevertheless its usage in this context clearly implies those who truly believe that *Y'shua* is the Messiah:

"And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ..." (Acts 5:14)

The *Elect* is another term that is used in Scripture, where it appears a total of fourteen times. We believe this term emphasizes the concept that *Messianic Believers* have been chosen (elected) by the Father to be a part of the Bride of Messiah:

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ [*Y'shua HaMashiach*],

" To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, ..." (1 Pet. 1:1-2)

Finally, there are five places where the term "*the Way*" is used:

"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets." (Acts 24:14)

Most, if not all, of these terms have been used by various Christian groups and some of them have been used by groups or fellowships within the *Hebrew Roots Movement*.

~ Church of God ~

Another label that was used in the First Century was *Church of God*:

"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Acts 20:28)

There are a number of church organizations who use this title in their name. Most of the Sabbath keeping Churches of God (there are also some Sunday churches by this name) trace their lineage back to the 19th century split mentioned earlier.

In our opinion, the title *Church of God* (while it is derived from some English translations of the New Testament) also comes with problems. The primary one being that modern Christianity has labeled some of these groups as cults. Thus, many "Christians" who might be in the beginning stages of understanding the *Hebraic* roots of the Faith, could be frightened off because of the cultist implications outsiders have attached to that name. In addition, the name *Church of God* would never be accepted as an umbrella term by Sacred Name groups, because it uses the English word "God."

Another problem lies with the word "Church," which, like "Christian" carries a lot of baggage that has been added over the years. When many people hear the word church, they think of a building. However, the Greek word *ekklesia*, from which church is translated really means:

"a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly."

Thus, a better translation of *ekklesia* would be "assembly" or "congregation." That would result in the names *Assembly of God* or *Congregation of God*, both of which have already been taken by others who do not necessarily share the *Hebraic* understanding of this movement.

~ Seeking a Label ~

In the past, in the *Hebrew Roots* publication, we have used the simple term *Believer* to designate someone who believes that *Y'shua* is the promised Messiah. However, religious Jews can also be called Believers, because they believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and they also believe in the coming of the Messiah to establish the *Malchut Shamayim* (the Kingdom of Heaven on earth), although they do not recognize *Y'shua* as fulfilling that role.

Therefore, some time ago we began to use the term *Messianic Believer*, in the hope that it would clarify that we believe *Y'shua* is the promised Messiah. Generally, the term *Messianic Believer* has served us quite well. However recently, when we used that term to try and explain to a Roman Catholic our religious orientation, we found that he did not understand the word "Messianic." A friend of ours said that she has had people mistake the word *Messianic* for *Masonic*, an unfortunate confusion of terms.

Another friend of ours calls himself a "*Born Again Israelite* according to John 3:3:
"Jesus [*Y'shua*] answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"
(John 3:3)

This response is descriptive for those in the Evangelical community who understand the term "Born Again." However, some do not, and many also do not understand what it means to be an Israelite. Folded into this concept is the understanding that Messiah *Y'shua* is going to return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Therefore, for many the term *Born Again Israelite* would probably require an explanation.

One possibility that comes to mind would be *Messianic Nazarene*. While it is somewhat redundant, it does clearly state the belief that *Y'shua* (the *Nazarene*) is the promised Messiah. However, once again we are faced with the term *Messianic*, which is sometimes not understood by those who are not familiar with Biblical terminology.

~ Who Is a Hebrew? ~

Still another possible label is *Hebrew Nazarene*. The problem here is that when some people hear *Hebrew* they immediately think "Jewish," which again brings up the issue of whether or not we are Jewish, plus the whole issue of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, this combination is descriptive, in that it implies that one is seeking to restore the *Hebrew Roots of the Faith* as a devoted follower of *Y'shua* the *Nazarene*.

In this context it is important to understand the meaning of the word *Hebrew*, which in the Hebrew language, is *Ivri* (Eev-ree'). It is usually taught that the word *Ivri* was derived from an ancestor of Abraham named *Ever* (Ay-vayr' = Eber):

"Eber lived thirty-four years, and begot Peleg. ... ¹⁸ Peleg lived thirty years, and begot Reu. ... ²⁰ Reu lived thirty-two years, and begot Serug. ... ²² Serug lived thirty years, and begot Nahor. ²⁴ Nahor lived twenty-nine years, and begot Terah. ²⁶ Now Terah lived seventy years, and begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran."

(Gen. 11:16-26)

There are a number of closely connected Hebrew words involved in the meaning of the word *Ivri* (Hebrew):

- { *avar* (ah-vahr' #5674) "to cross over" or transition from one place to another.
- { *ever* (ay-vehr' #5676) "a region across..... on the opposite side (espec. of the Jordan)"
- { *Ever* (Ay-vayr' #5677) the name of *Avram's* ancestor which means "the region beyond."
- { *Ivri* (Eev-ree' #5680) "a Hebrew." A designation of the Patriarchs or the Israelites. "One from beyond."

If then, we were to call this movement the *Hebrew Nazarene Movement*, it would indicate those men and women who have crossed over from the land of the dead to the land of the living, through faith in the power of the death and resurrection of the *Nazarene*, who is Messiah *Y'shua*:

"And if Christ [Messiah] is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness." (Rom. 8:10)

~ Conclusion ~

We believe it is time for this wonderful movement, which takes Believers back to the Roots of our Faith, to find an umbrella term which can include all who are a part of it. One that can include *Messianic Jews, Messianic Israelites, Messianic Gentiles*, and anyone else who has adopted a *Hebraic* understanding and life style.

We invite you to join us in a search to find a label that will make our efforts more understandable for those whom God is calling to a *Hebraic* understanding of the Scriptures. It needs to be short (one to three words) while still conveying a clear understanding that we believe *Y'shua* is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that we are *Torah* pursuant, in the process of returning to the "faith once delivered:"

"Beloved, ... I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." (Jude 1:3)

Shalom!

DEW & SAW

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

~ Sources ~

BibleWorks 5.0, CD-ROM Edition,
BibleWorks, Norfolk, Virginia.
Encyclopedia Britannica 2003,
CD-Rom Version.
Hastings, James, ed.,
Dictionary of the Bible,
Charles Scribner's Sons,
New York, 1963.
*The Open Bible, The New King James
Version*, Thomas Nelson Publishers,
Nashville, 1985.
Strong, James, S.T.D., LL.D., *Strong's New
Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*,
World Bible Publishers, Inc.,
Iowa Falls, 1986.
Thayer, Joseph Henry, DD,
*A Greek-English Lexicon of the
New Testament*, Baker Book House,
Grand Rapids, 1977.
Tregelles, Samuel Prideaux, LL.D.,
Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon,
Baker Book House,
Grand Rapids, 1979.
Wigram, George V., *The Englishman's
Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance
of the Old Testament*,
Baker Book House,
Grand Rapids, 1980.
Wigram-Green, Jay P., *The New
Englishman's Greek Concordance and
Lexicon*, Hendrickson Publishers,
Peabody, MA., 1982.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Used on Set Apart Ministries website with permission of the authors,
Dean and Susan Wheelock
<https://www.set-apart-ministries.org>
<https://www.hebrewroots.net>