

## Messianic and Hebrew Roots: What's the Difference?

In this Torah-Keeping, Messianic, Hebraic movement, we often tend to have trouble defining or labeling ourselves. Are we Messianic? Are we Hebrew Roots? Are we “followers of the Way”? Should we call ourselves Torah Observant, or is Torah Pursuant more accurate? Do these distinctions even help? Are we even still “Christians” anymore?

Many have pushed back against the use of such terms, claiming that such monikers are an unnecessary invention of man.

I intend to make the case that while such terms are indeed inventions of our own, they are not unnecessary. Consider this: if you visited a church named “Freewill Baptist Church,” you would assume they:

1. Are not Calvinist
2. Teach credo-baptism, not infant baptism
3. Are evangelistic

These things – at the very least – you would infer from their name. If you visited a church named “Trinity Presbyterian” you would assume:

1. They are trinitarian
2. They baptize infants
3. Their service is rigidly structured
4. They are Calvinist

These sorts of things can be inferred from the denomination and name of a church. While there are certainly other things that these two examples would have in common (ie. Both would affirm salvation by grace through faith; would both assert the full divinity of Messiah Yeshua; both would teach from the Old and New Testaments), you can understand a few things by the very name.

Now enter the Messianic Movement. At one time, the term Messianic applied almost exclusively to groups that expressed their faith in a heavily traditionally Jewish way. It didn't take long, however, for some Hebrew Roots groups to start taking on the “Messianic” moniker, despite their lack of faithful traditional Jewish observances. (Or in some cases, their direct opposition to Jewish traditions).

What I hope to do here, in brief, is highlight the distinctions in belief and practice for things that primarily characterize actual Messianic Jewish groups from Hebrew Roots groups. To accomplish this, we will take a short, brief survey of the two, and explain the differences. **I will not be documenting and citing resources along the way, as doing so would be beyond the scope of this short document's purpose.**

Additionally, *some* of what I will assert here has been my own personal observation, and as such there is no hard source to cite beyond my own personal testimony of spending my entire life in and around the movement. I am quite well aware this is merely anecdotal at best.

For the benefit of the reader – especially the student who loves to dig deeper – I will list multiple resources at the very end of this article that should fill in any gaps left my brief treatment herein. Additionally, much of the material asserted here can be found in said resources, albeit it will have to be pieced together. I have also hyperlinked these resources, so the reader may locate them for their own use if he or she so desires. Once again, I believe doing so here and now would not lead to much benefit for the casual reader, but I nonetheless leave the reader a list of resources.

This topic – and this very question – has been asked by many people. In fact, it is probably the very same topic that has sparked your own inquiry as you read this.

That is: what is the difference between Messianic and Hebrew Roots? It's a quandary that has caused much confusion. I hope to clear some of that up.

### **Messianic Jewish**

While both Messianic Judaism and Hebrew Roots would claim to be traced back to the first century with Yeshua and the Apostles, those claims are not helpful at this time. The Greek Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, and Roman Catholic Churches similarly claim to reach back all the way to Messiah and the disciples, and I think most people reading this can agree that the Assyrian, Greek, and Roman Churches do not resemble the First Century assembly very well.

What we're first going to look at is the modern history and rise (or perhaps "awakening" if you prefer) of these two specific groups.

Messianic Judaism – to a large extent – owes its origins to evangelicals. This is particularly the case regarding the evangelistic outreach organization "Jews for Jesus" that was founded in 1973. But it would be unfair to say this was the very beginning, as there was prior to this a Hebrew Christian movement that started in the late 1700s to early 1800s. The Hebrew Christian Alliance was formed in 1915, later changing its name in 1975 to the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA). Along with the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC, founded in 1979), both organizations are sort of umbrella organizations that help to provide resources and oversight for their respective chartered congregations.

In this way, Messianic Judaism more closely resembles a denomination of Protestant Christianity, in the sense that there is a denominational and organizational structure. This is one of the key differentiations between it and Hebrew Roots.

There are three primary branches within Messianic Judaism, though the first does seem to be the largest. These three terms are my own and I am employing them here simply to distinguish between the different streams of Messianic Judaism.

1. *Charismatic Messianic Judaism*. Many of the UMJC and MJAA congregations are very Charismatic, in the traditional evangelical sense. It is not uncommon, for example, to see tongue-speaking at such congregations. This makes sense, since Messianic organizations have largely been influenced by Charismatic evangelical

parachurch groups and denominations. Those most closely involved include the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Pentecostal, and Assemblies of God. Some prominent Messianic musicians (eg. Paul Wilbur) are also well-known among Charismatic circles. This group by and large (though not at every individual congregation) promotes some form of Bilateral Ecclesiology and/or Divine Invitation. In short, it is the assertion that Jews are obligated to keep the whole of Torah, while non-Jews are not. (It would be unfair to assume all MJAA congregations fit this category)

2. *Rabbinic Messianic Judaism*. Quite distinct from the first group, this group is hardly influenced by Charismatic Christianity's attempt to evangelize to Jews. Instead, it is better understood as an attempt to reconcile Rabbinic Judaism, with an acceptance of Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel. This group more often is found interconnected with normative Jewish congregations and organizations, and many people that fit this category maintain a belief in Yeshua but attend a "normal" Jewish (ie. Non-Messianic) synagogue.
3. *First Century Messianic Judaism*. This third and final group tends to be less Charismatic than the first and rejects the attempts to set non-Jews on a "second class citizen" level by rejecting Divine Invitation and Bilateral Ecclesiology. This group does not wholesale endorse Rabbinic interpretations and rules, but often consults and accepts Rabbinic writings as useful and beneficial when brought alongside the Scriptures (Tanakh and NT). Many Jewish traditions are observed including those that do not originate in the Scriptures, provided they do not conflict with them. (Note: my own congregation falls into this category)

There are more distinctions if we wanted to get down to the nitty-gritty, but that should suffice for now.

## **Hebrew Roots**

The history of the Hebrew Roots Movement (HRM) is a bit more muddled, and there are more variations in it. Many groups can trace their roots in one way or another to Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God in the 1930s. Others started out by attending Messianic Jewish congregations. The former split after Armstrong's death and continued to splinter into more and smaller congregations (such as United Church of God, Church of God International, Church of the Great God, Philadelphia Church of God, and Grace Communion International, among others) throughout the 80s and 90s.

Some of those that had attended Messianic Jewish congregations – being themselves non-Jews – were none too enthused to be told that the Torah was only obligatory for people of Jewish heritage, and as such they as non-Jews did not need to obey the dietary laws or keep the Sabbath. As a result, some left and started Messianic-like congregations that were centered on Torah keeping in contradistinction to Judaism.

Another co-related group at this time was the Sacred Name Movement (SNM), or Sacred Name Only (SNO), which also began in the 1930s, and continued to rise through the 90s and early 2000s. The teachers of this movement originally pushed the idea that one must call on (that is, pronounce) the Name of God “correctly” in order to be saved. Some proponents have held that the Divine Name is to be pronounced as Jehovah; others as Yehovah; others as Yahweh; and so on. More recently this has also included such amalgamations of Yahuah and Yahuwah. Similarly, it is asserted, names for the Son of God must be employed such as Yahshua, Yahusha, or Yahawashi. These groups also rarely use Anglicized terms such as Lord and God, often using only Elohim or a modified form of it, Alahym. The reason is much the same: the belief that using Anglicized terms is an affront to the Almighty and is tantamount to calling on an entirely different deity.

Two big names at the beginning of the rise of the HRM are Angus and Batya Wootten, who started in the early 1980s. They were previously involved with the Messianic Movement in the 1970s. Batya published a couple of books including “Who is Israel?” The Wootens, along with Moshe Koniuchowskiy, soon began to promote what Koniuchowskiy dubbed “Two House” theology. Their original brand of it was reminiscent of – though somewhat distinct from – Armstrong’s British Israelism. For Armstrong, this meant the Ten Northern Tribes of Israel were to be named among white European nations (Germany, France, the UK and US, etc.). For the new Two-House teachers, it was not so much one’s national origin, but rather one’s proclivity towards Torah-keeping. This brand of Two-House originally taught that if a person felt called to keep Torah but was not Jewish, then it must be because he or she was descended from the Lost Tribes. So it is asserted that while observant Jews are The House of Judah, observant non-Jews are Ephraimites.

Since that time, some other variations of Two-House theology have arisen. This includes:

- A return of British Israelism
- Black Hebrew Israelism, and other ethno-centric forms.
- The belief that the Jewish people are representative of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, while Christians are representative of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim).

While there are multiple such variations, some form of Two-House theology is one of the most distinct markers of the HRM. Some form of Sacred Name theology is also often present.

Another characteristic of Hebrew Roots groups is often various disparate calendars. While some accept the standard Rabbinic Jewish calendar, many instead have opted for an alternative calendar, and many different ones at that. Some observe the month by sighting the crescent moon locally; some do it by the sighted crescent in Jerusalem; some do it by conjunction; some do it by the last sliver of the moon. Others have opted to forego the use of the moon at all, and instead observe a variation of what has been

called the Zadok calendar (aka Qumran calendar aka Enoch calendar). Though there is no standard here either, as different Qumran documents describe different calendars.

Even the Sabbath itself has not escaped such controversy. Many HR groups have taken up what is known as the lunar Sabbath, which tries to fix the Sabbath to a day of the lunar month rather than the 7<sup>th</sup> Day of the week. Related to this is a belief that the Biblical day does not begin at sunset like the Scriptures describe, but instead attempts to promote the idea that a day begins at sunrise.

HR groups are often categorized by sensationalism and conspiracy theories. There is often hesitancy or even opposition to formal education of HR teachers and ministers.

While there are some big-name teachers who have risen to notoriety in the HRM, there is no formal structure. Because of this, there is little to no oversight. Congregations most often operate on a model of rigid hierarchy, typically with one person seated at the top with few to no others appointed (and overruled) by them.

There are some groups that call themselves Messianic (eg. Messianic Torah Observant Israel, MTOI) that are in fact not aligned with Messianic Judaism, but instead are distinctly Hebrew Roots.

Once again, a large part of the difficulty here is that there is so much variation. But to summarize, it is easiest to classify such groups by the following beliefs and/or practices that diverge from the standard, and usually they will exhibit multiple of the following:

- Rejection of the full divinity of Yeshua
- Lack of structure and organization
- Lack of educational attainment, often accompanied by a maligning of formal education
- Lack of ordination for leaders – most are self-appointed teachers, pastors, and Rabbis of their own congregations without proper approval by the Body they are supposed to serve
- Maligning of the normative Christian Church, often to the level of hostility that the claim is made that Christians are not going to be in the Kingdom
- Promotion of some form of Two-House theology
- Promotion of “alternative” calendars that have never been used among followers of Yeshua
- Promotion of alternative Biblical canon (often including 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and the medieval 16<sup>th</sup> Century Book of Jasher)
- Rejection of Paul’s letters

## **Commonality**

I would be remiss if I only noted the areas in which Messianics and HRs diverge and did not mention the areas of commonality. In fact, it is often these very areas of commonality that make it so difficult to see just what the differences are. Some of the key similarities are:

- Observance of the 7<sup>th</sup>-Day Sabbath
- Observance of the Biblical Festivals
- Observance of the Biblical dietary laws
- Donning of tsitsiyot – that is, wearing the blue-threaded fringes on one’s garments. In fact this is more often strictly observed by HR groups than MJ ones, as most MJ congregants wear them only on a tallit, and only then on Shabbat and festivals
- An emphasis on Torah observance in addition to faith in Messiah Yeshua

## **Concluding Notes**

I prefer not to divide people. I prefer to help people see what all we have in common. But it has been asked of me numerous times what the differences are, and I am at a point now where I can no longer simply type the same reply up in an email or post the same comment on social media.

I want to categorically state that I do not believe a HR believer is in danger of hellfire because he keeps a lunar Sabbath or because he pronounces God’s name as Yahuah. Similarly, I do not believe a Messianic Jewish woman is in danger of hellfire because she believes that her Jewishness is the reason she is obligated the food laws and non-Jews don’t have to. If such things dictated our “savability” then we would likely all be in trouble.

However, as a student of Scripture; as an aspiring scholar; as a congregational pastor; and as a fellow believer, it is my responsibility to uphold a standard of truth and fairness in representing what I see in Scripture and in our movement.

I do not condemn someone who falls into the Hebrew Roots category simply because they are there. Or those who knowingly want to put themselves in that category and reject all things that sound like they’re attached to “Judaism.” I do not fault people for having different views from my own, nor would I claim to hold all the perfect and true views on all things. Nevertheless, this brief article is my attempt to articulate the things I have personally seen as well as studied after spending my entire life in the Movement. I have seen just about all sides of it, and at no point have I made a claim here that I have not observed or could otherwise verify.

## **Where Are You Now?**

You may have gotten to this point now at the end of this article, and you are wondering... “where does that leave me?” For many of the people with whom I have spoken, they honestly believe Messianic Judaism (in particular the 3<sup>rd</sup> division as I defined it above) is where they best fit, given the definitions. But they have a hard time with that because, to them, Judaism is something foreign. Or most often, they themselves are not Jewish (or if they are, they didn’t know).

To these such people, I would state two things.

1. Don't let the term "Judaism" throw you off. When I personally use it, I most often qualify it with either "Messianic" or "First Century." Second Temple Judaism and First Century Judaism are terms often used in scholarly writings when discussing the religion (faith, belief system, etc.) of Yeshua and the Apostles. For me, when I use such terms, I am referring to the belief system espoused by my Messiah and His appointed leaders, the sh'lichim (Apostles).
2. You do not need to be Jewish to be Messianic. While the terms often go together, it is not necessary (no matter what someone may try to tell you). I do not call myself Jewish because I do not have Jewish blood (and I know this, as I have taken a DNA test before). But I am still a pastor and leader of a Messianic Jewish congregation (a congregation attended by some Jews, but predominantly non-Jews as of this writing in September of 2021). To me, I find it easy to simply say my faith is Messianic Judaism, because it is. I may not be Jewish – nor have I converted – but to anyone on the outside looking in, Messianic Judaism describes my faith best. (And it helps when I request time off for the feasts, when I can point my boss to a Jewish calendar).

Hopefully this has helped to clarify a few things for you, the reader. It may have only brought more confusion, in which case, I do apologize. Feel free to reach out to me if that's the case, and I will try to explain it better, as best I can.

שְׁלוֹם בְּמֵשִׁיחַ

Peace in Messiah,

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### **Further reading for referenced material:**

[Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations ed. By David Rudolph](#)

[Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past by David Stern](#)

[Who is Israel? Redeemed Israel – A Primer by Batya Wooten](#)

[The Hebrew Roots Movement: An Awakening! by Michael Bacon](#) (e-book only; note: this is not a scholarly work, though it does contain a myriad of references in endnotes)