

Answering the Bible's Question of the Mysterious Root

“Jewish roots” or “Hebrew roots” is a very popular subject today in the body of Christ, with many books, teaching ministries, websites and so on about this topic. After centuries of replacement theology and anti-Semitism from the historic church, we are witnessing a revival of Christian “Philo-Semitism” and positive interest in Israel.

Today, millions of Christians around the world are getting revelation and scriptural understanding about the need to positively connect with Israel and the Jewish people. For many, this includes teaching about the “Jewish roots,” which can take many forms: Torah studies, observing biblical/Jewish feasts, understanding the “Hebraic” mindset, Holy Land tours, participating in a Passover Seder, standing with Israel politically and more.

In this article (and the following two or three), we want to take a close look at the “roots” teaching, which is most often based on the Scripture which speaks most clearly of a Jewish root: the olive tree of Romans 11:16-24. What does the term actually mean in the biblical context? How would the Roman Christians, to whom Paul addressed the letter, have understood this teaching? How should it be applied today?

The Olive Tree and Its Root: Romans 11:16-24

The apostle Paul writes of an olive tree of God's people, its branches and its root. The word “root” appears four times in verses 16-18. The overall message of these verses is first a reminder to the Gentile, Roman believers (the “wild” branches) that they have been graciously and surprisingly “grafted into” this olive tree-community of God's people—a tree which for

many, many generations had only been “cultivated” among the Jewish nation/people (the “natural,” native, domesticated branches). The apostle then sternly warns the Romans not to become arrogant or boastful toward these native, Jewish branches, and to remember that they don’t support the root, but the root supports them (). While the apostle clearly identifies three kinds of branches (Jewish believer, Gentile believer, Jewish unbelievers—the “broken-off” branches), he doesn’t similarly define the root—nor does the Scripture explicitly label it as a “Jewish” or “Hebrew” root.

Throughout church history, biblical interpreters have offered four possible definitions of the root:

1. Jesus Himself, the “root and offspring” of David (Rev 22:16).
2. The patriarchs and/or the patriarchal (Abrahamic) covenant, based on verses 11:28-29.
3. The Jewish people/nation of Israel.
4. The first-century, Jewish believing community, especially represented by the apostolic Jerusalem church.

What do you think? Please study and meditate on these Scriptures as we continue our study, with Part 2 to come soon. Try, as much as possible, not to “import” any of your theology or ideas to the text; try to imagine that you are a Gentile, Roman Christian (some knew Jews; others did not) who is hearing this letter read publicly during a worship meeting. What would it have sounded like? Who, or what, is this mysterious root? {eoa}

This article originally appeared at .