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The Hebrew Roots Movement: Deeper Insights or Elitist Distraction?

by G. Richard Fisher

Wheels within wheels — is how the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:16; 10:10) described God and His revelation: subjects that are deep, vast, and complex. It could be used to describe the array of divisions within Christianity. There are so many wheels within wheels that it is impossible for one person to grasp them all.

One subculture could be labeled “Lovers of Israel”: those sympathetic to the Jewish people and the nation of Israel. This group is also interested in researching everything pertaining to Israel’s past. Within this subculture is the Hebrew Roots Movement.

This subculture is varied and contradictory, but can be broken down into divisions realizing that the divisions are not so tight and clear cut. They are:

1. *The Messianic Movement.* This group is made of large numbers of Jewish converts to Christ. Within it are organizations that are involved in

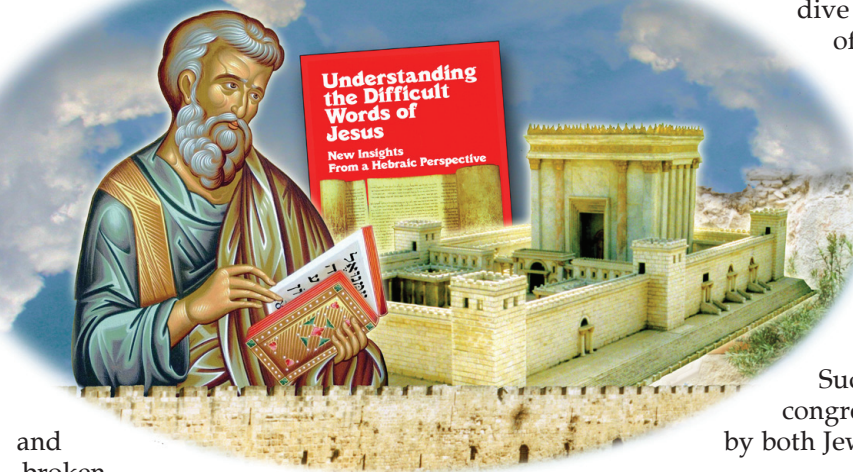
Jewish evangelism and apologetics. These organizations reach out to Jewish people and run the gamut from mainstream Evangelicals, such as Friends of Israel and Jews for Jesus, to

those who adhere to Jewish practices in varying degrees. There are probably hundreds of these kinds of groups that range from highly organized associations to individuals with a congregation. Some are strictly into unpacking Bible content and sharing

the Gospel, while others may dive deeply into the study of Second Temple (or first-century) Judaism. Some veer off into serious Talmudic study and take on all the trappings of Orthodox Judaism, including calling their pastors “Rabbi” and their churches “synagogues.”

Such extreme Messianic congregations are spurned by both Jews and Christians.

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2. *Third Questers*.¹ This is the scholarly wing of first-century biblical studies. It is filled with researchers and writers who spend their academic career unearthing information on Second Temple culture to varying degrees. Many of them contradict one another because they run the spectrum from evangelical to ultraliberal. The names most well known within this discipline are Ben Witherington, Darrell L. Bock, Richard Bauckham, Kenneth Bailey, James D.G. Dunn, John P. Meier, N.T. Wright, Raymond Brown, Geza Vermes, Richard A. Horsley, and John Dominic Crossan.² These often overlap with those who do manuscript study and archaeological research. The Third Quest is sometimes dubbed "The Search for the Historical Jesus," but it is in fact a search for first-century Judaism.

3. *Dual Covenant Groups*. This group includes John Hagee³ and Arnold Froese. They tend to be philanthropic, social, and ecumenical. They are interested in building bridges to the State of Israel, not necessarily converts to Christ from Israel. There is no evangelism of Jews because they believe that Jews are saved through the Abrahamic Covenant alone or some nuance of the Mosaic Law and adherence to it. Somewhat aligned to Dual Covenant belief is the so-called Two House Theory. They believe that all Gentiles are the lost tribes of Israel. When Gentiles realize this and become Jews in practice then together with Jewish people they will merit God's acceptance and approval. Gentiles have an inside track simply by being descended from the northern tribes. Those called Jews today are in because of their descent from the southern tribes of Judah and ultimately Abraham. Race, not grace, prevails. Realization of relationship, not radical conversion to Christ, is the key for this group.

4. *Noahides*. Noahide or B'nai Noach means "Descendants of Noah" or "Children of Noah." This is a small cult. Its members work closely with ultraorthodox rabbis in Israel and adhere to the Dual Covenant teach-

ings as well. They say that there are seven basic laws for all Gentiles extracted from the Book of Genesis and Noah's time and that these seven laws of Noah are all that Gentiles need for salvation.⁴ Jews have the Ten Commandments.

One of the better known Noahides is the late Vendyl Jones. Jones was a self-proclaimed archaeologist who boasted of finding holy anointing oil and sacred incense from Herod's Temple. He claimed to know where the Ark of the Covenant was buried, but never managed to produce it.

Among the accredited archaeologists in Israel he was a laughing-stock.⁵ Jones and an *ad hoc* committee of other Noahides, along with some orthodox rabbis in Israel, declared themselves to be the Sanhedrin of Israel in 2006. The new Sanhedrin, however, is a self-formed group that is recognized by no one in spite of the excitement of some sensationalist prophetic teachers at its founding. Jones died Dec. 27, 2010, in Texas, and is buried in Kibbutz Migdal in Israel.

5. *The Hebrew Roots Movement*. Stephen Katz, a Jewish believer who reviewed this movement for the Jews for Jesus ministry, writes:

"The Hebraic Roots or Jewish Roots movement refers to various organizations with a common emphasis on recovering the 'original' Jewishness of Christianity. This recovery comes through studying the Bible in its Jewish context, observing the Torah, keeping the Sabbath and festivals, avoiding the 'paganism' of Christianity, affirming the existence of original Hebrew language gospels and, in some cases, denigrating the Greek text of the New Testament. Writers such as Roy Blizzard, David Bivin, Brad Young and Robert Lindsay [sic] have given much impetus to this movement."⁶

Many small groups and individuals claim this designation and the most visible and influential part of the Hebrew Roots Movement can be found in Jerusalem, Israel. This movement centers on The Jerusalem School

of Synoptic Research based in Jerusalem. It was founded by Robert Lindsey (d. 1995), David Flusser (d. 2000), Menachem Stern (d. 1989), and Shmuel Safrai (d. 2003). Flusser taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and his forte was Second Temple times. One of the key figures today in the Hebrew Roots Movement is David Bivin. Bivin was a student of Robert Lindsey who called Lindsey, "my pastor, my mentor, and my second father."⁷

It was Lindsey who first had the idea of a retro-version, which is translating the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke into Hebrew from Greek and then seeing those translations as superior to the Greek text. Bivin says of Lindsey, "I believe that without Robert Lindsey's approach to the first three gospels the way to Jesus' person and message remains barren."⁸ Without question this is an elitist statement whether it is intended to be or not. It is an extreme and excessive statement because millions have never even heard the name Robert Lindsey or heard of his theories or teachings. It implies that these believers are shut out from having a way to Christ and are spiritually barren.

One also has to question Lindsey's (and by extension Bivin's) view of the inspiration of Scripture because Lindsey believed in the superiority and primacy of Luke's Gospel over the Gospels written by Matthew and Mark.⁹ This position of the superiority of Luke's Gospel was not finalized by Lindsey through study alone. His biographers write:

"Around midnight he slipped into a light sleep and had a fantastic dream in which 'the synoptic problem opened up like a book.' The dream was so real that he awoke with a start. With the dream fresh in his mind he looked over his notes and there it was — the clear picture for which he had been searching! Mark was not the first writer who was partially copied by Matthew and Luke. It was Luke who wrote first, and Mark was changing Luke! Matthew, in turn, was

using Mark and knew Luke only through Mark! ... Somehow he managed to climb the steps to the second floor where Margaret [his wife] was sleeping in their bedroom. He turned on the light and shook Margaret awake while shouting, 'Luke was first! Luke was first!'"¹⁰

The Hebrew Roots Movement also has its share of subcultures and spin-offs. There are even some organizations which associate with the Jewish and Hebraic Roots movement that try to refute the doctrine of the Trinity.¹¹

The basic premise of the Hebrew Roots way of thinking is the claimed existence of original Hebrew synoptic Gospels that are superior to the Greek texts and contain Hebrew idioms for deeper insights. The word synoptic comes from a Greek word meaning "to see together" and is a term for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because they have materials in common with each other and can be compared or seen together easily. The Jerusalem School tends to spawn elitism because of the claim of superior insights from the Hebrew text. It is good to remember that even if one has the Hebrew text, it does not guarantee proper interpretation because the Hebrew text is not self-interpreting. In this article our intention is to focus on the Hebrew Roots Movement and especially The Jerusalem School because it is foundational to most all of the proliferating Hebrew Roots Movement. From this point on we will designate it HRM.

6. *Autonomous entities.* There are also numerous independent archaeologists and aspiring archaeologists, along with independent prophetic teachers, who use the materials in right and wrong ways to reinforce their assertions. This is where selling and sensationalism abound. This is also where the average person can get lost in the many claims unless they have a good doctrinal foundation and some awareness of first-century culture.

7. *Eclectic system.* These are teachers and authors who select and choose in varying degrees of mixtures from all the above and those who pick

things helpful and not so helpful for dissemination to others. There are bad versions of this eclecticism (mixture of ideas), but we must be clear that there can be good versions as well. It all depends on who is doing the picking and choosing and from what they are picking. There are examples of that good version in evangelical Bible schools and seminaries and as well with reputable teachers, scholars, and missions organizations.

As we consider all the above, it is easy to become entangled in a myriad of ideas and philosophies. It is, after all, wheels within wheels within wheels in a mind-boggling array.

A GUIDE AND A CASUAL PURCHASE

This writer's informal introduction to the HRM took place over three decades ago. At the time I was leading tours to Israel every year in conjunction with my pastoral ministry and for the further training of my congregation. Our guide for several of these tours was a very well trained and very knowledgeable Israeli guide named Ezra Yaholam. His mind was like an encyclopedia. He knew even obscure, out-of-the-way places that were placed on the itinerary. For example, unrenowned sites as Veri Galilee, the observatory at Abu Tor, or the location of the ancient Jerusalem Armenian Mosaic all were part of Yaholam's geographical and historical repertoire. He was so personable that this business relationship turned into a personal friendship which lasted for many years until his death and which provided me a source of in-depth information about Israel.

On one of our excursions, Yaholam happened to ask if I had ever heard of David Bivin. I had not. On every subsequent tour, Yaholam would speak highly of Bivin, applauding his scholarship and deep insights into Jewish culture and customs. It was impressive to hear such a well-trained and educated guide speak so highly of someone else. On a number of the trips, there was an attempt to work out a personal meeting and time with Bivin, but it never developed. The best I could do was purchase one of

Bivin's books. I also visited the Baptist church on Narkis Street pastored by Robert Lisle Lindsey. At this time, I was unaware of the strong connection between Bivin and Lindsey. Following the purchase of Bivin's book, I developed even more interest in HRM.

BACK TO SCHOOL

The Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research is a loose consortium of Jewish and Christian scholars focusing on the Synoptic Gospels by studying the culture, language, and the backdrop of Jesus' life. The Jerusalem School is primarily the fountainhead for the HRM. The various scholars and writers who contribute articles to the Jerusalem School are in no way in doctrinal agreement, but each provides research studies and expertise in his particular area of interest. For example, there is no way Brad Young, who is an Oral Roberts University graduate, would be in complete doctrinal agreement with David Flusser, who was an unbelieving Jew. Flusser was quite critical of the New Testament text and often corrected it. So it is not to be assumed that all the contributing authors are fully on board with the Jerusalem School and its final conclusions. Most contributors would disagree with Bivin's foundational hypothesis. Unfortunately, because there is such a large assortment of trained men doing the articles, it may give the impression of unanimity on everything. There is at least one contributor who is overtly critical of Bivin's methodology. The Jerusalem School has wheels within its own wheels.

Before we look more closely at Bivin's book and examine his claims, it is important to understand some of the basic assumptions of the HRM and the Jerusalem School. These will become clear as we survey Bivin's material.

We are grateful for any teacher or group that does good background study of Scripture and brings to light the setting of the Bible. However, with the HRM there is a lot more going on and we should be aware of these things. Stephen Katz expresses a similar opinion and concern:

“Hebraic Roots teachers call upon believers to study Hebrew and learn about Jewish culture, which most of us can appreciate. More often than not, however, they call Gentiles to a Torah-observant and/or festival observant lifestyle as a means of drawing closer to Jesus and being conformed to His image. The implication is, if you really want to please God, if you really want to be holy, here are the rules. Even though most do not believe these observances are necessary for one’s salvation, there is often an implication that this is the higher way.”¹²

ORIGINAL WHAT?

The first assumption of the HRM is that the Synoptic Gospels can only be really understood properly and fully in Hebrew even though as we stated, the Hebrew is not self-interpreting. This also becomes an impossible barrier to cross because most Christians have never studied Hebrew. The only option these believers have is to swallow everything and anything that the HRM declares because they are supposed to be the linguistic “experts.” Accordingly then, the average Christian, quite unaware of Bivin and the HRM, is really mired in ignorance and barren if they are ignorant of the Synoptic School and its interpretations.

There is even more to this distinction because Bivin claims there are original Hebrew Gospels that are far *superior* to the Greek text. The obstacle to holding to this position is that neither Bivin nor anyone else has ever seen Hebrew *originals* or even copies of Hebrew *originals*. They are merely constructed from his own imagination, of course, with Robert Lindsey’s help. Bivin is actually only over-imagining what the Gospels might be like if they were in Hebrew. It makes for good detective story fiction, but it is not based on fact.

The second assumption is that the Synoptics can only be translated and interpreted through Jewish and rabbinical sources. What is overlooked is that these rabbinical sources may postdate Jesus by centuries. While this

second assumption is only partially correct, any reading back (to the first century) from later rabbinical sources must be done cautiously and with corroborating evidence and documentation. Customs occurring in second, third, and fourth century Judaism may have not existed in the first century. One instance might be the status of rabbi. Long after the first century it became a very specific office with rigid structure, specific requirements, formal training, and public ordination. However, in Jesus’ time, the position had no such meaning or requirements. Most any teacher could be designated “rabbi” if he had a group of followers.

This wholesale imposition of later rabbinical materials as an interpretive tool or hermeneutical principal can be misleading and easily diminish the illumination of the Holy Spirit. As well, it totally ignores the great insights and massive research given to us all throughout Church history. The HRM would have us assume that every scholar of every era in Church history somehow missed it or were never quite accurate in their insights. It is an arrogant position and it creates a separatist and elitist mindset. In the end we may end up with a halachic Jesus, not a biblical Jesus. Halacha has to do with the body of Jewish customs, laws, and traditions that developed over centuries. We may end up with a fictional Jesus and not the real Jesus of Scripture. If we construct a Jesus from Jewish tradition alone, He may have no relationship to the New Testament Jesus at all. A similar mistake was made by early Christian Gnostics, of whom Epiphanius once said that they “go looking for the one who does not exist, and have lost the one who does. Or rather, they have lost themselves.”¹³

Just as one should resist a Jesus constructed from late Roman Catholic tradition, or a Mormon Jesus, or the Jesus of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, we should reject a halachic Jesus. It is a fearful thing to start retranslating Scripture and reconstructing one’s Christology around a hypothetical nonexistent Hebrew copy of the Synoptics, hoping to create an accurate picture of Jesus. Let’s remember that

first-century studies do have limits. These studies can be valuable and helpful to a point. The materials must be interpreted and applied cautiously. The mind must be Holy Spirit-illuminated and aided and equipped by careful study. Knowledge alone can simply puff up.

KNOWING JESUS

We should also recall what the Apostle Paul stated and think seriously about his meaning when he wrote, “Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer” (2 Corinthians 5:16). To this David Lowery informs us: “Mere information about Jesus cannot transform a person from self centeredness to selflessness (5:15). Only conversion could effect that, as it had done for Paul (Acts 9:1-20).”¹⁴

Paul says that he used to see the Messiah purely in human terms, we might say academically through his Jewish grid only. Now he understood Jesus in a grander way and in spiritual terms. In recognizing both the deity and humanity of Jesus, the Apostle had a fuller and more realistic picture of who Jesus was and is. Jesus’ Jewishness and humanity separated from His deity creates a false Jesus. Warren Wiersbe captures Paul’s meaning as well:

“To know Christ ‘after the flesh’ means to evaluate Him from a human point of view. But ‘the days of His flesh’ are ended (Heb. 5:7) because He has ascended to heaven and is now glorified at the Father’s right hand.”¹⁵

It is noteworthy to realize that Paul is saying that even if we saw and knew the Jewish Christ in the flesh on earth, it would pale in comparison to being in spiritual union with the resurrected Jesus through the new birth. It seems that the HRM, perhaps inadvertently, is only concerned with knowing Jesus as He was in the flesh as a Jew and makes that the all-consuming pursuit. They seem to think there is no other way to really know Him but their way.

We are not suggesting that first-century studies are not valuable, but too much of any one thing can cause a loss of balance and perspective. As Solomon reminds us: "Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit" (Proverbs 25:16). Stephen Katz both alerts and advises that "a growing segment of believers are demonstrating an excessive interest in their Jewish roots, which can be harmful to their spiritual health."¹⁶

In other words, obsessing on one aspect of anything for too long can stall out Christian growth.

BACK TO THE SOURCE

The computer enthusiast can "meet" Bivin by going to Jerusalem Perspective Online and watching videos of his teachings.¹⁷ He is a slender man with the appearance of a kindly grandfather. As he sits and speaks he is rather monotone and tentative in his assertion that there is a deeper approach to the study of the Scripture by knowing Jewish culture and idioms. But there is a bit more to it than that and it retracts to his belief that Robert Lindsey's theories open the way to Jesus' person and message without which we remain barren.

Some of the specific illustrations Bivin uses in his Web videos include elementary interpretive blunders. In one of his video presentations, Bivin wants us to know that in Jewish culture people *stood* to pray and he uses the story of the Pharisee and publican in Luke 18:9-14. He conveys that knowing this gives us greater insight into the Bible. However, one may not be able to quite figure out what real value there is in knowing that people stood to pray. Of course, people stood to pray, but it may be incidental to the major thrust of the passage. It seems rather obvious that *some* people in the Bible stood to pray. However, to imply that standing in prayer is a universal rule for all the people of the Bible or that standing in prayer is a superior posture is just not true. Bivin's statement implying all Jews stood to pray is true for some eras and untrue for others.

Daniel, for instance, is facing a lion's den and Scripture tells us:

"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, *he knelt down on his knees* three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days" (Daniel 6:10, emphasis added). It appears that posture as far as praying is concerned is inconsequential. One position is not efficacious because prayer is a matter of the heart. Knowing that some stood to pray is no great revelation.

Jesus is another example that posture in prayer is arbitrary and subjective. In the Garden of Gethsemane account we are told: "And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and *He knelt down and prayed*" (Luke 22:41, emphasis added). At one point it says of Jesus, "He went a little farther and *fell on His face, and prayed*" (Matthew 26:39, emphasis added).

There is some indication in the Psalms that David's prayers took place in the night while he was lying in bed (Psalm 6:6). There is an old poem about a man who fell down a well head first. He said that the best prayer he ever prayed was while standing on his head! Why Bivin would make such a big matter out of people standing in prayer is not clear. One can pray seated in a plane, lying in a bed, kneeling in a garden, or any other way. Taking Bivin's emphasis too far would exclude a paraplegic from prayer.

A similar nuance expressed by Bivin is his emphasis on knowing that Jewish teachers "*sat* while they taught." Here again, the Bible student would inquire as to what value there is in knowing teachers sat while they taught, and if it is really true that all teachers always sat when they taught. In the Gospels, Jesus is often described as *walking* with His disciples and teaching them as they all walked. In John 8, Jesus *stood* in the temple to teach according to verses 1-20. In John 9:1 we read that Jesus passed by or walked by and as He did the whole chapter is filled with His teachings. So the Scriptures affirm that teachers sat as they taught, stood as they taught, and walked as they taught. The ac-

count on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 has Jesus walking with the two disciples (vv. 17-28), teaching them from the Old Testament and in the end they declare: "Did not our heart burn within us while *He talked with us on the road*, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (v. 32, emphasis added). Then in verse 35 they convey to others what had happened "on the road." Bivin's great insight turns out to be no insight at all. It is, in fact, misleading and simplistic. Upon close examination it does not seem that the HRM is offering a superior approach to Scripture after all, but simply imprecision, speculation, and overemphasis where it does not belong. This comes across as insider information.

IT'S IN THE BOOK

Bivin's book, written with Roy Blizzard, is titled *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus - New Insights From a Hebraic Perspective*. It was written in 1983, reprinted in 1994, and again in 2001. After nearly three decades, it certainly has not taken the academic world by storm. Neither has a new companion volume, *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insights from His Jewish Context*, written by Bivin.¹⁸

Bivin, who is now in his early 70s, was born in Oklahoma and settled in Israel in 1963. He studied at the Hebrew University for six years under Menachem Stern and then was tutored by Robert Lindsey. From 1970 to 1981, Bivin taught at the Jerusalem University College on Mt. Zion (then known as The American Institute of Holy Land Studies). His book was an attempt to package and express the views of Robert Lindsey and David Flusser. Lindsey wrote the Foreword to Bivin's book. Bivin still lives near Jerusalem.

In the Foreword of *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, Lindsey tells us that we are "limiting ourselves to the translation of the Greek texts, preserved so faithfully by the Church" and that the answer is "exploring more deeply into the Hebrew texts lying behind our Greek ones."¹⁹ In the 1940s Lindsey devoted himself to translating a modern Hebrew New Testament because the only ones available in Hebrew had been trans-

lated from Greek into Hebrew in the late 1800s using now-archaic Hebrew.²⁰

The basic premise that is followed in Bivin's book is that studying Greek texts alone limits us in our understanding, but finding Hebrew originals behind the Synoptics will give us greater knowledge, insight, and understanding. Because the Hebrew originals or copies of them cannot be found anywhere, a translation of the Greek into Hebrew was the best thing available.

NO ONE HAD IT RIGHT

Bivin would ask us to believe that the Christian Church has had it all wrong for 2000 years when they stated over and over in their doctrinal and creedal statements the fact of the inspiration of an original New Testament in the Greek language. The Westminster Confession (a Reformed confessional statement), for example, echoes what most creeds have expressed:

"The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic." ²¹

The historical statements of faith in many church constitutions carry the same belief.

Had there been only Jewish original Gospels, then Hebrew speakers in the land of Israel (and a few other places) would have been the only ones who could have interpreted it. God would not limit His Word in that way. God inspired the New Testament authors to write in a language that was universal and that everyone in the ancient world understood. This enabled the New Testament to be spread rapidly. Besides, it would not have taken almost 2000 years to discover all the creeds were wrong.

God's willingness to expose the world to truth is seen in His use of

the Greek language. In commenting on Galatians 4:4 and the phrase "when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His son," Donald Campbell observes: "This 'time' was when the Roman civilization had brought peace and a road system which facilitated travel; when the Grecian civilization provided a language which was adopted as the *lingua franca* of the empire."²²

The Greek text as God's chosen instrument has been widely recognized throughout Church history. Kenneth Wuest writes:

"The universal use of the Greek language made the speedy propagation of the Gospel possible. The earth-stage was all set for the greatest event in the history of the human race, the incarnation, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection of God the Son."²³

No one can gainsay the fact that *all* of the existing *very early* manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel available to us are written in Greek. Even if there were early Hebrew translations from Greek of Matthew's Gospel or the Synoptics, they never survived and God's providence failed. Yet Bivin, without proof, documentation, or manuscript evidence, insists:

"Our reasons for writing this book are not only to show that the original biography of Jesus was communicated in the Hebrew language, but to show that the entire New Testament can only be understood from a Hebraic perspective."²⁴

This is an overstatement and not true to the historical or biblical evidence. Equally critical is the fact that we cannot pick just a portion of the New Testament — namely the Gospels — and ignore the rest. There is no existing "original biography" of Jesus in Hebrew and so many of Paul's epistles clearly reflect Greek culture, Greek ways, Greek figures of speech, Greek illustrations, Greek idioms, and were written to Greek people in Greece and Greek speakers in Asia Minor. Everyone would acknowledge that there are Hebraic thoughts in

Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation (after all the writers were Jewish), but in spite of those scattered instances, Greek thought predominates.

EXPERIENCE FIRST

Bivin also claims that a large part of his motivation was based on his experience of going to various teachers and pastors with questions concerning the written Gospels and not receiving answers but merely being told, "the Bible will interpret itself."²⁵ While Bivin does not specify which churches or denominations he is speaking of, his experience is notoriously subjective and limited. This author's experience was quite the opposite.

Hebrew culture, customs, and idioms have been long understood by interpreters. The older works of Adam Clarke, Alfred Edersheim, George Adam Smith, David Baron, George Foot Moore, William Thompson, James Freeman, and others are still available. There has been a virtual explosion of information about Second Temple Judaism since the early 1800s because of archaeological activity.²⁶

No one would argue with Bivin when he says that the culture, religion, traditions, and customs underlying the New Testament Gospels are Hebrew. But the idea could be nuanced a bit by understanding the underlying culture clash of Jews with Rome and Greece and how some parts of the Jewish culture were tainted by the Greeks. However, what is at question is how we get to the knowledge of Hebrew roots.

Bivin also seems to be no friend to the verbal inspiration of Scripture. He believes he can question the Bible as written. In discussing Mark 15:34 he states, "These words are Aramaic, but it is doubtful that Jesus spoke them as Mark records."²⁷ It seems if something does not quite fit Bivin's theory, the fall-back is that we can doubt that the words were spoken as recorded. This makes Bivin the ultimate judge of what is in the Bible and what is not. Believers should become troubled when someone says, in effect, "Hath God said?"

That there may be Hebrew loan words in the New Testament does not prove Bivin's theory of an original Hebrew New Testament, just as Aramaic and Greek loan words in the New Testament prove nothing except that the writers drew heavily from their culture and were inspired by God to do so. John, in writing his Gospel, used the contrast of light and darkness, as did the Essenes. John was not an Essene, but he drew from the same culture.

One of Bivin's big guns fires blanks. He argues that Matthew 6:22-23 cannot be understood clearly in the Greek text and that one must have the rendering in Hebrew to understand it. Along with that is the implicit idea that its meaning was unavailable to us until Bivin's time — or we should say until Lindsey's time because Bivin fostered this idea from him. The statement of Jesus in Matthew's passage has to do with a "good eye" vs. an "evil eye." It is the contrast between having a "good eye" and a "bad eye." Bivin says that these two terms are "common Hebrew idioms"²⁸ for generosity and miserliness — and he is correct. The contrast is between being a giver or being one who is stingy. But we did not have to wait until the founding of the Jerusalem School to find this out.

Adam Clarke lived from 1762 until 1832. In his commentary on Matthew he certainly worked from the Greek text and had no trouble picking up the Jewish background of the text:

"This state of the eye is termed, ver. 23, *πονηρος evil*, i.e. *diseased* or *defective*. An *evil eye* was a phrase in use, among the ancient Jews, to denote an *envious, covetous* man or disposition; a man who repined at his neighbour's prosperity, loved his own money, and would do nothing in the way of charity for God's sake."²⁹

Thus more than a century before Lindsey and Bivin were born, commentators such as Clarke were unpacking the background and meaning of the Greek New Testament texts.

The study of the Hebrew background, culture, customs, and idioms

of the Bible has been going on for many centuries. Martin Luther not only used the commentaries of Rabbis Moses and David Kimchi, but praised them highly and recommended their use.³⁰ These Jewish commentaries circulated throughout Europe as early as the 15th century. The Christian world has not been as ignorant of Hebraic backgrounds as Bivin would have us believe.

DIGGING INTO CULTURE

The real issue is not whether we are studying a Greek text or a Hebrew text or an Aramaic text. We still have to do cultural background study, as Bivin suggests:

"It cannot be overemphasized, that the key to an understanding of the New Testament is a fluent knowledge of Hebrew and an intimate acquaintance with Jewish history, culture, and Rabbinic Literature."³¹

Martin Luther, John Calvin, Adam Clarke, and many others who studied the Greek texts of the New Testament (the only text available) illustrate this wonderfully. The point is we would not have to read a Hebrew New Testament text to study Jewish culture, background, and idioms as these are independent of the Bible as a discipline.

In the third chapter of his book, Bivin presents what he calls "Recent Linguistic Research."³² Bivin presents a few scholars from 1950 to 1982 who *speculate* on a possible Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, but offer no manuscript evidence. Bivin introduces Pinchas Lapide, an Israeli researcher and author, citing his article, "The Missing Hebrew Gospel." The title of that article alone undermines Bivin's case altogether. Not only is it missing, there is no proof it ever existed.

Other faithful Bible scholars also weigh in that there is not even a tiny bit of evidence within Matthew's Greek-written Gospel that it was a translation directly from Hebrew. According to respected theologians Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown:

"... not a trace can be discovered in this Gospel itself of its being a

translation. ... But the entire failure of all such attempts is now generally admitted, and candid advocates of a Hebrew original are quite ready to own that none such are to be found, and that but for external testimony no one would have imagined that the Greek was not the original."³³

Bivin's whole third chapter of his book does not seem to tie in with his overall theme and seems like a throw-away chapter that exists for filler. The chapter has a discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were written a century or two before Matthew and in Hebrew. It possibly makes the case for the Jews using Hebrew and not just Aramaic but does not seem germane to Bivin's argumentation whatsoever. Perhaps he is trying to argue against any, like George Lamsa, who would suggest Aramaic originals.

In the next chapter, Bivin appeals to six early Church Fathers, Papias and Irenaeus from the second century, Origen from the third century, Eusebius and Epiphanius from the fourth century, and Jerome, who died in the fifth century. Bivin offers one-to-two-line statements from these Fathers with no context. The Bible student who has done even a little study in Patristics (history of the early Church Fathers) knows that there is no unanimity among the Fathers and they often contradicted one another and even some, like Origen, swerved off into heresy. So we must consider the source and all of the early Fathers must be looked at very carefully from a biblical basis. We also count as suspect traditions, even Church traditions, because Jesus condemned tradition so strongly in Matthew 15:1-9. Any tradition must pass through the fine grid of Scripture. It must have explicit or strongly implicit biblical backing.

The statement of Papias (which was reported by Eusebius 200 years after the fact) says, "Matthew put down the words of the Lord in the Hebrew language."³⁴ This means virtually nothing because the words "Gospel" or "Gospel of Matthew" are not mentioned in Papias' statement and it

could simply mean that Matthew compiled a few pages of the more prominent sentences and sayings of Jesus. D.A. Carson says "Papias's expressions are ambiguous."³⁵

It is also of critical importance to note that in Papias' use of the term, "words" (of the Lord), comes from the Greek word *logia* which can mean different things in different contexts. Various suggestions as to what *logia* really means have a very wide latitude. Some would say it points to the Old Testament quotes in Matthew's Gospel, while others suggest that *logia* means Matthew's Semitic style and literary form because he has so many Old Testament themes. Still others say it may refer to the Gospel According to the Hebrews or that Papias was thinking of some other Semitic work. As noted, it could mean a few pages of selected statements of Jesus written in Hebrew. We do not know for sure, but there even could have been a much later extinct Hebrew translation from someone who translated Matthew's Gospel from Greek. It is of little wonder that Carson refers to Papias' statements as ambiguous.

Origen's quote in Bivin's book is of little or no help because it is a quote of Eusebius two centuries later. Origen actually said that what he knew of Matthew's Gospel he learned "by tradition."³⁶ It is just more ambiguity and lack of clarity and specifics.

The rest of Bivin's book consists of selected passages of Scripture and his interpreting them in the light of Hebrew customs and idioms. This portion of the book can be helpful.

A RIDDLE WRAPPED IN A PUZZLE

The issue becomes more complex when one realizes there is another teaching called the "Double Original" theory, which speculates that Matthew was inspired to write an original Gospel in Greek and another in Hebrew at the same time. This is an attempt to hold on to the original Greek text and the imaginary original Hebrew text. While this presumption is not held by Bivin or the Synoptic School, it does intrude into the mix.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, in their *Commentary*, speak to the issue:

"Moved by these considerations, some advocates of a Hebrew original have adopted the theory of a *double original*; the external testimony, they think, requiring us to believe in a Hebrew original, while internal evidence is decisive in favor of the originality of the Greek. ... But, besides that this looks too like an artificial theory, invented to solve a difficulty, it is utterly void of historical support. There is not a vestige of testimony to support it in Christian antiquity. This ought to be decisive against it. It remains, then, that our Greek Matthew is the original of that Gospel, and that no other original ever existed."³⁷

Even if we accepted Bivin's premise of a Hebrew original for Matthew's Gospel, the interpretation of Hebrew words is not self-evident. Those words in Hebrew or Greek have to be translated. Hebrew words do not translate themselves. Having a Hebrew manuscript in and of itself is of no help unless one translates the Hebrew words properly. Having a Greek manuscript and knowing Greek would be much more advantageous than having a Hebrew manuscript that could not be understood. In the end we must perform language study and use good research books and commentaries. There are many good books that help us with word meanings and etymology.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM LINE

Bivin's book has some value. Had he written it without getting into theory and the hypothesis about Hebrew originals, it could be a helpful little paperback in regard to the background of a number of Hebrew words and verses and some of the customs and idioms of the first century. It is, however, very limited because it does nothing for the study of the rest of the New Testament.

The hypothesis of an original Hebrew Gospel of Matthew or original

Hebrew Synoptics falls under its own weight. It cannot be proven.³⁸ Remember that Robert Lindsey was Bivin's mentor and the originator of the theory that there was an original Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew. However, even Lindsey's biographers admit, "To date, copies of the actual Hebrew text that Matthew is said to have written have not been found."³⁹

Bivin continues to promote something that has not been shown to exist. And he may not be aware of the troubling fact that such a view places him in league more with unwelcome company than responsible scholarship. A case in point is that Jehovah's Witnesses also claim an original Hebrew Gospel of Matthew. In an effort to justify its use of "Jehovah" throughout its New Testament translation, the Watchtower claims Matthew used the "divine name" in the form of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) because "There is evidence to indicate that Matthew originally wrote his Gospel in the popular Hebrew of the time and later translated it into Greek."⁴⁰

David Bivin may be sincere, but in the world of manuscript evidence and historical documentation, sincerity does not cut it. Fantasies that suggest that we have never had the right Bibles are more preposterous than educational. They just promote a "we've got it and you don't" mentality.

In the end, Bivin can advocate his original Hebrew Synoptics argument, but until he finds manuscripts, he cannot make his case. The way in which the Greek New Testament was revered and cherished by the Church in all ages makes it hard to imagine that if a Hebrew copy of the Synoptics existed, it would not have been recopied, cherished, and preserved in the same way. One would rightly expect at least some copies or portions to be passed down and be extant somewhere in the Church world. We have fragments of the Greek New Testament called "P" fragments (discovered in Alexandria, Egypt) which go back virtually to the Apostles' doorstep. God in His providence has permitted these to survive.

One of the less convincing “proofs” offered for later Greek Synoptics taken from Hebrew originals is an appeal to the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. This is a Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament completed approximately 200 B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt. However, there is no evidence that this set some kind of precedent for New Testament writers and the early Church. It may be a creative suggestion, but it is drawn up out of thin air. The huge difference is that the Septuagint is a different Testament (Old versus New), done in a different age (B.C. versus A.D.), and in a different place (Egypt). Most importantly, copies also can be seen and studied and its existence demonstrated. We know by empirical evidence that it exists. If anything, it shows the predominance of Greek.

In his various presentations, Bivin never reveals that some of Lindsey’s theories were born of a dream and not of a discipline. In closing, consider the counsel of Bivin as he gives the meaning of Jesus’ words, “Wisdom is justified by all her children.” Bivin’s paraphrase is, “He said simply and clearly in Hebrew idiom, ‘You can tell whether wisdom is real wisdom or stupidity by the consistency or inconsistency of its arguments. Since your arguments are so inconsistent, it is a clear indication of your stupidity.’”⁴¹ We would appeal to Bivin to heed these words and be more cautious and less dogmatic.

Endnotes:

1. The term *Third Questers* is derived from the current of three quests for the historical Jesus. The First Quest was an attempt to use historical methods apart from religious ones to construct a biography of Jesus. Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) is credited as being the father of the “Quest for the Historical Jesus.” The term was originally defined by Albert Schweitzer, who was part of the movement, as was U.S. President Thomas Jefferson. The Second Quest, as known as The New Quest, was a brief movement in the 1950s reviving the quest for a historical Jesus. The Third Quest began in the 1970s and continues as a fervent research effort into the historical Jesus — specifically the Jewishness of Jesus — principally due to better knowledge of first-century Judaism.
2. See further, Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest*. Downers Grove, Ill., InterVar-

sity Press, 1997.

3. See further, G. Richard Fisher, “The Other Gospel of John Hagee - Christian Zionism and Ethnic Salvation,” *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 1999, pp. 5-13.
4. These seven laws are the prohibitions against idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy, the eating of flesh taken from an animal while it is still alive, and the establishment of law courts.
5. See further, Randall Price, *In Search of Temple Treasures*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1994, pp. 142-146.
6. Stephen Katz, “The Jewish Roots Movement: Flowers and Thorns,” Jews for Jesus Web site, posted March 1, 2001. Document accessed at: http://jewsforjesus.org/publications/havurah/4_1/jewishroots.
7. Kenneth Mullican and Loren Turnage, *One Foot in Heaven, The Story of Bob Lindsey of Jerusalem*. Baltimore: Publish America, 2005, Foreword.
8. David Bivin, “Eight Tributes to Robert L. Lindsey,” Jerusalem Perspective Online, posted Jan. 1, 2004. Document accessed at: www.jerusalemerspective.com/Default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1691.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *One Foot in Heaven*, op. cit., pg. 168.
11. Two examples of those within the broader HRM who deny the Trinity and the deity of Christ are Sir Anthony Buzzard and Peter Michas. Buzzard says it is false to call Jesus the Almighty God because “That title is reserved for the Father of Jesus. Jesus represents God but is distinguished from Him” (Bible Quiz Question 6 on Buzzard’s Restoration Fellowship Website, <http://focusonthekingdom.org/index.html>). Michas writes, “To say God is three ‘persons’ opens the door to misunderstanding God. God is Spirit and cannot be reduced to the concept of a person. ... The Spirit of the Holy One is the very essence of the power of God the Father and not some separate entity” (*The Rod of an Almond Tree in God’s Master Plan*, pg. 257).
12. “The Jewish Roots Movement: Flowers and Thorns,” op. cit.
13. Frank Williams, Translator, *The Pannarion of Epiphanius of Salamis - Book 1*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 1997, pg. 91.
14. David Lowery in John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983, pg. 567.
15. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Encouraged*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1984, pg. 65.
16. “The Jewish Roots Movement: Flowers and Thorns,” op. cit.
17. The organization’s Web page address is: www.jerusalemerspective.com.
18. David Bivin, *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insights from His Jewish Context*. Holland, Mich.: En-Gedi Resource Center, 2005.

19. Robert Lindsey in David Bivin with Roy Blizzard, Jr., *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus - New Insights From a Hebraic Perspective*. Shippensburg, Penna.: Destiny Image Publishers, 2001, Foreword.
20. *One Foot in Heaven*, op. cit., pg. 79.
21. J. Gordon Melton, Editor, *American Religious Creeds*. New York: Triumph Books, 1988, Vol. 1, pg. 218.
22. Donald Campbell in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, op. cit., pg. 601, italics in original.
23. Kenneth Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966, Vol. 1, Galatians, pg. 115.
24. *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 4.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 3.
26. See further, E.M. Blaiklock, “A Chronological Table of Archaeologists and Their Works” in Merrill C. Tenney, Editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 1, pp. 266-277.
27. *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 10.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 15.
29. Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. New York: Abindon Press, no date, Vol. 1, pg. 90, italics in original.
30. Moses and David Kimchi were part of a famous medieval family of Judaic scholars, particularly active in Hebrew linguistics, Bible commentary, and theological controversy.
31. *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 16, italics in original.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 17.
33. Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973, pg. 880.
34. *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 24.
35. D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984, Vol. 8, pg. 11.
36. David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, pg. 318.
37. *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, op. cit., pg. 880.
38. For more information, see “Hebrew Gospels of Matthew” from Wikipedia. Document accessed at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_Gospels_of_Matthew.
39. *One Foot in Heaven*, op. cit., pg. 139.
40. Anonymous, “All Scripture is Inspired of God and Beneficial.” Brooklyn, N.Y.: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1963, pg. 176.
41. *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

