



## *Does a “Root of Bitterness” mean what we think it does?*

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The phrase “a root of bitterness” seems quite common among those who follow the God of the Bible. It seems like a short hand way of warning against bearing unresolved anger and bitterness or grudges toward anyone or over any old circumstances. Certainly this is wisdom not to retain anger, yet there is more to the meaning.

I am indebted to John Piper who wrote an article that encouraged my further exploration on the topic. The article will be found at: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/what-is-a-root-of-bitterness> It was posted in April, 1997, and challenges the common assumption of the meaning of this phrase. Following in his footsteps, I also wondered where the phrase originates in Scripture. It is found in Hebrews.

*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:  
Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any **root of bitterness**  
springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;*  
Hebrews 12: 14-15 KJV

Piper questioned what it actually means: is the root actually the bitterness, or the CAUSE of the bitterness? As I would be very comfortable to do, he then went back to Scriptures to find a first use of the term. Per Blue Letter Bible and E-sword, it appears that this specific term “root of bitterness” only appears once, in Hebrews. A very closely related term however, is found in Deuteronomy.

*Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away  
this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be  
among you a **root that beareth gall and wormwood;***  
Deuteronomy 29:18 KJV

From this, Piper concluded that the root is not itself the bitterness but the bearer of the bitterness.

There are 5 Hebrew and 3 Greek words that are translated as “root” and all have pretty obvious connections with the literal root, and one of each language also carries the connotation of to “root out” or “root up” or “break, draw away, pluck up,” and so forth.

The Greek word used under the English word “root” is rhize, Strong’s #4491, with the understanding that it may be used literally or figuratively.

The word gall is Strong’s #7219, transliterated as *roshe*, and meaning “a poisonous plant,” perhaps the “head of a poppy, or the venom of a serpent, gall, hemlock, poison and venom.” Wormwood is Strong’s #3939, transliterated as *lahannah*, meaning “to curse, or poisonous.”

Checking the Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible (AHLB), we see additional understanding of the word *roshe* in the paleo-Hebrew pictographic message of the root word being the head, the authority of a family or tribe, the head of a person, place, time or thing. Specifically, the word used takes us to an indication of it being as **Venom**: The poison of serpents that comes sacks located in the head. Also by extension any type of poison. [freq. 12] | kjv: gall, venom, poison, hemlock. In the AHLB for *lahannah*, we learn only it is from an unknown **bitter** plant, though this would seem to confirm the term “root of bitterness” found in Hebrews.

As I reconstruct this phrase with these definitions in mind I see that:

The root ---which may be the underlying support “rooted in” as well as the verb of being “rooted up”

Of bitterness – as stated in Hebrews pairs clearly with gall and wormwood in Deuteronomy as poison, venom or a bitter plant. There is even a connection with the head which directs a person, place, time or thing through the word gall. It comes from the picture of the poison of a serpent coming from sacks in the head.

So I am in agreement that the Hebrews phrase can be directly correlated with the Deuteronomy phrase and that it could be anger or poisonous, but either way it is deadly.

Then Piper went another step further to examine the context. He put the question forth as what is it that causes this root to spring forth “in the church.” He examined the verse following the declaration of concern about this root of bitterness:

*And it come to pass, **when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst:***

*The LORD will not spare him, but then the anger of the LORD and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the LORD shall blot out his name from under heaven.*  
Deuteronomy 29:19-20 KJV

Piper concludes that the danger is when Christians fall into presumption, that because they belong to a certain group or have had some kind of spiritual experience they will be safe, misunderstanding the nature of the covenant God has made with us. He views the message as one of grave concern and caution that Christians not “treat holiness lightly or presume upon more grace.” He concluded that a root of bitterness then would be a person or a doctrine that would encourage people to act presumptuously, not taking their salvation seriously and believing that it does not require vigilance in faith and a pursuit of holiness. (my paraphrase)

Though I would earnestly agree with his conclusion, I see that it goes a bit deeper yet. I see a series of thematic connections between these two Scripture references. The concern expressed in Deuteronomy about the root of gall and wormwood is:

*Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe,  
**whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God,  
to go and serve the gods of these nations;***

And in the Hebrews reference,

***Follow peace with all men, and holiness,  
without which no man shall see the Lord:  
Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God;  
lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;***

The initial concern in the Scriptures was about any person whose heart turned away from our God to serve the gods of other nations which would be the root leading to bitterness. Turning to serve other gods would indicate a falling away from walking after Him and His ways. There is no indication of the root having to do with the emotion of anger or bearing a grudge. It has more to do with estrangement from our God, and then bringing that estrangement into the assembly. I can't help but think of apostasy, a falling away from His ways, which has indeed happened repeatedly through the centuries. We are told that just as there is tribulation and then the final or Great Tribulation, so is there apostasy and the final Apostasy near the end of time and Messiah's return.

*Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;*  
2 Thessalonians 2:3 KJV

Our American association with “heart” often has to do with emotions but in the Hebraic context, the heart is the seat of all the soul-mind, will and emotions, and direction of a person. Their “walk” is their way of life. Serving gods of other nations would mean failing to carry out the commands that He has given us for how we are to honor Him in our lives and instead

beginning to do what other “gods” direct.

The author of Hebrews used slightly different words but the thematic meaning is the same: turning away from holiness and falling from the grace of God leads to bitterness and defilement. This is a very Hebraic word picture in which one’s observance of their faith is likened to walking a path. When one’s heart is following YHWH our God they are walking in His ways. This word picture is parallel to the picture of the Israelites “walking after” the pillars of cloud and fire while in the wilderness. Turning toward Him keeps us on the right path. Turning away from Him leads to trouble, loss of His grace and defilement. (Defilement, by the way, has to do with sullyng, or contaminating something and is different than sin. It may be best understood when one understands the Hebrew functional meaning of the word we see in English as “holy” which will be addressed here shortly.)

Deeper understanding of these two thematically related passages will require clearer definition and understanding of a few of the concepts referred to above.

- The identity or role of the person/doctrine
- The Covenant made on our behalf
- The definition of Christians
- The pursuit of holiness

In keeping with the picture presented in the ancient Hebrew, I suspect that this “root” that brings in bitterness/poison could be not only **any** person, or teaching, but also **the highest authority or head** of such a person or group. The poison coming from the head, the leader of the group, can bring bitterness/poison to the entire group.

Consideration of the covenant made on our behalf is needed here as well. Since in this study, we have already seen in action the provision that Scripture interprets Scripture we may also see then that this same principle would apply to define “covenant” as much as it does to define “root of bitterness.”

What covenant is under consideration in the Deuteronomy setting? Let’s look to additional information in the chapter for greater context. Though I would encourage reading the entire chapter I will highlight the most salient points here.

*These are the words of **the covenant, which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which he made with them in Horeb.***

Deuteronomy 29:1 KJV

*Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do.*

Deuteronomy 29:9 KJV

*Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath;  
But with him that standeth here with us this day before the LORD our God,  
and also with him that is not here with us this day:*

Deuteronomy 29: 14-15 KJV

**Which covenant is it that believers are not to treat lightly?** This Scripture is a reference to the Words of the Torah, just as was affirmed by Paul in his letter to Timothy, as the Torah WAS the Scripture referred to since the “New Testament” had not yet been written.

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:  
That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.  
2 Timothy 3:16-17 KJV*

Was this covenant made with “Christians?” That title didn’t come into use until Antioch many long years later. Though this reference **includes** those who identify themselves as Christians I understand it in a wider scope. I see that the covenant was made with all those who stood there that day as well as those who did not stand physically there. I see this as a thematic connection with what our Messiah Yeshua prayed in His high priestly prayer.

***Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;  
That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.  
John 17:20-21 KJV***

All who honor the God of Israel were represented there that day at the mountain. There were the people physically present as well as the generations that would descend from them, literally and figuratively present “in their loins.” They were receiving the covenant promise of YHWH that He would be their God and they would be His people, walking after Him alone. This same God, had already declared from the beginning, that He would make a way of restoration after sin entered the world, which we all understand to have been Messiah Yeshua who died in our place and made atonement for our sin.

In a very brief comment here as this is another separate study, upon having studied the words translated as “church” “assembly”, or “synagogue,” we find “*ekklesia*” and “*synagogue*” in the Greek. All have been based on the Hebrew word “*kahal*” or variations on this word. The translators chose to make a distinction at some point, choosing to use synagogue for those who had not acknowledged Yeshua as Messiah and church or assembly for those who had. In one way or another, these words refer to those who have been “called out” of the world to honor God, some even bearing Bride language connotations. Please do follow up and test this quick reference!

The Father and the Son are One, and Messiah prayed that we might be one with them. Those who believe in, honor and serve Messiah Yeshua, are also to believe in, honor and serve His Father because we are grafted in and made one household.

*Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;*

*That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:*

*But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.*

*For he is our peace, who hath made both one,  
and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;  
Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; **for to make in himself of twain one new man**, so making peace;  
And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross,  
having slain the enmity thereby:*

*And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.*

*For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.*

*Now therefore **ye are no more strangers and foreigners,  
but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;**  
And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the  
chief corner stone;  
Ephesians 2:11-20 KJV*

One can search the entire Bible through and will never find a covenant made with “Christians” so though I agree with Piper’s concern for correct understanding of the covenant, I see that a correct understanding per the Scriptures is wider than his terminology indicates. It is the Whole Word of God, beginning with the Torah, referred to in the context of the first reference to a root of gall/wormwood/bitterness. The covenant was made with all those who choose Him through the ages, referred to often as the Whole House of Israel; and in Ezekiel, a little more specifically; the whole House of Israel and their companions, and the whole House of Judah and their companions.

*Moreover, thou son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, **For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions:***

*And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand.*

*And when the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not shew us what thou meanest by these?*

*Say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; **Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand.***

*And the sticks whereon thou writest shall be in thine hand before their eyes.*

*And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land:*

*And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all:*

***Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwellingplaces, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God.***

Ezekiel 37:16-23 KJV

This understanding then takes us to the next point; the definition of what it means to “pursue holiness” which also leads to further exploration of covenant. I believe Piper has correctly concluded that it is unwise to underestimate the importance of pursuing holiness, or presume upon more grace. He is echoing Paul’s concerns here.

*Rom 6:1 What shall we say then? **Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?**  
Rom 6:2 **God forbid.** How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?*

Like Paul, Piper understands that we need to be careful not to presume upon grace and just go about our way and our own wishes, but remembering to seek God and His ways, allowing Him to work in and through us for His purposes. He saw further confirmation of this as he examined more verses in context.

*Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood;  
**And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst:**  
Deuteronomy 29:18-19 KJV*

The Literal Translation Bible may make this a little more clear to our modern day ears:

*and it happens when he hears the words of this curse, that **he should bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, even though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart, to snatch away the drunken with the thirsty.**  
Deuteronomy 29:19 Literal Translation Bible*

By the way, why is it considered a curse? I thought we were discussing a covenant! For this, we must find additional understanding of what a covenant involves. A thorough understanding of what covenant is about is very helpful to understand this and that study is highly recommended. Examining the ancient and most functional aspects of the Hebrew language also provides clearer images. In brief, this word used here, translated as “curse” is Strong’s #423, transliterated as *alah* and meaning “an imprecation, a curse, swearing or an oath.”

A covenant is an agreement, a swearing or an oath, between two parties though there are several forms consistent with ancient history. A Royal Grant and a Suzerainty Treaty are two prominent examples. In this case, we are considering the suzerain type in which mutual oaths are understood between both parties. Usually it is between a party of greater power or authority and one of lesser power or authority. The greater agrees to provide various things in exchange for the loyalty and service of the lesser. Such agreements usually include description of what the punishment will be for failing to keep their oaths. The one of greater power is able to enforce it this way. So the lesser party is agreeing in advance to receive the discipline/curse should they depart from the agreement.

Looking to the pictographic meaning of the word “*alah*” as stated in AHLB we find this.

The yoking together of two parties. A treaty or covenant binds two parties together through an oath (yoke). The oath included blessings for abiding by the covenant and curses for breaking the covenant (see Deuteronomy 28). The God of the Hebrews was seen as the older ox that is yoked to his people in a covenant relationship.

Looking back a little further to the pictographic meanings, AHLB has this to say about the closely related word “*al*” which can be translated as yoke, ox and strength.

The pictograph  is a picture of an ox head and also represents its strength. The  is a picture of a shepherd staff and also represents the authority of the shepherd. Combined these two pictographs mean "the strong authority" and can be anyone or thing of strong authority. The yoke is understood as a "staff on the shoulders" (see Isaiah 9:4) in order to harness their power for pulling loads such as a wagon or plow. Hence, the two pictographs can also represent "the ox in the yoke". Often two oxen were yoked together. An older, more experienced ox would be teamed up (yoked) with a younger, less experienced ox. The older ox in the yoke is the "strong authority" who, through the yoke, teaches the younger ox.

These descriptions include a reference to Deuteronomy 28, which provides the context to understand the verse and reference in question here in Deuteronomy 29.

So, this covenant agreement that provides mutual benefit is pictured as a yoke, but when one party resists it, that same agreement becomes a curse. When pulling together with a stronger partner all is well. When deciding to pull in another direction things change. In this reference, the concern is that one who has turned away from the Father and His ways may at some point begin to take it all on himself, imagining that he can bless himself, do his own stubborn thing and not suffer.

Many have understood that our Messiah has suffered and died for our freedom and that we are now free to do whatever we choose. They might then have difficulty understanding why this “blessing yourself” issue is a problem. An answer is found in what it means to pursue holiness.

“Holiness” is the usual English translation of the Hebrew word “*Kadosh*.” You will find a word study on this in our articles section of the website.

*Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious **in holiness**, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*  
Exodus 15:11 KJV

In brief, *Kadosh* is Strong’s #6944, and means a consecrated thing. Being consecrated means that it has been set apart for a certain use. In truth, the concept of “holy” means that something is set apart, but it doesn’t specify for WHAT use. We can be set apart to our God as much as we could be set apart to the Adversary, satan. As this verse implies, our YHWH God is set apart and glorious in Himself. There is no other like Him. He is glorious and without compare and set apart from all else.

When we are yoked to Him in covenant, we are being guided to walk in His ways, in His direction. Pursuing holiness then, means to desire to become like Him and to walk in His ways,

not our own ways, to keep His commands.

*Sanctify yourselves therefore, and **be ye holy**: for I am the LORD your God.  
**And ye shall keep my statutes, and do them: I am the LORD which sanctify you.***  
Leviticus 20: 7-8 KJV

Has this direction changed? Far from leaving the pursuit of holiness behind as an ‘Old Testament’ thing, Peter specifically confirms them as do other writers of the “New Testament.”

*Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to  
be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;  
As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your  
ignorance:  
But as **he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy** in all manner of conversation;  
Because it is written, **Be ye holy; for I am holy.***  
1 Peter 1:13-16 KJV

Here is a major challenge for those who have believed the viewpoint that the “Old Testament” is more or less obsolete, and as presented by Marcion, that the God of the “Old Testament” represents wrath with no mercy and grace, while the God of the “New Testament,” Jesus, represents mercy, grace and the end of the Law. The idea of what it means to be holy has been lost in this artificial division. There is SO much more to be said on this but it must be left for another time.

I would like to include a brief note, too, on the term “stubbornness of my heart.” You may recall that it is often said that rebellion is as witchcraft, but there is a comparison with being stubborn, too. I think you will easily see the thematic connections here, too.

*For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and **stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.**  
Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king.*  
1 Samuel 15:23 KJV

You will find an extensive study on this subject in my article found on the Shepherds Need to Know page, [What Shepherds Need to Know about the Biblical Understanding of “Stubbornness.”](#)

## Conclusion

We come at last to the conclusion of the matter of what “a root of bitterness” means. In agreement with John Piper’s conclusion from the Word, I do not see that it means what has been commonly taught. I affirm here the importance of recognizing the root of bitterness that could spring up among us as being turning away from our God lest we become self-sufficient and stubborn. We are to continue to pursue peace with men, and holiness-being set apart to our God-- yoked with Him for His guidance of our ways.

In addition to his comments, I further clarify that the message is not just to a body of people called Christians, but to all from the beginning to the end of time who honor and serve the God of Israel Who Alone is set apart, His church.

I affirm that a covenant can become a curse if we try to walk a different way than The One with Whom we are yoked.

Matthew recorded similar words from our Messiah Yeshua, confirming His unity with our Father and a reference to His yoke.

***All things are delivered unto me of my Father:***  
*and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father;*  
*neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son,*  
*and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.*

*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*  
***Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;***  
*for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*  
***For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.***  
Matthew 11:27-30 KJV

The author of Hebrews was concerned with the same issues Moses wrote of earlier and made thematic reference to the same picture. We do well to remain focused on The One Who is the same from age to age, and to steer clear of any who would speak otherwise, lest that root of bitterness of turning away from Him and His ways should arise.

I affirm that pursuing holiness is not old fashioned or outmoded but of deep significance to His people today. He IS coming again, soon.

May we be found set apart to Him, free of that bitterness, personally and corporately, when Messiah returns!

## **Resources**

Zodhiates Study Bible; Hebrew and Greek Lexicons

E-Sword and Strong's Concordance

Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testaments

Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible, Jeff A. Benner

"What is a Root of Bitterness?" John Piper: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/what-is-a-root-of-bitterness>