

“CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS (#5): JUDAISM”

(Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-6)

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–I–

1. **[BOTH Services:]** Read Text (9:30am MSG; 11am NRSV): Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-6 and Pray.
2. As we continue our series Christianity & World Religions, our focus today turns to **Judaism**, a faith we may think we already know about because our own faith emerged out of it.

A–But while its true that we Christians share much in common with our Jewish friends, there are important differences we need to understand and appreciate.

B–So, as we’ve done in the previous weeks, I’ll invite you to follow along in your bulletin sermon notes as I share highlights of the origins and beliefs of this faith, how these compare with those of our own, and how we should relate to our Jewish neighbors.
3. Let’s begin by remembering the **ORIGINS OF JUDAISM**, which (as with Christianity and Islam), is the story of the one God of Creation who, around 2000 BC, calls a man named *Abraham* to leave his home and set out for a new one that God would give.

A–But while Islam traces its lineage through Abraham’s son *Ishmael*, Judaism (& Christianity) traces its heritage through his son *Isaac* and his grandson *Jacob*, whose name was later changed to “*Israel*,” and whose 12 sons founded what came to be called the “*Twelve Tribes of Israel*.”¹

B–Their story, and the story of God’s relationship with them, is recounted through the 39 books of what’s called the “*TENAKH*” – the Hebrew scriptures (what we Christians call our “*Old Testament*”), which includes stories about Moses and the *Torah* (Law), the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and King David, Solomon and others in the *Ketubim* (or Writings).²

C–But the story of the Jewish people doesn’t stop with the *Tenakh* – in 70 AD, Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the great Temple there, leaving nothing but the retaining wall of the Temple mount (what’s known today as “*The Wailing Wall*”), and for the next 1900 years, Judaism was a religion in exile – with no central seat of authority or culture.

D–What changed that was the Holocaust of World War II, where over 6 million Jews (1/3 of the world Jewish population) was murdered by Adolf Hitler, and this encouraged the United Nations finally to re-establish the new state of Israel in 1948.³
4. Today, over 18 million Jews practice their faith around the world⁴ in three major branches (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform),⁵ and I’m including Judaism in this series *not* because of their great numbers, but because of their great influence on our world, in general.⁶

–II–

5. So let's look, then, at some of their **BASIC BELIEFS** as outlined in the *Tanakh*.⁷

A—First and foremost is *the concept of God as ONE* – that all humans should not only recognize, but also worship, the one and only God, the Creator of all things.⁸

1—Listen to what's known as the *Shema*, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. And you shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*”

2—Now, we Christians will recognize this as Jesus' first commandment,⁹ but it's also the very *heart* of Judaism, where God is portrayed as personal and loving (like in Christianity), but also as one who requires great honor and respect – which is why God's name is never spoken out loud, and is only spelled *YHWH* (“*Yahweh*”).¹⁰

B—A second vital belief in Judaism is *the concept of covenant* (Hebrew *brith*).

1—Their faith teaches that God made a covenant with them to be His chosen people in the world – chosen not for special privilege or favor, or because they were superior in any way, but chosen instead for special *responsibility*: to bear witness to God's existence, purpose, and desire for all humanity.

2—And this covenant, they believe, was first given to Noah (the rainbow covenant¹¹), then to Abraham and Jacob (in the *berit milah*, covenant of circumcision¹²), and finally to Moses (in the “Ten Commandments” and *Torah*¹³) – and it's recognized today when children reach the age of accountability in the rituals of *bar-mitzvah* (for boys) and *bat-mitzvah* (for girls).¹⁴

3—And through them, they'd say, the whole world will be blessed. We find this explicitly in today's scripture – listen to God's own words in Genesis 12:2-3: (MSG) “*I'll make you a great nation and bless you,... and all the families of the Earth will be blessed through you.*” (NRSV) “*I will make of you a great nation, and bless you,... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*”

C—The final thing I'll share from the *Tenakh* is *God's demand for moral living*.

1—In Judaism, it's not enough just to believe in and worship the one God. No, we're also held accountable for the morality of our conduct towards others.¹⁵

2—Remember the words of Micah 6:6-8, “*Shall [we] come before [the Lord] with burnt offerings? ...[No,] He has told you... what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?*”

3—One author explained it this way: “*Judaism is morality.... By acting correctly in the world, we sanctify God's name, [and] by doing the right thing, people see that our actions testify to the presence of God in the world*”¹⁶ – it's about “right living.”

6. So how, then, doe all of this **COMPARE WITH CHRISTIANITY?**

A–Well, while there are differences in our rituals of worship, holidays, and other religious observances, I should point out that in general, we have more *in common* with our Jewish friends than we have *differences*. For example...

1–Along with our Muslim cousins, we share belief in the one God of Abraham.

2–We share the writings of the *Tenakh* (our Old Testament), and its teachings about God, and the importance of covenant, morality, justice and love for others.

3–And, lest we forget... Jesus himself was a Jew – his own teachings reveal that he viewed himself not as raising up a *new* religion, but fulfilling the old *one* – “*I’ve come not to abolish the law or the prophets... but to fulfill [them]*” (Matthew 5:17).

B–And yet, all that said, the main point of divergence between our two faiths does revolve around our differing understandings of *the purpose and role of Jesus*.

1–You know, for Jews (as with our Muslim friends), Jesus was a great prophet, and good, moral teacher/example; but that’s as far as they’ll go.

2–In contrast, we believe Jesus was God himself – the promised Messiah & the way to salvation; and we’d say that the way to have a relationship with God is through faith in *him*, versus the keeping of *Torah*, or the mere living of a moral life.¹⁷

C–So, Christians often ask: “*Why won’t Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah?*”¹⁸ Several reasons:

1–First, they were looking for the Messiah to bring a reign of peace not only for Jews, but for all people – and the life of Jesus not only didn’t seem to do that, but to cause more divisions (and, I should add, the harsh treatment and persecution of Jews by Christians throughout history hasn’t helped change their minds any).¹⁹

2–Second, they were looking for the Messiah to free them from *political* oppression – to be a conquering king, like David. But all Jesus seemed interested in was freedom from *spiritual* oppression (“sin”), and the kingdom of *heaven*.²⁰

D–Now, we may not agree with these interpretations, but it’s why Jews generally don’t view Jesus to be the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.²¹

–III–

7. Given all this, then, **HOW SHOULD WE AS CHRISTIANS RELATE TO THEM?**

A–You know, there are many Christians (maybe some of you here today) who think that Jews may be well-meaning, but will still be shut out of heaven because they refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah / Savior.

B–Well, I understand the sentiment behind this, but I need to say that I think it’s not only *misguided*, but biblical *misinformed*.

1–Let me read what Paul says in Romans 11:28-29, “*From your point of view regarding the gospel... it may look like the Jews are God’s enemies. But from God’s point of view regarding election, they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*”

2–Did you hear that? God’s covenant (e.g., salvation) is “*irrevocable*” – meaning that God doesn’t cancel or rescind the *old* covenant (Judaism) just because there’s a *new* one (Christianity).

(a) Think of it like this: a person enrolls in a cell phone plan where they get a certain of minutes for a certain monthly price.

(b) Six months later, the phone company offers a *new* plan with *more* minutes for *less* money. But that person doesn’t switch – they keep the old plan.

(c) Well, their service doesn’t end just because they refuse to switch, does it? No. They may be *paying* more, but the old plan *does* still function.

3–Well, I think it’s just that way with our Jewish friends: ...even though they don’t accept the “new plan” with Jesus as Messiah, I believe our Bible is clear that *as long as* they’re faithful to the “old plan”(e.g., by keeping the *Torah*, being active at Synagogue, practicing good morality, etc.), then God’s grace still covers them, and they’ll join us in heaven.²²

4–Now, this *doesn’t* mean we don’t need to share our faith in Christ, because we still believe the “new” covenant is *better* than the old – but it doesn’t *negate* it, either.²³

C–The bottom line is that I believe we need to hold our Jewish friends and neighbors in the highest regard, for if Muslims are our “*cousins*” in faith, then Jews are our “*older brothers and sisters*” – they’re the “*first born*” of God, and as such deserve our respect & esteem.

8. So, as we dialogue and share our own faith in Jesus, let’s do so with a spirit of humility and love – to allow the light of the one we believe *was* the Messiah to shine through our hearts and lives to reveal God’s love in a new, meaningful ways through Jesus, the Christ of God.

10. [PRAYER:²⁴ “*O God, thank you for our Jewish brothers and sisters – the first born of our faith. We thank you for their passion for you as the one God of Creation, their understanding of covenant which helps us relate to you, and their commitment to faith that impacts their behaviors, as well as their worship. But we thank you most of all that you came to earth in person, and revealed yourself as Messiah through the person of Jesus Christ. Thank you that through him, the wall dividing us from you has been torn down, and that in its place has been created a ‘new humanity,’ reconciled to you and to one another through his cross, so that together our hearts are ‘built together spiritually’ as a place where you can dwell. Give us hearts to feel you, minds to understand you, and hands to serve you, so that we might reach the world for you. Help us to know your shalom/peace for all people through the love of Christ Jesus. In his holy name we pray, Amen.*”]

ENDNOTES:

1. Isaac's story is told in Genesis 21-26. Jacob/Israel's story is told in Genesis 27-33. It should be noted that the Jewish people are also sometimes called "*Hebrews*," a reference to Abraham's native tribe (*Ebre*) referenced in Genesis 14:13.
2. **TENAKH** is actually an acrostic (T.N.K.) made from the first letters of the three parts of Hebrew scripture: (1) **Torah** (Law/Instruction, which is the first five books, or *Pentateuch*, of our Christian Bible); (2) **Nevi'im** (Prophets, which includes most of the prophetic books of our Old Testament); and (3) **Ketubim** (Writings, which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and 8 other books from our Old Testament). In addition to the *Tenakh*, Jews also have as a second type of sacred writing the **MISHNAH**, which includes interpretations of the *Torah*, and which itself was interpreted in a document called the *Gemara*. These two collectively are known as the *Talmud*. For more information about Hebrew sacred texts, read generally Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions (FaithQuestions Series) (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 24-25; and Sean O'Callaghan, The Compact Guide to World Religions (Oxford, England: Lion Books, 2010), pp. 45-46.
3. During this time (and including today), since they had no Temple in which to offer sacrifices, Jews worshiped in assemblies (*synagogues*) led by teachers (*rabbis*).
4. There are around 6 million Jews here in North America, 4.5 million in Israel, and 3 million in Europe.
5. **Orthodox Judaism** is the most literal/conservative of the branches, and is divided by the ultra-orthodox Hasidim and the more liberal Neo-Orthodox groups. **Reform Judaism** developed in the Enlightenment as an attempt to make Judaism more accessible to modern culture. **Conservative Judaism** then developed in the late 1800s as a more moderate reaction *against* the liberalism of Reform Judaism. It stands theologically *between* Reform and Orthodox Judaism. For an overview of these branches, read generally Sean O'Callaghan, World Religions, pp. 43-45; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, pp. 25-26; Lewis M. Hopfe, World Religions (Growing Christians Series) (Nashville: Graded Press, 1987), pp.99-101; Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling with Questions People Ask (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), pp. 93-94; and Fritz Redenhour, So What's The Difference? (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976), pp.57-58.
6. Learn more about the origins and development of Judaism from the following sources: Lewis Hopfe, World Religions, Chapters 9-11, pp.75-105; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, pp. 21-24; Sean O'Callaghan, World Religions, pp. 38-45; Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 89-92; and Fritz Redenhour, So What's The Difference?, pp.55-59.
7. It should be noted that to most Jews, religious *beliefs* (like the ones I share here) are only *one* aspect of their Judaism. This is why some consider Judaism to be a "race", in addition to being merely a "religion." For an overview of basic Jewish beliefs, read generally Sean O'Callaghan, World Religions, pp. 47-49; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, pp. 26-31; Lewis Hopfe, World Religions, pp.80-83; Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 95-100; and Ridenour, So What's The Difference?, p.59.
8. Being reminded of the oneness of God is one of the primary purposes of Jewish worship, which takes place on the Sabbath (*Shabbat*) of each week – which is from sunset Friday through sunset Saturday (which is why their Synagogue services take place on Saturday, their Sabbath day). I was privileged to attend *Shabbat* services at the Reformed Temple Kol Emeth on Old Canton Rd., just 2 miles east of our church (Visit their website at www.kolemeth.net).

9. Matthew 22:38.

10. The famous 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides once said that one cannot know God as God *is*, but rather only as God *acts* – meaning that we can only know God *indirectly* through the people and things we see around us, rather than *directly*. This explains why Jews believe God revealed Himself to Moses only as YHWH (most likely pronounced “*Yahweh*”, and usually rendered in English as “*the LORD*” – the word *Adonai*, “*Master/Lord*,” is spoken in synagogues instead of YHWH). It also explains why the first four of the “Ten Commandments” focus on the focus and worship of the one God (Read Exodus 20:1-6 and Deuteronomy 5:7-11).

11. Genesis 9.

12. Genesis 15-17.

13. Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

14. Most Jews also believe that part of God’s covenant includes a commitment to give them a land of their own – the “Promised Land” of Canaan, which includes most of the present-day geography of the state of Israel. One author stated it this way: “*Christians need to realize the importance of Israel to Jews. Israel is not just another country; it is a theological statement. Many Jews consider Israel to be the promised Messiah since it provides hope and salvation to them*” (Lewis Hopfe, World Religions, p. 98).

15. What’s more is that this demand for moral behavior focuses on the here and now. Since not all Jews believe in life after death (i.e., in the existence of heaven and/or hell – the *Torah* by itself is ambiguous if either of these exist), the focus of Judaism is on life in the here and now – doing things “right” (justice and fairness) today, not in some future period of time. It’s priority is *not* so much on preparing ourselves for the *next* life (as some would claim is true with Christianity) as it is about having a guide for ethical/moral behavior in *this* life.

16. Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, p. 95. In his book, The Five Great Religions, Edward Rice says that “*To be a Jew today... means to lead a Torah-true life – that is the essence of Judaism*” (Rice, cited in Hamilton at p. 95).

17. Read generally, Fritz Ridenour, So What’s the Difference?, pp. 59-62.

18. This may, in fact, be the wrong question, because the reality is that some Jews *did* accept Jesus as the Messiah! Remember that at first, *all* Christians were Jews, including all the apostles and all but one author of the New Testament. They weren’t called “*Christians*” but followers of “*the Way*.” In fact, it’s been estimated that less than 20 years after Jesus’ death, nearly 1/3 of all Jews in Jerusalem were followers of “*the Way*.” So what happened? Well, as the church became more and more open to Gentiles, (following the teachings of Paul), it tended to become more and more closed to Jewish traditions, resulting in Judaism itself becoming more and more closed to the gospel of Jesus. Within several generations, Christians themselves even began *persecuting* Jews for those traditions. So, in many ways it could be argued that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus is as much the fault of *we Christians* as it is the fault of Jews themselves!

19. And the persecution of Jews by Christians throughout history hasn’t helped changed their minds!

20. In other words, Jesus’ message seemed to take two Jewish concepts – Messiah and Atonement – and combine them in a way that was completely foreign to messianic theology or expectation. In Jewish thinking, the Messiah will be a bringer of peace, not a sacrifice for sin. This is why Jews interpret passages like Isaiah 52-53 (the “Suffering Servant” passages that Christians claim point to Jesus) instead merely to refer to the

Jewish people as a whole (rather than to any one person – like Jesus – in particular).

21. This actually often leads to another related question: ***“Do Jews today still look for the coming of Messiah?”*** The answer all depends on who you ask: (1) Orthodox Jews, for example, still look for and pray for the coming of a literal Messiah; (2) many Reform Jews, on the other hand, no longer look for a *literal* Messiah, but instead look for the coming of a Messianic *age* – a time when people of all nations and races will come together in peace and harmony around the worship of the one God; (3) still others believe that the Messiah *did* come, not as a literal person, but in 1948 in the form of the re-established nation of Israel – a kind of “corporate messiah.” For more about their understanding of *Messiah*, read generally Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe?, pp. 26-27, 30-31; and Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, p. 96.

22. In other words, I think the Romans passage is saying that God will credit a conscientious Jews’ faith and works through Judaism as “salvation” in the same the way that God credited the faith and works of Abraham, Moses, and David as salvation in the Old Testament – Paul says that their faith was “reckoned to [them] as righteousness” (Read Romans 4, especially Verses 3, 5, 9 and 22). Today’s scripture in Genesis 15:6 says something similar, “[Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” – in other words, his Jewish faith was “credited” to him as “salvation.”

23. For more about this, read generally Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, pp. 104-110.

24. Portions of this prayer are a paraphrase of Ephesians 2:14-21.