

On Judaism

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Continuing our exploration of World Religions, we'll turn to Judaism. We can trace the foundation of Judaism to 1800 B.C.E. when God called Abram out of Ur. In Genesis, we read about this call: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." [1] Abraham (as he was renamed) and God make a covenant, a promise. In time, Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's maid, have their son Ishmael who will be the father of the Arab nation, and Sarah and Abraham have their son Isaac. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam will one day be referred to as the Abrahamic faiths—it all begins with Father Abraham. [2]

Now while Abraham is considered the Father of Judaism, Moses is considered the political founder. You'll recall the book of Exodus and God speaking out of the burning bush and Moses returning to free God's people from slavery in Egypt. Moses is with God on Mt. Sinai and brings the Torah to the Israelites, helping them understand what God requires of God's chosen people. After 40 years of wandering, they move onto the Promised Land under Joshua's military leadership and then Judges will guide the people. In time, the people demand a king and Samuel establishes a monarchy with Saul as the first king. King David succeeds him and secures the borders, establishing Jerusalem as the capital, and his son Solomon builds the First Temple.

Ultimately, the Kingdom divides, with the Kingdom of Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Israel falls to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. and Judah falls to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. The Babylonian Captivity was heartbreaking and also the height of prophecy—Second Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah and other prophets question God's people, theological claims, everything really. The oral tradition also starts to be written down since the Temple was destroyed and many artifacts were lost.

Now let's fast forward to 70 C.E. when the Romans sack Jerusalem. After the Temple was destroyed again, Israel has an identity crisis. Power had moved from Abraham to political and military leaders like Moses and Joshua to Judges to Kings like David and Solomon to Prophets throughout questioning everything to Rabbis in local synagogues. In fact, modern Judaism traces its origins to 2nd Century Rabbinic Judaism which developed from the Pharisees. The Pharisees are not portrayed very well in the Gospels because of the tensions among the Jewish groups at the time—the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Jesus and his followers. [3] This is a whirlwind tour of tradition and history, but hopefully we can see how power moved and that adaptability was important.

Moving on, here's a helpful description of the Jewish faith from the Jewish Outreach Institute: "Judaism is the ancient tradition of a relatively small community of people originally called Hebrews, or Israelites. Judaism was the first religion to hold as its central dogma the idea of monotheism: the belief that there is only one God, an infinite, omniscient source of all power and righteousness who has shared a special relationship with God's 'chosen people' since the days of the biblical forbearers Abraham and Sarah. Judaism as a religion has developed over thousands of years, but has always emphasized the oneness of God, the observance of commandments, the study of Torah and the importance of community and family." [4] We can see this in the Deuteronomy passage—it's about obeying commandments with a focus on community and covenant. [5]

Now let's consider modern observances. Judaism remains a textually based religion. The Torah is the revealed word of God and can mean the Five Books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus,

Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy or all the Hebrew Scriptures including the Talmud—rabbinic traditions and commentaries.[6] It's helpful to refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as Tanakh, an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings). Both Tanakh and the Talmud are used to practice in modernity.

Like Hinduism and Buddhism, Judaism has various branches. Orthodox Judaism is the most traditional and holds to the ancient, ritualistic rabbinic faith. Reform Judaism subjects religious law and customs to human judgment and differentiates between Torah's divine commandments and commandments specific to that time. Conservative Judaism is the mediating branch, seeking to conserve tradition by applying new historical methods within the boundaries of Jewish law, and it's the largest branch today. There's also Reconstructionism that rejects the belief that the Torah was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and views Judaism as a continual process of evolution.[7] Finally, there are strands of Jewish mysticism like Kabbala and Hasidic Judaism.[8]

Let's see how these differences play out. I read a wonderful book called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. A.J. Jacobs, a Jewish writer in New York, spends a year following the Bible, even and especially the obscure parts. For instance, Orthodox Judaism has 613 commandments compiled by the medieval rabbi Maimonides. In this spirit, Jacobs tackles Leviticus 19:19, "Nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials." [9] He discovers that there's a *shatnez* tester—*shatnez* is the Hebrew word for "mixed fibers." In modern day New York City, a person can come to your home and inspect your clothes to ensure that you have no mixed fibers.

Now you may be thinking, is this commandment really worth following? Jacobs asks this of Mr. Berkowitz, the *shatnez* tester. Here's his response, "This is a law God gave us. We have to trust Him. He's all-powerful. We're like children. Sometimes parents have laws children don't understand. Like when you tell a child not to touch fire, he doesn't understand why, but it is good for him." [10] What Jacobs realizes is that for some Jews, it's crucial to follow the inexplicable laws because it shows your level of faith and trust in God's ways. But we can observe how specific some of the 613 commandments are, and why there are different ideas about translating the Jewish faith to the present day.

Like all faiths though, Judaism has a shadowy side. This summer at our UCC General Synod, I attended a panel discussion on Israel/Palestine. Sydney Levy of the Jewish Voice for Peace spoke about Israel building settlements on land that is not rightfully theirs and once living on this land himself. Dr. Mira Rizeq of the YWCA of Palestine spoke of the Palestinians and said, "We are disappearing." She spoke of walls, mobility restrictions, and how hard life can be for the 2.3 million Palestinians in the West Bank. Perhaps this shadowy side deals more with modern-day Israel as opposed to Judaism. However, Judaism involves being God's chosen people and having a covenant including a Promised Land, so one can observe how some might be unwilling to compromise because of Torah interpretations and faith traditions.[11]

I want to end though by highlighting a few Holy Days, knowing that the Holy Days are perhaps the heart of the Jewish faith.[12] Each day has a central metaphor, and Shabbat is celebrated weekly. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year and marks a ten day period of prayer, self-examination, and repentance. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) is the holiest day and it's when Jews reconcile themselves to God and humanity. Sukkot is the Feast of Booths commemorating the 40 years of wandering in the desert. Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Hanukkah ("dedication" in Hebrew) commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians and the rededication of the Temple.[13] There are many more Holy Days, but each one has a central metaphor and helps Jews keep traditions alive.

To summarize where we've been, Judaism began when Abram and God entered a covenant around 1800 B.C.E. making Abraham and his descendents with Sarah God's chosen people. From there, power moved to political and military leaders like Moses and Joshua to Judges to Kings like David and Solomon to Prophets throughout questioning everything to Rabbis. Modern Judaism traces its origins to Rabbinic Judaism developed from the Pharisees. Judaism was the first monotheistic religion and has always emphasized the oneness of God, the observance of commandments, the study of Torah, and the importance of community and family. Judaism is textually based, relying on Tanakh (Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings)) and the Talmud to observe the faith.

Judaism has various branches and some of the differences stem from Torah interpretation. Orthodox Judaism is the most traditional (with 613 commandments) while Reform Judaism is the most progressive. Conservative Judaism is the mediating branch and the largest. Reconstructionism views Judaism as a continual process of evolution, and mystical strands include Kabbala and Hasidic Judaism. The shadowy side can be observed when some take the idea of being God's chosen people and the Promised Land to extremes in modern Israel. The Holy Days have been called the heart of the Jewish faith, some Holy Days include: Shabbat celebrated weekly, Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Sukkot (the Feast of Booths), Passover (commemorating the Exodus), and Hanukkah (commemorating the rededication of the Temple.) By observing these Holy Days, Jews keep their traditions alive for future generations. And that, my friends, is Judaism. Amen.

[1] Genesis 12:1-3, NRSV.

[2] Some of this sermon is from Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, Introduction to Religious Studies Class Notes, Elon University, Fall 2004

[3] Marilyn J. Salmon, Preaching Without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism, 6.

[4] Jewish Outreach Institute, "Intermarriage Q&A," <http://joi.org/qa/judaism.shtml>

[5] Deuteronomy 28:1-10, NRSV.

[6] Moojan Momen, The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach, 12.

[7] Jewish Outreach Institute, "Intermarriage Q&A," <http://joi.org/qa/judaism.shtml>

[8] Moojan Momen, The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach, 12.

[9] Leviticus 19:19, NRSV.

[10] A.J. Jacobs, The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible, 25.

[11] General Synod 29, Presentation on Israel/Palestine, Long Beach Convention Center, June 29, 2013.

[12] Irving Greenberg, The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays.

[13] "Jewish Holidays," Reform Judaism.org, <http://www.reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays>