

Judaism

“Waiting for the Messiah”

Historic Judaism – The Foundation of Christianity

To the Orthodox Christian, Judaism is absolutely unique among the world religions. *Historic Judaism*, the Judaism of the Old Testament, serves as Christianity’s roots and heritage. One cannot believe in the Old and New Testament writings and not acknowledge the honored place that God has given historic Judaism. Although Judaism rejected God’s greatest revelation and gift (Jesus Christ), Christians cannot ignore Judaism’s contributions to our faith.

From Abraham to the Promised Land (Genesis 12-50, Exodus, Deuteronomy)

Judaism (and subsequently the Jewish/Hebrew people) can trace its origins to a man called Abram (Abraham), and his divine call from God to leave his own people and homeland (Ur – in what is now modern day Iraq) and go to the land of Canaan. (*Genesis 12:1-3*). God’s promise to make a great nation from Abraham was repeated to Isaac (*Genesis 26:24*) and Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel (*Gen. 35:9-12*). The family of Jacob (“the children of Israel”) moved to Egypt to escape a famine. After years of slavery, Moses delivered them and led them back to Canaan and the *Promised Land*. During that time, God gave Moses the Law, which included the Ten Commandments. Joshua, Moses’ successor, led the people of Israel into the Promised Land and conquered it.

Judges, Kings and Captivity

After Joshua, Israel was led by judges for 350 years. During that time, the people of Israel were continually persecuted by neighboring nations and those they had failed (refused) to drive out of Canaan. Many of these nations were descendants of Ishmael, Esau and Lot (Edom and Ammon). The Israelites pleaded with God for a king in order that they “might be like other nations” (*I Samuel 8:19-22*). Saul was chosen and failed miserably. David was next and was a king “after God’s own heart”. Under David, Israel grew to be a great nation. David conquered and established Jerusalem as the capital. Solomon, David’s son, built the Temple and Israel continued to prosper. After Solomon’s death, the kingdom divided in two – the Northern Kingdom (Israel) with Samaria as its capital and the Southern Kingdom (Judah/Judea) with Jerusalem as its capital.

The northern kingdom (Israel) was conquered and taken in to captivity by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. The southern kingdom (Judea) was conquered and taken in captivity by the Babylonians in 606 B.C. It was during this time of exile that major changes occurred in the Jewish religion, especially in regard to worship. Since the temple could not be used for sacrifices and the central place of worship, houses of prayer, called *synagogues*, were established. The teachers in the synagogues were called *rabbis*. As time went on, the rabbis became predominant in the Jewish religion and the priests lost their impact and importance.

Restoration, Revolt and Roman Rule

When the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon in 538 BC, the Jews (as they were now called) returned to their homeland and began to rebuild (*Ezra, Nehemiah*). The “world” was then conquered by Alexander the Great and the Greek culture became dominant. (336-323 B.C.) After that, the land was ruled by Egypt. During this period, Greek and Aramaic became the dominant languages in Palestine. It was also during this time that the first five books of the Bible were translated into Greek (the Pentateuch) for the benefit of those Jews who, by this time, could not even read Hebrew. This text is known as the *Septuagint* and was a significant step in preparing the Word of God for dissemination to the world.

Eventually the land came under the rule of the Syrians, who tried to suppress the Jewish religion. A revolt in 167 BC, led by Judas Maccabaeus, resulted in the temporary independence of the Jewish nation. That lasted until the Romans took over in 63 BC and continued to dominate the Jews until 70 AD when Titus destroyed the Temple and scattered the Hebrew people permanently. The Jewish people did not occupy their “promised land” again until 1948.

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Three Branches of Modern Day Judaism

Today, Judaism can be fairly easily divided into 3 groups – Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. *Orthodox* Jews are the “traditionalists”; adhere strictly to the Law and the religious customs, dietary laws, rituals and ceremonies. *Reform* Judaism is the “liberal” arm of Judaism and holds that the political and cultural aspects and ancestry of their people are more important than the religious. *Conservative* Jews are a “happy medium” between Orthodox and Reform. They believe in the Law and most of its teachings, but are not convinced that the *homeland* is critical to Jewish existence. For the most part, however, all three branches believe in observing the Sabbath and the other holy days, in varying degrees.

Judaism – Holy Days and Holidays...Feasts and Festivals

The cycle of Jewish holy days is called the *sacred round* and is based on the ancient Jewish calendar. These holy days serve to commemorate and remind Jews of significant historical events where God demonstrated His covenant with them and are to be observed with joy and thanksgiving to Him.

The Sabbath (lit. *to rest*) – Beginning at sundown on Friday and continuing till sundown on Saturday, this day is observed in varying levels of adherence to Jewish guidelines. Regardless, the Sabbath is extremely important to Judaism. (*Exodus 20:8-11, Leviticus 23:1-3*) The day was established by the Lord specifically for rest (*Genesis 2:2*) and worship. Even the land was required to “Sabbath” every 7 years. (*Leviticus 25:1-5*)

Passover – (*Leviticus 23:4-8, Deut. 16:1-4*) Also called the *festival of spring* and the *feast of the unleavened bread*, this 7-day holiday commemorates the release of the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt. The Passover specifically remembers the time that the angel of death, who caused the death of the firstborn of each household, “passed over” all who had the blood of a lamb on the doorway of their houses. (*Exodus 12*) The feast held on the first night is called the *Seder*.

Shabout – *the feast of weeks*. Celebrated 50 days (Greek word – *pentecost*) after the Passover. It commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments and provided the opportunity to bring the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple. (*Leviticus 23:15-22*) The New Testament church began on this day. (*Acts 2:1*)

Rosh Hashanah – *feast of trumpets (Jewish New Year)* – Celebrated on the first 2 days of the month of Tishri (Sept.- Oct.). (*Leviticus 23:23-25*)

Yom Kippur – *The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32, Leviticus 16)* The holiest day of the year for Judaism. This day is celebrated 10 days after Rosh Hashanah. It is set aside for fasting, confession, repentance and reconciliation with God.

Sukkoth – *the feast of the tabernacles. (Leviticus 23:33-44)* 7-day celebration of the harvest. The Jewish people would bring offerings to the Temple and live in temporary shelters (booths/tabernacles) during this period.

Purim – celebrates the sparing of the Jews from mass execution by Haman/Persia. (*Esther 9:18-32*)

Hanukkah – the only holiday that does not have its basis in Scripture. This 8-day celebration commemorates the revolt of the Hebrew people, led by Judas Macabaeus. After the Temple had been cleansed (following a desecration by the Syrians), a lamp in the Temple stayed lit for 8 days without replenishing the oil. The 8-branched candlestick, the *Menorah*, represents this. Because Hanukkah is celebrated close to the Christmas holiday, it has borrowed many of those traditions (gift giving and family gatherings) as well.

As we have studied, *historic* Judaism and the Hebrew people provided the vehicle for 1) God’s revelation of Himself to the world; 2) the presentation of God’s standard of moral conduct and living; and 3) God’s written Word (Old Testament), which pointed to a coming Messiah (“Christ”) that would save the people *from their sins*.

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By the time Jesus walked the earth, tradition and the petty legalistic interpretation of the Scriptures had diluted the belief in original sin and the need for personal salvation. As a result the Jews were looking for a national deliverer and conqueror. It is at the point of this final rejection of Jesus [the] Christ (“Yeshua Mashiach”), that Judaism and Orthodox Christianity part ways.

So What’s the Difference”

1. **God** – “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”. (Deut. 6:4) The Jew believes in the Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. They reject the Trinity, denying the existence of God-the Son (Jesus) and the God-the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 4:4-6)
2. **Jesus Christ** – Many Jews accept Jesus as a good teacher or prophet. However, they do not accept him as the promised Messiah (John 1:10-13) because 1) Jesus did not bring immediate and lasting peace to Israel and 2) Jesus declared himself to be divine, co-equal with God (John 10:29-30), and the Jews were looking for a man sent by God (not *God* coming in the *form of man*).
3. **Man and sin** – Rejects “original sin”. Judaism teaches that man is born “neutral”, neither good nor evil, and chooses for himself and is accountable for his actions. He/she commits sins, but atonement is accomplished thru works and strict observation of Jewish laws and customs, including observing the Sabbath, the holy days, dietary laws, circumcision and purity laws. (Ephesians 2:8-9)
4. **Salvation** – Salvation is obtained through commitment to the one God and a moral lifestyle (deeds) as laid out in the Holy Scriptures (Law) and teachings. Does not believe in substitutionary atonement (as in Christ’s for us) provided by God’s grace, but hopes for God’s mercy to deliver them from judgment. A Jew can reach the end of his/her life without knowing *with certainty* where he/she will spend eternity.
5. **Heaven and hell** – Stresses this present life over and above the afterlife. Every aspect of the Jew’s life here on earth is regulated, guided, controlled and ordered.
6. **The Bible** – Judaism’s holy scriptures are:

The Tanakh - *The Torah (Law) of Moses* – which is Genesis to Deuteronomy, and *The Prophets and the Writings* – together make-up basically the Christian Old Testament, although there is no “old” testament by name, since there is no recognized “new” testament.

The Mishnah – Additional teachings written and compiled until the 2nd century A.D.

The Talmud – Additional writings, teachings and commentaries inclusive of the Mishnah, compiled around 5th century A.D.

These 3 books rule every facet of an Orthodox Jew’s life.

In spite of Judaism’s (Israel’s) rejection of Jesus as the Christ, God still holds a special place in His heart, and will ultimately bring about His plan, for the people and nation of Israel. (Zechariah 8:1-8, Isaiah 60, 62)