

Modern Judaism

Introduction: This study examines “modern” Judaism, a religion that has its roots in the Old Testament of the Bible, but is NOT the religion of the Old Testament. Its appearance is about as different as that of the original, as is modern denominationalism to 1st century Christianity. Likewise, there are many sects of Judaism today, just as nominal Christianity is divided, and it is therefore difficult to say “the Jews believe...” for that may vary from one Jew to the next. A modern rabbi named de Pool, in “Why I Am A Jew” put it this way, *"Judaism is concerned first and foremost with works. It judges man by his conduct without inquiring into his beliefs. There is no catechism to which a Jew must subscribe at his Bar Mitzvah or when he joins a synagogue"*

Disclaimers: 1) I am not an expert on Judaism 2) All negative remarks should be viewed as aimed at the religion, not anyone’s person. Anti-semitism is repugnant to any true Christian. Racial or social prejudice is un-Christlike. The KKK, Nazis, & posse members are wrong! 3) Political, social, ethnic and national considerations are purposely avoided in this lecture. I am a Bible teacher and will limit myself to religious, spiritual and Biblical matters. I do not buy into the many conspiracy theories, secret agendas of tri-lateral commissions, etc. anyway. 4) Claims made that Jews believe such and such by referencing centuries old documents is avoided. Modern Judaism is ever evolving and therefore it is unfair to pin old and denied beliefs on modern adherents. 5) Mystical Jewish beliefs of the Middle Ages are not entertained here. They are repudiated by modern Judaism, just as “Christianity” rejects the superstitions associated with it of that time period.

I) A Brief Overview of Judaism Through the Centuries

A sect called the Pharisees that came into existence just prior to the life of Jesus is the forerunner of rabbinic Judaism, which encompasses all of the movements of Judaism in existence today. Through the centuries many changes have taken place. In fact, there really are MANY Judaisms (plural) not just one homogeneous faith. It would be like saying “Christians believe such and such.” As we all know, almost every tenet of

nominal Christianity is disputed by someone else claiming to be Christian. Therefore, broad and sweeping statements are sometimes difficult and ill-advised. Through the centuries there have been many major changes, where what may be believed by many today is not the same as that of yesteryear.

“One must understand what makes Judaism different than the religion of the Old Testament. One must wrestle with what the hasadim struggled over in the Hasmonean era, or the Rabbis struggles in the Roman period, or why Maimonides had to write "A Guide to the Perplexed" in the late middle ages. Even more, one must sympathize with why so many Jews hate the black clothed traditionalists with such spite, and how the holocaust totally destroyed what little was left of fundamental Judaism in the years following WW II. As times changed, so did the idea of what makes a Jew Jewish. The kind of Judaisms prevalent now are different than the kinds that existed before the holocaust, and you can keep going back, and noting the events and conditions that forced change.” -- Lance Bailles

The most striking difference between modern thought of Judaism and that which was before is the shift in emphasis from an otherworldly to a this-worldly approach to the religious life. The ancient rabbis taught that this life is a preparation for the afterlife, for the Olam Haba (world to come). Louis Jacobs argues that it is indeed possible for a religion to be both this-worldly and otherworldly, for viewed from the aspect of eternity this world and the world to come are one. -- Abingdon Bible Dictionary

II) Some Familiar Terminology

Torah - In its narrowest sense, Torah is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In its broadest sense, Torah is the entire body of Jewish teachings.

Mishna - An early written compilation of Jewish oral tradition, the basis of the Talmud.

Talmud - The most significant collection of the Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah.

Rabbi - A religious teacher and person authorized to make decisions on issues of Jewish law.

Rabbinical Judaism - A general term encompassing all movements of Judaism descended from Pharisaic Judaism; that is, all movements in existence today.

Zionist - A social word describing anyone who favors "Jews" over Palestinians in the question of that little strip of land in the middle east.

Hanukkah - An eight-day festival commemorating the victory in 165 B.C. of the Maccabees over Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 215-164 B.C.) and the rededication of the Temple at Jerusalem. Also called Feast of Dedication, Feast of Lights.

Bar-mitzvah - Lit. son of the commandment. A boy who has achieved the age of 13 and is consequently obligated to observe the commandments. Also, a ceremony marking the fact that a boy has achieved this age.

Hasidic - A member of a movement of popular mysticism founded in eastern Europe in the 18th century.

Jew - A member of the Hebrew people; particularly, of the tribe of Judah. The term "Jew" is used for members of Judea who were taken to Babylon in captivity (586 - 539 B.C.) and their descendants who returned to restore Jerusalem, and to all those through history who descended from them. The reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah set the standards as to who is a Jew, emphasizing birth from a Jewish mother. -- Abingdon Bible Dictionary

Yom Kippur - Lit. Day of Atonement. A day set aside for fasting, depriving oneself of pleasures, and repenting from the sins of the previous year.

Israeli - A native or inhabitant of modern-day Israel.

Kosher - Lit. fit, proper or correct. Describes food that is permissible to eat under Jewish dietary laws. Can also describe any other ritual object that is fit for use according to Jewish law.

Kippah - The skullcap worn by Jews during services, and by some Jews at all times, more commonly known as a yarmulke.

III) The Changes Begin

The Synagogue replaced the Temple, prayer replaced sacrifice, and Jewish study became more important than it had ever been before. The aristocrats were replaced by the spiritual nobility, who came to be known as RABBIS. Rabbinic Judaism undertook the further development of the Torah and its

laws. It was also the fulfillment of an essential implication of classical prophecy: that the religious life does not depend on a functioning sacrificial system but on ethical and penitent action in the here and now.

The orally transmitted teachings of the Scribes and sages were crystallized into the Mishnah. Law code, textbook, and repository of traditions deemed most authoritative, the Mishnah assumed a status in rabbinic Judaism not unlike the NT in Christianity, although their contents are vastly different.

The Hebrew Bible and Mishnah together constitute the matrix of the developing rabbinic Judaism. The scholars interpreted and applied the Mishnah and other rabbinic teachings to everyday situations. These oral teachings and opinions were eventually written down and compiled into the TALMUD, one in Babylonia, the other in Palestine. The Talmud is made up of the MISHNAH and its exposition, the GEMARA.

-- Abingdon Bible Dictionary

IV) Major Divisions Of Modern Judaism

REFORM JUDAISM. Reform Jews make up what is probably the largest group of American Jews who are affiliated, about 45 per cent of American Jews. Reform Jews do not accept the binding nature of Jewish law, focusing instead on the moral autonomy of individuals to decide which laws are religiously meaningful for them. In general, Reform Judaism is a liberal religious movement whose adherents often support liberal social causes. Generally, the Reform service has less Hebrew than the Orthodox or Conservative services. The Reform movement is often thought, sometimes by its own members, to be the most lenient when it comes to religious practices. For example, keeping kosher is not required. However, there is some movement in contemporary Reform back toward embracing some of the traditional practices.

ORTHODOX JUDAISM. Orthodox Judaism is a relatively small movement, making up about 10 per cent of those Jews who affiliate. Orthodox Jews accept the halachah but, unlike Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews do not believe that the halachah itself can evolve. Orthodoxy accepts the idea that the 613 mitzvot in the Torah are binding on all Jews. They believe that God literally gave the Torah to Moses and therefore its rules are divine and must be obeyed. Because of this, the Orthodox are the most traditional of Jewish groups. There often is a barrier between men and women at services. There are no Orthodox women rabbis. In practice, Orthodox Jews tend to observe Jewish law on such matters as keeping the Sabbath and keeping kosher.

CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM. Conservative Judaism is, along with Reform Judaism, one of the largest of the groups. Conservative Jews make up about 40-45% of those Jews who affiliate. Conservative Judaism accepts the notion that Jewish law (halakhah) is binding upon Jews. That is, that Conservative Jews have an obligation to obey all the teachings (mitzvot, which is also translated as commandments) of Judaism. Thus, for example, Conservative Jews emphasize the laws of keeping the Sabbath and keeping kosher. Conservative Jews believe that Jewish law, by its very nature, is capable of evolution as humans learn more about interpreting the Torah (the first five Books of the Hebrew Bible). Therefore, Conservative Jews have changed some of the earlier interpretations. For example, men and women worship together in Conservative synagogues, people may ride in a car on the Sabbath to attend services, and women can be ordained as rabbis.

-- Dr. Lawrence Epstein

V) Is Christianity And Modern Judaism Compatible?

* **Pre-millennialism's claim** - The belief that the Bible foretells a physical reign of Jesus on earth for 1000 years, preceded by a restoration of Israel to Palestine and a general salvation of this people, has given rise to a spirit of acceptance of Judaism. But the Bible does not teach this!

* **Liberalism's claim** - The popular philosophy of the day is "nothing is absolute" and that includes religion. Therefore we cannot dogmatically say that Christianity is right and everything else is wrong. But God can!

* **Jewish Claim** - *There are many substantial and vital distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. Of course, there are many similarities as well, primarily because Christianity emerged from Judaism. However, the emergence was not a direct line. Christianity broke from Judaism, forming a new religion, so it is misleading, however comfortable the thought might be, to believe that the two religions are essentially the same, or to see Christianity as the natural continuation of Judaism.*

The differences between the two religions will be explored in this section. As a preface, it is useful to repeat Judaism's central belief that the people of all religions are children of God, and therefore equal before God. All people have God's love, mercy, and help. In particular, Judaism does not require that a person convert to Judaism in order to achieve salvation. The only requirement for that, as understood by Jews, is to be ethical. While Judaism accepts the worth of all people regardless of religion, it also allows people who are not Jewish but who voluntarily wish to join the Jewish people to do so.

-- Dr. Lawrence J. Epstein

* **What About A Messiah?** Most Jews no longer expect one!

"In Reform and Orthodoxy alike theology parted company from Messianism by so reconstructing the messianic hope as to render it something entirely different from what it had been" -- Neusner in Way of the Torah p. 123

"As we shall see, in modern times the Messiah became the "messianic hope" and Jews talked about a "messianic age" rather than a single, wonderful man" -- Ibid., p.44

Jesus is not seen as the messiah. In the Jewish view, the messiah is a human being who will usher in an era of peace. We can tell the messiah by looking at the world and seeing if it is at peace. From the Jewish view, this clearly did not happen when Jesus was on Earth or anytime after his death.

Jews vary about what they think of Jesus as a man. Some respect him as an ethical teacher who accepted Jewish law, as someone who didn't even see himself as the messiah, who didn't want to start a new religion at all. Rather, Jesus is seen by these Jews as someone who challenged the religious authorities of his day for their practices. In this view, he meant to improve Judaism according to his own understanding not to break with it. Whatever the Jewish response is, one point is crucial. No one who is Jewish, no born Jew and no one who converts to Judaism, can believe in Jesus as the literal son of God or as the messiah. For the Jewish people, there is no God but God.

-- Epstein

* **Merit Claim** - *"Zekhut is a treasury of accumulated merit similar in many ways to Catholicism's bank of good works. For a Jew it can be described as a lien on heaven or an entitlement to heavenly favor -- Neusner's Studying Classical Judaism p. 147 & 156*

* **Sin Claim** - *"Judaism does not believe that the soul is threatened in a way requiring outside rescue...The soul needs no saving because it is not lost; it needs no raising up because it is not fallen" -- Barish's Varieties of Jewish Belief p. 200*

* **The Meaning of Day Of Atonement** - *"The obligation rests inescapably on each to cleanse his own soul through communing and finding the right way of life by inward struggle" -- de Pool's Why I Am a Jew p. 115*

* **Miscellaneous** - Modern Judaism sees there no longer a need for a priesthood, a temple, sacrifices or a mediator between God and man. The

Bible does! Christians are priests; their body is a temple of the Holy Spirit; Jesus' sacrifice is still efficacious; and He is the one mediator between God and man.

VI) Is True Christianity And The Original Old Testament Religion Compatible?

* Philippians 3:3-11

* Romans 2:28-29

* I John 2:22-23

* Romans 7:1-4,7

* John 14:6

* Romans 10:1-4

Conclusion: Modern Judaism is not the true way to God.