

Judaism

World Religions

Jewish Population: World: 13,200,000; Israel: 4,900,000; United States: 5,700,000; Canada, 362,000 ¹

Denominations

in North America: Orthodox: 17 percent; Conservative: 33 percent; Reform: 22 percent; Unaffiliated: 28 percent

Who Are the Jewish People?

According to Scripture (see Gen. 12:1-2; 17:20-21; 21:12; 28:3-4, 10-17; Acts 7:8), they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of those who have joined themselves to the Jewish people as proselytes. They are not to be defined, therefore, in terms of race, politics, or religion. They constitute an ethnic group, or, to use a biblical phrase, “the house of Israel.” Although the lineage in Scripture was patrilineal, in the intervening centuries, lineage has been based upon the mother. Most unsaved Jewish people would further exclude from their definition those who have accepted Jesus as Messiah. Messianic Jews (or Jewish Christians) would not, of course, agree. They would argue that faith in Jesus (in Hebrew, Yeshua), the hope of Israel and the King of the Jews, rather than diminishing their sense of Jewishness, enhances it. Some would add that since the synagogue did not confer Jewishness upon them, neither could it take it away.

The Jewish people of North America are not united by organizational structure, theology, or political party. Of the 72 percent who are affiliated with a synagogue, less than 10 percent attend synagogue on a regular basis. While it is true that religious observance in the home is more important than corporate worship, it is also true that many are involved in secularism, New Age religions, and some even in Buddhism. Most are aligned with liberal social and political agendas. There is, however, a growing conservative movement that is emphasizing family values, capitalism, and conservative principles.

Categories and Denominations

Judaism is usually classified in three denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Orthodox Judaism, however, fall into two broad categories: Modern Orthodox and Hasidim. The Modern Orthodox are usually more academic, while the Hasidim are more mystical. One of the more “high profile” groups within Hasidism is the Lubavitch (also called Habad). Hasidic men usually wear black or dark gray suits and always wear skullcaps (in Hebrew, kippah; in Yiddish, yarmulke). Orthodox Jews insist on traditional Judaism, with few accommodations to modernity.

Reform Judaism (not “Reformed” Judaism), on the other hand, has embraced modernity, liberalism, and humanism in an effort to enhance a sense of relevance. Although there is a variety of beliefs within Reform Judaism, it generally maintains a more inclusive position regarding feminism, homosexuality, and agnosticism.

Conservative Judaism “fills the gap” between Orthodox Judaism and Reform Judaism. This is the largest denomination within American Jewry, and it is important to point out that “Conservative” applies to their approach to religion and should not be seen as a political label. Their desire is to make allowances for modern culture, while “conserving,” as far as possible, traditional Judaism. Again, there is a variety of perspectives within Conservative Judaism. Some conservative synagogues are closer to Orthodox Judaism, while others are closer to Reform Judaism. There are other, smaller groups within Judaism, but these are the principal ones.

In the midst of such diversity, it is almost impossible to generalize regarding their beliefs. Therefore, the only way to understand the beliefs of any particular Jewish person is to speak with him or her directly. It should also be noted that Judaism emphasizes behavior, not doctrine.

Nevertheless, acknowledging that there will be exceptions at every point, the following summary may be helpful in understanding the beliefs of the majority of the Jewish people of North America.

The Nature and Sufficiency of Scripture

Orthodox Judaism holds a very high view of the inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jewish people most often use an acronym, Tanakh, to refer to what most Christians call the Old Testament. The text is the same in Hebrew, although the order of the books is slightly different and there are occasional differences in the numbering of chapters or verses. While the Tanakh is viewed as the Word of God, Judaism accords different levels of inspiration to the different divisions within it. Torah, the five books of Moses, is viewed as being inspired by God; the Prophets have a slightly lower level of inspiration; and the Writings have a level of inspiration that is lower still. Reform Judaism holds a very liberal view, seeing the Scripture as little more than folklore and the collective wisdom of the Jewish people refined through the centuries. Conservative Judaism would hold a mediating position.

Scripture, however, is certainly not seen as sufficient—it is incomplete without the “Second (or Oral) Law.” This Oral Law is mostly embodied in the writings of Jewish traditions found in the Talmud. The Talmud is a set of books, composed of the Mishnah and several commentaries. It is printed in such a way that each portion of the Mishnah is printed on the same page with its commentaries. One popular compilation of the regulations of the Talmud is the Shulchan Aruch, which gives summary guidelines for the ordering of a Jewish home and lifestyle.

Not only is the Scripture insufficient without the Oral Law, Judaism maintains that a greater authority is to be accorded to these traditions. Judaism teaches that even if a voice from heaven contradicts the consensus of the sages, it (the heavenly voice) is to be rejected.

God

The defining verse of Scripture for rabbinic Judaism is Deuteronomy 6:4, commonly referred to as the “Shema” (Hebrew for “hear”): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” The key word in this verse proclaiming the oneness of God is a Hebrew word that allows for a composite unity. For example, it is used in Scripture of a man and his wife (“one” flesh) and of evening and morning (“one” day). The Shema notwithstanding, Judaism has increasingly used another word to describe God—a word that means absolute and unqualified singularity. God is seen as primarily transcendent, and for many Jewish people, God is more impersonal. For some, He has become little more than a philosophical construct or an impersonal force.

Man

Judaism’s view of humanity is influenced more by the biblical account of his creation in the image of God than the account of his fall through disobedience and sin. Consequently, Judaism offers a lofty humanism, which is essentially idealistic and optimistic. The alienation between God and man is overcome by man as he reaches toward God. Martin Buber, well known Orthodox Jewish theologian and author, says that, “it is the faith that struggling man, in his moral effort, can climb the steep hill which leads to God.”²

Rabbinic Judaism also insists on the absolute freedom of the human will. One Jewish author has said, “in the act of atonement, both God and man co-operate . . . , but in the forefront stands the work of man accomplished by his own strength.”³

Sin

Judaism is motivated by a desire to do God’s will. Judaism believes God’s will is primarily found in the Mosaic law, as it has been elaborated and applied to changing circumstances through the centuries. In rabbinic Judaism, good and evil are always possibilities for man, but his dignity and basic goodness requires that he be free to tip the scales in either direction, and his inclination is to choose the good. Therefore, Judaism is optimistic about one’s ability to do God’s will, and sin is not generally a major concern.

With the destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, the sacrificial system ended. This was one of the greatest crises in the long history of the Jewish people. It necessitated the reconstitution of Judaism, for the sacrificial system was foundational to the Mosaic Covenant. Scripture taught that man’s approach to God could only be indirect, (i.e., through the blood of sacrifices). Judaism reversed itself on this point and began to teach that one could approach God directly.

Atonement

Since the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, at least three positions have developed within Judaism regarding atonement for sin. The most common view is that repentance, prayer, and good deeds provide atonement. It is also held that the sufferings of the Jewish people, as a whole, provide for their own atonement. This is based on the understanding of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 as the people of Israel. Finally, there is the view that the Jewish people will automatically have a share in the world to come by virtue of being Jewish. In any case, there is no concept of a need for regeneration. If a Jewish person has strayed from God, it is only necessary for him to “return” (the Hebrew meaning of “repentance”) and walk in God’s ways.

Messiah

The emphasis that Christians have placed on Jesus as the Messiah has forced the issue into the background in

rabbinic circles. Within Judaism, opinion regarding the Messiah is varied. Judaism allows for concepts of the Messiah in both personal and impersonal terms. Some understand the Messiah as a future political or military deliverer. Others, however, understand the Messiah as a golden age of peace and prosperity. Finally, some conceive of the Messiah in nationalistic terms, as the modern State of Israel.

Although Orthodox Judaism retains the belief in a personal Messiah and He figures prominently in the liturgy, He does not occupy a leading role in contemporary Jewish thought. Furthermore, the other two positions are even further removed from the concept of a personal Messiah. In spite of this divergence of opinion within the ranks of rabbinic Judaism, they are in essence all agreed in this: Jesus is not the Messiah. A Jewish Christian scholar characterizes the synagogue's position like this: "With the Messiah or without the Messiah, to Judaism the Kingdom of God is in our hands; it is for us to establish it upon this earth."⁴ Thus, "The Kingdom of God is not God's kingdom, but man's kingdom where God has been made King."⁵

Jesus

Some have argued that it is not so much what Judaism affirms that is important, but what it denies. A central tenet of rabbinic Judaism is a denial that Jesus is the Messiah, much less, that He is God. Since the historicity of Jesus is difficult to deny, Judaism has embraced Him only as He is divested of deity and of His role as Messiah. When Jewish scholars speak of reclaiming the Jewishness of Jesus, they most often refer to the Jewish learning and concepts which Jesus expressed, but admit no authority or originality to Him. He was simply a humble Jewish reformer and teacher. Such a teacher only needs to be "reclaimed" as an obscure footnote in Jewish history. A Jesus that does not need to be rejected, however, does not need to be reclaimed.

The Holocaust

No event since the destruction of the temple in A. D. 70 has so traumatized the Jewish people as the Nazi holocaust. Yet, the horror of Hitler's genocidal depravity also affected the theology of the Jewish survivors, because it crashed headlong into their worldview, as described above. As Christians, we might expect that the holocaust would have challenged their view of man as good. Yet, strangely, instead of asking, "How could mankind have committed such unspeakable evil?" they ask, "Where was God when the six million died?" Their belief in God was more vulnerable than their belief in man. The biblical teachings concerning sin and the after-life, where the injustices of this world will be made right, were de-emphasized in rabbinic Judaism. Consequently, a significant number lost their faith in God in the aftermath of Auschwitz.

Witness to the Jewish People

The claims that the New Testament makes regarding Jesus stand as the central issue between traditional Judaism and Christianity. They are denied by the former and affirmed by the latter. Some charge that Christianity's claim that Jesus is the only way of salvation is a denigration of Judaism. However, Christianity's affirmation is no more a denigration of Judaism than Judaism's denial is a denigration of Christianity. We should all be seeking God's truth regarding atonement for sin and a lifestyle that is pleasing to Him.

Most Jewish people view Christianity as a Gentile religion that has no relevance to them. When a Jewish person places his trust in Jesus for salvation and is baptized, the Jewish community considers that he has turned his back on his people and has become a Gentile. It is therefore important to communicate that our desire is not that our Jewish friend would become a Gentile, but that, as a Jew, he or she would find atonement for sin and discover a personal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Humility, prayer, and genuine compassion must characterize Christian witness. Far too often Jewish impressions of Christianity have been characterized by arrogance, superiority, and a disregard for Jewish culture. Paul warns against this kind of Gentile pride in Romans 11:13-32.

Use terminology that emphasizes the Jewishness of our faith. For example, instead of "Christ," which is based on the Greek word for "the Anointed One," use "Messiah," which is based on the Hebrew. Instead of the "Old Testament," refer to the "Hebrew Scriptures."

Use verses from their Bible in discussing topics like: sin (see Ps. 14:2-3; 51:5; Eccl. 7:20; and Isa. 59:1-2), atonement (see Lev. 17:11 and Isa. 53:5-6), Messiah (see Isa. 53; Dan. 9:16; and Mic. 5:1 [v. 2 in our Bible]), and faith (see Gen. 15:6; Num. 21:7-9; and Joel 2:32 [3:5 in our Bible]).

Notes

¹Demographic estimates are based on information in the *American Jewish Yearbook, 2000* (David Singer, ed., NY: American Jewish Committee)

²According to Jakob Jocz in his *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (London: SPCK, 1962, p. 269).

³Dr. Max Dienemann, as cited by Jocz, p. 274.

⁴Jocz, p. 285-286.

⁵Jocz, p. 285.

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