

Judaism

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity: The term “Judaism”¹ should be distinguished from the religion of the Old Testament, as well as from the racial or ethnic term “Jew.” Judaism refers to the religion and culture of the Jewish people developed following the destruction of the temple and exile of Judah (586 B.C.; the term “Jew” is almost exclusively post-exilic), and emerged principally after the close of the Old Testament era. It reached its apex during the period of Rabbinic Judaism (about 200-600 AD) when Jewish interpretations and traditions were collected in the Mishnah and then in the Talmuds. Present-day Judaism is the result of a complex history out of which has evolved numerous movements and sects. Major divisions of Judaism today are: Orthodox, Reformed, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Humanistic.²

Founders: Instrumental in the formation of the major branches of Judaism are the following: Orthodox Judaism – Moses Maimonides (1135-1204); Reform – Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900); Reconstructionist – Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983); Conservative – Solomon Schechter (1847-1915); Humanistic – Sherwin T. Wine (1928--)

Statistics: Orthodox – 1,000,000 in approximately 1,000 congregations
Reform – 1,300,000 in app. 850 congregations
Reconstructionist – 50,000
Conservative – 2,000,000
Humanistic – 2,200 (1988)

History: Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people whose ethnic ancestors are the Israelites of the Old Testament. The history of the Old Testament people may be briefly summarized as follows. About 2000 BC, God called Abraham to be the “father of many nations.” Abraham’s family and sons’ families become the seed of Israel. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are the four patriarchs from whom a whole nation is born. During the period 1540-1150 BC the Israelites were living in captivity in Egypt under the Pharaohs and were subsequently released from bondage under the leadership of Moses. Following this deliverance, Israel received the Law on Mount Sinai, wandered in the wilderness, and came to the Promised Land of Canaan. From 1200 to 1050 BC Israel was ruled by the Judges and occupied the land Canaan. The period of monarchy begins with the anointing of Saul as king (1010 BC – 1000), followed by 40-year reigns of David (1000-961 BC) and Solomon (961-922 BC). In 922 BC the divided monarchy began, with the nation divided between Israel (Northern Kingdom) and Judah (Southern Kingdom) with their successive kings. The Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria in 722 BC and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity to Babylon in 586 BC.

The “restoration” of the Jewish people began on their return from exile in 538 BC. Jerusalem was rebuilt, together with the Temple and the city walls. In 322 BC Alexander the Great conquered Palestine and began the process of Hellenization (introducing Greek culture). After Alexander’s death and following a period of religious persecution under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), Judas Maccabeus led a revolt beginning in 168 BC. He marched to Jerusalem, cleansed the Temple that had been desecrated, and restored the worship of God—a high point in Jewish history commemorated by the Feast

¹ The name “Judaism” itself emerged about the opening of the Christian era (*2 Maccabees* 2.21; 8; 1; 14.38; cf. Galatians 1:13). See *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. “Judaism,” 512-14.

² This listing is taken from *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult*, George A. Mather and Larry A. Nichols, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 170-71.

of Hanukkah. In 63 BC Rome conquered Palestine, setting up a puppet government ruled by four Herod kings and several Roman Procurators (Jesus Christ stood trial under Herod Antipas and the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate).

Jewish unrest under Rome culminated in two revolts against Rome, in 66-70/2 AD and (First Jewish War, during which Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus) and in 132-135 AD (Second Jewish War, when Emperor Hadrian forbade circumcision and erected a temple to Jupiter in Jerusalem). The Jews were no longer in possession of their land and places. From the second to eighteenth centuries, with Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed (replaced by the synagogue in the Jewish Diaspora), Rabbinic Judaism with its emphasis on the Law developed. The “people of the land” of Palestine would have no land again until 1948 when Israel reclaimed it in the Six Day War.

After Jerusalem had been destroyed, the Jews spread throughout the world (this “dispersion” is called the “Diaspora”). Two main groups of Jews formed during the Middle Ages from this Diaspora: Sephardic Jews (traced their roots back to Babylon) and Ashkenazic Jews (traced their roots to Europe). During the Enlightenment (1720-80), Rationalism greatly affected Judaism. Many different branches and theologies resulted.

The Jewish Holocaust occurred during 1937–1945, when six million Jews were put to death in Nazi Germany. Large numbers were deported, including many who found their most welcome refuge in the United States.

“Zionism” is the Jewish movement dedicated to the restoration of the land of Israel to the Jewish people.

Sacred Texts and Literature:

Orthodox Judaism: The Hebrew Bible; The Torah; Joseph Caro, *Shulhan Arukh*; *Jewish Action* [periodical]; *Tradition* [periodical]

Reform: Hebrew Bible; *Journal of Reform Judaism* (periodical); *Reform Judaism* [periodical]

Reconstructionist: Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*; _____, *Dynamic Judaism: Essential Writings of M.M. Kaplan*; *The Reconstructionist Magazine*

Conservative: Hebrew Bible; Talmud; *Responsa* Literature; *The Codes*; Joseph Caro, *Shulhan Arukh*; *United Synagogue Review* [periodical]; *Conservative Judaism* [periodical]

Humanistic. Sherwin T. Wine, *Judaism Beyond God: A Radical New Way to be Jewish*; *Humanistic Judaism* (journal)

Beliefs and Practices:

Orthodox Judaism. Orthodox Judaism adheres to a strict monotheism. The Torah is the revealed Law of God and must be strictly observed as interpreted by the rabbis (all 613 commandments counted in the Torah). Humanity is morally neutral with a good and evil inclination.³ Man commits sin by breaking the commandments of the Law. “Salvation” is not a Jewish concept. Repentance (belief in God’s mercy), prayer and obedience to the Law are necessary for a proper relationship with God. The Messiah is a human being, but not divine; he will restore the Jewish kingdom and restore his righteous rule over the earth. There will be a physical resurrection. The righteous will exist forever with God, but the unrighteous will suffer (though disagreement exists on final destiny). Membership is through birth to a Jewish mother. The Sabbath and kosher food laws are strictly observed. Hebrew is used in synagogue worship and men and women are separated.

³ Portions of the summary of beliefs here and below are taken from a helpful chart in a Spring 1997 *Christian Research Journal* article titled “Understanding Judaism” (38-40). The reader is reminded that these summaries are greatly abbreviated and that further study is needed for a more detailed understanding.

Reform. The Bible is a human document, preserving Jewish history, culture, legends, and hopes and valuable for moral insights. Reform allows varied interpretations of the “God concept.” Humanity is basically good and moral improvement can be actualized. The Law is evolving and revelation is progressive. There is no “original sin”; “sins” are the ills of society. “Salvation” is attained through betterment of self and society. The concept not of a personal Messiah, but of a Utopian “Messianic Age” is favored. Reform has no concept of personal life after death. Synagogue (“Temple”) worship is in English, men and women sit together, choirs and organs are used. Each person has a capacity for good and evil. Immortality is mostly being remembered for the good left behind. Membership is chiefly through birth.

Reconstructionist. An offshoot of conservative Judaism. Reconstructionism views Judaism as “the entire cultural legacy of the Jewish people,” rather than simply a system of belief. Unlike Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism does not view inherited Jewish law (halahah) as binding. It advocates respect for Jewish tradition, but in the present pluralistic setting permits individuals and communities to make their own choices regarding religious practice and ritual observance. Diverse ideas about God are held, but stress is on “Godliness.” Emphasizes acts of social justice along with prayer and study texts and teachings (Torah).⁴

Conservative. The Bible is the word of God and man, with revelation as an ongoing process. God exists as a transcendent and immanent and eternal Creator, but most often God is impersonal and ineffable. There is no original sin, only immoral or antisocial acts. Humanity can perfect itself through enlightenment. Views on “salvation” tend to be like Reform, with emphasis on maintaining Jewish identity. Messianic views are similar to Reform, as well as views on life after death. The synagogue is the basic institution of Jewish life, with worship less altered than Reform. Retains some Orthodox practices, such as covered heads during worship.

Humanistic. Humanistic Judaism favors a non-theistic approach to Jewish identity and culture. The Bible characters such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not real. Reason, not faith, is the source of truth. The secular world is the real world and a transcendent world where God dwells is a myth of the past. Man is the measure of all things. Mixed marriages are totally acceptable. Ethical behavior is not judged as right and wrong based upon the Hebrew Bible, but upon what reason determines. Dietary laws are rejected. Rituals are observed but are interpreted secularly. Human achievement is celebrated rather than the divine acts of God, which are considered mythical.

A Lutheran Response

Together with the apostle Paul, Lutherans look upon the Jewish people with great appreciation and respect, for through the blessings given to them God showed His favor in a special way also to Christian people. Jesus, the twelve disciples, and the majority of the earliest Christian church were Jewish.⁵ St. Paul—himself also a Jew—regarded his fellow-Jews as “my kinsmen according to the flesh,” saying: “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 9: 3-5). As Martin Luther once wrote: “When we are inclined to boast of our position [as Christians] we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord. Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are.”⁶

Lutherans believe that the promises given to Abraham have been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the long-awaited Messiah descended from the seed of David (Matt. 1:1-18; Rom. 1:3). A central affirmation of the New Testament is that Abraham is “the father of all who believe” in the promise of God fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Rom. 4:11ff.), Who suffered and died for the sins of the world as

⁴See www.jrf.org/recon/rjis.html.

⁵Today, many Messianic Jews remain within the Christian church (e.g., Jews for Jesus).

⁶Martin Luther, “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 45:201.

God's perfect sacrifice (Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:26; 10:12, 26). God our Savior "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge" of this truth—both Jew and Gentile (1 Tim. 2:3-4; see also Rom. 1:16; 10:12; Eph. 2:16; 3:6).

Lutherans understand the Scriptures to teach that human beings cannot attain righteousness before God by means of obedience to Law, since they are born in sin and because of their sinful nature are unable to keep the Law in keeping with God's demand for perfection (Rom. 8:7-8; Gal. 2:15-16). "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law to do them," Paul reminds the Galatians, quoting Deuteronomy 27:26 (Gal. 3:10). Righteousness before God comes by faith in Jesus Christ, Who took our place: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). As a result of faith in Christ, Christians desire to do his will as revealed in God's commandments (Deut. 5; Exodus 20).

Lutherans do not observe Old Testament festivals such as *Yom Kippur* or Passover, though some congregations observe Seder as a reminder of Jesus' institution, at the Passover, of His Last Supper in which they believe they receive in a supernatural manner the true body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread wine for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Lutherans believe that Baptism, instituted by Jesus Christ, replaces the rite of circumcision (which is now a matter of free choice) (Matt. 28:18-20; Col. 2:11ff.).

We in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod "condemn any and all discrimination against others on account of race or religion or any coercion on that account and pledge ourselves to work and witness against such sins."⁷ We join Luther who in his last sermon said of the proper Christian attitude toward the Jewish people, "We want to treat them in Christian love and pray for them...."

For Further Reading

John Bright. *A History of Israel*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981.

Encyclopedia Judaica. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

Brevard Childs. *The Old Testament as Scripture* (Introduction). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

Encyclopedia of American Religions

Erwin Kolb. *Judaism* ("How to Respond" series). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995 Revised Edition.

Links and Websites

General - www.bbc.co.uk/learning/library/judaism.shtml

www.jewish.com

www.orthodoxjudaism.org;

Orthodox Judaism - www.ou.org

Reformed Judaism - www.rj.org

Reconstructionist Judaism - www.jrf.org

Conservative Judaism - www.uscj.org

Humanistic Judaism - www.shj.org

<http://www.equip.org/free/DJ431.htm>

⁷ 1983 Resolution 3-09 "To Clarify Position on Anti-Semitism," *Convention Proceedings*, 157.