

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Judaism

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Quote:

The term "G-d" is used in this essay to respect the Jewish prohibition against the title of the deity in full. Dates listed which are prior to the 4th century BCE

Early History of Judaism

Circa 2000 BCE, the G-d of the ancient Israelites established a divine covenant, making him the patriarch of many nations. The term Abrahamic Religions is used for these. These are the four religions which trace their roots back to Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i World Faith. The book of Genesis describes the events surrounding the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Joseph, who is recognized as a patriarch by Christians is not considered one by Jews). Moses was the next leader of the Israelites, led his people out of captivity in Egypt, and received the Law from G-d. Joshua led the tribes into the promised land, driving out the Canaanites through a series of military battles.

The original tribal organization was converted into a kingdom by Samuel; the second king, David, established Jerusalem as the religious and political center. Solomon built the first temple there.

Division into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah occurred after the death of Solomon in 922 BCE. Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BCE; Judah fell to Babylonians in 587 BCE. The temple was destroyed. Some Jews returned to Judah from Babylonians and started to restore the temple in 536 BCE. (Orthodox Judaism began around 422 to 352 BCE). Alexander the Great invaded the area in 332 BCE. Greek became the language of commerce, and Greek culture had a major influence. In 63 BCE, the Roman Empire took control of Judea and Israel.

Four major (and some minor) religious sects had formed by the 1st century CE: Pharisees, Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Many anticipated the arrival of the Messiah and the Roman invaders out and restore independence. Christianity was established as a new sect, centered in Jerusalem. Paul broke with this tradition and spread the faith to non-Jews. Many mini-revolts led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE. Jewish Christians were wiped out or scattered at this time. The movement quickly evolved into the religion of Christianity. Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Their religion was no longer centered in Jerusalem; Jews were prohibited from converting non-Jews. Judaism became decentralized and stopped seeking converts. The local synagogues became the center of Jewish life, and authority shifted from the centralized priesthood to the rabbis.

teachers, giving rise to Rabbinic Judaism.

The period from the destruction of the temple onward give rise to heavy persecution throughout Europe and Russia. Many groundless stories were spread, accusations of murder, the desecration of the Catholic host and continuing responsibility for the Holocaust. Unsubstantiated rumors continue to be circulated today. In the 1930s and 1940s the German Nazi party drew on centuries of anti-Semitism, and upon their desire for racial purity. They organized the Holocaust, the attempted extermination of the Jews. 6 million were killed in one of the world's greatest examples of religious persecution.

The Zionist movement was a response within all Jewish traditions to centuries of persecution. Their initial goal was create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The State of Israel was formed on 1948-MAY-18.

There are currently about 18 million Jews throughout the world. They are concentrated in North America (about 7 million) and Israel (about 4.5 million).

Jewish Texts

The Tanakh corresponds to the Jewish Scriptures, (often referred to as the Old Testament by Christians). It is composed of three groups of books:

- the Torah (aka Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy
- the Nevi'im: Joshua, Judges, Samuel (2), Kings (2), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah
- the Ketuvim, the "Writings" including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Esther, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles (2).

The Talmud contains stories, laws, medical knowledge, debates about morality. It is composed of material which comes mainly from two sources:

- the Mishnah, 6 "orders" containing hundreds of chapters, including series of laws and commentaries on the Scriptures. It was compiled about 200 CE.

- the Gemara (one Babylonian and one Palestinian) is encyclopedic in scope. It was compiled from hundreds of Rabbis from 200 - 500 CE, explaining the Mishnah with additional religious, legal, sociological, etc. material. It often records many different opinions, giving a definitive answer.

Basic Jewish Beliefs:

There is a story in wide circulation about a question asked of Rabbi Hillel in the 1st century BCE. A non-Jew asked the rabbi to teach him everything about Judaism on one foot. Rabbi Hillel responded: "What is hateful to you, don't do unto others." This is the basis of the Jewish commentary. Now, go and study."

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, (a.k.a. Maimonides) is generally accepted as one of the greatest Jewish scholars from Medieval times. He wrote a list of thirteen principles of Judaism, generally accepted by Jews for centuries as a brief summary of the Jewish faith.

wings of Judaism dispute some of the 13 today.

G-d exists.

G-d is one and unique.

G-d is incorporeal.

G-d is eternal.

Prayer is to be directed to G-d alone and to no other.

The words of the prophets are true.

Moses was the greatest of the prophets, and his prophecies are true.

The Written Torah (first 5 books of the Bible) and Oral Torah (teachings and other writings) were given to Moses.

There will be no other Torah.

G-d knows the thoughts and deeds of men.

G-d will reward the good and punish the wicked.

The Messiah will come.

The dead will be resurrected. 9

Additional Jewish beliefs:

Some additional beliefs found commonly among Jews are:

Some Jews view Jesus as a great moral teacher. Others see him as a false Messiah. Christianity. Some sects of Judaism will not even say his name due to the belief that it is an idol's name.

The Jews are often referred to as G-d's chosen people. This does not mean they are to be considered superior to other groups. Biblical verses such as Exodus 19:5-6 has selected Israel to receive and study the Torah, to worship G-d only, to celebrate the festivals. Jews were not chosen to be better than others; they receive more difficult responsibilities, and more onerous punishment if they fail.

The 613 commandments found in Leviticus and other books regulate all aspects of Jewish life.

The Ten commandments, as delineated in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, form a synopsis of the Law.

The Messiah (the anointed one of G-d) will arrive in the future and gather the Jews to the land of Israel. There will be a general resurrection of the dead at that time. The Temple, destroyed in 70 CE, will be rebuilt.

A fetus gains full personhood when it is half-emerged from its mother's womb.

Boys reach the status of Bar Mitzvah on their 13th birthday; girls reach Bat Mitzvah on their 12th birthday. This means that they are recognized as adults and are personally responsible for Jewish commandments and laws. Males are allowed to lead a religious service ("minyan") (a quota of men necessary to perform certain parts of religious services). After Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah they can sign contracts; they can testify in court; they can marry, although the Talmud recommends 18 to 24 as the proper age for marriage.

The more liberal movements within Judaism differ from some of the above in their view of the source of the Torah, the concept of direct reward and punishment according to deeds, and the resurrection of the dead.

Judaism and Christianity compared:

Although Christians base much of their faith on the same Hebrew Scriptures, there are major differences in belief:

Jews generally consider actions and behavior to be of primary importance over beliefs. This conflicts with conservative Christians for whom belief is of primary importance. Actions tend to be derivative from beliefs.

Jewish belief does not accept the Christian concept of original sin (the inherited Adam and Eve's sin when they disobeyed G-d's instructions in the Garden of Eden). Judaism affirms the inherent goodness of the world and its people as created by G-d. Believers are able to sanctify their lives and draw closer to G-d by performing good deeds (following the commandments).

No savior is needed or is available as an intermediary with G-d.

Jewish Practices

They include:

Observation of the Sabbath as a day of rest, starting at sundown on Friday and ending at sundown on Saturday. Strict discipline, according to the Law, which governs all areas of life. Regular attendance by Jewish males at Synagogue.

Celebration of the annual festivals including: Passover, or Pesach is the Jewish festival commemorating the Jews' deliverance out of slavery in Egypt circa 1300 BCE. A ritual Seder (dinner) is held in every Jewish home at this time. Six different foods are placed on the table, each with a symbolic meaning. Which they are eaten: Karpas (vegetables dipped in salt water) recalls the tears of slavery.

Maror (bitter herbs) to symbolize the bitterness of slavery.

Chazeret (bitter vegetables) also to symbolize the bitterness of slavery.

Choronet (apple, nuts & spices with wine) represents the mortar used by the Jews to build the Temple in Jerusalem.

Also placed on the seder plate, but uneaten during the Seder meal: Zeroah (roasted lamb shank) recalls the Passover sacrifice in the ancient temple.

Beitzah (roasted egg) symbolizes mourning, sacrifice, spring, and renewal.

Not placed on the Seder plate, but often eaten, is a boiled egg.

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, and is the anniversary of the creation of the world 5760 years ago. It is held in the fall.

The 10 days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, are a time of repentance and penitence.

Sukkot or the Feast of Booths is an 8 day harvest festival; a time of thanksgiving for the harvest. Hanukkah or the Feast of Lights is an 8 day feast of dedication. It recalls the miracle of the oil that burned for 8 days in the Temple. Maccabees in the cause of religious freedom. It is typically observed in December. Although a Jewish holy day, it has become more important in recent years.

Purim, the Feast of Lots recalls the defeat by Queen Esther of the plan to annihilate the Jews, circa 400 BCE.

Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks recalls G-d's revelation of the Torah to the Jews on Mount Sinai in late May or early June.

Rules for calculating Rosh Hashanah and Passover are available online at <http://quasar.as.utexas.edu/BillInfo/ReligiousCalendars.html>

The local synagogue is governed by the congregation and is normally led by a rabbi chosen by the congregation. A rabbi is a teacher who has been well educated in Jewish tradition.

Any adult male with sufficient knowledge can lead religious services. In conservative congregations, a woman can also preside. This is often done in small communities who lack a rabbi.

The Chief Rabbis in France and Great Britain have authority only by the acceptance of the community. Two Chief Rabbis in Israel have civil authority in areas of family law.

Jewish Movements:

There are five main forms of Judaism in the world today. However, the movements do not necessarily recognize the most liberal as being part of Judaism. They are listed among many of the world's great religions:

Conservative* Judaism: This began in the mid-nineteenth century as a reform movement. It is a main-line movement midway between Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

Humanistic Judaism: This is a very small group, mainly composed of atheists who regard mankind as the measure of all things.

Orthodox* Judaism: This is the oldest, most conservative, and most diverse form of Judaism. Orthodox, Chasidim and Ultra Orthodox share a basic belief in the divine origin of the laws they hold very different outlooks on life. They attempt to follow the original commandments as they view it to be. They look upon every word in their sacred texts as being divinely inspired.

Reconstructionist Judaism: This is a new, small, liberal movement started in the 1930's. They attempt to unify and revitalize the religion. They reject the concept that Jews are a chosen people. They have no connection at all with Christian Reconstructionism or the ultra-conservative form of Christianity.

Reform* Judaism: They are a liberal group, followed by many North American Jews. It started in the 1790's in Germany. They follow the ethical laws of Judaism but leave to each individual the decision whether to follow or ignore the dietary and other laws. They practice modern forms of worship. There are many female rabbis in reform congregations.

* These are the largest forms of Judaism.

A survey conducted in 2001 for the 2002 edition of the American Jewish Archives shows that fewer than 10% of American Jews are estimated to be Orthodox. However, Orthodox synagogues represent 40% of all U.S. synagogues. Reform Judaism has 26 percent of all synagogues. Conservatives have 23 percent. "Every other denomination or group represents 7 percent: Reconstructionist, Sephardi, Traditional, Humanistic, Gay/Lesbian -- according to synagogue affiliations..." 8 The total number of U.S. synagogues has increased from 2,372 in 1990 to 3,727 in 2001.

Jewish-Christian Relations:

