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A Thumbnail Sketch of Judaism for Christians

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Most Christians in the United States have grown up with Jewish neighbors, classmates, and friends. But their understanding of Judaism is usually limited to their reading of the Old Testament and the holiday in December called Hanukkah. Some of us were taught in Sunday school that Judaism teaches salvation by works. Many wonder how on earth Jews cannot see that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. In this essay we will see that religious Jews typically don't think in terms of being saved; that even when they do, they don't believe they got into the covenant because they deserved it; and that they think they have biblical reasons for rejecting Jesus as messiah.

But first, let's get an overview of numbers and groups. How many Jewish people are there? And into what groups are they divided?

Numbers and Kinds

Today there are roughly 15 million Jewish people worldwide, with 5 million in Israel and 6.5 million in the United States. Of the latter, 1.6 million are in New York State, and the vast majority of those are in New York City.

So you can see what a tiny religious group this is: six-tenths of 1 percent of the number of Christians (2.3 billion) and 1 percent of the number of Muslims (1.6 billion). But this has always been the case, even before the Holocaust. The Jewish population in the world has always been small in comparison to their overwhelming significance as a religious people. I say "overwhelming," because their religion not only "invented" monotheism—at least after the prehistoric rise of polytheism—but it became the mother of both Christianity and Islam, the largest religions in the world.

In the United States, as in Israel and other countries, Jews are divided into two groups—religious Jews and secular Jews. The former believe in God and perpetuate the Jewish tradition in a variety of ways. The latter have either rejected the idea of God entirely or else, while still believing in God, do not believe that the Jewish tradition is the best or only way to God. Yet they take pride in the accomplishments of the Jewish people, including their spiritual creativity.

Religious Jews in the United States are generally divided into three movements: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. These are three different responses to the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century intellectual movement that tended to reject religious tradition and embraced secular reason as the guide to all of life, both religious and secular.

The differences started in nineteenth-century Germany. Reform Jews accommodated themselves to Enlightenment culture, reducing their religion to what they thought simple and reasonable—ethical monotheism (there is one God, and we should live moral lives). They used organs in worship (a modern musical instrument then), prayed and preached in German (not Hebrew), discarded prayer shawls and head coverings, let men and women

sit together (this was new), and eliminated some kosher dietary rules. They also rejected Zionism, the movement to establish a homeland for the Jewish people.

The Orthodox reacted against Reform, thinking the latter had sold out to modern culture. They prayed for the ultimate restoration of Zion (ancient biblical Israel), regarded the whole Tanakh (Old Testament) as God's Word (the Reform thought only those parts that agreed with Enlightenment values were inspired), used only Hebrew in their services, forbade instrumental music in worship, separated men and women in the synagogue, and insisted that women cover their heads.

Conservatives, you might say, split the difference. Some have called them “right-wing modernists.” They believed that Jewish ritual is the heart and soul of Judaism, but they sympathized with Reform innovations. So they compromised by using mostly Hebrew in their services, allowing some instrumental music, and letting the sexes sit together.

As these movements developed into the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, Reform and Conservative Judaism came to resemble each other more and more, to the point that today both movements have agreed to ordain as rabbis sexually active homosexuals and lesbians. It is for this and other reasons that many observers say there are really only two main groups in today's Judaism, traditionalists and modernists. Perhaps the best way to understand today's Judaism is to see how these two camps differ on eight central Jewish ideas: Torah, God, morality, human nature, Israel, religious ritual, the world to come, and messiah. Milton Steinberg outlined these differences more than sixty years ago in his book *Basic Judaism*, but the dividing lines are still there today.

Traditionalists and Modernists: The Basic Difference

The best way to see how these two Jewish movements differ is to consider where they go to find their authority. In other words, how do they answer questions about what is true, good, and beautiful? Traditionalists generally say the answers are found in Torah (the Pentateuch or first five books of the Old Testament), while modernists look to human reason and experience. For example, to answer the question, what is God like?, traditionalists would say they know about God mainly from Torah, while modernists would say that while Torah might have some inspired general ideas about God, such as God's goodness and justice, we need human reason and experience to understand what those abstract ideas mean.

Torah

For traditionalists, every letter and word are from God, not only in Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Scripture (Tanakh), but also in the Talmud, which are the rabbinic commentaries written in the first through the seventh centuries AD in Babylon (modern Iraq) and Israel. Traditionalists think that even the rabbinic writings after the Talmud are inspired, but to a diminishing degree. Since Torah is God's Word, and God's Word is forever, Judaism should never change—say the traditionalists. Therefore the idea that Judaism has evolved over time is an illusion. People might have changed God's law, but the law itself has not and should not change. For God has revealed His will through the Bible and Jewish tradition, and our task as humans is to stick to it, not change it.

Modernists, on the other hand, say Torah is inspired only in parts—when they find what they consider to be truth and goodness in it. How do they know those parts are good and true? By using modern reason and experience. Those same authorities—modern reason and modern experience—also tell them that the law of change is universal, and therefore Judaism too must change with time. The ancient culture that gave us “revelation” was in fact limited by the cultural mores of those ancient days. Our modern days are blessed with so much more learning and wisdom, and we must use these modern insights to filter out what is ancient and false and bad from what we now see is good and true. That means Judaism must change if it is to continue to be true and good. Torah is revelation but only in some of its broad ideas. Many of its details were not at all inspired, but produced by cultures that we had best leave behind.

God

Both traditionalists and modernists say that God is one, not many (contrary to polytheism), not two (contrary to all dualisms, such as Zoroastrian or Chinese yin and yang, which believe in two equal forces that fight for mastery of the cosmos), not three (contrary to Christianity, which Jews believe teaches three gods and therefore a kind of polytheism), and not none (contrary to atheism).

Both groups of Jews also agree that the God of the Jewish Bible (and therefore the true God!) is very different from what the religions of the Ancient Near East (ANE: Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, and Canaan) said about the divine. In other words, the true God is creator (thus the world had a beginning and is not eternal, as most ANE religions believed), spirit (God does not have a body, as most ANE religions believed), lawgiver (God is moral, contrary to the gods of the ANE, who often did immoral things), guide of history (and thus outside of history, contrary to the ANE gods who were within history and could do little to change history), and humanity's helper, but through the resources of this world.

On miracles, traditionalists say God still performs them; modernists say God does not, for that would oppose God's plan to run the world according to the laws of nature.

Salvation? Both groups say that word may pertain to life after death, but its primary reference is to this world when there is victory over ignorance and selfishness.

Both groups agree that God is both transcendent (separate from this world) and immanent (in the world).

Morality

Traditionalists and modernists both talk about a life of "decency" that is honoring to God. They agree that the prophets in the Hebrew Bible rightly showed us that this life will seek justice and compassion for all human beings. It will perform the *mitzvot* (commandments), which are summed up by the Ten Commandments. They forbid idolatry (the first), using God's name irreverently (second—in the attempt to treat God's name with reverence, many Jews refuse to utter the revealed name "Yhwh" and will write "G-d"), dishonoring the Sabbath (third) or parents (fourth), murder (fifth), adultery (sixth), stealing (seventh), false witness (eighth), and greed for what others have (ninth and tenth).

Traditionalists believe the moral life is spelled out by the 613 *mizvot* of Torah; modernists think the general principles of justice and compassion are found through modern reason and experience.

Human Nature

Both traditionalists and modernists believe the human being is free to do what God commands. Here is where Jews and Christians disagree: Jews think the human will is able to master sin if it makes an effort; Christians believe in original sin, which means the will is disabled by an inherent selfishness that taints all its acts. Jews insist that although we will never be perfect, by repentance we can return to God and use God-given willpower to do what He has told us to do. Christians say this can happen only by the grace of Christ.

Israel

Traditionalists say God chose Israel as the chosen nation because of the merits of the fathers/patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and that Israel (the community of Jews everywhere) now lives to communicate God's truth to the nations.

This does not mean, by the way, that traditionalists think they are in God's family because of their works. It's more complex and less self-righteous than that. Some decades ago, the scholar E.P. Sanders showed that first-century Jews (think especially of the Pharisees) did not think their good works made them members of the kingdom of God. Instead, they believed God had put them into the "covenant" (God's family) by grace, but that they needed to follow the important rules of the law to stay in. Most traditionalists, and also some modernists, believe similarly. They say God made them Jews simply out of His goodness. And now that they are in the covenant, they need

to make sure they stay in the covenant by obeying God's commandments. That faithfulness will ensure a good prospect in the life to come.

Modernists have a different view of chosenness. They agree that the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) chose God, and this is why God chose them. But they add that if other nations choose God, they too will be "chosen." They are a bit embarrassed by the "one chosen nation" idea and interpret it as a universal call to all nations to observe the divine principles of compassion and justice.

Religious Practices

Traditionalists believe that everything Jews have done in their historic liturgies and daily practices (which have been developed by rabbinic tradition) represents God's will in Torah. Therefore they are scrupulous about even the smallest details, for they believe they are all of God.

Modernists, on the other hand, think the rituals are merely human devices for making us feel close to what is good and divine. So these rituals are always subject to improvement. But their basic inspiration may have been divine.

The World to Come

Both groups believe in recompense after death. Goodness on earth will be rewarded then, and evil will be punished. Both groups also affirm immortality and resurrection, but they disagree on what the words mean. Traditionalists have a more literal conception, and modernists say we can't know anything more precise than the fact of life after death.

Jewish people in general think that Christians are too presumptuous about these things, that we really can't guess what the specifics will be like. All we know is that we will survive death and that the life to come will involve the resurrection of the body. Christians undoubtedly ascertain details based on their reading of the New Testament, which teaches far more about these things than does the Old Testament.

Messiah

Traditionalists say the Messiah will be a man and that they are to hope and pray for the coming of this man. He will not be God, but he will abolish evil and establish goodness on a firm foundation.

Modernists, in contrast, are looking not to a man but to an age—a messianic age. But God is not the primary mover here. We human beings will bring it about by working for our dreams of justice and goodness. God inspires our dreams, and Torah helps us understand them, but it will be our efforts that will bring this age to pass.

Why Jews Reject Jesus as Messiah

Perhaps you are wondering why Jews say the Messiah will not be God. This is because Jews observe that the Old Testament prophecies never predict that the messiah will be God. Christians point to Isaiah 9:6 ("For a child has been born for us / ... and he is named / Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God..." NRSV), but Jews translate this as referring not to Messiah but to God who sent this child ("For a child has been born to us, / A son has been given us. / And authority has settled on his shoulders. / He has been named / 'The Mighty God is planning grace; / The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler'" Isa. 9:5 Tanakh NJPS).

Christians see Jesus as God not so much because of prophecies in the Old Testament but because of what they see in His own life. For example, He claimed the authority to forgive sins, which all first-century Jews knew was the prerogative of God alone (Mark 2:7). This by itself, completely apart from Jesus' miracles, was Jesus' own claim to divinity.

The primary reason Jewish people don't think Jesus was the anticipated Messiah is that Jesus did not bring worldwide peace and submission of the nations to Himself, as the psalmist and prophets said the Messiah would

(see Ps. 2:9; Isa. 9:2–7; 11:1–5; Jer. 33:14–26; Ezek. 37:24–28). Quite the opposite, Jesus' followers caused division and conflict in first-century Israel, and representatives of the Roman Empire had Jesus put to death.

Christians reply that there are two streams of prophecy in Tanakh (the Old Testament) about the Messiah. One does indeed say the Messiah will bring worldwide peace and justice. But there is another one that suggests the Messiah will be a servant whose sufferings will save the world (Ps. 22; 55; 88; Isa. 53:5, 10, 12). Jesus suffered and saved in His first coming and will bring worldwide peace and justice in His second.

In his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Jacob Neusner says he cannot accept Jesus as Messiah because a true Jew would never reject the Jewish law, which was the greatest gift God gave to His people. Neusner says Jesus changed the law and focused not on daily holiness (which the law is all about) but salvation in the next life for the individual.

Christians say that Jesus did not reject biblical law, but taught the meaning of the law. He, in fact, took the law very seriously, as these words in the Sermon on the Mount show:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17–19 NRSV)

David Gelernter, a Jewish computer scientist at Yale, writes widely respected books and articles on theology and politics. Reflecting the thinking of some fellow Jews, he has said that he cannot accept Christian faith, and Jesus' claims at the center of it, because of Jesus' incipient pacifism. "Turn the other cheek" and "Do not resist the evildoer" are teachings that cannot support a robust resistance to evil which this age of terrorism demands.

Yet Christians would say that there are New Testament reasons why most Christians in history have supported the just-war tradition, which says there are times when Christians can and must fight wars to resist evil. They look to passages such as Romans 13:4 ("The [civil] authority does not bear the sword in vain!" NRSV) and say Jesus' admonition not to resist the evildoer was probably a restatement of Psalm 37:1 ("Do not fret because of the wicked" NRSV), not a sign of pacifism.

Even if Jewish people do not agree with us about who Jesus is, we Christians can build bridges through our common beliefs in what we call the Old Testament to meaningful discussions about Jesus as we know Him from the New Testament. ■■

An explanation of cause is not a justification by reason.

C.S. Lewis

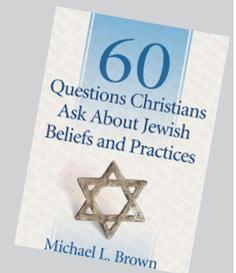


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RECOMMENDED READING

Michael L. Brown, *60 Questions Christians Ask About Jewish Beliefs and Practices* (Chosen Books, 2011)

Respected scholar and Messianic Jew answers sixty common questions Christians have about Jewish people, culture, practices, and the Jewish background to the New Testament. .



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