



# Modern Judaism

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Introduction: Of the 14 million Jews in the world, only 25% live in the modern state of Israel. Forty-four percent (nearly half) reside in the United States (de Lange, 1986, p. 18). There are about 5,000 synagogues in the United States with a combined membership of over six million (Mead, 1980, p. 148). Despite this, most Americans would have to plead ignorance of any real knowledge of modern Judaism. What little is known about the Jews tends to revolve around either Biblical information (which does not give a realistic picture of present day Judaism), or stories of the horrors of Nazi Germany (which tend to evoke sympathy but not understanding). Of course, Judaism and Christianity share in common the Old Testament scriptures as well beliefs in one God, after-life, and the nature of man. However, our points of similarity are not responsible for the failure to understand modern Judaism. Christians must become familiar with the points of difference if we're to have a meaningful dialogue with Jews.

## < Point of Origin >

Most people, including Jews, would trace the origins of Judaism to the covenant God made with Abraham in the twelfth and seventeenth chapters of Genesis.

God promised Abraham, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you." (Genesis 17:7, NKJV). The sign of this covenant was circumcision, a rite which is still performed today on male Jewish infants as well as proselytes (which demonstrates that the term "descendants" is not taken strictly in the genetic sense). Historically then, a Jew is defined as one who belongs to this group of people. While beliefs and practices have varied greatly among Jews even in Biblical times, this connection with the descendants of Abraham has served to identify the Jew and distinguish him from the non-Jew.

But to say that modern Judaism really originated in the Old Testament is more than a little like saying Roman Catholicism originated in the New Testament. Both institutions must rely upon extra-Biblical traditions to explain their existence. In the case of Judaism, this tradition began after the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Religious men tried to pattern themselves after Ezra, the "scribe skilled in the Law of Moses." (Ezra 7:6). In time, these "lawyers" and "doctors of the Law" came to view their own applications of the Law as having God's approval (King, 1990, p. 292). By the time of Jesus, Jews were taking such liberties in replacing Law with their traditions that Jesus warned they were in danger of losing their identity as the children of Abraham. He told them, "If you were Abraham's children you would do the works of Abraham." (John 8:39). Both Jews and Christians agree that "Judaism is a profoundly traditional religion" and "the doctrine of tradition has consequently been one of the pillars of Judaism down the ages." (de Lange, 1986, pp. 23-4).

Jews refer to the first five books of the Bible as the Torah (meaning "teaching"). But they also believe that oral traditions handed down from Moses to the Rabbis are Torah. These oral traditions, over which the scribes and Pharisees made such a fuss in Jesus' day, were eventually codified and reduced to writing. Rabbi Judah HaNasi compiled a book of law from these oral traditions in Jerusalem about 200 A.D. This work is known as the Mishnah (meaning "repetition").

Two schools of Jewish scholars, one in Palestine and the other in Babylon, worked to summarize, explain, and edit the Mishnah for three centuries after it was first written. Their completed work is known as the Talmud, which contains the Mishnah along with the comments of the scholars called Gemara. Containing about 2.5 million words, the Babylonian Talmud is considered more thorough and scholarly than the Jerusalem Talmud, and it is therefore more commonly used. "The Talmud, then, is the written form of that which, in the time of Jesus, was called the Traditions of the Elders, and to which he makes frequent allusions." (Rodkinson, 1894, p. 70). Truly, "The spirit of the ancient Pharisee survives unaltered in the Talmud" (Finkelstein, 1938). Adin Steinsaltz, considered by some Jews to be one of the greatest Rabbis of all time, said in 1976 that "the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture. . . No other work has had a comparable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct." ( p. 3).

## < Fundamental Points of Jewish Belief >

1. The Shema. The foundation of Jewish belief is the statement found in Deuteronomy

6:4–5: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." This statement is known as the Shema (meaning "hear..."), which is its first word in the Hebrew text. The Shema points to two of the main features of Judaism: (1) It is highly monotheistic (the first among modern world religions to advocate the concept of one God who is creator of all). (2) Its laws, teachings, and traditions center around the question, "What do I do to love God with all my heart, soul, and might?"

2. The Torah. Everything there is to know about life can be found in the Torah. The Torah contains God's revelation of His law to man. In the broad sense, the Torah includes not only the Pentateuch, but also the Prophets and other Sacred writings (most of our Old Testament, called Tanakh by Jews) as well as the Oral Torah now contained in the Talmud. "Torah is the embodiment of Jewish faith." (Donin, 1972, p.27). Of it the rabbis say "Turn it around and inside out and everything is in it." (Eckstein, 1984, p. 26).

3. Halakha. "Judaism stresses action more than faith." (Prager & Telushkin, 1975, p. 18). For this reason, it is dangerous to say that all Jews actually agree in their beliefs on any given point. Even the remarks made previously concerning Shema and Torah are misleading in this respect. Some loyal Jews may even doubt the existence of God and have a very liberal view of the Torah. According to the Jerusalem Talmud God said, "Better that they abandon Me, but follow My laws" (Haggigah 1:7). To the Jew then, it is not belief but law-keeping that matters most. Halakha is the overall term for Jewish law, and literally means "the way in which one goes." (Donin, 1972, p. 29). Halakha is the practical application of the written and oral Torah. It demands that the Jew be committed, not so much in his beliefs, but in his behavior. While some Jews may differ over how to properly apply the commandments to every situation and circumstance of life, most all of them would say that their actions need to be in full accord with Halakha as they understand it.

### < Points of Departure Among Jews >

Modern Judaism is deeply marked by the concept that tradition is important. At the same time, it is "deeply divided over the question of what constitutes authentic tradition, as well as by the question of the authority to be ascribed to tradition." (deLange, 1986, p. 30). Thus, "In American Judaism there are basically three religious groupings; the Orthodox, the Conservative, and the Reform (sometimes called the Liberal)" (Kertzer, 1953, p. 113). Their differences may be outlined as follows:

1. Orthodox Jews are the most faithful to the ancient traditions. They attempt to strictly observe Sabbath and Dietary regulations. They use only the Hebrew language in their worship. They maintain separate pews for women in the synagogues, and men may not use a razor for shaving.
2. Conservative. Conservative Jews hold the middle ground between Orthodox and Reformed Judaism. They follow the traditions, while accepting modern scholars' interpretations of them. Dietary and Sabbath laws are slightly relaxed, and English is sometimes allowed to be used in prayer.
3. Reform. A Reformed or Liberal Jew accepts only the moral laws of the Bible and those ceremonies which he finds personally elevating. He abides by no custom that is not adapted to modern life. Worship is similar to that of Protestant Christians. Beliefs must be rational and in harmony with modern science.

### Basic Jewish Practices

1. Sabbath Observance. The Sabbath is still sanctified by most Jews as a day of rest and "a memorial to the creation of the world" as well as "to the exodus from Egypt" (Donin, 1972, p. 65). The Sabbath begins on Friday evenings. Jewish households anticipate its coming by cooking food and cleaning homes before its arrival since "creative" work is restricted on the Sabbath. Friday evening each household joins together in a festive Sabbath meal which includes two whole loaves of "Sabbath bread" symbolizing the double portion of manna the Israelites received in the desert on Fridays. Candle lighting, blessing of children, Kiddush (blessing over wine), grace after the meal, singing, Torah study and recitation are part of the evenings' activities. The Sabbath day itself includes services in a synagogue comprised of prayer, and a reading from the Torah and prophets. At home there is more festive eating, study of Torah and Mishnah and relaxation (but no T.V.) (Eckstein, 1984, pp. 86–87).
2. Diet. Kashrut is the Hebrew word that refers to Jewish dietary laws. It is a variation of the word kosher which means fit, proper, or in accordance with the religious law" (Donin, 1972, p. 97). Reform Jews typically disregard the observance of kashrut, although many would still avoid the eating of pork (Eckstein, 1984, p. 172). Conservative and Orthodox Jews observe Kashrut, in some cases meticulously. Kashrut is founded upon the Biblical instruction concerning clean and unclean animals, food preparation, and the prohibition against eating blood. However, Jewish Rabbis have

greatly expanded these rules over the centuries so that now even clean animals "which were not slaughtered properly by a sochet (a trained, observant and licensed Jewish slaughterer), may not be eaten." (Eckstein, 1984, p. 173). Similarly, the scriptural prohibition against "boiling a young goat in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19) has been embellished by Jewish tradition to forbid eating meat and dairy products at the same time (usually a 3 to 6 hour waiting period is required) (Donin, 1972, p. 113).

3. Festivals and Holy Days. The Jewish lunar calendar is replete with holidays. The Pilgrim Holidays of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, during which Jews in ancient times would visit the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate, are Biblically based. Of course, each of the Pilgrim Holidays has been stripped of some important aspects since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. when both pilgrimage to Jerusalem and temple sacrifice had to cease. The High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are also tied to Biblical events, and are "the most widely observed of all Jewish holy days" as "even those Jews who normally do not attend synagogue services are inclined to observe them" (Eckstein, 1984, p. 116).

- On Rosh Hashanah Jews greet their New Year with the blowing of the trumpet (shofar). In the Bible, the Israelites were to "blow the trumpet" and proclaim a day of rest on the first day of the seventh month (Numbers 29:1; Leviticus 23:24–25). Jewish tradition also holds Rosh Hashanah to be "the anniversary of the creation of the world" as well as a "day of remembrance" when both God and man reflect upon the deeds of the past year (Eckstein, 1984, p. 117).
- Yom Kippur is the modern Day of Atonement and follows right after Rosh Hashanah on the tenth day of the seventh month (cf. Lev. 16:29–32). It is the holiest day of the year to Jews. No longer including the sacrifice of animals, traditionally Yom Kippur emphasizes prayer, fasting and repentance as a means of reconciliation with God.
- Purim is considered a minor feast, though it is the most joyous festival of the Jewish year -- rather like a Jewish Mardi Gras. It commemorates the salvation of the Jews in Persia in the days of Esther (see Esther 9:26–28).
- From a religious viewpoint, Hanukkah (Feast of Dedication) is also a minor Jewish festival; however, it is widely celebrated among Jews, perhaps because it comes close to Christmas. Hanukkah is the only Jewish festival without a Biblical basis, although John 10:22 mentions it in an historical connection. It is an eight day

commemoration of the victory of the Jews over the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes and the rededication of the temple in 165 B. C. The Talmud and later tradition claims that a one day supply of oil for keeping the "eternal light burning" miraculously lasted for eight days during the temple's rededication. Hence, in Jewish homes each night during Hanukkah a candle is lit on the nine-branched candle stand (or Menorah).

4. Rites of Passage. Various ceremonies and procedures mark an individual's birth and growth in Judaism. Among these are circumcision, Bar Mitzvah, and marriage. Of these, only Bar Mitzvah is probably unfamiliar to most Christians, since it has no Biblical basis.

Bar Mitzvah means "son of the commandments". At the age of thirteen, Jewish boys are accounted to be fully responsible to keep the commandments and live as Jews. The Bar Mitzvah celebration which marks this passage is conducted in a synagogogue, where the boy is called upon to recite a blessing and read publicly from the Torah for the first time (Eckstein, 1984, p. 149). He also puts on the teffillin or phylacteries for the first time. Teffillin are two small black boxes with straps. The boxes contain scripture written on pieces of parchment. They are worn around the head and left arm during prayer service by Jewish men (Eckstein, 1984, p. 170). Though currently popular among most Jews, the complete Bar Mitzvah ritual as well as a similar Bat Mitzvah ritual for girls at age twelve, is a relatively new tradition within Judaism.

## Cross-points

As one would expect, Jews reject and contradict the New Testament which they regard as "neither inspired nor Holy Writ but rather, an indirect source written by people with definite bias against the established Jewish community" (Eckstein, 1984, p. 259). They also allow their own written tradition to add to, take away from or authoritatively explain that part of the Bible which they do accept, namely the Old Testament or Tanakh. Adin Steinsaltz wrote, "It is impossible to approach biblical exegesis (explanation) without knowledge of the Talmud" (1972, p. 266). Here then are some key points of contradiction between the traditions of the Talmud and the Bible.

### The Talmud

### The Bible

1. Works lead to faith. According to the Talmud, 1. Faith leads to Works. "To him who

Jerusalem Talmud God said, "Better that they abandon Me, and continue to observe My laws," because the Talmud adds, through observance of the laws they will return to God (Hagigah 1:7).

2. Trial and death of Jesus. "On the eve of the Passover Jeshu (Jesus) the Nazarean was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 43).

3. Christ's Deity and Ascension. "R. Abahu said: If a man say to thee 'I am God,' he is a liar; if he says, 'I am the son of man,' in the end people will laugh at him; if he says 'I will go up to heaven,' he saith, but shall not perform it." (Babylonian Talmud, Taanith 65).

4. Sanctity of New Testament Books. "The Books of Minim may not be saved from a fire, but they must be burnt in their place, they and the Divine Names occurring in them." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 116). [Note: The term "minim" refers to Jewish heretics, especially Jewish Christians].

does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness." (Romans 4:5). "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead. . . Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (James 1:17 & 18b).

2. Trial and Death of Jesus. "Now the chief priests, the elders and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward." (Matthew 26:59–60). "Then they crucified Him. . ." (Matthew 27:35).

3. Christ's Deity and Ascension. "So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). "What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?" (John 6:62).

4. Sanctity of the New Testament Books. "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord." (I Cor. 14:37). "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren" (I Thess. 5:27).

5. Relationship of Tradition to God's Law. "There is greater stringency in respect to the teachings of the scribes than in respect to the Torah" (Law of Moses) (Babylonian Talmud, San. 88).

6. The Sabbath. "Rabbi Levi said, 'If the Jewish people would observe the Sabbath properly even once, the son of David would come. Why? Because it is equal to all the other commandments in importance.'" (Exodus Rabbah 25:12). "The principle categories of work which are forbidden on the Sabbath are forty less one" (Mishnah, Shabbat 7:2). "The rules about the Sabbath, festal offerings and sacrilege are like mountains hanging by a hair, for there is scanty teaching about them in Scripture while the rules are many." (Mishnah, Hagigah 1:8).

7. Dietary Laws. "The following signs disqualify cattle [making it trefah and so unfit for consumption]: if the gullet is pierced or the windpipe torn; if the membrane of the brain is pierced; if the heart is pierced through to the cells..." (Mishnah, Hullin 3:1). "No flesh may be cooked in milk [to avoid the possibility of transgressing the law against boiling a kid in its mother's milk] . . . No flesh may be served on the table together with cheese, excepting the flesh of fish and locusts . . . If a drop of milk fell upon a piece of meat that was cooking in a pot and there was enough to give its flavor to that piece, that piece cannot be eaten." (Mishnah, Hullin

5. Relationship of Tradition to God's Law. "You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition... And in vain they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:6b & 9).

6. The Sabbath. "Therefore let no one judge you in a food or in drink or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Colossians 2:16).

7. Dietary Laws. "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanks-giving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." (I Timothy 4:4-5). "And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.' But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common'" (Acts 11:7-9).



8:1–3).

### < Weak Points of Modern Judaism >

1. Traditions supplant God's Law. The very thing that Jesus condemned some of the Jews of His day for is one of the biggest flaws of modern Judaism. Judaism as a whole continues to be guilty of Jesus charge of "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do." (Mark 7:13). When people claim to have received a message from God, but allow the words of men to take precedence in their religious lives, they stand self-condemned. When a man (such as Isaiah), who is acclaimed by a people as a prophet of God, writes words which go completely ignored by those same people because of their human traditions, that people's religion is weak! The Lord through Isaiah condemned the Jews because "their fear toward me is taught by the commandment of men." (Isaiah 29:13).

2. The Law is not Kept. As we've noted earlier, Jews value law keeping above everything else (including faith). However, as we noted above, they do not keep the Law because of their traditions. It is their tradition which nullified the Hebrew Testament laws concerning animal sacrifices and temple worship. "If the Law is yet binding, then let faithful Jews obligate themselves to observe it in all of its parts: 'Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them' (Deut. 27:26)" (King, 1990, p. 293). The fact is that Jews have not obeyed this law from the outset, and that is the reason the New Covenant was necessary (cf. Hebrews 8:8–9).

3. Messianic Misconceptions. Jews say that, "Judaism does not believe that Jesus was the Messiah because he did not fulfill any messianic prophecies." (Prager & Telushkin, 1975, p. 87). Specifically, Prager & Telushkin state that Isaiah 2:1–4 necessitates that "World peace must accompany the Messiah, and should peace not come, the Messiah has obviously not come." (1975, p. 87). As it relates to Messianic prophecy then, the Jewish problem is the same as it was in Jesus' day: Jews are materially minded and look for an earthly fulfillment to most Messianic prophecies. On the other hand, when it is convenient for them to do so, Jews can so spiritualize plain Messianic prophecies as to make them unrecognizable. For instance, on Isaiah 53 which depicts the Messiah as the suffering servant, Jewish philosopher Eliezer Berkovits wrote:

"God's chosen people is the suffering servant of God. The majestic fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is the description of Israel's martyrology through the centuries..." (Prager & Telushkin, 1975, p. 89).

Not only is Judaism weak in that it clearly misunderstands so many of its own Messianic prophecies, but it demonstrates even greater weakness by failing to believe them. In his book entitled *What is a Jew?*, Rabbi Morris Kertzer stated, "Today, only the extreme orthodox still cling to the literal belief in the coming of a Messiah... Most Jews, however, have reinterpreted the age-old belief in a Messiah, not as an individual Redeemer, but as mankind collectively, who by their own acts can usher in a Kingdom of Heaven." (1953, p.39).

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## Review Questions on Modern Judaism

1. What is the Talmud? How and when was it written? How important is it to Jews?
  2. Name the three divisions of modern Judaism and give the major differences between them.
  3. What is the Torah?
  4. What is Kashrut?
  5. What is Halakha?
  6. In your opinion, what are the most significant differences between the teaching of the Talmud and the teaching of the Bible?
  7. In your opinion, what is Judaism's greatest weakness?
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