

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 20-25 (NRSV)

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,² so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. . .

²⁰When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?”²¹ then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.²² The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household.²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.²⁴ Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case.²⁵ If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.”

Hebrews 9:11–15 (NIV)

¹¹But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation.¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

¹⁵For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Today, we turn to the religion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Each week in this series poses its own challenges. With the eastern religions, the challenge was the enormous gulf that exists between those religions and the great monotheistic religions of the west. Last week, we had to get past the violent jihadists and strive to understand the religion of 1.5 billion Muslims around the globe. This week, the challenge is overcoming a lot of misconceptions that we already have in our heads about modern-day Judaism and the Judaism of Jesus’ day. I’d guess that most of us have friends and even family who are Jewish. Years ago, I attended the bar mitzvah of a friend’s son. It was a moving experience to see this boy embraced as a man by his community, obligated now to follow the commandments of God.

Because most of us have some familiarity with Judaism, we come to our Bibles thinking that the Judaism of Israel, the religion of Jesus’ day, was basically the same as Judaism in the 21st century. But that is not true. A bit of history will help us to grasp this.

The people of God

Judaism began nearly 4,000 years ago, the day that God came to a man named Abraham and promised him a land, descendants more numerous than the stars, and that all the

families would be blessed through Abraham's family. This family became the people of God, the ones through whom God would redeem the world. Later, God's people would be enslaved in Egypt. So God sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and seek the people's freedom. Eventually, Pharaoh let them go and God led them to Mt. Sinai. There, God taught them how to live as God's people (the Law) and gave them a religious system of altars, priests, and sacrifices so that they could atone for their sins against God.

For more than a millennium, God relentlessly pursued his people even as they forgot all their lessons, substituted ritual for love, and generally made a wreck of things. Finally, in 587 BC, the Babylonians overran Jerusalem and it seemed that all was lost. What followed shaped modern Judaism.

Many Jews fled Palestine and many others were exiled to places like Egypt and Persia. Over the next five centuries, some went southward into Egypt and across North Africa. Others went up into Turkey and across into Greece. This migration and exile of Jews out of Palestine is known as the Jewish Diaspora ("dispersion" or "scattering".) By the first-century AD, there was even a sizeable Jewish community in Rome.

The Diaspora and the loss of the temple

As these far-flung Jewish communities sought to live out their faith, they didn't have access to the temple in Jerusalem, nor priests, nor sacrifices. This temple system had been the center of Jewish religious life since Mt. Sinai. Those living hundreds or thousands of miles from Jerusalem had to make do. They took to meeting together in places set aside for that purpose. These were "synagogues," which is simply the Greek word for "meeting place." There, Jewish men and women would meet on the Sabbath to read Scripture, discuss it, pray together, and generally re-focus themselves on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In addition to building a religious life focused on the reading and discussion of Torah (the written Law) and the oral law, Jews in Alexandria translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, for many Jews of the Diaspora could no longer read or write Hebrew. This translation is known as the Septuagint. Many people don't realize that the writers of the New Testament used and quoted from the Septuagint, not the original Hebrew.

Although many Jewish communities in Galilee and Judea had synagogues in Jesus' day, Judaism was still a religion focused on the temple and the priestly system. As Jesus grew up he would have made his way to Jerusalem for each of the three major Jewish festivals. There, he would have participated in the sacrifice of animals at the temple.

It is here that many Christians lose their way when they come to Judaism and the Bible. We don't really comprehend that the Judaism we read about in our Bible was centered around and focused on the temple and the blood sacrifices. We go to synagogue with our friends and don't see anything like priests and sacrifices. What happened?

What happened were the Romans. In the late 60's AD, the Romans sent one quarter of their legions to stamp out the latest Jewish rebellion. In so doing, they destroyed the temple that Herod had built. Jesus had said the temple would be torn down, stone upon stone (Mark 13:2), and he was proved right only a few decades after his death and resurrection. If you visit Jerusalem, you can still see the giant stones from the temple lying on sidewalks below where they fell almost 2,000 years ago.

With the temple gone, Judaism was thrown into crisis. No temple. No priests. No sacrifices. Over time, even the pronunciation of the name of God was lost, as only the High Priest of Israel could say it and only in the temple on Yom Kippur.

But Judaism endured and began to be reshaped into a religion centered on the study of Torah, on synagogues and rabbis – all the elements of Judaism that did not require a temple and priests. As the rabbis would say, "Where two or three gather to study Torah, there is God."

Judaism had never been a very philosophical religion. It had always been more about the worship of the Lord God and the practices entailed in living life in God's presence. Judaism would remain so. However, in the 13th century Maimonides, a Spanish physician and philosopher, set out what he called "13 principles" that he believed set forth the essential

beliefs that should be shared by all those who embraced Judaism. At the time, they weren't widely embraced but came to be over time. Today, Orthodox Jews (see the page four text box) see them as foundational to the worship of God

The Thirteen Principles set forth by Maimonides

1. The existence of God
2. God's unity and indivisibility into elements
3. God's spirituality and incorporeality
4. God's eternity
5. God alone should be the object of worship
6. Revelation through God's prophets
7. The preeminence of Moses among the prophets
8. The Torah we have today is the one dictated to Moses by God
9. The Torah given by Moses will not be replaced and nothing may be added or removed from it
10. God's awareness of human actions
11. The reward of good and punishment of evil
12. The coming of the Jewish Messiah
13. The resurrection of the dead

You can see that Christians hold many of these beliefs as well. This shouldn't surprise us as, of all the world's religions, Christianity and Judaism are the closest cousins. In the first decades of Christianity it was beliefs about Jesus that pushed apart those who followed Jesus, Jew and Christian alike, and the Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah, much less as God. But it is important to remember that all of the first Christians were Jews who embraced Jesus as Messiah and Lord. It took more than a decade for Gentiles to begin to be a part of the movement. Paul, the most influential of all the apostles, was not only Jew, but also a Pharisee. But it was inevitable that the number of Gentiles would overwhelm the Jews in the Jesus movement; there were just so many more of them. And it wasn't long before Judaism and Christianity became like two rivers heading further and further apart.

Why didn't more Jews accept Jesus as their Messiah?

I very often get this question. To answer it, we have to put ourselves into the first-century Judaism of Palestine. The Jews of Jesus had lived under one foreign power or another for the better part of six centuries. They longed to be free and to have a rightful king. Many of them believed that God would very soon raise up one from among them who would be empowered by God to be that rightful king. A king like David, able to get rid of the pagan oppressors, cleanse the temple of its cheating priests, and restore Israel to its former greatness by ushering in the kingdom of God. They expected this Messiah to arrive in power and might and wonder and glory. Thus, when Jesus of Nazareth ended up on a cross, it could only seem that he was merely another of the would-be Messiahs who came before him and after him. The Jewish conception of the Messiah had no room for suffering and death.

The worldviews of Jews and Christians

Sadly, the relationship between Jews and Christians has been deeply marred by persecution of the Jews in the name of Christ. When you read even a bit of the history long before the Holocaust, it is hard to comprehend how anyone could think that such horrors were within the will of God. Thus, we are tempted to minimize the differences between Jewish and Christian beliefs. But the truth is that we do not agree about the most important question of all, "Who is Jesus?" In Judaism, Jesus may have been a well-meaning teacher, but he was not the Messiah; neither was he God in any way or sense whatsoever.

N. T. Wright offers us the following story of the world as told by Christians. I've drawn a line through one phrase and added a single phrase to the end to make it the story told by orthodox Jews (see the page four text box).

The story is about a creator and his creation,
about humans made in this creator's image and given tasks to perform,
about the rebellion of humans and the dissonance of creation at every level,
and particularly about the creator's acting,
through Israel ~~and climactically through Jesus,~~
to rescue his creation from its ensuing plight.

The story continues with the creator acting by his own spirit within the world to bring it towards the restoration which is his intended goal for it.
which will be accomplished upon the arrival of God's Messiah."

You can see that Christians and Jews share many of the same answers to life's most important questions, but we do not share the answer to the most important question of all – "Who is Jesus?" It should be our hope that Jews and Christians will continue to find much common ground as we tell an increasingly skeptical world that there is a Creator who made us, knows us, and loves us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Certainly, the place to begin is sharing some of your own experiences with Jewish friends, family members, and colleagues. Have you ever attended synagogue or other Jewish gatherings, such as a bar mitzvah or a wedding? What struck you? What were your impressions? What did you learn?
2. The study explains a bit about the diaspora and the destruction of the temple by the Romans to help us understand that the Judaism of our friends is not just like the Judaism we meet in the Bible. Why do you think the temple was so central to the Judaism before its destruction?
3. Why do you think Judaism endured the loss of the temple, even as it changed? How do you think Judaism has endured the endless persecutions of the last two millennia? What part do you think God has played in this? What can each of us do to combat anti-semitism?
4. Finally, many Christians don't really comprehend that Jesus was Jewish. Why so much misunderstanding around this? What difference does it make that Jesus was born a Jew? Couldn't he have been born Roman or a Brit or Chinese? (Hint – Christians have always embraced the Old Testament.)

(taken from the BBC religions site)

What is the Torah?

The Torah is the first part of the Jewish bible. It is the central and most important document of Judaism and has been used by Jews through the ages.

Torah refers to the five books of Moses which are known in Hebrew as *Chameesha Choomshey Torah*. These are: *Bresheit* (Genesis), *Shemot* (Exodus), *Vayicra* (Leviticus), *Bamidbar* (Numbers), and *Devarim* (Deuteronomy).

Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai 50 days after their exodus from Egyptian slavery. They believe that the Torah shows how God wants Jews to live. It contains 613 commandments and Jews refer to the ten best known of these as the ten 10 statements.

The Torah is written in Hebrew, the oldest of Jewish languages. It is also known as *Torat Moshe*, the Law of Moses. The Torah is the first section or first five books of the Jewish bible. However, *Tanach* is more commonly used to describe the whole of Jewish scriptures. This is an acronym made up from the first letter of the words Torah, *Nevi im* (prophets), and *Ketuvim* (writings).

Similarly, the term Torah is sometimes used in a more general sense to incorporate Judaism's written and oral law. This definition encompasses Jewish scripture in its entirety including all authoritative Jewish religious teachings throughout history.

The word Torah has various meanings in English. These include: teaching, instruction and law. For Jews the Torah means all of these.

What is the Talmud?

The Talmud is the comprehensive written version of the Jewish oral law and the subsequent commentaries on it. It originates from the 2nd century AD. The word Talmud is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to teach', which can also be expressed as the verb 'to learn'.

The Talmud is the source from which the code of Jewish *Halakhah* (law) is derived. It is made up of the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah is the original written version of the oral law and the Gemara is the record of the rabbinic discussions following this writing down. It includes their differences of view.

The Talmud can also be known by the name *Shas*. This is a Hebrew abbreviation for the expression *Shishah Sedarim* or the six orders of the Mishnah.

The main divisions in modern Judaism

This is a good summary, written by Dr. Jill Carroll, an adjunct professor of world religions at Rice University. Her website is www.world-religions-professor.com

Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews and secular Jews are the most influential and important groups within Judaism in the modern period.

Orthodox Jews are those who maintain the most traditional beliefs and practices of the religion. They strictly observe the dietary laws (called "kosher" or "kashrut") and the practices of the sabbath, and are often marked by their ways of dress and appearance. Men undergo the ritual of circumcision when infants. As adults they wear black suits and hats, and sometimes allow their hair in front of their ears to grow into long curls. Women sometimes wear hats or other head coverings, and dress modestly. Orthodox synagogues are gender segregated.

Reform Judaism began in the 19th century as a movement designed to bring Judaism into line with the ideas of the western European enlightenment. Reform Jews reject outright what they see as the dogmatic, outdated practices of Orthodox Jews and focus on the ethical dimensions of the faith instead of the traditional rituals, commandments and practices. Reform Jews moved the Sabbath from Saturday to Sundays, often read scriptures in the vernacular language instead of Hebrew, set aside the kosher dietary codes and the distinctive ways of dress, and often discarded circumcision as well. The guiding sensibility here is that in order for the religion to be relevant and authentic, it must be reformed and reinvigorated from time to time, which sometimes means changing the fundamental ways in which the religion is practiced. Reform Judaism is the largest form of Judaism in the United States.

Conservative Judaism also began in the 19th century in reaction to what it perceived as the radical nature of Reform Judaism. The latter, according to Conservative Jews, threw out too much of what is vital to the Jewish religion. So, Conservative Judaism is a sort of middle position between Orthodox and Reform groups - many traditions and practices are retained, but some reforms are instituted as well. Conservative Judaism is the second largest form of Judaism in the United States.

Secular Jews are those who identify as Jewish culturally, but not religiously. Unlike most other religions, Judaism is passed down through matrilineal bloodlines. That is, a person is a Jew if his/her mother is Jewish. So, many Jews identify as Jews and have Jewishness as a core part of their identity, but they don't believe in God or practice the Jewish faith. They are secular people whose Jewish identity is cultural, not religious.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 3 God comes to Moses at the burning bush.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Exodus 12 The institution of the Passover</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Samuel 7 God promises David that one from his family will always sit on the throne of Israel.</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 2 On Pentecost, Peter rises to tell them of their crucified Messiah. He pulls no punches.</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 7 Stephen, the first Christian martyr, defends himself at trial by telling his accusers the story of Israel.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

