

# Bridges to the World's Great Religions



## Judaism

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### **Introduction to the Series**

We're going to be looking at the great religions of the world this Fall - for three reasons.

- 1 - One is this - one of the best ways to learn about your own religion is to learn about another religion.
- 2 - A second reason we don't have a monopoly on the truth and we can learn from others. I believe the verse that says, "*Jesus Christ is, 'the way, the truth and the life.'*" But I also believe there is other truth out there as well. All truth is God's truth, so we don't have to be afraid of it.
- 3 - A third reason to study other religions is this: how can we use such words as "tolerate" "affirm" "coexist" "accept" when we know so little about the other religions?

**We begin by starting with the religion closest to ours, one we owe an eternal debt of gratitude to - Judaism.** It's the faith of our Savior.

It's what Jesus was immersed in as a young child. It's the Bible stories he learned and the prayers he said.

**Judaism has had not only an enormous impact upon our faith, it's also had an enormous impact upon the world. *Jews are Small in Numbers, but Enormous in their Contributions to the World.*** There are only 14 mil. Jews worldwide-4.9 mil. in Is., 5.2 mil. in US Think for a moment about the Cultural Contributions of Jews. Here's a few names:

Felix Mendelssohn, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Stephen Sondheim, Allen Ginsberg, Artur Miller, Bob Dylan, Philip Roth, Steven Spielberg, Barbra Streisand, Sandy Koufax, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud

Jews make up less than 2% of the population in the US, but their impact is incredible. One area of American life that Jews have dominated is comedy. The majority of working comics are Jewish. Jews have longed looked at the absurdities of life. You see this in the prophets of the Old Testament - "Why are we living in tents when those godless Babylonians are living in palaces?" The prophets, like comedians, also pointed out hypocrisy when they saw it. Here's a few names to consider: the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Mel Brooks, George Burns, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Jerry Lewis, Joan Rivers, Jerry Seinfeld, Adam Sandler and Jon Stewart.

Here's another amazing fact: 25% of all the Nobel prizes have gone to Jews. And in business such companies as Levi's, Starbucks, Facebook, Google, Hyatt & Dell all have Jewish origins. When you think of all the hardship and oppression that Jews have faced in their history, their impact, success and contributions to the world are staggering.

**Here's the biggest one of all:** one out of every two people on the planet owes a huge debt to Judaism because half of all people alive today are part of a religion that came from Judaism - Muslims & Christians. Judaism gave birth to Christianity & Islam. And half of the people on the planet are either Christian or Muslim. There are about 1.5 bil. Muslims and 2.2 bil. Christians.

**So, what a debt we owe to Judaism!** Judaism gave us Jesus! And Judaism also gave us the Old Testament. I'd like you to hear some of the great passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of the finest literature from the ancient world comes from the Hebrew Bible. Let's take a look:

## **Selected Verses from the Hebrew Scriptures**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep . . .*

*Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.*

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it."*

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

*"Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."*

*The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord*

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.*

*Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*

*You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them*

*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.*

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.*

*Honor your father and your mother.*

*You shall not murder.*

*You shall not commit adultery.*

*You shall not steal.*

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your*

*neighbor's wife, servants, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

*He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.*

*If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness- on them light has shined.*

*For unto us a child is born; unto us a son given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders; and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

## **Key Concepts of Judaism**

**A. Monotheism** - One, Holy, Almighty, Personal, Just God

This is Judaism's chief contribution to the study of God. There's an emphasis on a radical qualitative distinction between God & humanity. This is not the case with other religions. (Ex. Hinduism - "The Atman is the Brahman." = the spirit of your soul is the spirit of the universe)

**B. Covenant with Ancient Israel** - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - Covenant reaffirmed through Moses, David,

**C. Law/Torah** - refers to first 5 books of the Bible, also refers to the entire Hebrew Bible, Mishnah & Talmud - ancient commentaries on Bible, are also called "Torah." "Torah" can also refer to Jews discussing the Torah. Similar to the Christian theologian Karl Barth, who taught that the Word of God comes to us in 3 different forms - Jesus Christ, the Scriptures and the Sermon - the Word of God proclaimed

**D. Narratives/Stories** - a religion of stories - Adam & Eve, Noah & the Ark, Joseph & his Brothers, Moses and the Israelites, David & Goliath, David & Bathsheba.

Christianity's focus is often doctrine. Incarnation, Trinity, Cross, Resurrection, etc. Islam is a religion of ritual. Ex. praying 5 times a day  
Judaism is a religion of stories.

**E. A People & their Land** – this is one of the dominant themes of the OT.

**F. Prophets** - all of life is holy, all of life is to be under the reign of God, social justice, esp. justice for the poor

**G. Communal Worship & Prayer.** Like Christianity, Judaism is a religion of community.

**H. Exile & Return** - this is a central theme within the Hebrew scriptures  
Adam & Eve get exiled from the garden  
Cain kills his brother Abel - he gets exiled  
How can they get back to God?  
Abraham & Sarah are asked to leave their homeland (exiled) to go to a new land.  
Once there in two generations the family is exiled to Egypt because of a famine in the land. Will they get back home?  
Then of course there's the Babylonian exile & return.  
All throughout the Old Testament and throughout the history of the Jews,

there's this theme of exile and return.

Steven Prothero is a professor of comparative religion at BU. He says this is **the dominant theme of Judaism - Exile and Return**. All religions address problems in the human condition. But they address different problems. **Christianity** sees the problem as sin, separating us from God. And the solution is salvation through Christ. **Islam** sees the problem as pride, and the solution is submit to God.

**Judaism's "Problem" to Solve:** Exile from God

**The Solution:** Return to God and Community.

**The Methods:** Tell the Stories & Keep the Laws/Torah, and Community Prayer, Praise & Commemorations

(from Stephen Prothero's God is Not One: the Eight Rival Religions that Run the World)

(I also want to mention The Zionist Movement which began in the 19th C. It culminated in a return from exile in 1948 The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. The Jews were without a homeland for almost 1900 yrs. So in many ways, 1948 was the ultimate return. Of course it created another issue and that was the displacement of the Palastinians.)

## **Branches within Judaism**

(1st C. - Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots)

**A. Non-Observant Jews** - largest category

**B. Orthodox** - focus on following the laws, Ultra Orthodox = Hasidic  
(21% of American Jews)

- defenders of the Torah
- kosher dietary laws
- services are in Hebrew, male clergy only
- men wear a yarmulke most of the time

**C. Conservative** - focus on tradition (33% of American Jews)

- worship is in Hebrew, women & gay & lesbian folks may be ordained as rabbi

**D. Reformed** - focus on ethics (39% of American Jews)

- focus is on social justice issues, prophetic trad.

**E. (Messianic Jews** - ethnically & culturally Jewish yet theologically Christian)

(I write this in parenthesis because most Jews do not consider Messianic Jews Jewish. Messianic Jews accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, while most Jews are still awaiting the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom of peace. We'll all be together at the return of Christ - our second coming, their first.)

**Kosher:** do not mix meat & dairy, only eat fish with scales & fins, no pork or birds of prey, meat must come from animals that chew a cud & have cloven hoofs - comes partly from the Bible and from rabbinical tradition

**Observances** (\* = Major Observances)

**\*Shabbat/Sabbath** - Friday sunset to Saturday sunset

- they welcome in the sabbath, turn to outside doors

**\*Rosh Hashanah** - Jewish New Year, celebrates the gift of creation – Gen. 1 & 2

**\*Yom Kippur** = The Day of Atonement

**Sukkot** - Feast of Booths, remembers the Exodus and Wilderness journey

**Chanukah/Hanukkah** - Festival of Lights, Maccabees def. Syrians, 2nd C. BC. Hanukkah is sometimes called the "Jewish Christmas" because it involves gift-giving and falls near our Christmas. But Hanukkah is really a minor holiday within Judaism.

**Purim** - commemorates Esther saving the Jews in Persia



**\*Passover** - delivery from slavery in Egypt

**Savuot** - "Sha - voo - ott") (Pentecost) celebrates the spring harvest & God's gift of the Torah

**\*Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah** - "son/daughter of the commandments" - "called to Torah"

## **What Christians can learn from Judaism:**

### **A. "Arguing for the Sake of God"**

Jews believe there are two kinds of arguing. One is arguing for arguing's sake. They believe that's a waste of time. But arguing for the sake of God is worth doing. It's how we learn and grow.

Hasidic saying: *"If you are proved right, you accomplish little, but if you are proved wrong, you gain much; you learn truth."*

Jews love the questions.

Elie Weisel - *"If a Jew has no one to quarrel with, he quarrels with God, and we call it theology; or he quarrels with himself, and we call it psychology."*

**B. Honest about The Struggle of Faith** - wrestling with God - Jacob=Israel, Laments in Bible, Lamentations.

Job - what other religion has an entire sacred book devoted to the question - "Why?"

- The Holocaust caused many Jews to wonder - did God go into exile?

- 1/3 of all Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

Elie Weisel says this is the ultimate question for Jews today: How can we have faith in God after the Holocaust?

**C. Devotion to the Will & Words of God** - "called to Torah" - devoted to God's word

**D. Prophetic Tradition** - justice for the poor to "repair the world" (our denomination carries on this tradition)

**E. Keeping the Faith while in Exile** in a strange land, a model for us  
- *"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land"* (Ps. 137:4)

"Chai" is a symbol of Judaism - Life, Live, Living!



"L'chaim!" = To Life!

An appropriate symbol for a people who have suffered the worst fate in human history, and yet with remarkable resilience they affirm life and faith.

**"L'chaim!"**