

Judaism Notes

Judaism is a monotheistic religion based on Jewish writings called the Torah. The Jewish people believe that God made a covenant with Abraham, by which He would give them a land and make them a unique people belonging to Him, and a second covenant with Moses, which gave them the Torah (Law) by which they were to live.

History

Judaism began when God came to Abraham around 2100 BC and called him out of Sumer (the region of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers).

God made a covenant with Abraham, wherein He promised to make Abraham's descendants numerous and into a great nation. God would give him a land of his own, and his descendants would be used by God to bless the world.

In the 1800s BC, the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, were enslaved in Egypt.

In 1446 BC, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt under the leadership of the Moses, the greatest prophet in Judaism.

God then appeared to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, where He a second covenant with the Israelites, giving them the Law (Torah) and the Talmud.

God had them build a tabernacle (later replaced by the temple), where they would make sacrifices to remove their sins of violating the Law.

God then brought them to the land of Canaan, the land that He had promised them.

Over time Israel disobeyed the Law, and, because of their idolatry and social injustice, they were taken into exile in 722 BC and 586 BC.

They were allowed to return to their land under the Persian King Cyrus II in 539 BC.

In 70 AD, the Romans destroyed the Jews' temple, where they made sacrifices to God.

Without a temple and sacrifices, the Jews began to build synagogues and emphasized obedience to the Torah in order to be right with God. The rabbis ("teachers") became the authority on the Law.

In 135 AD, the Romans drove the Jews out of their land, and they were scattered throughout the world.

This scattering created two major religious-cultural divisions within Judaism: the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim.

The Sephardim ("Iberian") originated in the Iberian Peninsula, which includes Spain and Portugal. These Jews spoke Ladino, a blend of Spanish and Hebrew.

The Ashkenazim appeared in Germany and then Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania. These Jews developed the Yiddish language, a form of German that incorporates Hebrew words.

Traditionally, the Ashkenazim concentrated more on the study of religion and Jewish law than did the Sephardim, who more fully embraced science and secular philosophy.

In following years of persecution, the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, France in 1306, and Spain in 1492. In 1569, Pope Pius expelled all Jews from the Papal States, located in present-day Italy.

In many places, Jews were forcibly segregated from the rest of the population. In the 1500s and 1600s, government officials established ghettos for Jews in Rome, Italy; Frankfurt, Germany; and many other European cities.

During the 1700s to 1900s in Eastern Europe, including Russia, Poland, and Ukraine, tens of thousands of Jews were violently killed by these governments and the people.

Between 1933 and 1945, 6 million Jews were exterminated in the Holocaust by Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. The Catholic Church and many European Protestant Christian churches supported the ghettos and executions of the Jews.

After Germany lost World War II, many surviving Jews immigrated to the United States, Canada, and South America.

A group of Jews known as Zionists wanted to return to Israel and create a Jewish state and refuge for Jews.

The Arabs living in Israel, also known as Palestine, opposed the establishment of a Jewish state, and conflict broke out among the Arabs, Jews, and British, who controlled Palestine.

In 1947, the United Nations approved a plan to divide Palestine into two states—an independent Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state. Arab leaders rejected the plan and launched attacks against Jewish settlers.

On May 14, 1948, the Chairman of the Provisional State Council of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, proclaimed the State of Israel.

The conflict between Jewish people and the Arabs in Israel continues into the present day.

Today about 14 million people identify themselves as Jews, mostly living in Israel (about 6,400,000 adherents) and America (about 5,700,000 adherents).

Writings

The Tanakh (“the holy writings”) is the authoritative word of God. In Christianity it is called the Old Testament. TaNaKh is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter of each of its three subdivisions.

- **Torah** (“instructions”) contains the first five books of Moses. It contains a historical account of the early Jewish people and instructions for worshipping God.
- **Nevi'im** (“prophets”) contains the narrative books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and the prophets. Its authority is secondary to the Torah.
- **Ketuvim** (“writings”) contains Ruth, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, the wisdom literature, and poetry.

The Talmud (“learning”) is the “oral law,” which is a commentary on and interpretation of the Torah. The Jewish people believe God gave Moses the Torah and the Talmud. They believe that the Talmud is necessary for understanding the Torah.

The Talmud has two parts:

- **Mishnah** (“study by repetition”) is the teachings of the rabbis and gives guidelines for the Torah. These oral teachings were written down and gathered together between 200 and 220 AD.
- **Gemara** (“study”) are other rabbinic elaborations on the Torah. These were compiled in the 500s AD.

Midrash (“to explore”) is a series of stories and interpretations primarily focusing on the Hebrew Bible.

Beliefs about God

God is the sovereign creator over the entire universe.

God is not triune in nature but is a single being (Deut. 6:4-5).

God is personal and relational. He interacts with His people and makes covenants with them in order to bless them.

God is a moral God with moral demands who will hold people accountable for their deeds.

Beliefs about the Material Realm

God is the sovereign creator of all creation.

This world is a good and orderly world that God created for humans to enjoy.

Beliefs about Humanity

Humans are created by God and are morally accountable to God.

Humans are born good without any sin.

Humans have the ability to choose good or evil.

Beliefs about the Problem with the World and Humanity

There is no sin nature to overcome.

Sin is seen as individual deeds, not as a deep corruption of one’s heart and motives.

One sins morally and socially as they disobey the Torah.

Beliefs about the Solution to the Problem

The Jewish people presume a right standing with God.

Obedience to the Torah and its dietary laws are necessary.

One’s good desires and deeds must outweigh one’s bad deeds.

Tzedakah (“charity”), or caring for the needy and oppressed, is required by the Torah.

Repentance through keeping the Sabbath and rituals can remove one’s bad deeds.

Jews hope in the grace of God that they are good enough to enter the afterlife.

They believe in a resurrection into what they call “the world to come.”

Gan Eden (“Garden of Eden”) is the afterlife and is described as a place of happiness and tranquility.

Some Jewish people believe the unrighteous go to hell for eternity, while others believe they only go to hell for 12 months to be cleansed and then enter Gan Eden.

Beliefs about the Messiah

The Messiah, or mashiach, (“anointed one”) will appear on Earth, rebuild the temple, and return all people to the holy ways of the Torah.

The Messiah will defeat Israel’s enemies and transform the world into a paradise without pain or evil.

The Jewish people reject Jesus as the Messiah.

Branches of Judaism

Orthodox Judaism believes in the absolute authority of the Torah. Orthodox Jews believe they should hold to all of its teachings and that they are required to follow all the regulations of the Torah. They follow all the Jewish dietary laws of the Torah.

They believe in the coming of the Messiah, who will come to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and establish Israel as full nation. They believe in an afterlife and the resurrection of the dead.

Men and women sit separately in the synagogues, where the reading of the Torah is the focus of their religious gathering.

Most Orthodox Jews have a positive view of technology and scientific advances and maintain close contact with the modern world without compromising their traditional Jewish beliefs.

Orthodox Judaism makes up about 7% of religious Jews. Before the 1800 AD, they were the only Jewish group.

Reformed Judaism began in Germany in the 1700s AD, at the time of the Enlightenment. They hoped to better align traditional Jewish religious practices with the modern German society. Their goal was to become more German without losing their Jewish identity.

They adopted new practices and eliminated beliefs that might be perceived by non-Jewish people as superstitious and threatening.

They believe that the Torah is not the word of God but contains the words of God. They believe they are bound only by the moral dictates of the Law, not by the religious and ritual commands of the Torah.

They reject the dietary laws, the coming of the Messiah, and the rebuilding of the temple.

They modeled their synagogue services after the worship services of modern Christian churches.

Reformed Judaism makes up about 42 percent of religious Jews. The majority of synagogues are Reformed.

Conservative Judaism developed in the 1800s AD in a desire to find a middle ground between the previous two groups. They looked to preserve Jewish tradition while living in the modern world.

They believe that the Torah was divinely inspired by God rather than written by God.

They teach that Jewish laws, beliefs, and texts must be modified to suit the times without abandoning the core beliefs of Judaism and the teachings of the Torah.

They observe the Sabbath and dietary laws, but they permit considerable flexibility and freedom in carrying out these responsibilities.

Conservative Judaism makes up about 38 percent of religious Jews.

Secular Jews make up more than half of the Jewish population, most of them identifying themselves as atheist or secular spiritualist.

Practices in Judaism

Worship in the synagogue every Sabbath (seventh day of the week) is how one connects to God.

Both men and women wear head coverings. The male head covering is called a yarmulke or kippah. Women may wear scarves or hats.

Each Sabbath morning, the people stand as the Torah scrolls are taken from the Holy Ark, then the people recite the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5) and sing. Then a portion of the Torah is read.

Judaism recognizes three very important holidays:

- **Rosh Hashanah** (“beginning of the year”) is the new year celebration.
- **Yom Kippur** (“Day of Atonement”) is a day set aside for fasting and repenting of one’s sins committed during the year.
- **Hanukkah** (“Festival of Lights”) is an eight-day festival celebrating the cleansing of the temple in 164 BC.

Symbols



Star of David was never a uniquely Jewish symbol. It came from Kabbalah during the 1200s AD and began to be adopted by Jewish communities in Europe in the 1800s AD.



Menorah is a nine-branched candelabra used in the celebration of Hanukkah.

Witnessing to Jewish People

Pray for wisdom and pray for them.

Love them and listen to them.

Ask them what they believe.

Build a relationship with them.

Share your story with them.

Get them to think about how their worldview corresponds to reality.

Share with them how Jesus provides a better relationship, path, and future.

Jewish people believe that Christianity is for Gentiles and that Judaism is for the Jewish people. Explain to them that you became a Christian through personal faith.

They have an unspoken fear that faith in Jesus means ceasing to be a Jewish and having to abandon their Jewish history and culture. Remind them that Jesus is a Jew and came to fulfill Judaism.

Avoid Christian jargon like “born again,” “saved,” etc.

Avoid the terms “the Jews” or “you Jews” because it sounds anti-Semitic to them.

“Jewish” should be used with the people, land, language, and religion—not stuff like money or media.

Avoid the phrase “the cross” because it communicates persecution. Instead use “the death of Jesus.”

The Jewish people love to tell Jewish jokes; do not join them.

Stick to witnessing to Jewish friends.

Join them in their holidays and find common ground.

Explain well the concepts of sin, salvation, and savior. These words are foreign to them.

Explain how Jewish prophecy has been fulfilled through Jesus. Many of them do not know their own prophecies.

Use the Bible only when they have shown a willingness.