

Judaism

(part 1 of 4): An Introduction



The Merriam Webster online dictionary defines Judaism as a religion developed among the ancient Hebrews and characterized by belief in one transcendent God who has revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets and by a religious life in accordance with Scriptures and rabbinic traditions.^[1] It would also be correct to say that Judaism incorporated the cultural, social, and religious beliefs and practices of the Jewish people.

According to the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, there were around 13.1 million Jewish people in the world in 2007; most reside in the USA and Israel. Many of these people identify themselves as Jews but do not believe in, nor follow any Jewish laws or rites. Judaism 101^[2] claims that more than half of the Jews in Israel today call themselves “secular,” and do not believe in God and that half of all Jews in the United States don’t belong to any synagogue.

Jews generally consider anyone born of a Jewish mother to be a “Jew”. Some groups also accept children of Jewish fathers however that is not the norm. Furthermore, a Jew does not lose the technical status of being a Jew by adopting another faith; they do however choose to lose the religious element of their Jewish identity. It is possible for a non Jew to “convert” to Judaism but it is not a simple process. Jews do not try to convert people to Judaism and in fact part of the conversion process requires a rabbi^[3] to make three vigorous attempts to dissuade a person from converting.

Although many make contrary claims that Judaism is a religion or a race, a culture, or an ethnic group, none of these descriptions appear to be entirely adequate. For the purposes of this article we will discuss Judaism, the religion.

Judaism (an organised religion) was, in its pristine form, revealed to Prophet Moses; however Jews trace their ancestry back to Prophet Abraham; so to do Christians and Muslims. Prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, known in

Judaism as the Patriarchs, and known and accepted as Prophets of God by Islam..

According to Jewish tradition Abraham was the son of an idol merchant, but from his early childhood, he questioned the faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single Creator, and he began to teach this belief to others. This belief is generally accepted as the world's first monotheistic religion.^[4]

Say, "Truly, my Lord has guided me to a Straight Path, a right religion, the religion of Abraham, hanifa (i.e. Monotheism - to believe in One God). And he was not among those who associated others with God" (Quran 6:161)

Verily, Abraham was the leader of a nation, obedient to God, hanifa (i.e. to worship none but God), and he was not of those who associate others with God (polytheists, idolaters, disbelievers in the Oneness of God). (Quran 16:120)

Judaism has no formal dogma or set of beliefs, actions are considered far more important than beliefs. Jews believe that there is one God, the Creator of the universe, with whom every Jew can have an individual and personal relationship.

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, (a.k.a. Maimonides) put together 13 Principles of Faith that are widely accepted amongst the different movements of Judaism. More recently they have been called into question by more liberal schools of thought; however for our purposes here they summarise the general precepts of Judaism. Personal opinion on all of these precepts is acceptable, due to, as already pointed out, the focus being more on actions rather than belief.

God exists.

God is one and unique.

God is incorporeal.

God is eternal.

Prayer is to be directed to God alone and to no other.

The words of the prophets are true.

Moses was the greatest of the prophets, and his prophecies are true.

The Written Torah (first 5 books of the Bible) and Oral Torah (teachings now contained in the Talmud and other writings) were given to Moses.

There will be no other Torah.

God knows the thoughts and deeds of men.

God will reward the good and punish the wicked.

The Messiah will come.

The dead will be resurrected.

The website Judaism 101 describes the nature of the relationship between God and humankind and God and Jews as it is understood by the different Jewish schools of thought. “Our scriptures tell the story of the development of these relationships”. [5] Jewish scriptures outline mutual obligations; however the various movements of Jewish thought often disagree about the nature of these obligations. “Some say they are absolute, unchanging laws from God (Orthodox); some say they are laws from God that change and evolve over time (Conservative); some say that they are guidelines that you can choose whether or not to follow (Reform).”[6]

Judaism has a rich history of religious text, but the central, most important religious document, is the Torah. The word Torah, especially for non Jews, or Christians, most commonly refers to the first five books of the Old Testament (Bible), what the Jews call the books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. When Muslims refer to the Torah, they use the word *Tawrat* and mean the law as it was revealed to Prophet Moses.

When Jews use the word Torah, they usually mean the entire body of Jewish scripture, known as the Tanakh. Tanakh is also an acrostic term for Torah (the Law), Nevi'im (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings), the three parts of Jewish scripture, again, what Christians would call the Old testament. In some circumstances Tanakh can refer to the whole body of Jewish law and teachings.

Next in importance and authority comes the Talmud; a body of work that explains the scriptures and how to interpret and apply the laws. This was compiled and written down in a body of work commonly referred to as the Mishnah. Over the centuries, additional commentaries elaborating on the Mishnah were written down in Jerusalem and Babylon. These additional commentaries are known as the Gemara.

The body of work included in the Gemara is massive. It includes comments from hundreds of Rabbis from 200 - 500 CE, explaining the Mishnah with additional historical, religious, legal, and social comment. The Gemara and the Mishnah together are known as the Talmud. This was completed in the 5th century C.E. There are two Talmuds, one compiled in Jerusalem and another in Babylonia. The Babylonian Talmud was compiled later and is more comprehensive, it is the one usually meant when someone refers to “the Talmud”.

In part 2 we will continue to explore the religion of Judaism, discuss why Jews (or what we will come to learn are the Children of Israel) are often

referred to as the “Chosen people” both in Jewish and Islamic literature and scripture.

Footnotes:

[1] (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/judaism>)

[2] (<http://www.jewfaq.org/judaism.htm>)

[3] A Jewish scholar or teacher.

[4] Not according to Islam, where the Prophet’s of God, including Adam, the father of human kind practised and taught pure monotheism.

[5] (<http://www.jewfaq.org/beliefs.htm>)

[6] Ibid.

(part 2 of 4): The Chosen People

In the last article we learned that that the organised and structured religion revealed to Prophet Moses came to be known as Judaism. The name probably originated from Judah, the son of Prophet Jacob and leader of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, or from the ancient Kingdom of Judah. The Jews, under God’s guidance became a powerful people with kings (who were also Prophets of God) including Saul, David, and Solomon, who built the first great temple. More detailed information about the Ancient kingdom of Israel can be found on this website.[1]

However Jews, as a people, trace their history back to Prophet Abraham, as do Muslims. Islam Judaism and Christianity are known as Abrahamic faiths or the three great monotheistic faiths. In Islam and Judaism the people known as Jews are usually referred to as the Children of Israel. This should not be confused with the state of Israel that exists today in the Middle East. Israel is another name for Prophet Jacob (in Islam Yacub), therefore the term ‘the Children of Israel’ refers to the descendants of Prophet Jacob.

Over a thousand years after Abraham, the Jews were living as slaves in Egypt; their leader was the Prophet of God known as Moses[2] to Christians, and known in Judaism as Moshe Rabbenu ('Moses our teacher'). He led his people out of slavery in Egypt and on their behalf he received the Torah that included not only the Ten commandments, but a total of 613 rules (or commandments) that some Jews continue to live by to this day.

Jews believe there is only One God, with whom they have a strong and binding covenant.

“That I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore, and your descendants will inherit the cities of their enemies. And through your

children shall be blessed all the nations of the world, because you hearkened to My voice." (Genesis 22:18)[3]

And God said to Moses; "And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." (Exodus 19: 5&6)[4]

According to various Jewish websites, the fact the Jews refer to themselves as God's chosen people does not mean that they are in any way superior to other peoples. Biblical verses such as Exodus 19:5 simply imply that God selected Jews to receive and study the Torah, to worship God only, to rest on the weekly Sabbath, and to celebrate the festivals. Jews were not chosen to be better than others rather they were selected to receive more difficult responsibilities and a more onerous punishment if they fail.

God, they say, appointed the Jews to be his chosen people in order to set an example of holiness and ethical behaviour to the world.[5] This is confirmed in Islamic scripture and literature.

"O Children of Israel! Remember My Favour which I bestowed upon you and that I preferred you..." (Quran2:47)

"And We gave Moses the Scripture and made it a guidance for the Children of Israel (saying): 'Take not other than Me as (your) Protector, Lord, or Disposer of your affairs.'" (Quran 17:2)

"O Children of Israel! Remember My Favour which I bestowed upon you, and fulfil (your obligations to) My Covenant (with you) so that I fulfil (My Obligations to) your covenant (with Me), and fear none but Me." (Quran 2:40)

Thus, to fulfil their covenant, Jews keep God's laws and seek to bring holiness into every aspect of their lives. A religious Jew tries to bring holiness into everything he does, by doing it as an act that praises God, and for such a person, life becomes an act of worship. The Quran however goes on to state that the Jews failed to keep their covenant with God.

"And believe in what I have sent down (this Quran), confirming that which is with you, the Torah and the Gospel, and be not the first to disbelieve therein, and buy not with My Verses a small price (i.e. getting a small gain by selling My Verses), and fear Me and Me Alone." (Quran 2:41)

“So, because of their breach of their covenant, We cursed them and made their hearts grow hard. They change the words from their (right) places and have abandoned a good part of the Message that was sent to them...” (Quran 5:13)

Islam teaches that all prophets came to their people with the same proclamation, “...‘**O my people, worship God, you have no other God but Him...**’”. (Quran 11:50). Among the prophets that Islam recognises is a chain of Prophets sent to the Jews. Prophets that Jews, Christians and Muslims are all familiar with. This chain includes Prophets Moses, King David, King Solomon, Zechariah, John the Baptist and Jesus, son of Mary. The Jews disbelieve in Jesus son of Mary even though his mission was clear.

“And in their footsteps, We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel, in which was guidance and light and confirmation of the Torah that had come before it, a guidance and an admonition for the pious.” (Quran 5:46)

Prophet Muhammad is the last of the Prophets, yet the Jews also disbelieve in him and disbelieve any references made to him in the Torah.

“O you who have been given the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Believe in what We have revealed (to Muhammad) confirming what is (already) with you...” (Quran 4:46)

In part 3 of this series of articles about Judaism we will discuss the similarities between Judaism and Islam.

Footnotes:

[1] (<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/2435/>)

[2] (More information can be found here. <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/3366/>)

[3] (http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8217/jewish/Chapter-22.htm)

[4] Ibid.

[5] (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/>)

(part 3 of 4): Focus on Similarities not Differences

In part 2 we discussed the role of the Jews as *The Chosen People* and concluded with the fact that the Quran states that the Jews failed to keep their covenant with God. From Islam’s point of view the Jews fell from grace. In the Torah (and the Bible) we find the following passage.

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the

peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers... “ (Deutoronomy 6: 7-8)

However in the Quran, the words of God, revealed more than 650 years after the birth of Jesus, son of Mary, we find a very different set of circumstances.

“...they disobeyed (God and the Messengers) and were ever transgressing beyond bounds. They used not to prevent one another from wrongdoing (sins, polytheism, and disbelief) that they did. Vile indeed was what they used to do” (Quran 5:78&79)

It is only natural to wonder what happened throughout the history of the Jewish people to have them fall so far from the grace of God. Quran tells us that the Jewish people were not grateful for the untold blessings God had bestowed upon them; instead they transgressed, lied and blasphemed. Despite this Judaism and Islam have a lot in common.

Christianity Judaism and Islam are referred to as the three monotheistic faiths. They all profess a belief in One God; however, it is undeniable that the beliefs of Christianity are somewhat different to the other two. Jews are strict monotheists, as are Muslims. Their belief in God is sometimes referred to as pure monotheism. Both Jews and Muslims view God as a single, indivisible entity. This contrasts with most Christians who view God as a Trinity, a single entity with three distinct personalities, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Say: ‘He is God, (the Unique) One.’” (Quran 112:1)

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One (Deutoronomy 6:4)

Let us examine some of the similarities between Judaism and Islam in more detail.

- Jewish belief does not accept the Christian concept of original sin (the belief that all people have inherited Adam and Eve’s sin when they disobeyed God’s instructions in the Garden of Eden). Islam also denies the Christian concept of original sin and the notion that humankind is born sinful. In Islam each person bears responsibility for his own deeds. These deeds, sinful or otherwise cannot be inherited.

“And no bearer of burdens shall bear another’s burden...” (Quran 35:18)

- Jews do not recognize the need for a saviour as an intermediary or partner with God. Islam states clearly that there is no need for God, or even a Prophet of God to sacrifice himself for humankind’s sins in order to buy forgiveness. Islam refuses this view entirely. The foundation of

Islam rests on knowing with certainty that nothing should be worshipped but God alone.

This is also true of Judaism; however the similarities in regards to atonement end here because Judaism totally rejects Jesus as a prophet of God and fails to accept his position as Messiah^[1] to the Jewish people. Islam teaches that Jesus did not come to atone for the sins of mankind. Jesus came to denounce the leaders of the Children of Israel, who had fallen into lives of materialism and luxury. His mission was to confirm the Torah, to make lawful things that were previously unlawful and to proclaim and reaffirm the belief in One Creator.

“.. None has the right to be worshipped but God, the One and the Only True God...” (Quran 3:62)

- The most obvious common practice is the statement of the absolute oneness of God which Muslims observe in their five times daily prayers (*Salah*), and Jews state at least twice per day (morning and night) in their affirmation of the oneness of God known as the *Shema Yisrael*.
- They share the belief that Jerusalem is a holy place, particularly the Dome of the Rock known to Jews as the Temple Mount. Both religions believe this is where Abraham brought his son to sacrifice him - his first son Ishmael in Islam and his second son Isaac in the traditions of Judaism. Ishmael is considered by both religions to be the father of the Arab nation and Isaac the father of the Jews.
- Both Judaism and Islam share many fundamental concepts; including divine judgement and an afterlife.
- Islam and Judaism both have systems of religious law that do not distinguish between religious and secular life. In Islam the laws are called *Sharia*, in Judaism they are known as *Halakha*.
- Both Judaism and Islam consider the study of religious law to be a form of worship.

The two faiths also share the fundamental practices of fasting and charity, as well as similar dietary laws and aspects of ritual purity. With such obvious similarities one might ask why Jews and Muslims seem to be enemies. Furthermore, if Islam is a natural progression from Adam and Eve through a long line of prophets to Prophet Muhammad and the revelation of Quran, why don't more Jews embrace the Islamic faith? Part 4 will attempt to address these questions and conclude our study and discussion of Judaism.

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#) (Hebrew - Anointed One) - In Jewish tradition, a person of the line of King David who will return the Jews from exile, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and initiate a period of prosperity and peace.

(part 4 of 4): So Very Similar; so Why not the same?

In the three previous articles about the religion of Judaism we have learned first and foremost that Judaism and Islam have much in common. The political landscape of the 21st century seems to paint a picture of Jews and Muslims being mortal enemies but this is not the case. The two faiths share a history and at times have lived worked and cooperated with each other. Many Muslims wonder why Jews do not automatically see Islam as an extension of their own faith and thus embrace Islam wholeheartedly. The fact is many do, but the majority do not. In this final article we will continue to look at the similarities between the two faiths and briefly explore their historical interaction.

Judaism and Islam share a joint legacy of traditions. The two faiths share many of the same prophets, all acknowledging a common parent in Abraham. All ascribe similar attributes to God, including Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and Forgiver. The two faiths believe God is both Omnipotent and Omniscient. The kinship of these faiths continues through moral values, including respect for life, respect for parents, giving charity, doing good, and avoiding evil. Even their beliefs about the final moments of humankind's existence are similar. Judaism and Islam share the tradition that if the trumpet to signal the end of time is blown and you are holding a seedling in your hand, you should plant it. There is considerable and continued physical, theological, and political overlap between the two faiths.

The Torah records Abraham as the ancestor of the Jews through his son Isaac, born to Sarah fulfilling a promise made in Genesis. In the Islamic tradition Prophet Muhammad is a descendant of Abraham's son Ishmael. Jewish tradition also equates the descendants of Ishmael with Arabs. The so called Jewish prophets feature prominently in Islamic scripture and literature and the message is always the same – worship One God.

“Abraham was the father of the Prophets; no Prophet was sent after him but he was from among his descendents. He had two sons whom God chose to be Prophets. They were Ishmael the grandfather of the Arabs, from among whose descendents God sent the Prophet Muhammad and Isaac whom God blessed with a son Prophet Jacob, who was also known as Israel, after whom the Children of Israel and their Prophets were called.”[\[1\]](#)

“And We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob, each of them We guided, and before him, We guided Noah and among his progeny David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses and Aaron. Thus do We reward the good-doers. And Zachary and John and Jesus and Elias, each one of them

was of the righteous. And Ishmael and Elisha and Jonah and Lot and each one of them We preferred above the humankind and jinn (of their times).” (Quran 6:84-86)

Historically, Jews and Muslims have shared their cultures and prospered together, sometimes for centuries. This connection is best reflected in the 700 years of Muslim rule in Spain, at that time known as Andalusia. It was here that Jews held some of the most important political positions, were doctors to the Muslim rulers, and generated profound philosophical theories. Maimonides lived and wrote *The Guide to the Perplexed* (a discussion of some of the most difficult theories of theology) in Cordoba. A statue in his honour stands there still. Jews were able to make great advances in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and chemistry, and this era is sometimes referred to as the Golden age of Jewish culture. In 1492, when Andalusia was overrun by the Catholics and the Muslim rulers deposed, Jews and Muslims fled together to the safety of Muslim lands in North Africa and east toward Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Iraq.

“God does not forbid you from showing goodwill and dealing justly with those (of the unbelievers) who do not fight you because of your religion, nor drive you forth from your homes. God surely loves those who are just. God only forbids you respecting those who fight you on the basis of your religion, and expel you from your homes...” (Quran 60: 8 & 9)

The treatment of both Jews and Christians by Muslims is well documented. The Caliph Omar under whom Jerusalem was conquered about six years after the Prophet's death, not only issued an edict protecting the Christian religious sites, but also invited 70 Jewish families from Tiberias to take up residence in Jerusalem, from which they had been expelled by the Romans. Jews and Muslims have very much in common, the greatest doctrine being their belief in One God, indivisible and accessible.

With so many similarities one could easily ask the question, just why are more Jews not converting to Islam? As mentioned earlier, many are. In the early days of Islam many Jews did in fact convert to Islam and one in particular, Abdullah Ibn Salam, was a close companion of Prophet Muhammad. His story can be read in detail on this web site^[2]. The following is a short and list of notable Jews who converted to Islam.

- Rashid-al-Din Hamadani - 13th century Persian physician
- Yaqub ibn Killis - 10th century Egyptian vizier.
- Leila Mourad - Egyptian singer and actress of the 1940s and 1950s.
- Lev Nussimbaum - 20th century writer, journalist and orientalist.
- Jacob Querido - 17th century successor of the self-proclaimed Jewish Messiah Sabbatai Zevi.

- Ibn Sahl of Seville - 13th century Andalusian poet.

We actually know very little about the number of Jews who convert to Islam today. However their numbers may be higher than we imagine considering that Islam is, according to Pew,^[3] growing about 2.9% per year. This is faster than the total world population which increases about 2.3% annually. This site has collated what reliable statistical data there and it is available here.^[4]

Data from the state of Israel suggests that the conversion rate of Jews to Islam in Israel has doubled over the past several years. “Jews say they decided to convert after deepening their knowledge of Islam. Many are disappointed in Judaism,” a senior member of the Islamic court said. They are converting even though the Israeli Religious Affairs and Interior Ministries make it very difficult for them. According to one convert, “They are giving me the run around, sending me back and forth from office to office. They made me see a psychiatrist, to ‘make sure I wasn’t brainwashed.’ They did everything so that I would despair and return to Judaism.”^[5]

When you look at all the similarities it certainly appears that it is a small step, not at all a big cognitive leap, for a Jewish believer to slide effortlessly into the religion of Islam. Islam is however a gift from God, and God bestows it on whom He wills.

Footnotes:

^[1] From Usool al-Deen al-Islami by Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ibraaheem al-Tuwayjri (with some grammatical amendments).

^[2] (<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/4703/viewall/>)

^[3] The Pew Research Centre is an American think tank organization based in Washington, D.C. that provides information on issues, attitudes and trends shaping the United States and the world.

^[4] (<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/4394/viewall/>)

^[5] (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3274735,00.html>)