Judaism: An Overview

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. It is based on the principles of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) and the *Talmud* (a record of rabbinic discussions about law, ethics, custom and history). The history of Judaism begins with the covenant between God and Abraham, in which God establishes the Jews as His chosen people and promises them future blessings, including a large population and land. Most significantly, the Jews are the people through whom the entire world would be blessed (in the coming of the Messiah). Judaism is one of the oldest religious traditions still in practice today. Jewish history and beliefs have influenced other religions including Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i faith.

Jewish Texts

The *Tanakh* corresponds to the Old Testament and is composed of three parts:

- *Torah* (law) – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- *Nevi'im* (prophets) – Joshua, Judges, Samuel (2), Kings (2), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi.
- *Ketuvim* (writings) – Ruth, Chronicles (2), Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations and Daniel.

The *Talmud* comes mainly from two sources:

- *Mishnah* – containing hundreds of chapters, including series of laws from the Hebrew Scriptures.
- *Gemara* – including comments from hundreds of rabbis from 200-500 A.D. explaining the *Mishnah* with additional historical, religious, legal and other material.

Basic Jewish Beliefs

The closest thing to a creed in Judaism is the 13 articles formulated by rabbi and scholar Moses Maimonides, who lived from 1135-1204 A.D.

1. God alone is Creator.
2. God is one and unique.
3. God is incorporeal (without material existence).
4. God is eternal – the first and the last.
5. Prayer is to be directed to God alone and to no other.
6. The words of the prophets are true.
7. Moses was the greatest of the prophets, and his prophecies are true.
8. The *Written Torah* (first five books of the Bible) and the *Oral Torah* (teachings now contained in the *Talmud* and other writings) were given by Moses.
9. There will be no other *Torah*.
10. God knows the thoughts and deeds of men.
11. God will reward the good and punish the wicked.
12. The Messiah will come.
13. The dead will be resurrected.

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Some additional beliefs found commonly among Jews are:

- Jesus was a great moral teacher; or, Jesus was a false prophet or an idol of Christianity.
- The Jews are God's chosen people; that is, God selected Israel to receive and study the *Torah*, to worship God alone, to rest on the weekly Sabbath, and to celebrate the festivals.
- The 613 commandments found in Leviticus and other books of the Torah regulate all aspects of Jewish life.
- The Ten Commandments form a brief synopsis of the Law.
- The Messiah will arrive in the future and gather Jews once more into the land of Israel. There will be a general resurrection of the dead at that time, and the Jerusalem Temple, destroyed in 70 A.D., will be rebuilt.
- Boys reach the status of *Bar Mitzvah* on their 13th birthday. Girls reach *Bat Mitzvah* on their 12th birthday. Following these milestones, males and females can sign contracts, testify in religious courts, and marry (although the *Talmud* recommends 18 to 24 as the proper age for marriage.

Jewish Practices

Jewish practices include:

- Observation of the weekly Sabbath.
- Strict discipline, according to the Law, which governs all areas of life.
- Regular attendance by Jewish males at synagogue.
- Celebration of the annual festivals including: Passover, Rosh Hashanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Sukkoth (Feast of Booths), Hanukkah (Feast of Lights), Purim (Feast of Lots), and Shavout (Feast of Weeks).

Main Forms of Judaism

There are five main forms of Judaism in the world today:

- **Orthodox** – the oldest, most conservative, and most diverse form of Judaism. Modern Orthodox, Chasidim and Ultra Orthodox Jews share a basic belief in the Jewish Law, even though they differ in their outlooks on life. They attempt to follow the original form of Judaism as they see it. Every word of the sacred texts is considered inspired.
- **Reform** – a liberal group including many North American Jews. The movement started in the 1790s in Germany. Reform Jews follow the ethical laws of Judaism but allow the individual to decide whether to follow dietary and other traditional laws. They use modern forms of worship. Many of their rabbis are females.
- **Conservative** – a movement that began in the mid-nineteenth century in response to the Reform movement. It is a mainline movement midway between Orthodox and Reform.
- **Humanistic** – a very small group composed mainly of atheists and agnostics who regard man as the measure of all things.
- **Reconstructionist** – a small, liberal movement started as an attempt to unify and revitalize the religion. It rejects the concept that Jews are a unique people whom God favors.

It's important to note what some call a sixth – and growing – form of Judaism: **Messianic Judaism.** These Jews believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah. Culturally and ethically they are Jews, but they have embraced Christianity. Some prefer to be called Hebrew Christians, Jewish Christians, or simply believers.

Moshiach: The Messiah

Traditional Judaism holds to a foundational belief in the eventual coming of the *moshiach* – the Messiah (Hebrew) or Christ (Greek). Jews teach that the Messiah will be a great political leader descended from King David (Jer. 23:5). He will be well-versed in Jewish law and observe its commandments (Isa. 11:2-5). In addition, he will be a charismatic figure who inspires others; a great military leader who wins battles for Israel; and a great judge who makes righteous decisions (Jer. 33:15). But above all, he will be a human being who is in no way divine. It is believed that in every generation a person is born with the potential to be the Messiah.

Though many have claimed to be the Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth (1st century), Shimeon ben Kosiba (2nd century), and Shabbatai Tzvi (17th century) to name a few – Jews claim all of them died without fulfilling the Messiah's mission, which involves:

- Bringing about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people by restoring the Jews' homeland and capital city (Isa. 11:11-12; Jer. 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5).
- Establishing a government in Israel that is the center of all world government (Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10; 42:1).
- Rebuilding the temple and reestablishing its worship (Jer. 33:18).
- Restoring the religious court system of Israel and establishing Jewish law as the law of the land (Jer. 33:15).

Before the time of the Messiah, there will be war and suffering (Ezek. 38:16). After he comes, the world will enter a period known as *Olam Ha-Ba*, or the world to come, or the Messianic Age, characterized by peaceful coexistence among people, and even animals (Isa. 2:4). Jews will return from their exile among the nations to Israel (Isa. 11:11-12; Jer. 23:8; 30:3; Hosea 3:4-5). The whole world will acknowledge God and worship Him according to the Jewish religion (Isa. 2:3; 11:10; Micah 4:2-3; Zech. 14:9). Sin will cease (Zeph. 3:13). Sacrifices will continue to be brought to the temple, but these will be limited to thanksgiving offerings because there will be no necessity for sin offerings.

Jews do not believe that Jesus was the *moshiach*. They argue that he did not fulfill the mission of the Messiah as described above.

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