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What Do You Know About Judaism? - Part 2
The Beliefs and Practices of Modern Jews

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In the first installment of this three-part series we traced the long and amazing history of the Jewish people from their beginning with Abraham right up to the establishment of the modern state of Israel. In this second part of three installments will examine more about the divisions of modern Judaism and the beliefs and practices of modern Jews. (Read part one here: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/04/what-do-you-know-about-judaism-part-1-tal-davis/>)

Perhaps the first and most significant question we need to ask is, "Just who is a Jew?" That question seems simple, but it really is complicated because even Jews disagree as to how to define their own identity. For some it is an ethnic or heritage identity. For others it requires religious conviction. Still others see it as purely cultural. This controversy seems especially true among American Jews.

According to a 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center:

"U.S. Jews do not have a single, uniform answer to what being Jewish means. When asked whether being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, ancestry, culture or some combination of those things, Jews respond in a wide variety of ways, with just one-in-ten saying it is only a matter of religion.

"Many American Jews prioritize cultural components of Judaism over religious ones. Most Jewish adults say that remembering the Holocaust, leading a moral and ethical life, working for justice and equality in society, and being intellectually curious are 'essential' to what it means to them to

be Jewish. Far fewer say that observing Jewish law is an essential part of their Jewish identity. Indeed, more consider 'having a good sense of humor' to be essential to being Jewish than consider following halakha (traditional Jewish law) essential (34% vs. 15%)." <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/>

Misconceptions about Modern Judaism

The above statistics illustrate several misconceptions that many people, even evangelical Christians, have about Jews and contemporary Judaism. Many people assume that all Jews believe in the God of the Old Testament and obey the laws and practices found in the Hebrew Scriptures. They also think most Jews dutifully keep the Sabbath (Friday evening until Saturday evening), are regular attenders in a local synagogue, and practice kosher laws for foods, etc. As we will see these assumptions are, for the most part, wrong. For one thing, most of the Jewish religious practices found in the Old Testament ceased functioning in A.D. 70 when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans, as Jesus Himself predicted (Matt. 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6). So, we ask then, what are the facts about the beliefs of modern Jews?

The Beliefs of Modern Judaism

Most Jews do accept the tradition that they have a special relationship with God (Yahweh) through the covenant He made with Abraham (Gen. 17:1-8). That covenant was sealed by the practice of male circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14). Today most Jewish male infants are circumcised on the eighth day after birth as proscribed by God.

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So religious practice maintaining the traditions and covenant relationship is considered very important. Nonetheless, as far as theological beliefs are concerned, they are not regarded as important for most Jews. In fact, it is fair to say, many Jews today do not even believe in God and most are naturalistic in their worldview orientation. They often embrace the secular practices of the societies in which they live.

That being said, for many Jews, their religious traditions, to one degree or another, are vital parts of their Jewish identity. In this section we will examine some of the traditional beliefs of modern Judaism and how various Jewish groups interpret and practice them.

The Scriptures: Traditionally Jews have accepted as inspired Scripture the Hebrew writings that were officially recognized at the rabbinical Council of Jamnia (*Yavneh* in central Israel) in A.D. 90. According to tradition, rabbis from throughout the Mediterranean world met there to finalize a Hebrew scriptural canon for all Jews. Many scholars, however, believe the canon was actually set a couple of hundred years earlier. In any case, the Jews now accept the same content as in the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament as canonical. They do not consider the Apocrypha, inter-testamental books found in Roman Catholic Bibles, as canonical.

These scriptures (called the *Tanakh*) are divided into three major divisions. The first division is called the Torah (the Teachings or the Law) and includes the first five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This section is regarded by most Jews as the most important. Later rabbinical interpretations were codified to help people practice it more

perfectly. The *Mishna* is a collection of interpretations (*Halakah*) of the *Torah*, collected from about A.D. 90 to A.D. 200.

The *Gemara* is a collection of stories that illustrate the *Halakah*. These together form what is called the *Talmud*. In some ways these interpretations are more important for Judaism than are the Scriptures themselves.

The second division is the *Nevim* (the Prophets). This section includes the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The third division is the *Ketuvim* (Writings). These include the Psalms, the Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The order of these books may differ from one Hebrew version to another.

God: Traditional Judaism's primary theological standard is the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear O Israel! The LORD (*Yahweh*) is our God, the LORD (*Yahweh*) is One!" Historically Jews have believed in One personal God (*Yahweh*) who is creator and Lord of everything that exists. They believe that their people have a special relationship with Him based on the covenant He made with Abraham. The Trinity doctrine is rejected. Reform Jews (see part three) are flexible about who God is, or even whether or not He even exists, leaving it to the individual to decide.

Jesus Christ: Modern Jews often view Jesus as an unorthodox rabbi or reformer who was wrongly deified by the early Christian movement (especially Paul). Judaism denies that Jesus died to atone for sin or that He rose from the dead. They do not accept Him as savior or judge.

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Some Jews, however, known as Messianic Jews, retain their Jewish culture and traditions but do believe that Jesus Christ was the Jewish Messiah. Ironically, most Jews will easily embrace secular or atheist Jews, but will exclude any Jews who believe in Jesus, saying they can no longer be regarded as Jewish.

Humanity: Judaism views Human beings as a unique part of creation, not just animals nor divine, but created in God's image. Every person has worth and is precious to Him. Nonetheless, people are morally frail, tend to disobey God's laws, and often fall into idolatry. Most reject the idea that people all have an inherited sinful nature.

Salvation: Worshiping the One True God, obeying His commands, and living a moral and ethical life is how one attains salvation according to Judaism. Jews should study the *Torah* and *Talmud*, strive to live by their teachings, keep the Sabbath, and honor the High Holy Days (see part three). Orthodox Jews are extremely careful to keep the Sabbath and follow the laws as closely as possible. Conservative Jews (see part three) also try to be faithful to the law but not to the degree of the Orthodox. Reform Jews usually base their ethics on the progressive secular standards of modern society and may or may not keep the Sabbath and High Holy Days (see part three).

Since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70, no sacrifices for sin have been made. Some Orthodox Jews would like to see a new temple erected on the Temple Mount and the sacrificial system restored. However, most Jews probably do not believe they are even necessary in the modern era.

Life After Death: Traditionally Judaism taught that righteous living Jews (and some righteous Gentiles, i.e.

non-Jews) will be resurrected to a new life and receive a reward of Paradise. In any case, most people will have to be purged of their sins in *Gehinnom* (Hell). The worst sinners will stay in *Gehinnom* or eventually be annihilated from existence. Actually, most Jews, especially those who are Reform, do not concern themselves very much about life after death. In fact, most probably do not believe there even is a postmortem existence.

This concludes part two in this three part series on Judaism. In part three, we will examine more about the major divisions of Judaism and look at the important High Holy Days that are significant aspects of historic Judaism.

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