

# Our Neighbor's Faith – Judaism

## History and Description<sup>1</sup>

First and foremost, let's be clear that there is no way we can begin to understand Judaism in the following session. Today's information will give you some broad strokes of the picture, and hopefully give you some starting places for further exploration later.

Second, let's also be clear about what you might mean - intentionally or unintentionally - when you talk about "Jews" and "Judaism." These terms could be talking about the religion (believing in one God with roots in sacred scripture); about a modern nation in the Middle East (where not all Israelis are Jews and not all Jews are Israelis); a historic people; a cultural way of life that may or may not have anything to do with religion (people consider themselves "Jewish" without really ever going to worship or participating in other religious practices). When the Bible talks about Hebrews, Israelites, Judeans (people who lived in Judea), or even Jews, it's not really the same thing as what "Jewish" means today.

The Jewish faith has been around for thousands of years, and both Christians and Muslims have ties to and/or roots shared with Judaism. Technically, Jews even use a different calendar, with different months, and the year is somewhere in the upper five thousands.

There are different branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform are the largest four), but they all share some things in common. The three basic concepts across the board are God, Torah, and Israel.

God is the Creator of the Universe, the Redeemer from Egyptian slavery and the source of ultimate redemption. God is the Revealer of those Teachings and Laws that make up the Torah, which is the Word of God's Presence.

The Torah is the Scripture (what we call the Old Testament, but in a slightly different order). More specifically, the Torah is the first five books (Genesis through Deuteronomy, or Pentateuch) as revealed on Mount Sinai to Moses. The Torah remains the primary source for a still-expanding literature of rabbinic interpretations (rabbis are teachers in the Jewish faith, sort of the equivalent to a pastor - Jesus was called Rabbi). These interpretations have led to rituals, theology, and ethics.

"Israel" is both the actual community of people since the time of Scripture to the present, and the physical/cultural reality of the Land of Israel throughout history.

God started Covenant relationship with Abraham (Genesis 12). This relationship is the opportunity to live in observance of the Commandments (Mitzvot). There are 613 commandments in the first five books of the Torah, and living by them links all the individuals in the community to God. There are centuries worth of evolving and swirling rabbinic interpretations of how to apply those initial commandments to life and behavior, like how to observe the Sabbath, how a wedding ceremony goes, how liturgy should be for worship, and what kind of ethics guides life.

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<sup>1</sup> Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 76-81.

Jewish practice includes much Holy Time, and you may be familiar with some of these practices and holidays. Sabbath (or Shabbat) is the seventh day of the week, measured from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. There is worship at home along with a Sabbath meal: candles are lit, there are blessings over wine or grape juice and bread; and there are prayers. There is also synagogue worship either Friday night or Saturday morning. This weekly family and community experience is very significant and a large part of the fabric of life for practicing Jews.

There are also Holy Days: Rosh HaShannah (New Year); the Ten Days of Repentance that culminate with Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement); Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles); Hanukkah (Feast of Lights, based on a military victory in 165 BCE when the nearly used-up consecrated oil for the temple miraculously lasted for eight days); Purim (based on the book of Esther); Pesach (the Passover, which Jesus was celebrating with his disciples at the Last Supper that has links to Easter for Christians); and Shavout (a day of pilgrimage that became, for Christians, Pentecost).

A brief overview of Jewish history starts with Abraham in Genesis 12 being drawn in to Covenant with God; this first period of history lasts until 168 BCE after all the Scriptures and their stories had taken place and the Greeks dominated the region. Next comes the Rabbinic period until 1000 CE, when the Jews were dispersed (called the diaspora) around the world after the Temple was destroyed again in 70 CE, and the focus turned to synagogues, with Jews having to adapt to keep the faith in the midst of other cultures. Then there is the medieval period until around 1650, which includes lots of conflict with Islam and especially Christianity, and Jews getting persecuted and kicked out of almost every country they were in. The modern period lasts until the present and includes lots of immigration and more adaptation. The Holocaust, where six million Jews were killed for being Jewish, and the formation of the nation of Israel after so many years of diaspora, are two recent events with permanent effects of Jewish identity.

Some other characteristics of Judaism you might be familiar with involve ceremonies and celebrations. There is the bris, or baby-naming ceremony, on the eighth day after a baby is born (also the day when male children are circumcised). There is a bar- or bat-mitzvah (for boys and girls, respectively) on the 13th birthday, that signifies adulthood: teens spend years studying Scripture and Hebrew and then lead worship, reading in Hebrew from a scroll and teaching about it in front of the congregation. Jewish weddings are also marked by a number of specific traditions. And when someone dies there are ceremonial acts of mourning (sitting Shiva for seven days, other ceremonies and prayers).

There are many stereotypes of Jews: some might seem relatively harmless, but they lay the foundation for others that are unspeakably toxic. Some of these stereotypes and their accompanying antisemitic attitudes are justified by translations of the New Testament that emphasize how the Jews killed Jesus, even though Jesus, his disciples, Paul, and almost everyone else in the Gospels, and much of the rest of the New Testament, were all Jewish, too. Martin Luther at one time had a positive attitude towards Judaism; however, when Jews declined his attempts to convert them, his writings turned angry and violent towards them. Later generations, most notably the Nazis, have used Luther's words as justification for hatred of and violence towards Jews.

Finally, as Christians, understanding our Jewish roots is understanding who we are. The New Testament doesn't make much sense without the Old Testament, since Jesus was a fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecies. Every page of the New Testament contains

references to, quotes of, allusions to, and an assumption of understanding of, the Old Testament. Another way to talk about the two parts of the Christian Bible are to say the First Testament and the New Testament, or the Elder Testament and the Younger Testament, or to refer to the Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible. What’s more, God does not break covenants; therefore, the covenants that God made with Israel never stopped being valid. For Christians to treat Jews as anything other than honored and favored by God is an affront to God’s faithfulness.

Statistics: As of 2010, the four major branches of Judaism in the country (Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox) had a total of 762,340 members and 3,446 houses of worship. (For comparison, the ELCA was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

Experience

To check out the different branches of American Judaism, you could visit [www.reformjudaism.org](http://www.reformjudaism.org) (Reformed); [www.uscj.org](http://www.uscj.org) (Conservative); [www.jewishrecon.org](http://www.jewishrecon.org) (Reconstructionist); and [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org) (Orthodox); and take some quick peeks to get an idea to the differences. For a general overview of Jewish beliefs and practices, visit the Reformed website and go to the tab called “Beliefs and Practices.”

There are a number of synagogues in the Richmond area. Do you know anyone who attends one of them? Have you ever attended any Jewish ceremonies?

In what ways does our society assume people are Christian? How can avoiding this assumption make our lives richer?

Comparison with the ELCA<sup>2</sup>:

<u>Judaism</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Believe the everlasting covenant between God and Israel is rooted in God’s love. The Torah reveals God’s will for the people and is obeyed by the people in faith as their part in the covenant.	1. Believe that since humanity rebelled against God, God sent Jesus into the world to establish a new covenant, so all people might believe and be saved.
2. Accept the Torah is the complete guide for Jewish life. This may refer to all Jewish writings, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), or the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible).	2. Accept the Bible (Old and New Testaments) as the written witness to God’s revelation of saving actions through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the key to interpreting the Bible.
3. Teach that beings are created good and in the likeness of God. They are able to fulfill God’s will by living according to the Torah. Sin is a human action that violates God’s will.	3. Teach that beings were created good and in the likeness of God but are by nature sinful as a consequence of the fall. Sin is a condition that can be overcome only through Jesus Christ.
4. Worship is centered in the home and synagogue. The synagogue is a place of prayer, learning, and social activity.	4. Worship is centered in the church. The church defines itself as the community where the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments administered.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<p>5. In terms of governance, Reform congregations are autonomous; Conservative and Orthodox congregations are subject to the rules and principles of their movements. Congregations are led by an ordained rabbi(s) and an elected board of laypeople.</p>	<p>5. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.</p>
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What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. Worship for Jews takes place as much in the home as it does in the synagogue, even if in different ways, due to in large part the rich calendar of holy days and other observances. We Lutherans could learn about worship not only happening at church, but also at home with family, or anywhere else God so moves us.
2. Lutherans' historical background is not nearly as diverse, lengthy, or tumultuous as that of our Jewish neighbors; however, over the centuries Lutheranism has spread to many countries around the world, and we could learn from our brothers and sisters scattered around the world in the global Lutheran church.
3. The Jewish tradition seems, to large extent, much more comfortable talking about different ways to interpret scripture, often times comfortably holding "competing" interpretations side by side simultaneously. Lutherans in our history get into some heated debates and conflict over how to interpret scripture and have a path littered with schisms and new denominations. We could hopefully learn about how to live as a community with our differences more easily.

Let's pray:

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God. Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and your teaching to Moses. Hear our prayers that the people you called and elected as your own may receive the fulfillment of the covenant's promises. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**