

## **Judaism – Pre-Messianic Catholicism**

There are many reasons why a Catholic might want to learn about any of the other world religions, but there is a special reason for a Catholic to learn about Judaism. For the relationship between Judaism and the Catholic Church is absolutely unique. As Pope John Paul II put it:

“The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You [i.e. the Jews] are our dearly beloved brothers, and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers. Jesus belongs to the Jewish people, and he inaugurated his Church within the Jewish nation... Whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism.”

From a Christian perspective, Judaism and Christianity are actually one and the same religion, divided into two phases, one designed for the period up to the Incarnation of Christ. The other for the period following. Thus, Judaism is “pre-Messianic Catholicism”, and the Church is “post-Messianic Judaism”. In the words of Vatican II:

In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race, the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham and, through Moses, with the people of Israel... The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament... The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all mankind and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy, and to indicate its meaning by various types. The books of the Old Testament with all their parts acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it.

### **The Jewish Religion**

To understand Judaism, it is helpful to consider it as a people, a faith, and a covenant.

#### **A People**

As a people, Judaism represents a single people, or tribe – the descendants of Abraham, the father of the Jews, through his son Isaac. Of course, over 4,000 years since Abraham there has been conversion into, as well as, out of Judaism, and extensive intermarriage and intermingling of people, but Jewish people’s identity as the “seed of Abraham” remains a central theological principal of Judaism. As a result, Judaism has never considered itself as appropriate for all peoples, and the evangelisation of non-Jews has never been a priority. Rather, it represents a covenant made by God to a single people, for the special role that people were to play among the nations of the earth. Judaism sees the Jews as having been specially chosen by God to live in a uniquely close relationship with Him, not just for their own sake, but to intercede for the rest of humanity as a “priestly people” (“You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” – Exodus 19:4), bringing the knowledge of God, and his blessings to the whole world.

## **A Covenant**

Judaism is based on the special covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants through the generations. The story is told in Genesis 12-22, contained in both the Christian and the Jewish Bible. About 2000 years before Christ, when all the peoples of the earth were pagans, worshipping a host of false gods and idols (which were in fact fallen spirits, or demons – “the gods of the pagans are demons” Psalm 96:5), the one true God revealed Himself to one of the pagans, Abram (later renamed Abraham) and asked him to travel to a distant land, where God would make him a father of a great people. After Abraham demonstrated his fidelity through a series of tests, culminating in his willingness to sacrifice his only legitimate son to God, God rewarded Abraham with the promise of a special blessing on his seed, and that through them, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed:

I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.  
[Gn. 22:16-18]

This was the origin of the Jewish people, of the special covenant God made with them, and of God’s promise to one day send, through them, the Messiah, to establish God’s reign on earth.

## **A Faith**

God continued His special relationship with Abraham’s son, Isaac, Isaac’s son Jacob (later renamed Israel, hence the use of “Israel” to refer to the Jewish people), and Jacob’s sons, who became patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. During a time of famine, Jacob and his sons moved to Egypt, where they were later made slaves. One of them, Moses, was appointed by God to be their liberator. Moses led the Jews out of their captivity in Egypt and through the desert to the “promised land”, then called Canaan, later called Israel. During the journey through the Sinai God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the first five books of the Bible, that Judaism calls the “Torah”, or “Law.” The Torah became the cornerstone of the Jewish faith. The final stage in the development of the Jewish scriptures took place between the third and the sixth century after Christ, when Jewish authorities wrote down the oral tradition that had developed within Judaism. This became known as the Talmud, or “teaching”.

## **A Jewish Creed**

The closest that Judaism comes to an official creed is the “Thirteen Principles of Faith”. God has given the Jewish people, as His special priestly people, an extensive body of law, much of which applies only to them, that will be a source of peace, happiness, and blessing to them if they obey it. If they fail to, they will be punished.

Judaism expects, in general, that the reward or punishment for good or bad behaviour will occur in this life, as well as in the next. The central prayer of Judaism, recited three times a day, is the “Shema”, drawn from Deuteronomy 11, which promises temporal good fortune as a reward for obedience to God:

If you obey My commandments that I command you...then I will send the rain for your land in its season...And I will provide grass in your field for your cattle, and you shall eat and be sated. Be careful that your heart not be tempted and you turn away to serve other gods and bow to them. For then God will be furious with you and will block the heavens and there will be no rain and the land will not yield its produce, and you will perish quickly from the good land that God gives you. (*Dt.* 11:13-17)

Judaism recognises a mystery behind suffering, and that at times the good suffer too (for example the story of Job). But there is no well-developed theology of the redemptive value of suffering in Judaism, or in the Old Testament, comparable to what is found in Christianity. This is only logical, from a Christian perspective, since it was only with the coming of Christ that suffering took on its ultimate redemptive value, through one's uniting it with the suffering of Christ.

A major principle in Judaism is the coming of the promised Messiah, who will establish God's reign on earth. The belief in the coming of the Messiah is absolutely central to traditional Judaism (although in recent times the more modern forms of Judaism have moved away from this belief). The Old Testament has hundreds of prophecies relating to the Messiah that detail who he will be, of what lineage, where and when he will be born, and how he will transform the world, and so forth.

Judaism has a much less well-developed theology of the afterlife than does Christianity. From a Christian perspective it makes sense that the Jewish scriptures – revelations made to man before Christ – should be vague about the afterlife, since according to Christianity, before Christ descended to the dead after the crucifixion, there were no human souls in heaven.

### **Jewish Laws**

Traditional Judaism identifies 613 commandments in the Old Testament, which in aggregate dictate one's behaviour in almost every aspect of life. Many of these laws may appear arbitrary, foolish, or rude to non-Jews. Yet most come directly from the Old Testament and so the Christian must recognise them as having been commanded of the Jews by God. It was only when Christ came that these laws were lifted from the Jews. Of course, since Judaism rejects the authority of the New Testament, it considers the laws still binding.

### **Rabbinic and Temple Judaism**

There are, nonetheless, great differences between today's Judaism and the Judaism that is presented in the Old Testament, especially around the role of animal sacrifice. These changes were necessitated by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The sacramental system prescribed for the Jews in the Old Testament required animal sacrifice that had to be performed in one place, the Temple in Jerusalem. These changes were necessitated by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. The sacramental system prescribed for the Jews in the Old Testament required animal sacrifice that had to be performed in one place, the Temple in Jerusalem. Animals were to be sacrificed daily – for the remission of sins, for purification, for atonement, and as thanksgiving. When the Temple was destroyed and those sacrifices were no longer possible, the leading rabbis gathered together and agreed on an alternative system, known as "Rabbinic" Judaism (as opposed to the earlier form, "Temple"

Judaism), in which prayers, almsgivings, and good deeds are substituted for the no longer possible animal sacrifice.

## **Judaism Today**

There are currently about 14 million Jews in the world today, or about 0.2% of the world population. Of these, 6 million live in North America and 5 million live in Israel. Their prominence is far disproportionate to their numbers. For instance, since the Nobel Prize was founded in 1901, over 20% of its winners have been Jewish – in the sciences, almost 30%. Of course, within the Jewish community can be found a wide range of beliefs and practices (Orthodox, Reform, “Messianic”, unaffiliated). Only a minority of Jews (Orthodox) today attempt to follow the full range of Jewish law, and these account for 10% of the Jews in the U.S. They often live and work amongst non-Jews but distinguish themselves apart by observance of Jewish laws. These laws include:

- A strict prohibition against working – which is defined as including driving, turning on an electric device, lighting a stove, etc. – on the Jewish Sabbath, which begins Friday at sunset and ends at sunset on Saturday.
- The requirement of men to keep their heads covered (hence the wearing of skullcaps)
- A prohibition against men shaving (although some interpret the law to allow electric shavers).
- Strict dietary laws, such as the prohibition against eating any milk products and any meat products at the same meal, eating any unclean animal (defined in Leviticus 11 as including shellfish, pork, etc.) or any animal not properly slaughtered according to Jewish law (detailed in Leviticus 17).

## **Jewish-Christian Relations**

The history of the relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities has been a complex one. In the first few decades after the death of Jesus, Christianity was seen as a new sect within Judaism, one that consisted of those Jews who believed Jesus to have been the Messiah. This would make it no anomaly at the time – every few years a new pretender to the title of Messiah would emerge within its top group of followers. Thus the early Christians, almost all of whom were Jews by origin, were seen as “apostate” Jews, and subject to punishment by the Jewish authorities as heretics. And they themselves, too, still saw themselves as Jews, albeit ones who followed the new “way” that was introduced by the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. Hence they continued to participate in many Jewish practices, including synagogue and Temple worship. This only ended definitively around 132 AD, with the emergence of another claimant to the title of Messiah, Bar Kochba. When Bar Kochba called on the Jewish people to take up arms and violently overthrow their Roman oppressors, the only Jews who refused to participate – because they knew that Jesus, not Bar Kochba, was the true Messiah – were those early Jewish Christians. It was their refusal to participate in the Bar Kochba revolt (which resulted in the final dispersion of the Jews from the Holy Land) that led to the definitive separation between the Jewish-Christians and the rest of the Jewish community.

Among the early Jewish Christians there were those who made the error of overemphasising the continuing need to follow Jewish ritual law even after Jesus – a heresy that became known

as “judaising”. In response, there was a tendency for some early Christian theologians to overreact, with exaggerated polemics condemning Jews and Judaism.

There was a political dimension, too, to the early conflict. The Jewish community had finally achieved a workable relationship with the Roman authorities under whom they lived and feared that the new Christians – who were perceived by the Roman authorities as another type of Jew – would endanger the relationship. In their favourable treatment of slaves and the poor, the Christians were perceived by those authorities as posing a threat to the social order.

With rare exceptions, a contentious relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities continued throughout most of the ensuing centuries. The causes for the tension included social, economic, theological, political, and spiritual ones. The Jews were visibly outsiders, a separateness emphasised by their distinctive dress and customs dictated by the Jewish law. The mere continued existence of the Jews seemed to be an insult to the truth of Christianity. This perception was exacerbated by the fact that in their rejection of the claims of Christianity, the Talmud and other Jewish theological books contained insults against Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Social and economic factors also contributed to the tension. In many Christian countries Jews were forbidden from owning land or engaging in trades, leaving them little alternative than to support themselves by buying and selling. As such, they were seen as making a parasitic living off the productive work of others. Since Christian religious principles were often seen as prohibiting Christians from lending money with interest, banking activities fell to the Jews, which could also lead to resentment. Once the Jews became a powerful economic force, it frequently was to the political or economic advantage of Christian leaders to incite animosity, or even violence, against them.

One theological factor that contributed to the tension between the two communities was the understanding of the Church teaching that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” The shift in the understanding of that doctrine that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did much to take the pressure off the relationship between the two communities, and to allow them to see each other in a much more benign light. The Church’s current understanding of that doctrine is presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.

Vatican II thus ushered in a new era in Jewish-Christian relations, characterised by a far more positive interaction than ever before. It came, however, at the cost of the cessation of most of the Church’s activity, including prayer, aimed at evangelising Jews.

## **Judaism From a Catholic Perspective**

### **The Jews’ Role Prior to the First Coming of Christ**

As mentioned at the outset, according to the Catholic faith, Judaism has played an absolutely central role in bringing about the salvation of all mankind. It was Jesus himself who said, “salvation is from the Jews.” (*Jn* 4:22).

If the Second Person of the most Holy Trinity was to incarnate as a man, it would be at a particular point in time and among a particular, “chosen” people. That people would have to be prepared over many centuries. First, they would have to be separated from all of the other tribes around them who worshipped fallen spirits – i.e. demons – masquerading as gods. They would have to learn about and worship the one true God, the uncreated Creator of all that is. They would have to be taught about the creation and fall of man, the seriousness of sin, the need for redemption, and the coming of a Redeemer. They would have to be taught to adhere to a sufficiently high moral code to be able to recognise the Redeemer when he came and to be able to spread knowledge of his redemption to the rest of the world after he died. Finally, they would have to prepare, over the generations, a virgin of such purity and holiness that she could give her flesh and blood to be the flesh and blood of the God-man (the Blessed Virgin Mary). That was the role for which the Jews were chosen, and in which they succeeded, despite their widespread failure to follow him. They were chosen to bring about the coming of the Redeemer, and he came, and they were chosen to spread the Gospel to the four corners of the earth, and it has been spread. There could hardly be about 2 billion Christians in the world (of about 1 billion Catholics), had they failed.

### **Why the Chosen People?**

God seems to like to choose the weakest and most insignificant for His special missions, precisely to make it apparent that God is behind all that is happening, not the individuals involved. For instance, St Bernadette, the illiterate peasant girl who received the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Lourdes, said that “The Holy Virgin chose me because I was the most ignorant of creatures”. And when St Margaret Mary Alacoque, the nun chosen to receive the Sacred Heart apparitions, asked Jesus why he chose her for the apparitions, Jesus replied, “Oh that’s simple, if I could have found anyone more insignificant than you, I would have chosen her instead.” The fact that God’s choice of the Jews was related to their insignificance is made explicit in the Old Testament:

Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem... On the day you were born, your naval string was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you nor rubbed with salt nor with bands. ...And when I passed you by, and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood, live! ... Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood, and anointed you with oil. I clothed you with embroidered cloth and shod you with leather. I swathed you with fine linen and covered you with silk... And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendour which I had bestowed upon you, says the Lord God. (*Ezk 16:4-14*)

Yet there is also a positive reason why God chose the Jews. He chose the Jews in part to reward Abraham in his willingness to sacrifice his son on Mount Moriah. The story is told in the Book of Genesis:

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies, and in your seed the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. (*Gn 22:1-18*)

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac was intimately linked to, one could even say reciprocated by, God's willingness, two thousand years later, to sacrifice His only begotten Son on the very same mountain, just a few hundred yards away, at the spot known as "Calvary". "Take your son, your only son, whom you love" (Gn 22:2) was echoed two thousand years later in "For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son...His beloved Son" (Jn 3:16, Mt 3:17). As the son of Abraham climbed the mount with the wood on his shoulders for his own execution, so too did the Son of God. Abraham's utterance "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering" (Gn 22:8) was prophetic far beyond anything he could have known, referring not only to the provision of the ram "provided" by the Lord, but referring far more profoundly to the only truly acceptable sacrifice, the "Lamb of God, who took away the sins of the world" (Jn 1) – God's only Son offered on the altar of Calvary.

### **The "Chosen People" to Foreshadow Later Salvation History**

Particularly significant from a Catholic perspective is the typological foreshadowing of the Eucharist, in the manna given to the Jews in the desert. In fact, the entire story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt was seen by the Church fathers as a summary of salvation through Christ.

Jesus himself drew the parallel: (Jn 6:48-49, 51):

"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give you is my flesh."

### **The Jews' Role between the First and Second Comings of Christ**

The role that Judaism and the Jewish people have to play in salvation *after* the First Coming of Christ is less obvious. Was their role exhausted in bringing about the First Coming? Is their continuing failure to recognise Jesus as the Messiah a punishment for their role in the crucifixion? Will they have a role to play in the Second Coming, as they had in the First?

Substantial light can be shed by a brief look at chapter 11 of St. Paul's letter to the Romans:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew... (vv. 1-2)

As regards the Gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. (v. 28-29)

Have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! (vv. 11-12)

Yet St Paul immediately continues with the suggestion that this failure will not be permanent, and when the Jews do enter the Church, they will bring a special blessing to it:

...if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!... For if their rejection means reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (vv. 12-15)

In his writings, Paul says that the Jews will be “grafted back into their own olive tree.”

When will this happen? Paul continues:

A hardening will come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved. (vv. 25-26)

The veil that has been cast over the eyes of the Jews will be lifted, and they too will recognise Christ, when the “full number of the Gentiles” has come in. What does that refer to? This idea of the “times of the Gentiles” which ends only after the “full number of the Gentiles come in” appears in a prophecy made by Jesus himself:

They [the Jews] will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled, and there will be signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the earth distress of nations and perplexity of roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with what is coming on the world, for the powers of the Heavens will be shaken, and then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great Glory. (*Lk* 21:24-27)

The Jews literally fell by the edge of the sword and were led captive among all nations when Jerusalem fell to the Romans, first in 70 AD and then for the final time in 135 AD. From that point on Jerusalem was “trodden down by the Gentiles”, i.e. in Gentile hands, until 1967 AD, at which point the old city of Jerusalem returned to Jewish hands for the first time in almost 2000 years. Jesus’ prophecy then continues with a vivid description of the Second Coming. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly associates this prophesied conversion of the Jews with the Second Coming:

The glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by all Israel for “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” in their “unbelief” toward Jesus (*Rm* 11:20-26; cf. *Mt* 23:39).

Given this glorious future for the Church, Jew and Gentile, one can do no better than to conclude this study with the words with which St Paul closes Romans 11:

Just as you [the Gentiles] were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their [the Jews’] disobedience, so they [the Jews] have been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they may also receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (*Rm* 11:33-36)