

EZEKIEL 37:1-14 GENESIS 12:1-3 and 15:5-6

Today we turn our attention to Judaism. Of all the world religions we'll study, Judaism may be the most familiar to us. The sacred text of the Jewish people is our sacred text. The stories of the Jewish people are our stories. The heritage of the Jewish people is our heritage – at least up to the time of Jesus Christ. We, as Christians, diverge from this commonality at the point of Jesus; but, I'll talk more about this in a little bit.

As we look at our world religions we've talked about how many of these faiths begin with a man: Hinduism began with a man nearly 2000 years prior to Jesus - Buddhism begins with a man – Siddhartha Gautama or Buddha, born about 600 years before the time of Jesus. Islam began with a man named Mohammed, born about 500 years after the time of Jesus. Even Christianity begins with an individual – Jesus, but Judaism is a bit different.

Judaism begins with a people, a nation that God chooses to be in a relationship with him, a people that God chooses to work through to redeem the world. The origin of Judaism begins God's command to Abraham.

From our scripture reading this morning in Genesis 12 we see that God speaks to Abram, *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.”* Abram follows this command and is eventually led to the land of Canaan where he and his people settle in.

Abram, who is later renamed Abraham by God, comes from a polytheistic, idol worshipping tribe of people. His people were shepherds and Bedouin nomads who wandered the desert regions looking over their flocks of sheep and cattle. That God would choose him out of all the people in the world – to be a part of the world’s redemption – is interesting. It doesn’t appear there is any specific reason to choose Abram except for what we read in our text. Let me jump to our Genesis readings for a moment because this will help set the character of Abram into context for us.

Abraham is talking to God, voicing his doubt in God’s plan for him. He says to God, *“O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless... you have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be*

my heir". Abraham has two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. From Ishmael's descendants would come the Arab people and the Islam faith and from Isaac's descendants would come the Hebrew people, the Jews.

Abram is talking about his son Ishmael whom he had with the Egyptian slave girl, Hagar.

God responds to Abraham with these words, "*Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be*". And here's where we pay attention to Abram's response. "*And he believed in God*". Abraham *believed* in God. That's the character of Abraham. He believed. He didn't question – like we've seen Moses question God. He doesn't run the other way – like we've seen Jonah run away from God. Rather he believed. And because of this belief, "*God reckoned it to him as righteousness.*"

Abraham was in a right relationship with God. He believed God. He followed God. He left his home land to go to Canaan because God asked him to. He listened to God. He was in a right relationship with God. And because of all this Abraham stands at the center of three of our world

religions. Mohammed (founder of the Islamic Faith), Jesus, and Moses all look back at this historical figure and recognize him as the central person who, because of his right relationship and obedience to God, has helped bring the rest of the world into a connection or relationship with God.

Mohammed, who began the Islam religion, is a descendant of Ishmael – Abram’s son through Hagar. Jesus’ whose lineage comes through Abram and King David. Jesus’ followers, both Jews and Gentiles, become Christians. And Moses, a descendant of Abram, brings to the Hebrew people the 10 commandments and the laws God and from this the Jewish people are established by the laws of God. Islam, Christians, and Judaism all look back to Abram.

Now in time Abraham and Sarah do have a son who is named Isaac. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 when they had this son together. Isaac would grow up and have a son named Jacob.

Like many of us Jacob would wrestle with his faith – he wrestled with God both figuratively and literally and Jacob would be renamed Israel – which translates into “to wrestle with God”. Israel would go on to have 12

sons who would become the leaders of their own tribes or the 12 tribes of Israel.

In time these tribes or people would experience a great famine in their land and they would migrate to Egypt where they were welcomed and made to feel at home – at first! These twelve tribes were a prolific people and in time the Egyptian people felt threatened by them and enslaved the people. Until one day, four hundred years later, Moses would be called forth at the burning bush to go speak before the Pharaoh and tell them to let his people go.

Moses leads his people out of Egypt. During this Exodus he is called to Mt. Sinai where he receives the laws or Ten Commandments which he gives unto the people. Moses continues to give the people the laws of God over the course of their wilderness journey. These laws help constitute who the Hebrew people are.

The story of the Hebrew people is found right here – in our Old Testament. There are thirty nine books of our OT and these books comprise their sacred text.

The Hebrew bible is called the **Tanak** and the *Tanak* contains the **Torah** – which is the first five books of the Bible. It also contains the **Nevi'im** – which is the prophetic writing in the Bible such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Joshua, Judges... and lastly, the **Ketuvim** – which is the rest of the writings such as Psalms, Proverbs, Job...

The word *Tanak* comes from combining the initial sounds of the *Torah*, *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* together. This is their sacred text and it's also part of our sacred text. It is our Older Testament.

One thing that is important for us to understand is that Judaism is not a monolithic religion. There are many branches of Judaism in the same way there are many branches of Christianity. Knowing this, it is difficult at best to say there is one way; one belief; one understanding of Judaism – rather there is a variety of all of this within Judaism.

Nevertheless, let me try to give you a basic understanding of Judaism... In Rev. Adam Hamilton's book on world religions he asks the question, '*what does it mean to be a Jew today?*' There are two answers to this that dovetail together. The first comes from author Edward Rice who

writes, “*To lead a Torah-true life – that is the essence of Judaism.*” Being true to the laws that God has given is the most important. It is also noted that Judaism is less orthodoxy and more orthopraxis. Orthodoxy means to have the right doctrine – the right belief. And orthopraxis means having the right action. Generally speaking, Judaism is more about the deeds – how you live out your life in accordance to God’s laws.

Judaism focuses on the rituals and ceremonies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Sabbath supper, blessings over the meals, eating certain foods or avoiding certain foods – living this ritualistic life, following God’s commands and laws, and adhering to tradition leads to a hallowed or holy life. This is a direct reflection of the source of all holiness, namely God.

So while Christianity focuses primarily on the relationship with God and as a result of that relationship we find ourselves being transformed and doing good deeds, Judaism focuses more on the obedience to the covenant that God made with Moses and the people. It focuses more on the laws and carrying out those laws.

Rabbi Mark Levin of Congregation Beth Torah states that Judaism is morality. It is God's revelation through inspiration of how to spend our lives being God's servants. By acting correctly in the world, we sanctify God's name. By doing the right thing, people will see that our actions testify to the presence of God in the world.

If doing the right thing brings us into a right relationship with God, where does Jesus fit in with Judaism? Do the Jews believe Jesus is the Messiah? Are the Jews still hoping for the coming of the Messiah? Well, it depends on who you ask. The Orthodox Jews still pray daily for the coming of the Messiah. The Reform Jews have left behind the idea of a literal Messiah and believes the Messiah is to be spiritualized or turned into basic principles and ideas.

Let's talk a bit more about Jesus here. One of the questions asked is, why did the Jews not accept Jesus as the Messiah? After all – Jesus was Jewish. Part of the answer to this is that some Jews *did* believe Jesus was the Messiah.

Most of the first Christians were Jews. They didn't call themselves Christians but rather **followers of the Way**. These were faithful Jews following the Messiah that had been promised them long ago. BTW: All the apostles were Jews. All the authors of the New Testament except one, was a Jew. The founding members of the church were Jews.

I recently read that by 50AD within 20 years of Jesus' resurrection – one third of Jerusalem were followers of the Way – this included priests and Pharisees, but for the most part Jews did not believe. And this is an area where Christianity and Judaism disagree.

I want to address two points – where we differ as Christians and Jews and asking the question can Jews have an eternal relationship with God if they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah?

The big difference between Christians and Jews centers on Jesus. Many Jews believe Jesus was a prophet and a teacher, but not the Messiah – not their savior. You see, the Jewish people were looking for a savior who would take them out from under the Roman yoke that had kept them oppressed for so many years. Jesus didn't remove that yoke from their

back. The Scriptures promised that in the messianic age of peace, the lion would lay down with the lamb. The swords would be beaten into plowshares and God's glory would be revealed. Because this didn't happen many Jews did not, and still do not, believe Jesus was the Messiah.

As Christians we have a new covenant made for us through Jesus Christ – the grace and hope and mercy and love of Christ and an eternal life through our faith in Christ – that's the new covenant made for us in Jesus' blood, made on the cross and through the resurrection. But as Paul states this doesn't preclude God's first covenant made with God's people, the Jews, as they seek to be in relationship with God through God's grace.

EZEKIEL – COMMUNITY RESTORED

■ RESTORED TO NEW LIFE

The WHOLE WORLD bound together in God's grace and Love...

BLESSING OF UNDERSTANDING OUR NEIGHBORS