



Orthodox Judaism

By Steve Cohen

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Orthodox Judaism

A Diversity of Belief Systems

One cannot understand Jewish people today by studying only the Old Testament. Jewish people identify with different religious groups, writings, teaching and theology from a multitude of sources. The Jewish religious calendar and festivals, attitudes toward Jesus, traditions, concepts of family, and varying concerns comprise a multi-faceted Jewish milieu.

What Jewish people believe can cover an encyclopedia's worth of information. We will present a basic overview of the highlights to help Christians better understand Jewish beliefs.

The divisions, or denominations, that Jewish people tend to be found in today are:

- Orthodox
- Reform
- Conservative
- Reconstructionist

Some minor offshoots are the Hassidic movement (the ultra-orthodox) and the Zionistic movement (a political movement). Some Jewish people are atheistic or agnostic. And of course there are the Jewish Christians, also known as "Messianic Jews."

Current North American Jewish Demographics

Surveys taken to determine how Jewish people identify themselves have yielded different results. More than six million Jewish people live in North America today. Nearly a third identify themselves as members of the Reform movement, about one quarter identify themselves with the Conservative movement, and less than a fifth describe themselves as Orthodox.

Orthodoxy today seems to be on the upswing, as many modern Jewish people are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives through Judaism. Many Jewish people do not have religious affiliations, other than to attend services such as the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. Some even claim to be atheistic in their background, others agnostic, while still others claim to be Zionistic.

Zionism is sometimes mistaken to be a religious movement. But basically, Zionism is a political movement. It concerns itself with the return and restoration of the land of Israel to the Jews, rather than the maintenance of a religious theology.

Jewish people identify with different branches of Judaism, because there is no unifying theology of Judaism today. Different rabbis hold differing opinions; in fact, Judaism could probably best be typified as "unity with diversity." Jewish people feel a unity of purpose, but they hold a diversity of opinions as to how they should be leading their lives.



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Jewish people who claim to be Orthodox can trace their roots to 1,400 years before Jesus' birth. Orthodox Judaism claims to have Ezra the scribe as its forefather. He sought to organize the Scriptures into a form that could be easily communicated to the person on the street. He transliterated the Scriptures from the Hebrew script and the Hebrew pronunciation to the Aramaic script, with a Hebrew pronunciation.

He also helped bring together a group of teachers called scribes, or sofrim. They sought to help transmit the intent and thought of the Scriptures down to the people, and were charged with the responsibility of watching over every jot and tittle of the Scriptures.

Orthodox Judaism today seeks to maintain, as much as possible, the ancient religious traditions and observances. The liturgical worship setting is maintained mostly in Hebrew. An Orthodox Jew would seek to follow as many of the 613 Mosaic laws (the Mitzvot) as possible, except for those laws pertaining to the sacrificial system, halted in 70 C.E. following the Temple's destruction by the Romans. An Orthodox Jew also practices a traditional lifestyle, emphasizing the maintenance of religious duties to fulfill one's life.

Reformed Judaism is a much more modern movement. In the 18th century, Moses Mendelssohn, considered its father, sought to help Jewish people to relate to modern, western European culture. He hoped to bring Jewish people out of the ghettos and second-class citizenry status to a point of equality with other European people and cultures. He attempted to encourage his fellow Jewish people to be rational in their faith, orthodox in their practice, and German in their culture.

Following the approach of Enlightenment philosophy, Mendelssohn maintained that if the true doctrines of religion are based on reason, divine revelation is no longer needed as a source of truth. Enlightenment philosophy held that revelation cannot disclose any ideas that cannot be discovered by man's reason.

In taking this position, Mendelssohn divorces himself sharply from the views of earlier Jewish philosophers, especially Maimonides. Maimonides believed that man's knowledge of truth is derived from both reason and revelation. However, Maimonides also believed that truth is essentially rational and cannot contradict reason. Nevertheless, it requires the support of revelation in order to reach the common people who do not know philosophy and are unable to discover truth by their own efforts.

Mendelssohn rejects the notion that truth can be derived from two sources. If man can arrive at a truth by his own capacity to reason, revelation is superfluous and therefore illogical. Revelation cannot convince any man of something his reason cannot understand. Mendelssohn is aware that his rejection of revelation on philosophical grounds clashes with the classic self-image of Judaism that sees itself as foundationally based on the Sinaitic covenant between God and Israel. If Judaism is revealed, it cannot be a religion for Mendelssohn, or if it is a religion it cannot have been revealed.

He resolves this dilemma by defining Judaism not as a "revealed religion" but as "revealed law." The central religious tenets of Judaism—the existence and unity of God, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul—are not specific Jewish notions but doctrines of the general religion of reason,



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which require no proof or act of revelation to be intelligible. What distinguishes the Jew from the non-Jew is not his religion, which is the common property of all men of reason, but the unique laws, statutes and commandments disclosed at Sinai.

That God spoke at Sinai is for Mendelssohn an established historical fact, because the entire people of Israel clearly witnessed it. All people are destined to attain goodness, but Jews can attain it only by observing the Sinaitic laws.

For him the God of reason and the God of Sinai are one and the same: the benevolent Creator and Sustainer of the world whom reason can affirm, and the King and Guardian of Israel who spoke at Sinai and ordained the laws that govern Jewish life. This “revealed legislation” has an additional function in that it prescribes rules of life that “guide the seeking mind to divine truths—partly eternal, partly historical—on which the religion of this [the Jewish] people was based.”

In emphasizing that the observance of the mitzvot makes the Jewish people unique and is indispensable to Jewish existence, he adapts a theory previously formulated by the Christian theologian Faustus Socinus (1539–1604). Socinus asserted that God can reveal law to man, but not metaphysical truths. Socinus, therefore, defines religion objectively as the giving of law and subjectively as its observance.

For Mendelssohn, several conclusions follow from his definition of religion and revelation:

- (1) No miracle can validate the truth of any faith or doctrine that cannot be established by reason. Miracles can at most support or confirm rational truths, but they cannot establish them.
- (2) For the same reason Judaism does not possess dogmas. It addresses itself to man’s will but does not attempt to control his thoughts. “Faith accepts no commands; it accepts only what comes to it by way of reasoned conviction.” Judaism requires conformity in act, but grants freedom in matters of doctrine.
- (3) If, as Mendelssohn firmly believed, a knowledge of truth is indispensable to man achieving happiness, truth must be accessible to all people without distinction of race or creed. No religion, not even his own Judaism, can be the sole instrument through which God discloses his truth.
- (4) Freedom of thought and doctrine requires equal respect for all religious ideas. “Let every man who does not disturb the public welfare, who obeys the law, acts righteously toward you and his fellow men be allowed to speak as he thinks, to pray to God after his own fashion or after that of his fathers, and to seek eternal salvation where he thinks he may find it.”

Nevertheless Mendelssohn discusses the difference between the Jewish religion, which brings man closer to eternal truths through his daily conduct regulated by the Torah, and other ancient religions, which conceal the truth through idolatry.



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In ancient Judaism, in contrast to idolatry, religion and state were joined. Thus, a violation of the honor of God was a political crime and chastised accordingly. This situation was brought to an end when the Temple was destroyed. Those punishments have become invalid for “political crimes,” because they can only be applied as long as God was sovereign of the Jewish State. It was thus “Jerusalem”—that is, classic Judaism— which for Mendelssohn embodied the true religious might (religiöse Macht), united all contrasts, led to eternal truths, and elevated the Jew toward happiness in this world and in the world to come. (The Encyclopedia Judaica)



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