

**Christianity and World Religions:
JUDAISM**

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Mark 12:28-31**

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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When you are getting to know someone, one of the first questions you normally ask is, “Where are you from?” We all like to know where a person comes from, because where a person comes from tells us much about who a person is.

Many people like to research genealogy or family history. Back before the internet, my family had a distant cousin who did the painstaking research, tracing our family back to the British Isles. I learned that the Reeves part of our family came from Wales, and another branch could be traced to the clan of McDonald in Scotland. Very interesting. I hope that doesn’t make me the sworn enemy of anyone here!

Since the internet, genealogy has become much easier. You can go to websites and figure out your ancestry. Since scientists discovered and mapped the human genome or DNA, you can also get a genetic study done to determine what percentage of your DNA came from where. DNA testing has doubled each of the last three years.

People are fascinated with their origins. We have roots in our family heritage, roots in our community and nation, and roots in our faith heritage as well.

Our spiritual DNA as Christians can be traced directly to Judaism. Our religious roots are Jewish. Judaism is the root onto which Christianity is grafted. You can’t understand Christianity without understanding the Hebrew faith.

Given our rootedness in Judaism, one would think that Christians would honor Jews as their spiritual foreparents and brothers and sisters in faith. But that has not been our history at all. The story of Christian anti-Semitism has been tragic and terrible. Because of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, ever since the Christians got the upper hand in the Roman Empire, Jews have been persecuted, vilified, abused, and killed by Christians. Spain, England, Russia—many countries have threatened and expelled their Jewish citizens.

The worst, of course, was the Holocaust under the Nazi regime in Germany during the Second World War. Before Hitler’s “Final Solution” was stopped, 6 million Jews had been murdered in concentration camps. After WWII, people vowed that it would never happen again, but anti-

Semitic violence still goes on. In 2014, a shooter opened fire in Kansas City at a Jewish community center, aiming for Jews but killing two Methodists and a Catholic who were there to participate in programs.¹ One year ago, a man opened fire in a Jewish worship service in Pittsburgh, killing eleven people.² New York City police report that anti-Semitic hate crimes have risen 63% this year over last.³

That is why we are doing this sermon series. This is why we need to affirm our common roots. This is why we need to find ways to live together in mutual respect and stop the hatred.

So much of what we believe goes back to the roots of our faith in the Hebrew Scriptures (what we normally call the Old Testament). The Hebrew Scriptures as a whole are referred to as the *Tanakh*, which is derived from the letters T, N, and K. Those letters stand for the three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures. T is for *Torah*, the first five books of the Old Testament, containing the stories of the origins of the Jewish people and the law of Moses. The Jewish stories in Genesis go all the way back to creation, so our faith is connected all the way to the beginning of the world.

N is for *Nevi'im* or the prophets, which include the actual prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as some of the historical books like I and II Kings. K is for the *Ketuvim* or writings. These are the poetic and literary books like Psalms, Proverbs and Job.

These were the Scriptures of Jesus. He quoted Scripture all the time, and it's interesting to see how he quoted from all three sections of the *Tanakh*. He most often spoke from Deuteronomy in the Torah, Isaiah in the prophets, and the book of Psalms in the writings. Any time the New Testament talks about Scripture, it means the Tanakh.

But Jewish writings did not end with the Old Testament. About the time of Jesus, there was an active community of rabbis who wrote stories and commentaries to flesh out the meaning of Scripture. The first body of work was called the *Mishnah*, which consists of commentaries on the Law of Moses. Later stories and commentaries became the *Gemara*. The *Mishnah* and *Gemara* together are called the *Talmud*. All these writings were put into final form by about 500 A.D.

Judaism, like Christianity, has different branches, sort of like our denominations. The Orthodox Jews are the most conservative of the groups. They dress in a particular way and follow the kosher food laws and take all the commandments very seriously. They believe both the Torah and the Mishnah are inspired writings reflecting the will of God.

Conservative Jews are not as conservative as the Orthodox. They believe in the older traditions but are also open to some reforms. For instance, the Conservative Jews will ordain women rabbis.

Reform Jews are the most progressive group and the largest group within American Judaism. They stress the moral imperatives of love and justice, but they don't follow all the Jewish laws about food, dress, and sabbath as closely.

When it comes to beliefs, many of the beliefs of Judaism are echoed in Christian beliefs, because, after all, they came from the same source. Above all, Jews are monotheists. They believe in one God. The basic creed of Judaism is the *Shema*, which we read moments ago: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*"⁴ Jews will recite the *Shema* every day when they rise and when they go to bed at night. The God of the Hebrews is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who revealed his name to Moses, the same God we recognize whenever we read the Old Testament. There's only one.

Jewish life is based on the *Torah* or the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses started with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and then added laws about sabbath, laws about cleanliness, laws about food, laws about community, until there were 613 commandments or *mitzvot* for faithful Jews to follow. The impossibility of keeping all 613 commandments is partly what led to the theology of grace in the New Testament.

Two of the basic principles of Christian life have their roots in Jewish teaching. The Golden Rule, as stated by Jesus, says, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*"⁵ This was a version of a famous saying by Rabbi Hillel the Elder, who lived in the century before Jesus. Approached by a Gentile who asked him to explain the Torah while standing on one foot, Rabbi Hillel said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.

That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."⁶ By stating it positively, Jesus expanded the meaning to say don't just avoid evil, but do good.

When Jesus was asked to summarize the Torah, just like Rabbi Hillel was, he drew on his deep Jewish faith. A scribe, an expert in the Jewish law, asked him, "*Which commandment is the first of all?*" Jesus answered with a double commandment. The first part was directly from the *Shema*: "*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*" Then he added a word out of Leviticus 19:18: "*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.*"⁷ Jesus wasn't inventing anything here. He was drawing on the Jewish faith that he had learned growing up and still held close to his heart.

Much of the Law of Moses had to do with instructions for sacrifices that were to be performed first in the tabernacle in the wilderness, then in the Temple in Jerusalem—sacrifices of grain, wine, and animals. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans, the physical sacrifices ended. Now the Jews focus more on the sacrifices of the heart, things like confession of sin, repentance, fasting, and prayer. As it says in Psalm 51, "*you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*"⁸

What happens when we die is a big deal for Christians. You will find several opinions on the afterlife within the different branches of Judaism. Some, especially the Orthodox, believe in a resurrection after death. Others don't. Still others are agnostic on the subject; maybe there is life after death, maybe there isn't. They do have a term for "the world to come." It's called *Olam Ha-ba*. But it's not really the focus of the Jewish faith. They are generally more focused on this life, on being faithful to God in the present, living well now, and making the world a better place.

So we begin to see some of the differences between Judaism and Christianity. One big difference is the theology of God. For Jews, God is unseen and mysterious. There are clues about God's nature from creation

and his covenant history with the Jewish people. But they will tell you, no one has ever seen God.

Christians, however, have a different view. We believe we have seen God. When we look at Jesus, we see God. Jesus is the incarnation of God the Father. He is the Son of God. His actions of healing and comfort, his words of teaching, and especially his sacrificial death on the cross reveal the nature of God to us.

We believe in the Trinitarian nature of God: one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This doesn't make sense to the Jews. It sounds like three gods to them, because to them, Jesus is not God.

This would be the primary separation point between Christians and Jews. Jesus was a Jew, and Judaism acknowledges Jesus as a wise rabbi. But they do not believe he is the Messiah that was promised by the prophets. Jesus did not re-establish the kingdom of Israel and usher in an era of peace and prosperity. He did not act like the Messiah they were expecting. In fact, he died a horrible and humiliating death. Christians explain that by saying Jesus was not the kind of Messiah the Jews expected, but he was the kind of Messiah the world needed. And through his death and resurrection, God defeated the powers of sin, evil, and death. The Jews ask, "If the Redeemer has come, why doesn't the world look more redeemed?" So they continue to wait for the Messiah to be revealed and establish the reign of God in the world.

This, of course, raises the issue for Christians of the salvation of the Jews. Understand that this is more an issue for some Christians than it is for the Jews. I find that some Christians think God has a mean streak and would somehow delight to condemn his children who do not know the right formula for salvation. I also find most Jewish people, even if they aren't sure about the afterlife, trust that, whatever happens, God loves them and will be good to them in the *Olam Ha-ba*.

The Apostle Paul was very concerned about the fate of his Jewish brothers and sisters who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. On the one hand, God had made a covenant to be their God. On the other hand, Jesus is Lord and the way to salvation. What Paul finally went with, in the 11th chapter of Romans, is that God's covenant is irrevocable. The disobedience

of the Jews opened up a relationship with Christ for the Gentiles, so that all who had sinned, Jew or Gentile, could receive the mercy of God. Gentiles are the branch grafted into the tree of Judaism, so that the whole tree may live.

We might also remember our idea from the beginning of the series called Christian inclusivism. We believe Jesus is the Son of God, Messiah, and Lord of the Universe, Savior of the whole world. We also believe that God can have mercy on whom God has mercy and be gracious to whom God wants to be gracious. The eternal fate of any individual or group is not our call. Jesus himself said he has other sheep who are not of his fold, and he would bring them in, too, so that there would be one fold and one shepherd. The Jews are really not worried about their eternity with God; maybe we shouldn't be either.

What Jews are worried about is making the world a better place to live. They have a very important concept called *tikkun olam*. It literally means "repair of the world." The concept comes from a legend in the Jewish mystical writings called the *Kabbalah*. The story is told that at creation, when God said, "Let there be light," God sent light into the world contained in many vessels. If the vessels had arrived whole, the world would have been perfect. But the holy light was too powerful to be contained in the vessels, and they shattered, scattering fragments of light all over the world. The job of faithful people is to gather the fragments of light, and when enough sparks of light have been gathered, the *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, will be complete. We gather the light by following the commandments of God and by doing acts of justice, mercy, and kindness.⁹

We can appreciate and partner with our Jewish brothers and sisters in living to repair the world. There is plenty of brokenness to go around. We can follow the commandments of our Lord. We can do acts of justice, mercy, and kindness. We can resist the hatred of anti-Semitism. We can join in the *tikkun olam*. And Yahweh, their God and our God, will be glorified.

¹ Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions, revised edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 76.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pittsburgh_synagogue_shooting.

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/04/us/anti-semitic-hate-crimes-new-york/index.html>.

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

⁵ Luke 6:31.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_the_Elder.

⁷ Mark 12:28-31.

⁸ Psalm 51:15-17.

⁹ <https://jteach.org/project/the-broken-shards-a-tikkun-olam-story/>.