

Bible Special 06-06-13a

This is Tuesday, the 13th of June, 2006. We continue tonight our study on why the Bible, what are the distinctives of the Christian faith, and what are the characteristics of the alternatives. Let's take a moment as we begin to go to the Lord in prayer and ask His blessing on our study, shall we pray? Father, we are grateful for every opportunity we have to gather and to be encouraged, to be comforted, to be strengthened through fellowship, through uniting our hearts and our minds in the study of Your Word and in the important focusing of our attention on the priorities and the goals and the values that should be ours as believers in this life.

We thank You for the spiritual gifts that You have distributed amongst us and for the blessing that they impart. We pray that each one here tonight will be blessed even as we seek to gain a better understanding of our faith, especially in the light of the alternatives that are found in the world. We pray that in all things the Lord Jesus will be glorified and we ask it in His name, amen.

Well, this slightly unusual study for us, since it is not exegetical, it is not text-based, it is more context-based. What is the context for our faith? Why are we Christians and not Buddhists or Hindus? Why do we believe that the Bible is God's Word and that other quote-unquote holy books are not? That has been the thrust and the focus of our study. We want to educate ourselves not only textually, but contextually.

We want to be able to hold up our end of a conversation with someone from a different faith, be able to explain and to know for ourselves why we found our faith and our spiritually held beliefs on the Bible and not on other alleged candidates for truthful Scripture. In this study, we have taken a close look at some of the Eastern family of religions. We've looked at Buddhism.

We've looked at Hinduism. And we are now turning our attention to those that are more closely related to the Christian faith. And there is no faith more closely related to Christianity than Judaism.

And that is going to be what we look at tonight. I originally thought, well, I'll cover Judaism and Islam in one go, one night. But I think anybody thinking about that idea for more than about five seconds will realize that we'll be doing well to get through Judaism this week and Islam next week.

But Judaism is, of course, the ground from which Christianity sprang from one perspective. And as soon as we say that, we have to make a distinction between what Judaism was in the first century A.D. and what Judaism is today. If you look at the words of the Apostle Paul, we find that he actually talks about Judaism in the New Testament.

But in rehearsing his own qualifications, in rehearsing his history, his life, he uses the word, but it doesn't mean then what it means now. You remember when he's talking about himself as born on the eighth day, circumcised according to the tradition of the Hebrews and so on, and he says he was an expert in Judaism and he actually uses the word. Well, this is the tradition of

the Pharisees and we'll see a little bit more about what that is tonight.

But the beliefs and the traditions of the Jews in Jesus' day and in the Apostles' day were quite different than what they are today. So we need to educate ourselves a little bit on this. Judaism and Elizabeth's teacher in her English class helpfully gave her a handout on Judaism that has some of the basic ideas we're going to talk about here.

And in this it says it's one of the world's oldest religions, which of course is true, particularly if you recognize the date of Abraham, circa 2000 B.C., 1850 B.C., depending on how you figure your times, which makes it something in the vicinity of 4,000 years old, just going back to Abraham. And of course we believe the book of Genesis and we believe that it goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. So it is indeed one of the world's oldest religions.

First to teach belief in one God, monotheism. And this today remains one of the central and defining tenets of modern Judaism is monotheism, monotheism, a single God. Judaism has been the religion of only a single people.

Oddly enough, they are called the Jews. Both Christianity and Islam can trace roots back to Judaism. Without Judaism there would not be Christianity.

Without Judaism there would not be Islam. The authoritative and originating text for Judaism is the Torah. Not the Old Testament necessarily in its entirety.

The foundation text for Judaism is the Torah, the five books of Moses. Of course the rest of the Tanakh, the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim, the prophets and the writings, are also considered inspired and authoritative. But the foundational document for Judaism both in Jesus' day and down to the present is Torah, the law, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

That is the basis of the faith. The historic writings, the poetic writings, the prophetic writings, all of these depend upon the Torah to have meaning and understandability. The central teachings of Judaism are that there is a God, a single God, who has a requirement of His followers, His people.

They are to do what is just and what is merciful. You find this in the prophets. What does the Lord require of you, O man? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

How do you serve God? How do you live this life of justice and mercy and humility? Well, you study the Scriptures, the Old Testament, the Torah in particular, and you endeavor to live by its precepts, to fulfill its commands. The fundamental outlook is very similar to that which Jesus distilled in the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

Judaism believes that all people are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with respect. Judaism, especially in its modern forms, is primarily a moral and ethical religion. It concerns itself with morality and with ethics.

How do you behave? How do you live? How do you treat others? That's the focus. Now, the first major thing we should remember out of what I have said thus far is that what is the defining feature of Judaism, especially modern Judaism? It looks at behavior. It looks at what you do and says what you do ought to be good.

It ought to be moral. It ought to be ethical. You ought to do good.

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly.

Treat people with respect as those who have been created in the image of God. All of that sounds good, right? Should Christians do the same? Is that the defining feature of Christianity? It's not at all. Pop quiz now.

What are the defining features of Orthodox Christianity? Number one, person and work of Jesus Christ. Number two, the lost and hopeless condition of man. And number three, the truthfulness and the veracity of Scripture.

The inspiration of Scripture. The accuracy of Scripture. And when you look at point one and point two of Orthodox Christianity, what do we find? The Holy Spirit convicts of sin and righteousness and judgment because man has a big sin problem.

Man has a corruption problem. Man has a separation from God problem that cannot be solved by good behavior. That can't be solved by good works.

Does Judaism address itself to this problem? No. Can Judaism embrace or recognize the solution to this problem? No. Why? It doesn't think the Messiah has come.

It doesn't think. And even when it looks at Messiah, it doesn't see Messiah as the substitutionary, efficacious atonement for sin. The messianic expectation of Judaism is just like it was in Jesus' day.

Deliver us from the Middle Eastern cauldron of conflict and warfare and terrorism. Deliver us into a brighter day. Deliver us into a utopia, into a kingdom where there's justice and so on.

Judaism fundamentally in its modern form does not recognize sin or sinfulness and the corruption of man. It just says, well, of course you're not as good as you should be. You should try to be better.

But there's no solution other than, well, just try to be ethical. Try to be moral. Which isn't any different than any other of the religions that we've looked at.

Well, what defines the parameters? What's the whole defining basis of Judaism? Well, it centers its belief in God. And to that extent, it's good. Jews believe in God.

They believe He is omniscient. They believe He's omnipotent. They believe that He is benevolent, that He's good and good to all.

The rain falls on the just and the unjust. God is good to all. They believe that God is transcendent, that He is spiritual, that He's above and beyond this world.

They believe that He is the creator, creator of the universe, creator of life, creator of this earth, and that He is not a distant, uninterested God, that He's active and engaged. But the key element of Judaism is covenant. Judaism believes in the Abrahamic covenant.

God came down and made a deal with Abraham and his descendants, specifically through Isaac and Jacob, the children of Israel, the children of Jacob. And with Moses comes the Torah, the commandments that give them His laws summed up and idealized in the Ten Commandments. So Judaism, in practice, focuses on the study and observance of God's laws and commandments.

And of course this makes sense, doesn't it? Because what is Judaism? How can I act good? How can I be moral? How can I be ethical? Here's God's laws and commandments. If I perform these, if I conform to these, I'll be good. God will bless me.

As of this year, it is estimated that there are about 15 million Jews, which is surprisingly small to me. But this is the estimate as of 2006. The population is given in the... You can find this online at the jewishvirtuallibrary.org and they have an article there called The Jewish Population of the World.

They give the top 50 countries where Jews reside by population and they list them out there. And if you add it all up, you get 15 million. Of course, the vast majority of those are either in Israel or in the United States.

There's about 6 million listed for the United States. One of the other large population centers is Israel with about 5 million. So there's 395,000 in Argentina.

There's 393,000 in Canada. There's 606,000 in France. 717,000 in Russia.

And much smaller, about 300,000 in the United Kingdom. About 140,000 in the Ukraine. And then it just dwindles down to very small numbers after that.

So roughly 15 million throughout the world. And this number isn't really changing much. The rate of Jewish people who die out there, their conversion or proselytization rate and their birth rate and so on is such that that's been a pretty stable number.

And when you think about the, just as an aside, when you think about the 70th week of Daniel, when you think about the tribulation period, and you think about the 144,000 servants of God who are going to not take the mark of the beast and so on, what percentage is that going to be of the current population? Well, 144,000, if you multiply it by 100, gives you 14.4 million. Am I right? So it's about 1%. 1% of the current population would end up being, is my math right on that? 144,000 times 10 would be 1.4 million times 100 would be 14.4 million, right? So that's not an unrealistic expectation.

When you think about Christianity perhaps and the difference between the wide road and the narrow road and you think that there's a single digit percentage probably of people who claim to be Christians or who call themselves Christians who are actually, I mean, there's all kinds of people who call themselves Christians. A fellow I've spoken of recently that was the big cheese of the Jesus seminar and the search for the historical Jesus and a very famous scholar on all things related to the historical Jesus named John Dominic Crossan. He claims to be a Christian.

He used to be a Catholic priest, but he resigned the priesthood and now he doesn't believe in the inspiration of Scripture. He doesn't believe in the divinity of Christ. He thinks the Bible is myths and legends.

He thinks Jesus was just a man, but he claims to be a Christian and he's emblematic of millions of people who say, oh yeah, I'm a Christian because I believe that people ought to be good and oh, I think there's, you know, I think I believe in the golden rule and I think I'm a pretty good person. Sure, I'm a Christian. You know, I think when God looks down at the population, he'll figure I'm in the top half of good people.

Well, at any rate, Judaism is, as I said, confined largely to the United States and Israel in terms of numbers at this point. So let's look a little bit more closely at it because if somebody says they're Jewish, what do they mean? Are they culturally Jewish? Are they socially Jewish? Are they hereditarily Jewish? What does it take to be classified as Jewish? What do the Jews think a Jew is? Well, it's not necessarily racial. It's not necessarily ethnic.

It's not necessarily cultural and it's tough to define because Judaism has such a long history that it has sort of meant different things at different times. If you were in the nation of Israel before Christ, well, that sort of qualifies you as being Jewish. But today, the Jewish community breaks down into several denominations, if you will, and by looking at what these denominations hold to and what they believe, you can kind of figure out what is and isn't a Jew.

First is Orthodox Judaism. Orthodox Jews believe that, in fact, most Jews believe that if your mother was Jewish, you're Jewish. This is kind of like if your parents are Americans, you're American no matter where you're born.

If you're born of a Jewish mother or converted in accordance with Jewish law, you're Jewish. Other kinds of Jews like American Reformed Jews and so on think you can have a Jewish father or a Gentile mother, et cetera. Even if you don't practice Judaism, you're still a Jew, kind of like the Catholics.

If you're born into a Catholic family, even if you're not a practicing Catholic, you're still a Catholic. Italian mafiosi all consider themselves to be good Catholics because they were kind of born into it. But if you accept the Jewish principles of faith, which we'll talk about in a moment, then you're Jewish.

And even if you become agnostic or atheist, they still consider you to be a Jew. You're just a sad,

sorry Jew, but you're still Jewish. What's surprising is the constancy.

I mentioned before that there's about 15 million Jews in the world today. In 1900, how many Jews would you guess were in the world? Before World War II? Before World War I? The Jewish yearbook published in 1901 listed the number of Jews in the world at 11 million. So in the last hundred years plus, the total number of Jews has only gone up about 4 million.

I find that quite surprising. The World Jewish Population Survey conducted about four years ago said there were 13.3 million Jews in the world. The Jewish Year Calendar published last year said there's 14.6 million.

Jewish population growth is currently 0%. There have been a lot of arguments, as I said, but Orthodox Judaism, this is what defines Orthodox Jews. There's kind of three big groups within Judaism.

Let's talk about the Orthodox Jews first. They believe that the Torah was written by God and dictated to Moses and that the laws in it are binding and immutable. It's the Word of God through Moses, just like we believe the New Testament is the Word of God through the Apostles.

That's how they look at the Torah. They have a codification of this or an expansion and an explanation of this that was written about 500 years ago. It's called the Shulchan Aruch.

Shulchan Aruch. That's S-H-U-L-K-H-A-N, Shulchan. Shulchan is the Hebrew word for table.

Aruch, A-R-U-K-H, means arranged or set. This is the set table. Martin Luther had a thing that he used to publish called Table Salt.

Well, this is the set table. The Shulchan Aruch was composed, it was the magnum opus of a guy named Rabbi Yosef Karo, K-A-R-O. It is an authoritative compilation.

Orthodox Jews consider this to be the definitive. This is sort of like the church equivalent of this would be people who go back and look at the Nicene Creed or the Athanasian Creed or some creed that distills down the essence. Many churches have a constitution and a part of their church constitution is their doctrinal statement.

And this is what defines us. We believe, if you look at our church website, we don't have a doctrinal statement. But we do have a summary of truths that we believe are biblical and that sort of define where we are in the theological world.

And you can look at those. They're under ten or so points. But we just call them, I can't even remember what we call them, doctrinal truths or some such thing.

But you don't have to subscribe to those to be a member of our church. They're basically, if somebody says, well, what kind of a church are you? Are you a hand-waving charismatic? Are you a vineyard church? What are you? Are you Lutheran? Are you Catholic? Are you

Episcopalian? What are you? Well, you can read through those truths and get an idea of what we understand the Bible to say. And so that, for many, is a doctrinal statement.

Well, that's what the Shulchan Aruch is for Orthodox Jews. Anybody that says, hey, my family's Orthodox or I'm Orthodox, well, they're holding to the Shulchan Aruch. Rabbi Yosef Karo wrote this in 1550 or so.

And he surveyed the huge truckloads of rabbinic literature. He to this day is one of the most well-read rabbinic scholars that has ever lived. He just grabbed the whole pile of thousands upon thousands of authors and documents and managed to synthesize it and compile it and categorize it and distill it down into this is what Judaism is.

And he did this for a number of reasons, which I won't go into. But it had to do with the forward thrust of history, the invention of the printing press and that different people were believing different guys. Here's Maimonides, who is called the Rambam.

And he was one guy in the Spanish Jews really thought the Rambam was great. And then other Jews from other places thought these other guys were great. And the opinions conflicted and nobody could figure out what was going on.

And as the printing press and the dissemination of these views went outside local communities of Jews and as they began to move around and get educated, why, everybody was all scratching their heads saying, we don't even know what we're supposed to believe. And so Cairo sat down and wrote the Shulchan Aruch. And he said, look, I'm going to set the table for you.

This is what Judaism is. And Orthodox Judaism to this day says, there you go. We don't have to go back and read all 42 volumes of the Rambam.

We've got the Shulchan Aruch. Now, listen, if you don't know who the Rambam is, you need to. Maimonides is one of the most famous Jewish rabbis ever.

And we'll know a little more about him before we're done. Anyway, suffice it to say, and listen, the Shulchan Aruch itself is a Reader's Digest condensed version of Cairo's Magnum Opus, which was the Beit Yosef, the House of Joseph document. And he didn't really think much of the Shulchan Aruch.

He said, well, you know, I wrote this for kids. This is the children's version of what you really need to know, which is in the Beit Yosef. But it's got four parts.

And I won't give you all the Hebrew names for these, you know, the Orach Chaim and so on. I'm not going to give you all that. But it's got four sections in it.

Section one of the Shulchan Aruch addresses prayer, the synagogue, Sabbaths and holidays. So it's kind of the worship, ritual worship area. The second section has laws related to diet and religious conversion and sort of Jewish practice.

The third section has the laws of marriage and divorce and things of that nature. And then the fourth section has laws of finance, financial responsibility, lawsuits, damages, witnesses, and sort of legal proceedings between Jews. This is how you ought to resolve legal disputes.

So that, again, as I said, is 500 odd years old. That's what the Orthodox Jews go by. And this rests on a much simpler foundation.

In the same way that you think, well, you've got your whole Old Testament, how would you sum up the law of Moses? How does the Bible sum up the law of Moses? What have you got? Ten commandments, right? That's the foundation on which, and Jesus distilled those down into the two. Love the Lord your God, love your neighbor as yourself. Well, Orthodox Judaism and the Shulchan Aruch all sort of rests on Maimonides the Rambam who was way back in the 11th century A.D. and he had the 13 principles of the Jewish faith.

And this is what really defines modern Judaism today in the Orthodox sense. Your Reformed Jews and your conservative Jews or your conservative and your progressive Jews are sort of fallings away from this classic Judaism. And so we'll look at those when we come back from the break.

But here's the biggest thing. If you don't remember anything else about Judaism, remember this. It's all about doing good.

What it fails to address is becoming good. There's a difference in what you do and what you are. And the major failing of Judaism as it has been historically since the days of Moses is focusing on what is done instead of who you are, what you become before God.

Can you be transformed? Can you be sanctified in the inward man? Judaism ignores this whole concept because it doesn't really recognize inherent sinfulness and the need for a remedy. And you think, how can that be? Day of Atonement and so on? Well, we'll talk about that when we come back from the break.