

The Abrahamic Religions:

An Introduction to World Religions

Judaism: Beliefs

Session Week 5

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Aim and Learning Outcomes – Week 5 Session

Aims

- This session aims to discuss the Belief of Judaism Religion.

Learning Outcomes

- Students have some understanding of:
 - The Belief systems of Judaism.

Jewish: Identity

- Not all Jews follow Judaism, but Judaism remains, in essence at least, the religion of the Jewish people.
- So, who are the Jews? History suggests that they are a Semitic people who originated from either the Arabian Peninsula or south-east Mesopotamia.
- Perhaps in conflict with other Semitic people, or perhaps seeking more fertile land than the desert or semi-desert of their places of origin, they migrated west and north into what came to be known as Palestine, Jordan and southern Syria. At times Jews ruled themselves, but more often they were ruled by others.
- The Torah, the most important of all Jewish scripture, provides us with another account of Jewish origins
- Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ismael. Isaac had a son called Jacob. Jacob fathered 12 sons, one of whom was Levi, the great grandfather of Aaron and Moses.
- The 12 tribes of Israel derived from Jacob's 12 sons, and contemporary Jews are offspring of the 12 tribes.

Jewish: Modern Time

- In the modern world Jewish is most commonly defined in one of two ways:
 1. You are Jewish if your mother is a Jew
 2. You are Jewish if you subscribe to Judaism.
- Most Orthodox Jews believe that only someone born of a Jewish mother is Jewish.
- United by a common heritage (an “ethnic” religion), divided in contemporary practice:
- Orthodox:
 - Modern
 - Chasidic (Ultra Orthodox)
- Reformed (18th century Germany)
- Conservative – moderates, response to reform. Conversion is acceptable within certain schools of Judaism such as:
 - Reform
 - Liberal Judaism
- Reconstructionalism (20th century America)

Judaism: Belief

- Lying at the heart of Judaism is belief in
 - Monotheism
 - One God, creator of the universe, personal but non-corporeal
 - Prophets of old – especially Moses, through whom Torah was revealed to the Hebrew people
 - Torah (first five books of the Bible), containing religious, moral and social law which guides the life of a Jew the Hebrew Bible does not include the New Testament
- The Jewish concept of the Divine:
 - The earliest references to God are in the form of the Hebrew letters *YHVH*, which are often translated into Latin characters as *Yahweh*.
 - The Jewish people believe that God's true name is so Holy.
 - God is eternal, omnipotent and indivisible.
 - God is the creator and the ruler of the universe.
 - God is near every creature and listens to the prayers of all who pray.
 - God is active in the unfolding of history.

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- In seeking a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of God, it's important to bear in mind the following.
- Judaism has cherished and encouraged freedom of thought. Why?
- Because neither knowledge nor understanding are possible without enquiry, debate and the right of people to make up their own minds. An outcome of this tradition is that conceptions of God are elastic and amenable to diverse interpretations. In the end, everyone makes of the common God of Judaism his or her own God, an envisagement unique and peculiar to each individual.
- This aside, what can be said with some certainty God?
- First, Judaism tends to assume God, or take God as read. Very little time is spent trying to prove His existence. Having assumed Him to exist, it's up to individuals to decide whether He is transcendent – having existence outside the created world – or immanent – present throughout the world.
- Second, no matter how God is defined, humankind's knowledge of God is limited. Humankind's ignorance is greater than its knowledge.
- However, and this is the third point, God is One. This implies that there is no other God.

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- Polytheistic conceptions of the Divine are simply false. Moreover, dualist conceptions of the Divine, such as those associated with Zoroastrianism, are equally erroneous.
- Fourth, God, Who is essentially good, is the creator of the universe and all it contains. He animates and sustains everything around us.
- Fifth, God is a Spirit, that is, a mind that contemplates and a power that acts. Put a little differently, God is Reason and Purpose.
- Sixth, God is the guide of history. He is at the center of a design of which the finale is to be humankind's ultimate fulfillment and redemption, or humankind's deliverance, liberation and salvation. As a result, He is active in humankind's unfolding history.
- Seventh, God is humankind's helper, and the help provided can be significant as well as trivial. Significant or trivial, help is always on offer.
- Eighth, God is a liberator of people and their societies. He works with individuals to ensure that they do not acquiesce in servitude, their own or that of others.

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- Ninth, God is the Saviour of souls. He saves at the Day of Judgement, but also contributes to the saving of souls in this world by helping men and women overcome their limitations. Such limitations may include ignorance, insensitivity, sinfulness, pride, selfishness, lust and cynicism.
- The next important belief that the Jewish people subscribe to is the idea that both good and evil exist. Put simply, a follower of Judaism would argue along these lines. Because God is good, people should be good. Jews can give expression to their goodness by loving God and all people.
- However, God has given people the gift of free will, or the capacity to choose what they do. Because of free will sinful things occur. God will forgive sins provided people are truly sorry. Repentance, prayer and good deeds make up for sinful ways.

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- God is the Creator and Omnipotent, but humankind exercises free will. If this is so, where does responsibility for suffering lie, with God or with humankind? Most practising Jews would say, without hesitation, that it lies with humankind. Why?
- Because, in essence, God is good. Does this apparent contradiction confirm the theory about God's enigmatic nature?
- Most of us probably know that practising Jews regard themselves as a the Chosen People. Put simply, the concept of Chosenness goes something like this. Because God gave the Jews His laws by way of Moses when he was on Mount Sinai, the Jews are His Chosen People.
- However, this does not imply that other people are somehow inferior. It means that Jews have special duties and obligations. Jew see themselves as “a light to the nations” because they seek to teach the world about God, His laws, and the good, or morally sound, life which the laws help define. However, contemporary Jews don't require that everyone should covert to Judaism. Jews simply say that all people should believe in God, live their lives with love and respect, and care for others.

The Concept of Chosenness – in Judaism

- Chosenness, the basis of the Covenant, or agreement, that Jews entered into with God at the time of Moses, means that Jews must set an example for others to follow or to learn from.
- The terms of the Covenant are summed up in the Ten Commandments, known to the Jews as the Ten Words, or the Decalogue. By entering into the Covenant Jews took upon themselves both a tremendous privilege and a profound responsibility. They had the privilege of knowing God's laws, but such knowledge meant that they could no longer plead ignorance about God's expectations of humankind.
- On a number of occasions God warns the Jews that, if they fail in their responsibility to live by the laws, they will incur His wrath (e.g. Amos 3:1-2).

The Idea of Messiah – Judaism

- The key idea adhered to by all followers of Judaism is belief in the Messiah. Jews believe that, at some time in the future, a leader sent by God will bring peace and harmony to all of humankind.
- The Messiah will inaugurate an utopian era. Jews believe that the Messiah has yet to come because war, famine, discord and sinfulness persist.
- The Messiah will be an “anointed one”, a leader of the Jews who will be their saviour. He will trace His origins to King David. With the arrival of the Messiah, some Orthodox Jews believe that the Jerusalem Temple will rebuilt. The Second Temple was destroyed in 70CE.
- There have been many people down the centuries alleging that they were the Messiah. For one reason or another most Jews rejected claims, even at the time the alleged Messiahs emerged. With the benefit of hindsight, it would appear that those with doubts are vindicated. No one can claim that a time of universal peace, harmony and well-being has ever existed.

Afterlife - Judaism

- For Jews death is not the end; there is a future eternal existence, a world to come, even though precise details about this life are unknown. On the Day of Resurrection God will restore the dead to life. The Day of Resurrection will occur at the end of Messianic Age. Following resurrection, God will judge everyone with the righteous entering Heaven and the sinful Hell.
- The afterlife is an idea which is rarely discussed. Judaism is a faith concerned, to a very large degree, with the here, the now and the world we live in.
- Nonetheless, if contemporary Jews are pressed to say how they visualise Heaven and Hell, they may well conclude that Heaven means that one is in the presence of God and Hell is where God is absent.
- Today, almost all Jews conceive of Heaven and Hell as being non-physical states in which souls reside for all time. Such Jews do not subscribe to the idea of bodily resurrection.

Conclusion

In the 12th century, Maimonides formulated what has come to be accepted, broadly at least, as the 13 Principle of Faith. These can be found in the Sedder, or Jewish prayer books, and express the belief that:

1. God is the Creator of all
2. God is One
3. God has no body or material form
4. God is eternal
5. God alone is to be worshipped
6. God spoke through the prophets of the Bible
7. Moses was the greatest of all the prophets
8. God gave Moses the Law
9. The Law is complete and final
10. God knows everything, even before it happens
11. God will reward the righteous and punish sinners in this world and the next
12. God will send the Messiah (a man “anointed” as leader of the Jews who will be their saviour)
13. God will restore the dead to life.

Next Session

- We continue to cover Judaism and its Practices.

Reference

- Robinson, George (2001) Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs and Rituals (Pocket Books)