



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 20: The Vocabularies of Christian and Jewish Religious Life

Words matter. Proverbs Chapter 18, verse 21, teaches that “death and life are in the power of the tongue,” a striking verse that underscores the import of how we use words to convey our ideas, thoughts, and emotions. Words assume even greater significance when we engage in religious and interreligious discourse. What do Christians and Jews mean when they speak about God? The Messiah? Salvation? Witness? In this video, we’ll explore how we use these and other words and terms and their similarities and differences in Jewish and Christian usage. It is essential to understand and appreciate the vocabularies of Christian and Jewish life for those who want to learn more about other religious traditions, and especially for those who engage in interfaith dialogue,

Let’s begin with **God**. Judaism and Christianity are monotheistic faith traditions that affirm belief in one God. Both Christians and Jews hold sacred the law found in the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods beside Me” (Exodus Chapter 20, verse 3). When Christians speak about God, they typically mean a Triune God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jews, on the other hand, believe in one God who is indivisible. Jewish literature has a rich vocabulary of terms to describe God, including God as a loving parent, a revered sovereign, and a military leader.. These images, as well as all others in Jewish tradition, refer to the attributes of one and only one God.

Jews affirm that God is incorporeal, without form or physical substance. When Jews speak of all people as children of God, they mean that all human beings are created in the Divine image. We are to act like God, but we are not literally “of God.” In Jewish thought, no one individual, whether Jesus or anyone else, has a special status as the **Son of God**, born of a Heavenly Father.

A central tenet of Christian faith is the **Holy Spirit**. For many Christians, the Holy Spirit is more than a force; the Holy Spirit is the third “person” of the Trinity. Traditional Jewish thought speaks of *ru’ah ha-kodesh*, a holy spirit that pervades the world and imbues our lives with a spark of the Divine. For Jews, this holy spirit is part and parcel of the one God, a divinely-inspired force but not a separate entity.

This brings us to the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism: their views of **Jesus**. In Jewish thought, Jesus is seen as a first-century figure who was born, lived, and died as a Jew. He was an itinerant teacher, preacher and healer, and likely identified most closely with the Pharisees. For Jews, Jesus is not the Son of God, nor was he a prophet. His death on the cross was a punishment meted out by the Roman governing authorities of Judea because Jesus was viewed as a political threat to the hegemony of the Roman Empire.

The word **Messiah** is another important term in assessing the respective Christian and Jewish understandings of Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is the Messiah, the one appointed by God to redeem the world. Messiah is the English word for the Hebrew term *mashiah*, meaning “anointed.” The Greek word is Christos, from which we derive the name Jesus Christ.

In Christian thought, the nature of Jesus’ first coming was his conception by the Holy Spirit and virgin birth, his life free of sin, and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Christians believe that Jesus will return a second time to redeem the world and usher in the Messianic age of peace and goodwill for all humanity.

For Jews, the post-Biblical concept of the Messiah is inextricably bound up with the idea of a Messianic era. The Messiah will be a descendant of the House of David, a gifted human being to be sent by God to usher in the Messianic age. No one has yet done this; hence, Jews await the coming of the Messiah in future days to heal a broken world. For Jews, Jesus does not meet the litmus test of the Messiah in the teachings of their faith tradition.

As to Jesus’ role in absolving human beings of **sin**, Jews and Christians differ in their understanding of sin. While there are diverse views of sin among Christian denominations, many Christians believe that sin is a state of being. All humans are born with original sin due to the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. In this theological outlook, affirmation of Jesus as God’s chosen One cleanses human beings of original sin.

Jews do not believe in original sin. In Jewish thought, all humans are born free of sin. Jewish tradition defines sin as “missing the mark.” Sin is not a state of being in Judaism; it is an act that contradicts God’s *mitzvot*, or commandments. Neither God nor anyone sent by God has the power to absolve us of our sins. Instead, we must undergo our own process of *teshuvah*, repentance, in order to restore our relationship with God and receive Divine forgiveness. For interpersonal sins, we first reconcile with those we have hurt and ask to be forgiven by them before we can seek Divine forgiveness.

Jews understand and appreciate the singular importance of Jesus for Christians, who sometimes wonder how and why their Jewish friends and neighbors **don’t** believe in Jesus Christ. In a majority Christian country such as the United States, it can be challenging to realize that Jews and people of other faith communities don’t attend church on Sundays, celebrate Christian holidays, exchange Christmas presents, or participate in other familiar Christian customs and traditions. Jews have their own set of holidays with religious and cultural practices, customs, and traditions.

Jews even have their own **calendar**, with twelve months of 29 or 30 days, and a cycle of counting years that traditional Jews believe traces its origin to the creation of the world.¹ This Hebrew calendar differs from the familiar Gregorian calendar linked to the birth of Jesus. While Jewish people living in the modern world accept this global calendrical standard, they typically refrain from using the designations **BC**--Before Christ--and **AD**--*Anno Domini*, Latin for “the year of our Lord.” Instead, they use the religiously neutral abbreviations **BCE**, Before the Common Era, and **CE**, or Common Era.

There are many other words and phrases that differ in Christian and Jewish usage. Here is a selection of these terms listed in alphabetical order:

Bible: Jews hold the Hebrew Bible—Torah, Prophets, and Later Writings—as their sacred Scripture, but do not accept the New Testament as Scripture for their community. This is in contrast to Christians, who affirm the New Testament as sacred Scripture along with the Hebrew Bible, called the Old Testament in Christianity.

Christian Witness: In Christian parlance, being a witness or giving witness means demonstrating in word and deed one’s faith in Jesus Christ, and sharing this religious truth with others in the hope that they too will welcome Jesus Christ into their lives. There is no concept of religious witness in Judaism, which has not been a proselytizing faith tradition for more than two thousand years. The closest Jewish belief to the Christian understanding of “witness” is to live one’s life according to the highest ethical standards of Judaism and thereby serve as a moral exemplar to others.

Faith: In Christianity, this is the term used for obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. In Judaism, faith is belief in one God and a religious life in accord with the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic traditions.

Faith--Creed versus Works--Deed: Both Christianity and Judaism teach the importance of faith and good works. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to note that Christianity emphasizes faith over deeds, while Judaism stresses right actions over right thoughts.

Grace: According to traditional Christian theology, grace is the spontaneous gift of God’s favor for sinners to achieve salvation, and the Divine influence in individuals for restoration and regeneration through Jesus Christ. For many Christians, grace is conferred through the sacraments or ordinances. For others, it is a matter of personal faith.

Jewish tradition speaks of *hein*, a word that is variously translated as “grace,” “precious,” or “pleasant,” and is derived from the Hebrew root that means “lovingkindness,” “compassion,” and “mercy.” In the Hebrew Bible, *hein* is viewed as the unmerited love of one human being toward another, or God’s love of humankind. As Jewish tradition developed through the centuries, *hein* came to be viewed as one of two core attributes of God. Divine lovingkindness is balanced by Divine justice, as evidenced by the Jewish High Holy Day liturgy that asks God to move from the heavenly throne of justice to the throne of compassion and mercy.

¹ For further information, please watch the “Jewish Calendar and Holidays” and “Jewish Calendar and Holidays-Part 2” videos in the “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic” series.

Heaven: For Christians, this is the eternal future home of those who accept Jesus Christ. Jewish theology speaks of God being in heaven, but Jewish conceptions of heaven do not align with popularized images that we see and hear today. Jewish tradition focuses more on this life than the next one, and thus has diverse and often contradictory views of the afterlife, known in Judaism as *olam haba*, The World to Come.

Hell: In Christian thought, hell is the abode of the wicked who face eternal punishment after they die. The Hebrew Bible contains references to an underworld but does not affirm the idea of perpetual damnation based upon one's beliefs in this world. Some Jewish scholars contend that the notion of hell is foreign to the Jewish tradition.

Religious Freedom: Christians often speak of religious freedom as the free exercise of their faith and the ability to think, express, and act upon what they believe. Jews also affirm the cherished American doctrine of **freedom of religion**, a right that allows them to practice their own Jewish faith. However, they may speak of religious freedom in terms of **freedom from religion**--the need of minority faith communities to guard against an erosion of the wall that separates church and state and a firm rebuke to those who proclaim America to be a "Christian nation."

Sabbath: The Jewish Sabbath, *Shabbat*, begins on Friday at sundown and concludes on Saturday evening. It is a sacred day of rest with special customs and rituals for the home and the synagogue. For Christians, the Sabbath is almost universally observed on Sunday. It too includes worship and restful behaviors.

Salvation: A word that denotes saving the soul from sin and the consequences of sin. Many Christians believe in individual salvation from sin by receiving Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Son of God. Jews do not believe individuals receive salvation by Divine grace, nor do they need personal salvation from original sin, which is not a Jewish concept, as previously noted. In Jewish thought, collective salvation or redemption will come for the Jewish people with the end of exile. Both individual and collective salvation in Judaism depend upon prayer, Torah study, and the performance of good deeds.

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