



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

### **Script 22: Can Jews be Christians?**

What makes someone Jewish? This is a challenging and emotionally-charged question. Let's examine it thoughtfully and thoroughly.

Judaism is not simply a religion but also has ethnic, cultural, and national dimensions as well. One is born into or converted into the "Jewish tribe." Jews are not baptized. As a member of the Jewish people, the individual is in covenant with God. One does not have to hold any particular beliefs or follow any of the commandments to be acknowledged by the Jewish community as Jewish. One does not have to believe in God. An individual who is not a member of the Jewish people cannot claim membership just because they would like to become Jewish. One who wishes to become Jewish undergoes extensive education, performs various rituals, and receives certification by a Jewish court in order to join the Jewish community. This type of gatekeeping is very different from the many other world religions where intention to belong is sufficient to open the doors of membership.

Since the beginning of the first century CE,<sup>1</sup> the Jewish community has granted Jewish status to children born of a Jewish mother, or to children born of a non-Jewish mother whose parent(s) bring them for conversion to Judaism according to Jewish law. The Jewish community also accepts as Jewish any adult who has followed a course of training and who has converted to Judaism according to Jewish law.

In 1983, the Reform Jewish movement in the United States elected to accept as Jewish any child having one Jewish parent, either father or mother. The ruling was based on the Biblical practice of conferring Jewish status through patrilineal descent, the religion of the father. The Conservative and Orthodox Jewish movements do not accept patrilineal descent as definitive evidence of Jewish personhood.

From the viewpoint of Jewish tradition, a Jewish person who professes a faith other than Judaism is an apostate Jew, one who has strayed from their faith and people. However, if that

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<sup>1</sup> CE: Common Era, a term used by Jews and many Christians in place of AD.

person wishes to return to full membership in the Jewish community, it is possible to do so via a re-entry ritual.

In the early days of the formation of Christianity as an organized religion, the issue of who was a Jew and who was a Christian was fluid. However, as the Christian Church became more institutionalized, the lines dividing the two religions became fixed. At its most fundamental level, Christians were those who accepted Jesus as their savior and as the Messiah. Jews were those who rejected the idea of Jesus as a savior and as the Messiah.

So, what are the key differences between Judaism and Christianity? Christians believe in the one God that is manifested in the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The God of the Jewish People is singular and indivisible. Christians affirm belief in Jesus as the Son of God. For Jews, all people on earth are children of God, and no one individual has a unique standing in this regard.

Acceptance of Jesus as the savior is the definitive belief of the Christian religion. Judaism does not believe in the necessity of a mediator in the relationship with God. One's relationship with God is immediate, personal, ongoing, and eternal. Christians also believe that Jesus absolves the individual of original sin. There is no concept of original sin in Judaism. Therefore, a Jewish individual has no need for absolution.

The belief that Jesus is the Messiah is central to Christian doctrine. Judaism teaches that the Messiah has not yet come. Why? According to Jewish tradition, Jews look forward to a time of peace, harmony, and goodwill on earth. This era is known as the Messianic age, and the figure of the Messiah in Jewish thought is fundamentally bound up with the Messianic age. The anointed one who will usher in the Messianic age is the Messiah. Anyone who fails to do so, including Jesus, is not the Messiah in the eyes of Jewish tradition.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 1970's, an organization called "Jews for Jesus" started in San Francisco. It spread a message among college-age Jews that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, could offer Jews a vibrant new spirituality and a way to live a more Jewish life. The dominant theme preached by Jews for Jesus was that Judaism without Jesus was incomplete. They asserted that one could become a "completed Jew" by accepting Jesus as the Messiah and as a personal savior. Furthermore, by doing so, they claimed that Jews could retain their Judaism and be Christian at the same time.

One prominent group, Hebrew or Hebraic Christians, are people of any religious background who refer to Jesus as "Yeshua HaMashiah," a Hebrew term that means "Jesus the Messiah." Hebrew Christians see themselves as "children of Abraham by faith" whether or not they were born of a Jewish mother or father. Another group, Messianic Jews, are people, both Jewish and Christian by birth, who affirm that Jesus is the Messiah and see themselves as part of the Jewish community. They may follow Jewish law in some form with regard to religious and personal practice. They call their worship spaces "synagogues" and call their religious leaders "rabbis." They freely mix Jewish rituals and symbols with Christian theology and customs.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, please watch the "Vocabularies of Christian and Jewish Religious Life" video in the "Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic" series.

Jewish leaders and their communities across the globe consider members of all these groups to be Christian because of their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. From the point of view of the Jewish community, the message of Jews for Jesus, Hebrew Christians, and Messianic Jews is based on a theological fiction--namely, that one can be both Jewish and Christian at the same time. In the eyes of the Jewish community and of Jewish tradition, one is either Jewish or Christian, but not both.

A final point is in order. Christian seminarians and other religious leaders should recognize and appreciate the highly critical normative Jewish response to these groups. The Jewish view of the Messiah cannot be severed from the Jewish view of the Messianic age. While Jews respect their Christian friends and neighbors as fellow monotheists who believe in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, they understand that belief as the fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism. Jews of most every stream of Jewish life and thought—Orthodox and non-Orthodox, religious and secular—share the view that Jews who believe in Jesus Christ have passed through a theological boundary and removed themselves from the Jewish community as it defines itself. This deep-seated view is rooted not only in Jewish theology, but also in Jewish history filled with antisemitic violence and forced conversions to Christianity.

Jews cherish the fundamental principles of religious liberty that allow people to freely express their own religious beliefs and practices. While Jews understand the imperative claimed by many Christians to bear witness to others about Jesus, Christians should understand that centuries of antisemitism, forced conversions, and persecution have led to strident Jewish opposition to being evangelized by Christians. Jews are especially troubled by groups they view as spiritually fraudulent, and they take great offense at campaigns that claim that one can only be a “good Jew” or a “fulfilled Jew” by becoming a Jew for Jesus, Hebrew Christian, or Messianic Jew. Christians do well to appreciate the challenging fact that their Jewish neighbors may have difficulty articulating what they believe in, but they know quite well what they *don't* believe in.

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