



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

Script 3: Biblical Israelites and Modern Jews

Jewish tradition teaches of an encounter between Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and his student, Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, soon after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE.¹ Looking out over the ruins, Rabbi Joshua lamented, “Woe unto us, that this place where Israel’s sins were atoned is destroyed.” “My son,” Rabbi Yohanan responded, “be not grieved, for we have another means of atonement as effective as this. And what is it? Acts of kindness.” Rabbi Yohanan offered as proof, God’s declaration through the prophet Hosea, “For I desire kindness, not sacrifice.”²

This story illustrates not only the unprecedented challenge that the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem posed for the Jewish people, but their response to that challenge. Up to that point, the Jewish people, the remnant of the once much larger Israelite nation, worshiped God in the manner described in the Torah in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Prior to Kings Hezekiah and Josiah, there were many local shrines that eventually became centralized into the main Temple in Jerusalem, although there were a few other temples, such as the ones in Shiloh and Elephantine, that continued for a period of time. The essence of centralized worship was a Temple in which animal sacrifices were offered to God at the hands of a hereditary priesthood. The ancient Temple served as the site of daily and holiday communal offerings, as well as the sacrifices of individuals seeking atonement or expressing thanks. In addition, the Temple was a gathering place for the entire nation on the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot (also known as Pentecost), and Sukkot (also known as the holiday of Tabernacles). This biblical religion based on one central shrine was a national institution.

The destruction of the Temple and the increased dispersion of the Jewish people in its wake changed all this. It was left to a newly emerging group of Jewish leaders - the rabbis - to reshape religious practice for a people that lost not only their Temple and their priesthood, but their national identity as well. The religion they shaped - what we recognize today as Judaism - was consonant with the holidays, the values, and the sense of peoplehood that the ancient Judeans

¹ The Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of AD.

² Hosea 6:6

sought to nurture, while being transportable and adaptable to other lands and changing conditions.

The rabbis did this by setting Judaism not in one Temple, but in its scriptural texts and in the teachings through which they interpreted them. Rabbinic methods of interpretation adapted these sacred texts to the new conditions in which the Jewish people found themselves. The rabbinic sages drew upon a message established in Jewish prophetic texts such as Micah, Chapter 6, verse 8:

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good,
And what the Lord requires of you:
Only to do justice,
And to love goodness,
And to walk humbly with your God.”

Rabbi Yohanan’s path to atonement through acts of kindness rather than animal sacrifice is a foundation of the rabbis’ response to the loss of the ancient Temple. Through it, the central elements of the Temple-based biblical cult were transformed into what we now know as Judaism. By means of this process, prayer took the place of daily and holiday sacrifices. Home and synagogue celebrations took the place of pilgrimages. And a sense of having a universal purpose took the place of a particular geographic identity.

Rooted in textual interpretation, Judaism is highly adaptive to changing situations as new circumstances yield new understandings of these sacred texts. Moreover, because Judaism has no central authority, it is free to develop differently in different places. In the United States, with its unprecedented level of religious freedom, Judaism has developed a number of different movements, each of which represents a unique response to challenges such as modernity and personal autonomy. Thus, Jewish practice in one congregation will likely look very different from another congregation in the same neighborhood.³

What unites them all, however, is the knowledge that the texts they are interpreting are holy and therefore must be expounded with deference to their sanctity. Moreover, since Jewish observance is built on the long saga of Jewish history, Jews have an innate sense of themselves as part of an historical continuum. The need to remain true to this historical identity curbs the tendency toward behavior or belief that would cause an irreparable break with the past, even as Jewish people disagree about which elements of that past are most important to preserve.

A modern Jew will look at her ancient texts, particularly the Torah, and see a reflection of the tradition she knows. She will read about the Sabbath or the festivals and recognize their larger patterns and purposes that transcend the Temple rites that figure so prominently in their biblical description. She will, in fact, read of these sacrificial rites as she does the often severe, Biblically-mandated penalties that adhere to their violation--as part of a tradition that we understand through the long lens of historical and textual interpretation. And she will take pride in being the inheritor

³ For further information on this topic, please refer to “Jewish Identity 201,” another episode in the “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic” series.

of an ancient faith that has survived throughout the ages by never losing its focus on what really matters.

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