

**WHAT DO YOU THINK COULD BE THE BASIS OF A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A CHRISTIAN AND A JEW? EXPLAIN AND JUSTIFY YOUR REASONS**

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## **1 Introduction**

The Christian faith is founded on the Jewish Scriptures, and was itself based on the life of a Jew, Jesus Christ. In this essay, drawing largely on the Bible and the course text (LBC 1998) we seek to provide bases for dialogue between Christians and Jews where differences and similarities in the faiths can be developed and tested, as well as confronting Anti-Semitism.

## **2 Parallels in belief and approach**

Although a discussion must inevitably mention differences, I think the most fruitful approach is to begin with beliefs in common, assessing differences in detailed approach. An excellent way to do this is with Maimonides' "13 Principles of Faith" (see Unterman 1997).

Concerning principles regarding God's nature, Christians and Jews can agree about the existence of the Creator and in his providence, his unity, his eternity, and that worship is due to him alone. The Christian would need to explain his belief in God's unity in the context of the Trinity (see also the discussion of the Passover below). Concerning principles regarding revelation, there could be agreement over God's communication through the words of the prophets, the status of Moses and the revelation to him at Sinai, and the immutability of the Law (see Matthew 5:18, also the discussion of covenant below).

Then in Maimonides' principles there are common beliefs in the omniscience of God in respect of humanities' deeds and that he rewards and punishes good and evil (retribution in the after life). We note that Judaism entails justice on earth if the people are faithful, while Christianity recognises that faithfulness may lead to persecution. On Maimonides' last two principles there could be an interesting debate as to whether the Pentateuch endorses belief in Resurrection – there are suggestive points in the Prophets, as noted in Grudem (1994), such as Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2 and Ezekiel 37. Both faiths also look to the coming of the Messiah, although the Jewish faith does not acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, as discussed below. In this

context, an interesting parallel is in the universal elements of the Jewish faith – at times forgotten by Jews themselves, that Christians see as an Old Testament blessing for the spread of faith among the Gentiles. See Psalm 86:9, Zechariah 14:16 and Jonah for showing how Yahweh of the Jews longed for worship by all the nations in Jerusalem.

Sin is crucial to both faiths as a barrier between humanity and God (Isaiah 59:2, Ephesians 4:18) so needs to be discussed. Jews focus on free will and the choice of an individual to sin, and do not share the Christian view of original sin (although here the Christian could cite Jeremiah 17:9 and Isaiah 64:6 that suggest a predisposition to sin). Both stress the need for forgiveness and repentance, and the mercy of God. Judaism stresses that humanity brings about atonement by deciding to begin again; Christianity would stress the role of the Holy Spirit in the process as John 16:8 "he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment". The Christian, who would suggest man is incapable of durable repentance without the Holy Spirit, could note to the Jew that the prophecy of Ezekiel 36:25-27 very much foreshadows the wider process of salvation as seen by Christians (Grudem 1994 chs 33-38) and the role of the Holy Spirit; "Cleanse you from impurities" is justification, "new heart and spirit" is regeneration, while "move you to follow my decrees" is sanctification, in which the Spirit has a particular role.

The concept of covenant – a legal agreement between God and man - is a basis of both faiths. For Jews, the first covenant was that with Noah, never again to flood the earth (Genesis 9:11); then there is the promise to Abraham of the land of Canaan, and of circumcision (Genesis 17:3-17:14), renewed to David that his line would never fail (2 Samuel 7:5-16) and thirdly the covenant with Moses and the ten commandments (Exodus 34:10). The Christian would add the promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:33 "'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people", which Paul in 2

Corinthians 3:6 identifies with Christ's sacrifice (Cotterell 1990). The Christian can argue that only the Mosaic covenant was superseded by Jesus, while those to Noah, Abraham and David remained in force (Grudem 1990, p521), also for Jews. Furthermore, that Jeremiah is highlighting the view of law that Christians hold, as relating to motives and not only actions.

Turning from doctrine to praxis, a basis for discussion is parallels in the way in which Scripture. The Talmud and later works are attempts to interpret the Torah for the current time and in the light of the inspiration of the reader. This is similar on the one hand to the Catholic approach where authorities and tradition develop the understanding of Scripture, but also the Protestant view that the tradition is not static and new interpretations are always feasible (LBC 1998). Jews see interpretation as part of revelation, while Christians also use interpretation – such as the idea of the Trinity - as doctrine.

A further area for discussion is a comparison of how diversity is expressed in Christianity and Judaism. Whereas the Christian church has different denominations, the Jews have the different movements of the Orthodox, the Reform, Conservative and Hassidism. The Christian could note how such tendencies are often represented within rather than across denominations (low and high church, charismatic, etc.). The Jew and Christian could compare the crucible for these movements, the “Haskalah” or Enlightenment with the Christian Reformation. Orthodox and Reform Judaism appear to correspond to the more conservative/fundamentalist and liberal wings of Christianity – notably in respect of their view of Scripture. Hassidism appears to have some parallels to Protestantism in stressing the ability of every person, however ignorant or poor, to communicate with God. Following the point made above, Hassidism also, as Jesus stressed, put emphasis on the motive rather than the deed itself (e.g. Matthew 5:28 on adultery).

### 3 Differences in belief and approach

There is a need to debate the key difference between Jews and Christians - the attitude to Jesus. For Christians he is the Messiah, the Son of God, while for Jews he is just one of many pretenders to the position of Messiah, and his indirect claim to be Son of God is regarded as blasphemous (as stated by the High Priest in Matthew 26:65); Jews can note as proof that an era of peace did not arise with his reign. Christians can then highlight the doctrine of the Second Coming and debate whether it is implicit in Micah 5:3-5, where verse 4 could refer to the *post-1945* rebirth of Israel and not the *post exilic* return. The Christian could explore with the Jew the extent to which the Torah itself is seen by Jews as God's supreme revelation, a place taken for Christians by the life and work of Jesus himself.

There are a number of grounds on which the person of Jesus could be discussed, using the Old Testament scriptures, accepted as the Word of God by both faiths, and also the traditions of the Jewish faith. One is the prophecies of the Old Testament that point to Jesus, as is illustrated extensively throughout the Gospels, and especially Matthew. It would be important to note those over which Jesus himself would have no control, such as the place of his birth, (Micah 5:2), and the time Jesus was buried before his resurrection (three days, in parallel with Jonah in the whale, Jonah 1:17 and Matthew 12:40).

There are two specific aspects of Old Testament prophecy that would need discussion in depth as central to both faiths. The first is the figure of the suffering servant in Isaiah 40-53. For Jews, the suffering servant of God is the nation of Israel, whereas for Christians he is Jesus. The discussion could focus in particular on the last song in Isaiah 52-53, which foreshadows in considerable detail the life, reception, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as expounding the meaning of his death. Furthermore, as noted by Pawson (2003), the first 39 chapters of Isaiah talk of a *coming king* and the last 27 the *servant of God*. Whereas for Jews

the link is unclear, God speaks in Matthew 3:17 regarding Jesus “This is my Son” – the king of Isaiah 9:6 – “with whom I am well pleased” – the servant of Isaiah 42:1.

The other key figure is the Son of Man, the name that Jesus accepted most willingly for himself. This links an insignificant human being, as in Job 25:6, and the prophet as used for himself by Ezekiel, with the mighty Son of God of Daniel 7:13 whom “men of every language worshipped”. For Jews the Son of Man is not of course Jesus, and the Messianic figure of Daniel is still awaited.

Concerning the traditions of the Jews, the link of the life of Jesus to the sacrificial system before the sack of Jerusalem would also have resonance. As stated in Hebrews 10:11-14, for Christians Jesus’ death was the culmination and end of sacrifice as “he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” while the former Temple sacrifices had to be repeated as they did not meet God’s desire for repentance and change of heart (Psalm 40:6).

Linking to this, contrasting views of the festivals of the Jewish faith and their relation to Christianity can also be a ground for discussion. As an example one may cite the Passover, which for the Jew commemorates God’s killing of the firstborn of Egypt, which triggered the departure of the Hebrews from Egypt. The Messianic interpretation of the Passover<sup>1</sup> is a powerful one, which suggests that in addition to looking back to the age of Moses, it also looks to the life of Christ. As an example one may discuss why there are three pieces of unleavened bread. A traditional Jewish explanation is that it represents Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Christians might rather suggest it reflects the Trinity (also citing Elohim, the plural word used for God). Then the breaking of the middle bread (Matzah) symbolises the death of Christ, and its hiding and refinding by the children (the “Afikomen”) symbolises his burial

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://godonthe.net/passover/messianic\\_haggadah.html](http://godonthe.net/passover/messianic_haggadah.html)

and resurrection. This is as well as being his own gesture to his disciples that Christians commemorate as Communion. As is stated in the Messianic Seder (op cit), “Just as the lamb's blood protected the Israelites from death, Yeshua's blood will protect us from death.”

### **3 Antisemitism**

The history of anti-Semitism is an important barrier between Christians and Jews, of obvious relevance in a discussion. It would be wise for the Christian to show humility at it and the role of the church in its development, such as Medieval church legislation that passed laws forbidding commercial relations between Christians and Jews, the Papal Bull of 1555 requiring segregation between Catholics and Jews, enforcing Jewish ghettos.

A positive aspect is to point out that the New Testament does not condone it. Notably, the pejorative references to “the Jews” opposing Jesus in texts such as the Gospel of John (10:31) do not refer to the whole Jewish race (Pawson 2003). In the same Gospel, those of the Jewish faith from Galilee as called “Israelites”, see John 1:47 referring to Nathaniel. This gives no grounds for persecution of those persons of Jewish origin in more recent years.

### **Conclusion**

A dialogue between Christians and Jews can be very fruitful, and has numerous bases throughout Scripture and tradition. We may add that only a book could fully answer the question, which encompasses almost the whole of Christian theology. A continuation of such dialogue, if it led Jews to faith, would of course hasten the second coming of Jesus, which itself involves 12,000 each from the tribes of Israel coming to faith (Revelation 7:4-10). Assessing the central role of the Jews in the end-times for Christians would prolong the discussion considerably!

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**Word count 1998 including Bible Texts.**