

Week 32

Special Topics: Judaism and Islam

+ Introduction

If you were to make a list of the most influential people in world history, you would probably hear people come up with names like William the Conqueror, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, or Isaac Newton. While all these men certainly played a substantial role in influencing humanity, I would argue that the influence of these men pales in comparison to two men that tower over human history. The first, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem marked the key hinge moment of human history, and His legacy has undeniably shaped the entirety of the past two thousand years. The other man that I would argue has influenced the world more than anyone outside of Jesus is Abraham.

The three monotheistic religions of the world (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) all trace their lineage back to this one Mesopotamian man. According to Pew Research, the world population featured 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims, and about 10 million Jews as of 2015.¹ Thus, over half of the world's population trace their lineage back to Abraham in one form or another. This week's lesson will explore the similarities and differences between what we believe and what Jews and Muslims believe.

+ Judaism Overview

GENESIS 12:1-3 *The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.*

²*"I will make you into a great nation,*

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

³*I will bless those who bless you,*

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you."

If you were to boil down the identity of the Jews, it would simply be that they claim the title of God's chosen people and the true descendants of Abraham. The Jews look to the promises that God

made to Abraham, and they trace those promises through Abraham's descendants Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and all the way through to today. The Israelites find their identity in the fact that they have been set apart by God and struggled and wrestled with Him throughout their history. Israel, the new name given to Jacob later in his life, literally means 'God contended' or 'wrestles with God' in Hebrew. They have wrestled with the promises of God compared to the difficult circumstances they have experienced, they have wrestled with keeping their end of the Law given by God, and they have wrestled with the temptation to doubt their God and worship other gods.

One unique feature of those who adhere to Judaism is that they might wear Judaism as an ethnic identity or a religious identity without following its principles. Many Jews will claim their ethnic identity but not observe the religious requirements. Those who do follow the religious requirements of Judaism, keep the same Old Testament Scriptures as Christians, and place a special emphasis on the Law of Moses regarding ritual cleanliness, circumcision for males, food restrictions, holy days, and other religious and ethnic markers that separate them as God's people.

The primary promises of God given to Abraham can be divided in this manner:

1. That he would have many descendants that would become a great nation.

- a. God made this promise to Abraham when He and his wife Sarai (later Sarah) were already very old and had no children. God promised Abraham that a great nation would come from him and that his legacy would be great.
- b. In order for this promise to be fulfilled, Abraham would have first to have actual descendants, and then they would need to form into a real nation. These things, of course, did eventually come to pass.

2. That his descendants would have a great name and that they would bless the world.

- a. This promise of God suggests that Abraham's descendants would not just form a nation but also become well-known in the history of the world. It also suggests that the world will come to be blessed through them. One fascinating development of this promise of God has developed in the past century. Shortly after the first century (2,000 years ago), the Jews were largely driven out of the land of Israel, and they no longer had a nation to call their own. As a result, the people of Israel were forced to scatter into different parts of the world, largely assimilating into Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Even though they no longer had a nation to call their own, and even though they were few in number, the Jews remained well known throughout the world.
- b. After one of the darkest moments in the history of the Jews, when an estimated 5.85 million Jews were murdered in World War II, Israel regained its title as a nation with its own land in 1948. For context, as of 2015, there were still only about 10 million Jews in the entire world. Even when all hope seemed lost, God's promise that Abraham's descendants would have a great name and bless the world persisted. Another interesting thing to note is the positive influence that Jews have had on the world in spite of their tiny numbers. Jewish people only represent .19% of the world population, yet Jews

represent 20% of Nobel laureates. The contributions that the Jews have made to the world in science, medicine, and technology are incredible when you consider that they went so long without a nation and how few they are compared to the rest of the world. Abraham's descendants have truly been influential and a blessing to the world.

3. That He will bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him.

- a. Time and time again, the nations that attempted to curse the Jews have come to ruin. Many of the primary antagonists of the nation of Israel (The Philistines, the nations of Canaan, the Babylonian Empire, the Roman Empire, etc.) ceased to exist entirely.
- b. Part of this is because the nations of the world tend to come and go, but the nation of Israel remains while these others have fallen away.

4. That they would be given a specific land as their inheritance from the land of Canaan.

- a. Genesis 15:18-21 says *"On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."*
- b. The land in this passage includes the modern-day version of the nation of Israel, but actually includes quite a bit more land from the surrounding countries as well. Part of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants was this physical piece of land, which makes it all the more significant that the Jews again have their own nation-state in the land promised to Abraham.

5. That all these promises would come to fruition through the line of the promised son, Isaac.

- a. In Genesis 16, Sarah had the idea of allowing Abraham to have a child with her Egyptian maid named Hagar to have a descendant. Abraham had a child with Hagar named Ishmael. Abraham wanted God to fulfill His promises through Ishmael, but God made it clear that the promised son would come through Sarah. Eventually, Sarah did become pregnant, and Isaac was born to them.
- b. God did promise to bless Ishmael and that he would have many descendants as well. This distinction is important, because as we will discuss in a moment, Muslims trace their lineage through Ishmael, saying that he was the true promised son of Abraham.

Where We Differ

As Christians, we value and treasure the history of the people of Israel. We believe that we have continued in the line of the great followers of God, many of whom are listed in the "Hall of fame of faith" in Hebrews 11. We look to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, the Prophets, and others as our forefathers in a similar way that Jewish people do today.

The key difference is what we believe about Jesus. If you meet someone who is a practicing Jew today, they will either tell you that they are still waiting for the Messiah to come or that they do not believe a Messiah is coming at all. Instead, they believe that God has called them to continue following the Law of Moses as their fathers have done before them.

On the other hand, we believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises that God made to Israel. God promised that He would bless the world through the descendants of Abraham in the land that was promised to them. Jesus, the Faithful Israelite in the land that God promised to Abraham, took the sin of the world upon Himself, fulfilling all the sacrificial requirements of the Law, and bringing all the symbolism of Israel's holy days to bear.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*

The Day of Atonement, the Passover, and Israel's rites and rituals ultimately pointed toward what God would do in and through Jesus Christ. As Christians, we share so much in common with the Jews, but we ultimately disagree on the person of Jesus.

+ Islam Overview

Like Christians and Jews, Muslims also trace their heritage back to Abraham. Muslims view Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac all as prophets of God. In Islam, the primary message of the prophets is that of monotheism, as exemplified by the most important confession in the religion, "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God."²

The basic formulation of the religion of Islam is that people must completely submit to the will of an all-powerful God. Muslims do this by repeating the confession (listed above), praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, giving alms to the poor, taking a pilgrimage to Mecca, and holding fast to the primary tenants of Islam. Islam is very much focused on accumulating more deeds that please God that can outweigh one's bad deeds as a religion.³

Muslims consider Muhammed to be the premier prophet of their religion, and they believe that Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael. The primary thing that Muslims have in common with Christians and Jews is the belief that there is one God, though they refer to Him as "Allah."

There are some shared stories in the Bible and in the Quran; however, the shared stories often carry significant differences, as many of the key elements of these stories come to different conclusions in the Quran. In addition, the vast majority of the Muslim world identifies as coming from the spiritual line of Ishmael, who they believe constructed Mecca along with his father, Abraham. This is part of the reason why large swaths of the Muslim world are antagonistic toward Israel and the Jews.

The Doctrine of Islam

Muslims summarize their doctrine in six articles of faith:

1. **Belief in one Allah:** Muslims believe Allah is one, eternal, creator, and sovereign.

2. **Belief in the angels.**
3. **Belief in the prophets:** The prophets include the biblical prophets but end with Muhammad as Allah's final prophet.
4. **Belief in the revelations of Allah:** Muslims accept certain portions of the Bible, such as the Torah and the Gospels. They believe the Qur'an is the preexistent, perfect word of Allah.
5. **Belief in the last day of judgment and the hereafter:** that everyone will be resurrected for judgment into either paradise or hell.
6. **Belief in predestination:** Muslims believe Allah has decreed everything that will happen. Muslims testify to Allah's sovereignty with their frequent phrase, inshallah, meaning, "if God wills." ⁴

Where We Differ

There are many areas where Islam differs from what we believe. The most significant of these is with Jesus. Muslims believe that Jesus was the second most important prophet in history, behind Muhammad. They acknowledge the virgin birth of Jesus, His miracles, His disciples, and His ascension into heaven. Interestingly, they deny His crucifixion and His death, and they deny that His divinity as God Incarnate, God's Son. ⁵ While it seems on the surface that Islam might have even more in common with Christianity than Judaism because of their recognition of Jesus, they are actually much farther away.

Acknowledging Jesus as a prophet while denying His Divine nature undermines the entire point of what we believe and what the Bible teaches. Jesus is the full revelation of God's nature and character, and denying Jesus leads to a complete perversion of the truth of God. In Jesus, we see that God has come near to us, that He understands us, and that He is willing to humble Himself in order to serve others. Philippians 2:5-11 explains it this way:

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

⁶ *Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*"and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

The "God" of Islam (Allah) would never allow himself to be humbled in that way. Muslims essentially worship a "god" of complete power (Allah), and Allah demands they submitted to him. Because of their rejection of Jesus as the Son of God and divine, Muslims conceive of their "god" as essentially a being of raw power and will.

Another point to note about the reliability of the Muslim account of biblical history is that Muhammad lived about 500 years after Jesus, and the Muslim scriptures were written during or after his lifetime. This means that Quran cannot plausibly be more reliable in its stories about Jesus' life and death than the Gospels, which were written much closer to the time of Jesus' actual life and ministry.

✚ How to Respond

Our first response to Judaism and Islam should be that we pray that those within these religions can come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, God's interaction with Abraham and his family has left an indelible mark on the history of the world even up until this very day. It is important that we take to heart something that Paul says in Romans chapter 4 about Abraham and the promises of God. Paul reflects on Genesis 15:6, which states, *"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."*

When looking at this passage, Paul points out something that was an explosive idea for the early Christians and their Jewish counterparts: Abraham was considered righteous by God because of his faith before he and his family had received the sign of circumcision. This means that God did not need Abraham or his descendants to follow the Law in order to be God's people, but He required them to respond to Him in faith. It was not based on actions or deeds, rather by faith.

Paul takes this to a logical conclusion in Romans 4:16-17 when he says, *"¹⁶Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."*

Paul tells us that Abraham's true descendants are not the Jews through Isaac or Muslims through Ishmael, but instead, it is those who respond to God in faith. And God has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ, and this means that those with faith in Jesus are the true descendants of Abraham. Abraham's descendants are not determined by blood or by religious observances but by faith in God revealed in Christ.

+ Conclusion

We need to be ready to give a defense of our beliefs and why we live the way we live in Christ Jesus (1 Peter 3:15). The world in which we live is changing more and more each year, especially with the growth of the Islamic faith. Houston has the largest population of Muslims in Texas, including 209 Mosques and storefront religious centers.⁶ In contrast, there are only 40 Jewish synagogues in Houston.⁷

We are to be a light to this world (Matthew 5:16). We have been entrusted with the good news of Jesus Christ. Part of that responsibility is not only to tell our story but also to understand the story of others in order to point them to the truth.

+ Addendum

Below is an outline of Judaism and Islam from the SBC Focus Your Influence Workbook created in 2020:

I. JUDAISM

A. Sources of Jewish theology: Scripture

1. Christian approaches to the Old Testament:
 - a. The Old Testament as a whole is equally authoritative for Christians (i.e., no particular books take authority over the others).
 - b. But the entire Old Testament is governed from the Christological perspective of the New Testament.
2. Jewish approaches to the Hebrew Bible (not the "Old Testament"):
 - a. The Hebrew Bible is not equally authoritative. Particular books take preeminence over the others.
 - b. The Hebrew Bible is divided into the Torah, Prophets, and Writings.
 - c. For Jews, the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy) takes precedence over the Prophets and the Writings.

B. Sources of Jewish interpretation: Rabbinic literature

1. Jewish approaches to authoritative interpretation
 - a. For Jews, a secondary interpretative lens carries great authority. This is the Rabbinic literature. It functions as the governing understanding that Jews are to have when they approach the Torah.
 - b. Rabbinic literature comes in two parts:
 - i. The Mishna ("repeating"): Sometimes called the "Oral Torah," this is the oral tradition of how to interpret the Torah. It stems from the 2nd century A.D.

- ii. The Talmud ("study"): The Mishna was itself studied and commented upon, leading to a secondary interpretive layer called the Talmud that culminated around the 7th century A.D.
- 2. Christian approaches to authoritative interpretation
 - a. Catholic and Orthodox: Scripture must be interpreted in accordance with officially appointed church leaders and with early Christian thinkers.
 - b. Protestant: Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice. No church officials are to lord authority over Scripture. (This is Luther's sola scriptura.)
- C. Main points of the Jewish religion that distinguish it from Christian theology:
 - 1. Monotheism: The Shema (Deut. 6:4) describes God as "one." Jews do not view God as a Trinity.
 - 2. Messiah: Jews look forward to a Messiah but deny that Jesus was the Messiah.
 - 3. Incarnation: Jews deny that Jesus was the divine Logos/Son of God or a true prophet.
 - 4. Common threads: the inspiration of the Hebrew Bible; rejection of polytheism; Ten Commandments.
- D. Jewish rituals and ethics
 - 1. Examples of Jewish ritual/ethics:
 - a. Sabbath: no work; what can Jews do or not do on the Sabbath
 - b. Purity/Kosher laws: what can Jews eat or not eat in common with Gentiles
- E. Main techniques of evangelizing Jews
 - 1. Historical obstacles to evangelizing Jews: Christian persecution of Jews
 - 2. Theological differences: monotheism and the Trinity
 - 3. Suggested avenues of conversation:
 - a. Read the Gospels: Many Jews are completely unfamiliar with the biblical record of Jesus.
 - b. Discuss predictive prophecy relating to the Messiah: Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.
 - c. Explain the concept of "grace" versus "works," using Romans 4 and Abraham's faith.

II. ISLAM

- A. Source of Islamic theology: The Koran
 - 1. The Koran contains the oral messages given to the Prophet Muhammad by Allah (the Arabic word for "God").
 - 2. It largely consists of poetic orations. It was written down by Muhammad's followers at a later time.

3. The Koran is considered without error by Muslims.
4. Ideally, Muslims must read the Koran in Arabic. Muslim practice does not value translation to the same degree that Christianity does.

B. Sources of Islamic interpretation: Hadith (“story” or “report”)

1. The Hadith contain non-scriptural stories/quotes about Muhammad and his teachings.
2. The Hadith is a source of religious law and moral guidance teachings that are of lesser authority than the Koran.

C. Main points of Islamic theology that distinguish it from Christian theology

1. Monotheism: “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Muslims do not believe in the Trinity.
2. Jesus:
 - a. Many Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, that He was crucified, and that Jesus will return to judge the earth one day.
 - b. Muslims do not believe that Jesus was the incarnate Logos/ Son of God or that Jesus rose from the dead.
3. Violence: Islam encourages the enforcement of religion through political means, including the murder of apostates from the faith. However, many cultural Muslims focus more on the passages in the Koran that emphasize peace and religious tolerance.
4. The Bible was corrupted after it was written. The Koran is the new revelation of God’s will.
5. Common Threads: The Koran speaks of some Old Testament figures: Cain and Abel, Abraham, Moses, and others.

D. Islamic rituals and ethics: Five Pillars of Islam

1. **The Creed-** The confession of monotheism and Muhammad
2. **Salat- Prayer:** Five times per day toward Mecca
3. **Zakat-** Giving to the poor
4. **Fasting during Ramadan:** Muslims are required to fast during daylight hours in this month, but they can eat after sunset and before sunrise.
5. **Pilgrimage:** Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least one time during their life as long as they are financially and physically able.

E. Main techniques of evangelizing Muslims

1. Historical obstacles: The Crusades, American Imperialism, 9/11.
2. Theological differences: monotheism and the Trinity; explain the “Sonship” of Jesus.
3. Some Muslims believe that if something is in the Bible, then it is in the Koran; they believe the Koran is an updated and purified version. There are stories in the Koran similar to stories in the Bible but with significant differences.

4. Suggested avenues of conversation:

- a. Read the Gospels, specifically the book of John. Ask them, If Jesus was a prophet; what did He claim? Highlight how Jesus took our shame on the cross.
- b. Show the love of God as displayed in the cross and in the doctrine of grace. Explain that Christianity is the only religion with eternal security.

Additional Resources:

- <https://www.gotquestions.org/Islam.html>
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/difference-Christianity-Judaism.html>
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jews-reject-Jesus.html>

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¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

² file:///C:/Users/rreynolds/Downloads/Basic%20Beliefs%20of%20Islam%20(1).pdf

³ file:///C:/Users/rreynolds/Downloads/Basic%20Beliefs%20of%20Islam%20(1).pdf

⁴ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Islam.html>

⁵ Reynolds, Gabriel S. (May 2009). "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" (PDF). *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 72 (2): 237–258. doi:10.1017/S0041977X09000500. JSTOR 40379003. S2CID 27268737. Archived (PDF) from the original on 17 June 2012.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Houston

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Houston