

Christians at the Roundtable of World Religions
“What Can Christians Learn From Jews?”

Genesis 12:1-3
Romans 11:25-29

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Dr. J. Howard Olds

Three Jewish gentlemen immigrated to New York from Europe. As they parted company to pursue different lives in the United States, they made a covenant to meet again in 20 years. Twenty years passed and the three men gathered for a reunion at a New York hotel. The natural leader of the group said, “I came to this country and had no idea what to do. I thought and I thought until I realized my last name was Goldstein, so I decided to go into the gold business.” “Interesting,” said the second man. “I was worried about what to do as well, and then I realized my last name was Silverberg, so I went into the silver business and life has been good.” That’s when the last immigrant spoke up and said, “My last name is Taylor. I knew I would never make money as a tailor, so I told God if he would make me wealthy, I would make him my business partner.” “And what happened?” asked the two friends. “Well,” said the business man with a smile, “maybe you have heard of the clothing company called Lord and Taylor.”

As we begin this consideration of Christianity and Judaism, we must first acknowledge that God and the Jews have been in business together for a very long time. About 4,000 years ago, God called Abraham to establish a new nation. Abraham obeyed. God kept his promise. And for centuries now, the Jews have considered themselves a chosen people, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Among all the religions of the world, Jews and Christians are most alike, and closest of kin.

THE FAITH WE SHARE

We believe in the same God. Every Jewish child is taught the Shema. “*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Christian families would do well to teach their children that scripture.

This transcendent, relational, holy God created the universe and all that is within it. God said let there be light and there was light. God said let birds fly through the air and the animals inhabit the earth and it was done. Then as James Weldon Johnson puts it in that great piece he entitled Creation: *God looked around and said, “I am still lonely.” So God sat down on the side of a hill where he could think. By a deep river, he thought and he thought until he thought, “I’ll make a man.” So, the great God Almighty, who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, who flung the stars into the far corners of the night, took a piece of clay and*

shaped it into his own image and breathed into it the breath of life. We became human beings. Before Newton discovered the Law of Gravity, before Darwin developed the Theory of Evolution, before the modern world introduced us to quantum physics, Moses let us know that this is our Father's world and we are God's own creation created in his image.

We share the same roots of faith. Jesus was a Jew. Mary and Joseph followed Jewish traditions. Jesus preached from the Old Testament and chose Jewish disciples. As Paul liked to say, "I am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin, educated under Gamaliel, a strict keeper of the Law.

The first Christian converts were all Jews. The Gospel spread with the help of outpost Jewish synagogues in the Greek world. By 50 A.D., approximately one-third of Jerusalem were followers of The Way. When early Christians wanted to bask in their own chosen-ness, Paul warned them sternly: *"If you, though a wild olive shoot have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you* (Romans 11:17-19).

We pursue the same path of righteousness. Amos, that troubler from Tekoa, marched down to the city hall of his day and dared to say, *"Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never failing stream."* One reason we crowd around a hero like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is because the Christian world has produced so few prophets. We have our star-studded preachers and our politically correct church leaders, but the Church has produced woefully few prophets.

As the Holocaust 70 years ago so horribly reminds us, the Church by and large stood silent while six million Jews went to the gas chambers. One Christian wrote: They came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. They came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. They came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. They came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me. We Christians would do well to reclaim our heritage of social justice.

THERE ARE PLACES WHERE JEWS AND CHRISTIANS DIFFER.

We differ in our understanding of Christ's mission on Earth. Jews respect Jesus. They simply do not accept him as the Messiah. As a rabbi said to me this week, "Jesus was the Savior of the Church. I just have no need for Jesus to be my personal savior."

In 70 A.D. Jews did away with the elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Since the Temple was destroyed, there was no longer a place for animal sacrifices to be offered, so Jews replaced sacrifice with prayer, good works

and repentance. Meanwhile, Christians began proclaiming Christ to be the “*Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world.*” It was His ultimate sacrifice that eliminated the need for animal sacrifice.

Christians also began to interpret Jesus as the “suffering servant” as mentioned by the prophet Isaiah. We still use that imagery. “*Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, and by His stripes we are healed*” (Isaiah 53).

In T.S. Eliot’s work The Cocktail Party, Celia goes to her psychiatrist for help. In her first session she begins with the statement: “I must tell you that I should really like to think there’s something wrong with me, because if there isn’t, then there’s something wrong with the world itself, and that is much more frightening! That would be terrible. So, I’d rather believe there is something wrong with me that could be put right.” Paul believed there was something wrong with him and that Christ was the answer to his sin, as well as the sins of others.

We differ in our methods of salvation. Jews are saved by keeping the Law, observing ritual, doing good works, and repenting of their sins. The strictness of such a life depends on whether you are Orthodox, Conservative or Reformed.

Christians are saved “*by grace through faith which is not of ourselves, but is the gift of God.*” Remember the story about the Christian who died and found himself before St. Peter at the Pearly Gates seeking entrance to heaven? “We go by a point system up here,” explained St. Peter. “You need 100 points to get in. So, tell me about your life on earth.” “Well,” said the man, “I went to church all my life, taught Sunday school for a while, and served on several church committees.” “Great!” said St. Peter. “That’s one point.” “I ran an honest business, did my best to raise my kids, and tithed my income to the church and other charities.” “Well done,” said St. Peter. “That’s one more point.” Shocked at the thought of needing 98 more points, the man said, “Lord, have mercy. Who can get in this place?” “That’s 98 points,” said St. Peter. “Come on in.”

So we Christians sing:

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

We differ in our understanding of the Resurrection. Paul seems very clear in Romans 11:29 that God’s covenant with the Jews, first established by Abraham is irrevocable. God does not go back on his word. The Jewish concept of afterlife, however, seems vague, nebulous, and shadowy at best. When I asked my Jewish friend to describe immortality in Jewish terms he replied, “It is

simply not a major theme in our religion. Just live a good life because it's the right thing to do and everything else will be all right."

As I drove back home from that interview I thought about the words of Jesus, I so often use at funerals. *"Let not you hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am"* (John 14:3).

So, we have our differences, and we have our common ground. As I was leaving the rabbi's office I asked what Christians could learn from Jews. My friend replied, "They can learn to get along with each other and respect their neighbors who might be different." I suspect that is a good word to us from Yahweh today.