

Connecting the Bible to 21st-Century Culture

Many of us are familiar with the Judaism of the Bible, but few of us understand how it has developed over time and how it differs today. We also struggle to reconcile the early church we read about in the book of Acts with the typical western church of today.

A brief overview of the development of these two faiths and their interaction will help connect the Bible to today.

Judaism

When Jesus walked this earth, the headquarters for Judaism was in Jerusalem, where the temple system was in full operation. There were several Jewish sects at the time and Jesus often interacted with them.

The most prominent Jewish sect in the New Testament was the Pharisees. These were the rabbis who focused on teaching the people how to observe the law of Moses. Different schools of thought existed within this sect regarding the interpretation and application of the law. Jesus sometimes spoke against the hypocrites in their ranks, and because of this, Bible readers tend to view this sect negatively. However, their contemporaries viewed them as respected spiritual leaders, and Jesus actually agreed with much of their teachings.

The second sect mentioned in the New Testament is the Sadducees. They were primarily made up of the aristocratic priestly class and were found mainly in Jerusalem, where they oversaw the temple and the sacrificial system. The Sadducees strictly followed the law of Moses but disagreed with the Pharisees over the authority of the oral law. They were often accused of corruption due to the overbearing temple tax system that enriched them and their leadership in the Sanhedrin,

which had a quasi-governing role under the Roman authorities.

The Fall of Jerusalem's Impact on Judaism

In A.D. 70, after a three-year siege of Jerusalem, Roman forces destroyed the city, including the temple and thus the headquarters of the Jewish faith. Without a temple, the priesthood and the sacrificial system came to a halt.

The destruction of Jerusalem was devastating to Judaism—it dispersed the people and their leaders and, as a result, changed the mosaic of Judaism. The only sect that survived was the Pharisaic tradition of Judaism, which became known as rabbinic Judaism. A rabbinical center in the Galilee and another one in ancient Babylon led in the development of a Jewish faith that could be practiced outside of the land of Israel and without a temple sacrificial system. Rabbinic Judaism later split into the major streams seen today, some of which are more orthodox—even ultraorthodox—and others that are less strict and more assimilated, but it helped Judaism to adopt and survive in exile.

Christianity

The destruction of Jerusalem also affected the early church which had started out as a Jewish movement headquartered there. Eventually, Gentiles began accepting Christ, and many of the epistles in the New Testament reflect the difficulty of unifying Jew and Gentile within the churches. As these churches throughout the Roman Empire became increasingly Gentile, they began losing their understanding of and appreciation for the Jewish roots of their faith.

Because of the destruction of Jerusalem as well as growing persecution of Christians there was now no centralized Jewish leadership with the authority to steer the growth of this new faith. Instead, leadership centers developed in Antioch, Alexandria and Rome.

Tension also arose between the mainstream Jewish world and the Jewish followers of Jesus, who were resented for having fled the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. When they then refused to follow Simon Bar Kokhba as Messiah, in a revolt against the Romans in A.D. 132, the division turned to bloodshed. The split between the church and the synagogue was final.

The Roman Empire had considered Judaism a legal religion, and once Christianity was considered a separate faith, it was deemed illegal and was greatly persecuted. But all that changed in the fourth century when the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, and within a few decades, Christianity was declared the state religion of the Roman Empire.

Christians now had the upper hand and began to distinguish their faith from that of the Jews. Their preaching against the Jewish faith birthed a new theology—supersessionism, known today as replacement theology—that proclaimed the church had replaced the Jewish people in God's plans and purposes. That theology and a teaching of contempt for the Jewish people produced centuries of laws that denigrated the Jewish people.

This sad history of Christian antisemitism paved the way for the Nazis' final solution—the extermination of the Jewish people. While space does not allow a full explanation of the full history and development of Christian antisemitism, it is important that Christians today know of its existence and the importance of standing against it.

The tide began to change some 500 years ago when the Bible was translated into the vernacular and the printing press produced mass quantities. For the first time in many centuries, Christians could read the Bible for themselves and learn of the Jewish roots of their faith and the eternal promises God made to the Jewish people.

Jewish-Christian Relations

We are especially blessed to be part of that Bible-based

segment of Christendom—evangelical Christianity—and engage the Jewish people today with respect and honor. Evangelical Christianity is the fastest-growing segment of Christianity and will one day be the largest. It is largely philosemitic and approaches the Jewish people with respect, if not fervent love and support.

It is a privilege to be part of this generation of Christianity and a new day in Jewish-Christian relations.
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