



# Short Introductions to the World Religions - Judaism

| Voll, Fritz

## Short Introductions to the World Religions - Judaism

1. According to 2000 figures there are close to 13.1 million Jews in the world, of which 5.7 million live in the United States, 4.9 million in Israel. Canada has the sixth largest population of Jews with 360,000, after France, Russia, and Ukraine.

2. Judaism is the Jewish religion. It is based on revelation and a covenantal

relationship of the only One God with the Jewish people. The name Jew is derived from Juda, one of the twelve tribes of Israel which had originally formed the Southern Kingdom, was taken into captivity by the Babylonians, and returned from exile to Judea (while the other tribes never returned as a group from their earlier captivity). The major religious branches of today's Jewish community are indicated by such adjectives as orthodox, conservative, reform or liberal, reconstructionist, hasidic, and even secular or non-observant. The differences between these branches have mainly to do with questions of Torah observance.

3. The first name given to the Jewish Patriarchs and their families (probably by the Canaanites) was Hebrews. It means "the ones who came from beyond" the River Jordan. The name Israel was introduced through the new name given to Jacob in Gen. 32:28. The descendants of Jacob called

themselves the sons of Israel, children of Israel, people of Israel or Israelites. The modern Jewish state is called Eretz Yisrael and its citizens are Jewish or Arab Israelis. The earliest historical proof of the name Israel dates from the year 1225 B.C.E. (on the column of the Egyptian Pharaoh Menephta).

4. All Jews trace their ancestry back to Abraham. In him God choose Abraham's children to be "God's people". God's choice of Israel is directed against the power-hungry and oppressive regimes of the world and aims at making this people a "light unto the nations". The election of Israel is not based on its own achievement but entirely on God's free choice. It does not imply the rejection by God of any other people, to the contrary, it opens up the possibility of other peoples being drawn into a covenantal relationship with God. Jews believe that every God-fearing non-Jew is blessed by God in the covenant of

Noah and will participate in the world to come.

5. God made covenant by giving Israel the Torah and by Israel receiving it. Torah is instruction or teaching. The Written Torah, the five books of Moses, is complemented by the Oral Torah, compiled in the Talmud, the first representing revelation the latter reflection. The dual Torah leads the Jewish people "to sanctify God"s name". God"s name is honoured when the Torah is studied, and when God"s creation is understood (in science) and cared for (in medicine, in social, legal, political engagement). To sanctify God"s name is "to sanctify the world". Torah points the Jewish people to "the world to come", the redemption of this earth from all oppression. It puts trust in God"s Torah and the human ability to help bring about a better world, because God would not have given the commandments if they could not be fulfilled. In Judaism

the Messiah is not the redeemer of the individual, but a heraldic figure who initiates the redemption of the whole world. Torah is much more than just "law", it is not a heavy burden, as Christians tended to portray it, but an "easy yoke", a mark of distinction: to be the people of the covenant.

6. Religious communal life is centred in the synagogue. It is not the same as a church. For prayers the service needs at least ten Jewish men (in orthodox and hasidic synagogues) or ten Jews of either sex (in liberal or reform and many conservative synagogues). Rabbis are teachers and judges. Many congregations have no rabbi. In Yiddish the synagogue is called "shul" (school). It is the place of religious learning. In Judaism learning (not only religious learning) is a high ideal and of immense value. A learned and wise Jew deserves more respect than a financially successful one. Through learning a Jewish person honours God by

gaining insight into God's plan of creation.

7. Observing Jews pray three times a day, mornings, afternoons, and evenings in private or - preferably - with the congregational quorum. Basic objects required for proper recitation of prayers are the siddur (prayerbook), talit (prayer shawl), kippah (skullcap), and in orthodox congregations tefillin (phylacteries, cubes with Bible texts).

8. The Jewish calendar is luni-solar, the year is determined by the sun and the months by the cycles of the moon. Of special importance is the Sabbath, observed on Saturday of each week. The day is set aside not only for physical rest from labour but for spiritual renewal through prayer, Torah study and the strengthening of family bonds. The High Holidays or Days of Awe are Rosh HaShanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). The three festivals that correspond to the ancient annual pilgrimages to the Temple in

Jerusalem are Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost or Feast of Weeks), and Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles), commemorating the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the time of the giving of the Torah, and the time Israel lived in the desert.

Chanukah and Purim are minor festivals that celebrate Jewish victories in 168-165 B.C.E. and 365 B.C.E.

9. Jew is everyone born of a Jewish mother, or a person who has converted to Judaism.

Circumcision of a newborn male on the eighth day is the sign of the covenant, not the acceptance into it. The individual Jew is religiously very free. Many Jews are not observant.

Nevertheless, in spite of the dangers of antisemitism all over the world and through the centuries past, Jews honour their Jewishness.

10. The history of the relationship between Christianity and the Jewish people has been more troublesome than Christianity's relationship with any other religion. The

Nazi Holocaust that killed six million Jews (the Jewish Shoah) and the recreation of the State of Israel have led many churches to rethink their theology and their relationship with the people Israel. Most of the major church denominations have issued statements distancing themselves from traditional Christian anti-Judaism and are strongly opposed to any form of antisemitism.

Fritz Voll

[Back to content](#)  
[World Religions](#)