

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE JEWISH RELIGION

Just as you cannot find a suitable and generally accepted definition of “Jew,” so you cannot find any such definition for “Jewish Religion,” and yet everyone knows that there are such people as “Jews.” In fact, they are, in a sense, “ubiquitous,” and everyone knows that there exists a “Jewish Religion.”

Ask the average Jew what is his religion and he will unhesitatingly reply that it is the belief in the “Torah.” If you further ask: “What is the ‘Torah’?” — Then the answer will be hesitatingly vague, depending on the religious segment to which he belongs. Generally the “Torah” is defined as the “Bible,” meaning the Old Testament, in particular the five books of Moses. But usually all the laws that the Rabbis have ever enacted are included in the word “Torah.”

Now there is not a single word in the whole Bible which could be translated as “religion,” in the sense in which this term is generally used. There is nothing in the Bible which might be defined as “Jewish Religion.” The word *dath* which in modern Hebrew means “religion” is mentioned only in post-exilic books of the Bible (in Daniel, Ezra and Esther), and there it means, “law,” “custom,” “command,” “sentence.” Another word which in modern Hebrew is often used as “religion,” *emunah*, is to be found in the Bible, but there it means, “trust,” “belief,” “faith,” “steadiness”; there is nothing in it that suggests worship, devotion, etc., which we usually associate with religion.

Nowhere in the Bible (Old Testament) does it say what a Jew should believe in, although it tells him what to do and what *not to do*. *

*** Recently a well-known rabbi let it be known that a Jew does not even have to believe in the existence of God in order to be called a “Jew.”**

Neither is there anything in the post-biblical Talmudic books which might be taken as a “Creed.” The Jew was enjoined to *obey the Law of God*.

The Jewish people were not *commanded to believe* in the existence of God nor that He revealed Himself on Sinai and gave them the Law (Torah), although this belief was a matter of course and self-evident. But they were *taught to believe*, and they generally, firmly, believed that *God and the Torah and Israel are bound together as one*, and when they really served God it was with all their heart and all their mind.

They were always aware that God is particularly their own God and that they are particularly His own people. This conviction came after long years of preaching by the prophets and after much and repeated castigation which followed their wandering astray — away from God during the “first commonwealth” (when they often relapsed into idol worship). The destruction of the first Temple brought about a radical change of heart. Then the belief in God was firmly, lastingly and immutably inculcated in every Jewish heart.

During the “Second Temple,” and up to the time of Christ, the Jewish people (with the exception of the Sect of the Sadducees who, although politically influential, were yet a small minority) unwaveringly believed in God, and in the Bible as the holy and true Word of God. This belief included the “coming of the Messiah” and the “resurrection of the dead.”

It is this “*belief*,” besides the various ritual practices, which might be called “the Jewish Religion.”

The need for writing down a creed, to be recited and reaffirmed daily was not felt till about the twelfth century when the Jews had to fortify and defend their religion against the onslaught of other religions; in some countries it was Mohammedanism, in others Christianity.

Various Jewish authorities put forward various “credos,” but only that formulated by Maimonides, the “Rambam;” was generally accepted and later embodied into the daily “prayer.”

At the beginning of the morning service it is recited in verse and at the end of the service in prose. This creed, in Hebrew “*Ani Ma’amin*” — “I believe,” consists of thirteen Articles of Faith (or properly “Principles of Faith,” see chapter 20).

Maimonides writes that he devoted much time and thought on the formulation of these principles, yet one may wonder why this genius, this master of fine style, simplicity and logic had not made these principles as clear and simple as he did his other writings. They are not clear. They evoke many questions. They need elucidation and there is only confusion in them.

Because this “creed,” which is generally accepted as the essence of the Jewish religion, is often used as an argument against Christianity, it is fitting here to show some of its defects and discrepancies.

For example, only one of his thirteen principles he bases on the Bible by quoting a fitting passage (see Tenth Principle). All others he takes for granted. On what biblical passage does he base his Sixth Principle, declaring that all that the Prophets said is true? And why is it necessary to have a special “credo” that the prophecy of Moses was true? Why is Six in the present tense, and Seven in the past tense? Who were the Prophets that preceded Moses (7)? In Principle Eight, what is meant by the “whole Torah”? Does it mean only the Pentateuch, or the whole Bible, or the Bible plus its interpretation of the Rabbis as recorded in the Talmud? On what passage of the Bible does he base the Principle Thirteen of the resurrection of the dead?

His Principles on the existence and nature of God are vaguely stated. It may be said that they were meant to be more as an abnegation of Christianity than as an assertion of Judaism.

We may divide his Principles into two sections:

1. Those that refer to the belief in the infinite, incomprehensible, unimaginable Being — God.
2. The belief in all that is written in the Torah — *because it was given by God.*

The Christian conception of God, according to Scriptures, is One infinite Being who, in order to create the world, to rule it and to communicate with man, has revealed Himself in finite form of man or by the Holy Spirit. Thus He is conceived as a triune Being, expressed in the doctrine of the “Trinity.”

The God of Maimonides is an infinite unit that precludes all revelation or materialization as becoming “flesh.” While the Hebrew Bible in defining the unity of God uses the word “*echad*,” which does not exclude a plurality in one, Maimonides uses the word “*yachid*” which designates an absolute unit, or singleness and solitariness. This change he introduced to show that the Christian conception of God as a trinity is foreign to Judaism.

Maimonides seems to have labored under two contradictory ideas about God.

On the one hand he was a faithful follower (and adherent) of the Rabbis and he made it incumbent on the Jews to observe all the laws which the Rabbis (up to his time) had enacted. On the other hand he was a firmly convinced rationalist, steeped in Aristotelian philosophy, whose God could be defined or conceived only by negatives, i.e., He is not good, not bad, not big, not small, has no desires, does not care, and of course has no mouth to speak, no ears to hear, no hands to do anything, etc.

The Bible, however, tells of God revealing Himself to man, loving, hating, getting angry, repenting, speaking, walking; in short, becoming man, becoming flesh.

The Rambam (Maimonides) explains elsewhere such anthropomorphisms as allegories and metaphors. In this he followed the Alexandrian school of interpretation of the Bible. According to such interpretation of the Bible, God could not have come down to Sinai and there declared His Law. But if this were so, if it is allegory, or pure fancy, why does he want the Jews to believe that Moses (real flesh and blood) received the Torah on Sinai and that this Torah is true and therefore binding on every Jew?

If the story of Abraham and his dealings with God as told in the Bible were pure allegory, as allegorists say, why should the Jews (even the so-called rational and Reform Jews) today have to circumcise their flesh in order to be a Jew? All on account of that “ancient fable” of Abraham and his fictitious covenant? On account of another ancient “allegory,” as that of Jacob struggling with the angel, according to the Bible, Jews of today, as those of old, have to observe certain *Kosher* laws, which entail a great deal of trouble and cost.

Maimonides, the great rationalist, the allegorist, insists that the Jews must obey, must keep meticulously all such laws! He wrote large volumes compiling all these laws; 613 laws of the Bible, and hundreds of others which the post-biblical rabbis built around them.

Maimonides “believed in the Bible,” because, according to him, it is all compatible with human reasoning. What seems to be irrational is just a kind of fable having some inner meaning.

According to him “*the literal sense must give way when it contradicts the postulates of philosophy,*” and yet according to him all legal enactments must be taken and observed literally. *His allegorism is thus confined between the barriers of his rationalism on the one hand and his fidelity to tradition on the other.*

Such inconsistency may be found in many of the arguments of the rabbis, particularly of the liberal type. In contradistinction to Christianity they like to boast that Judaism is a rational religion. They like to quote Maimonides, who is considered to be one of the greatest authorities on Judaism, who allows reasoning powers full play in investigating biblical precepts, to justify scriptural religion to the human intellect, to verify the fundamental concepts of religion on purely rational grounds. How much rationalism underlies the thousands of laws (e.g. the Kosher Laws) which comprise the religion called “Judaism”?

According to the rationalists, God, the Jewish God, is so perfect that He could not have walked the earth in the guise of a man, as the Christians believe, lived a man’s life and died a death of suffering. “To say that God put on the garb of flesh is pure idolatry” — so the rationalist rabbis say in contention with Christianity. Here again is inconsistency: Why should God, the infinite, the perfect, not be able to put on the garb of flesh? Is He not omnipotent? Could He do everything else, but not put on the garb of flesh, and walk the earth?

Suppose God did not reveal Himself to man in the “garb of flesh” or in any other irrational manner, suppose He did not appear to Adam, Noah, the Patriarchs, to Moses, to the prophets, etc., as the Bible tells us.

Suppose He did not choose the Jews as His people (how could the “Infinite” do such a thing!) and did not command them, do this, and don’t do that. Suppose He did not promise rewards for pleasing Him, and punishment for displeasing Him — suppose all these stories of the Bible are fiction and fancy of an ancient, primitive, immature people. Strike out all this “nonsense” of the Jewish Bible, what will there be left? What would there be left to justify a “Judaism,” whatever it be?

The great Maimonides whose “God” is some inconceivable idea, some “Not,” should not have linked this “credo” with that of giving the Torah on Sinai since the two are contradictory.

Indeed, his impersonal, unfathomable, philosophical God has almost nothing to do with Judaism; for Judaism has come into being with the revealed God, with the personal God, with the One who has taken on the “garb of flesh.”

The first sentence of the Constitution, the preamble, of Judaism which was given on Sinai, begins with “*I am Jehovah thy Gods * who has brought thee out of Egypt . . .*” Not “I am the infinite, the inconceivable . . .”

*** In this quotation I understood the word “Gods” because in the language of the Hebrew Bible — it says “Gods” — implying God as a plurality.**

When God revealed Himself to Moses, in the Burning Bush, He did not introduce Himself as God of the universe, but as the Gods of his father, “the Gods of Abraham . . .”; and when He sent him to His people, He instructed him to tell them that Jehovah the Gods of their fathers, the Gods of Abraham . . . had sent him.

All through the Bible He is the Gods of the fathers, the particularly Jewish Gods, the personal one. Very seldom is He mentioned as God of the universe. So also in the Jewish prayers it is “our Gods and the Gods of our fathers . . .”

God is revealed. God makes Himself understood to man in the way man is capable of understanding. Of course the Old Testament prophets as well as the New Testament disciples of Christ knew that God is infinite, indescribable, but they like to think of Him, pray to Him as the father in whose *image* He created His children.

A father speaks to his little children in the language of little children; otherwise they would not understand him.

After much opposition the Jewish people adopted the Creed of the thirteen articles of faith but the average Jew does not understand the “credo” in the single God of Maimonides anymore than he would understand the triune God as is the credo of Christianity.

Nor does the average Jew speculate about the nature of God, whether He is immanent or transcendent. He believes that God is omnipresent, but that God, as taught by Maimonides, so far transcends human comprehension that all positive descriptions of Him are inappropriate, foreign to the Jewish mind.

To him, to the average Jew, God sits in heaven (sometimes they call it “Gan Eden” — the Garden of Eden) on His throne of Glory, surrounded by the angels (Cherubim and Seraphim) and by the saints who after death have been going up to be with Him. He, or the “Shekinah” (very few Jews have a clear conception of what that means) who used to be in the Tabernacle, or later in the two Temples often comes down to the Synagogue or wherever Jews pray as a congregation.

The Jews believe in the same God as does the average Christian ascribing to Him the same attributes. The only difference is that while the Christian can by the doctrine of the Trinity reconcile the conception of the infinite God with the conception of the personal God who has revealed Himself to man, either by taking on the “garb of man” or by inspiration, the Jew is not quite sure of that.

He often explains that, by saying that it is the angels who act in His stead and take on human form. The wise and well-informed Christian may easily prove to him that the “Trinity” is not only a better solution to that problem —of God revealing Himself to man —but the only true one.

MANY BOOKS

Many scholarly books have been written on Judaism, or on The Jewish Religion, most of them in America, but hardly any of these books are written objectively. It seems that the only aim of most of these books is to prove that Judaism is much better than Christianity.

One may wonder for whom such books were intended. The observant Jew does not want any proofs. The non-observant Jew does not care for any proof since religion, especially rites and rituals, does not interest him.

The same may be said about the Christian. The nominal Christian who cares little about religion is not likely to read such books, while the true Christian would likely not be influenced by them, since to him, high moral standards, noble thoughts, etc., as Judaism is pictured in those books, is not enough to bring sinful man to God — to him there is no way to God but through His Son.

Whatever is the purpose of those books, they generally present to the reader only a blurred picture of Judaism. They conceal a great deal, they misinterpret a great deal, they exaggerate a great deal and even misstate a great deal. In short, they often tell you half-truths, and even less, and make you believe that they are full truths. Their “Judaism” is not Judaism. However, most of them agree, and we agree with them, that “Judaism” is more a “way of life” than it is a religion. It is not a mere recitation of a certain creed, visiting a house of worship at specified times, having prayer once in a while.

The average Jew’s conception of Judaism is as it was *in practice* all through the dispersion: It was a total subordination, a complete dedication of all thoughts and actions to the will of God (as interpreted and enacted by the rabbis). If the present day Jew does no longer practice this old rabbinic Judaism it is not that he has come to a new conception of Judaism, but because it has become too confused to him, too difficult.

In their perplexity most contemporary Jews (of all segments) came to think that by modifying and adjusting the old laws and customs to modern life they can keep Judaism alive (a crippled, moribund Judaism, some semblance of it). Let us have a glance at the old now vanishing Judaism as the observant Jew had practiced it and a great many Orthodox Jews still tenaciously adhere to it (See chapter on “Segments”).

The Jew who observes Judaism * awakes in the morning with the sure consciousness of the divine presence. This consciousness is with him all through his waking hours, till he falls asleep at night.

*** Again I want to emphasize that observant Jews have, during the last few decades, been rapidly disappearing.**

Accordingly all his time is filled with worship. On each week-day he spends at the synagogue about three hours in prayer, on the Sabbath and holy days more hours are given to prayer (See Chapter on Prayer). All through the day there are various occasions for benedictions.

A great many Jews dedicate most of the time to the study of the Torah. Even artisans and businessmen find spare time for such study. Not only the Jew’s prayers and study, but also his eating, drinking, dressing, washing, etc., all is dedicated to God’s glory; everything is done according to prescription, everything intertwined with ritual and benediction. Fringes, Phylacteries, and Mezuzoth are to remind the Jew of his duties to God, as it is written in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (at home, on the way, on lying down, and rising up). (See also Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41). Thus Judaism is a way of life—a constant uninterrupted living with God, from the cradle till the grave, or as one said it: “from the womb to the tomb.”

Imagine what such zeal — zeal for godly things — would do to mankind if the zeal were coupled with true knowledge, as Paul expressed it in Romans 10:1-3.

The Lord who has chosen this people, and trained them to such religiosity, to such zeal, is about to fill them with knowledge, as the waters cover the sea (see Isaiah 11:9). According to Jeremiah 31:33 — **“This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”**

REWARD

Two principles * have nourished the zeal and the power of endurance of the Jew to keep and practice the Torah tenaciously and meticulously in the face of almost insurmountable difficulties and at great sacrifice — often with supreme sacrifice. These were the hopes of the coming of the Messiah and the Resurrection.

*** The 12th and 13th Principles of the Thirteen, formulated by Maimonides.**

With the coming of the Messiah the Jewish people as a nation will be rewarded for their faithfulness to God, and with the Resurrection, every individual will be rewarded according to his deeds. The more a man suffers in this world for God’s sake, the greater will be his reward in the world to come.

We shall have a special chapter on the Jewish belief in the coming of the Messiah. But we shall have here a few words on the “World to Come.”

The last of the thirteen Articles of Faith expresses the belief in the resurrection of the dead. But it does not state when, where, how and to what purpose will the dead arise, nor whether these will be Jews only or also Gentiles. So also is the preceding Eleventh Article very vague when it says that God rewards those that keep His commandments, and punishes those that transgress them. It does not say when and how this retribution takes place. It does not even say, or hint, that a man may avert punishment, by repentance or atonement.

The Jews faithfully repeat daily this thirteen-fold confession of faith because the rabbis told them to do so — although they are quite confused as to their exact meaning.

Yet they derive consolation in the promise of a glorious future — or reward.

What the Jew generally believes, is that in this world the righteous may suffer, and the wicked may prosper, but the real retribution is in the “World to Come.” In Hebrew it is “*Olam haBa*,” and to this world comes each and every individual right after his death. The body may disintegrate and crumble and wait till after the coming of the Messiah, when it will come to life again, but the soul soon after death comes before the Heavenly Tribunal where it is judged according to its merits and demerits in this world.

Every Jew is entitled to a share in the “World to Come” but it usually takes a year of expiation by torment in hell (some kind of purgatory) till the soul is totally purged, purified from the sins it committed in this world. In order to alleviate the pangs and pains of hell the survivor’s next of kin (only male) recites the “*Kaddish*” at the three daily prayers during the year after death. To make it still easier for the dead he learns daily a portion of the “*Mishnah*” or hires someone to learn it in his stead. On certain holidays there is also a special *Memorial Service* for the souls in which the sons (and daughters — in the female section of the synagogue) participate.

The soul — according to common belief — does not sever all its connections with this world. For the first seven days, after its departure from the body, it is a great deal “at home” with its loved ones. Then for another three weeks, altogether thirty days it frequents less its earthly abode, and gradually it is weaned away from this world. But there always remains some connection between the living and the dead. Jews have often gone to the graves of relatives invoking the help of the departed souls; they are asked to intercede for the living who were in need of speedy succor. The graves (sepulchers) of saints are frequented, especially on their anniversaries (memorial days), and are invoked for intercession before the “Throne of Glory.”

Formerly Jews generally believed in transmigration of souls (“gilgul”). For some reason the departed soul may have to be born again in this world, to have another chance and amend wrong done before. It may even transmigrate into an animal for a certain period and for a certain purpose. Sometimes some wicked soul, instead of submitting to Judgment, enters and possesses some living person resulting in his or her mental illness and premature death (see Dibbuk, See “Vocabulary”). Some of the Chassidic rabbis were known as proficient experts at expelling such evil spirits from the bodies of the possessed.

These beliefs have undergone great changes. The “dibbuk” and the “gilgul” are now considered more as folklore and bygone superstition, but the Jews as a whole still have an ingrained ineradicable belief in life after death and that the departed “near and dear” are still near and dear. The Jews including many of the “moderns,” “reformed” and skeptics are still very careful in the observance of “*Yarzeit*,” *Kaddish and memorial service and Hazkarath Neshamoth* (See “Vocabulary”). To them it is not a mere honoring the memory of the dead, but a renewal of communion with them, and a refastening the ties that bind the living with the beloved dead ones.

Is this “cult of the dead,” as one may call it, an integral part of Judaism? Although many “exponents” of Judaism say “no,” my answer is “yes.” Because as we have seen, “Judaism” is the peculiar way Jews live, think and practice. This cult has been lived and practiced by Jews for ages.

I found it necessary to enlarge upon this part of Judaism because the so-called exponents of Judaism, in contrasting it with Christianity, claim that it is pure logic and common sense, even compatible with “science,” etc., that there is no mediation, intercession in Judaism, that there is no original sin, that every man is judged on his own merits and that men are generally good, and God is good and all-merciful, and therefore always forgiving human frailties and thus not likely to punish cruelly any transgressions of His Law. These exponents sometimes rudely scoff, ridicule, sometimes politely hint at the stories and miracles of the New Testament and show how irrational they are, how foreign to Judaism which is all rational, all reasonable.

These “scholarly” exponents of Judaism, especially in America and Britain, are of the “reform” liberal type to whom traditional Judaism is as foreign and obnoxious to taste and thought as it is to Christians. But preferring to remain Jews they reform, or deform, Judaism, fitting it to their own tastes and thought by calling passages from the Bible and rabbinic books — out of their context. They are clever writers and speakers, but they stand alone. Their sort of Judaism is but a creation of their own image, whereas the Jewish people as a whole have, through the ages, believed and observed a Judaism which is radically different from that of the modern “exponents” whose books, seemingly, are intended only for “export” — for Christians.

Contrary to the liberals, who teach that the Jews have been exiled from their ancient homeland, not for their sins, but only for the benefit of the world — to teach the Goyim (Gentiles) the true faith, the Jewish people know and continually confirm it in their prayers, that it is for their sins that they were exiled and are continually praying for forgiveness and for bringing them back to their ancient promised land.

In opposition to the expositions of the liberals, the Jews have believed in original sin, have believed that they could never be justified before God, and only for the sake of the Covenants He made with their forefathers, and for His own sake could they dare ask for His grace and pardon. They have believed that God is compassionate, but they also know that He is vengeful, when necessary. They often felt His hand, and contrary to the modern spokesmen of Judaism, the Jews have believed in just retribution, in the “world to come,” in an abode of bliss (Gan Eden) and another of woe (Gehenom). They have always believed in the power of intercession and mediation, and in vicarious atonement. Not only does the Jewish Bible testify to these common beliefs, but the Jewish literature through the ages does so (except the few English writing “exponents” of the latter days).

In short, although there is a wall of partition between traditional Judaism and Christianity, it is not so formidable as not to be demolished. Both are really one and the same religion — the religion of the Bible. It may seem as a daring statement but it is true: original Christianity is original Judaism. It is the rabbinic exposition on the one hand and Gentile influence on the other hand that has accentuated the parting of the ways. This “wall of partition” has to be demolished, has to be removed, for the peace and salvation of mankind. According to prophecy the Jewish people will do this job after they have learned that this is *their* job.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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