

WHY I AM NOT A JEW ... OR AM I?

Recently my daughter Rachel (not just my daughter, but also a lawyer with our firm) and I were going to meet a client in her home in North Carolina. We were going to meet another lawyer (Tom) and his associate (Cate) who were flying in from Philadelphia.

Rachel and I arrived on time in our rental car, initially pulling past the house, as the GPS program on my iPhone announced, "You have arrived at your destination." We stopped, looked at the surrounding homes for the right number, and then backed up a bit before pulling up in the driveway.

We stood outside for about five minutes before we saw Tom and Cate walking up the road, lugging their briefcases. They were laughing. It seems their Uber driver dropped them off several blocks from the right house. They got there eventually, but it was quite a process.

This story is typical, and likely repeated with different people in different locations many times daily. We know some things about where we are expected. We get directions or instructions that get us close. But if we've never been there before, we are subject to a number of problems. First, how good are we at following directions? How good are the actual directions? How well do we understand them? Are we paying attention as we receive them or follow them? Do we have a reasonable idea of what the destination looks like? GPS programs make this easier, but it still isn't flawless.

I find this to be a good analogy for an issue about Judaism that brings me to my final segment on this. Why I am not a Jew ... or am I? While I'm not a genetic Jew, nor am I a practicing Jew, there is a definite relationship between what I believe and Judaism.

The early Christian apostle Paul was both a Jewish rabbi (teacher) and lawyer. He wrote to a group of Christians made up of Jews and Gentiles, found in a common church in Rome. As he was helping them sort through the relationships to each other, to the broader church, and to the Lord, he used an analogy I find instructive.

Paul explained that the Gentiles were wild branches that were grafted onto the trunk of a tree. The tree with its roots was Israel, or maybe more robustly -- the people of Israel with its oracles, salvation-history, and calling. The Gentiles were grafted onto the tree, but still owed their nourishment to the Hebrew roots that nourished the Jewish branches. This analogy is laid out in the eleventh chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Not only is Christianity firmly ensconced in the tree of Israel's faith, but the faith of Israel's roots, seems to me to lead inevitably to the Christian conclusion, even for those who are Jewish. Jesus is called "Christ" and the associated faith is called "Christianity," but those words only have meaning from Jewish Scriptures and teaching.

“Christianity” is “Christian” with an added “-ity.” That suffix is used in English to form a noun that means “the condition of or state of.” In other words, Christianity is the condition of being a “Christian.” “Christian” is a noun referencing one who engages in, or works with, or is associated with the base noun “Christ.” So “Christianity” is the state of associating with or following the teachings and person of Christ. Now that is all well and good, but what does it have to do with Hebrew Scripture and teaching?

“Christ” is the key. “Christ” was not the name of Jesus. It was a title. Moreover, it is the English spelling of a Greek word for the title given Jesus. The title is that of “anointed one.” Christ comes from the Greek *christ-os* where the –os is an ending but the core word is *christ* (χριστός). It is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mashiach* (משיח). We would more commonly translate *mashiach* as either “anointed” or the title “Messiah.”

“Christianity” means a belief that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. It is a faith that, properly understood, is firmly rooted in Judaism. It can only *be* properly understood in light of Judaism. It isn’t really a fully distinct faith, but one that sees Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who also brought salvation to those of the nations, the “Gentiles.” In fact, this is one of the promises of the Jewish Messiah. Through him, and hence through Abraham, *all the nations of the world* are blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

Is Jesus Really the Jewish Messiah?

In one of his teachings, Jesus had an assembled crowd on a hillside, and Jesus explained many aspects of holy living. This “Sermon on the Mount” included many classic lessons including the blessings we call the “beatitudes,” (e.g., “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”). As Jesus explained things, he inserted a comment about his role and the Hebrew Scriptures. In Matthew 5:17 we read,

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.

In an earlier segment of this lesson, I laid out many of the prophetic statements about the Messiah found in books we label “the Prophets.” At this point in the lesson, I want to zoom in on Jesus’ claim that he came to “fulfill” the Law.

The “Law” (capital L) that Jesus referenced is called in Hebrew the *Torah*. It was the first five books of the Old Testament, which in English we call Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Those books contain some of the most famous stories of the Bible. They speak of creation, Adam and Eve, their sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Noah and the flood, the call of Abraham from Ur to Canaan, Joseph and the descent

of Israel into Egypt, Moses and the flight from Egypt to the Promised Land, the giving of the Ten Commandments and remaining legal code, and more.

Because these books contain narrative and legal code, one might fairly ask, “What did Jesus mean when he spoke of *fulfilling* these books?” The answer is not complicated, and it is quite beautiful. It shows Christianity’s roots firmly in the Hebrew faith, and affirms that in many ways, Christianity is a fulfillment or completion of God’s revelation to the Hebrews.

Multi-volume books could be written on this, and the demands of the spacing here restrict how much I can cover. But there is great value in looking at some core illustrations of Jesus fulfilling the narratives and legal code of the *Torah*.

The Sin of Adam and Eve with its Curses and Estrangement from God and Life

God warned Adam and Eve that they couldn’t eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil without negative effects. It would kill them. After they sinned, we can better understand God’s warning. Physically, their cells started dying. They were set for death, and nothing would stop that. Spiritually, they died as well. The close fellowship and intimacy they shared with God was severed. They no longer lived in a Utopian Garden, where God walked and talked with them. They were ashamed, seen in their realization that they were naked. This showed alienation from God, and they struggled to find their way, with strife and enmity engulfing them and their future.

God announced the resulting condition and curses, but not without some acts of mercy. First, Adam and Eve were given clothing by God. As the “nakedness” was a manifestation of their awareness of their sin, so the clothing was prophetic that God would cover their sin. Second, as God set out the curses, God made a promise that through the offspring of woman, would come one who would crush Satan in his work among humanity. In God’s language,

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel (Gen. 3:15).

This one who would bruise the head of Satan the serpent is singular and male in the Hebrew. The HE who will step on Satan is one who will himself suffer or be “bruised” in the heel. The act of stepping on Satan will not be without personal pain and consequence.

This is a formative story in the Torah. It sets up not only the sinful condition of people, but God’s promised solution to the sin and death. A single male will be born of a woman and bring to naught, the power and work of Satan.

This is not only seminal to the Hebrew faith, but it is seminal to Christianity. That is the fundamental teaching of what Jesus accomplished. Rabbi and apostle Paul explained this also in his letter to the Roman Jewish and Gentile church,

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous ... through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:18-21).

The Calling, Blessing, and Obedience of Abraham

When God called Abraham (he was "Abram" at the time) from his ancestral home in Ur, God instructed Abraham to head to another location, ultimately Canaan. God promised something significant,

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3).

God assures Abraham, and all of us who read his words, that through Abraham will come a great nation that will ultimately bless all the nations of the world. What might that blessing be? Money? Surely not, for money is just as often a curse as a blessing. Health? Doubtful, for even the best health is only temporary. In our current bodies, we will all eventually die.

The real blessing, the ultimate good, is to restore the lost fellowship and alleviate the curses incurred through the sin of Adam and Eve. After the sin, enmity exists between people and God. We are rebellious, even in our best behavior. We doubt, even in our strongest faith. We make bad choices, often with our best motives. We long for something greater, we sense the need for purpose, we know there must be more to life than living and dying.

The answer to these problems is peace with God, which fills our greatest need. It will only come through the blessing of God. In the *Torah* God promised to bring this blessing to Abraham, his nation, and all the nations of the world. This promise is again fulfilled in Jesus as Messiah.

What's more, the promise to Abraham did not come based upon the legal code of Moses. Moses wasn't even born yet, and the events at Sinai wouldn't happen for another 400 years! It wasn't based on circumcision or some other demarcation of Hebrew status. It came to Abraham as a gift in response to his faith. Abraham trusted God to be good to his word, and Abraham left Ur, following God's lead. Abraham was declared righteous by God as part of this journey, but even that wasn't based upon Abraham living up to the moral code

of the Hebrew law. It was based on Abraham trusting God. (IMPORTANTLY: The word for “trust” is the same word for “faith” or “believe” in verb form. The two are one and the same.)

Rabbi Paul explained it this way in his letter to the Roman church,

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations” (Rom. 4:13-17).

Rabbi Paul makes the argument that if we were to look only to the legal code of Moses for our righteousness, then God erred in promising it to Abraham because of his faith. Of course, God could not and did not err. God’s promise to Abraham was clear.

And he [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he [the LORD] counted it to him [Abraham] as righteousness (Gen. 15:6).

This is the foundation of Christian theology. God credits our faith as righteousness. This is not because God is a willy-nilly God who can arbitrarily decide to cut some folks some slack. Rather God takes righteousness and justice seriously. They are critical parts of his unchanging nature and character. The Christian belief is that God could justify Abraham by faith, just as he can people today, because of the redemptive work of Christ as a sacrifice for sinful people. In other words, we should die for our own sins, but instead, God credits the death of Jesus on our behalf.

Rabbi Paul explained,

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins [i.e., Abraham and others]. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:23-26).

The Christian believes that Jesus was the Messiah for Abraham as well as people today. Otherwise, there was no more just redemption for Abraham.

This leads to another storyline of Abraham that enhances this understanding of Jesus as fulfilling these *Torah* stories.

In Genesis 22, God gave Abraham a bizarre instruction concerning his son Isaac. When Isaac was still a boy, God instructed Abraham to offer him up as a sacrifice saying,

Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.

This story is laden with foreshadowing of the life and death of Jesus. It is as if it was written after the death of Jesus, because it fits so well. Yet it cannot be disputed that this story is centuries old by the time Jesus is born.

The story is set up by God noting that Isaac was Abraham's "only son" whom he loved. This language Jesus echoed when speaking with a Jewish lawyer named Nicodemus. Jesus said that "God so loved the world that *he gave his only Son...*" (Jn. 3:16). The punch that Jesus adds is that in Genesis, it is noted that Abraham loved Isaac, while Jesus shifts it to God loving the world!

The Abraham/Isaac storyline continues in ways showing Jesus as a fulfillment to the story. On the third day, Abraham takes Isaac to sacrifice. Isaac doesn't ultimately die, but is granted life. Of course, three days is also the time that Jesus spends in the tomb before his victory over death.

God directs Abraham to a very specific place for the sacrifice. It is "on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Abraham is directed to Mount Moriah for the sacrifice. A thousand years later, Solomon will build the first temple to God on that same mountain (2 Chron. 3:1). Solomon's temple is destroyed, but rebuilt.

Then by the time Jesus is crucified, the temple on the ancient site is where the events unfold for Jesus' sacrifice, culminating in the temple curtain being ripped in two. That was the curtain that separated the temple's inner court from the Holy of Holies where only the high priest was allowed to enter. Once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to make sacrifices for the sins of Israel. When Jesus died, that system was fulfilled, and no more was a sacrifice needed. The curtain was torn.

In the Abrahamic story, once they arrived at Moriah, Isaac carried the wood up the hill for the sacrifice. This is another aspect of the story fulfilled by Jesus who was assigned the task of carrying the wood for his own crucifixion (Gen. 22:6; Jn. 19:17).

In the story, Isaac understood that a lamb was supposed to be offered in sacrifice, not a dove, a heifer, or some other animal. Isaac asked his father where the lamb was for

sacrificing. This previewed the sacrifice of Jesus who was labelled the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Gen. 22:7; Jn. 1:29).

Abraham’s response was prophetic. Abraham had adequate vision to know that God would provide the lamb, in one form or another (Gen. 22:8). Isaac was then bound feet and hands upon the wood, as Jesus would be two millennia later (Gen. 22:9; Mt. 27:2).

Here the stories make a dramatic departure. Abraham’s hand was stayed as he lifted the knife to pierce Isaac, but not so for Jesus. The Father allowed the sacrifice of Jesus. It was necessary to satisfy justice and redeem the people.

At the end of Abraham’s day, he named the place “The LORD will provide”¹ (Gen. 22:14). The passage is pregnant for what would happen in the future,

So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided (Gen. 22:14).

What was to be provided there? The real sacrifice! Jesus fulfilled this part of *Torah* millennia later when God provided the “only Son whom he loved” for sacrifice. Jesus rightfully saw himself fulfilling *Torah*.

The Festivals

In the *Torah* we read of a number of festivals that God instituted for the people. These were not simply times of partying and celebration. They were important reminders of what God had done, and a foreshadowing of what God would do. In them, we see events that would unfold in the life of Jesus. These were more ways in which Jesus fulfilled the *Torah*. Consider briefly several of the festivals that were written up by John, a Jewish fisherman from the first century who was a close follower of Jesus.

Passover

Passover was the festival that distinguished the Jews from the Egyptians as God’s chosen people. It was the festival where the Passover lamb was slain for the sins of the people. Christians view it as the festival that God intended to be prophetic of the sacrifice that God

¹ Here and in several other places in this story the Hebrew uses the word *ra’ah*. At its root the word is to “see.” When you add various prepositions, it’s meaning ranges from “provide” to “gloat over.” It is used where Abraham looks up and “sees” [*ra’ah*] the mountain where the sacrifice is to take place (Gen. 22:4). It is used where Abraham looks up and “sees” [*ra’ah*] the ram that is caught in the thicket as a substitute for Isaac (Gen. 22:13). It is also used in places where our English Bibles translate it as “provides.” Thus we see it in Genesis 22:8 – “Abraham said, ‘God will provide [*ra’ah*] for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’” Importantly, it is used twice in the verse where Abraham prophetically names the place in Genesis 22:14 – “So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The LORD will provide’ [*ra’ah*] as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided [*ra’ah*].”

would later provide through Jesus for God's people, to lead the people from the bondage of slavery to sin into the promised land of God's kingdom.

Against this backdrop of the Passover, in John 2:12-25, John told us of a time where Jesus went into the temple in Jerusalem. This was the temple where the sacrificial system was at its commercial best. At the temple, a great number of sacrificial animals were for sale. People bought those to offer as sacrifices. There were also money-changers (think of airport currency exchange desks in foreign airports) for the people who came into Jerusalem from foreign lands to change currency and buy the animals for sacrifice. Seeing these things, Jesus made a whip from cords and drove the moneychangers out of the temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke also wrote of Jesus driving moneychangers from the temple. John, however, added a detail the others left out. Jesus not only drove the moneychangers out, but he also drove out the sacrificial animals themselves, "both sheep and cattle" (2:15).

Why did John tell us this? What was Jesus about? The temple itself was the center of Jewish worship and national hope. It was the core symbol of the Jewish religion. Against this backdrop, John repeatedly showed events in the life of Jesus that were forecasting the work Jesus would perfect in his passion and sacrifice. We see that here too. In this sense, Jesus drove out the animals for sacrifice in the temple because they were not necessary when Jesus himself was there. Jesus was showing that the old order was going and his new order was coming. In the new order, there was no reason for sacrificial animals. Jesus himself would drive them out, replacing them with himself, the true Passover lamb. Undoubtedly, Jesus was also clearly incensed at the way the sacrifices had turned from a foreshadowing of God's redemptive work into a market-driven profit center for so many.

The Jews questioned Jesus' authority to do such a deed and demanded from him a miraculous sign to validate such drastic judgment. Jesus responded that the miraculous sign they sought would come from their own unbelief. Jesus told them to "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn. 2:19). The people did not understand that Jesus was referring to raising the real "temple" where God really dwells and communes with man, namely in Jesus the Messiah, the Word made flesh. The people believed Jesus was talking about the physical temple where the symbolic sacrifices of actual animals were taking place. They did not see how anyone could rebuild that awesome structure in just three days!

Of course, had the people understood Jesus saw himself as the real temple, they would have realized that there was no need for sacrificial cattle and sheep. These people, however, had no such understanding. It is ironic that their desire for a sign stemming from their own disbelief would ultimately bring about the very sign they sought. In other words, their disbelief would result in the death of Jesus; the following resurrection would be their miracle.

This story John wrote from the life of Jesus contrasted the old Jewish sacrificial system with that of the new messianic sacrifice that was once and for all. It especially highlights this change when we consider that John wrote this gospel well after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D. At the time of John's writings, Jewish sacrifices had ceased because of the absence of the temple. Yet, the finished work of Christ was a sacrifice once and for all. The temple of his body underwent a resurrection after three days and lives for eternity. Not only that, but the church became the body of Christ and is the dwelling place of God with man until Jesus returns.

Sukkot

In addition to the three Passovers, John also wrote of Jesus celebrating the Feast of Booths. Also called the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot* (from the Hebrew for "tent" or "temporary shelter," typically a "lean to"), this was a festival Moses introduced in Leviticus 23:33-44.

The feast was to be observed for seven days beginning on the 15th of Tishri. That made the festival an autumn festival, usually falling between September and October in our Western calendar. Leviticus records the instruction:

You shall live in booths seven days in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt (Lev. 23:42-43).

Because the festival occurred in the autumn each year, it quickly took on an emphasis as a festival of thanksgiving for the completed harvest and the provision of God in that harvest. The Bible sometimes refers to the festival as the Feast of Ingathering (Ex. 23:16b; 39:22) showing the usage of the holiday as a time for celebrating harvest. It lasted one week² and formed a special holiday season in the Jewish year.

As Jewish history unfolded, the festival took on special significance as a foreshadowing of the Messianic Age to come. This understanding of the festival stemmed from the idea that while one year's harvest was being celebrated, there would come a year when the harvest would not only be the year's crops, but also a harvest of the nations. This thought was that the nations would gather in a final onslaught against the Jews, that Yahweh would intervene on the Jews' behalf, and that while the wicked were punished, the holy remnant would see the perfect age of the Messiah ushered in with celebration at Jerusalem.

² Today, the festival is celebrated for 8 to 9 days with additional add-on days depending upon whether the celebration is in Israel or outside Israel.

The practice of the Feast of the Tabernacles included reading from Zechariah 14, which prophesied the coming day of the Lord.³ This passage set forth two characteristics of the Messianic Age:

1. Continuous daylight with an absence of winter (Zech. 14:6), and
2. An unfailing source of water (“on that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem...” Zech. 14:8).

We lose touch with the significance of these two issues in 21st century America. Our electric lights and overall safety keeps the night and darkness from being too threatening or beyond control. Similarly, we face neither the anxiety nor the possible health risks from a lack of good pure water. To ancient people, however, these were major life issues and concerns. That these concerns would disappear in the Messianic Age was an incredible hope and dream.

We have Rabbinic evidence indicating how the Jews celebrated these two promises at the festival. Before dawn each day, a golden pitcher was filled with water from the pool of Siloam. While Isaiah 12:3 was sung (“With joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation...”), a procession brought the pitcher of water to the temple. At the temple, the water was poured out into two pipes which channeled the water underground and into the Kidron Valley. The significance of this ceremony was its prophetic symbolism that a time would come where the water scarcity would be no more and a never-ending stream would issue forth from under the temple, making glad Jerusalem, the city of God.

The second promise was celebrated by a brilliant lighting of the temple court all night long. The lights were not extinguished until just before the sun dawned. At that point, a blare of trumpets was followed by a vow of fidelity to the LORD, and to him alone.

With that background, we can better consider the story of the Festival of Tabernacles as our Messiah, Jesus, celebrated and explained it (recorded in John 7 and 8). Jesus did not go up to the feast in a showy fashion. Instead, he sent others first and came himself in secret. The Jews at the festival were searching for Jesus, the miracle worker. We know that a good many Jews were discussing whether or not Jesus could be the Messiah. That being the case, no doubt many were especially abuzz about that year’s festival and what might happen with Jesus. In the middle of the week-long feast, Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. There was considerable interest in how this carpenter with no substantial formal education was able to teach in such a way. Jesus explained to those who wondered that Jesus’ teaching was from God, not from school!

³ Zechariah 14 speaks of the coming Day of the Lord with the coming Messiah. In verse 16, it references that the survivors from the nations will “go up year after year to worship the king, Yahweh Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.”

Jesus' interacted with various groups. Some wanted him dead, others questioned whether he was possessed, and some wondered if Jesus might be the Messiah, especially as they saw that no one arrested him. John then takes the story to the last day of the feast. On this day, Jesus stood up and declared in a loud voice:

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He that believes in me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

John clarified that Jesus was referencing the Holy Spirit that would come to the people after Jesus was glorified. In light of the practice of the day, we can see in this statement of Jesus a deeply profound message, but an equally disturbing message. If the pitcher of water from Siloam was to indicate the promise of unending water in the day of Messiah, then Jesus was boldly making a proclamation that the day was upon the people.

Although the people did not understand that Jesus was speaking of the Spirit as the water, they were very aware of the implications of what Jesus was saying. John tells us that upon hearing this statement, a number of the people proclaimed that Jesus was indeed the coming prophet, the Messiah. Others argued that Jesus could not be Messiah because these folks mistakenly thought Jesus came from Galilee while the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. The priests and Pharisees put forward an effort to have Jesus brought before them, but those sent to retrieve Jesus were too amazed at his teaching to bring him in. Nicodemus tried to stand up for Jesus in their midst, but those in power mockingly shut him up.

Jesus was never a partial Messiah, which is no less true on the occasion of this festival. John begins chapter 8 telling us that Jesus did more than make the promise of unending water. Jesus also spoke to the people and addressed the second aspect of the festival – unending day:

Again Jesus spoke to them saying, “I am the light of the world: he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).

Jesus' statement takes on a special significance because it was made at the festival where light was a significant promise of the Messiah to come. Furthermore, throughout the Old Testament, light is used as a metaphor for God's direction and effect upon man.⁴ John himself has used the metaphor as early as the first chapter explaining that Jesus was the light of the world that bestows the “light of life.”

⁴ For example, Psalm 27:1: “Yahweh is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?”; 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path”; Isaiah 42:6 “I will make you...a light for the Gentiles.”

John gives us the finale to the Feast of Tabernacles. After Jesus made the claim of being the light, those in power question Jesus' authority for making such a bold and near blasphemous proclamation. In Jewish courts, it took two witnesses for evidence to be considered credible. Jesus told the people that there was a witness of two, Jesus and God the Father. Many of the masses believed Jesus was in fact Messiah. Jesus said to those who were persuaded that he was the Messiah, that if they would abide in the words and teaching of Jesus, then they would not be temporary followers but true disciples. Then, Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." This was troublesome to the people. They explained that they were Abraham's seed (how could anything be more true?) and that they were not enslaved to anyone (what need to be set free?)

Jesus upset the people by explaining that they were in fact enslaved to sin. The freedom from sin that would come from Jesus would set the people "free indeed." Jesus then further upset the people by telling them that if they were truly Abraham's children, then they would do the works of Abraham. Rather than accept the words of Jesus (and with them truth and freedom!), the people persisted in arguing with Jesus in disbelief.

Jesus then told the people that they were refusing to hear and believe what he is saying. Jesus told them that rather than Abraham as father, the devil was in fact the father of those arguing. The Jews responded that Jesus was the one with a devil. They challenged Jesus on whether Jesus thought of himself as greater than Abraham. Jesus answered that Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Jesus and the people mocked that Abraham could ever have anticipated the day of Jesus.

These were harsh statements, but ones that Jesus would lay down his life supporting. That he would do so brings another fulfillment of Jesus to the teachings of the *Torah*.

Yom Kippur

Our English Bibles do not use the Hebrew term *Yom Kippur*, but instead use the English translation, "Day of Atonement." In the Torah, it is found in Leviticus 23:26-32,

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD. And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on that very day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall not do any work. It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwelling places. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves. On the ninth day of

the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath."

Leviticus 16:1-34 gives much fuller instructions:

- This was the only day each year when the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. The LORD would appear above the mercy seat, and no one was allowed in the presence of the LORD except under very specific circumstances and in a very particular manner. (16:1-2).
- The high priest had to wear special garments and wash himself before entering into God's presence. To enter God's presence dressed as an ordinary man or in an unclean status would make a High Priest unfit for being before the presence of the Almighty (16:3-4).
- The high priest was to offer two sets of sacrifices, one for himself/household and one for the people. The sacrifice for the high priest and his household was for a ceremonial cleansing for the high priest before the high priest could seek cleansing for the people (16:5-6).
- The high priest was to have two goats to atone for the Israelites. After casting lots, Aaron was to slaughter one goat as an atoning sacrifice for the people (16:7-10). The slaughtered goat and the bull slaughtered for the high priest and his household were brought through their blood into the Holiest place and the blood from the sacrifices was sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. This was to set the blood before the very presence of God himself (16:11-16).
- The high priest then went back to the main altar and offered a further sacrifice to cleanse the altar from the uncleanness of Israel (16:17-19).
- The high priest then took the second goat and placed his hands on it, symbolically placing the sins of the people onto the goat. And the high priest shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness. (Lev. 16:21).
- The goat was driven out from the midst of the people to die alone outside the camp in a solitary place in the desert (16:20-22). (From this developed the term "scapegoat.")
- The final work then began with the high priest taking off his special clothing, bathing again, and then a final atoning offering for all now that the sacrifices for uncleanness were complete (16:23-28). This was an annual practice of atonement

that was performed, while Israel and Judah obeyed the Lord, as long as the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) was standing. Israel was told, that in this way, on this day, “shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins” (Lev. 16:30).

These sacrifices were done in the New Testament time period also up until the destruction of the temple in the rebellion of 68-70AD. In the New Testament, this holy day was termed “the Fast” (e.g., Acts 27:9).

Obviously, Jews today do not sacrifice any animals at the temple redundant. No high priest makes atonement wearing special clothing or casting lots on two goats. The reading of the Leviticus passage is deemed to have some effect of the actual practice that was done when the temple and tabernacle made such sacrifices possible.

Jews today see this as the day God signs his judgment that was made on *Rosh Hashanah*. Final prayers of repentance are offered along with a day of self-denial. Generally, this self-denial involves fasting, no bathing for pleasure (hygienic needs are okay, so you may wash your hands after going to the restroom!), no leather of any kind, and no sexual relations.

All of this works together in mainstream Jewish thought for reaching atonement before God. Eisenberg explains,

...fasting is not sufficient in itself to secure atonement. To gain divine forgiveness, there must be sincere repentance combining contrite confession and a solemn resolve to abandon the ways of evil.⁵

Generally, synagogues have five different services on *Yom Kippur*. Services include readings of the Leviticus 16 passage as well as the Isaiah 57:14-58:16 passage that speaks of the difference between good and false fasting. Frequently read later in the day is the entire book of Jonah, holding up as an example the entire city of Nineveh whose repentance turned the heart of God.

Christianity finds the Day of Atonement as one of the clearest examples in the Torah of what the Messiah would do. The New Testament book of Hebrews explains the Day of Atonement as a picture of Jesus who was the true atoning sacrifice before God.

Even beyond that, Jesus fits into several different roles found in the Atonement ritual. Among the points made in Hebrews are:

- Jesus is the ultimate High Priest (Heb. 4:24).

⁵ Eisenberg, Ronald, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Jewish Publication Society 2004) at 207.

- Jesus goes behind the curtain separating the Holy of Holies and goes into the ACTUAL presence of God (not just an earthly image) (Heb. 6:19-20).
- Jesus himself is pure and clean before he approaches God, not needing a sacrifice, special clothes, or ritual bathing before performing his tasks (Heb. 7:26).
- Jesus himself is the actual sacrifice for the people (Heb. 7:27).
- Jesus also functions as the scapegoat who has the sins of the people on his head and is driven out from the camp and the people (Heb. 13:12-13).
- Jesus' blood goes before the very throne of God. (Heb. 9:12).
- God's justice is met fully once and for all by the death of Jesus (Heb. 9:23-28; 10:10). Because Christ is the perfect sacrifice, there is no perpetual need of killing a bull, a goat, or any other animal as a representative of the people. This is no longer an annual ritual, it is finished.
- The curtain secluding the Holy of Holies is ripped by Jesus (Heb. 10:19-20; Mk 15:38). This wall of separation between God and man is totally gone so that, through Christ, humanity is in direct relationship with God the Father.
- Our fellowship with God is fully restored by the death of Christ. (Heb. 10:22-23).

There is much in common between the Jewish celebrations and those of the Christian church, yet there is also a very important difference. It is that difference that brings about the distinction among many Jewish belief systems and that of Christianity.

Both the Jew and Christian view the relationship with God as one that is marred by sin. There is true moral guilt that needs forgiveness. Both Jew and Christian recognize the need to confess honestly to God, to repent and turn from sin, and to seek the forgiveness that can come only from God.

But, the Christian believes that a sacrifice was not merely a cultural event. Christianity believes that it was and is a real necessity for real justice, and hence for real forgiveness.

While there was no real inherent value in the blood of bulls or goats who have no morality and thus no sin, there was and is inherent value in the presentation of a human life without blemish. It is the exact life (and "living sacrifice") that God's justice requires. Animal sacrifices were never enough, and only in Jesus is the sacrifice fully sufficient. Jesus is hence, Christ, or Messiah.

While many modern Jews admirably take a period of time each autumn to contemplate their sins to make amends and seek forgiveness, both from others and from God, the justice of such forgiveness is perceived differently. All the fasting in the world, all the self-denial, all the humility and begging for forgiveness does not truly pay the price for sin. The price for sin is death, plain and simple. That death was pictured in the rituals God gave Israel, and it was fulfilled in the death of Christ for the sins of the world.

Therefore, Christians celebrate this sacrifice, coming with contrite hearts, with lips bearing confession and with humble spirits, yet the celebration draws its validity from the sacrifice of God, not the sacrifices of sinful men.

CONCLUSION

I am a Christian. I am not a Jew. Yet as a Christian, I am solidly in the tree of Judaism. Historically and in the modern world, many Jews were and are Christians, meaning they believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah. Because for the first decade of Christianity, basically every Christian was a Jew, once the Gentiles began placing their faith in Jesus and his death for their sins as well, the Jewish church was faced with a big theological dilemma. Should Gentiles have to convert to Judaism *before* becoming Christians.

In Acts chapter 15, the decision was made after much debate, study of Scripture, and prayer. The decision was, “No, Gentiles did not have to first become Jews.” So in history until today, Gentiles can be Christians by trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus for justice and fellowship with God. Jews can remain practicing Jews and also put their trust in Jesus as Messiah, walking in the forgiveness of Jesus.

Am I a Jew? No and yes. I am grafted onto the tree!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...*you shall have a holy convocation.*” (Num. 29:1).

The Lord set Israel to a number of celebrations. They included times of rest from work, of fasting and feasting, of family and community. These times were for holy reflection upon God, his character, and his deeds. These times are important for believers today. As Jesus said of the Sabbath, man was not made to follow it. The Sabbath was made because man needed it! So, we are to zealously look for the times where we set aside the busy work of life, gather together as family and community, and give time to worship our God.

2. “*You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.*” (Lev. 16:30).

The core behind any of this lesson is relationship with God. God made us to be in fellowship with him, but sin brought that fellowship to an end. How does the story have an ending of restored fellowship? Through a forgiveness of sins! That does not come simply from an apology, but through a fair and just punishment. It is the sacrifice of Christ that provides God's justice in passing over sins.

3. *“He [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:2).*

Trusting in God for our just restoration with him, involves paying the price for our sin. Jesus has done that. I can't. You can't. No one else but the Messiah can do that. Our righteousness will never flow from anything more than that. We, like Abraham the father of all Jews, are called to trust in Jesus/God and in him we will find our righteousness.