

**Core Seminar**

**Evangelism**

**Class 12: Sharing the Gospel with Jews**

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I. Introduction

When you think of the millions of Jewish people alive who profess that the God of Abraham, Moses and David is a key part of their heritage, how does your heart respond? Even if there isn’t a Jewish bone in your body, can you identify at all with Paul,when he thinks of the Jews and says, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (Rom 10:1)?

This morning we want Paul’s burden to become our own. How can we obey 1 Peter 3:15 and “always [be] prepared to make a defense” of our faith to our Jewish friends? That’s what we want to explore today.

We’ll look at:

**1) A basic introduction to Judaism;**

**2) A handful of Biblical themes to use in evangelism; and**

**3) How to respond to a few questions that our Jewish friends often raise.**

**II. Understanding Judaism**

First, what is it that defines Judaism? Let’s look at Jewish history and some major Jewish movements.

**A. History**

As we’ll see in a moment, modern expressions of Judaism are quite diverse. Many Jews today don’t even profess to believe in God, while others seek to follow God’s law with exacting precision. So very similar to many religions you have the more orthodox and the more liberal. But there is one unbreakable thread that binds all forms of Judaism together, and that is the history of the people of Israel. For the sake of time, I’ll assume we’re familiar with the basic Old Testament storyline. That being that in the Old Testament, God redeems the descendants of Abraham and gives them his law and his presence, making them his special people. But you’ll also remember that they later rebelled and were sent into exile by God. God was gracious, and Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem with some of the Hebrew people to rebuild the city and the temple.

**1. After the Old Testament**

During the time after all the Old Testament books were written, many Jews remained dispersed throughout the various empires that ruled during these 4-5 centuries before the birth of Jesus. Official worship could only take place at the temple, so Jewish communities throughout the dispersion devoted themselves to the study of the Torah by establishing synagogues. And in these synagogues teachers or “rabbis” would develop various interpretations of the laws that Israel cherished.

This is the period of time that saw a major diversification within Judaism, as a bunch of variations developed by the 1st century, including the Pharisees and Sadducees who we read about in the New Testament. And, as we know, many Jews in the first century came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

**2. From 70 AD to Today**

Those early Jewish believers, like us, knew that Jesus had fulfilled the need for a temple with its sacrifices and offerings. But most Jews still saw the temple as the central place where God met with them and received his prescribed worship. So you can imagine how earth-shattering it was when in the year 70 AD, the Romans took over Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Judaism would never be the same again.

Because of this the Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, where they again turned to the study of Torah in synagogues to define their religious identity. They meticulously catalogued rabbinic teachings that had been passed down orally into a massive collection of volumes known as the “Talmud,” which means “instruction” or “learning.” Think of the Talmud as a collection of commentaries on the Torah that provide a huge range of ideas, questions, applications, stories, and traditions. Again, notice a “range” of interpretations.

Because of this, modern Judaism is essentially Talmudic in character. By that, I mean that its focus is on all the various rabbinic *interpretations* of the Torah. The average Jew today may assume he can’t understand the Bible – after all, the rabbis have been debating it and questioning it ever since the old days! For many Jews, then, religion is NOT simply reading scripture and living by it, but entering in to a long tradition of questions and interpretations in search for truth.

**B. Major Movements**

It’s no wonder, then, that today we can identify several main movements of Judaism that have resulted from this interpretive tradition: Orthodox, Conservative and Reformed.

**1. Orthodox: Hoping in the Law**. On one level, Orthodox Jews are easy for Christians to understand, because they believe in the Hebrew Bible and take it seriously. The number of Orthodox Jews worldwide is comparatively small.

For Orthodox Jews, keeping the law as literally as possible is their hope of salvation. They try to be good, moral, and get a good Jewish education. They observe the dietary laws by keeping kosher, obey to the ceremonial laws of the Jewish holidays, wear certain symbols and clothing, and keep the Sabbath. To ensure that they keep the Sabbath, they refrain from all work, and some go to extremes like not driving or using electricity. They also ask God to be merciful when they fall short. They observe the Day of Atonement or “Yom Kippur” not by offering a sacrificial lamb as in Leviticus 16, since the temple is no more. Rather, atonement comes through heartfelt repentance and recommitment to observing God’s law. Like most Jews, the Orthodox don’t conceive of original sin as making someone totally unable to please God, the way we do. They say we’re born with an inclination to evil and an inclination to good. We have to learn the right interpretation of God’s law so that we can follow the good.

**2. Conservative: Religious but Modern.** Conservative Judaism also seeks to follow the teachings of the rabbis, but with more relevance to modern times. Jewish people in this stream may still wear a head-covering, called a “yarmulke”[[1]](#footnote-1) or “kippah,” but their dress will be more contemporary than the Orthodox. They still keep kosher and uphold basic theological beliefs, but allow men and women to sit together in the synagogue and hold services in English as well as Hebrew.

**3. Reform[[2]](#footnote-2): Hoping in this Life.** Finally, Reform Judaism is the most theologically liberal movement. Reform Jews see the Bible as a collection of stories or myths. Most don’t go to the synagogue regularly, similar to “Christians” who only go to church on Easter and Christmas. Reform Jews probably think of themselves more as “cultural Jews” than as religious.

Therefore, it’s not uncommon to find Reform Jews who are agnostic, whose Judaism consists in a sense of tradition and morality but not a belief in God. Some abandoned faith in God after the Holocaust, and reinterpreted their Judaism to make it mainly about ethics and values. Evangelizing to a Reform Jew from the Old Testament can be difficult because they often don’t have knowledge of the Bible; and even if they do, they often don’t believe it.

**C. Putting It All Together**

So then how does all of this inform our evangelism? Orthodox and Conservative Jews essentially practice a religion of works righteousness grounded in history and tradition. With these friends, we must emphasize our incurable sinful nature and desperate need for a perfect savior to bear our sin. Reform Jews, on the other hand, are quite similar to our secular and agnostic neighbors. We should invite them to consider the possibility of the existence of God and the historical resurrection of Jesus.

Spoiler alert, all that to say that the basic evangelism strategy with Jews is everything that’s already taught in the evangelism core seminar: make friends, invite people into your life, pray for opportunities to share the gospel, and share it faithfully. And particularly with Jewish friends, use that “make friends” step to learn about *their* interpretation and experience of Judaism.  **Ask good questions** about what they believe and how they view some of the major historical events and views we’ve just covered. Some examples: “Do you try to obey the Torah? How can you obey all those commandments?” “What do you do if you sin and you need atonement?” “How does your Jewish background influence the way you live each day?” “Do you pray to God and what do you ask him for?” “What does it mean to be Orthodox/Conservative/Reform?”

One of the best ways to build a friendship and take a conversation toward spiritual things at the same time is to talk to Jews about their traditions and holidays. Ask if they keep a **kosher** diet and why. When a relative dies, Jews will often visit with the grieving family for a whole week, called “**sitting shiva**.” Ask what that means to them. Are they traveling home for **Passover**? Find out what they believe the Passover means and talk to them about how you see Jesus as the great Passover Lamb who shed his blood so that God’s judgment of death passes over us as foreshadowed in Exodus 12. **Yom Kippur**, the Day of Atonement, is a key holiday to discuss, because it relates to how Jews seek atonement through fasting, repentance, and good works. Most Jews celebrate **Purim**, which remembers the events of the book of Esther, but for many this holiday is about wearing costumes, drinking, partying and having a good time. Consider reading Esther with a Jewish friend and exploring how it is all about God’s plan to preserve a people for himself, which he ultimately does through Christ. Ask what **Chanukah[[3]](#footnote-3), Rosh Hashanah[[4]](#footnote-4), Succoth[[5]](#footnote-5)** and other holidays mean to them.

Ultimately, while knowing some background about Judaism and discussing these holidays are great ideas for getting started, there’s no substitute for studying the Word of God with someone and letting it do its work. That’s where we’ll turn in a moment. Before we do, **any questions??**

**III. Biblical Themes to Use in Evangelism**

Thankfully, many Jews already respect the Old Testament. So, I want us to look at a number of key biblical themes that you could use in evangelistic conversations. We’ll cover each of them briefly now, but I’ve included the scripture verses on your handout so you can study them later. You could always summarize a couple of verses in a brief conversation, but if you can, try to sit down over coffee with a Jewish friend and look in depth at one of these “themes,” studying each verse in context.

One small note: since Jewish folks often feel strange about the term “*Old* Testament,” you might consider calling it the Hebrew Bible or the “Tanak,” which is its Hebrew title.

Let’s begin with two ways to get to Christ from the Torah, the first 5 books of the Tanak, since Jewish people uphold these books as the most important part of scripture.

**A. The Coming King:** The goal here is to show that the Messianic hope is central to the Torah, and that Jesus fulfills that hope. Here are the key verses:

* + - * **Genesis 3:15:** God tells Satan that an offspring of Eve will bruise his head. The whole rest of the book of Genesis is asking the question, *who will that offspring be?*
      * We learn in **Genesis 12:1-3** that it is through Abraham’s descendants that God will bless all the families of the earth.
      * Then in **Genesis 17:5-7**, God tells Abraham that kings will come from his line. It seems that the promised offspring of Genesis 3:15 will be a royal figure.
      * That leads us to **Genesis 49:10,** where Jacob is blessing his twelve sons. Listen to what he says about Judah: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.” So it is from the line of Judah that a forever king will come, whom all nations on the earth obey!
      * This prophesy is reinforced in **Numbers 24:17-19**, where similar language is used to describe the coming king: “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel... and one from Jacob shall exercise dominion.”
      * In **Deuteronomy 17:18-20** we learn that the king of Israel should write a copy of the whole Torah for himself so he can live by it. It seems that Israel’s hope is supposed to be in a king who fully obeys the law of God!
      * Jewish folks may not be used to the idea of seeing a Messianic figure in the Torah. They associate these books with language of law, not language of a coming king. So it may be useful to show that all of this language about a ruler with universal dominion gets picked up in one of the most famous Messianic prophecies, the vision of the Son of Man in **Daniel 7:14:** “To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”
      * From here, it may be useful to study the first couple of chapters of **Matthew** to see how Jesus’ genealogy gets traced back to David, Judah, and Abraham, and to see the Magi come to pay him tribute as was predicted in Genesis 49.

**B. God’s Provision of Forgiveness:**  But we also know that the Messiah did not only come to be Israel’s great king, but also to provide lasting forgiveness for those who repent and believe. This is a key difference between Christianity and Judaism: For Jews, the Messiah is to bring deliverance for the Jews, to destroy any enemies of the Jews and to bring world peace. They didn’t conceive of the Messiah primarily bringing reconciliation between man and God. But we can show from the Torah that that reconciliation is man’s greatest need and that it is God who would provide it through a greater Passover Lamb.

* + - * A good place to start is **Exodus 34:6**, where we learn that God is merciful and gracious, but he doesn’t leave the guilty unpunished. How can he both forgiving and just?
      * As your Jewish friend probably well knows, in the Torah God answers that question by providing the sacrifices we see described in Leviticus. Read **Leviticus 16** with your Jewish friend to see how atonement needed to be made every year due to the people’s constant sin. Then go on to **Lev** **17:11** to see God’s ordained way for accomplishing forgiveness: through the death of an innocent. *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”*
      * That should remind your Jewish friend of the Passover lamb, described in **Exodus 12-13.** When God’s angel would see the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the Jews, he would pass over their homes and spare their sons from death. The important thing to see here is that God established Passover as a yearly holiday so the Jews would not forget this image. It’s an image of substitution: the lamb dies in the place of someone else.
      * These concepts prepare you well to bring up passages like **John 1:29,** where John the Baptist says “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” or even better, to do a study of **Hebrews 7-10** which explains how Jesus fulfills all the Old Testament sacrifices.

**C. Messianic Prophesies:**  Of course, the Messianic hope in the Hebrew Bible only becomes clearer throughout salvation history, so you’ll want to explore some key prophecies from the writings and prophets with your Jewish friend too. Here’s a sampling of some of the clearest ones:

* + - * **Micah 5:2** says the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. That would be very hard for a false Messiah to achieve since you can’t decide where you’re born!
    - See **2 Samuel 7:12-17** for God’s promise to David that one of his sons would reign forever,
    - **Zechariah 9:9-10** predicts the Messiah’s entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, which Jesus fulfilled.
    - **Psalm 22** previews the Messiah’s suffering on the cross, including the mocking of passersby (22:7), Jesus’ thirst (22:15), the dividing of his garments (22:18), and the piercing of his hands and feet (22:16).
    - **Psalm 16:10** foretells how the Messiah would not forever be abandoned to death; Peter uses this text in Acts 2 to show that Christ’s resurrection was predicted by God.
    - Finally, the crown jewel of Old Testament prophesies must be **Isaiah 53.** Not surprisingly, this text has received many different interpretations from Jewish scholars, who sadly seem to have a vested interest in explaining how it could *not* be about the Messiah. Remember that the Jewish idea of a Messiah is mainly that he is a victorious king. But we see here that this king would also be God’s suffering servant, who would be pierced for the transgressions of God’s people and take their punishment.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**D. Studying the Gospels:** At this point we see why it’s so important for our Jewish neighbors to learn about Jesus himself, from the gospels – the writings of the Jews who followed him and knew him. Just the idea of reading the New Testament can be a huge obstacle to a Jewish friend. But if they can read a gospel with you, they’ll quickly notice the “Jewishness” of Jesus. Getting to read the Gospel with a Jewish friend is so crucial. Jesus was culturally Jewish, not Southern Baptist! All his disciples were Jewish. All the New Testament writers, except Luke, were Jewish – a simple fact which may make your friend more willing to read it. But open up to a book like Matthew, and your friend will quickly learn that Jesus was no ordinary rabbi.

* + - * You’ll see in **Matthew 1:23** that Jesus came to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy about a son named Immanuel, or “God with us.”
      * You’ll see in **Matthew 9:6** that Jesus has authority to forgive sins – and all the rabbis knew that only God alone can do that.
      * In the same vein, look at all the divine prerogatives Jesus exercises in Matthew, through his authority over nature (8:26-27), over demons (8:29-32), over disease (9:22), even over death (9:25). Then note the reason Jesus said he would die, in **Matthew 26:28:** “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Do note that most Jews will find the idea that Jesus is God nearly incomprehensible. We shouldn’t shy away from it, since it’s the clear teaching of scripture. But it may help our Jewish friends simply to contrast Jesus with the great Old Testament figures using Christ’s own words. Abraham, Moses, David and the great prophets never said like Jesus that they would “give my life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Only Jesus said “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12) and “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Since some of these clearest statements are in the book of John, that could be a good book to study together.

Don’t forget to pray that as we share these truths with our Jewish friends, the Lord would “open their hearts” to hear and believe just as he has done with so many over the centuries.

**IV. Answering Common Questions**

As we love our Jewish neighbors, we shouldn’t only proclaim truths to them. We should listen to their questions and provide thoughtful answers with patience and gentleness. As we wrap up, consider these three common questions that Jews often raise and how we might answer them faithfully.

**A.** The first is a **Theological** question**: Where Was God during the Holocaust?** We can’t underestimate how much this awful event overshadows the worldview of many Jewish friends. Now, the problem of evil is truly difficult to answer, and you shouldn’t feel pressure to offer a simplistic explanation**. 1) First,** it’s important to **listen and empathize** with the pain many Jews feel having lost relatives in such a heinous manner. Then, if they really want to discuss God’s relationship with evil, it’s probably best to stick with what we know:

**2) God hates evil and will judge** all those who have committed terrible atrocities and don’t repent. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom 12:19).

**3) God works good through man’s sin** even if we can’t comprehend how. We must make this point delicately: in Genesis 50:20 we see that what Joseph’s brothers meant for evil, God meant for good... In Acts 4:27-28 we learn that God even predestined that evil people would crucify Jesus, by which he accomplished immeasurable good... Still, we shouldn’t be like Job’s friends and pretend to know exactly why any instance of suffering happens. We still see “in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor 13:12).

**4) Jesus has tasted unjust suffering** and so he has compassion for all who have suffered unjustly. Heb 2:18, “Because he himself suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” He experienced a horrific death even though he – like no one else who’s ever lived – was perfectly innocent.

If God is in charge of history, why did so many Jews in particular to die in this way? Ultimately, we don’t know. What we do know is that he invites all, Jew and Gentile, to come to him for eternal rest (Matt 11:28-30). We must act on what we know, not what we can’t understand.

**B.** The second is a **Cultural and Historical** question: **Isn’t Christianity Anti-Semitic?**

Jews often see our evangelism through the lens of the long history of Christian persecution. In this view, trying to convert a Jew is another form of oppression against Jewish identity. After all, the reasoning goes, if we believe that Christianity is superior, that means we believe Judaism is inferior and needs to be corrected, improved, or replaced. How should we respond?

**1)** We should **acknowledge** that hurtful things have been done by so-called “Christians,” but explain that these actions are *contrary* to God’s Word, not consistent with it. Ultimately should judge a movement or religion not by the deeds of all who align with it, but by its basic teachings.

**2)** We should **point out the Jewish foundation of our faith**. Paul says that Gentiles are like a wild plant grafted into the “nourishing root of the olive tree” of the Jewish people of God (Rom 11:17). If Jesus is truly the New Adam who came to redeem God’s people, then it’s unloving *not* to tell Jews about him. Explain that your goal isn’t *to convert* someone – only God can do that. Your goal is to love your friend by telling them the Messiah has come.

**C.** Finally, Jews considering Christ may have a deeply **Personal** question: **If I Believe in Jesus, Will I Stop Being Jewish?**

**1)** Sadly, opposition to Jesus as Messiah has become so characteristic of Judaism that many think if they accept Christ then they won’t be Jewish any more. Of course, that’s not what Paul, Peter, John, and the other **disciples** thought! For them the most Jewish thing in the world was to count everything as loss “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (Messiah) Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8).

**2)** Still, we have to help our Jewish friends **count the cost**. Jesus commands us to take our cross and follow him, and he told his 12 disciples –all of them Jews – that they would experience bitter opposition from their own family members for pledging allegiance to his kingdom (Matt 10:21-22). Understand that family loyalty continues to be a major cultural value of Jews today. It’s a kindness to explain to Jews considering Christ that if they believe, their life truly will never be the same. They’ll no longer depend on eating kosher, keeping the Sabbath, and obeying commandments to be assured of God’s redemption. They may choose to continue enjoying some of the Jewish cultural traditions... but it’lll have to be in a very different way, since they will see these holidays and practices as fulfilled in Christ. Their family very well may disown them for following Jesus. The costs are great. But as Jesus, the greatest Rabbi said, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark (8:36).

Only the Spirit of Christ can open hearts to see that Jesus is more precious than the unfulfilled hopes of Judaism. So let’s pray that God would give us many opportunities to share this good news.

**Any Questions?**

**[Pray]**

1. Usually pronounced “YAH-muh-kuh” by Jews in America. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many erroneously refer to this movement as “Reform*ed*” Judaism [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Or Hanukkah. Festival of lights. Eight-day Jewish holiday commemorating the rededication of the Holy Temple (the Second Temple) in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire of the 2nd century BC. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jewish New Year (literally: “head of year”) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Feast of booths or feast of tabernacles (Leviticus 23:40-43) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Use only if there’s enough time*: It’s popular in Jewish readings to see the “Servant” of Isaiah 53 as the whole nation of Israel, who would suffer to bring blessings to the world. So it might be helpful to read the text with your Jewish friend and ask if it makes more sense to see the servant as an individual or as the nation. Can we really say that Israel was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (v. 3), that Israel “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities,” (v.5)? That they made Israel’s “grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence?” Such verses only make sense if the servant is one man, suffering for the sins of God’s people. Jesus was actually pierced and he was actually buried in a rich man’s grave, and he did no violence. The same could not be said of the nation as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)