

Slow Religion

The Foundations of Christian Faith in the 21st Century

The Slow Religion: The Foundations of Christian Faith explores the core beliefs and experiences of the Christian faith and invites reflection in our 21st Century/Covid-19 pandemic context. The series is led by Joe Jennings, the Rev. Zoila Schoenbrun (St. Stephens Church), the Rev. Br. Richard Edward Helmer (Church of our Saviour) and Nancy Clark (St. Mary the Virgin) and is organized into two sets: first, the historical context and development of the faith; and, second topical examinations of belief and how to apply those today.

The topics include: God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Incarnation, Resurrection, Forgiveness of Sins and Eternal Life. Each subject will include a brief presentation to give historical and textual content, readings in the Bible, creeds and prayers from multiple sources, and then questions for reflection and discussion.

CLASS #1

Pre-Christian Origins and Context

Pre-Christian context for the new religion: Jewish views of God, early creeds and prayer life. Sources include the Old Testament and other texts.

SUBJECT



Judaism 2000 BCE-30 CE

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Emergence of Monotheism. Yahweh/God and Ruach/Spirit.

Covenant with Israel/Chosen People. Salvation History.

Prayer Life

The Temple

The Messiah

Death and Resurrection

READINGS

Gen 1:1-2 “1 In the beginning when God created[a] the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[b] swept over the face of the waters.”

Deut 6:4-5 “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Deut 26:5-9 “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7 we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Sin and Forgiveness: The Torah portrays the first collective sin of the Jewish people as the making of a molten calf (Exodus 32) and presents a model of forgiveness in the people’s healing from that sin. We first learn of the concept of *s’liḥa* (forgiveness) in this story when the Israelites ask God, “Pardon our iniquity and our sin.” (Exodus 34:9) This story and several others in the Bible establish the God of Israel as a forgiving, compassionate and even merciful God, in addition to being a God of justice and law. These two themes—justice and mercy—are at the center of the *Yamim Nora’im*.¹

Repentance and Atonement: The Bible expanded the concept of repentance and atonement with the institution of the ancient Temple’s sacrificial system, which held that atonement could be achieved through expiation rites. While one biblical understanding of reward and punishment holds that there are consequences for sinful actions, the goal of expiation rites was not just avoiding punishment, but a redirection of one’s life toward godly behavior. The choice of which way to go belongs to each person.⁶ In Deuteronomy, the Torah imagines God saying, “I put before you the blessing and the curse, life and death; therefore, choose life, that you may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19) ²

On Resurrection

References to Resurrection in Jewish Literature

- Israel’s exile and restoration -- Ezekiel 37:1-14 the vision of the valley of the dry bones
- Resurrection begins life and is about a return from exile -- Isaiah 26:16-21
- Martyrs, and resurrection focused on their vindication -- Daniel 12, 2 Maccabees, 2 Macc 7:1-23
- Restoration of state after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD: 4 Ezra 7, 1 Enoch and 2 Baruch
- Important in Pharisaic theology: Josephus (War 2:163; Ant. 18:14) and the New Testament (Acts 23:7-8)

“Resurrection functioned for the Pharisees, not as an abstract doctrine about what happens to God’s people (or to anybody) after death, but as a statement about the great turn-around within Israel’s fortunes

¹ <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/article/sin-and-forgiveness>

² <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/article/sin-and-forgiveness>

that would shortly take place, and about the fact that when this event happened those who had been loyal to Torah, but had died ahead of time would be raised to share in the blessings of the Age to Come.”
Pharisaic belief, in other words, is to be seen as a development of the same underlying story that we see in Daniel and 2 Maccabees.

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-3, 7-8.

“The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.” (3:1-3)

“In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever.” (3:7-8)

Two views during first century CE Jewish religious leadership:

- Sadducees, who seem to have denied any doctrine of post-mortem existence/resurrection Mark 12:18; Josephus, War 2:165
- Pharisees, who affirmed a future embodied existence, resurrection

PRAYERS

Exodus 3:4-14 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush... "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."... I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians... I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."... "I am who I am."... '(Say) I am has sent me to you.'

1 Kings 19:11-15 11 Elijah at the cave on Horeb. "Now there was a great wind... but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ... "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."

Isaiah 6:8 "8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Isaiah 57:15-16

"For thus says the high and lofty one
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,
and to revive the heart of the contrite.

1 Chronicles 29: 10-14 David said: "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever... all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.... 14 "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you."

1 Kings 8:27-30 (A prayer of Solomon) "27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! 28 Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; 29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. 30 Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive."

Psalms 36:9 "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."

Psalms 46:10 ""Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth."

Psalm 31:5 "Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God."

Psalm 18:1 "I love you, O Lord, my strength.

2 The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

The Life of Prayer in Judaism Prior to the Christian Era*

1. THE SHEMA, it's recitation, more a credal statement than what we usually understand as prayer, was what we usually understand as prayer, was central to worship.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

The practice of reciting the Shema before sunrise and after Sunset was an obligation for all men and boys 12 years and beyond. Women, children and slaves were not included. This was a mandate for all Jews in Palestine and throughout the Diaspora. "Hear O Israel" has set benedictions before it and after it.

2. THE THREE HOURS OF PRAYER

By the third century BCE and at least into the first century CE the custom of praying three times a day is recorded in the Book of Daniel (6:11) Ezra (9:5) and Judith (9:1) They were observed morning, afternoon and evening. These three hours of prayer, called the Tephilla (The Prayer) is a Hymn consisting of eighteen benedictions. To these, the individual could add private, personal petitions. The Tephilla was to be said by all, including women children and slaves. Of particular note is the afternoon (3 PM) observance at the very hour of the sacrifice offered in the Temple which is referenced in Acts 3:1.

*Joachim, Jeremias, The Prayers of Jesus.

SUMMARY

	Jewish/OT
God	Monotheism
	Yahweh, Covenant with Israel One transcendent God who revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets and by a religious life in accordance with Scriptures and rabbinic traditions. God who created and rules the entire world and who at the end of history will redeem all Israel and the whole world.
Jesus Christ	NA Messiah: an individual who is anointed to free Israel, cleanse the Temple and bring about universal, political realm of justice and peace
The Holy Spirit	Ruach, God's spirit in OT
Incarnation	NA
Death	Final
Resurrection	Small element for one faction of the Jewish community. Not a central point or seen as very important by any of the factions. Pharisees believed it would occur for the righteous at the end time. Great turnaround of Israel Sadducees disagreed and did not believe in resurrection
Forgiveness of Sins	Sin is the result of our negative human tendencies or inclinations, known in Hebrew as the yetzer hara (the inclination toward evil), which must be channeled in ways that affirm life by the influence of the yetzer hatov (the inclination to goodness). The word in Hebrew for sin (ḥet) literally means something that goes astray, like an arrow that misses the mark. ³
Eternal Life	
Communion	Readings, Prayer and Interpretation are basic structure of Jewish synagogue service
Prayer	The Schema – creed and prayer Tephilla -- three hours of prayer
Covenant	The arrangement between God and his chosen people is designated a covenant and is structured by an elaborate and intricate set of laws.
Chosen people	Between creation and redemption lies the particularistic designation of the Jewish people as the locus of God's activity in the world, as the people chosen by God to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). This arrangement is designated a covenant and is structured by an elaborate and intricate law. Thus, the Jewish people were both entitled to special privileges and burdened with special responsibilities from God.

³ <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/article/sin-and-forgiveness>

REFLECTIONS

1. Many Christians are exposed to and learn about the foundational teachings of our faith through hearing the readings from Scripture during Worship Services. Though the Gospel is central, the Old Testament readings and the Psalm appointed enrich the fullness of God's message. How does the OT witness inform, instruct and enrich -- or not -- your journey in faith?
2. Reflecting on a compelling, heart-moving story from the OT -- what is it that grips you and how does it affirm for you the message of God-with-us: then and now?