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# HOW DID WE GET TO...A DISTINCTION BETWEEN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY?

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## Discussion Guide

Today, most people take for granted that Judaism and Christianity are distinct religions. In this video, Sarah explores how this distinction came to be. She also considers some contemporary Christian beliefs about Judaism, particularly related to first-century Jewish understandings of grace and works, and argues that these beliefs misrepresent first-century Judaism.

Questions for Discussion (you might find it helpful to read these questions before you watch the video):

1. What, if anything, have you been taught about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the New Testament and the early history of the Christian church?
2. Sarah asserts that Christians often contrast a supposed Christian emphasis on grace with a supposed Jewish emphasis on works. Have you heard Christians make that or other distinctions between Christianity and Judaism? Do you agree with Sarah's assertion that those contrasts tend to denigrate Judaism in order to make Christianity seem better?
3. In the videos, Sarah argues that first-century Judaism was not a religion of "works righteousness" and she offers a reading of Paul to make her case. What do you think of her argument? Does it, as she contends, make sense of what Paul writes in Galatians and Romans?
4. What, if anything, did you learn about the emergence of Christianity and Judaism as distinct religious traditions? Did anything you learned help you understand either tradition better?
5. Sarah asks Christians to stop making Judaism sound bad in order to make Christianity sound good. Is denigrating Judaism a problem in your community? What might you start or stop doing in order to provide a more accurate portrayal of both Christianity and Judaism?

Key Ideas (you can watch for these in the video and revisit them afterwards in your discussion):

1. The story of how Judaism and Christianity became distinct religions in complicated and contested.
2. Christians have tended to portray first-century Judaism as a religion of “works righteousness.” Many scholarly interpretations of first-century Judaism, including interpretations of Paul’s writing on Judaism, indicate that Jews understood the covenant itself as a gift of grace and “works” as responses to that gift.
3. Some interpreters of Paul think that he believed Gentiles did not have to follow works such as kosher and circumcision not because God had ended the Abrahamic covenant but precisely because God, in Jesus, had kept it.
4. Scholars have suggested various key points in the process by which Judaism and Christianity emerged as distinct religions. These include the exclusion of Christians from synagogues, the Roman definition of Judaism as a religion rather than an ethnicity, and Roman recognition of Christianity as distinct from Judaism.
5. Some scholars have suggested that early Christians tried to make a positive case for Christianity by denigrating Judaism, including by claiming that they (Christians) understood the Hebrew scriptures better than did Jews.
6. Inaccurate Christian portrayals of Judaism—portrayals that go beyond acknowledging real differences between the two traditions—have had ongoing and pernicious effects.

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## Video Outline

### I. Introduction

A. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* is an early Christian text recounting a fictional conversation between a Jewish man (Trypho) and Justin.

1. One reading: *The Dialogue with Trypho* is a fairly straightforward example of Christian attitudes toward Judaism in the second Christian century written in a time when there were well-established boundaries between Christians and Jews—boundaries understood by everyone.

a) Contains themes contained in other polemics.

2. Another reading: *The Dialogue with Trypho* is part of a longer effort to delineate boundaries between Christianity and Judaism.

B. Question: isn't there a very clear distinction between Judaism and Christianity from the very beginning?

C. In this video, we are going to delve into some of the questions around the development of Judaism and Christianity as separate religions, particularly questions related to justification by faith and the law.

D. Thesis: The answer to the question of when Judaism and Christianity separated is complicated. Also, many scholars think much of what many Christians think New Testament writers, particularly Paul, were saying about Judaism was not what they were saying.

### II. Christianity, Judaism, and “Works Righteousness”

A. Many Christians have said (and say) that “Christians believe in grace, but Jews believe in works” and base this understanding of the difference between Christianity and Judaism in Paul's writings.

B. Many scholars now agree that Paul was not differentiating Judaism and Christianity on the basis of grace.

1. Scholarly understandings of first-century Judaism, Christianity, and salvation have been influenced by E.P. Sanders's 1979 book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

a) Sanders argued that first-century Jews did not believe that they had to keep the law in order to be part of the covenant. Rather, they understood keeping the law as a response to God's gracious gift of the covenant.

C. The covenant and works in Genesis

1. God makes promises to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17.

a) In Genesis 17, God stipulates that males in the covenant need to be circumcised.

b) Genesis 12 and Genesis 15 do not have the stipulation but do have covenants.

2. In sum: in Genesis, covenant precedes works.

D. Many scholars agree that first-century Jews did not think that they earned their way into the covenant by keeping laws. Rather, they understood themselves to be demonstrating fidelity to that covenant by keeping the law, particularly by practicing circumcision, observing the Sabbath, and keeping kosher

1. Keeping the law was not a work that earned grace. Rather, it was a way of living that responded to grace already given.

E. Paul and works of the law.

1. Scholars such as James Dunn and N.T. Wright have argued that Paul's argues that keeping kosher and circumcision—the two “works” Paul singles out in Galatians—functioned as identity markers for Jews. Keeping those rituals demonstrated that they were in the covenant.

2. But, according to Paul, there was now a new identity marker: Jesus. What marked you as a member of the covenant was Jesus, not circumcision or kosher.

3. To people who argued that Gentiles had to have both those identity markers (circumcision and kosher) and Jesus, Paul said, no, Jesus alone was sufficient to mark someone as in the covenant.

4. Paul did not think that God rescinded or superseded God's covenant with Abraham and, hence, to the Jews.

a) In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that Abraham's nation will be a blessing to the nations. God, according to Paul, had absolutely kept God's promise through the Jewish messiah, Jesus, a blessing to the nations. Through Jesus, Paul was bringing Gentiles into the covenant. God kept God's promises because a descendent of Abraham was blessing all nations through inclusion in God's covenant.

F. Implications of this reading of Paul

1. It corrects a longstanding, erroneous Christian belief that Jews reject grace.
  - a) The idea that Jews reject grace has been used to justify anti-semitism.
2. It makes sense of Paul's writing. In Galatians and Romans, Paul attempts to work out how God can be faithful to God's promises if God includes the Gentiles in the covenant and does not require circumcision.
3. It also makes sense of Paul arguing that people no longer need to perform "works of the law" even as he has a lot to say about what people should and should not do in terms of behavior.
4. It could lead to a more covenantal, and less individualistic, view of salvation.

### III. On the Distinction Between Judaism and Christianity

- A. Situation in the New Testament: a complicated situation on the ground.
  1. There were still Jews, people who never became part of the group that saw Jesus as the Messiah.
  2. There were Jews who saw Jesus as the Messiah and who also still believed in keeping practices like circumcision and kosher.
  3. There were Jews like Paul who saw the Jesus movement as in continuity with the history of Israel but were not convinced that practices like kosher and circumcision needed to be followed.
  4. There were Gentiles who followed Jesus who believed themselves to be entering into the Abrahamic covenant without adopting practices such as circumcision.
- B. There are different ways of thinking about when Jews and Christians "parted ways" (from Timothy Gabrielson).
  1. When there was mutual religious recognition or the point at which the two groups saw each other as mutually exclusive, meaning you could either be Jewish or you could be Christian.
  2. When religious interaction stopped (e.g. Christians stop going to synagogue or celebrating Jewish holidays).
  3. When social concourse or relations between Jews and Christians largely stopped.
  4. When people who were not Jews or Christians—Roman authorities, for example—thought of the two groups as different.
- C. Scholars increasingly agree that there was not just one moment in time when Judaism and Christianity became separate theologically, socially, pietistically, and politically.
- D. Some possible parts of those many processes:
  1. The expulsion of Christians from synagogues at the end of the first century.

a) A long line of scholarship that suggests that Jews leaders expelled people who worshipped Jesus from the synagogues and that this expulsion is the context for the Gospel of John and its often hostile statements about “the Jews.”

(1) Not everyone agrees that this happened or was so decisive.

2. Romans defining Judaism as a separate religion from Christianity.

a) The *Fiscus Judaicus*: after Rome destroyed the temple (70 AD) the emperor required that Jews, who before the temple’s destruction were supposed to send two drachma to the temple, send the same amount to Rome.

(1) Early on, some argue, the tax applied to anyone the Romans considered Jewish—which seemed to include non-practicing Jews and maybe included Gentile Christians.

(2) At the end of the first century, a new emperor clearly defined the tax as only applicable to Jews and based what constituted Judaism on religious practice.

(a) Thus, something identifiable as “Judaism” as distinct from “Christianity” was developing based not on ethnicity, but on religious practice. Now, note that this is a hypothesis.

3. Roman authorities identify Christians as separate group (111 AD)

a) Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor, wrote to the emperor Trajan, wondering what to do about the Christians, this new group that refused to worship the Roman gods.

b) Christians, in this letter, seem to be distinguished from the Jews whose refusal to worship the gods Rome tolerated.

c) Point in time where we know that Rome distinguished between Christians and Jews (although that could have happened earlier—we just lack clear evidence).

4. Inclusion of “Old Testament” as Christian scripture.

a) A response to people like Marcion who argued that the god of Israel and Israel’s scriptures was a vengeful, cruel god distinct from the God of Jesus Christ.

b) Bart Ehrmann's hypothesis: In addition to theological reasons for rejecting Marcion, there was a practical or apologetic one. By including the Hebrew Scriptures in their canon, Ehrmann suggests that Christians were emphasizing the ancient roots of their faith. Jesus's historical life might have been recent, but the prophecies about him and the community of which he was the culmination—those were very, very old.

(1) As Christians adopted the Old Testament, they also claimed that they, and not the Jews, understood it (differentiating themselves as true inheritors of the Hebrew scriptures).

#### IV. Conclusion

A. Many Christians name the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity in ways that are inaccurate and derogatory to Judaism.

1. There are real differences, but the differences were not between a religion that accepted grace and one that did not.

B. Judaism and Christianity emerged as different things over time.

C. How Christians name differences between Judaism and Christianity matters.

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## Glossary

**E.P. Sanders:** a modern biblical scholar who argued that first-century Jews did not believe that they earned their way into the covenant through “works righteousness,” but that they understood the covenant as a gracious gift.

***Fiscus Judaicus:*** a tax imposed on Jews by Rome after the destruction of the temple (c. 70 AD); some scholars suggest that originally it was levied on anyone the Romans considered Jewish, which might have included non-practicing Jews and perhaps even Christians, but eventually was levied only on those who engaged in Jewish practicing (marking a point where Rome saw Judaism as a religion marked by practices).

**Justin Martyr:** second-century Christian apologist who wrote *A Dialogue with Trypho*, a fictional discussion between Justin and a Jewish man.

**Marcion:** a second-century Christian theologian who argued that the God of Jesus was distinct from the God of the Hebrew Bible and that the Christian scriptures should not include the Hebrew Scripture or any New Testament writings. His proposed canon included some letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke (some argued it was an edited version). Marcion’s proposal led other Christians to make a case for including the Hebrew Scriptures and other writings in the emerging Christian canon.

**Pliny the Younger:** Roman governor whose letter to Emperor Trajan in 111 AD called out “the Christians” as a specific group.

**Works of the law:** A phrase Paul uses; many Christians have understood it to mean any work performed to “earn” God’s favor, but many contemporary scholars believe it means specific works such as keeping kosher and practicing circumcision meant to identify who was part of the Abrahamic covenant (by grace).