

Carly Hegarty

Professor Alma Heckman

His 74A: Middle Eastern and North African Jewish History

15 November 2020

### The Origins and Divisions of the Abrahamic Religions

Judaism is the oldest of the Abrahamic religions and both Christianity and Islam emerged from antecedent Jewish customs and religious traditions that were prominent across the Middle East throughout the medieval period. Christianity and Judaism have historically opposed one another; however, during the formative years of early Christian ideology the boundaries between these two faiths were not as definite as they appear currently. Rather, Christians in the first century CE grew to feel existentially threatened by the autonomy Jews initially possessed within the Roman Empire and, subsequently, employed extensive measures to distinguish their faith from that of whom they considered to be traitors. These circumstances profoundly differ from those that surround the development of early Islam, which primarily took place in what is today Saudi Arabia during the sixth and seventh centuries CE. The Prophet Muhammad, the foundational figure of Islam, fundamentally regarded Judaism as a legitimate, monotheistic faith that was deserving of political protection. Therefore, when the majority of the Jewish community came under Arab-Islamic control in the years following Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Jews were granted an inferior, yet secure, legal status that largely enabled them to practice peacefully while coexisting with the Muslim majority. Such disparities in the social and political climate of early Christianity and Islam illustrate that while both of these religions evolved from Jewish foundations, Christian rhetoric purposefully demonized the Jews as a tool of political alienation; whereas Muslims were overall more accepting of a religiously and culturally pluralistic empire.

Early Christianity primarily developed in the periods immediately before and after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, which, at the time, was the epicenter of Jewish religious, political, and cultural life (His 74A, Lecture #4). At a moment in which the foundations of Judaism were crumbling, Christian teachings emerged as an alternative school of religious and cultural thought. Many of the people that are now considered to be prominent figures in Christianity, including Jesus himself, were in fact Jewish, which is a testament to how the emergence of Christianity was very much contextually situated within a pre-existing Jewish framework. The last supper has also been historically identified as a Passover meal, which is a Jewish celebration of Hebrew liberation from centuries of slavery in Egypt (Efron, et al. 114). Furthermore, Saint Paul, one of Jesus's earliest and most influential interpreters, put forth the notion that salvation depended on faith in Christ, rather than adherence to the laws of Moses (Efron, et al. 110). Due to the fact that there are no historical documents written by Jesus himself, Saint Paul's writings constitute the majority of contemporary knowledge on Jesus and his earliest teachings, which have been dated between 27 and 29 CE (Efron, et al. 111). Additionally, Jesus's role as a messiah was believed by Christians to occur in two stages, the first of which being his birth and eventual crucifixion and the second being his coming on the Day of Judgement, or the moment in which all living mortals would be judged by God on whether they were fit to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (His 74A, Lecture #5). Christian messianic literature bears many similarities to early rabbinic Judaism in that both Christian and Jewish eschatological thought, or the respective beliefs concerning the final destiny of the soul and humankind, believe that the Day of Reckoning may be violent (Efron, et al. 115). The origins of the eventual separation between Christianity and Judaism have historically been traced back to Saint Paul's

interpretations of Jesus's preachings; however, early Christian thought was largely compatible with Judaism.

Despite the various parallels between Christian and Jewish ideology, many of Jesus's early followers were fixated on differentiating themselves and their beliefs from Judaism, which was the dominant religion across the Middle East in the first centuries CE. According to Saint Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus signified a radical transformation in people's relationship to God (His 74A, Lecture #4). He believed that Jesus was a divine messiah who was sent by God to extend salvation to all of humanity, which effectively enabled early Christians to bypass all Jewish laws in order to assert their faith in Christ (Efron, et al. 111). Although Saint Paul saw these changes as occurring within Judaism and did not foresee a complete religious conversion, early Christians made extensive efforts to distinguish their behavioral practices from that of the Jews. For example, Christian theology changed the day of the Sabbath, or a designated day of religious observance and abstention from work, from Saturday, as recognized in the Jewish tradition, to Sunday (His 74A, Lecture #4). These measures were largely rooted in the Christian belief that the Jews were responsible for Jesus's death as Judas, one of Jesus's twelve disciples, was Jewish and betrayed Jesus by informing Roman authorities of his whereabouts (Efron, et al. 117). Early Christian authorities demonized Judaism in their religious and political rhetoric in an effort to establish themselves and their culture as distinctly pure and holy (His 74A, Lecture #5). The Jewish rejection of Jesus as the son of God was weaponized against them by Christian forces in a calculated effort to label all Jews as sacrilegious traitors.

Christian hostility towards the Jewish community was primarily a way of separating this emerging religious tradition from the pre-existing one; however, these Judeophobic sentiments did not profoundly threaten the Jews until the rise of Emperor Constantine in the Roman Empire.

Prior to Constantine's assumption of power, Judaism remained a legitimate religion according to Roman law and thus received protection from the state (His 74A, Lecture #4). Early Christians, however, were not granted this same degree of legal protection until Constantine converted the Roman Empire to Christianity in 312 CE, at which point the Church became a legally protected institution and this religion spread rapidly across the regions controlled by Roman forces (His 74A, Lecture #4). The primary reason why Judaism was not entirely extinguished during this period was the theologian and philosopher St. Augustine, who believed that the Jewish minority should remain to serve as a reminder of the barrenness of Jewish culture and tradition and, simultaneously, underscore the authority of both Emperor Constantine and Christianity (His 74A, Lecture #5). Although many individuals practiced elements of both Judaism and Christianity during this transitory period, Roman officials asserted that one could not worship at the church and the synagogue (Efron, et al. 118). Such measures reinforced the subordinate position of the Jewish community that endured for centuries and continued to strengthen as Christianity rose to political and cultural prominence through subsequent regimes in the Middle East and Europe.

Contrastingly, early Islam largely developed and grew in popularity alongside, rather than in competition, with the Jewish traditions that continued to dominate the religious and cultural context of the Middle East during the 6th and 7th centuries CE. The Prophet Muhammad, who was born in 571 CE, is believed in the Islamic faith to have been divinely visited by the archangel Gabriel who delivered him the first in a series of messages or revelations that would eventually constitute the Qur'an, or the sacred text of Islam (His 74A, Lecture #5). He began to preach these monotheistic teachings publicly, as instructed by Allah, in approximately 613 CE in Mecca, what is today Saudi Arabia, at which point he likely came into

contact with Judaism through the Jewish merchants who frequently traveled across the Arabian Peninsula (Cohen 59). However, Muhammad was soon persecuted by the ruling elite in Mecca as his monotheistic teachings represented a threat to the nobility's polytheistic beliefs (His 74A, Lecture #5). He and his followers migrated to Medina in 622 CE, a journey now known as the Hijra, which effectively indicated the emergence of Islam as a formidable, independent political and religious entity (Newby 49). A highly consequential aspect of Muhammad's teachings for the Jews was his assertion that there was to be no compulsion in religion (His 74A, Lecture #5). This fundamental component of Islam existed from the religion's origins and indicated an acceptance of pluralism that was entirely missing from early Christianity. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Islam had become widespread across the Arabian Peninsula and the Muslim conquests that ensued across the Middle East and North Africa not only marked the beginning of centuries of Jewish subordination to Islamic rule, but also the start of Judeo-Arabic relations that would allow for Jewish culture and scholarship to flourish without sacrificing their religiosity.

Although Jews did occupy an inferior social and political position within the Muslim hierarchy, their sovereignty as a religious minority was legally protected due to the dhimma system. According to the Qur'an, forced religious conversion was prohibited and thus, Arab forces mandated the Jewish communities within their domain to pay taxes to the Muslim state in exchange for relative religious autonomy (Cohen 64). Jews were awarded dhimmi or "protected" status in Islamdom because they were also devout monotheists and thus, Judaism was recognized by Muhammad and subsequent Islamic regimes as a legitimate faith and received political and legal protection as a result (Stillman 39). This sustained feeling of security enabled Jewish immersion into the Arab-Islamic culture during the Middle Ages, which manifested in a number

of ways including the development of Judeo-Arabic literature and other collaborative forms of scholarship (Cohen 67). Most notably, Judaism and Islam contained several foundational similarities that serve to highlight how these two religions, while distinct, were not competing with one another and could, for the most part, coexist. Both of these faiths placed adherence to religious law and ritual purity at the utmost importance and followed strict behavioral guidelines, including dietary restrictions, in order to remain pure in the eyes of God (Newby 42).

Furthermore, the Five Pillars of Islam, which are the core practices and beliefs in the Muslim faith, possess striking similarities to the foundational principles of Judaism, including ritualistic fasting on certain occasions and the emphasis on prayer as the primary way to communicate with the divine (His 74A, Lecture #5). The similarities between early Islamic faith and Judaism reflect the contextual overlap of these two religions, but also serve to highlight how the pluralism of Muslim ideology allowed Muhammad's followers to perceive the Jews as an authorized, protected minority, rather than as inherently threatening to their dominion.

This deeply complex and nuanced time period is extremely difficult to generalize and thus, it is vital to avoid broad oversimplifications about how the Jewish community was treated by Islamic and Christian empires during the Middle Ages, respectively. With that being said, the Jewish community has undergone and withstood numerous regime changes that have explicitly or implicitly threatened their religious traditions. In regards to Christianity, the Jewish tradition was perceived by Jesus's earliest followers to undermine the authority of their beliefs and of Christ himself and the potentially dangerous implications of these notions were largely emphasized by Emperor Constantine and the Roman Empire. This fueled hateful Judeophobic sentiments in Christendom and heavily contributed to the marginalization of Jews in Christian society. The Islamic empires that rose to power during the medieval period, contrastingly,

featured a pluralism that, with some notable exceptions, allowed for the rise of Islam without infringing upon Judaism as a religious and cultural entity. Both Christianity and Islam have undeniable origins in Jewish tradition, but the disparate ways in which these faiths developed demonstrate the differing political agendas that informed how the Jewish minority was regarded.