

“The Lord is One”

How Christianity Separated from Judaism

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Slide 1

1. Last month, we saw how Buddhism separated from its Hindu roots because of different conceptions of the divine.
2. Today, we will see how Christianity separated from its Jewish roots because of different conceptions of the divine.

Slide 2

1. It is common for Christians to assume that what Christians call the “Old Testament” presents only a single image of God.
2. But, as one author recently wrote: **“If you read the Hebrew Bible carefully, it tells the story of a god in evolution, a god whose character changes radically from beginning to end.”** Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 101.
3. The earliest Hebrew view of God was similar to that of the Canaanites, who worshipped nature gods such as Ba’al, El and Asherah.
4. These gods were in the forces of nature, had human characteristics and mated with other gods to produce divine offspring.
5. For example, *Psalm 29* says that Yahweh **“will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire,”** an image of God suggesting the Canaanite views of Ba’al. *Psalms 29:6*.

Slide 3

1. In the ninth century B.C., the Hebrew prophet Elijah escaped from Queen Jezebel, who had restored worship of the nature gods of the Canaanites.
2. He came to the Mountain where Moses had met Yahweh in the burning bush.
3. Yahweh, translated as “LORD” in most English Bibles, appeared to Elijah near this area, called “Elijah’s Spring”.

Slide 4

- 1 **“Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind, there**

was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire.” *1 Kings* 19:11 – 12.

2. The image of Yahweh had changed.
3. **“Unlike the pagan deities, Yahweh was not in any of the forces of nature but in a realm apart.”** Armstrong, *A History of God* at 27.
4. Most Jews would never again accept the idea that Yahweh could have offspring.

Slide 5

1. Most scholars believe the conclusion that Yahweh was the only God came later in Jewish history.
2. **“[B]efore Israelite religion denied the existence of all gods other than Yahweh it went through a phase of granting their existence but condemning their worship (by Israelites, at least).”** Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 105.
3. For example, after escaping the Egyptians, Moses and the Israelites sang: **“Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?”** *Exodus* 15:11.

Slide 6

1. In 586 BC, Babylon conquered the southern Kingdom of Judah and destroyed Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem.
2. The most important inhabitants, including prophets, were taken to Babylon.
3. The Jews attributed their plight to an incorrect understanding of God.
4. While in exile, an unnamed prophet usually called “Second Isaiah” wrote: **“I am the LORD and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.”** *Isaiah* 45:5.
5. This teaching **“gave voice to the monotheistic ideal that Yahweh was the only deity in the cosmos.”** Smith, *The Early History of God* at 191.
6. As one author noted: **“The chastisement of the exile largely cured the Jews of the problem of idolatry. *** [T]he emphasis upon monotheism was one of the characteristics of Jewish belief. This was underscored in the daily recitation of the Shema.”** Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* at 538.

Slide 7

1. The *Shema*, which means “hear,” is the Jewish trumpet call to monotheism -- **“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”** *Deuteronomy* 6:4.

2. So important is this understanding of God that these young men in Jerusalem have a copy of the *Shema* in a box on their heads and on their arms so it is near their hearts. See *Deuteronomy* 6:6.

Slide 8

1. After the return of the Jews from Babylon, their land was conquered by the Greeks and, after a brief period of freedom under the Maccabees, by the Romans in 63 BC.
2. Looking at the writings of their prophets, Jews increasingly **“expected the prophesied messiah of the Hebrew Bible to be a human prophet with the temporal role of evicting the Roman occupiers.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 165.
3. Many first century Jews believed the Messiah would establish the Kingdom of God on earth and at that time all the righteous dead would be physically resurrected to join that kingdom. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* at 135.

Slide 9

1. In about 26 AD, Jesus began preaching about the coming Kingdom of God in synagogues and hill sides on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.
2. These ruins in Capernaum are over one synagogue where Jesus preached.
4. Based on his message and his miracles, **“many Jews in Palestine had believed that he was the Messiah.”** Armstrong, *A History of God* at 79.
5. Among Jesus’ teachings was that the *Shema*, proclaiming **“the Lord is one,”** was the most important of God’s commandments. *Mark* 12:29.
6. Ironically, this commandment was one of the main reasons Christianity eventually separated from its Jewish origins.

Slide 10

1. The *Book of Zechariah* predicts that the Messiah will arrive, **“righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** *Zechariah* 9:9.
2. So, when Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives on a donkey, residents of Jerusalem put branches in His path recognizing him as the Messiah, shouting for the **“coming kingdom of our father David.”** *Mark* 11:10.

Slide 11

1. Shortly after the so-called “triumphal entry,” Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem and his followers went into hiding.

2. As Karen Armstrong writes: **“That should have been the end of the matter.”** Armstrong, *Jerusalem* at 144.
3. As the Bible itself reports, at least two other recent Messianic Jewish movements had failed when their leader was killed. *Acts* 5:34-40.

Slide 12

1. But the Jesus movement did not die.
2. The tomb of Jesus was empty on Sunday morning and Jesus then appeared to his disciples. *Matthew* 28:16-17.
3. **“[T]he resurrection awoke the dejected disciples to the truth that Jesus was in fact the Messiah.”** Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* at 108.
4. Peter and Jesus’ other disciples began preaching that **“God has raised Jesus to life.”** *Acts* 2:5, 32.
5. They saw his resurrection as evidence that the end-time and the resurrection of the dead would soon occur. Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 100.

Slide 13

1. It is common in churches today to say that the Jews rejected the resurrected Jesus as the Messiah.
2. That claim ignores what the Bible says.
3. Just after Pentecost, Peter said: **“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. * * * Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”** *Acts* 2:14-15, 41.

Slide 14

1. As one author writes: **“[T]he primitive Christian community in Jerusalem was composed primarily of, and administered by, converted Jews who retained a deep attachment to Jewish religious customs such as Sabbath-keeping. . . . Mary Magdalene, Peter and James, and the first generation of Jews who affirmed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and believed in his resurrection claimed to remain Jews faithful to the Torah and [Jewish law].”** Shanks, *Partings* at 257, 283.
2. So, as the Bible reports, **“[e]very day [the followers of Jesus] continued to meet together in the temple courts.”** *Acts* 2:46.

Slide 15

1. Many scholars believe these earliest Jewish followers **“believed Jesus was a human prophet, not a god, born of human parents.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 164.
2. Their beliefs were maintained by second century Christians called “Ebionites” who claimed a **“fundamental and ongoing continuity with Jesus and the apostles.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 192.
3. **“[The Ebionites] regarded [Jesus] as plain and ordinary, a man esteemed as righteous through growth of character and nothing more, the child of a normal union between a man and Mary.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 90.
4. They believed God had “adopted” Jesus to be the Messiah at the time of his baptism by John. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* at 156.

Slide 16

1. The idea that the early Jewish followers of Jesus could believe he was the Messiah but was not divine seems strange to Christians today, who believe “Messiah” and “Son of God” were synonymous to first century Jews as they are to most Christians today.
2. As N.T. Wright, a retired Anglican bishop, says: **“That is simply not the case.”** Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* at 107.
3. Karen Armstrong, a former nun, has written: **“By the time of Jesus’ death in about 30, the Jews were passionate monotheists, so nobody expected the Messiah to be a divine figure: he would simply be an ordinary, if privileged, human being Nobody since the return from Babylon had imagined that Yahweh actually had a son, like the abominable deities of the *goyim*.”** Armstrong, *A History of God* at 80.

Slide 17

1. The beliefs of these early Jewish followers of Jesus obviously **“differ markedly from the tradition of contemporary Christianity, which derives from Paul.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 99.
2. Paul, who claimed he was a Pharisee, was born as Saul in Tarsus in what is now Turkey. *Acts* 23:6.
3. According to the *Book of Acts*, Saul went to Damascus to find Jewish followers of Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. *Acts* 9:1-2.
4. While on the road to Damascus, a light blinded Saul and he fell to the ground, as imagined by this statue in Damascus. *Acts* 9:3-4.

Slide 18

1. Saul had a **“visionary experience of the resurrected Jesus.”** White, *From Jesus to Christianity* at 155; *Acts* 9:3–6; *1 Corinthians* 15:8.
2. He later went out of his way to point out that he learned about Jesus only from these revelations, writing in his letter to the Galatians: **“I did not receive [the gospel that I preached] from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”** *Galatians* 1:12.

Slide 19

1. Convinced Jesus would soon return and usher in the resurrection of the dead, Saul assumed the name Paul and began seeking followers of Jesus in the synagogues scattered around the Roman Empire.
2. It is not clear how much success Paul had among the Jews in the synagogues. *Compare Acts* 13:46 with *Acts* 14:1.
3. But his **“message resonated with one particular constituency found within Hellenistic synagogues, the ‘God-fearers.’”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 112.
4. **“The God-fearers were Gentiles who liked the ethics and monotheistic beliefs of Judaism. They valued its antiquity.”** *Id.* at 112.

Slide 20

1. The God-fearers would not become Jews because **“[circumcision] was a nonnegotiable requirement of the Torah, going back to the time of Abraham”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 112.
2. Believing that faith in Jesus made following Jewish Law superfluous, Paul began preaching that followers of Jesus did not need to follow the Law of Moses, at least with respect to circumcision. *Galatians* 3:25.

Slide 21

1. Upon learning that Paul was seeking followers among uncircumcised Gentiles, James, the brother of Jesus who was the Bishop of Jerusalem, sent a delegation to Antioch, where Paul was preaching. *Galatians* 2:12.
2. The delegates said: **“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”** *Acts* 15:1.
3. Paul called the emissaries from James the **“circumcision group”** (*Galatians* 2:12) and said: **“As for those agitators [preaching circumcision], I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves”** (*Galatians* 5:12).

4. What the *Book of Acts* characterizes as a “**sharp dispute**” eventually led to a conference in Jerusalem in about 49 A.D. attended by both Paul and James. *Acts* 15:2.
5. According to the account in *Acts*, Paul spoke about the success that he had had among the Gentiles. *Acts* 15:12.
6. Others, described as “**the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees,**” argued that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses before they could become followers of Jesus. *Acts* 15:5.

Slide 22

1. After hearing from both sides, James, as leader of the early church, announced his decision: “**It is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.**” *Acts* 15:19.
2. James then announced that a letter would be written, stating that non-Jewish followers of Jesus could follow a much shortened list of laws, called the “Noahide Laws” because of their association with Noah, that did not include circumcision. *Acts* 15:20, 29.
3. A recent author says that the letter ordered by James “**is effectively the founding document of Western civilization**” because it allowed Christianity to spread to Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 98.
4. The letter also began the formal separation of Christianity from Judaism.
5. As one author writes: “**The origins of Christianity might still be almost Jewish, but without the Mosaic law it was no longer a Jewish religion.**” Moynahan, *The Faith* at 27.

Slide 23

1. After Paul became free to seek followers from non-Jews, his letters more and more focused on Jesus as the incarnation of God, which some scholars believe drew upon teachings of “**the Roman mystery religions familiar from his youth growing up in the Diaspora.**” Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 111.
2. For example, in his letter to the Romans written in about 55 A.D., Paul says: “**For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.**” *Romans* 8:3.
3. An explicit statement that Jesus is the incarnation of God is found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, likely written in about 62 A.D., in which he quotes from an early hymn describing Jesus as “**being in very nature God . . . [a]nd being found in appearance as a man.**” *Philippians* 2:6, 8.

Slide 24

1. Paul's claim that **"God took the form of a human being in Christ is contrary to Jewish beliefs. To the Jew, God has no human form and no human being has been or ever can be the incarnation of God."** Trepp, *A History of the Jewish Experience* at 100.
2. The Jewish idea that God cannot be seen in human terms goes back at least to the exile teachings of Second Isaiah: **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."** *Isaiah* 55:8.
3. It is one of the most fundamental Jewish beliefs, today and in the first century.
4. Consequently, **"Paul's teaching spelled the end of any Jesus-based religion that could still claim to be 'Jewish.'"** Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* at 93.

Slide 25

1. In 65 A.D., after the deaths of James and Paul, it would still have been possible to imagine that followers of Jesus could continue to exist among both Jews and Gentiles.
2. Both groups would believe Jesus was a resurrected Messiah, but have different views on the importance of following Jewish Law and in the divinity of Jesus. *See Shelley, Church History in Plain Language* at 22.
3. But events soon eliminated that possibility.
4. In 66 AD, a minor disturbance got out of hand in Caesarea Maritima, built by Herod the Great along the Mediterranean coast.
5. The riot spread to Jerusalem, where Zealots, violently opposed to Roman authority, took up the fight.
6. Hearing of what became known as the First Jewish Revolt, Emperor Nero sent 60,000 troops to the area to put it down.

Slide 26

1. In 70 AD, after a long siege, Roman troops broke down the walls of Jerusalem and entered the city.
2. Josephus reports that there were a total of 1.1 million casualties from the First Jewish Revolt, most of them Jewish. Josephus, *The Jewish War* Bk. 6, Ch. 9.

Slide 27

1. The Temple was completely destroyed.
2. This relief on the arch of Titus, the commanding general, shows the soldiers parading through Rome with the golden menorah taken from the Temple.

3. The fall of Jerusalem was another **“early signal of distinction of one [Jewish] entity from the other.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 73.

Slide 28

1. *Mark* quotes Jesus as predicting the destruction of the Temple and encouraging his followers to **“flee to the mountains”** when they saw impending destruction of the city. *Mark* 13:2, 14.
2. Eusebius reported that **“those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem”** to Pella across the Jordan River **“before the war began.”** Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 68.
3. **“Pious Jews considered the Christian flight an act of treason, and it sealed the fate of the church in the Jewish world.”** Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language* at 23.

Slide 29

1. For their part, Christians claimed that God had destroyed Jerusalem because not everyone had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. *Id.* at 69.
2. That idea is attributed to Jesus in a unique and often-overlooked passage in *Luke*, in which Jesus weeps during his triumphal journey while contemplating the siege and destruction of Jerusalem because **“you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”** *Luke* 19:44.
3. The church of *Dominus Flevit* memorializes that event.

Slide 30

1. Although many Christians today see the four Gospels as reflecting consistent and simultaneous views of Jesus as the divine Son of God, **“[t]he development of Christian belief in the Incarnation was a gradual, complex process.”** Armstrong, *A History of God* at 81.
2. As the Gospel writers more and more came to understand and describe Jesus as the divine Son of God, their teachings became **“more and more unacceptable to [Jewish] belief in God as one (the Shema).”** Shanks, *Partings* at 31.

Slide 31

1. *Mark*, the first Gospel, was likely written just before the final destruction of Jerusalem.
2. As Karen Armstrong writes: **“Mark’s Gospel . . . presents Jesus as a perfectly normal man, with a family that included brothers and sisters. No angels announced**

his birth or sang over his crib. He had not been marked out during his infancy or adolescence as remarkable in any way.” Armstrong, *A History of God* at 80.

3.. Although Bibles today include the phrase **“Jesus Christ, the Son of God”** in *Mark* 1:1, the earliest known manuscripts do not include **“the Son of God.”** <http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?book=34>

Slide 32

1. In *Mark*, the story of Jesus begins with his baptism: **“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”** *Mark* 1:9-11.

2. There is no suggestion that anyone but John and Jesus were present and God’s remarks were directed to Jesus.

Slide 33

1. The first part of the statement was identical to God’s adoption of a non-divine Davidic king by proclaiming on the day of his anointment: **“You are my son; today I have begotten you.”** *Psalms* 2:7.

2. *Mark’s* account supported the view of early Jewish followers of Jesus that God had “adopted” Jesus as the Messiah, the “anointed one,” upon the day of his baptism. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* at 156.

Slide 34

1. Most scholars today believe that *Matthew* was the second Gospel, written for a community of Jewish Christians in about 80 AD.

2. It incorporated large sections from *Mark*, but adds, among other things, the statement that Mary, a virgin, had conceived Jesus **“through the Holy Spirit.”** *Matthew* 2:18-22.

3. For *Matthew*, because of this divine birth Jesus was already the Son of God at the time of his baptism.

4. So unlike *Mark*, *Matthew* suggests that John, who was not considered divine, was reluctant to baptize Jesus. *Matthew* 3:14.

5. *Matthew* also subtly changed *Mark’s* account of what God said upon Jesus’s baptism: **“This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** *Matthew* 3:16-17.

6. Since *Matthew* understood that Jesus was born divine, God now spoke in the third person to an assumed crowd and not to Jesus in the language of adoption from *Psalms*.
7. As a result, the devil then knew that Jesus was the **“Son of God”** in *Matthew*’s account of the temptation of Jesus, something entirely missing in *Mark*. *Matthew* 4:3, 6.

Slide 35

1. *Luke* was the third Gospel, written for a Gentile audience between 80 and 90 AD.
2. *Luke*, like *Matthew*, makes extensive use of *Mark*.
3. Like *Matthew*, *Luke* states that Jesus was conceived by a virgin, but adds that Jesus would be called the **“Son of God”** because the Holy Spirit will **“come upon”** and **“overshadow”** Mary, language that scholars have long suggested has a sexual connotation. *Luke* 1:35.
4. Reflecting his view of Jesus’ divinity from the time of conception, the author of *Luke* modified the words of *Mark* about the baptism of Jesus: **“Herod locked John up in prison. When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the holy spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”** *Luke* 3:20-22.
5. The statement about the baptism of Jesus is now **after** the statement that John the Baptist has been put in prison and the text says nothing about water or the Jordan River.
6. The text suggests this old picture, in which Jesus is apparently being baptized not by John but by the Holy Spirit.

Slide 36

1. There is general agreement that *John* was the fourth Gospel, written in about 90-100 AD.
2. *John* includes these famous opening lines: **“In the beginning was Logos (the Word), and Logos (the Word) was with God, and Logos (the Word) was God. . . . Logos (the Word) became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”** *John* 1:1, 14.
3. In this formulation, Jesus is not just the Son of God from the time of his conception - he *is* God and has existed forever.
4. Because *John* reported that Jesus had always been God, there was no need for him to report that Jesus was even baptized, so the statement in *John* about the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus as a dove says nothing about Jesus being baptized by anyone. *John* 1:32-34.

5. The explicit claim in *John* that Jesus is God was fundamentally inconsistent with the beliefs of Jewish Christians and **“a threat to the unity of God, to the fundamental Jewish creed (*Shema*) that God is one.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 49.

Slide 37

1. Some scholars believe that the message **“the Gospel of John conveyed is that all Jews are evil, opposing God’s Son, the Christian Jesus.”** Wilson, *How Jesus Became Christian* at 233.

2. For example, *John* quotes Jesus as calling Jews children of the devil. *John* 8:44.

3. It is not entirely clear why the author of *John* quoted Jesus as calling Jews the children of the devil when the earlier gospels had not.

4. However, one clue is found in *John’s* statement that **“the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.”** *John* 9:22.

5. Obviously this statement is **“evidence that there must have been Judeo-Christians still worshipping in the synagogues on the Sabbath even after the fall of Jerusalem.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 257.

Slide 38

1. In about 85 AD, in an apparent effort to unify the Jews, no longer bound together by the Temple, an important rabbi named Gamaliel II introduced a so-called “test benediction” for recitation in the synagogues: **“For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the Nazarenes [Christians] and the *minim* [heretics] perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed.”** Barrett, *The New Testament Background* at 210 – 211.

2. The word “*minim*” included Jewish Christians. *Id.*

3. The requirement that Jewish Christians repeat this anti-Christian benediction **“effectively excommunicated Christians from the synagogues and formalized the break between the two faiths.”** Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* at 491.

4. Exactly who first excommunicated whom can be debated, but the result was unmistakable.

5. **“Any Jew who wished to remain faithful to his religion could not also be a Christian. The new faith had become and would remain a gentile movement.”** Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language* at 23.

6. Although pockets of Jewish Christians continued to exist and, in fact, still exist today, Christianity and Judaism were now separate religions, with dramatically different images of the divine.
7. And, as time went by, even the Jewish nature of Jesus was forgotten.
8. As one author says: **“To the Christian disciples of the first century, the conception of Jesus as a rabbi was self-evident, to the Christian disciples of the second century it was embarrassing, to the Christian disciples of the third century and beyond it was obscure.”** Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* at 17.

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