

Section 2

What is Judaism?

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE INQUIRY

1. What are the various beliefs of the five major world religions?
2. How does geography play a role in the development and spread of religion?
3. What effect does religion have on economic, political, and social institutions?
4. What effect does religion have on art, language, and literature?

TERMS, PLACES, PEOPLE

Torah
Judaism
Exodus
Rabbi
Sabbath

In this section you will learn about the religion of **Judaism**. You will discover what the central teachings of Judaism are and how the faith has continued today. Judaism is described as a religion, a culture, and a nation. All these descriptions have some validity to them depending on the context you are speaking of. In truth, the Jewish people, those who follow Judaism, are best described as an extended family.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western_wall_jerusalem_night.jpg

It has been said that an estimated one-third of Western Civilization has been influenced in one way by Jewish ancestry. The evidence is found in the names we choose for our children. For example: Adam, Noah, David, Isaac, Rebecca, and Sarah are all names with their roots in the ancient texts of Judaism. Some of our laws today have roots in Jewish law from thousands of years ago. The influence of Judaism also extends far beyond our western cultures; both Christianity and Islam find their belief systems holding strong ties to the extended history of Judaism.

History of the Israelites

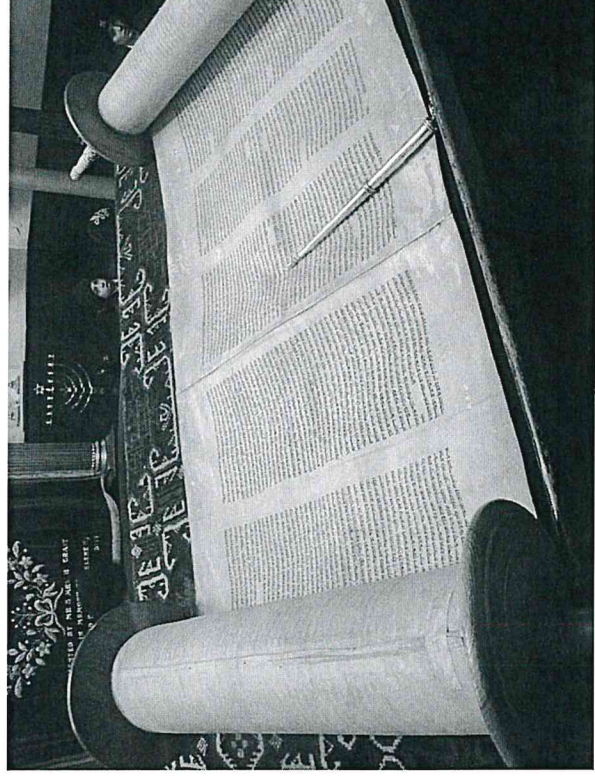
The history of Judaism is the history of the Jewish people. Jewish civilization developed over time, beginning around 1950 BCE and continuing on today. This group, sometimes referred to as Israelites in ancient texts and as Hebrews in others, originally lived in Mesopotamia. Around 1950 BCE they migrated to Canaan, a strip of land that runs along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Much of the information historians have on the origins of Judaism and the history of the Jewish people comes from many artifacts and writings.

The **Torah** is an example of one such source. The Torah is Judaism's most sacred text,

consisting of the first five books of the Jewish Bible. The Torah tells the history of the Jewish people and outlines the laws and guidelines for their society. According to the Torah, a man by the name of Abraham lived in Mesopotamia. In 1950 BCE, Abraham moved his family to Canaan, where the Israelites began to herd cattle, primarily sheep and goats.

Around 1800 BCE the Jewish people were forced from Canaan due to a famine. In hopes of surviving, they were forced to settle in Egypt. For a time, they found success in Egypt, but eventually were seen as a threat and enslaved by the Egyptian pharaoh. Eventually, the Jewish people were led to freedom by one of their most influential leaders, Moses. The Torah refers to this as the



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exodus. The exodus is the event that marked the escape of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt.

The Torah says for the next 40 years the Jewish people traveled in the Sinai Peninsula, until they were able to once again settle in Canaan. After a period of living mostly as separate city-states and smaller political groups, the Jewish people were able to establish their own kingdom of Israel in their homeland of Canaan around 1000 BCE. The kingdom of Israel was ruled by many kings, most notable are King David and his son King Solomon. With the passing of King Solomon, the kingdom divided into two kingdoms, Judah in the south and Israel in the north

Important Jewish Leaders (Abraham, Moses, David)

The history of Judaism reaches far back into ancient times. With so much history, you can see there are many important leaders in Jewish history. It is important, however, to identify three who stand out as most significant for our understanding of Judaism. They are Abraham, Moses, and David.

Abraham- According to the Torah, God spoke to Abraham first, telling him to take his family and move to the land of Canaan, an area referred to as Palestine today. God promised Abraham that, if he followed his directions, he would become the father of great nations and that they would be blessed. Abraham took his family and moved out of Mesopotamia and into Canaan. This is the reason Abraham is called the Father of the Jewish people.

At this time, most people followed religious beliefs that worshiped many gods and goddesses. According to the Torah, Abraham introduced the belief in a single God to the region. The belief in only one God, monotheism, is a central idea in Judaism.

Moses- Moses is widely believed to be the greatest leader in the history of the Jewish people. According to the Torah, Moses was born into slavery in Egypt but would eventually rise to a position of power and lead the Jewish people out of slavery and out of Egypt. Moses told the people that God had sent him to lead them back to Canaan, the “promised land” where Abraham had lived centuries earlier. God directed Moses that if, the Hebrews faithfully followed and showed obedience, they would be given this “promised land.” Once they were able to escape from Egypt, they lived in the Sinai Peninsula for decades before finally returning to Canaan.

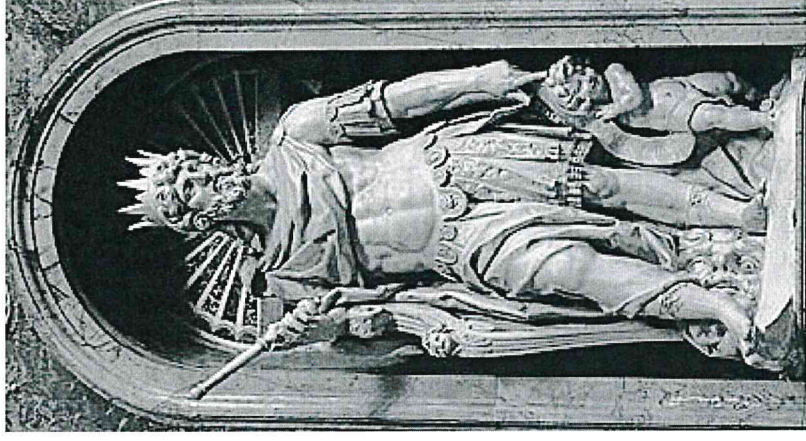
Moses not only serves as a great leader, the person who confronted the Egyptian pharaoh and led the Jewish people out of slavery, but he was one who had the largest influence on the fundamental teachings of the religion. According to the Torah, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments or laws that the people were to follow. These teachings became the foundation of Judaism.

David- Once the Jewish people were able to move back into Canaan, they established a single united kingdom known as Israel after a long period of instability. Once united, Israel’s first King,

Saul, was appointed. While he brought some stability and unity to the Jewish people living in Canaan, his rule proved to be unpopular and a new King, David, was appointed during a period of civil war and attacks from surrounding city-states. David became King approximately 1000 BCE.

King David brought structure to Israel. David's reign is often looked back on as a golden era in the history of the Jewish people. He established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel as well as a holy city. A temple would be built there by David's successor that was seen as the center of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people.

David established a strong central government with a strong army, courts, and officials. As King, David defeated many enemies of Israel and brought a measure of security to the Jewish state. Because of the leadership of David, Jerusalem is still seen



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as the most holy city to the Jews, as well as a symbol of their faith.

Exile and Rule by Foreign Powers

During the time of Diaspora, the Jewish people would be under the rule of a number of different nations. While in Babylon, the Babylonian empire held many Jewish people captive. In 539 BCE the Persians overthrew the Babylonians. At this point, the Persian king ended the exile and allowed some Jewish people to return to Judah and rebuild their temple. From that point on, the Jewish people would be mostly ruled by the conquering empires you read about in the previous chapter. Following the Persians, the Greeks took control and ruled over the Jewish people for many years. Finally around 170 BCE the Jewish people were able to force the Greeks from Jerusalem. At this time they reclaimed their temple. Today Jewish People celebrate Hanukkah to honor this victory.

The Jewish people in Palestine were able to live as an independent nation for almost 80 years after the war with the Greeks. Then in 63 BCE the Roman Empire took control of the area they called Judea (Judah). Under Roman rule, the Jewish people were treated harshly in an attempt to prevent any acts of rebellion. For about 200 years, the Jewish people were under Roman control. After many attempts to gain their independence, a final Jewish revolt was put down in 135 CE. The Romans took control of Jerusalem and banned all Jewish people from entering.

Although many were able to remain, most were spread throughout the world. They did, however, adapt and keep many cultural traditions and core religious beliefs alive. Many continued to look at Jerusalem as the center of their religious life. It won't be until 1948 CE that the Jewish state of Israel will be created and the Jewish people are able to return to their ancient homeland.

Central Teachings

The most important Jewish text is the Torah. This instructs the Jewish people how to lead a moral life. The Torah is how God teaches morality (a standard of right and wrong) to Jewish followers. Many of these laws and teachings are found in the ten Commandments, some of the oldest laws and teachings in Judaism. According to the Torah, the ten Commandments were given to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai in the transition period between slavery in Egypt and conquering the land of Canaan. Some of these

commandments list the duties that the Jewish people have towards God. "You shall have no other God" is an example of these duties, reminding them that they are only to worship one God and practice monotheism. Other commandments list out the moral teachings (concepts of right and wrong) for interacting with others. For example, "You shall not commit murder." Other commandments speak of how to treat others and forbid stealing and lying.

In addition to the ten commandments found in the Torah and the other teachings of the Torah, the Talmud is very important to Jewish life. The Talmud is a collection of written text versions of the Jewish oral law and commentaries of that law. The Talmud originates from the 2nd century CE. This holy book guides Jewish believers in the interpretation of the laws and teaching found in the Torah and other sacred writings.

Worship

The Jewish place of worship is called a synagogue and there were many established all over the world as Jewish communities survived and grew in the various places they settled after the Diaspora. The synagogue is a place of worship and study. Many times it also serves as a community center. The religious leader in the Jewish faith is known as a



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Rabbi. The rabbi is not a priest. They are simply a teacher, a person who is educated in Jewish law and tradition. They are charged with instructing the community and to answer questions. Rabbi have also taken over the spiritual leadership within the Jewish community. In Judaism, any adult who is sufficiently educated can lead a religious service. It is not unusual for a service to be conducted without a rabbi or for other members of the community to lead the service even when a rabbi is there.

Services are mostly conducted in Hebrew, however, some will mix Hebrew with the local language, including English. Songs are sung without music added, many times in Hebrew as well. Everyone, with the exception of unmarried women, wear a type of “hat” in the synagogue in order to show reverence to God. The most common “hat” is called a yarmulke (yamaka). Many times adult men will often wear a Tallit, or prayer shawl, as well.

Holidays and Celebrations

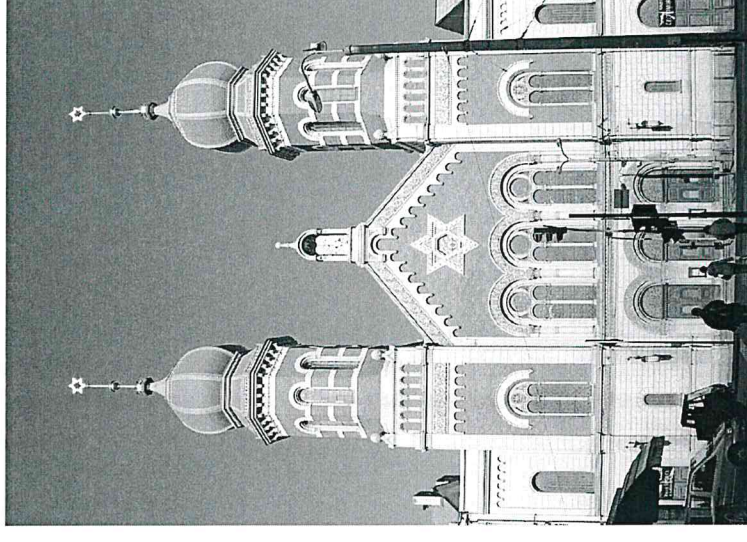
Along with many holidays and celebrations, Jewish people also keep a holy day each week. This day is called the **Sabbath** or Shabbat. The Sabbath occurs on Saturday. It is a holy day where work is forbidden. The Sabbath begins at nightfall on Friday and lasts until nightfall on Saturday. God commanded the Jewish people to observe the Sabbath and to keep it holy as the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath is part of the Covenant, or binding agreement, between God and the Jewish people. The Covenant is a central part of Judaism, and according to the Torah

was first made with Abraham. God promised to love and protect Abraham and his descendants. In return Abraham promised that he and his people would always devote themselves to God. The Sabbath is a reminder of this covenant, and most Jewish people see the Sabbath as a day set aside to devote to God.

Judaism has a number of holidays and celebrations throughout the year. The main Jewish holidays include Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, and Hanukkah. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year.

During this time Jews celebrate the hope of a new year. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a sacred and solemn occasion where

Jews look back on their life over the past year and look to improve on it. It is a day of fasting, reflection, and worship.



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The Passover holiday falls in the spring time; this is one of the most important Jewish festivals. During Passover, the Jewish people remember the events that led to the liberation from slavery in Egypt. There are blessings, songs, and events that symbolize the event. During the eight days of Hanukkah, Jews celebrate the recapturing of Jerusalem from the Syrian Greeks in 164 BCE. Jews say prayers, feast on fried foods, light a menorah (seven branch candlestick) and exchange gifts.

Summary

Judaism is one of the oldest faiths in the world. Like we will see with other religions, not everyone who calls themselves a member of this religion acts the same way or believes exactly the same thing. Religions often have many different interpretations of their core beliefs reflecting the culture or the time period, but it is their core beliefs that defines them. As we look at more religions, consider what are the core beliefs that define that religion.