

Judaism is quintessentially a historical religion. It sees human history as a reflection of the desires and demands of God, and it understands itself to have been founded more than 3,200 years ago at Mount Sinai, when a divine revelation was delivered through Moses to the people Israel. The covenant, or agreement, with God that was sealed at Mount Sinai established a set of moral and ritual obligations that continue to govern Judaism today.

A Ritual Initiation

Those obligations are reaffirmed every Saturday in the rituals that mark the coming of age of thirteen-year-olds. The details of the **Bar Mitzvah** and **Bat Mitzvah** ceremonies (the Aramaic terms mean 'son of the commandment' and 'daughter of the commandment', respectively) reflect several of the features that Jews consider most significant in their tradition generally.

The coming-of-age ritual is a regular part of every congregation's weekly worship. Saturday for Jews is the day of rest, called the **Sabbath**. It is a day for prayer and public assembly in the **synagogue**, the Jewish house of worship and community meeting. The teenager reads two selections from the Hebrew Bible: one from the **Pentateuch** (the five books of Moses, which make up the first section of the Bible) and one from the second section, called the *Prophets*. (The third section, called the *Writings*, is a collection of assorted works.)

The idea that adulthood begins at thirteen is based on an ancient concept of legal majority that has nothing to do with attaining adult status in the modern world: it will still be several years until a thirteen-year-old is allowed to drive a car or cast a vote. Rather, what the ceremony signifies is arrival at the age of ritual and moral responsibility. Thus the young person's presence may be counted towards the **minyan**, the quorum of ten necessary to begin group prayer, and he or she may be called to read aloud from the sacred scripture and recite the

law) can include both the entire Hebrew Bible and all the commentaries on it, but here the term refers specifically to the five books of Moses. The Torah that is proclaimed in synagogues is written entirely in ancient Hebrew, painstakingly transcribed by hand onto a scroll that is treated with the utmost respect. In order to read from it, the candidate must have learned both the ancient script in which the text is written and the traditional melodies to which the words are chanted. The Torah is considered the ultimate repository of religious truth, and Jews are expected to study as well as observe it throughout their lives.

The blessings recited by the young person express the values of the community, which responds by reaffirming them. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah then gives thanks for the scripture that has served as a guide for the people Israel. The city of Jerusalem and the dynasty of David are mentioned, and finally the Sabbath itself is extolled for the beauty and quietude it brings. In its response to the blessings, the congregation notes that the only way in which Jews are different from anyone else is that they have been given the special responsibility of studying and keeping the Torah.

In other respects the coming-of-age ceremony may differ significantly from one congregation to another. Some conduct their services almost entirely in the local language (English, French, etc.). Others prefer a service largely or even wholly in Hebrew. Some insist that candidates prepare by studying Hebrew and learning the traditional

Timeline

c. 1280 BCE	Moses leads the
c. 1000 BCE	David takes Jeru
922 BCE	Northern kingd
c. 800 BCE	Amos initiates lit
722 BCE	Assyrians conqu
621 BCE	Josiah centralizes
586 BCE	Babylonians con
538 BCE	Persians conquer
164 BCE	Rededication of t
70 CE	Romans lay siege
c. 220	The <i>Mishnah</i> of F
c. 500	The Babylonian
882	Birth of Saadia, C
1040	Birth of Rashi, cc
1135	Birth of Moses M
1250	Birth of Moses of
1492	Jews expelled fro
1666	Sabbatai Zvi is pr
1698	Birth of Israel ber
1729	Birth of Moses M
1881	Severe pogroms i
1889	Conservative Jud
1897	Theodor Herzl ar
1938	German synagogi
1948	Establishment of

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Timeline

- c. 1280 BCE Moses leads the Exodus from Egypt
- c. 1000 BCE David takes Jerusalem and makes it his capital
- 922 BCE Northern kingdom separates following Solomon's death
- c. 800 BCE Amos initiates literary prophecy
- 722 BCE Assyrians conquer northern kingdom and disperse its people
- 621 BCE Josiah centralizes worship at the Temple in Jerusalem in Deuteronomic reform
- 586 BCE Babylonians conquer Jerusalem and deport its leaders
- 538 BCE Persians conquer Babylon, permitting exiles to return
- 164 BCE Rededication of the Temple after Maccabean uprising
- 70 CE Romans lay siege to Jerusalem and destroy the Temple
- c. 220 The *Mishnah* of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi
- c. 500 The Babylonian *Talmud*
- 882 Birth of Saadia, *Gaon* in Babylonia (d. 942)
- 1040 Birth of Rashi, commentator on Bible and *Talmud* (d. 1105)
- 1135 Birth of Moses Maimonides, author of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (d. 1204)
- 1250 Birth of Moses of León, author of the *Zohar* (d. 1305)
- 1492 Jews expelled from Spain
- 1666 Sabbatai Zvi is promoted as the messiah
- 1698 Birth of Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, in Poland (d. 1759)
- 1729 Birth of Moses Mendelssohn, pioneer of Reform in Germany (d. 1786)
- 1881 Severe pogroms in Russia spur Jewish emigration
- 1889 Conservative Judaism separates from Reform in the United States
- 1897 Theodor Herzl and the first Zionist Congress
- 1938 German synagogues vandalized in prelude to the Holocaust
- 1948 Establishment of the state of Israel

that only males can be called to the Torah, they are the minority in North America today, and many of them now offer similar (though not exactly equivalent) ceremonies to celebrate girls' coming of age.

After the service the young person's family usually holds a luncheon or dinner for relatives and friends to celebrate his or her success and the

family's good fortune. These events may be simple, centring on the religious dimensions of the day, but they can be almost as lavish as a wedding reception, with a catered feast and a dance orchestra.

Behind the Bar Mitzvah ritual has always been a rite of passage to maturity, but it has taken on a new significance both for the family and for

Traditions at a Glance

Numbers

Approximately 14 million

Distribution

7 million in the Americas (mostly US, Canada, and Buenos Aires, Argentina); 3 million in Asia (mostly in Israel); 4 million in Europe (mostly in Russia, Ukraine, France, and England)

Principal Historical Periods

1700 BCE–70 CE	Biblical
c. 70–700	Talmudic
700–1700	Medieval
1700–present	Modern

Principal Founders

The patriarchs and matriarchs: Abraham and his wife Sarah (legendary, c. 1700 BCE); Isaac (their son) and his wife Rebecca; Jacob (their son; also called Israel) and his wives Leah and Rachel (father and mothers, with Bilhah and Zilpah, of the children of Israel). Also Moses (legendary prophet who received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, c. 1200 BCE); Saul, David, and Solomon (semi-legendary kings, c. 1000–900 BCE).

Leaders

Ezra helped build the second Temple, 515 BCE. Yochanan ben Zakkai founded the first rabbinic academy, 70 CE. Judah the Prince produced the *Mishnah*, 220 CE. David Ben Gurion was the first prime minister of the state of Israel, 1948.

Deity

One God, called 'Lord' or 'God' in English. His name is never spoken in Hebrew.

Authoritative Texts

The Hebrew Bible, the *Talmud*, and the *Midrash* (commentaries).

Noteworthy Doctrines

All the righteous of the world can be saved; God has commanded the Jews to observe special laws, including dietary laws and dress codes.



A young man reads from the Torah during ceremony (Nancy Louie/istockphoto).

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the community since the late eighteenth century, days when the Torah is normally read in the syna-



A young man reads from the Torah during his Bar Mitzvah ceremony (Nancy Louie/istockphoto).

that their sons and daughters learn as much as possible about the tradition and appreciate the meaning of the event. Moreover, Jews' understanding of what Torah entails is much more complex and varied than it was in the era that is the subject of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Today some in the community emphasize the moral meaning of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony over its ritual components, preserving the tradition by renewing it in ways that are meaningful in the contemporary world. We will see other examples of such renewal in the course of this chapter.

Defining Judaism

The diversity of Judaism today is the product of historical circumstance. In the course of its

development Judaism gave rise to two other world religions. Christianity and Islam, like Judaism, trace their spiritual lineage to the biblical patriarch Abraham. Judaism is by far the smallest of the three traditions, with a worldwide population just 1 to 2 per cent the size of its Christian and Muslim counterparts. Yet its historical influence is far greater than its small numbers would suggest, for it was with the Jewish people that monotheism—the belief in one God—originated.

Christians and Muslims readily acknowledge their debt to the ideas and practices of ancient Judaism. Each of the Abrahamic faiths sees itself as continuing and fulfilling the mission of ancient Israel. Each lays claim to the historical pedigree that the Hebrew Bible gives to 'the people of the LORD'. But because they are preoccupied with their own interpretations, Christians and Muslims often fail to appreciate the distinctive interpretations of their shared heritage that have developed in Judaism over the past two millennia. It will be our task in this chapter to sketch that development.

Is the Jewish heritage by definition religious? The answer is yes and no. Yes, because it is possible to join the Jewish community through conversion, and many people have done so. On the other hand, the tradition is far more commonly inherited than chosen, and for that reason Judaism is frequently considered an 'ethnic' religion.

Some Jews have said yes to their ethnic identity while saying no to the religion. A substantial number of North Americans, Europeans, and Israelis identify themselves as Jews but do not take part in the religious tradition. Rather, they see themselves as members of a cultural community with distinctive literary and artistic traditions, foods and folkways, and roles in their various social and historical milieus. Religion, to them, is a part of their culture, but not necessarily the defining part.

Neither is biological descent. The idea that the Jews constitute a genetic race, which was central to their persecution in the twentieth century, simply cannot be substantiated. Ever since the time of the ancient Hebrew kingdoms, people of diverse

origins have converted or married into the community. Thus any attempt to identify someone as Jewish on the basis of biological heredity is bound to fail.

It is impossible to arrive at an exact count of the world's Jewish population, partly because of these differences in definition. In all, Jews probably number just under 14 million worldwide today. Approximately half live in Israel now. The next largest population of Jews is in the Americas, mostly the United States and Canada, but with significant populations in Argentina and Brazil. The rest live mainly in Europe, especially France, England, Ukraine, and Russia (though Jews from the former USSR and its sphere of influence have immigrated to Israel, Europe, and North America in large numbers in recent years). The world population of Jews in the early twenty-first century is almost one-third smaller than it was in 1939. In that year the Second World War began, and by the time it was over in 1945, roughly 6 million European Jews had been put to death by the Nazis—the political party that ruled Germany—in what is widely known today as the **Holocaust**.

Israel aside, the main centres of Jewish culture today are in some European cities and, in particular, the large urban areas of eastern North America. About half of all Jews are unaffiliated with any synagogue. The other half span the range from liberal and unobservant to intensely traditional and deeply observant. In the United States and Canada, there are three major groupings: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. To understand Judaism, it is important to note that for the most part the divisions reflect differences in ritual practice rather than belief or doctrine. The exact divisions depend on the history of Judaism in each specific country. By contrast, in Christianity differences in belief and doctrine used to be the defining issues separating one denomination from another.

Jews believe that God expects all human beings to follow the same fundamental moral code, which was revealed in a covenant given to Noah after the primeval flood and is accessible to the

entire human race through reason. In addition, however, Jews understand themselves to be bound by a subsequent covenant, delivered through the prophet Moses at Mount Sinai. God took the Israelite people out of Egypt and, when he did, he again claimed them as his people. They responded that the LORD would be their God (*Jeremiah* 7: 23, 11: 4, 30: 22). The promise was confirmed at Mount Sinai, where the Hebrews (or Israelites, as they were known then) were commanded to follow a number of special rules that set them apart from all other peoples. For this reason Jews today think of themselves as God's special people: not in the sense that they are preferred above any other, but in the sense that they have been saved from slavery and elected to fulfill a special responsibility, to serve as God's priests in the world (*Leviticus* 19: 2; 26: 12).

✿ ORIGINS

The Biblical Period

The history of Israel, as it is recorded in the Torah, is history written from a special perspective. It is the history of a people as they understand and follow a God who has chosen them to serve as his instrument. Some of that history is well known because the foundation of Hebrew religious literature, the Hebrew Bible, is sacred scripture for Christians and Muslims as well. Its interpretations differ not only *vis-à-vis* the other communities but within Judaism.

The liberal wing of Judaism accepts modern historical principles and reserves the right to question the historical accuracy of the biblical text, just as some modern Christian and Muslim scholars do, distinguishing between myth, legend, and history. On the other hand, the traditional wing of Judaism believes every word in the text to be literally true. They take the text to have been dictated to Moses and the various prophets by divine inspiration. The student must be sensitive and alert

to a range of opposing perspectives on the same events.

The earliest known references to Israel in secular historical records date from the thirteenth century BCE. The key moment comes when we can begin to match the Israelites' narratives with accounts of the same people and events in the texts of their neighbours. Archaeologists have recovered an Egyptian stela (a monumental stone) dating from about 1206 BCE inscribed with a hymn describing the victories of the Egyptian pharaoh Mer-ne-Ptah:

Great joy has arisen in Egypt;
Jubilation has gone forth in the towns of Egypt.
They talk about the victories which
Mer-ne-Ptah Hotep-hir-Maat made in Tehenu:
'How amiable is he, the victorious ruler!
How exalted is the king among the gods!' . . .
The princes are prostrate, saying:
'Mercy!' . . .
Plundered is Canaan with every evil . . .
Israel is laid waste, his seed is not . . .
All lands together, they are pacified.
(Wilson 1950: 365-81)

The hieroglyphic expression referring to Israel here designates a wandering people rather than a people with a territory or fixed borders. This is consistent with other semitic-language texts, a century or so earlier, that mention Hapiru (possibly 'Hebrews'? but meaning 'migratory people') or Shoshu, an Egyptian word meaning a migratory tribe. Whatever the historical value of the Hebrews' own legends, then, it seems they were identifiable to others as the people Israel by the end of the thirteenth century BCE. This is where we will draw the line between biblical legend and biblical history.

It would be naive to suggest that every subsequent detail in the Hebrew biblical narrative can

be accepted as history without question. Historical inquiry becomes a matter of puzzling out what most likely happened, regardless of what the sources themselves may say. Not surprisingly, the results of such exercises are sometimes quite at odds with traditional pious understanding of the Bible as factual in every detail.

Creation in Genesis

The first eleven chapters of *Genesis* describe the primeval history of the universe. In Chapter 1, God creates heaven and earth. Interestingly, the text does not actually state that the universe was created from nothing. What it says is that before creation, everything was chaotic and primal waters covered the earth. God 'divided the light from the darkness' and created different things on each of the first six 'days', in a process that culminated in the creation of humanity, male and female. Then, on the seventh day, God rested, setting the pattern of a weekly Sabbath. Because the text describes the order of time as proceeding from evening to morning, Jews celebrate the Sabbath starting at sundown on Friday night and ending at sundown on Saturday.

Chapter 2 of *Genesis*, however, tells a different story. Here God causes a mist to rise from the ground, out of which vegetation sprouts. He then creates the primal man, Adam, and plants a garden in Eden, where he places the man before creating the animals and, finally, the woman, Eve.

Religious traditionalists sometimes worry that such inconsistencies obscure God's plan; therefore they try to rationalize or smooth them over. In fact, there are passages in the Bible itself that suggest efforts to interpret earlier material. The author of *Isaiah* 45, for instance, unlike the author of *Genesis* 1, explicitly says that God created the darkness as well as the light:

So that [people] from the rising and the
setting sun
may know that there is none but I:
I am the LORD, there is no other;

I make the light, I create darkness,
author alike of prosperity and trouble.
I, the LORD, do all these things.
(*Isaiah* 45: 6–7)

The writer of *Isaiah* 45 in the fifth century BCE felt it necessary to emphasize that God was the creator of good and evil, darkness and light, in order to underline the distinction between the teachings of the Hebrews and those of the Zoroastrians.

Modern biblical scholars take a different view of these textual inconsistencies. Instead of treating them as problems for human understanding of God's plan, they see them as clues to the composition of the text. Thus they suggest that the three interpretations of the chaos before creation came from different sources, and that the contradiction was allowed to stand because the compiler of the biblical text was reluctant to change any of them. Thus (as we shall see in more detail below), the first chapter is now ascribed to a priestly writer known as the P narrator, while the second chapter is believed to be part of an ancient Hebrew epic compiled by the king's court and commonly designated JE. *Isaiah* 45, so-called 2 *Isaiah*, was written in the Persian period by a prophet who felt that further interpretation was necessary. *Genesis* 1 offers an ordered view of creation. Everything is arranged according to the days of the week. But there is also a priestly hierarchy. First is God, the creator, who creates by means of his word. Second is the Sabbath, the period of rest built right into the universe. And third is humanity, male and female, created at the last moment before the Sabbath in the image and likeness of God.

Another voice in the biblical narrative (the D writer) has Moses lecturing to the people:

Take ye therefore good heed unto your-

God has allotted unto all the people under
all the heavens (*Deuteronomy* 4: 15–19).

The earliest interpretations of the creation story within the Bible itself take it to mean that humanity should never worship created objects like the sun, the moon, and the stars, that God created everything, and that there are not separate gods for the good and the bad.

The Primal Couple

Genesis 2 ends with God's creation of man and woman. 'Adam' is the Hebrew word for 'man' in the sense of humanity, but here it appears as the proper name of the individual created as well. Thus 'Adam' has connotations similar to those of 'Everyman' in English. 'Eve', according to the biblical text and most interpreters, is derived from the word for 'living'.

In *Genesis* 2 Adam and Eve stand naked without shame, in a state of perfect innocence, peace, and harmony. *Genesis* 3 shows how easily this state can be reversed. In a play on words, the childlike nakedness (in Hebrew, 'arom) of the primal couple is contrasted with the shrewdness (in Hebrew, 'arum) of the serpent who presents them with the temptation to become like God by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The characters are sketched in just a few words. Adam is unwary and trusting and speaks in very simple sentences; Eve is curious and evidently intelligent, speaking in complex sentences that show her thinking through problems. In fact, the couple do not lack understanding or intelligence before they eat the forbidden fruit: what they lack is moral sense, or the ability to make moral distinctions. After all, the tree is not the 'tree of knowledge'; it is the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil'.

Indeed, it is Eve's sharp intelligence that ap-

The shame and guilt they experience are two aspects of the 'knowledge of good and evil'—that is, the moral capacity—eating the forbidden fruit.

The Eden story explains the course of human life through narrative rather than philosophical argument. Thus pain and the consequences of human disobedience are a matter of moral discernment. Even though Adam and Eve have been banished from the paradise of the immediate presence of God, he continues to show his loving care while expelling them. The story purports to explain a wide variety of things, from why snakes crawl on the ground to why women have pain in childbirth, to why we have to work for a living and why war. Some of these matters are natural, some are accidents, and others are ultimate issues of human existence. We call such stories 'etiological' because they explain the causes or reasons behind certain circumstances.

According to later Jewish tradition, the transgression committed by the primal couple was so great as to cast a permanent cloud over the nature of the world or to require further atonement. In contrast, the dominant Christian interpretation sees their disobedience as the 'original sin' that there is a deep and sinister relationship between sexuality, sin, death, and Satan (the enemy of God, with whom the snake is sometimes identified). Finally, it is important to keep in mind that not all the consequences of the Eden story were negative. One of the positive benefits is the fact that humanity has since had the moral capacity to choose good and to keep God's commandments. The choice is one of the basic elements of the human condition.

The shame and guilt they experience afterwards are two aspects of the 'knowledge of good and evil'—that is, the moral capacity—acquired by eating the forbidden fruit.

The Eden story explains the conditions of human life through narrative rather than philosophical argument. Thus pain and evil are the consequences of human disobedience and lack of moral discernment. Even though Adam and Eve have been banished from the paradise that was the immediate presence of God, he continues to show his loving care while expelling them. The narrative purports to explain a wide variety of phenomena: from why snakes crawl on the ground and why women have pain in childbirth, to why people have to work for a living and why we die. Some of these matters are natural, some are cultural, and others are ultimate issues of human existence. We call such stories 'etiological' because they offer to explain the causes or reasons behind our present circumstances.

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The Israelite Narratives

The first eleven chapters of *Genesis* provide the

show how badly they govern themselves when left free to follow their own conscience. In fact, they so foul the earth with violence and corruption that God must find a way to destroy their evil society.

The story of the flood was virtually universal in the mythologies of the ancient Near East. Thus the Hebrews merely adopted a theme that was probably familiar to all the peoples with whom they came in contact. In the dominant Mesopotamian accounts, the gods cause the flood because they are disturbed by the din of human life (some scholars have suggested that this story points to overpopulation). In the Hebrew version of the story, however, the motivation is moral: to punish the evil that humans have perpetrated and clear the way for a fresh start, God floods the earth, allowing only Noah and the creatures in his ark to survive.

But human judgment is no better after the flood than before it. When the king of Babylon attempts to approach God's level by building a tower to heaven, God responds by confounding human language. Not until *Genesis* 12 is there any sign of hope that humanity can be redeemed. Finally, in that chapter, God chooses Abraham to serve as an example of a righteous life. Thus, the primeval history is a prologue to the major action of the Hebrew Bible, which is the story of the people Israel in their relationship to God.

The word 'myth' has come to connote falsity, and even today people are more likely to apply it to the narratives of other cultures than to their own. This is especially true of Israelite culture, which for many years was believed to have rejected any sort of mythology in favour of belief in the one God.

Israelite culture could be considered anti-mythological to the extent that it rejected the various fertility cults and nature gods of its neigh-

ultimate order of things. And in that context it is possible to see the Hebrew view of the relationship between God and the people Israel itself as a myth expressing the ultimate meaning of life for Hebrew culture.

Abraham

The narratives of the **patriarchs and matriarchs**—the tribal ancestors of the Hebrews—mark the transition from the imaginative paradigms of myth and allegory to the anecdotal detail of legend. While there is no evidence outside the Bible that Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and his wives, Joseph, Moses, and the rest ever existed, we can plausibly situate them in the culture of the ancient Near East as it is documented in archaeological records from places like Mesopotamia and Egypt.

In the past these neighbouring cultures were known to the West almost solely through the Bible's references to them, but modern archaeological and textual research has brought to light many details of the patriarchs' world. We now have records of ancient peoples living on the Mesopotamian plain (between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in modern Iraq) and in Egypt whose history goes back 2,000 years before the Hebrews. Mesopotamian texts composed after 1800 BCE suggest that the stories of the patriarchs do contain some historically accurate threads. For instance, the names of Abraham's ancestors resemble place names mentioned in northern Mesopotamian records between the nineteenth and twelfth centuries BCE. According to the biblical account, Abram (his original name, changed to Abraham in his old age) is told by God to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees, in southern Mesopotamia, and move first to Haran, in northern Mesopotamia and eventually to the land of Canaan, which is located mainly in the hill country known today either as the West Bank or as Judea and Samaria.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the Jews are ancient people, but the Hebrews of Abraham's time (and their descendants, the

Israelites and Judeans) saw themselves as a people newly born through the specific command of their God. Even so, by the beginning of the Common Era the Jews' history as a people was long and eventful enough for the Romans to recognize them as an ancient people and to respect the legitimacy of their religion.

Covenant

The central organizing concept in the ancient Hebrews' religion was the covenant (in Hebrew, **berith**). A theological term, 'covenant' means much the same thing that 'contract' does today. The purpose of life for those bound by the covenant is defined by the special contractual relationship into which first Abraham, then Jacob and Moses and the people of Israel, enter with God, since the covenant specifies exactly how God desires Abraham's descendants to behave. God promises Abraham that he and his descendants will have the land of Canaan for their own—but the land is not a free gift. Both sides must live according to specific obligations.

When Abraham asks for some assurance that the divine promise will be fulfilled, God appears to him in a vision and instructs him to 'Bring . . . a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' Abraham obeys, cuts the animals in two, and lays 'each half over against the other'. Then, after 'the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land' (Genesis 15: 8–10, 17–18).

The flaming torch, signifying the presence of God, passes between the pieces of the animals to signify that God has sworn a solemn oath. This ceremony is believed to reflect the treaty-making practices of the ancient Near East. (Apparently, the cutting-up of the animals symbolized the laying of a curse on anyone who violated the oath.) Thus God's providence is expressed in the form of a treaty between two great chiefs: Abraham, the

ancestor of all the people of Israel, and Yahweh, the God who promises to oversee the destiny of his descendants, provided they conform to the model of behaviour laid out in the covenant.

The theme of obedience to God's will is emphasized a few chapters later, in *Genesis* 22, when God calls on Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham binds his son, prepares the fire, and is grasping his knife when at the last moment an angel intervenes, telling him to spare the boy and sacrifice an animal instead. Indicating God's opposition to the human sacrifice practised by the Canaanites, this story also helps to justify the building of the Temple at Jerusalem, which was identified as Mount Moriah (*2 Chronicles* 3: 1), the place where the sacrifice supposedly took place.

The idea that the laws governing a particular society have divine sanction was in no way unusual. All the great cultures of the Near East at the time of the Hebrews, and for centuries before them, attributed their legal systems to various gods. The Babylonian king Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 BCE), for example, was said to have been selected by the god of wisdom to establish his famous code of law. However, Hammurabi's code was also seen as his own great achievement. The Hebrews were distinctive in regarding their law as having been given to them directly by God.

The two other patriarchs—Abraham's son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob—are similarly portrayed as making covenants with God, as is Moses, centuries later, at Sinai. These accounts of the legendary early leaders parallel the ceremonial covenant-making of the part-legendary, part-historical Hebrew kings David, Solomon, and Josiah, and the scribe Ezra. Each of these great figures in biblical history renews the covenant between himself, his people, and his God.

Finally, the nature of the rewards promised in return for faithful adherence to the covenant reflect the values and perspectives of Hebrew society at the time when these narratives were written. The ultimate rewards are offspring and a homeland,

but in addition Abraham himself is assured of a long life and a peaceful death (*Genesis* 15: 15). It is also worth noting the absence of any reference to the prospect of a reward after death. The ancient Hebrews understood ultimate rewards in concrete terms: an easy death after a long and comfortable life, with many descendants to carry on afterward. The early part of the Hebrew Bible offers no indication of interest in the disposition of souls after death.

Moses and the Exodus

The narratives of the patriarchs as national ancestors in *Genesis* are followed by the dramatic account of Moses as leader and lawgiver in *Exodus*. Whereas the stories of the patriarchs are situated in a period of migration from Mesopotamia into the land of Canaan, the Moses narratives place him at the head of a migration from the other centre of ancient Near Eastern civilization, Egypt. In reality, these two migrations may have overlapped, some of the Hebrew ancestors coming from the direction of Egypt via the Sinai Peninsula and others from the east and north, from the direction of Mesopotamia. In the Bible, however, the two migrations are described as occurring in strict chronological and historical sequence. Thus the descendants of Abraham are first sent to Egypt and then, after 400 years of oppression, are led home by Moses. In arranging their material in this way, the compilers emphasized the linearity of Hebrew thought and its dogged historicism, in which God is seen as the author of every consecutive event.

The Divine Name

Chapter 3 of *Exodus* relates an encounter that Moses has with God during a visit to the wilderness before his people's escape from Egypt. In that account, Moses has a vision of God as a flame in a bush that burns without being consumed. God then identifies himself as the God of the patriarchal lineage—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and gives his personal name, represented in Hebrew by the four letters YHWH.

Conventionally, scholars write this Hebrew word as 'Yahweh'. Without the vowels to go between those consonants, it is impossible to know how that name would have been pronounced, although the text of *Exodus* 3: 14, in which YHWH tells Moses 'I am who I am', suggests a connection with the Hebrew verb *hayah*, 'to be'. Thus the statement 'I am who I am' may mean 'I am the one who causes things to happen.' If this interpretation is correct, God's own name, Yahweh, may originally have meant something like 'he who causes to be'. It was not unusual for gods in the ancient Near East to be named after their primary features. If that was the case with the Hebrew God, embedded in this etymology are far-reaching intuitions about the uniqueness of events. God causes history, as well as the endless seasonal repetition that characterizes the concept of time in the agricultural calendar.

Over the centuries, partly because of the commandment not to take God's name in vain, it came to be considered blasphemous to pronounce the name at all. However, traditional Judaism also forbade any tampering with the Hebrew scriptural text, in which the sequence YHWH appears frequently. Therefore Jews reading aloud from the scripture would substitute the Hebrew word *adonay* (a title similar to 'lord') wherever the four letters YHWH were written. English translations usually print the substitute term entirely in small capital letters, as LORD or GOD.

The name 'Jehovah' is a variation on the same theme, formed by combining the four Hebrew consonants YHWH with the vowels from the word *adonay*. 'Jehovah' is used only in Christian circles; it gained currency in the sixteenth century, when Protestants with limited knowledge of Hebrew began turning to the ancient biblical texts in their campaign against the abuses they perceived in the institutional Church of Rome.

In some branches of Judaism today, not even the four Hebrew consonants are written: instead, the name is represented by a double y, or an h with an apostrophe. Similarly, the English words 'God'

and 'Lord' are not written in full, but as 'G-d' and 'L-rd'. In spoken usage, the Hebrew expression *ha-Shem*, 'the Name', is substituted for YHWH or Adonai.

The Exodus

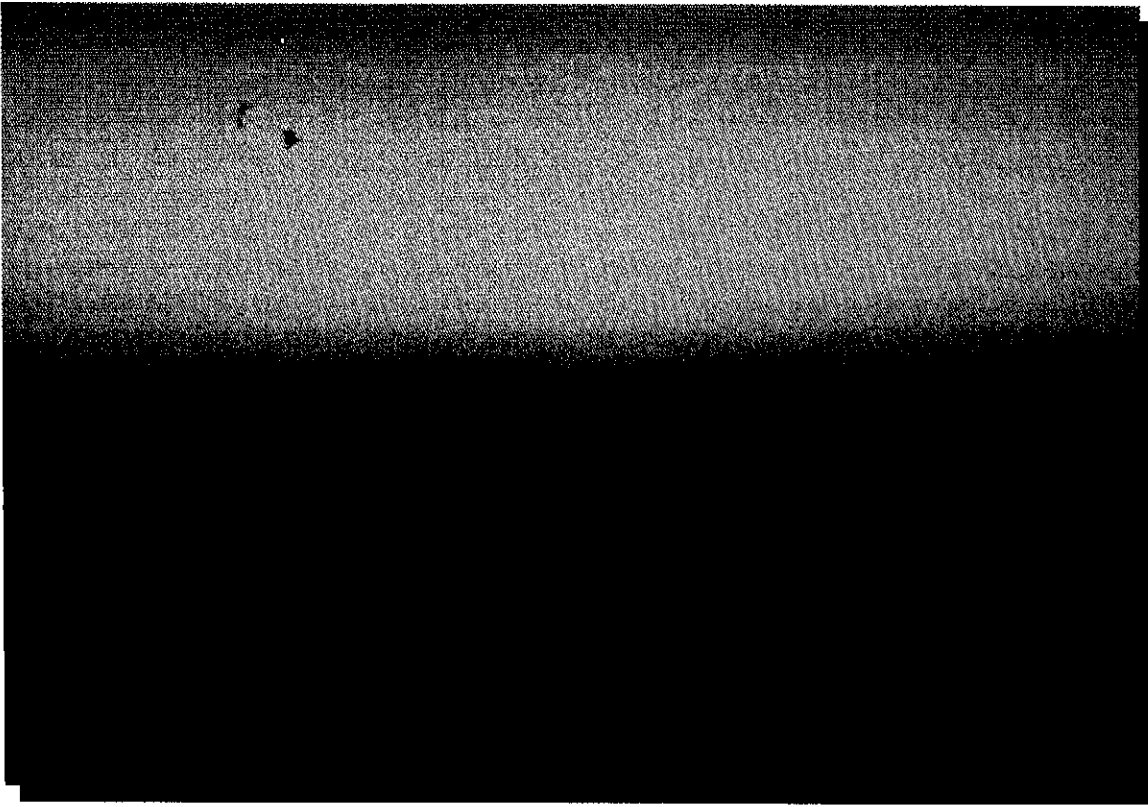
When the **Exodus** story begins, the Hebrews are in Egypt, working on construction projects in the eastern part of the Nile Delta. The work amounts to slave labour, and God tells Moses to request the Hebrews' release from the Egyptian pharaoh. When the pharaoh refuses, God sends plagues on the Egyptians but spares the Hebrews, enabling them to escape from Egypt. They cross the Yam Suf—traditionally translated as 'Red Sea', but literally the Reed Sea—which swamps their pursuers, and reach the barren Sinai Peninsula.

In time all Jewish people, whatever their individual origins, would come to identify with the Exodus story, which they understood as a metaphor of the transition from slavery to freedom as a people under God's special providence, with a destiny and a purpose. To this day they commemorate their participation in the event during the **Passover** festival.

It is during the forty years of nomadic life in the wilderness, under the leadership of Moses, that the legal foundations of Israelite society are laid. Moses meets with God at Mount Sinai and receives the Ten Commandments as the core of Israel's law, written on stone tablets 'with the finger of God' (*Exodus* 31: 18).

The Ten Commandments, presented in *Exodus* 20: 2–17 and again in *Deuteronomy* 5: 6–21 (the term 'Deuteronomy' means 'second law'), are stipulations of a covenant. In the covenantal renewal ceremony that is described in *Deuteronomy*, there is a communal oath taking: all the people, not just the leaders, swear to obey its terms.

The foundations of Israelite ritual life are also laid during the wilderness period, when the children of Israel were wandering in the desert. Moses' brother, Aaron, becomes the archetypal priest. In the absence of a permanent Temple,



In the shadow of Mount Sinai. There is no archaeological proof that this peak on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula is the one where Moses received the Ten Commandments, but it has been associated with the event since at least the fourth century (Andrew Leyerle).

Hebrew worship is instituted in an elaborate tent called the Tabernacle. Kept in the Tabernacle as the central cult object is a chest called the Ark of the Covenant, which serves as the throne for God's invisible presence. No image is placed on this base, for the deity is not to be represented by any three-dimensional image. However, two winged beasts called the cherubim are depicted on the top, and God is sometimes imagined as riding between their wings. The prohibition against depicting God himself marked a sharp contrast to the image-rich practices of all the Israelites' neighbours. When Moses discovers that Aaron has capitulated to popular sentiment and erected a statue of a golden calf for the people to worship, Moses proclaims God's denunciation of such idolatry.

The Israelite Kings

The Israelites proceed from nomadic to settled life in the land of Canaan under Moses' successors, beginning with Joshua. The book of *Joshua* recounts some spectacular victories over the Canaanites. But the following book, *Judges*, suggests that it was no easy task to displace the Canaanites, with their heavily fortified cities and well-equipped armies.

At first the Israelites are able to gain only a few positions in the hill country for themselves, and for a time they are even tempted to emulate the Canaanites in their worship of a fertility god named Ba'al. But Yahweh denounces the Canaanite religious practices of ritual prostitution and child sacrifice, and he demands that the Israelites repudiate them, promising the Hebrews progeny and long life if they obey his covenant.

The Ten Commandments, *Exodus* 20: 2–17

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other god to set against me.

You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous god. I punish the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I keep faith with thousands, with those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrong use of the name of the LORD your God: The LORD will not leave unpunished the man who misuses his name.

Remember to keep the sabbath day holy. You have six days to labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; that day you shall not do any work, you, your son or your daughter, your slave or your slave-girl, your cattle or the alien within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and on the seventh day he rested. Therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and declared it holy.

Honour your father and mother, that you may live long in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not commit murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his ass, or anything that belongs to him.

The greatest threat the Israelites face, however, comes from the Philistines, who arrive on the coastal plain at about the same time as the Israelites emerge from the desert and become their principal rivals. Although 'Philistine' now connotes a lack of culture, the biblical Philistines were related to the Mycenaean Greeks and far more advanced than the Hebrew shepherds, especially in iron technology. The Romans would eventually name the region Palaestina, after the Philistines.

In this period the Israelites lived as a loose tribal confederation informally ruled by chieftains known

as *shofetim* (often translated as 'judges'). There was no official process for electing or appointing the judges: their leadership was charismatic, meaning that it depended entirely on popular acceptance. Evidently there were local elders and priests too, but in moments of crisis the people looked to the judges for leadership. By modern historical standards, the judges—Deborah, Samson, Shamgar, Jephthah, and Ehud, to name only a few—are all legendary characters, but the accounts in the book of *Judges* describe them as chosen by God to save the Israelites from threats of foreign domination.

In the two generations coming shortly after 1000 BCE, Israelite society experienced a shift to a centralized monarchy. Kingship was a new institution, created to deal with the threats posed by the Canaanites and especially the Philistines. According to the story narrated in *1* and *2 Samuel*, God chooses first Saul, then David, and finally David's successors to be kings because the Israelites need relief from the Philistine menace. At first God is reluctant to appoint a king, but both the people and the times seem to demand one. Ultimately God places the government squarely in the hands of a dynasty founded by the unlikely figure of David.

We first meet David, the youngest son of Jesse, as an inexperienced youth fit only to look after the sheep. But God strengthens David's hand to the point that he is able to defeat the Philistines' champion, Goliath, and unify the northern and southern tribes as a single Israelite people. The Bible leaves us with the impression that the Philistines disappear, although we know from the archaeological evidence that their cities continued to exist as more or less powerful entities throughout the entire period of Israelite settlement. Then David captures Jerusalem from the Jebusites and makes it his capital, often referred to as 'the City of David'.

David's successor is Solomon—his son by Bathsheba, his favourite wife. Solomon undertakes a number of ambitious construction projects throughout the kingdom, including a lavish Temple to Yahweh on the hill called **Zion**, a rock-outcrop ridge on the uphill side of Jerusalem. But his build-up of the central government and his use of conscript labour have the effect of alienating the ten northern tribes.

On Solomon's death, about 921 BCE, the kingdom breaks up. The northern tribes follow a usurper named Jeroboam. Eventually they make Samaria their capital and take the name Ephraim or 'Israel' for themselves. In inscriptions in foreign capitals they are often known as the 'Sons of Omri', after a powerful later king. The southern kingdom of Judah is usually known as the 'Sons of David' on foreign inscriptions. The northern

kingdom continues for two centuries until they are overrun and dispersed by Assyrian invaders in 722 BCE, after which they become known as the 'ten lost tribes'. The southern tribes, centring on Jerusalem and using the name Judah, continue until 586 BCE, when the city was invaded by Babylon and its leaders were sent into exile. In the centuries that followed the Babylonian conquest, the people longed for a restoration of the Davidic kingship as a sign of God's continuing loyalty to his covenant people.

The Five Books of Moses

In the northern and southern Israelite regions, the stories of Abraham and Jacob functioned to unify their populations, who all claimed descent from these patriarchs. The idea of a family connection to Jacob originated among the ten Hebrew tribes in the northern kingdom, and Jacob's alternative name, Israel, became the name of the people. Meanwhile, the idea of a family connection to Abraham, who lived south of Jerusalem, served to bond the remaining two Hebrew tribes in the southern kingdom of Judah. When the kingdom was unified under David, each region, north and south, came to understand the other's stories as part of its own heritage. Eventually, scribes living in the south incorporated all the stories into a single narrative told from the perspective of the Davidic monarchy.

The kingship as an institution was able to put its imprint on many of the early traditions of Israel because it was the power behind the collection of the stories. Later generations would look back to the accomplishments of King David, followed by those of King Solomon, as manifestations of divine favour. As founder of the Judean dynasty, David was idealized for his military shrewdness. He was also depicted as talented in music, so that the hymn collection of the Jerusalem Temple, the contents of the book of *Psalms*, came to be attributed to him.

With the reign of Solomon, the scribes attached to the court and the Temple began to see their little

country as having at last established a reputation in the wider world. And indeed it had, although the immediate reason appears to have been a short-lived power vacuum created by the simultaneous declines of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian empires. Solomon enters into marriages with foreign princesses, thereby cementing political alliances, and plays host to a visiting queen from Sheba, a region to the south in Arabia later fabled for its aromatic incense. Solomon is portrayed as the paragon of wisdom, and the biblical collection of *Proverbs* is attributed to him.

But the United Kingdom of Israel did not last long. Solomon's son Rehoboam made the decision to impose the Jerusalem government's policies on the northern tribes, which led them to secede under Jeroboam. The breach was never healed. But after the northern tribes were dispersed by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, the southern kingdom continued as a state for another century and a half, until it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

Besides the accounts produced within the governing circles in the society, many ancient traditions were collected and transmitted by priests. The clearest examples can be seen in the books of *Leviticus* and *Numbers*, centring on the priestly law code in *Leviticus* 18–26. These traditions were also included in the five books of Moses, in the late monarchy and the exile. The priestly writers were responsible for editing the books into the form we know today.

All the editorial voices mentioned so far—northern, southern, even priestly—put their individual stamps on the biblical account of the transmission of the law at Sinai. It is the crucial event defining the Israelite people, and today it still gives the Jewish religion its special character. For the Orthodox community, it was at Sinai that the entire corpus of the five books was given, from the story of creation to the farewell address of Moses before he dies at the threshold of the promised land. It was all given by special revelation, directly from God to Moses.

Various editors and transmitters of the text, from their own perspectives, sought to emphasize that the covenant between Israel and God entailed a social contract. The Ten Commandments emphasize human social responsibilities, as does the Book of the Covenant, the extended law code that immediately follows the commandments. Similarly, the priestly narrators, interested in the ritual and liturgical aspects of the covenant ceremony, portray Moses as an intermediary between God and the people.

Critical study of the Bible in modern times has meant a major shift in the questions asked of the first five books of the Bible. For centuries, tradition had ascribed their composition to Moses, acting under divine inspiration or dictation. Faced with a discrepancy or difficulty in the received text, a traditional commentator would typically ask what God intended the text to mean. Modern interpreters, by contrast, have tended to ask who wrote it, why, and what they have chosen to make a particular statement, and why. In this context discrepancies are seen not as challenges to faith but as clues for investigation.

Modern Theories of the Composition of the Bible

One of the first to suggest that the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, might be a composite creation was the eighteenth-century French physician Jean Astruc, who called attention to differences in the names used to refer to God. He suggested that material by one author, who consistently referred to God as Yahweh, had been intermixed with that of another, who regularly referred to God as Elohim. Other investigators began to notice stylistic differences within the text, and in the second half of the nineteenth century a theory of four major blocks of material in the Pentateuch was articulated by the German scholar Julius Wellhausen.

Wellhausen's theory, known as the **Documentary Hypothesis**, has been vehemently criticized by traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims and by those who reject its humanizing assumptions. It has also been criticized by many liberal and radical

scholars, who may share those assumptions but who disagree on details of composition and compilation. Still, the broad outlines identified in the Documentary Hypothesis continue to shape much contemporary scholarship and serve as a basis for further research. In that sense, it stands as one of the great intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth-century Bible scholars imagined individual people writing specific documents at specific times. Now we know that each source represents the perspective of a particular oral tradition, later written down by a group of scribes working under the auspices of a particular institution in the society—such as the royal bureaucracy or the Temple bureaucracy—and that in each case oral traditions were included in their editorial efforts, a process that continued over several generations.

The hypothetical author or school associated with use of the name Yahweh is called the Yahwist. The material of this source is identified by the letter J, because the name 'Yahweh' is spelled with J in German, the language of the scholars who first put forward the hypothesis. The Yahwist, who emphasized southern localities and the role of Abraham, is thought to have worked in the southern kingdom of Judea, probably beginning before the division of the kingdoms in the late tenth century BCE.

The second source is called E, or the Elohist, for its use of the generic term 'Elohim' to refer to God. E wrote in the northern kingdom after its separation, probably starting during the ninth century BCE, and emphasized northern local traditions. E refers to the sacred mountain as Horeb, not Sinai, and to the people displaced by the Israelites as Amorites rather than Canaanites. God is a more awesome and remote entity for E than for J, and the covenant relationship is less nationalistic.

In many places, however, the two strands, J and E, have been woven together to create a great Hebrew epic known as JE, which can be recognized by its use of the term 'the LORD God' to speak of the divinity. The Garden of Eden story

beginning in *Genesis* 2 is a good example of JE, whereas *Genesis* 1 represents a priestly prologue to the whole story.

According to *2 Kings* 22: 8, a copy of the book of the law was found during the reign of Josiah, in 621 BCE, in the course of repairs to the Temple in Jerusalem. On the authority of that book, altars elsewhere in the kingdom were suppressed and worship was centralized at the Jerusalem Temple for the first time. Since the earliest known reference to the restriction of worship to a single location comes in *Deuteronomy* 12: 13, it is assumed that the book that was found was *Deuteronomy* and that it, the D source, was a new production.

Ostensibly, *Deuteronomy* is a sermon by Moses, which would place its composition some 600 years earlier. But its vocabulary and concerns are those of Josiah's day, when the prophet Jeremiah was active. Indeed, when Moses speaks of himself as a prophet in *Deuteronomy* 18: 15, he suggests a set of role expectations characteristic of the prophetic movement as it is thought to have existed in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE but not earlier. Central to the D source is a rewards-and-punishments theology of national morality.

In some ways the most striking aspect of the Documentary Hypothesis is its suggestion that P, the priestly source, was a late contribution to the body of writings that make up the Pentateuch. It is another voice that had been developing independently in the society. In its present form, it is thought to come from 586–539 BCE, the period after the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed and the Judean leadership sent into exile by the Babylonians, for it contains numerous descriptions and measurements of the Temple and its furnishings. As long as the Temple stood, there would have been no need for these details, but with the Temple in ruins, P offers a literary blueprint for its restoration.

Israelite Society

The complex textual history makes it difficult to form a clear picture of ordinary life in the biblical

period. In the case of gender relations, for instance, we do not know whether the stories reflect conditions in the actual patriarchal period or in the kingship period when they were written. Yet some contemporary interpreters use biblical models to govern their own behaviour and to force others to comply. When interpreters say that the Bible restricts marriage to one woman and one man, they seem to forget that the patriarchs and many Israelites took several wives and concubines, as late as the time of Jesus.

There are a few basic respects in which the biblical accounts probably do reflect social reality, since the details are consistent across the centuries. Marriage, for instance, was almost universal among Hebrews; men were allowed several wives if they could afford to support them; and children were highly prized (offspring are referred to again and again as rewards for faithful observance of the covenant with Yahweh). On the whole, tilling the land and securing it from harm were men's responsibilities, while raising children and running the household were women's. The nature of the interaction between men and women is not so clear, however.

The relationship between Abraham and Sarah is depicted as cooperative and very direct. Certainly Sarah is able to affect many decisions within the household. And David is portrayed as indulging his wives even in the highly charged political atmosphere of his old age, when the succession to his throne was paramount in all his children's minds. But these characters represent the elite of their society, and the power that women at that level enjoyed was conferred on them by their husbands. A woman without a husband (or father, or son) to provide for her depended entirely on the protection provided by Yahweh's laws (*Exodus* 22: 22; *Deuteronomy* 10: 18).

Women often play a part in the exposition of important themes. For example, the military victory of the judge Deborah over the Canaanites helps to illustrate God's control over history. He chooses the least likely characters as champions—women,

left-handers, lowly shepherds, inexperienced youths—precisely in order to show that it is he, not the individual, who determines victory and defeat. Deborah's gender thus functions exactly as the young David's weakness does, to demonstrate God's power.

God's complete control over history is also reflected in many birth stories. Often, when a special birth is to be announced, the prospective mother is said to be barren. Since failure to bear children would undermine the covenant, God intervenes directly to prepare the mother's womb so that she can deliver the child who will benefit the people. Later, Greek stories of heroes born from the union of gods and humans would apparently play a role in the New Testament doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus. But the Hebrew Bible chose a different way to mark a special or revelatory birth.

Somewhat easier to reconstruct than the personal life of the Israelites is their legal system. The Hebrews appear in many instances to have put more emphasis on fairness than their more civilized neighbours. Incarceration was a frequent punishment among the latter, but virtually unknown among the Israelites. A large number of Hebrew laws allow for penalties of monetary restitution rather than bodily mutilation. Restitution is quite frequently substituted for crimes that in neighbouring countries were punished by death. By Greek and Roman times, the use of monetary compensation for loss was evidently universal.

On the other hand, for crimes like murder or adultery, Hebrew society consistently demanded capital punishment, whereas in other nations the punishment depended on the rank of the perpetrator. In most Mesopotamian nations, an aristocrat could make restitution for the death of a commoner, but a commoner would suffer capital punishment for the same crime. Hebrew law made no such distinction in status. It also demanded capital punishment for adultery on the part of a wife, because violation of the marriage vow represented an offence against the deity before whom the marriage was sworn. The common double standard of the

ancient world, where the punishments for infidelity differed significantly between men and women, was exacerbated by the fact that men were permitted to have more than one wife.

Slavery was practised throughout the ancient world, but was somewhat less offensive in Hebrew society than elsewhere, at least in some respects. For example, the Israelites were forbidden to enslave their debtors for any more than a fixed term. Thus a man—and his family—could be enslaved to work off the value of an unpaid debt. But the period of enslavement was not indefinite. When the debt was discharged, at puberty in the case of a young female slave, or at the next sabbatical year (when the fields lay fallow), Hebrew slaves had to be set free.

The Prophets

Perhaps as important as the voices of the priests and legal experts in the Hebrew Bible are those of the prophets. Since both Christianity and Islam also associate themselves with prophetic insight, the prophetic movement may be said to have influenced more people than any other religious movement in human history.

Hebrew prophecy appears to have grown out of ancient Near Eastern traditions of spirit possession. Such experiences are described as 'ecstatic' because they involve a kind of psychological displacement, so that practitioners 'stand outside' the bounds of normal awareness and conduct. A number of ecstatic prophets—among them Elijah, Elisha, and Micaiah ben Imlah—are mentioned in the Bible from the time of the Hebrew settlement of the land through the early monarchy, but the period of the major prophets, whose visions and predictions are preserved in the Bible, does not begin until about 750 BCE.

How the prophets received their messages is unknown. It is possible that they actively sought to induce visions; however, they present themselves as the intermediaries used by God to communicate with his people, and the words they deliver are understood to be God's, not their own. The

prophetic writings surviving from (or ascribed to) the period between the ninth and fifth centuries BCE are notable for their rational clarity, their social criticism, and their poetic intensity. These literary prophets (all of them men) appear in a variety of contexts, sometimes speaking from within the administration of the monarchy and sometimes as social critics standing outside it. Whatever their social location, the message they deliver is always the same: that the people are not living up to God's covenant and that they will soon be punished if they do not change their ways.

The writings of the prophets refer to the concept of the covenant not in the narrow technical language of treaties, but in the broader language of metaphor. The prophet Amos delivers the words of Yahweh: 'You only have I known of all the families on earth. Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' The word 'know' in this context has a specific meaning in ancient Hebrew, referring to recognition of a covenant obligation. Yahweh, as Amos presents him here, may sound like a kind of despot, but in fact he is stating a grievance and seeking redress because Israel has defaulted on its contract with him.

In the eyes of the prophets, marriage contracts are also covenants. They have stipulations and are enforced by an oath. The accusations of seduction and adultery in *Hosea* gain their force by describing the covenant between Israel and Yahweh as a troubled marriage. The prophet presents Israel as the wayward wife of Yahweh, who will win her back and even forgive her adultery. Metaphorically, the prophets are describing the people's worship of the Canaanite fertility gods with the term 'adultery':

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in

From the Prophets

It has been told you, mortal, what is good and what the LORD requires of you: only to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God (*Micah 6: 8*).

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked (*Isaiah 11: 3-4*).

In the days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be set over all other mountains, lifted high above the hills. All the nations shall come streaming to it, and many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us climb up on to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and we may walk in his paths.' For [Torah] issues from Zion, and out of Jerusalem comes the word of the LORD; he will be judge between nations, arbiter among many peoples. They shall beat their swords into mattocks and their spears into pruning-knives; nation shall not lift sword against nation nor ever again be trained for war (*Isaiah 2: 2-4*, also *Micah 4: 1-3*).

that day, says the LORD, you will call me, 'My husband', and no longer will you call me, 'My ba'al.' For I will remove the names of the ba'als from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. . . . And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (*Hosea 2: 14-20*).

If the people give up their sinful relationship with the Canaanites' goddesses and gods, their sexual rituals of fertility and their abhorred child sacrifice, Yahweh will reconcile with them. The force of this prophetic writing depends on the prophet's effective use of the metaphors of love and betrothal for covenantal obligation. Since the name of the Canaanite god, Ba'al, also means 'husband', it too becomes part of the extended metaphor of adultery. Through the ages, the Hebrew tradition's great sin of idolatry has continued to be identified with adultery.

Despite the prophets' warnings, however, the nation continued its drift towards ruin. The

literary prophets recorded the destruction of the northern and southern kingdoms. Some of them had been critics of the establishment; others belonged to it. But their eloquence, as well as their successful predictions of national destruction, convinced later Israelite society that they all spoke the word of Yahweh.

The Babylonian Exile

In 586 BCE the Judean kingdom fell; Solomon's Temple was razed, to lie in ruins for three generations; and the Hebrews' leaders were sent into exile in Babylon. As much as any single event, the Exile marks the transition of the Hebrew tradition from the national cult of an ancient kingdom to the religious heritage of a widely dispersed people. From the sixth century BCE on, we can speak of Jews (the 'Judeans') and Judaism, rather than of Hebrews, Israelites and Hebrew or Israelite religion.

The catastrophes that followed the Babylonian invasion mark the disruption of many ancient Israelite institutions. As in the case of many historical transitions, not everything happened overnight, but the Exile gave focus and impetus to a number of significant social and religious changes.

The heritage was no longer that of a national state but of a subject or minority population. Especially among Jews dispersed abroad, life was now more urban than agricultural, so that many of the old agriculturally based laws and rituals needed to be rethought. In the absence of the Temple, the focus shifted away from formal worship towards congregational life. At some time during the Exile, the institution known as the synagogue was born, and Temple worship never regained its former importance even after the Temple was rebuilt. Aramaic gradually replaced Hebrew as the vernacular language, and although Hebrew remained the language of ritual, it took on an antiquarian flavour. The longing for restoration of Yahweh's sovereignty expressed itself in a variety of ways, including visions of a deliverer king (messianism) or a cosmic battle followed by judgment at the end of the age (apocalypticism).

Even to Jews who lived at a distance from Jerusalem, the Temple there symbolized their covenant:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres.

For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

(*Psalm 137: 1-6*)

The destruction of the Temple brought on a crisis of confidence. The problem was not that Yahweh's dominion was limited to the region of Judah, for he was also lord of all creation, but that he had been worshipped in a single place for so long. Did the destruction of that building mean that Yahweh

had finally abandoned his people? The author of *Lamentations 5: 20-2* expressed the general fear:

Why dost thou forget us for ever, why dost thou so long forsake us?

Restore us to thyself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old!

Or hast thou utterly rejected us? Art thou exceedingly angry with us?

The nation needed a sign that God had not permanently rejected it. As if in response, the prophet Ezekiel describes the appearance in a storm cloud of a heavenly chariot driven by the glory of God. Abandoning the Temple just before its destruction, the divine radiance approaches Babylonia. Thus the answer to *Psalm 137's* despair is that Yahweh's song *can* be sung in a foreign land because he has come into exile with his people:

Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking (*Ezekiel 1: 28*).

When Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon in 538 BCE, therefore, he was seen by the Israelites living there as part of God's plan (see *Ezra 1: 1; Isaiah 41: 2, 44: 28, 45: 1*). In his own statements Cyrus did not present himself as the bringer of a new order to the world, but as the restorer of the ancient regimes destroyed by the Babylonians, and hence the champion of all the old gods. He allowed the traditional priests of Babylonia's god Marduk to practise their own religion. And he allowed the Jews to go back to Judea to re-establish their Temple. The account in *Ezra* suggests that Cyrus himself is a worshipper of Yahweh:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD

stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem' (*Ezra* 1: 1–3).

The covenant is being reformulated by the demands of history: The Israelites have learned something about the world from their sojourn in exile. Now Yahweh must direct all of world history, not just the destiny of Judah. Cyrus, the Emperor of Persia, was not a devotee of Yahweh. But his decision to allow the return to Jerusalem was in keeping with his policy of patronizing the priesthoods and cults of the old order. The writer of *Isaiah* 45 is so impressed with Cyrus's rise to power that he calls him the 'messiah' (the anointed one), designated by Yahweh to serve as the instrument through which Israel's destiny will be fulfilled.

The Second Commonwealth

Not all the Jews wanted to return to Judah under the new Persian regime (538–331 BCE), however. Many artisans and aristocrats were prospering in Babylon and chose to stay there, forming the nucleus of a community that would play a major role in the composition of the Babylonian *Talmud* in the early centuries of the Common Era.

With prophetic rhetoric, a postexilic author of later chapters in *Isaiah* declares the theme of homecoming. He maintains that God is on the verge of repeating all his past deliverances:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (*Isaiah* 40: 1–2)

The exiles are to be drawn from the far corners of the earth. The new in-gathering will be like a new Exodus, bringing the people of Israel across water and fire. *Isaiah* (43: 15–19) says that, just as at the Red Sea (*Exodus* 15: 3), Yahweh will appear as a warrior doing battle. New heavens and a new earth will be created. This new Israelite commonwealth will be a fresh beginning:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (*Isaiah* 60: 1–3)

Isaiah's words are among the most stirring biblical passages. Unfortunately, the condition of returning exiles was still poor. Archaeological evidence suggests that the buildings were so decayed quickly. In fact, the beginnings of a postexilic community, or 'second commonwealth,' were so meagre that very little is known of it in that period.

The fate of the succession of Judean kings is unclear. The heir to the throne, who bore the Babylonian name Sin-Ab-Usuru, or Sinar-dassar in Hebrew, arrived in Jerusalem shortly after the return began. Thereafter the descendants of David were called *nasi* ('prince') rather than *melek* ('king'), perhaps in deference to the Babylonian Empire, which ruled the country from 539 to 331 BCE. Zerubbabel, another descendant of David, apparently arrived in Judea to succeed Sinar-dassar. The second Temple was then completed.

515 BCE. After that date, all references to Zerubabel and the kingship cease.

The mysterious disappearance of the Davidic king stimulated legends about a future king. One object of speculation was 2 *Samuel* 7, which promised that the Davidic kingship would continue forever. Thus the idea was born that a king of David's line would return and bring with him a perfect order. Until this time, the term 'messiah' had always referred to the current anointed priest or king. Centuries later, it came to be understood as meaning a future king, since there was no anointed, divinely sanctioned king in the line of David on the throne, although the priestly line continued intact.

Ezra and Nehemiah, who established a stable government in Judea, arrived there as court officials of the Persian Empire. Their dates are not known for certain, but the government they set up was explicitly based on the covenantal blueprint outlined in the first five books of Moses. In describing the 'constitutional assembly' convened by Ezra, for instance, Nehemiah attempts to turn the harvest festival known as **Sukkoth** ('Booths' or 'Tabernacles') into a covenant-renewal ceremony, even though he is aware that the crops are now promised to Persian overlords. Such a ceremony could not inaugurate independence. Instead, covenant renewal was at best a national day for the Jewish area called Judah under Persian rule.

An inhabitant of this region, the former tribal territory of Judah, was known as a *yehudi*, a Judean. This is the root of the English word 'Jew'. But under the Persians and then the Greeks, *yehudi* was usually a territorial rather than a religious designation. The term gained its modern meaning, referring to a member of the Jewish religion, only in the first and second centuries CE. The shift, occurring just as the New Testament was being written, gave it a particular ambiguity then. Even so

human society. In the Hebrew case, however, it is also part of a larger symbolic system in which the holiness of the people is protected by concentric circles of exclusion, culminating in the absolute purity of the high priest as he enters the inner sanctum of the Temple on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

One reason the Hebrews had prohibited intermarriage appears to have been the Canaanites' practice of child sacrifice, which continued even into Roman times. Worshippers of Yahweh were expected to marry within Abraham's family, so that their numbers would grow through the gift of progeny—the very opposite of Canaanite child sacrifice. In time, however, the practice of conversion developed, permitting foreigners to become Jews. The biblical book of *Ruth* identifies a woman of the neighbouring Moabites as an ancestor of King David. In this romance, the emphasis is on marriage *into* the family—rather than intermarriage, marriage *out* of the family. The fact that David's ancestor enters the family Israel from outside legitimizes the practice for later generations. From now on, the people of the covenant are defined ideologically, not just genealogically.

In the absence of a king, most of the affairs of state came under the purview of the priests. To refer to this system of government as theocracy would be incorrect, for God did not rule directly. Rather, the ruling priests claimed to be carrying out God's purposes. Some of the priests became political bureaucrats.

A notable achievement of this period was the editing of the first five books of the Bible by the priestly aristocracy. Put together in a single work consisting of five scrolls, the document came to be known as the Torah, a word originally signifying a priestly ordinance and reflecting the editorial contributions of the priests. The priestly editors did not fundamentally alter the original epic stories

countries seeking to preserve the traditions disrupted by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

The Torah became the foundation document of the nation in the period of the second commonwealth in somewhat the same way that the collected body of British law came to serve as Britain's constitution. Because of the conventions in which covenants were written, however, the Hebrew constitution came complete with a creation myth, a national epic, and a narrative history.

Hellenistic Judaism

The Persian Empire fell to Alexander the Great in 331 BCE. That conquest marked the end of the Hellenic age—the time of the city states in classical Greece—and the beginning of the Hellenistic (from *hellenizo*, meaning 'I speak Greek' or even 'I learn to speak Greek'). It was in this period that Greek was adopted by many peoples of the eastern Mediterranean, where it remained the most important language of trade even after the Romans arrived.

The common culture of this period had little to do with the values of ancient Athens. Increasing trade and cultural contact fostered a cosmopolitan outlook that gradually eroded the Judeans' connections to the traditions of their forefathers. This was especially true for the Jews—now the majority—who lived outside the ancient land of Israel, throughout the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. The reality of the **Diaspora** (from the Greek for 'sowing of seed', hence 'dispersal') meant that Judaism had to evolve new ways of understanding and explaining itself.

The Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt adopted Greek names as well as Greek styles of architecture and dress. By the early third century BCE, knowledge of Hebrew had declined to the point that the Bible had to be translated into Greek. According to legend, the translation was the product of seventy scholars who, although working independently, by a miracle produced identical drafts. The edition is therefore called the **Septuagint** (from the Latin for 'seventy').

This story was only a legend, but it served to establish both the religious authority of the Septuagint itself and the legitimacy of biblical translation generally. (By contrast, Islam holds that only the original Arabic Qur'an is authentic; any translation is considered to be only an interpretation.)

Translation brought the Bible to a community with a new set of cultural expectations. For the Jews in Alexandria, the Greek Bible was less the covenant charter of the Hebrew state than it was an object of meditation and literary study. Thus the editors of the Septuagint took the three divisions of Hebrew scripture—*Law*, *Prophets*, and *Writings*—and rearranged them in four genres (law, history, poetry, and prophecy). In the process, various conflicting versions of the same stories were juxtaposed, and the discrepancies between them became more evident than they had been in the Hebrew original.

Even the community still living in Judea was touched by Hellenization, although it may have kept more of its native ways. The district of Judea was very small—closer in size to modern metropolitan Jerusalem than the modern state of Israel. Surrounded by Greek-influenced societies, it could hardly ignore Hellenistic culture. Examples of Hellenistic influence include the amphitheatre and gymnasium constructed in Jerusalem in the second century BCE. In addition, several records identify women as the leaders of congregations and the benefactors of buildings; these women likely benefitted from a general improvement in the status of women—at least among the upper classes—in the late Hellenistic world.

Hellenization proceeded at different rates in different classes, accentuating divisions and exacerbating conflicts among the social classes of Judea. The two groups traditionally charged with leadership within the community—the priests and the rural aristocrats—sought out Greek educational institutions. A developing trades class also learned rudimentary Greek for use in international exchange. These Jews felt that Greek philosophy and culture did not interfere with their Jewishness.

In their early contact with Jewish traditions, the Greeks seem to have been favourably impressed. Hecataeus of Abdera, who travelled and wrote in the fifth century BCE, praised Moses as one 'who did not make any kind of picture of gods, as he did not believe that God was in human form'. Theophrastus, writing in the fourth century BCE, described the Jews as a 'race of philosophers', and many schools of Greek philosophy were sympathetic to the principle of monotheism. Not all responses to Judaism were positive, however. Most anti-Jewish comments by Greek (and Roman) writers merely express a general dislike of foreigners, but xenophobia would cross the line into anti-Semitism in the first century. According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Apion—an educator who wanted to keep Jews out of the great schools of Alexandria—claimed that the Jews of Jerusalem worshipped an ass's head made of gold.

The Maccabean Revolt

For over a century, Judea was under the control of the Ptolemies—the Greek dynasty (descended from one of Alexander's generals) that had ruled Egypt since 305 BCE. In 198 BCE, however, the territory passed into the hands of a rival Greek dynasty called the Seleucids, the rulers of Syria. Identifying the Hebrews' Yahweh with the supreme god of the Hellenized world, the Seleucids transformed Jerusalem's Temple into a cult place of Zeus in 168 BCE. The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, raided it for its riches, then moved troops into the Temple area and suspended the local Torah constitution. He may not have intended specifically to crush the Judeans' religion; his motives may have been primarily economic and political. But from the Judeans' perspective, any threat to their community amounted to an attack on their religion.

In 166 BCE a general revolt broke out, led by a group of resistance fighters called the Maccabees (derived from 'hammer', the Hebrew nickname of their leader, Judah). Though its immediate objective was to expel the Seleucids, this action also

reflected a dispute within the Jewish community, between traditionalists and those who favoured assimilation to the dominant Hellenistic culture. In *1 Maccabees* the traditionalists accuse the Hellenizers of 'abandon[ing] themselves to evil ways': repudiating the covenant, intermarrying with gentiles, and even 'remov[ing] their marks of circumcision' (*1 Maccabees* 1: 11–15). Those who favoured assimilation probably thought it would advance the political and economic interests of Jerusalem. In the less Hellenized rural areas, however, they were seen as undermining the religious basis of Judean life and violating the Torah constitution. Worse yet, the main proponents of Hellenization were the priests.

The Maccabees prevailed, recapturing Jerusalem from the Seleucids and expanding the Jewish state to its pre-exilic boundaries. The rededication of the Temple, in 164 BCE, brought the divided community together and is commemorated in the minor holiday called Hanukkah. Thereafter, however, the rebel leaders set themselves up as client kings of the Seleucids and Romans, readily adopting Hellenistic culture. Their descendants, known as the Hasmonean dynasty, ruled in shaky independence for more than a century, from 165 BCE until 64 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem and brought Judea under Roman occupation.

Dynamics of Hellenism

The Maccabean revolt was a watershed. Once the Hellenization process came into conflict with the traditional constitution of Israel, the Torah, it could no longer be tolerated. But the converse was also true: Greek ideas, no matter how foreign, could be incorporated into Judaism as long as conflict with Torah could be avoided. Life under a foreign empire was possible as long as the political situation allowed for the Israelite constitution to operate as well. Thus a second, subtler phase of Hellenization began, in which Judaism began to adapt Hellenistic ideas and use them for uniquely Judean purposes.

First-Century Sects

Hellenistic society was not merely cosmopolitan but individualistic, and Hellenistic culture encouraged opposing concepts of truth. These qualities were reflected in Hellenistic Judaism, which comprised a variety of sects. Any attempt to impose a single orthodoxy would have led to wholesale defections, but accommodating diversity promoted stability. As in North American party politics today, power was effectively balanced between two major groups—the Sadducees and Pharisees—who together ran the Sanhedrin, a communal council with juridical functions. Representing the upper and middle classes respectively, both these groups faced challenges from two smaller, more radical sects: the Essenes and the Zealots.

Sadducees

The Sadducees represented the upper stratum of Judean society—the aristocracy that embraced Hellenization. The upper class both politically and occupationally, they were also the party of the priestly establishment and the custodians of the Temple, in charge of its operations. They insisted on a narrow, literal interpretation of the law.

Pharisees

The Pharisees represented the middle classes. Some were landowners, some were skilled workers (tent-makers, carpenters, glass-blowers), and many were professional scribes serving the aristocratic Sadducees. From time to time the Pharisees also held power in the Temple, but they were more at home in the synagogues of Judea.

In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees were disposed to interpret the scriptural text broadly, though they tried to establish principles and procedures for scriptural interpretation. They were also punctilious about rules of purity and tithing, which distinguished members in good standing from the general populace. Special groups called *havuroth* ('brotherhoods') were even more strict about these matters, and although they did not withdraw from the general population, they tended to live near their fellowship brothers. Disdaining the Sadducean priests as purely cultic functionaries, the *havuroth* considered themselves to be the proper custodians of the law.

The Christian writers of the New Testament, not surprisingly, were critical of the Pharisees, depicting them as hypocrites more interested in

Josephus on Jewish Sects

Josephus (37–c. 100 CE) came from a priestly family in Jerusalem and was well acquainted with the religious landscape of his day.

Now at this time there were three schools of thought among the Jews, which held different opinions concerning human affairs; the first being that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes. As for the Pharisees, they say that certain events are the work of fate, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not. The sect of Essenes, however, declare that Fate is mistress of all things, and that nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with her decree. But the Sadducees do away with Fate, holding that there

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Essenes

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Reading the past described
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Zealots

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The most famous of these revolutionary
the Zealots (also known as the Sicarii).

the outward forms of ritual than in the inner substance of righteousness. From the Pharisees' own perspective, however, paying attention to external forms was a way of making the sacred law part of everyday life.

Essenes

The Essenes are widely believed to have been the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls—a collection of manuscripts from the Maccabean and early Roman period discovered in 1947 near the Dead Sea at Qumran. They were a group of rigorously observant priests under the leadership of a man they called the Teacher of Righteousness, or Righteous Teacher. When a candidate they disapproved of was appointed high priest, they left Jerusalem and retired to the desert. There, they established a centre of priestly purity in preparation for what they believed to be the coming **apocalypse**: the final battle between the forces of darkness and light at the end of time.

Reading the past described in the Torah as the model of their future, the Essenes produced a genre of commentary known as *peshar*, applying the text to the events of their own time. They thought of themselves as the new children of Israel, waiting to take the promised land back from the Hellenized Jews and gentiles—the new Canaanites—after a second forty years in the desert.

Zealots

At the far end of the political spectrum were several groups that rejected Roman authority under any circumstances. Most of what we know about these groups comes from Josephus, who describes them as bandits. But in fact their motives appear to have been purely political.

The most famous of these revolutionaries were the Zealots (also characterized by Josephus as 'the Fourth Philosophy'), who came together expressly to liberate Judea from Roman control. Beginning in the northern region called Galilee in 66 CE, the revolt was effectively crushed with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, but a group of perhaps a

thousand rebels defended the fortress of **Masada** for another four years.

Masada was a natural high mesa near the Dead Sea, fitted out by Herod the Great as a self-sufficient, fortified palace, which the Zealots captured from the Romans shortly after the revolt began. It remained the almost impregnable headquarters of the Zealot movement until the rest of Judea had fallen. But after a four-year siege, it too was finally conquered in 73. When the Romans entered the fortress they found all the remaining defenders—men, women, and children—dead by their own hands. According to Josephus, the mass suicide followed a stirring speech by Eleazar:

But since we had a generous hope that deluded us, as if we might perhaps have been able to avenge ourselves on our enemies . . . let us make haste to die bravely. Let us pity ourselves, our children, and our wives, while it is in our own power to show pity to them; for we were born to die, as well as those were whom we have begotten. . . . But certainly our hands are still at liberty, and have a sword in them. Let them then be subservient to us in our glorious design; let us die before we become slaves of our enemies, and let us go out of the world, together with our children, and our wives, in a state of freedom (Whiston 1802, 3: 471–2).

The emergence of the Zealots upset the balance between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The revolt against Rome left Jerusalem and the Temple in ruins and also destroyed Qumran. It was from the ashes of these disasters that the **rabbinic movement** would emerge to carry on the traditions of Pharisaism.

Samaritans

Although the Samaritans were descendants of the northern Israelites, their ancestors are thought to have begun marrying outside the Hebrew faith around the end of the eighth century BCE. By the

Hellenistic period they were becoming a separate group on the fringes of Judaism. Rejecting the *Prophets and Writings* of the Hebrew Bible, they accepted only the first five books of Moses as canonical, and their version of those books differed significantly from the Hebrew Pentateuch in that it contained several references to a messianic figure expected to be a prophet like Moses.

Christians

Christianity also began as a sect within Judaism, and it is the only Jewish sect of its day whose origins are well known. If we understand Christianity better by considering it as a first-century Jewish sect, therefore, we also understand the first-century Jewish sects better by considering Christianity as one of them.

The Christian message that, with repentance, all are equal before God was typical of all sectarian apocalypticism in first-century Judea. The Christian practices of public repentance, purification through baptism, and chaste communal living were likewise typical of the other contemporary apocalyptic groups. Furthermore, like all the Jewish sects of the time, the Christians posed a problem for the Romans and their upper-level Jewish administrators in that their movement had a clear political dimension. Yet these similarities only emphasize the striking difference between Christianity and Essenism, for example. Essenism was limited to a priestly elite whose members were preoccupied with the cultic purity rules that allowed them to approach God's holy places. Christianity, by contrast, was primarily interested in reaching out to the distressed or sinful.

Jewish Thought in the Hellenistic Period

Attitudes in the Diaspora

with Greek philosophy on essential issues. Thus, for example, Philo argued that the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden was not literally true, but should be understood as an allegory of the development of the soul's moral virtues. In this respect Philo seems strikingly modern. Like the Sadducees, however, he insisted on a literal interpretation of many of the laws in the Bible.

The Concept of God

From the beginning, Jewish thought has centred on the assumption of a single, all-powerful creator God who for his own reasons has chosen Israel to carry his message to the world. That God is the sole master of the universe is affirmed in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6: 4: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is One.' Contact with Greek culture challenged this idea of God. By this time most Greek philosophers had come to see the universe as dependent on a single principle—variously identified as love, or beauty, or the good—and to think of the traditional gods in allegorical rather than literal terms. Furthermore, the Greeks understood change as a kind of imperfection—and since the idea of creation implied change, in their view the ultimate good could not be a creator. Rather, creation had to be the work of a semi-divine intermediary power called a demiurge. Under the influence of Greek thought, Hellenistic Jewish philosophers like Philo reasoned that there must be some intermediary power to carry out Yahweh's work on this earth. Among the powers they envisioned was the *logos*: a kind of instrumental divine intelligence.

The notion of an intermediary was taken up by Christianity, in which Jesus was said to have a double nature, divine and human at the same time. The idea that God's essence contained a son as well

From the Psalms

LORD, what is humanity that you are
Or mortals that you take notice of the
Human life is but a breath of wind,
Their days are a shadow that passes a
(Psalm 144: 3–4)

Yahweh, hear my prayer, listen to my
with you.
I am your guest, [but] only for a time
Look away, let me draw breath, before
(Psalm 39: 12–13)

But remember this: wise men must die
The grave is their eternal home, their
to estates, but they must leave them
For men are like oxen whose life cannot
(Psalm 49: 10–12)

Bible and in later commentaries on it. So prophets had pointed out, Yahweh was not only of Israel, but of all creation. In the Hellenistic era, Christians presented a competitor for the role of God's chosen people—with a significant difference. Whereas Judaism emphasized responsibilities entailed by the covenant which the Jews were to transmit God's message to humanity, Christianity emphasized the fulfillment of the covenant's promises, without the need to obey the ordinances of Jewish law.

Resurrection

The Jewish Bible abounds in predictions of the fate of the world at the end of this age.

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The notion of an intermediary was taken up by Christianity, in which Jesus was said to have a double nature, divine and human at the same time. The idea that God's essence contained a son as well as a father represented a fundamental alteration of the unitary divinity envisioned by Judaism.

From the *Psalms*

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Or mortals that you take notice of th
Human life is but a breath of wind,
Their days are a shadow that passes
(*Psalms* 144: 3–4)

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From the *Psalms*

LORD, what is humanity that you are mindful of it,
Or mortals that you take notice of them?
Human life is but a breath of wind,
Their days are a shadow that passes away.

(Psalm 144: 3-4)

Yahweh, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for help, do not stay deaf to my crying, for I find shelter
with you.

I am your guest, [but] only for a time, a nomad like all my ancestors.
Look away, let me draw breath, before I go away and am no more!

(Psalm 39: 12-13)

But remember this: wise men must die; stupid men, brutish men, all perish.

The grave is their eternal home, their dwelling for all time to come; they may give their own names
to estates, but they must leave their riches to others.

For men are like oxen whose life cannot last, they are like cattle whose time is short.

(Psalm 49: 10-12)

Bible and in later commentaries on it. Still, as the prophets had pointed out, Yahweh was the Lord not only of Israel, but of all creation. In the Hellenistic era, Christians presented a competing claim for the role of God's chosen people—with a significant difference. Whereas Judaism emphasized the responsibilities entailed by the covenant, under which the Jews were to transmit God's law to all humanity, Christianity emphasized the fulfillment of the covenant's promises, without the obligation to obey the ordinances of Jewish law.

Resurrection

The Jewish Bible abounds in predictions regarding the fate of the world at the end of this age. Yet it says almost nothing about the destiny of the individual at the end of this life. Doctrine concerning

Hellenistic era, continuing even into the Byzantine period of the first several centuries CE, is termed 'apocalyptic', from the Greek for 'unveiling' (the Latin equivalent is 'revelation'). Most apocalyptic literature is eschatological in nature and visionary in presentation. Whereas the prophets had claimed to report Yahweh's words, the apocalypticists generally claimed to report their own visions: 'I saw, and behold . . .'.
The elements that make up the visions represent a kind of code. Sometimes the code is explained and sometimes it is not: the passages without explanations left the field wide open for reinterpretation over the centuries. By and large, the subject of these texts appears to be the fate either of Israel as a whole or of a particularly faithful subgroup.

Expulsion of Jews

Spain 1492

by 1300

Abdullah Zvi 16

1840 •

1881 •

1948 •

Constantinople 10

95 theses 15

1910 •

1870 •

1945 •

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body and soul, and therefore had no basis for thinking that something separate from the body might survive death. (The Hebrew word *nefesh*, which is often translated as 'soul', is better translated as 'person'.)

The original answer to the question of where personality goes after death was Sheol, an underground place similar to the Greek Hades, where the individual resides in greatly attenuated form. Sheol is not equivalent to either heaven or hell; rather, it is a pit, a place of weakness and estrangement from God, to which all the dead go and from which the spirits of the dead issue on the rare occasions when they can be seen on the earth. Occasionally, the psalmists and prophets appear to suggest that the righteous live in God's presence, but what this means is unclear:

Where can I escape from thy spirit? Where
can I flee from thy presence?

If I climb up to heaven, thou art there; if
I make my bed in Sheol, again I find
thee. . . .

If I say, 'Surely darkness will steal over me,
night will close around me', darkness is no
darkness for thee and night is luminous as
day; to thee both dark and light are one.

(*Psalms* 139: 7-8, 11-12)

All our days go by under the shadow of thy
wrath; our years die away like a murmur.
Seventy years is the span of life, eighty if
our strength holds; the hurrying years
are labour and sorrow, so quickly they
pass and are forgotten. . . .

Teach us to order our days rightly, that we
may enter the gate of wisdom.

(*Psalms* 90: 9-10, 12)

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate
of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies
the other. They all have the same breath,
and man has no advantage over the
beasts; for all is vanity.

(*Ecclesiastes* 3: 19)

There is a passage in *Job* that has often been
read as a prediction of resurrection, but a more
plausible interpretation would see Job as seeking
an advocate who will vindicate his challenge to the
justice of God while he is still alive:

For I know that my Redeemer (or Vindica-
tor) lives, and at last he will stand upon
the earth;

And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side, and my
eyes shall behold, and not another.

(*Job* 19: 25-6)

Job, like *Ecclesiastes*, seems almost to argue explic-
itly against any simple belief in immortality—in
direct contradiction to the way the book is usually
understood today. And while *Ezekiel* 37 describes
the resurrection of buried bones, this image is
clearly identified as a metaphor referring to na-
tional renewal, not personal immortality.

Judaism did eventually develop a doctrine
of resurrection, however. This development is
traced to the second century BCE, around the
time of the Maccabean revolt—likely the first
occasion when Jews were asked to risk death
specifically for their religion. The evidence is the
first unequivocal biblical reference to resurrec-
tion, in the book of *Daniel*. (Although this text
purports to have been written during the Baby-
lonian period, most—if not all—of it is now as-

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In *Daniel's* vision, the righteous
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The Messiah

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in *Isaiah* 45.

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prophets predicted that God would
ideal king some time in the future. As
brew kings reigned, however, the ter-
was reserved for them. Thus the con-

contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

In *Daniel's* vision, the righteous martyrs who died in order to remain true to God's Torah will be restored to everlasting life, while those who persecuted them will endure everlasting punishment. Until the late first century, the idea of resurrection was still a novelty, subject to debate. The Sadducees rejected it entirely, while the Pharisees accepted it, as did the Christians. (The willingness of Jesus' followers to believe in his resurrection would have been consistent with the idea of resurrection for martyrs.)

The Messiah

The term 'messiah' comes from the Hebrew *mashi-ah*, meaning 'anointed one'; anointing (pouring oil over the head) was a standard Hebrew inauguration ritual signifying divine sanction, usually of a new king. Like the doctrine of resurrection, the idea of a messiah is a concept that emerged and developed in the context of Israel's historical experience. In Hellenistic times it came to mean an ideal future king, priest, or prophet who would lead Israel to victory, but until the collapse of the Judean monarchy in the sixth century BCE, the term almost always referred to the current king. A rare exception, suggesting recognition of divinely sanctioned special service, is a reference to the Persian king Cyrus—who made possible the return from Babylon—as Yahweh's anointed in *Isaiah* 45.

Before the Exile, a few passages from the prophets predicted that God would raise up an ideal king some time in the future. As long as Hebrew kings reigned, however, the term 'messiah' was reserved for them. Thus the expected king is

throne disappeared without a historical trace, that the idea of a future king began to take on a new significance. One basis for hope was a promise in 2 *Samuel* 7 that Israel would never fail to have a king of the Davidic line.

The precise nature of the hopes associated with the future king varied. Thus the Essenes expected a priestly messiah, while Philo, who refers in a veiled way to the messiah, looked forward to a future victory over evil and unjust rulers (*On Rewards* 115–19). And the apocalyptic literature associated the messiah with a divine overturning of the existing order, exemplifying God's sovereign control of events and rewarding the piety of the faithful who had trusted in God.

At one place in the apocalyptic literature a messiah's death is envisioned, but only as a natural part of a sequence of eras. In 2 *Esdras* (or 4 *Ezra*) 7: 28–30, God's kingdom is to be established by the messiah and his supporters, all of whom are to live for 400 years. When all die at the end of this period, the world will return to chaos, but eventually the righteous will be resurrected. Nowhere in this literature is there any hint of the Christian idea that the messiah will die for humanity's sins. Whatever suffering may be involved, the messiah is the one who is expected finally to bring God's justice to the world.

Together, the disastrous wars against Rome and the spread of Christianity made the rabbis wary of messianic movements, for they exposed the community to internal and external threats. The rabbinic view was summed up in the advice of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (first century CE) that, on hearing reports of the messiah, a farmer should first finish planting his tree and only then go to see whether the reports were true (*Avot of Rabbi Nathan* 31b). The message was clear: while one must not give up hope that the messiah will come, it would be foolhardy to give