

Judaism

Judaism is a small religion with adherents making up perhaps one quarter of one per cent of earth's population. However, Judaism has had an enormous impact on human history. In addition, Judaism is an exemplary demonstration of tradition – of the preserving of stories and rituals; of how such stories and rituals yield identity; and how traditions are nevertheless organic and ever-evolving, counter the stereotype of them as static and inflexible.

Overview

Biblical account traces Judaism's origins to a **covenant made by Abraham** with the god YHWH.

- Judaism centres on four key themes:
  i) God
  ii) People – Jews can be ethnically defined and include atheists or religiously defined and include Korean converts. But Jews are always a people, a community.
  iii) Land – a connection to the land of Israel.
  iv) Law – for the devout, life is lived in **adherence to Torah**.

- Its history is usually divided into three periods: **First Temple**, **Second Temple**, and **Rabbinic Judaism**. We will explore all three, focusing especially on the first two.





Origins



The founding story of Judaism is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, showing his loyalty to God.

- Biblical account traces Judaism to the covenant between Abraham and the god YHWH.
- Early Bible stories are accepted by Orthodox Jews but **Reform Jews** follow scholarship that sees such stories as **more mythical**.
- **Israel certainly exists by about 1000 BCE**. Some believe the community emerged over time by tribes who settled in the area and who became connected over time.

First Temple Judaism (992 - 586 BCE)

Key historical developments during this period include:

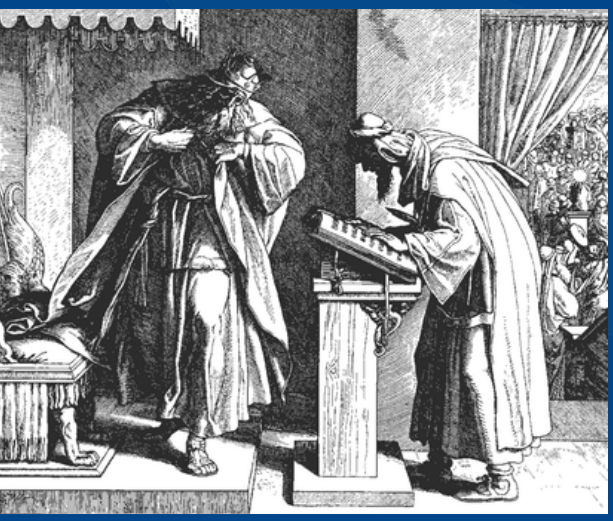
- David makes **Jerusalem** his capital.
- The **writing of texts** likely begins (under David).
- David's son Solomon builds a **temple**.
- After Solomon, a succession struggle **divides the kingdom** into north and south.
- The **northern kingdom** is conquered and destroyed in 722 BCE.
- The **southern kingdom contains the tribe of Judah** from which comes the words Jews and Judaism.
- Ends with the Babylonian captivity when Southern Kingdon is conquered and the **elites are taken to Babylon** (leads to writing of the Torah).



The temple sacrifices linked the people to God.



This temple, 2/3rds the size of the Jerusalem temple and just 4 miles away, was in use during the entire first temple period.

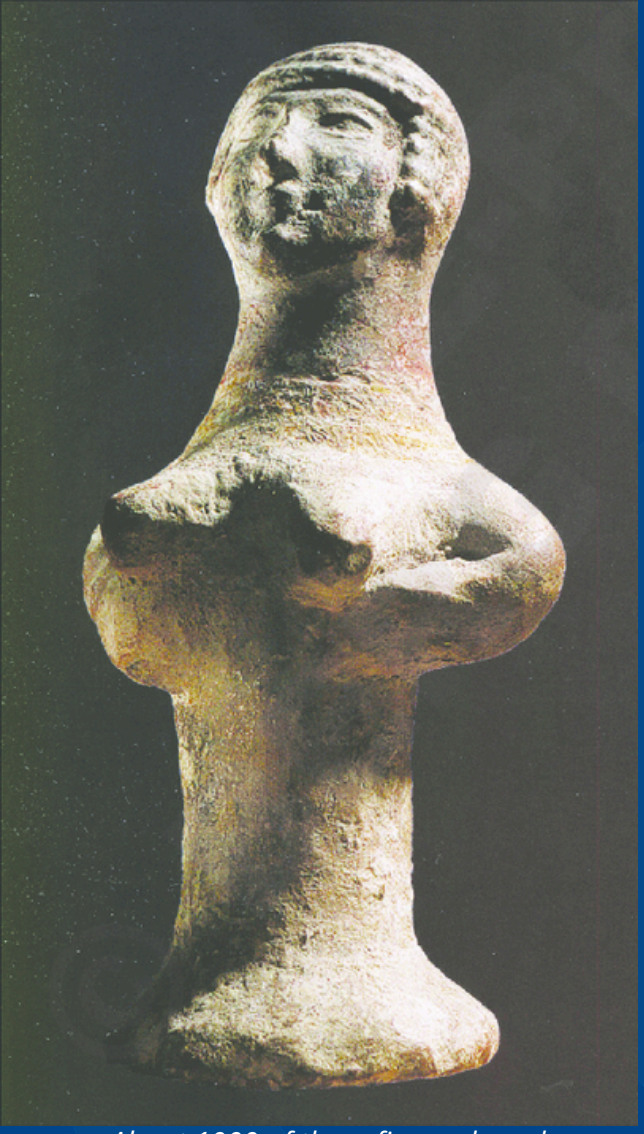


When a new book of the law is found and read to Josiah, he rends his garments and dramatically reforms the kingdom's religion.

Key religious developments include:

1. **YHWH emerges and gains strength**:

- Scriptures and archaeology seem to suggest **Jews are polytheists** (YHWH being one god) and slowly **moves towards monolatry** (believing multiple gods exist but worshipping just one).
- Big shift is late in this period under the reign of King Josiah, a reformer king.



About 1000 of these figures have been dug up in ancient Israel, most in Jerusalem. However, they disappear after the First Temple period.

2. Temple emerges and gains strength:

- The temple in Jerusalem starts as a central place of worship but late in this period becomes seen as the only valid place to carry out key sacrifices and rituals.
  - Centres **power and wealth in Jerusalem**.
- **Temple is the sun** around which the faith revolves. The place of fire sacrifice, festivals, and the very throne of God.

3. No Torah

- Parts of the Torah have been written but parts have not and there is **no single "Torah" document.**

4. Conservative

- In the large stretch of land from Egypt to India at this time, religion is conservative, seeking to maintain order amidst chaos, and to **preserve the cosmos**. Utopian visions are not part of the teachings.

5. Bleak Afterlife

- The afterlife is in the underworld, known as **Sheol**. It is not hell but it is **unpleasant**. This life is the best life there is.



Ra ensured the sun rose in Egypt. From Egypt to Israel to India, religion at this time was conservative, hoping to preserve order.

Second Temple Judaism (c. 538 BCE - 70 CE)

When the Persians destroy the Babylonians, they **let the Jewish elite return** to Israel to rebuild the temple. But two generations had past and what is recreated will be different than what was. These differences are as follows:

1. Torah is written and becomes central.

- Enabled people to **show devotion without a temple** during Exile.
- Become a people set apart **(distinguished by vigilant adherence to purity codes)**.
- **Moses and exodus story are Torah's central narrative**. Story of exile and return becomes powerful in Jewish life and beyond (e.g. language of Martin Luther King).

The Torah made Judaism a book religion and very portable.



The Torah made Judaism's central story not about Abraham but rather Moses. Its story of exile and return has reverberated down Jewish history.





Rabbis emerge in the second period and are chosen by merit and learning, rather than lineage.

2. New elites and new buildings:

- **Synagogues** make faith more **portable** and **democratic**.
  - Leaders (rabbis) chosen for merit rather than lineage (temple priests).
  - **Educates commoners**.
  - **Participatory prayer** by all replaces passively watching priest conduct temple sacrifice.
- New scribal elites and synagogue leaders.

3. Monolatry yields to monotheism (YHWH now creator of universe, not tribal deity)

- Angels now act as **intermediaries between prophets and God**.

4. Satan emerges (contrast II Samuel 24:1 with 1 Chronicles 21:1)

- Accounts for **chaos and evil**.

5. Idea of a glorious future

- New **apocalyptic genre emerges** that is not conservative but radically hopeful.
- Includes **afterlife** of heaven and hell (idea only found in Daniel in the Hebrew Bible).
- End times idea helps an **earlier Messiah idea** ("anointed" one or king from David's line) to proliferate and to take on **more cosmic meanings**.

New sects emerge and one, the Zealots, help launch a revolt against the Romans. The Jews lose, the temple is destroyed and **temple Judaism ends**.



Satan was a general Hebrew noun but it becomes a proper name for a figure of great evil during the late Second Temple period.

Monotheism: God becomes the creator of the universe and the only god there is.



Rabbinic Judaism (post 70 CE - present)

The end of the temple could have ended Judaism. But from its ashes, Jewish leaders would forget something new: Rabbinic Judaism. The key changes were:

1. No land

- Judaism becomes a religion of the **diaspora**.
- Reversed when **Israel is reborn nineteen centuries later**.

2. No temple

- **Torah replaces the temple** to some extent – it becomes the centre of the faith.
  - Central to shabbat services.
  - Learning to read Torah is required for a bar or bhat mitzvah.
  - Inherently **portable**.
- Priests replaced by rabbis and mom/dad.



The Torah is the centre of Rabbinic Judaism.



3. Torah focus fosters **Oral Torah** (Mishna & Talmud)

- **Bible is sacred and closed** so no new books can be added.
- What continues now is the development of commentaries.
- Layers of interpretation do not always agree!
  - **makes study/argument into a religious act**.

4. Rise of antisemitism.

- **Takes root from Christian gospels**.
  - Written at a time of heated disputes between Jews and the Jesus movement.
  - Christians also had incentives to **attribute Jesus' death to someone other than Romans** (since they lived in the Roman empire).

Much of Jewish ritual now happens in the home with mom and dad in the role priests once occupied.

5. Rise of modern branches

- **Hasidic Jews**
  - Respond to bleak oppression with joyous celebration.
  - **Mystical branch** based on understanding that fragments of God are in all of us.
  - Hasids all belong to **different courts** that follow a particular rebbe who often is seen to possess superordinary powers.



Jews study scriptures in pairs, along with loads of commentaries. Argument and discussion are part of religious devotion.

- **Reform**
  - Liberal Judaism emerges as Jews grapple with the enlightenment.

- **Orthodox**
  - Those **Jews who resist liberalization.**
  - Today, **"Modern Orthodoxy"** stays adherent to the law but is putting **women in traditionally male roles** and some are **open to gay relationships**.



Antisemitism has been described as the longest hatred.

- **Conservative**
  - A middle branch between Reform and Orthodox Jews.

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Quote & Story

“People who pray for miracles usually don’t get miracles, any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or good boyfriends get them as a result of praying,” he wrote. “But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayer answered.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner

The Oven of Akhnai

In this well-known Talmudic story, the rabbis are arguing about whether a specific oven is kosher or polluted. “Halakha” means Jewish law so they are arguing whose opinion is in accord with genuine halakha and whose is wrong.
The Sages taught: On that day, when they discussed this matter, Rabbi Eliezer answered all possible answers in the world to support his opinion, but the Rabbis did not accept his explanations from him

After failing to convince the Rabbis logically, Rabbi Eliezer said to them: If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, this carob tree will prove it. The carob tree was uprooted from its place one hundred cubits, and some say four hundred cubits. The Rabbis said to him: One does not cite halakhic proof from the carob tree. Rabbi Eliezer then said to them: If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, the stream will prove it. The water in the stream turned backward and began flowing in the opposite direction. They said to him: One does not cite halakhic proof from a stream.

Rabbi Eliezer then said to them: If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, the walls of the study hall will prove it. The walls of the study hall leaned inward and began to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua scolded the walls and said to them: If Torah scholars are contending with each other in matters of halakha, what is the nature

Story Cont'd

of your involvement in this dispute? The Gemara relates: The walls did not fall because of the deference due Rabbi Yehoshua, but they did not straighten because of the deference due Rabbi Eliezer, and they still remain leaning.

Rabbi Eliezer then said to them: If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, Heaven will prove it. A Divine Voice emerged from Heaven and said: Why are you differing with Rabbi Eliezer, as the halakha is in accordance with his opinion in every place that he expresses an opinion?

Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: It is written: "It is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). The Gemara asks: What is the relevance of the phrase "It is not in heaven" in this context? Rabbi Yirmeya says: Since the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we do not regard a Divine Voice, as You already wrote at Mount Sinai, in the Torah: "After a majority to incline" (Exodus 23:2). Since the majority of Rabbis disagreed with Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, the halakha is not ruled in accordance with his opinion. The Gemara relates: Years after, Rabbi Natan encountered Elijah the prophet and said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time, when Rabbi Yehoshua issued his declaration? Elijah said to him: The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me.

Baba Metzia 59b: 1-5