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Judaism

The Citadel in Jerusalem are pictured

The Citadel (Tower of David; left) and the Dome of the Rock (right) in Jerusalem are pictured, with a portion of the Western Wall visible in the foreground.(Credit: Photos.com/Jupiterimages)

Along with Christianity and Islam, Judaism is one of the three major monotheistic religions of the world. It shares with them the belief in one God who is the creator and ruler of the universe and the lord of human history. Of the three, Judaism is much the oldest. According to biblical tradition, the origins of the faith can be traced back at least 3,000 years to Abraham, the patriarch who is considered the father of the Jewish faith (*see* Abraham), and his descendants who formed the nation of Israel. Ancient Israel dwelled in the land of Palestine in the Middle East, and the modern state of Israel, founded in 1948, represents a return of the people to a homeland that had been controlled by other powers for more than 20 centuries. (*See also* Israel; Palestine.)

An Israeli boy reads from a Torah scroll

An Israeli boy reads from a Torah scroll during a Bar Mitzvah service held at the Western Wall, Jerusalem.(Credit: Richard T Nowitz/Corbis)

During the course of its history, any major religion will develop within itself a great deal of variety and numerous points of view: Islam is divided into two main branches and several different schools of interpretation, and Christianity is made up of many denominations. So, too, Judaism in the modern period is not uniform (*see* below, “Modern Judaism”). This article presents primarily the basic beliefs and institutions of Judaism as they emerged in the ancient world and have persisted in a fairly traditional manner for nearly two millennia.

Origins

Although some scholars believe that the Bible or, more properly, the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament, does not include a reliable history of ancient Israel, many regard it as one of the most important sources pertaining to Israel's history (*see* Bible). The period covered by the Biblical narratives is a long one—from about 2000 BC to the end of the 6th century BC—and much of the material included in the book was written long after the events they describe. Later developments were recounted in books that are not included in the official Hebrew canon but are recognized as important sources for the tradition and are

included in the Bible of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

According to the biblical account, the story of Israel as a nation began with the founding of the people by Abraham. The most important moment in the life of Abraham and in the origins of the people of Israel occurred when God established the covenant (solemn agreement) with Abraham. God commanded him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, which Abraham reluctantly agreed to do. Seeing that Abraham was willing to follow his law, God sent an angel to stay Abraham's hand. God promised to make the children of Abraham into a great nation and they were to be obedient to God forever. Abraham's descendants shared this promise, and his grandson, Jacob, organized Israel into 12 tribes.

Long after the time of Abraham, an agricultural crisis led the Israelites to move to Egypt, where they were originally made welcome but later turned into slaves. After more than 400 years they were freed from Egyptian bondage under the leadership of Moses and led back to Palestine, or Canaan, as it was called then (*see* Moses). This release from Egypt is believed to have taken place about the 13th century BC, and the period of the Exodus, as it is called, was an important step in the formation of Judaism. As revealed in the Bible, it was during this period that the Ten Commandments, one of the most important religious codes in history, was sent to the Israelites by God. In this code, which Moses is said to have received on Mt. Sinai, the covenant was renewed, and God's people were expected to act ethically and worship only the one God.

Over the next several centuries Israel developed into an independent nation in the Middle East. The Bible portrays Israel's first three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—as powerful figures. After Solomon's death, the kingdom was divided in two parts. The 10 tribes of the north formed the kingdom of Israel, and the two tribes in the south emerged as the kingdom of Judah, which included Jerusalem. The northern kingdom was overrun by the Assyrian Empire late in the 8th century BC, and its people were assimilated into the empire and disappeared from history (the so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel would later find a place in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought). The southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians early in the 6th century BC and many of its people were carried off to Babylon. This Babylonian captivity began what is called the Diaspora, or dispersion. From that time until the present, the Jewish people were dispersed throughout the world, particularly in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region.

Some Jews were allowed to return to their homeland after Babylon was conquered by the Persian Empire later in the 6th century BC. From that time on, however, the region was under the domination of one foreign power after another, with the exception of a brief period of independence in the 2nd century when the Maccabees led a revolt against the tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In the 1st century BC, the region was incorporated into the Roman Empire as Palestine and the people were ruled for a time by a client king imposed on them by Rome. At first accepting Roman rule, the Jews came to resent it and revolted. In the First Jewish Revolt (AD 66–70), the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Roman armies, and the independent Jewish state collapsed. This was a particularly important event in the history of Judaism, and it is sometimes identified as the moment of the beginning of modern Judaism because the central institution of the faith—the Temple in Jerusalem—was destroyed and new places of worship and a special class of teachers took its place. A Second Jewish Revolt took place from 132 to 135 and was savagely suppressed by the Romans; from that time until the modern state of Israel, the Jewish people had no homeland.

The history of Israel may be viewed as the tale of a tiny nation caught up in the struggles between the great powers of the day. But Jews do not see it that way, and it is their view of Israel's past that sets them apart from other states and forged the nature of Judaism. It is Israel's firm conviction that the one God, creator of the universe, was active in every phase of its history: God called Abraham and told him to go to Canaan to become the father of a nation. God released the people from Egypt and led them back to Canaan because He chose to select Israel from all the nations of the world and use it as the vehicle for bringing knowledge of Him to the rest of the nations.

Although it is possible to draw a line of historical continuity from ancient Israel to modern Judaism, the two are not identical. The word Judaism is not to be found in the Hebrew Bible, nor is the word religion. Today it is impossible to do without the word religion when discussing the relationship of humans to God, but in ancient Israel, as in much of the rest of the ancient world, life was not compartmentalized into the social, the political, the economic, and the religious. The people of Israel believed that all human activity—both individual behavior and community action—was under God's guidance. The notion of religion would have been incomprehensible to them.

It has been argued that Judaism, as distinct from earlier Israelite traditions, originated in the period after the return to Palestine from the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BC. The days of Israel's political power

were over. The people began to reflect on the meaning of their existence, in the light of their whole history from Abraham to the Diaspora. What direction the nation should take was unclear, since there seemed to be no new directives from God. If there were no new directives, the Israelites had to rely on what they knew—their history as it had been compiled in the many books that now make up the Hebrew Bible. Should Israel assert itself to become a political power again, or should it await some definitive action by God to restore its fortunes? Opinions were sharply divided, and, by the time of the early Roman Empire, a number of parties or sects had formed.

One party centered around the priestly cult of the Temple at Jerusalem. The Temple was the center of worship and sacrifice. Another major party consisted of the rabbis, teachers and interpreters of God's law. Some small sects, most notably the group at Qumran who compiled the Dead Sea Scrolls, withdrew from public life to await the coming of God's kingdom, while others organized to prepare a revolt against the Romans. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70 and ended Jewish opposition 60 years later, Jerusalem as the center of worship ceased to exist. The rebellious sects were smashed, and the groups who had withdrawn into the desert to await the coming of God seemed to have disappeared shortly after AD 100. The one group that was left to fill the breach and provide guidance for the Jewish people was the party of rabbis. The program of the rabbis replaced Temple worship and pilgrimages to Jerusalem with the study of God's law, prayer, and good works. The new place of worship became the local synagogue (from a Greek word meaning “assembly”), where Jews could gather together and hear the Scriptures read and interpreted, sing the Psalms, and pray.

The rabbis attempted to standardize religious practices for the dispersed community and to build up a large body of interpretation of God's law. This collection of rabbinic law, called the Mishna, became the primary reference source in all rabbinic schools and the core around which the Talmud—the extensive commentaries on the Mishna—were later compiled. The rabbis also saw to it that the collection now known as the Hebrew Bible was carefully put together about the end of the 1st century AD.

Beliefs

The beliefs of Judaism rest upon the Hebrew Bible. Of particular significance is the Torah, the name of which comes from the Hebrew for “to point the way.” The Torah is the first five books of the Bible. Commonly called the books of Moses, they contain the early history of Israel and the laws of God. Jewish doctrines concerning God, man, the nature of Israel, obedience, and the end of the world are derived from the Torah and other writings. In a broader sense, the term Torah is also used to designate the entire Hebrew Bible and may refer to unwritten traditions that many Jews regard as divinely inspired.

God

The foundation on which the whole course of Israel's faith rests is the conviction that the one God, creator of the universe and absolutely unknowable in Himself, revealed Himself (revelation) to Abraham and his descendants. The concept of revelation is not an easy one to grasp: In the common understanding of the term, what is revealed is no longer hidden, but with reference to God, He always remains hidden in his revelation. He does not put Himself on display, but He acts within the course of events. His acts are perceived only by faith in those to whom He gives understanding. This means that all of His actions could be regarded from a completely secular point of view: There is no evidence available to the senses that can point to an event and say it is from God.

This God, Israel believes, was the one and only God; all other gods are but idols and fictions of the imagination. As stated in the basic creed of Judaism, derived from Deuteronomy 6:4–9: “Hear, O Israel! the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” This God created the universe and humankind, and He, for incomprehensible reasons, chose Israel to be His beacon light for the rest of the nations. He did this, because the world, as it exists, did not know Him: It was Israel's mission to call all people back to knowledge of Him and obedience to His precepts. God's law upholds and provides for the whole of creation. To go against the law, whether natural or moral, creates many evils.

The Covenant

The arrangement God made with Israel is called a covenant. It was first stated to Abraham about 2000 BC in

Mesopotamia: “The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Leave your own country, your kinsmen, and your father's house, and go to a country that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation'.” The obedience of Abraham was dependent upon God's fulfilling this promise. This covenant has been renewed time and again by God in Israel's history, always with the condition that the nation be obedient to His commands. After the escape from Egypt, God restated the covenant (Deut. 7:6–11):For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people. . . . Know, therefore, that only the Lord your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His gracious covenant to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments, but who instantly requites with destruction those who reject Him—never slow with those who reject Him, but requiting them instantly. Therefore, observe faithfully the instruction—the laws and the rules—with which I charge you today.

Torah

“These commandments, statutes, and laws” find their fullest expression in the Torah. After Moses had led Israel out of Egypt, the people formed themselves into a nation. He became their lawgiver. According to the book of Exodus, Moses received the Ten Commandments, the basic moral law, directly from God on Mount Sinai.

These laws were amplified by an extensive code providing statutes and regulations for all aspects of personal and communal life, including the manner of worship and sacrifice. The complete laws may be found in the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible.

Torah, however, means more than law. In its broadest sense, it is the entire content of Judaism: its sacred Scriptures, its oral traditions, its theological affirmations, its ethical obligations, its historical recollections, its ritual and ceremonial observances, and its interpretations of authoritative texts. More specifically, Torah is the five books of Moses, the first books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. From this core developed the rabbinic teaching and interpretations that formed the foundation for modern Judaism, which the rabbis elaborated upon in their teachings in the Mishna and explained in the Talmud. The creation of the Mishna, an authoritative, post-Biblical collection of oral laws, was considered necessary by the rabbis in order that Jewish people dispersed throughout the Middle East and the Roman world would have one standard for the practice of their religion. The Mishna was given its final form by the 3rd century AD.

While there was one Mishna for all Jews, there developed two Talmuds, one in Palestine and the other in Babylon. Both places were at the time advanced centers of rabbinical learning; both Talmuds were compiled during the early centuries of the Christian era. In time the Babylonian Talmud became the standard work for all of Judaism. This happened in part because Babylon was a far more stable region than Palestine, but it also owed a great deal to the determination of the Babylonian school to displace the work of its Palestinian competitors.

The nature of humankind

The book of Genesis presents humankind as created in the image of God. The meaning of this term is uncertain and has been the subject of debate for centuries. Presumably it means that as God's creature, a human is able to be responsive to the Creator and is also free to make individual ethical choices.

The issue of human death was never clearly defined in Israel. There was no question of the body's dying and an immortal soul's going off by itself, because the individual was believed to be a unit, not a composite of body, mind, and soul. The whole person died; but Israelites did not believe that death meant extinction. The dead continued to exist in a kind of netherworld called Sheol, where they had no experience of any kind. This concept, while not very clear, laid the groundwork for the later belief in the resurrection of the body from the dead.

Ethical behavior

Humankind is, with no choice of its own, created by God and subject to His divine will. This will is expressed in the law—the moral law of the Ten Commandments and the hundreds of statutes that are meant to regulate daily life for the individual and the community. It is necessary to note here that individual and community

always are together. There is no life for the individual outside the community: God called a whole people for Himself, not isolated individuals. A just society requires just individuals, and just individuals function best in a just community. The whole law can be summed up as total devotion to God and love for one's neighbor. The statutes, as collected in the book of Leviticus, specify all the many ways these two injunctions are to be carried out, and the regulations are extremely detailed, governing the minutest aspects of daily living along with the larger arena of social interaction.

In rabbinic Judaism, the supreme virtue for individuals and the community is the study of the Torah, for it is by careful scrutiny of God's laws that true obedience can be learned. The Torah is not only a guide to right attitudes but also a compendium of specific directives to be observed in detail.

The coming of God's kingdom

The promises made by God within the terms of the covenant were specific. They promised to make Israel a great nation with a land of its own. They also pointed to a time when Israel, under an ideal king, would draw all other nations together in a worldwide community of justice and peace under the guidance of God's law. After the exile in Babylon and the evident failure of Israel to become a holy people and witness to all nations, speculation arose about how God would in fact fulfill His promises. The variety of speculation led to the emergence of a number of schools of thought.

One opinion held that there would be a gradual restoration of Israel to its promised land in Palestine. There, a divinely chosen ruler would exhibit his obedience to God and stimulate the obedience of the people. This holy community, in which economic, social, and political justice reigned, would be the inspiration to lure all nations to an imitation of Israel.

Another view put little faith in the gradual processes of history. It looked, rather, for a decisive act on the part of God whereby He would reassert His divine sovereignty over the whole creation. This expectation often looked for the appearance of a messiah figure, an individual chosen by God to inaugurate His reign on Earth. The messiah (meaning, “the anointed one,” from the ritual of applying oil in the consecration of a king), would be a monarch after the style of David, Israel's greatest king (*see* David).

Other motifs were also woven into the hope for God's kingdom. It was expected by some that all the dead of Israel would be raised to enjoy life in the new community. But even the restored kingdom was not viewed as permanent. At some future date God would intervene to judge the wicked and transport the righteous to a new world—a transformed creation—where the rule of God would be direct and endure forever. Some believers held that the end of the present world would be preceded by a titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil. After the victory of the righteous the end would come.

Still other Jews abandoned hope of a redemption within the historical process. They emphasized instead a personal salvation through individual piety and scrupulous adherence to all tenets of the law.

Institutions and Practices

As had been true in ancient Israel, so too in rabbinic Judaism it was understood the life of the individual and the life of the community were bound up together. The institutions and practices of Judaism reflect this conviction. There are observations and rituals that take place within the family, ceremonies that pertain to the individual, and the pattern of practices within the synagogue—the community of the faithful. Many of the observances are bound up with the cycle of the religious year, with its feasts and its commemorations.

The rabbi

The term rabbi means literally “my teacher.” It was used as a title of honor for graduates of Palestinian academies in the period after the exile. The graduates, who had studied the Torah, were normally appointed as legal officers and supervisors of local communities. They were not priests: All the priestly functions took place at the Temple in Jerusalem under the authority of a priestly class whose membership was strictly regulated. Nor were the rabbis a clergy in the modern sense: They were not ordained to serve their function. They were appointed scholars. A synagogue could actually call the rabbi it wanted to serve them.

In the modern period the rabbis have become similar to Christian clergy. They are college graduates who receive subsequent training in seminaries. After seminary graduation, they serve as congregational rabbis in much the same way as Roman Catholic priests and Protestant clergy serve their congregations.

The synagogue

The origins of this local house of worship and community center are obscure. The earliest evidence for a synagogue is from the 3rd century BC, though the synagogue probably first made its appearance in the years after the Babylonian captivity, when Jews were dispersed throughout much of the Middle East, and later throughout the entire Roman Empire. The center of Israel's worship life was, of course, in the Temple at Jerusalem, and all Jews were expected to make at least one annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But to maintain the quality and continuity of religious life, it was necessary that those who were far from Jerusalem have some place where they could study the Scriptures and hear them explained. After the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the synagogue became the locus of worship life.

A Jewish service takes place inside a synagogue.

A Jewish service takes place inside a synagogue. (Credit: Richard T Nowitz/Corbis)

At the heart of synagogue worship is the public reading of the Scriptures, specifically the five books of Moses arranged in an annual cycle. These books, the Torah, are inscribed on a large scroll. The order of worship consists of preparatory prayers, the recitation of Psalms, the “Hear, O Israel” (the *Sh'ma,* from the Hebrew word that opens the passage in Deut. 6:4), a call to worship, a prayer of petition, the reading of Scripture, and concluding prayers.

Worship services take place on Friday evenings (the beginning of the Sabbath, or seventh day), on Saturday mornings, on holy days and festivals, on Monday and Thursday mornings, and on Sabbath afternoons. The Sabbath is derived from the creation story in the book of Genesis, where it is stated that, after the six days of creation, God rested. When, in later generations. the law was promulgated in Israel, it was commanded that the people observe the seventh day as a day of rest and, later, worship as well.

The language of formal worship, at least for more orthodox Jews, is Hebrew. This language of ancient Israel was for a time replaced by Aramaic, a similar language, and by other local languages. In the modern period, Hebrew developed as a literary tongue, and its use has been restored in worship, as well as in the reading of the Scriptures.

Festivals and holy days

Families and friends often gather for a meal

Families and friends often gather for a meal called a seder to celebrate Passover.(Credit: age fotostock/SuperStock)

Judaism has two cycles of festival days in the year. One, beginning in the spring, observes occasions of historical or agricultural interest. Passover, for instance, commemorates the escape from Egyptian bondage. Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, marks the end of the grain harvest as well as the giving of the law to Moses. Sukkoth, or the Feast of Tabernacles, is an autumnal harvest festival. The last of these holidays, Simchat Torah, marks the conclusion and new beginning of the annual cycle of Torah readings.

The other cycle begins in the fall with Rosh Hashanah, the new year, and a ten-day period of penitence that concludes with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most solemn and important of the Jewish holy days. In early winter the lesser feast of Hanukkah commemorates the Maccabees' successful war for independence in the 2nd century BC. Purim, later in the winter, celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from potential extermination in Persia, as told in the book of Esther. In the summer a fast day commemorates the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD 70. All of the festivals and holy days combine synagogue worship and family observances and rituals.

Individual and family observances

Judaism considers that all of life is holy, that is, set apart for devotion to God. All the moments of an individual's daily life, therefore, are times when God is to be remembered and thanked. Every deed, no matter how trivial in appearance, reminds each person that the world and his life exist in the presence of God.

The family, too, is a locus of worship and devotion. Nearly every occasion of community worship in the synagogue has its counterpart in an observance by the family at home. One of the best known of these is the Passover Seder, or meal, with its symbols and the narration of the events surrounding the Exodus from Egypt. Most of the celebrations involve a careful and highly ritualized preparation of food.

The life of the individual and the family is marked by a series of rites of passage, rituals that single out notable events in the life of the person within the community. Infants are dedicated to God and named. At the coming of age, a young person accepts responsibility for following the Commandments in a ceremony called a Bar Mitzvah; in many non-Orthodox traditions there is a similar rite for girls known as a Bas, or Bat, Mitzvah. In the ceremony, which is after a girl's 12th birthday and a boy's 13th birthday, the young person is called to read from the Torah. Betrothal, marriage, and death are also marked with observances in the community of the local synagogue.

Modern Judaism

Like all major religions, Judaism has always had within it a number of movements, points of view, and local emphases. These did not constitute sects as such historically, since rabbinic authority maintained itself intact until the 18th century. By that time, Jewish people had settled all over the Western world. In the Middle East and North Africa they were influenced by Islam, with its rich cultural and philosophic traditions. In Europe Jews came into contact with a modernizing society, new ideas in philosophy and religion, discoveries in science, European modes of living, and the Industrial Revolution.

These developments could not but influence the growth of Judaism in the modern. era. The Enlightenment in Europe challenged traditional philosophical and religious views and promoted new ideas on the nature of human beings, society, and religion. One result of this was a demand for reform in Judaism, particularly in Western Europe.

In Germany during the 1840s, Reform Judaism became institutionalized. It asserted that since the Jews were no longer a nation, but citizens of the states where they lived, they were no longer bound by the whole religious code of law. Only the dictates of the moral law were necessary.

Reform Judaism never had any great success in Europe, but when millions of Jewish immigrants came to North America in the late 1880s, they brought it with them. By 1880 most of the synagogues in the United States had become Reform and were members of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which had been formed in 1873.

Conservative Judaism appeared in the 1840s. Although it did not adhere entirely to Orthodox standards, it clung more closely to the traditions of historic Judaism, while making some concessions to the spirit of reform.

Reconstructionism was founded in the United States in the 1920s and holds that Judaism is a religious civilization, and its religious elements are expressions of a specific culture. The movement rejects the notion of an all-knowing God who made a covenant with His chosen people, and it does not accept the Bible as the inspired word of God.

The most traditional adherents of rabbinic Judaism are commonly called Orthodox, those who uphold what they consider to be the unchanging faith of Israel. Despite this claim of upholding tradition, Orthodox Judaism, like all major segments of Judaism, is marked by variety within the tradition.

Two major phenomena of the 20th century have deeply influenced modern Judaism: Zionism and the Holocaust. Zionism, the reassertion of Jewish nationhood and the goal of reestablishing the state of Israel, emerged in the late 19th century under the leadership of Theodor Herzl in Europe. Although not winning the loyalty of all Jews, Zionism gained momentum steadily after 1900. Whether a Jewish state would have been established without the occurrence of the tragic events in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and '40s is difficult to say. During their time in power, the Nazis promoted an aggressive anti-Semitic policy that at first segregated Jews and denied their civil rights and even their humanity. The Nazis shipped Jews to

concentration camps that developed into extermination camps where Jews were killed. The systematic massacre by the Nazis of about 6 million Jews—the Holocaust—one of the most cataclysmic events in world history, spurred the proponents of a Jewish homeland to achieve their goal. Three years after the end of World War II (1939–45), the State of Israel was established in Palestine. For the first time in nearly two millennia, the Jewish people had their country again. (*See also* Herzl; Holocaust; Zionism.)

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