

Overview of Judaism

It is believed that the Hebrews came with Abraham from Mesopotamia around 2000 bc, along with Abraham's El Shaddai ("god of the mountain"). It is more likely that they were natives to the area just to the east and conquered their close relatives the Canaanites to establish their historical domain. Constant warfare with neighboring peoples apparently resulted in a large number of Hebrews being enslaved by the Egyptians, which sets the stage for the singular event of Jewish history, the Exodus.

Moses, probably an Egyptian, assisted the captive Hebrew population in its hour of need, possibly by introducing Egyptian cleanliness laws in a time of plague. Around 1300 bc, he led them, it is said, back into Palestine, where they would be of enormous influence on their settled brethren.

Intertribal wars led them to seek a monarch similar to the ones they had observed in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In about 1010 bc, they found that monarch in a ruthless warlord named Saul.

Only four years later, his seat was taken by David. After defeating the Philistines he established Jerusalem as his capital.

In 966 bc, David was succeeded by Solomon. Under his rule, the Hebrews became rich, investing in the trade between Phoenicia and Egypt. Judaism revolved around laws unlike the laws of the Hindus. Sin could be lifted by means of prayer and sacrifice, and uncleanness (such as menstruation and childbirth) by ritual purification, all controlled by the priestly caste.

After Solomon, the condition of the Hebrew tribes began to deteriorate. Rich and poor classes developed, and the caste of priests (descendants of Levi) became increasingly powerful. Solomon's kingdom split into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In 722 bc, Sargon II, the Assyrian emperor, overwhelmed the entire area.

The Assyrians were a particularly brutal group and the Hebrews, like others, suffered greatly. They introduced an idea borrowed from the larger cultures around them: the Messiah, including virgin birth and all.

King Josiah ruled the area from 639 to 609. He and his priests saw the need for a codification of Hebrew traditions to provide solidarity among the people. In 622, they "discovered" (or created) a scroll presumably written by Moses, and called it the Book of the Covenant or the Law. It was probably much of Deuteronomy, and parts of Exodus (xx to xxiii?).

In 587 bc, in the midst of a war between Egypt and Babylonia, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine, destroyed most of Jerusalem, including the Temple. He took much of Jerusalem's population to Babylon as slaves. This was the Babylonian

Captivity.

In 539, Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered Babylonia and made Palestine part of the Persian Empire. He freed the Babylonian Jews and restored their wealth, and they returned to Jerusalem. Ezra, in 458 bc, had this Law read aloud. This time, it took two weeks, because the collection included the entire five volumes of the Torah. The present form of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) was developed by 300 bc.

Modern scholars view the Torah as having four authors (or groups of authors):

- "J" (for Jehovah) called God *Yahweh* and was likely from Judah. He was responsible for much of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers.
- "E" (for Elohim) used *Elohim* (God) instead, and was likely from Israel. He wrote the rest of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. J and E were probably integrated soon after 722 bc.
- "D" represents the Levite priests who put together Deuteronomy. It probably dates from not long before 622, when King Josiah "discovered" it.
- "P" (for priestly code) covers genealogies and rituals in the preceding books, plus Leviticus. It was probably written not long before King Josiah died, in 609. Some believe "P" may have been Jeremiah.
- "R" (for redactor) combined J, E, and P into the first four books of the Torah, and then added D. Some scholars believe he may have been Ezra.

In 332 bc, Alexander the Great took Jerusalem. It surrendered without a fight. Alexander was supposedly an admirer of the Jews and their God. This introduced a long period of Greek rule -- and accompanying Hellenization -- which would affect Judaism greatly. . The development of a Hellenized Jewish community in Alexandria (Egypt) led to a split between those liberal Jews and the more conservative Jews of Palestine. Also, the Samaritans, who inhabited what was originally Israel, broke ranks with the Jews of Judea (Judah), keeping only the original Torah as their scripture.

In 168 bc, Simon Maccabee took Judea out of the hands of Alexander's successors (the Seleucids), and began his own dynasty. But in 63 bc, Pompeii conquered the area and made Judea a part of the Roman province of Syria.

- The next hundred or so years were crucial ones for the Jews. In 37 bc, nationalistic Jews in league with Parthian invaders, revolted. The Romans had appointed Herod ("the Great") as King of the Jews two years earlier, and he repelled the invaders and eliminated their Jewish supporters. .