

Religions of the World

Series Editor: Ninian Smart

Judaism

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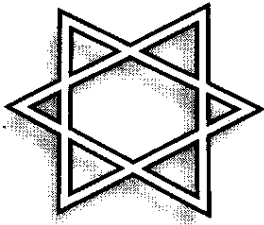
The History of the Jewish People 2

Judaism in Biblical Times

The early history of the Israelites—ancestors of the Jewish people—is based largely on the stories recounted in the Hebrew Bible. Jews also know this book as the *Tanakh* (a Hebrew acronym for its three component parts); while Christians call it the Old Testament, and incorporate it into their scriptures. The

first five books of the Bible are known as the *Pentateuch* (*Torah*), and it is in the first book, Genesis, that the essentials of the Jewish faith—God's creation of the world—are explained.

Scholars are uncertain, however, of the historical accuracy of these Biblical accounts because some of the events, people, and genealogies included can not be supported by archaeological findings or by references to the Israelites in the writings of peoples in neighboring lands.



Jews believe themselves to be descended from the Patriarch Abraham who Biblical narratives and genealogies suggest lived sometime between 1700–1900 B.C.E. Abraham was a native of the Middle Eastern city of Ur (in present-day Iraq). God promised that if he left his comfortable life, he would become the father of a great nation. Even though he and his wife were not young and they had no children, Abraham accepted the call and became a nomadic herdsman. In the course of time, he had a son, Ishmael (c.1850 B.C.E.) by a slave woman, who was to become the father of the Arab peoples. But Ishmael was not to

be the heir of God's promise. Finally, against all expectation, Abraham's elderly wife, Sarah, produced her own son, Isaac (c.1850 B.C.E.). A *Covenant* relationship was established between God and the Patriarch. God promised that he would protect and preserve Abraham's family; they would be as numerous as the stars of heaven, and they would be His **Chosen People**. On their part, Abraham's descendants must obey God's commandments. As a symbol of the covenant, the practice of circumcision was instituted: "Every male among you shall be circumcised... It will be a sign of the covenant between you and me..." He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised." To this day, many secular Jews have their sons circumcised. It remains a basic article of faith.

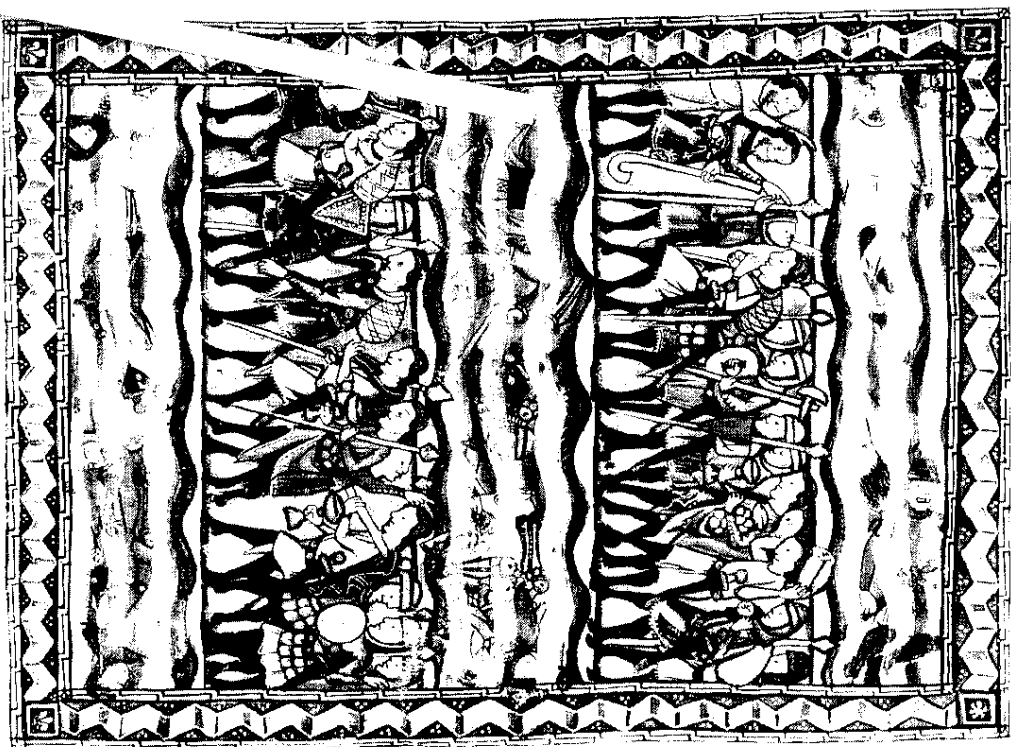
The three Patriarchs, Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob (c.1750 B.C.E.), are all revered in the Jewish tradition. Jacob was also given the name of Israel ("One who has striven with God"). Later, Jacob took his entire family and settled in Egypt. He was the father of twelve sons who, in their turn, were the fathers of the Twelve Tribes of the Jewish people. Initially they had been privileged immigrants, but the Book of Exodus describes how "There arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph [Jacob's second youngest son]." The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites and set them to building cities. However, a young Jew named Moses, who, according to the story, had been brought up at the pharaoh's court, was inspired by God to lead his people to freedom. God sent a series of ten plagues upon the land. The last one was the death of all the firstborn. The Israelites avoided this calamity. They were instructed to kill a lamb and smear its blood on the door posts of their houses. On seeing the stain, the Angel of Death would "pass over" the house. So great was the horror that the Egyptians finally allowed the Jews to leave. They gathered their possessions together, not even giving themselves time for their bread to rise, and they fled the country. This event is still celebrated by Jews today as Passover (*Pesach*), one of the most important festivals of the faith. It is a celebration of freedom. For eight days, nothing made with a raising agent is eaten and the festival begins with

a family dinner at which the story of their ancestors' escape from slavery in Egypt is told again.

For 40 years, the fugitives wandered in the desert of the Sinai peninsula. It was during this time that Moses received the ultimate revelation. On Mount Sinai, he was given the *Torah*, the Jewish law. This is enshrined in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Orthodox believe that the *Torah* was literally dictated by God to Moses. As Maimonides (1135–1204), the great philosopher and codifier put it: "I believe with perfect faith that the whole and complete Law as we know it is one and the same as that given to Moses... I believe with perfect faith that the Law will never be changed, nor that any other law will be given in its place by the Creator." Reform and Conservative Jews adopt what they see as a more flexible position, but for all Jews, the *Torah* is the foundation of their religious life. Every week in the synagogue, the pious read from the *Torah Scroll*, and the cycle of the Pentateuch is completed every year. In a very real sense, the Jews are a people of the book.

The Book of Joshua describes the Israelite conquest of Canaan (modern day Israel), which was seen as God's Promised Land. Initially the Israelites were led by a series of charismatic judges who arose at times of military danger, but gradually the need for a king was felt. The Twelve Tribes first chose a young man named Saul (eleventh century B.C.E.), but he committed suicide after a devastating defeat inflicted by a neighboring nation. He was succeeded by David (tenth century B.C.E.) who, in the tradition, is regarded as in many ways the ideal king. He conquered the city of Jerusalem and made it his capital, and God promised that He would establish his descendants "for ever and hold your throne for all generations." Jews still believe that when God sends a new king, a *Messiah* (the anointed one), to bring about divine rule on earth, the chosen one will be descended from David.

David's son, King Solomon (d.c. 930 B.C.E.) built the magnificent **Temple** in Jerusalem. It was dedicated to the One God



The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt—celebrated during the festival of Passover (*Pesach*)—is a central event in the history of the Jewish people. Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites were delivered from bondage and escaped from their pursuers on dry land when the Red Sea miraculously parted.

and here sacrifices were offered daily in praise of the Almighty and in atonement for Israel's sins. However, after the death of Solomon, the Ten Northern Tribes split away from the Two Southern and established their own kingdom. During the period of the Divided Kingdoms (930-722 B.C.E.) many of the Biblical Prophets were at work. Elijah (ninth century B.C.E.), Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah (all eighth century B.C.E.) warned the people of impending disaster. They were convinced that God would punish His people because they ignored His word, led wicked lives, and were not faithful to the Covenant. So powerful was Elijah in particular that he did not die, but was taken up to Heaven in a fiery chariot. It is still believed by the Orthodox that he is waiting to return to herald the days of the Messiah.

The prophecies proved to be all too accurate. In 721 B.C.E., the Assyrians (from modern day Iraq) destroyed the Northern Kingdom. The Ten Northern Tribes disappeared from history. Although legend maintained that they still survived in some far-away region and could yet be gathered together in the days of the messiah, the reality is that they intermarried with neighboring tribes and lost their national and religious identity. Then, in 586 B.C.E. the Babylonians, the successors of the Assyrians, conquered the Two Southern Tribes (Judah and Benjamin). They destroyed King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and they took the Jews into exile. It was a devastating experience. Nonetheless, sustained partly by the words of the Biblical Prophets and by the Law, the Jews survived. The Prophet Ezekiel comforted the people by reminding them of God's faithfulness: "I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of cloud and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land."⁵⁵

During the long years of exile from the Promised Land, the Jewish leaders built up a hope for the future. They looked for a kingly figure, a messiah, who would restore the nation to its former glory and put an end to all human conflict. More importantly, this period marked the flowering of the prophetic tradition. Not only did the Prophets condemn Jews for adopting

pagan practices, they also chided the people of Israel for their past misdeeds, and insisted that they return to the true spirit of the law, and not just empty rituals. The Prophets did not want Jews to ignore the rituals but sought to remind them of ethical obligations. Scholars see this as a deepening sophistication in Judaism, even a movement away from particularist features to a new universalism. At the same time, the Prophets also warned of the dangers to Jewish identity in a political arena full of enemies.

The Jewish leaders also seem to have developed the practice of meeting together on a regular basis. They could no longer offer sacrifices because the Temple was the only proper place for that, but they could come together to pray and to study the *Torah*. This was the start of the synagogue as an institution. Less than 70 years later, the Babylonians, in their turn, were conquered by the Persians (from modern-day Iran). Although many chose to remain where they were in the comforts of Babylon, a group of the faithful struggled back to the Promised Land. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel (a descendant of David) and the priest Haggai, they rebuilt the Temple. It was on a far smaller scale than the previous building, but sacrifice could be resumed. However, from that time on, there were two centers of world Jewry, Judaea (the old Southern Kingdom) centered on Jerusalem and the Dispersion, with its center in Babylonia.

Things were not easy for the returned exiles, but the situation was transformed by Nehemiah (fifth century B.C.E.) who was appointed governor of the land in 445 B.C.E. The scribe Ezra (fifth century B.C.E.) gathered the people together and read the Law to them. The listeners were transfixed. They were immediately determined to keep the festivals prescribed in the *Torah*: *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (weeks) and *Sukkot* (tabernacles). These were agricultural celebrations as well as commemorations of God's goodness in liberating the Jews from slavery, giving Moses the Law, and preserving the Israelites in the wilderness. In addition, Ezra insisted that the people divorce their foreign wives so that the land would be purged of idolatrous influences. Even today, the Jews see their faithfulness to the *Torah* and their

aversion to **intermarriage** as the cornerstones of their ethnic and religious survival as a people.

The Second Temple and the Dispersion

The Babylonians had not taken the entire Jewish population into Babylon, only the leaders and the affluent and influential. The "people of the land" had been left behind. They intermarried with people of other settled populations, but they retained their belief in the One God. When the exiles returned, these people had been eager to stress their relationship with the Jews and had offered to help rebuild the Temple. The Jews did not want their assistance. Once the **Samaritans**, as they came to be called, saw that they were not to be accepted as Israelites, they developed their own, separate, traditions. A small group survives to this day. They insist that their version of the *Torah* is the correct one and that their **High Priest** is descended from the family of Moses' brother Aaron, the first High Priest. In 333 B.C.E. they were given permission to build their own Temple on Mount Gerizim. They claim that this is the only place where it is permissible to offer sacrifice and that it was chosen by God. This Temple was destroyed by Jewish forces in around 128 B.C.E., but the Samaritans continue to offer the Passover sacrifice on their mountain and to practice their ancient form of Israelite religion.

Judaea itself continued to be occupied by foreign powers. In 333 B.C.E., the King of Persia was defeated by Alexander the Great (352–323 B.C.E.) of Macedonia (Northern Greece). Alexander's aim was to spread Greek culture throughout the world. He conquered a huge empire which extended from Greece to the borders of India and included Egypt and Babylonia. When he died of fever, his lands were divided between many generals. After 20 years of fighting the number of generals was reduced to three. Ptolemy I founded the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, Seleucus I the Seleucid dynasty in Mesopotamia, and Antigonos I the Antigonid dynasty in Asia

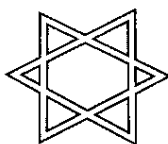
Minor and Macedonia. Initially, Judaea was under the control of the Ptolemies of Egypt. In general, the Ptolemies were tolerant of Jewish religious practice and there was a thriving Jewish community in the city of Alexandria on the Nile delta. Although these Egyptian Jews remained faithful to the God of their ancestors, they spoke Greek and enjoyed a fairly assimilated lifestyle. The Hebrew Scriptures were first rendered into Greek in Alexandria: the translation was known as the **Septuagint**. Alexandria was also the home of the eminent Jewish philosopher, Philo (c. 25 B.C.E.–40 C.E.) who tried to integrate Greek philosophy and Jewish religious teaching into a unified whole.

By 198 B.C.E. a Seleucid king, Antiochus III (reigned 223–187 B.C.E.), had taken over the control of Judaea. Although he did share the tolerant attitude of his predecessors, he was determined to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. Various measures were introduced such as Greek games in which the athletes competed naked. This was totally abhorrent to the Jewish tradition. The next monarch, Antiochus IV (reigned 175–163 B.C.E.) was even more insensitive. He occupied the city, banned circumcision, and plundered the Temple treasures. He rededicated the building to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, and he ordered that the sacrifices should include pigs, which the Jews regarded as ritually unclean (or unkosher). Conflict arose between those Jews who wished to liberalize Jewish practice in the interest of greater assimilation with the Greek world, and the Jewish traditionalists led by the priest Mattathias (d.c. 167 B.C.E.) and then by his sons, particularly Judas (known as *Maccabee*, the hammer, d.c. 160 B.C.E.). Antiochus' army supported the **Hellenizers** but the traditionalists succeeded in recapturing Jerusalem. Their first priority was to cleanse the Temple and to rededicate it to God. Supposedly there was only enough holy oil to sustain the great light for one day, but miraculously it lasted for eight. These events are commemorated at the winter festival of lights (*Hanukkah*). Today the community lights candles for eight days to celebrate this victory of the Jews over foreign influences.

ART FOCUS

Jewish

Art



THE SECOND OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS reads, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath..." (Exodus 20:4). This has largely been understood as a prohibition against any form of idolatry (excessive worship of images) and the making of any image of God. While Jews have been less strict than Muslims in their rejection of all pictorial art, there has been a general reluctance to reproduce the human figure or face in a religious context.



However, there is a strong craft tradition among the Jews. In many places, particularly in Islamic lands, Jews have been famous as metal workers and much care has been lavished on the production of ritual objects. Every Jewish home should have a *menorah* on the door (a small box containing a prescribed portion of Scripture). This may be made of silver, wood, glass, or plastic and an enormous variety of design exists. Similarly, most families possess a wine cup and a set of candlesticks; both necessary for the celebration of the Sabbath and other festivals. Again, there is no uniform design and they can be made of a variety of materials. Often they are objects of real beauty.

In the synagogue itself, it is customary to keep the Scrolls of the Law either in a metal case or in a cloth cover. Both may be richly decorated. Attached to the wooden Scrolls there may be elaborate metal finials (ornaments). These are often hung with bells, reminiscent of the priests' vestments in the Temple in Jerusalem. Alternatively they may be hung with crowns, symbolizing the fact that the *Torah*, the law, is the ruler of Jewish life. Over the cover is hung a silver breast-plate or shield, sometimes engraved with the Ten Commandments, but invariably a splendid example of the silversmith's art. Because the Scroll itself is regarded as sacred, the text is not touched by the human hand. Instead a pointer is used. This is often made of silver and is frequently fashioned in the shape of a pointing human hand.

Most characteristic of all is the seven-branched candlestick. This was part of the furnishings of the Temple in Jerusalem. As the relief on the Arch of Titus shows (see page 46), it was carried in triumph to Rome when the Temple was sacked in 70 C.E. It has remained a prominent symbol of Judaism and has appeared in many forms and been understood in different ways throughout the history of Judaism.

Ancient Jewish catacomb on the Appian Way, Rome. The practice of burying the dead in subterranean tunnels, with side recesses for tombs, originated with the Jews of Palestine.

Mattathias's descendants succeeded in founding a dynasty of both rulers and High Priests. The Seleucid kings were compelled to acknowledge the independence of Judaea and the kingdom was extended to include Idumaea, Galilee, and northern Trans-Jordan. The inhabitants of all these areas were compelled to convert to Judaism. But the Jewish empire was not to survive. By the middle of the first century B.C.E., the Romans had annexed Judaea and had turned it into a client state. Herod (73-4 B.C.E.), the son of an Idumean military governor of Judaea under the Romans, was an official in Galilee. When the Romans were expelled by the Parthians, Herod fled but returned with a Roman army in 37 B.C.E. to reconquer Judaea. He was then made King of Judaea by the Romans and he ruled until his death. Despite being a Jew by religion, he was detested by his people as a usurper. Nonetheless, he did a great deal for the country. He built the new port of Caesarea (named for his Roman master); he negotiated various privileges for the Jews of the Roman Empire; and he rebuilt the Temple on a splendid scale. It was magnificent. It contained an outer court where everyone, Jew and non-Jew, could mingle, another court for Jewish women, a further court for male Israelites, and a court of priests where the hierarchy offered the daily sacrifices. The innermost sanctuary was the **Holy of Holies**. This was hidden from sight by a curtain and it was only entered once a year by the High Priest on the **Day of Atonement** (*Yom Kippur*). There he would beg God's forgiveness on his people. Today the Day of Atonement with its preceding **Ten Days of Penitence** remains the most solemn season of the Jewish year.

The Temple was administered by the hereditary priests. They were said to have been descended from Moses' brother Aaron, to whom it was said "the priesthood shall be theirs by a perpetual statute." They were drawn from a group known as the **Sadducees**, who were possibly named for Zadok (tenth century B.C.E.), the High Priest of King Solomon who had also served under King David. They are mentioned in the **New Testament** and are described by the historian Josephus (c. 38-c. 100 C.E.). They upheld the complete authority of the Pentateuch and they

rejected the permanent validity of a body of oral interpretations of the law. As a result, they did not believe in such doctrines as the **Resurrection** of the dead since these developed as a result of discussing the complicated implications of the Biblical text. They were not a large group, but, as the aristocrats of the Jewish nation, they exerted a great deal of influence and as the group most in authority had to deal with the Romans. The **Pharisees** were quite different. They were described as scribes and sages and they were famous for their verbal interpretations of the sacred books. Regularly in the synagogues they expounded the deeper meanings of the Scriptures and, as the self-appointed moral leaders of the people, they devised a complex body of **Oral Law** over the years. By the first century B.C.E., every Judean village contained a synagogue where the people could gather together and listen to the Pharisees' sermons.

There were other sects in Judaea at the time. The **Essenes** were a monastic group who led ascetic lives while they waited for God's salvation. We know about them from Josephus and also because they were probably the original owners of the famous **Dead Sea Scrolls**. The **Zealots** were freedom fighters and political guerrillas. After the death of Herod in 4 B.C.E., Judaea was subject to a series of rulers and Roman governors. It was not a happy time. There was hostility between the rich and the poor, a series of famines, and an increased sense of messianic excitement. One sect in particular, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, was particularly imbued with this fervor. They claimed that the Kingdom of Heaven was dawning. After the crucifixion of Jesus, they hailed their martyred leader as the promised Messiah, believed in his resurrection, and in time broke away from other Jews to become a distinct and separate religion, Christianity. These events are described in the Christian New Testament, or the **Gospels**, and today Christianity is the world's largest religion.

Matters came to a head in 66 C.E. The Zealots raised a revolt and took control of the city of Jerusalem. The Roman armies marched in from the north and laid siege to the city. By late summer 70 C.E. the daily sacrifices were suspended, and on



The Arch of Titus was erected in 81 C.E. by the Roman senate in honor of Vespasian and Titus. It commemorates the Roman victory over the Jews in the year of 66-70 C.E.

August 24 the beautiful Temple of Herod went up in flames. After the devastation, all that remained standing was the extreme Western Wall. This remains the most sacred place in the Jewish world and is a goal of pilgrimage. Even secular Jews return to the land of their forefathers to say their prayers or just to stand in awe in front of the great Wall. Meanwhile the Zealots continued to hold out in the south, at the fortress of Masada. When the rebellion was finally subdued, the Romans held a triumphal procession through the streets of Rome displaying the spoils of the Temple. This is recorded on the Arch of Titus which still stands in the Roman *forum* (marketplace).

There was a further Jewish rebellion against Rome in 132 C.E., but this had been put down by 135 C.E. Around this time the Roman emperor Hadrian converted Jerusalem into a pagan city, and forbade Jews from living there. He also renamed the

province of Judaea as *Palestina*—Palestine—after the Jews' old enemy, the Philistines—a deliberate attempt to obliterate the connection between the land and the Jewish people. Scholars regard this as the definitive end of Jewish political sovereignty in their Promised Land, at least for the next 1800 years or so. The Jews had to come to terms with a new religious system which could no longer be centered on the Temple, the priesthood, and sacrifice. By this stage there were Jewish colonies in all the major urban centers around the Mediterranean Sea. Increasingly the Jewish religious establishment was to concentrate on the needs and developments of these growing Dispersion communities.

Rabbinic Judaism

With the Temple a charred ruin, Judaism could have disappeared like so many of the cults of the ancient world. Its survival was largely due to the vision and dedication of the Pharisees. During the siege of Jerusalem, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai (first century C.E.) escaped from the city and founded an academy on the coast at Javneh. There groups of scholars gathered to discuss, develop, and preserve the legal tradition. Under Johanan's successor, Gamaliel II (early second century C.E.), the supreme legal body of the Jews, the *Sanhedrin*, was reestablished and the learned came from far and near to listen to and participate in the debates. The canon of Scripture was decided, regular daily prayers were organized, and a system of rabbinical ordination for Jewish leaders was established.

Activities were only temporarily halted by the rebellion of 132-5 C.E., although the Javneh academy was transferred to Galilee. By the second century C.E., the oral interpretations of the law had become highly complex and Judah ha-Nasi (the patriarch) set himself the task of recording the debates and decisions on each particular topic. His official position and authority allowed his book of legal opinions, the *Mishnah*, to become the officially accepted one. The text of this great law

book is divided into six orders: *Zeraim* dealing with the laws of agriculture, *Moed* with the laws of Sabbaths, fasts and festivals, *Nashim* with the laws of marriage and divorce, *Nesikin* with the civil and criminal law, *Kodashim* with the laws of Temple ritual and sacrifice, and *Tahorot* with the laws of ritual purity. It is not merely a summary of conclusions. The debates are recorded with the minority view expressed first ("Rabbi Simeon says...") and each account ends with the final conclusion ("But the sages declare..."). It is an astonishing piece of work and by accomplishing it, Judah ha-Nasi provided a solid foundation upon which further discussion could be based.

At that time the Jewish leaders were also preoccupied with the correct interpretation of the Scriptures. The rabbinic interpretation of Holy Writ is known as *Midrash*. Since the Pentateuch, in particular, is regarded as the Word of God, it is vital that it should be correctly understood. Various experts devised rules for exegesis so that conflict could be avoided. For example, the fourth of the Ten Commandments reads: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God." By following the rules, the rabbis decided that there were 39 different types of work to be avoided. These include harvesting and kindling a fire, which is why Orthodox Jews today will neither pick a flower nor turn on an electric light during the Sabbath.

Meanwhile, other scholars founded centers elsewhere. In Galilee there were well-known academies in Tiberias, Caesarea, and Sepphoris. The Jewish community of Babylonia was not to be left behind. There the king recognized the community leader and gave him the title of *Exilarch*. This was an hereditary office and its holders claimed to be related to King Jehoiachin (sixth century B.C.E.), the last Judean king of Davidic descent.

At the same time famous schools of learning were established at Sura in Central Mesopotamia and Pumbedita on the river Euphrates. The heads of these academies held the title of *Gaon*. Together with the Exilarch, the *Gaonim* controlled the powerful Babylonian community. These scholars were not known

as rabbi; this was a title only bestowed by the laying on of hands at ordination and it only applied in Judaea. Babylonian authorities were known as *Rave*. It should be pointed out that the modern title of rabbi is used somewhat differently. Today a rabbi is one learned in Jewish law, who has been ordained to teach and preach and who generally serves a congregation full time. The Judean and Babylonian scholars almost invariably had secular occupations from which they gained their livelihood. Only in the Middle Ages did the title "rabbi" come to mean the spiritual leader of a particular Jewish community.

The work of interpreting the law continued. By the end of the fourth century C.E., the rabbis of Judaea had assembled the teachings of further generations of scholars on four of the six orders of the *Mishnah*. The additional material was described as *Gemara* (completion) and the whole is known as the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) *Talmud*. The same work was being accomplished in Babylonia. The Babylonian *Talmud* was completed in the sixth century C.E. It is nearly four times as long as its Palestinian counterpart and is considered to be more authoritative because of the lasting influence of the Babylonian schools and Exilarchate well into the Muslim period. It is quite extraordinary. Not only does it record the legal judgments and debates, it contains information on medicine, history, science, and agriculture. There are proverbs and fairy tales, folk legends, and rules of etiquette. It has been compared with a great sea with its constant free association of ideas. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was the main study of the Babylonian academies and it spread throughout the Jewish world. To this day it remains the main text in the Orthodox *Yeshivot* and many enjoy dipping into its riches. Even though many of its provisions are no longer relevant—such as those pertaining to the Temple and Priesthood—they are still read. Within the Orthodox community today, *Talmudic* study remains a lifetime commitment.

However, not all Jews regarded this development of the Oral Law with favor. In the days of the Temple, the aristocratic Sadducees believed that only the **Written Law** was authoritative and that later oral interpretation could be ignored. It seems

that despite the efforts of the Palestinian and Babylonian sages, this strand of opinion survived within the community. In c. 760 C.E. Anan ben David, who had been passed over for the Exilarchate, set up his own alternative movement. Anan's principle was "Search thoroughly in the *Torah* and do not rely on my opinion." He insisted that the whole law was to be found in the Scriptures and not in rabbinical interpretation. Gradually the movement spread. Adherents were known as the *Karaites* and by the tenth century, communities were established in Egypt, North Africa, Persia, Babylonia, and Palestine. The rabbis resisted this incursion, but failed to stamp it out. Many eminent Biblical scholars of the early Middle Ages were of Karaite origin and they were as persecuted as their **Rabbanite** co-religionists in the Christian *crusades*, which sought to evict the Muslims from Palestine. By the sixteenth century, however, their numbers were in decline and by the mid twentieth century communities survived only in the Crimea, Egypt, and a few in Eastern Europe. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 made a difference. They were regarded as eligible for immigration under the Law of Return and many took advantage of this. Today there is a community of approximately 7000 Karaites living in Israel. They maintain their own customs, have their own ritual butchers, and support their own religious court. But both by the laws of Israel, and by their own custom, they are not allowed to intermarry with the Israeli population.

The Growth and Challenge of Christianity

Today there are Jews living all over the world. We know that by the first century C.E. there were communities in all the major cities of the Mediterranean. The Christian missionary Paul (first century C.E.) wrote of his plans to visit Spain in his Epistle to the Romans,⁸ and since he always preached first to the Jews, we must presume that there were Jewish colonies in the west. In the early days, Judaism itself seems to have been a missionary religion. In the New Testament, Jesus described the Pharisees

crossing "land and sea to make a single **proselyte** [convert]." All this changed in the fourth century once Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christians felt that their New Testament added to and "completed" the Old Testament. As Christian theology developed, it emphasized that by accepting the Kingship of Jesus, Christians, and no longer the Jews, were the elected nation of God. In addition the conversion of Gentiles to the new faith, and the adoption of Hellenistic ideas, made the rift between them and their Jewish antecedents irreparable.

The early Christians believed that they were the true inheritors of the privileges of Israel and that the Jews were hard-hearted and blind in their rejection of their own Messiah. By the time the Gospels were written, the Jews were perceived as demonic. For polemical reasons, the New Testament writers interpolated conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leaders into their narratives. Blame for the death of Jesus was placed squarely on the Jews—"His blood be on us and on our children"⁹—and the seeds were sown for nearly 20 centuries of Christian antisemitism.

In Christian Europe, the Jewish communities were self-contained units. The Christian rulers allowed each area to establish its own rules and by the tenth century there were important centers of Jewish learning in Northern France and in the Rhinelands. Jews had settled in England at the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 and there were small communities throughout France, and the Holy Roman Empire (present-day Netherlands, Germany, and Austria). Important scholars included the great Biblical commentator Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, 1040-1105), whose work on the Scriptures and the *Talmud* are still standard texts today. Yet Jewish existence in Christian Europe was never secure. The Church continued to teach that it was the Jewish people alone who were responsible for the death of the Christian Messiah, Jesus, and there were periodic outbreaks of violence against the community.

The situation was made worse by the crusades. By the eleventh century, the Muslim Turks were in control of the Holy

Land and the Christian holy places. The princes of Europe were encouraged by the Church to send armies to fight the Infidel. If it was meritorious to slaughter Muslims abroad, then it seemed only logical to harass the Jews at home, because both were considered infidels. Then, when the Black Death raged through the continent in the fourteenth century, the Jews were widely accused of causing the disease by poisoning the wells. Terrible accusations were made against them.

As early as 1144, the community of Norwich, England, was charged with using the blood of Christian children in the manufacture of Passover unleavened bread. The *Blood Libel*, as it was called, spread throughout Europe. The entire community was expelled from England in 1290; a few years later the French King evicted all the Jews from the French crown lands. In 1298 Christian mobs destroyed approximately 150 Jewish settlements in Germany. Then, in 1492, after the Christian monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella had driven out the Muslim rulers from Spain, they also evicted the ancient and successful Jewish community from their dominions.

This made the hospitality of Poland seem very attractive. Here from the thirteenth century, the Jews were protected. They were used by the great Polish nobles to collect taxes and manage the huge estates. The religious wars of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century also led to the migration of Jews from central to Eastern Europe. By the end of the sixteenth century the Jewish communities of Poland and the Baltic States were the largest and most powerful in Europe. They benefited from a system of communal autonomy. *Yiddish* (a German and Hebrew language written in Hebrew characters) was the common language and the rabbis ran their own religious courts and *yeshivot*.

Meanwhile the Jews had fared differently in the Muslim countries. The founder of Islam in southern Arabia, Muhammad (c. 590-632), had hoped that the Jews would accept his message. Like them, he taught that God is One, and he adopted certain Jewish rituals such as a fast day, similar to the Day of Atonement. Like the Jews, the Muslims may not eat pork, they

have fixed times for prayer, and they reject the worship of images. Much of Muhammad's original legislation was similar to the Jewish *halakha* (law) and, like the Jews, the Muslims have an extensive tradition of Oral Law. Nonetheless, the Jews of Arabia were not prepared to acknowledge that Muhammad was God's Prophet, and in consequence Muhammad became hostile to them. In particular, the Jewish community of Medina was expelled and destroyed.

Despite this unfortunate beginning, Muslim rulers have generally been tolerant toward the Jews and have seen their value. Since they were **monotheists** (believers in one God), they were not regarded as infidels and there was no obligation to fight a holy war against them. Although there were negative incidents, generally the Jews were allowed to live in Muslim territory and enjoy religious freedom. In return they were expected to wear distinctive clothing which marked them out as Jews, they were not allowed to make converts, and they were obliged to pay an additional annual poll tax. This, of course, had the effect of maintaining their distinctive identity. There were many successful communities living in Muslim lands throughout the Middle Ages.

In the Iberian peninsula there were poets such as Judah Halevi (1075-1141), Moses ibn Ezra (c. 1055-c. 1135), and Solomon ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-c. 1056), and philosophers such as Bahya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda (c. 1050-1120), Abraham ben David Halevi ibn Daud (c. 1110-80), and Hasdai Crescas (1340-1412). Most famous of all was Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204). He not only produced a comprehensive codification of the corpus of the Jewish law (the *Mishneh Torah*), but his philosophical work, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, set the tone for all subsequent debate. However, the glory of Spanish Jewry was not to last. After Spain was conquered by the Christians, there was a period of uncertainty. Then in 1492 all the Jews were expelled from Spanish soil. The only reprieve was baptism. The members of this rich, cultured, and successful community were scattered. Some went to North Africa, some to Italy, some to Holland, and others to Turkey.

The Sephardim and Ashkenazim

By this time, it was clear that two different traditions were existing side by side. Jews who traced their descent from ancestors who had settled in Christian Europe in the Middle Ages were known as the *Ashkenazim* ("German"). They lived in the German States and, after the persecutions, in Austria, Poland, the Baltic States, and Russia. Meanwhile, those who were descended from the Jews of Spain, North Africa, and Babylonia were known as the *Sephardim* ("Oriental"). Each group fully recognized the other's Jewishness, but they used different liturgical rites and had many different customs. There were local differences even within the broader *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi* communities. The *Ashkenazim* composed hymns, known as *Piyutin*, and penitential prayers (*Seihot*). They were known for their piety, their strict adherence to Jewish law, and their *Talmudic* scholarship. The *Sephardim*, on the other hand, were thought to be more open to secular culture and were known for their legal codes and their liturgical creativity. This may have been because their host culture was more open to participation of the *Sephardim* in their culture. The difference is well illustrated by the seventeenth-century communities of the Dutch city of Amsterdam. The original community was *Ashkenazi*, but, after the great expulsion, many Spanish Jews settled there. Contemporary engravings of the Spanish and German synagogues show the Spanish congregation as far more affluent, genteel, and worldly; indeed the worshipers look as if they are dressed for a gala theatrical performance. The German synagogue was darker and smaller; the women were banished to a remote balcony and there was an atmosphere of intense piety. The differences in custom were openly acknowledged. When the Sephardic legal authority Joseph Caro (1488–1575) published his great code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh* ("Prepared Table"), Moses Isserles (1525–72) had to add a supplement to make it acceptable to the *Ashkenazim*. Having said that, it is remarkable how consistent the essential Jewish laws were in the two communities.

The population of the modern State of Israel is a mixture of *Sephardim* and *Ashkenazim*. When the State was founded in 1948, it was seen primarily as a refuge for the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust—the *Ashkenazim*. In fact, many of the *Sephardim* communities living in Arab-ruled countries were then so harassed by their rulers that they took the opportunity to immigrate.