



Change and Evolution

Stages in the Development of Judaism: A Historical Perspective

As the timeline chart presented earlier demonstrates, the development of the Jewish faith and tradition which occurred over thousands of years was affected by a number of developments and events that took place over that period.

As with other faiths, the scriptures or oral historical records of the development of the religion may not be supported by the contemporary archaeological, historical, or scientific theories and available data or artifacts. The historical development of the Jewish religion and beliefs is subject to debate between archeologists, historians, and biblical scholars. Scholars have developed ideas and theories about the development of Jewish history and religion. The reason for this diversity of opinion and perspectives is rooted in the lack of historical materials, and the illusive nature, ambiguity, and ambivalence of the relevant data.

Generally, there is limited information about Jewish history before the time of King David (1010–970 BCE) and almost no reliable biblical evidence regarding what religious beliefs and behaviour were before those reflected in the *Torah*. As the *Torah* was only finalized in the early Persian period (late 6th–5th centuries BCE), the evidence of the *Torah* is most relevant to early Second Temple Judaism. As well, the Judaism reflected in the *Torah* would seem to be generally similar to that later practiced by the Sadducees and Samaritans.

By drawing on archeological information and the analysis of Jewish Scriptures, scholars have developed theories about the origins and development of Judaism.

Over time, there have been many different views regarding the key periods of the development of Judaism. For the purpose of this document, we will describe the historical development of Judaism as undergoing the following distinct phases or periods:

1. Early Roots
2. Mosaic Stage
3. Monotheism (1300–1000 BCE)
4. Hellenistic Judaism (400 BCE–200 CE)
5. Rabbinic Judaism (200–1700 CE)

Early Roots

The early development of the Hebrew religion and its related worship before the migration from Egypt is not clear or well-known and, as a result, is often debated. The origins of Judaism have been traced back to the Bronze Age. It is believed to have emerged from the polytheistic ancient Semitic religions.

Judaic history is silent about Hebrew practice and worship during the time in Egypt. A single religious observance remains from this period: Passover. Passover commemorates an event in Egypt that took place shortly before the migration: the sparing of the Hebrews when God destroyed all the first-born sons in the land of Egypt.

The early Hebrew religion was likely polytheistic and a local variety of the pattern found in Iron Age Phoenicia in which there was a triad of deities. These deities were

1. a protective god of the city (often El)
2. a goddess, often El's wife or companion (in Ugarit and Israel Asherah), who symbolizes the fertile earth
3. a young god (in Ugarit and Israel Baal who was usually the goddess' or El's and the goddess' son) whose resurrection expresses the annual cycle of vegetation

Mosaic Stage: National Monolatry (1300–1000 BCE)

During the Iron Age (1300–700 BCE), the Israelite religion became distinct from other Canaanite religions due to the unique proto-monotheistic worship of *Yahweh*.

According to Jewish history, as narrated in Exodus, the second book of the *Torah*, the Hebrews became a nation and adopted a national god on the slopes of Mount Sinai in southern Arabia. While little is known about Hebrew life in Egypt, the flight from Egypt is described in Jewish history with great detail. The migration from Egypt itself creates a new entity in history, the Israelites. Exodus is the first place in the *Torah* which refers to the Jews as being a single national group, the *bene yisrael*, or children of Israel.

The *Yahweh* religion is learned when the mass of Jews collect at Mount Sinai in Midian (located in the southern regions of the Arabian Peninsula). During this period, Moses teaches the Hebrews the name of their god and brings them the laws that, as the chosen people, they must observe.

Scholars disagree greatly about the origin of the *Yahweh* religion and the identity of its founder, Moses. While Moses is an Egyptian name, the religion itself likely comes from Midian because Moses lived for a time with a Midianite priest, Jethro, at the foot of Mount Sinai. It appears that the Midianites had already developed a religion centered on *Yahweh* at this point and they worshiped the god of Mount Sinai as a form of a powerful deity of nature. It is, therefore, possible that the Hebrews picked up the *Yahweh* religion from another group of Semites and that this *Yahweh* religion slowly developed into the central religion of the Hebrews.

In Hebrew history, during the migration from Egypt and for two centuries afterwards, the Hebrews followed many religions, to different degrees.

The Jewish religion at that point was initially a monolatrous religion (a belief in the existence of many gods but with the consistent worship of only one deity). While the Hebrews were asked to worship no deity but *Yahweh*, there is no evidence that the existence of other gods was denied. The account of the migration contains numerous references, by the historical characters, to other gods. Also, the first law of the *Decalogue* is that no gods be put before *Yahweh*, not that no other gods exist. Consequently, while still controversial, most scholars have reached the conclusion that, for about two hundred years, the initial Mosaic religion was a monolatrous religion.

The Prophetic Revolution (800–600 BCE)

During this period where the Hebrews settled in Palestine, after over two centuries of sporadic conflict with indigenous peoples, a damaging civil war, and the constant presence of threats, the disparate Hebrew settlers of Palestine began to long for a unified state under a single monarch. This desire would lead to the first major crisis in the Hebrew world view, the formation of a Hebrew monarchy.

However, by desiring to have a king, the tribes of Israel were committing a serious act of disobedience towards *Yahweh*, as this suggested that they were choosing a human being and human laws instead of *Yahweh* and *Yahweh's* laws.

In the books of Samuel in the account of the formation of the monarchy, Samuel tells the Israelites that they are committing an act of disobedience for which they will dearly pay. Ignoring Samuel's warnings, they push ahead with the monarchy. Saul, the first monarch is disobedient towards *Yahweh's* commands and falls out with both Samuel and *Yahweh*, and gradually becomes a despot. This pattern—the conflict between *Yahweh* and the kings of Israel and Judah—becomes the historical pattern in the Hebrew stories of the prophetic revolution.

This leads to a group of religious leaders addressing the crisis created by the institution of the monarchy by reimagining and redirecting the *Yahweh* religion during this period. These religious reformers were called *nivi'im*, or prophets. The most important of these prophets were Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah (who is actually three people: Isaiah and "Second Isaiah" [Deutero-Isaiah], and a third, post-exilic Isaiah, and Micah). These, and a number of lesser prophets, are as important to the Hebrew religion as Moses.

The innovations of the prophets can be grouped into the following three large categories:

- **Monotheism:** The prophets clearly designate *Yahweh* as the one and only God of the universe. *Yahweh* ruled the entire universe and all the peoples in it, whether or not they recognized and worshipped *Yahweh*. The *Yahweh* religion as a monotheistic religion is concretized during the prophetic revolution.

- **Righteousness:** While *Yahweh* was first seen and described as having many human aspects and sometimes failings (e.g., sometimes angry and violent), the *Yahweh* of the prophets can do nothing but good and what is right and just. *Yahweh* becomes a God of righteousness. In this concept of God, the good and the just are always rewarded, and the evil are always punished. The evil in the world is the result of human action.
- **Ethics:** Earlier practices were concerned with the cultic rules to be followed by the Israelites; the prophets re-centered the religion around ethics. Ritual practices became less important than ethical demands that *Yahweh* requires of humans.

The prophets and the historical forces which led to their innovations are important to understand. The emergence of a Hebrew monarchy brought with it all the evils of a centralized state: arbitrary power, vast inequality of wealth, poverty in the midst of plenty, heavy taxation, slavery, bribery, and fear. The prophets were specifically addressing these corrupt and fearsome aspects of the Jewish state. In doing so, they created a new religion, a monotheistic religion, centered on distinguishing right and wrong.

Post-Exilic Religion (600 BCE–400 BCE)

The defeat and exile of the Jewish people during this period had an enormous impact on Jewish religion and culture. Defeated by the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC, the Judean population was partially exiled to Babylon. This was followed by Nebuchadnezzar returning, laying siege to Jerusalem, and burning it down along with the Temple.

These events shook the Hebrews world view. They had been promised the land of Palestine by their God and the covenant between *Yahweh* and Abraham promised them *Yahweh's* protection.

The literature of the Exile and the time shortly after demonstrates the despair and confusion of the population uprooted from its homeland. In *Lamentations* and various *Psalms*, we get a profound picture of the sufferings of those left in Judea, who coped with starvation and massive privation, and the community of Hebrews wandering Babylon. In *Job*, a story written a century or so after the Exile, the central character suffers endless calamities—when he finally despairs of *Yahweh's* justice, his only answer is that *Yahweh* is not to be questioned.

The Hebrew religion shifted profoundly in the years of *Exile*. A small group of religious reformers believed that the calamities suffered by the Jews were due to the corruption of their religion and ethics. These religious reformers reoriented Jewish religion around the *Torah*, the five books of Moses. These five books represented all the law that Hebrews should follow. These laws, mainly centered on cultic practices, should remain pure and unsullied if the Jews wished to return to their homeland and keep it.

Post-exile Jewish religion was about reform, an attempt to return religious and social practice back to its original nature. This reform was accelerated by the return to Judaea itself; when Cyrus the Persian conquered the Chaldeans in 539,

he set about re-establishing religions in their native lands. This included the Hebrew religion. Cyrus ordered Jerusalem and the Temple to be rebuilt and, in 538 BC, he sent the Judaeans home to Jerusalem for the express purpose of worshipping *Yahweh*. The reformers then occupied a central place in Jewish thought and life all during the Persian years (539–332 BCE).

However, more changes were to come. While the reformers were busy trying to purify the Hebrew religion, the Persian religion (Zoroastrianism) began to impact on Jewish peoples. Zoroastrianism offered a world view that both explained and tempered the tragedies such as the *Exile*. It seems that the Hebrews adopted some of this world view in the face of the profound disasters they had weathered.

Zoroastrianism, founded in the seventh century BCE by a Persian prophet named Zarathustra (Zoroaster is his Greek name), was a dualistic, eschatological, and apocalyptic religion. After the Exile, popular religion among the Judeans and the Jews of the Diaspora included several innovations that draw on Zoroastrianism.

- **Dualism:** After the *Exile*, the Hebrews adopt a concept of a more or less dualistic universe, in which all good and right comes from *Yahweh*, while all evil arises from a powerful principle of evil. Such a dualistic view of the universe helps to explain tragedies such as the *Exile*.
- **Eschatology and Apocalypticism:** Popular Jewish religion begins to form an elaborate theology of the end of time, in which a deliverer would defeat once and for all the forces of evil and unrighteousness.
- **Messianism:** Concurrent with the new eschatology, there is much talk of a deliverer who is called *messiah*, or anointed one. In Hebrew culture, only the head priest and the king were anointed, so this *messiah* often combined the functions of both religious and military leader.
- **Otherworldliness:** Popular Judaism adopts an elaborate afterlife. Since justice does not seem to occur in this world, it is only logical that it will occur in another world. The afterlife becomes the place where good is rewarded and evil eternally punished.



Figure 16: Maurycy Gottlieb—Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur

Hellenistic Judaism and Roman Rule (400 BCE–200 CE)

Palestine was conquered by Alexander the Great in 322 BCE and came under Greek control. It was later conquered by the Romans and was under their control from 63 BCE–135 CE.

After being conquered by Alexander the Great (332 BCE), Palestine became part of the Hellenistic kingdom of Ptolemaic Egypt, the policy of which was to permit the Jews considerable cultural and religious freedom. When, in 198 BCE, Palestine was conquered by King Antiochus III (247-187 BCE) of the Syrian Seleucid dynasty, the Jews were treated even more liberally, being granted a charter to govern themselves by their own constitution, namely, the *Torah*. Despite this freedom, Hellenistic beliefs and culture began to have a significant impact on the people of Palestine.

Following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, and the expulsion of the Jews, Jewish worship stopped being centrally organized around the Temple, prayer took the place of sacrifice, and worship was rebuilt around the community (represented by a minimum of ten adult men) and the establishment of the authority of *rabbis* who acted as teachers and leaders of individual communities.

Post-Temple Stage: *Rabbinic* Judaism (200 CE–1750 CE)

Rabbinic Judaism develops after the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile and dispersal of Jews from their lands. *Rabbinic* Judaism has been the mainstream form of Judaism since the 6th century CE, after the codification of the Babylonian *Talmud*.

From the 3rd to 6th centuries CE, the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible and the *Talmud* were compiled. As there were various versions of the Hebrew Bible, for *Rabbinic* Judaism, the Masoretic Text (MT) is considered the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the *Tanakh*. However, contemporary scholars seeking to understand the history of the Hebrew Bible's text will draw on a number of other resources such as Greek and Syriac translations of the Hebrew Bible, quotations from rabbinic manuscripts, the *Samaritan Pentateuch* and others such as the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. It is important to note that many of these are older than the Masoretic text and often contradict it.

Due largely to the censoring and burning of manuscripts in medieval Europe, the oldest existing manuscripts of various *rabbinical* works are quite late. The oldest surviving complete manuscript copy of the *Babylonian Talmud* is dated to 1342 CE.

Prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, there were a number of small Jewish sects such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and followers of Jesus; however, after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, these sects took different paths or broke off from Judaism.

Following from Pharisaic Judaism, *Rabbinic* Judaism is based on the belief that, at Mount Sinai, Moses received from God the *Written Torah* (*Pentateuch*) in addition to an oral explanation, known as the *Oral Torah*, which Moses transmitted to the people. In contrast Sadducees, Karaite Judaism, and Samaritanism, do not recognize the oral law as having divine authority nor do they accept the *rabbinic* procedures used to interpret Jewish scripture.

Although today there are significant differences among Jewish denominations of *Rabbinic* Judaism with respect to the binding force of *halakha* (Jewish religious law) and the willingness to challenge preceding interpretations, all identify themselves as coming from the tradition of the oral law and the rabbinic method of analysis. It is this aspect which distinguishes them as *Rabbinic* Jews, in comparison to Karaite Judaism.

The Sadducees believed that only the *Written Torah* was divinely inspired and dismissed some other core tenets of the Pharisees. The sect was an important aspect of the upper social and economic echelon of Judean society and fulfilled various political, social, and religious roles, including maintaining the Temple. The sect is believed to have become extinct sometime after the destruction of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

While Samaritanism is a similar and related religion, it is traditionally considered separate from Judaism. Samaritans believe that they are the direct descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh from the northern Kingdom of Israel, which was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE. They also believe that their worship, which is based on the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, is the true religion of the ancient Israelites from the time before Babylonian captivity, preserved by those who remained in the Land of Israel. In contrast, they see Judaism to be a related but altered and amended religion, brought back by those returning from the Babylonian Captivity. The Samaritans believe that Mount Gerizim was the original Holy Place of Israel from the time that Joshua conquered Canaan (Israel). The major issue between Jews and Samaritans has always been the location of the Chosen Place to worship God: Mount Zion in Jerusalem according to the Jewish faith or Mount Gerizim according to the Samaritan faith. Once a large community, the Samaritan population today is estimated to be fewer than 1,000 persons.

Like the Sadducees who relied only on the *Torah*, some Jews in the 8th and 9th centuries rejected the authority and divine inspiration of the oral law as recorded in the *Mishnah* (and developed by later *rabbis* in the two *Talmuds*), relying instead only upon the Tanakh. These included the Isunians, the Yudganites, the Malikites, and others. They soon developed oral traditions of their own, which differed from the *rabbinic* traditions, and eventually formed the Karaite sect. Karaites exist in small numbers today, mostly living in Israel. Rabbinical and Karaite Jews each hold that the others are Jews, but that the other faith is erroneous.

Over a long time, Jews formed distinct ethnic groups in several different geographic areas. Some of these groups are the Ashkenazi (of central and Eastern Europe), the Sephardi (of Spain, Portugal, and North Africa), the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, and the Yemenite Jews from the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Many of these groups have developed differences in their prayers, traditions, and accepted canons; however, these distinctions are mainly the result of their being formed at some cultural distance from normative (*rabbinic*) Judaism, rather than based on any doctrinal dispute.

Modern Judaism (1750–present)

As indicated earlier, modern Judaism is founded on *Rabbinical* Judaism. However, beginning in the 18th and 19th centuries, movements developed that resulted in the development of the four major divisions that exist in Judaism today.

Jews in Europe were affected by the intellectual, social, and political movements of the late 18th century that swept Europe and the rest of the World, and that we now know as the *Enlightenment*. These movements advocated scientific thinking and free thought, and encouraged people to question previously unshaken religious dogmas. The emancipation of the Jews in many European communities and the *Haskalah* movement started by Moses Mendelssohn brought *Enlightenment* to the Jewish communities.

Reform Judaism grew out of *Enlightenment* and was an attempt to respond to the challenges of integrating Jewish life with *Enlightenment* values. German Jews in the early 19th century began to develop the concept of Reform Judaism, adapting Jewish practice to the new conditions of an increasingly urbanized and secular community.

The ideas of Reform Judaism were not accepted by all. Some were strongly opposed to the Reform movement and became known as being Orthodox Jews. Later, some members of the Reform movement felt that Reform Judaism had gone too far and was moving away from tradition too quickly. This led to them forming the Conservative movement.

Orthodox Jews who were sympathetic to the *Haskalah* formed what became known as neo-Orthodox or modern Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews who opposed the *Haskalah* became known as Haredi Jews.

These major contemporary divisions in Judaism are discussed in the section that follows.