



Significant Persons/ Founders

Historical Figures

Abraham

According to Jewish tradition, Abraham was born under the name Abram in the city of Ur in Babylonia in the year 1948 from Creation (circa 1800 BCE). He was the son of Terach, an idol merchant; however, from his early childhood, he questioned the faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single Creator, and he began to teach this belief to others.

Eventually, the one true Creator that Abram had worshipped called to him and made him an offer: if Abram would leave his home and his family, then God would make him a great nation and bless him. Abram accepted this offer, and the covenant between God and the Jewish people was established. Abram was subjected to ten tests of faith to prove his worthiness for this covenant.

God promised the land of Israel to Abram's descendants. Abram was growing old and his beloved wife, Sarai, was past child-bearing years. She therefore offered her maidservant, Hagar, as a wife to Abram. (This was a common practice in the region at the time.) Hagar bore Abram a son, Ishmael, who, according to both Muslim and Jewish tradition, is the ancestor of the Arabs.

When Abram was 100 and Sarai 90, God promised Abram a son by Sarai. God changed Abram's name to Abraham (father of many), and Sarai's to Sarah (from "my princess" to "princess"). Sarah bore Abraham a son, Isaac, who was the ancestor of the Jewish people. Abraham died at the age of 175.

Jacob

Isaac's wife Rebecca (Rivka) gave birth to fraternal twin sons: Jacob (Ya'akov) and Esau. Esau had little regard for the spiritual heritage of his forefathers, and sold his birthright of spiritual leadership to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew. An angel of God later blessed Jacob and gave him the name "Israel".

Jacob married Leah and later her sister Rachel, as well as Rachel's and Leah's maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Between these four women, Jacob fathered

12 sons and one daughter. These 12 sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin) are the ancestors of the tribes of Israel, and the ones for whom the tribes are named. The Jewish people are generally referred to as the Children of Israel, signifying their descent from Jacob.

Moses (c.1391–c.1271 BCE)

Along with God, it is the figure of Moses who dominates the *Torah*. Acting at God's behest, it is he who leads the Jews out of slavery under Pharaoh's rule, unleashes the Ten Plagues against Egypt, guides the freed slaves for forty years in the wilderness, carries down the law from Mount Sinai, and prepares the Jews to enter the land of Canaan. Without Moses, there would be little apart from laws to write about in the last four books of the *Torah*.

The saddest event in Moses' life might well be God prohibiting him from entering the land of Israel. An act of disobedience to God while in the desert is generally offered as the explanation for this harsh punishment.

Despite challenging episodes, Moses impressed his monotheistic vision upon the Jews with much force for the succeeding three millennia. No one knows Moses' burial place to this day.



Figure 23: Rembrandt-Moses with the Ten Commandments

Rashi (1040–1105 CE)

Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Shlomo Yitzhaki) is widely known as Rashi. He is considered to be the greatest European Jewish scholar and teacher of medieval times and one of the most influential and widely read Jewish commentators. He was born and died in Troyes, Champagne, in northern France.

In 1070, he founded a *yeshiva* (Jewish religious school) and taught many students, some of which also became prominent Jewish scholars. Sadly, in 1096, Rashi's family became the victims of the Crusades and the persecution of the Jews that took place throughout Europe. He witnessed the massacre of many friends and family members at the hands of Crusaders en route to the Holy Land.

Rashi is best known for his comprehensive commentaries on the *Bible* and the *Babylonian Talmud*. From the 1520s until today, few editions of the *Talmud* that have been published do not feature Rashi's commentary in the margins. His commentaries on the *Hebrew Bible* are considered to be foundational elements of Jewish education to this day. In addition to his commentaries, Rashi also wrote

responses on a range of Jewish religious questions, as well as devotional poetry.

Rashi's fame and influence is a result of his concise explanatory style and clarity of explanations. His commentaries effectively combine an explanatory style that clearly describes the simple meaning of the text and an interpretive style that further expands and clarifies the meaning of religious texts and complex ideas.

Rashi is also known for his position on the role of women in Judaism. As a scholar, he was one of the few at the time who was willing to make changes for the benefit of women's rights, even where the Jewish religious texts and sources were not favourable to women. Rashi saw women as being 'godly folk' and, while he was not immune to prejudicial opinions about women in the sources, he is seen as being relatively open and considerate towards women within the Jewish tradition.

While he primarily wrote in Hebrew, he sometimes created his own terms in his commentaries and he frequently translated Hebrew terms into French, writing the French in Hebrew script with the intention of instructing his French-speaking students and followers with respect to various subjects, but especially those that impacted daily life, such as *Shabbat* observance, kosher laws, and relations with non-Jews.

Maimonides/Rambam (1135–1204 CE)

Maimonides was a twelfth century Jewish sage credited with amazing writings and achievements. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah* (which later served as the model for the *Shulkhan Arukh*); he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism. He published a commentary on the entire *Mishna*; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and served as the leader of Cairo's Jewish community.

Maimonides' full name was Moses ben Maimon. In Hebrew, he is known by the acronym of *Rabbi* Moses ben Maimon, Rambam. He was born in Spain, but to avoid persecution by the Muslim sect in power, he fled with his family, first to Morocco, later to Israel, and finally to Egypt.

To this day, Maimonides is one of the most widely studied Jewish scholars. Maimonides was one of the few Jewish thinkers whose teachings also influenced the non-Jewish world; much of his philosophical writings were about God and other theological issues of general, not exclusively Jewish, interest.



Figure 24: Israeli postage stamp depicting medieval Jewish scientist and philosopher Maimonides (Rav Moses ben Maimon, RAMBAM)

Nachmanides/Ramban (1194–1270)

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Nachmanides, was the foremost *halakhist* of his age. Like Maimonides before him, Nachmanides was a Spaniard who was both a physician and a great *Torah* scholar. However, unlike the rationalist Maimonides, Nachmanides had a strong mystical bent. His biblical commentaries are the first ones to incorporate the mystical teachings of *kabbalah*.

Nachmanides could be described as one of history's first Zionists, because he declared that it is a commandment to take possession of Israel and to live in it (relying on the *Torah*). Nachmanides fulfilled this commandment, moving to the Holy Land during the Crusades after he was expelled from Spain for his polemics. He found devastation in the Holy Land, "but even in this destruction," he said, "it is a blessed land." He died there in 1270 C.E.

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904)

Theodor (Binyamin Ze'ev) Herzl was the visionary behind modern Zionism and the reinstatement of a Jewish homeland. Herzl was an Austro-Hungarian journalist and writer. He coined the phrase "If you will, it is no fairytale," which became the motto of the Zionist movement. Although at the time no one could have imagined it, Zionism led, only fifty years later, to the establishment of the independent State of Israel. Herzl died and was buried in Austria. In his will, he requested to be buried in the state of Israel. In 1949, after Israel's establishment, his remains were brought and buried in Jerusalem on a mountain that was then renamed in his honour—Mount Herzl.



Figure 25: Theodor Herzl