

Judaism: The Story of Tradition and Identity

The Bible is the cornerstone. The Talmud is the foundation. The edifice that they underpin is Rabbinic Judaism and from the middle of the First Millennium until the nineteenth century, that was the dominant kind of Judaism.

George Robinson

One superficially attractive but actually misleading [notion is that Jews] are united by a common religion. There is a Jewish religion, and for very many Jews it is the focus of their lives But it would be unrealistic to maintain that it is the Jewish religion that unites the Jewish people. In fact the Jewish religion [is that which] divides the Jewish people today, perhaps almost as much as it divides Jews from non-Jews.

Nicholas de Lange

If you have a sapling in your hand, and it is said to you, "Behold, there is the Messiah"—go on with your planting, and [only] afterward go out and receive him. And if the youths say to you, "Let us go up and build the Temple," do not listen to them. But if the elders say to you, "Come, let us destroy the Temple," listen to them.

The Talmud

Part 1: The Beginning

Thousands of years ago there was a man named Terah who lived in a bustling city on the edge of the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. One day he charged his oldest son to sell his graven images while he went on a business trip. In the course of the day an elderly man approached the boy with the intention of buying an image. After learning of the man's age, the boy mocked the elder for foolishly thinking—after all his years—that an image made from a tree in only a few days was a suitable god. The man, shocked by the boy's insight, took the sentiment to heart and ceased worshiping idols.

That afternoon a woman came to the boy's shop to offer fine flour to the idols he was in charge of. Afterward the incensed lad took a stick and broke every one of the images except the largest one. He then put the stick in the idol's hand. When his father returned and saw the destruction of his business, he demanded an explanation. The boy replied that each of the little gods had begun fighting the moment the woman entered with the flour because they each wanted to be the recipient of worship. Not surprisingly, the largest of the idols proved victorious and crushed the others. Infuriated at his insolence, the father handed the boy over to Nimrod—the mighty ruler and hunter of old.

Nimrod lauded the boy's refusal to worship idols and instead suggested that fire was the most powerful force on earth. "Actually," the boy replied, "water has power over fire." Nimrod conceded and was prepared to make water his god to be worshiped before the boy pointed out to the great hunter that wind has authority over water. He then explained that people are stronger than wind. Eventually Nimrod tired of the boy's antics and threw him into the fire. Because of his faith in the one true God, however, the boy was saved from the fire without as much as a scratch or burn. Although the archangel Gabriel had offered to help the boy, God himself stepped in to shield him from harm.¹

So goes the story of Abraham, father of the three great monotheistic religions, as found in *Genesis Rabbah*, a Jewish commentary on *Genesis*. Clearly, this is not the story of creation in *Genesis*—a creation story that we Christians, together with Jews, hold to be the story of the creation of the world. As important as the *Genesis* account is—and it is important—this is not necessarily the starting point for contemporary Judaism. What is the starting point? To answer that question, let us look at a quote from the contemporary Jewish rabbi and scholar Shai Cherry:

1. This story is based on *Genesis Rabbah* or "Midrash on *Genesis*." See Samuel Rapaport, trans., *Tales and Maxims from the Talmud* (London: Routledge, 1912), 60, 77–78.

Judaism has variously been called a culture, an ethnicity, and a civilization, all terms that struggle to include more than "just" religion.²

Judaism today is just as much a culture, an ethnicity, and a civilization as it is a "religion." As a result, I wanted to begin our discussion with a story that encompasses these different aspects of Judaism without focusing just on the religious aspect—as important as that is. As for culture, the story above speaks of Jewish identity. Specifically, it seeks to undermine the (religious) idol worship that tempted so many Jews as the nation lived in close proximity to rival nations in biblical times. In terms of ethnicity, Abraham is commonly regarded in the Jewish tradition as the originator of the Jewish nation and religion. This is apparent not only in the Bible but also in other Jewish literature. Indeed, *Genesis Rabbah*, the Jewish midrash (or commentary) from which the story above was taken, makes this point strongly:

Perhaps in the proper order of things Abraham should have been the first man created, not Adam. God, however, foresaw the fall of the first man, and if Abraham had been the first man and had fallen, there would have been no one after him to restore righteousness to the world; whereas after Adam's fall came Abraham, who established in the world the knowledge of God. As a builder puts the strongest beam in the center of the building, so as to support the structure at both ends, so Abraham was the strong beam carrying the burden of the generations that existed before him and that came after him.³

Finally, in regard to the idea of civilization, Abraham is seen as the "strong beam" that carried the Jewish civilization forward. In fact, we begin with Abraham not only because he was so pivotal to Judaism but also because he is the father of the three great monotheistic religions in the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. From this one man three powerful stories emerged that have significantly impacted global history.

Part 2: Historical Origin

The story of the Jewish people is one of the most remarkable of all ancient stories. This is because there is perhaps no other people group that has received as much attention and has had as much influence on the world in relation to its actual size. Indeed, as one Jewish scholar points out, the

2. Shai Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism: Part 2* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2004), 1.
3. Rapaport, *Tales and Maxims from the Talmud*, 67.

Jewish people, with the exception of modern-day Israel, “are a numerically insignificant minority” in all the places they reside.⁴ Although small, the Jewish people have penetrated all parts of the world and have infused their distinct culture into the larger cultures in which they find themselves. The Jewish story is one of trying to maintain one’s Jewish identity within the larger context of ethnically and religiously diverse nations.

Origins and Kingdom

We begin our historical overview of Judaism in the beginning of time. The book of Genesis describes the God of Israel as the Creator and Sustainer of the world. This God created two people—Adam and Eve—who gave rise to all humankind. Although they are the first people recorded in history, Abraham is customarily regarded as the founder of the Jewish nation. Indeed, as one historian of the Hebrew Bible quips, “A history of Israel must properly begin with the call of Abram to the father of the chosen nation.”⁵ The book of Genesis explains that Abraham came from the ancient city-state of Ur, which was a thriving culture. We are told that the Lord God commanded Abraham at the age of seventy-five to leave his home for a place that God would give him (Gen. 12:1–3). Today we call this land Israel or Palestine.

Eventually Abraham’s descendants became as numerous as God had promised. They grew from twelve sons to twelve tribes. The book of Exodus narrates how the pharaoh of Egypt noticed how fruitful the Jewish people had become and enslaved them in Egypt for hundreds of years. After rescuing his people from Egyptian bondage through Moses, God made a covenant with the Jewish people and regarded them as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Out of this “kingdom of priests” God consecrated the tribe of Levi as the priestly tribe that would perform the necessary rituals to stay in covenant relationship with this God.

Temple	Built	Destroyed	Destroyer	Scripture
1st Temple	960 BC	586 BC	Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar	1 Kings 6–8; 2 Kings 25:1–21
2nd Temple	515 BC	AD 70	Rome under General Titus	Ezra 6:13–18; Mark 13

4. Nicholas de Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

5. Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 25.

“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.”
—Galatians 3:7

Several hundred years after the exodus, the twelve tribes of the Jewish nation became isolated and territorial. It was not until the time of King David and his son Solomon in the tenth century BC that the tribes were officially united. David set up his capital in Jerusalem, where the Jewish temple was built. The period under the united kingdom, however, lasted briefly. Over time, stronger world empires such as Assyria and Babylon conquered, destroyed, and divided the tribes and Jewish people groups, which had been weakened by the nation’s division into northern (Israel) and southern (Judea) territories after King Solomon’s death in the tenth century BC. The Hebrew Bible interpreted the destruction and exile of the Jewish nation as God’s condemnation for worshiping idols, acting wickedly, and violating the covenant God had made with the Jews hundreds of years before (2 Kings 17:7–20).

Dispersion

The most enduring defeat and exile of the Jewish people occurred in the sixth century BC at the hands of the Babylonians.⁶ The Babylonian armies ravaged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple that God had ordered to be built there, and exiled the wealthiest and brightest citizens into Babylon. This event marked the beginning of the dispersion, the scattering of the Jewish people across the world outside Israel. Although some Jewish people returned to Israel within a century after the Babylonian exile and rebuilt the temple, many did not. In fact, many Jews prospered in exile and experienced better living conditions away from Israel than they did inside their own nation.⁷ For those who did return, things were not the same. Not only was the temple only a shadow of its former glory (Hag. 2:3), but the Jewish people were still under the authority of Persia.

Even during New Testament times in the first century AD, despite the fact that the temple had been refurbished and enlarged, there was a common understanding that the people of Israel were still in dispersion. This is the case for two reasons. First, even though some Jews did live in Israel, many did not. Second, the Jewish residents of Israel were under pagan rule—first under Persian and then Greek and Roman rule. The Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth lived right before the Jewish nation rebelled against Roman occupation. Jesus, for his

6. Raymond Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20–23.

7. *Ibid.*, 28.

“On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘Yeshu is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.”
—Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a)

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Talmud are taken from Michael Rodkinson, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud* (Boston: The Talmud Society, 1918). Also, some Jewish commentators question whether this comment refers to Jesus of Nazareth.

"Torah learning is even more pleasing to the All-Present than burnt sacrifices. After all, if a person studies Torah he or she knows the will of the All-Present."

—Talmud (Avot of Rabbi Nathan 4)

There were several movements in Judaism at the time of the temple's destruction in AD 70: the Sadducees, who were in control of the temple system; the Essenes, who lived ascetic lives away from most Jews; the Zealots or even Sicarii, who advocated Jewish independence against Rome; and the Pharisees, who focused on observing the *halakha* or Jewish laws and customs, and out of whom rabbinic Judaism emerged.

part, encouraged the Jews to live within the kingdom rule of God and to repent (Mark 1:14–15).

In the middle of the first century AD many Jews found themselves increasingly in friction with Rome. Rebellion ensued. The First Jewish War lasted from AD 66–70. It was a watershed moment in Jewish history. The Romans crushed the Jews and destroyed the Jewish temple. But unlike in former times, the temple was never rebuilt. Instead of centralizing around the performance of daily sacrifices by priests, Judaism redefined itself. This redefinition of Judaism came to be called *rabbinic Judaism*.

Rabbinic Judaism, as its name suggests, refers to the Judaism that emerged under the guidance of rabbis or "teachers." Although its origins can be indirectly traced back to Ezra in the fifth century BC, it emerged most fully in the context immediately after destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70. The Jewish priesthood fell into disuse soon after the temple's destruction because there were no sacrifices to be made. The group that filled this leadership void was made up of rabbis who, instead of making sacrifices in the temple, interpreted Torah. As one scholar explains:

Rabbinic Judaism centers on the constant study of the Torah and the oral traditions associated with it and involves the meticulous observance of religious regulations, which are understood as constituting a legal system. By placing the study of the Torah at the center of Jewish religious life, the rabbis incidentally laid the foundation for the preoccupation of later Jewish culture with intellectual activities of all kinds.⁸

Seventy years after the destruction of the temple, the Jews rebelled again. Known as the Second Jewish War (132–35), this spirited yet failed attempt to take control of Roman-occupied Judea began hopefully but ended disastrously for the Jews. Simon bar Kokhba (d. 135), the leader of this rebellion, ruled from Jerusalem for three years before undergoing the same fate as his countrymen. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed or enslaved. Moreover, the Romans—headed by Emperor Hadrian (76–138 AD)—eradicated all Jewish presence from Jerusalem by exiling Jews on penalty of death, prohibiting circumcision, burning Jewish scrolls, and renaming the area.⁹ The sobering outcomes of this war portended the next millennium of the Jewish story—continued exile, dispersion, and maltreatment under more powerful people groups.

8. *Ibid.*, 53.

9. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

Contemporary

Although there was always the option to identify as a Christian or a Muslim during the medieval period, in the late 1700s there were generally three options for Jews, particularly in Europe. The first was to assimilate into the dominant culture. This was a common choice that many Jews took. Although this option downplayed one's Jewish identity, it did provide educational and employment opportunities. Another option was to observe the Jewish traditions and customs as had been done for hundreds of years. Such an approach meant marginalization in the larger culture, but it also gave one identity within the Jewish community. Finally, the last option was a mixing of the two.

Jewish Ethnicities	Descent
Ashkenazi	German / Eastern European
Ethiopian	Sub-Saharan African
Mizrahi	North African / Middle Eastern
Sephardic	Spanish and Arab

This modernizing of Judaism was aimed at gaining "social acceptance without abandoning Jewish identity."¹⁰ Put simply, contemporary Judaism—with its division into Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist—emerged out of this larger context. That's because these movements each sought to deal with the rapid changes taking place during the Enlightenment and the rise of modern states. Many Jewish people struggled to understand, on the one hand, how to stay faithful to one's ancient customs while, on the other, how to adapt to an ever-changing world.

The twentieth century has been a momentous period for many in the world but especially for the Jewish people. The two most decisive events in the story of Judaism in this century were the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel. As for the first, there was a long history of Jewish persecution in Europe, but this came to a head with the election of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) as chancellor of Germany in 1933. Within months of his election, Hitler implemented hateful measures against the Jews. The government boycotted Jewish businesses, expelled Jews from civil service, removed their children from

10. Norman Solomon, *Judaism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100.

schools, and began the building of concentration camps.¹¹ Two years later Jews were stripped of their citizenship. Germany aggressively expanded its territory and found allies that forwarded its violent program against the Jews before the Allied forces ultimately defeated Germany and the Axis powers in 1945. But the war had taken its toll. Although difficult to imagine—let alone express in words—in as little as a decade 6 million of the 10 million Jews living in Europe had been murdered.¹²

Ironically, notes Jewish scholar Nicholas de Lange, the anti-Semitism and genocide that the Jews experienced during the Holocaust expedited the formation of a Jewish state in the middle of the twentieth century.¹³ The founder of the movement toward Jewish statehood or Zionism was the Austro-Hungarian journalist Theodore Herzl (1860–1904). His passionate plea for the creation of a (secular) Jewish state where Jews could live free from anti-Semitism continued to gain momentum after his death. Although some traditional Jews initially rejected Zionism because they believed it was the Messiah's task—the timing of which only God knew—to gather the Jewish people out of exile and into a Jewish state, this changed after World War II.¹⁴ Within two years of the ending of the war, the United Nations partitioned Palestine into two territories, a Jewish and an Arab state. On May 14, 1948, the state of Israel came into existence.¹⁵ Since that time Zionism and the Zionist movement have continued strong. Indeed, I once had a conversation with a woman in Israel about her religious faith. She told me categorically that she did not believe in religion or God. “However, if pressured into choosing something,” she continued after pausing to reflect on our conversation, “Zionism would be my religion.”

Part 3: Religious Writings

There are a variety of religious writings associated with Judaism. Judaism is the world religion that is perhaps most focused on education, learning, and books.¹⁶ Naturally, then, there are a host of writings that are important to this religion and culture. In addition to the Bible, some

11. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*, 202–3.

12. Solomon, *Judaism*, 15.

13. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 42.

14. Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 95.

15. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*, 231.

16. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 43–44.

“The longing to return to the Land of Israel, a yearning that suffuses Jewish prayer and rituals, began to be fulfilled toward the end of the 19th century. The irony is that many of the early pioneers to the Land of Israel were secularists, motivated by politics rather than theology.”
—Shai Cherry

Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism*, 2:21.

of the key writings include the Talmud, prayer books, mystical writings, and interpretive works on the Bible.

The Bible

Law (Torah)	Prophets (Nevi'im)		Writings (Ketuvim)		
	Former	Latter	Poetry	Five Rolls	History
Genesis	Joshua	Isaiah	Psalms	Ruth	Daniel
Exodus	Judges	Jeremiah	Job	Song of Songs	Ezra-Nehemiah
Leviticus	Samuel	Ezekiel	Proverbs	Ecclesiastes	Chronicles
Numbers	Kings	The Twelve		Lamentations	
Deuteronomy		Prophets		Esther	

We begin our discussion with the Hebrew Bible, the oldest and most foundational of the Jewish writings. The Hebrew text used by Jews—the Masoretic Text, which was given its present shape a millennium ago—is the same text that we Christians use in our Bibles. Apart from the name, the only difference is the arrangement. Whereas the Christian Old Testament contains thirty-nine books beginning with Genesis and ending with Malachi, the Hebrew Bible is classified into the three main categories of Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and Writings (*Ketuvim*), which, when put in an acrostic in Hebrew, are referred to as the Tanakh. The main reason that the Christian Old Testament contains more “books” is that the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures dating to the third century BC—needed extra parchment space when translated into Greek, since Greek letters are larger than Hebrew ones. The Greek translators divided several larger books such as Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into two.¹⁷

The Hebrew Bible was written over the course of hundreds of years in many different areas. The foundational section, the Torah or first five books, discusses the establishment of the Jewish nation from the beginning of creation to the time of Moses, who lived sometime between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries BC.¹⁸ The Prophets discuss the next thousand years of God's interaction with and preservation of the Jewish

17. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 23–25.

18. Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 60.

The Hebrew word *Torah* is a broad term that may refer to any of the following: the first five books of the Bible; the whole Hebrew Bible; or the oral tradition given to Moses, that is, the Talmud.

people through the course of the united kingdom, the exile, and the Jewish return to Israel. Finally, the Writings are the most varied of the Hebrew Scriptures. This section contains poems, histories, and prophetic documents that span hundreds of years of Jewish history.



Fig. 4.1.
The Torah in
Hebrew.

The Talmud

In addition to the Bible, the most important book in the Jewish canon is the Talmud (“study”). There is a story in the Talmud about when the famed Rabbi Hillel (70 BC–AD 10), whose grandson Rabban Gamaliel taught the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3), answered the secret to life while his student stood on one foot: Like Rabbi Jesus only a few decades later, Hillel said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary” (Shabbat 31a).

If the Torah can be explained so succinctly, we may be wondering, why is the Talmud so long? The answer is twofold. First, the Torah itself

does not spell out all the implications of its commandments and prohibitions. Take the fourth commandment, for instance: “Remember the Sabbath day” (Ex. 20:8). By itself, this commandment does not explain exactly *how* we are to remember the Sabbath and to abstain from work. For example, is starting a fire or taking a walk “work”? In the Talmud the rabbis discuss these issues. (By the way, the rabbinic answer to the first question was “yes,” while the answer to the second depended on how far you walked.)

The other reason the Talmud is so long has to do with the time-honored tradition of Jewish debate and argumentation. Unlike Christianity or Islam, Judaism has a long and strong tradition of arguing with God. Jewish scholar and Rabbi Jacob Neusner goes so far as to say that the God of the Torah “expects to be argued with.”¹⁹ While all the many rabbinic discussions and interpretations of biblical law have struck some in the Christian tradition as legalistic and too focused on minute details, the Jewish tradition understands these discussions as important ways to preserve the Torah.

According to the Talmud, God gave Moses the “written Torah” and “oral Torah” on Mount Sinai. The written Torah is what came to be recorded in the Pentateuch. The oral Torah, by contrast, was not initially put into writing. Instead, it was passed down and preserved generation after generation. As the following Talmudic excerpt explains:

Moses received [the oral] Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets. And prophets handed it on to the men of the great assembly. They said three things: “Be prudent in judgment; raise up many disciples; and make a fence for the Torah.” (*Avot* 1:1)

The “fence” that the rabbis made for the Torah is the Talmud. Although its name is a broad term referring to rabbinical commentary, the Talmud is technically composed of two major parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara. Stated differently, the Mishnah plus the Gemara equals the Talmud.

The first part of the Talmud, the Mishnah (“repetition”), contains the sayings and opinions of rabbis from around 300 BC to AD 220. Rabbi Judah HaNasi (AD 138–220), a descendant of Rabbi Hillel and of King David, edited and compiled the definitive version of the Mishnah in the early part of the third century.²⁰ The Mishnah contains laws, principles, stories, and opinions on any number of civil and religious issues. It is understood to be separate from yet parallel to the Hebrew Bible. Each

19. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 24.

20. Brad Young, *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 83.

of its six volumes or “orders” contains several tractates, several chapters per tractate, and several *mishnah* verses or *mishnayot* per chapter.²¹

I once asked one of my classes to read portions of the Mishnah in preparation for a discussion on Judaism. Not one single person understood what he or she was reading! Jacob Neusner, who translated a contemporary version of the Mishnah, captures the disorienting nature of the book well in the eyes of outsiders:

Falling into the hands of someone who has never seen this document before, the Mishnah must cause puzzlement. From the first line to the last, discourse takes up questions internal to a system that is never introduced. The Mishnah provides information without establishing context. It presents disputes about facts hardly urgent outside a circle of faceless disputants. Consequently, we start with the impression that we join a conversation already long under way about topics we can never grasp anyhow.²²

Unlike the Hebrew Scriptures, which contain many stories from beginning to end, the Mishnah has no real beginning or ending. The first “order” jumps into commentary concerning when the Shema—the liturgical declaration taken from Deuteronomy 6:4—can be recited in the evening.

The second part of the Talmud is the Gemara (“study”). This section is even more detailed and intricate than the Mishnah. The Gemara, written in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew, “consists largely of detailed and strenuously argued disagreements on the meaning and validity of both Mishnaic and biblical laws.”²³ In other words, whereas the Mishnah debates the meaning of the Torah, the Gemara debates the meaning of the Mishnah *and* the Torah. The Talmud is arranged according to *mishnah* verses from the Mishnah followed by *sugyot* or topical commentary from the Gemara. The two different Talmudic versions are the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. They were completed around AD 350 and 500, respectively.²⁴

Other Jewish Writings

In addition to the Bible and the Talmud, there are many other important Jewish writings. The first of these, the Midrash (“study” or

21. *Ibid.*, 84–86.

22. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), viii.

23. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 54–55.

24. George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs and Rituals* (New York: Atria, 2000), 344–46.

“investigation”), is a collection of texts that chiefly interpret the Bible. It includes rabbinic discussions of the Bible during the first several centuries AD. The midrashim are often classified into legal commentary (*halakha*) and nonlegal commentary (*haggadah*). In the beginning of this chapter, I referred to a midrash on the book of Genesis. The midrashim are enjoyable to read and include sometimes fanciful yet always intriguing interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Another important genre of Jewish writings is prayer or liturgical books called *siddurim*. A *siddur* is not only what you might read from if you attend a synagogue service, but also what many Jews use for prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Finally, the last Jewish writing I want to mention is the Zohar (“radiance”). It is the most significant of the texts associated with the Jewish mystical tradition called Kabbalah (“receiving”). Commonly regarded as being written in the thirteenth century AD in Spain, the Zohar is concerned with different mystical and esoteric ways to study Torah.²⁵ It is one of the more interesting Jewish writings—as the initial section of the book reveals:

There was a man who lived in the mountains. He knew nothing about those who lived in the city. He sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw. One day he entered the city. They brought him good bread. He said, “What is this for?” They said, “Bread to eat!” He ate, and it tasted very good. He said, “What is it made of?” They said, “Wheat.” Later they brought him cakes kneaded in oil. He tasted them and said, “What are these made of?” They said, “Wheat.” Finally they brought him royal pastry made with honey and oil. He said, “And what are these made of?” They said, “Wheat.” He said, “I am the master of all these, for I eat the essence of all these: wheat!” Because of that view, he knew nothing of the delights of the world; they were lost to him. So it is with one who grasps the principle and does not know all those delectable delights deriving, diverging from that principle.²⁶

This intriguing parable is about getting to the more advanced levels of Torah and not assuming that because you know something at the basic level, you know it at the deeper level as well.

Part 4: Beliefs

Judaism is one of the most difficult religions for my students to understand. The main reason for this has to do with the students’

25. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 60.

26. Daniel Matt, trans., *Zohar: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Books, 2005), 2.

In Hebrew, words are made plural by adding the letters *im* or *ot* at the end of the word. For instance, *siddur* (prayer book) becomes *siddurim*; while *mitzvah* (commandment) becomes *mitzvot*.

assumption that they know more about Judaism than they actually do. While we Christians do share common Scriptures with Judaism and therefore hold many views that are similar, there are also sharp contrasts. So the first lesson we must learn about this religion is that while it is an outgrowth of the Hebrew Bible, contemporary Judaism is not equivalent to the Old Testament.

Indeed, my students are often shocked when I inform them that many Jews today do not even believe in God's existence! It is common for Jews to understand and identify themselves primarily as culturally Jewish rather than religiously so. As one Jewish scholar writes succinctly, "religion is . . . secondary to Jewish identity."²⁷ What's more, unlike its offspring, Christianity and Islam, Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. The truth is that rabbis generally discourage conversions to the Jewish religion. There is a lengthy tradition admonishing rabbis to send potential converts away three times before allowing their conversion.²⁸

Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), the leading rabbi of nineteenth-century German Orthodoxy, went so far as to write that "Judaism is the one religion which does *not* say, 'Outside me there is no salvation.'" Instead, he explained, the upright of all people groups are traveling toward the "same blessed destination."²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that of all religious groups in the world, the Jewish people are the "most likely religious group to describe their outlook as secular or somewhat secular, including 14 percent who could be classified as atheists and agnostics."³⁰ More than half the Jews in the world do not attend synagogues on any regular basis.³¹

I once had a conversation with an Orthodox Jewish man in Jerusalem. My friend asked the man what would be required for him to convert to Judaism. The man replied bluntly, "You don't have to convert to Judaism. All God requires of you, a Gentile, is to follow the seven laws of Noah. Conversion would be of no value." The man was alluding to the common belief that only the Jewish people are expected to observe the 613 commandments of God. The Gentiles, by contrast, are required to observe only seven basic laws. If we observe these basic laws, we will be afforded a portion of the world to come.

27. De Lange, *Introduction to Judaism*, 1.

28. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 251.

29. Gwilym Beckerlegge, ed., *The World Religions Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 47.

30. Cherry, *Introduction to Judaism*, 2:35.

31. Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 267.

Noahic Laws for Goyim (Non-Jews)

1. No murder
2. No sexual immorality
3. No idolatry
4. No eating animals from torn limbs
5. No cursing God
6. No theft
7. Setting up a system of law

This concept comes partly from the Talmudic passage that states: "The Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it until He came to Israel who received it" (Talmud [Avodah Zarah 2b]). Because only the Jewish people accepted the Torah—after every other people group rejected God's offer—only they are expected to keep its commandments or *mitzvot*. The 613 commandments that the Jews are expected to keep are often divided into 365 positive commandments (equaling the days of the solar year) and 248 negative ones (equaling the supposed number of bodily organs). This classification came from Rabbi Simlai in the third century AD, although several rabbis since then have divided the commandments slightly differently.³²

Religious Denominations

Although all forms of Judaism today trace their heritage back to rabbinic Judaism, there is great diversity within all the denominations or movements in contemporary Judaism. Most of these movements appeared in Europe during the Enlightenment when Jews were granted citizenship and admitted to public universities and professions that were historically barred from them. One of the important Jewish thinkers of this period, Moses Mendelsohn (1729–86), affirmed the rights of Jews to live as free citizens and to be afforded the rights and privileges offered in the countries where they lived. The Jewish people, like their Christian counterparts, responded to the changes of modernity in various ways, the result of which created a Jewish identity that differed greatly from the past. The religious movements that emerged during and after

32. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 196.

this time came to be known as Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism.³³

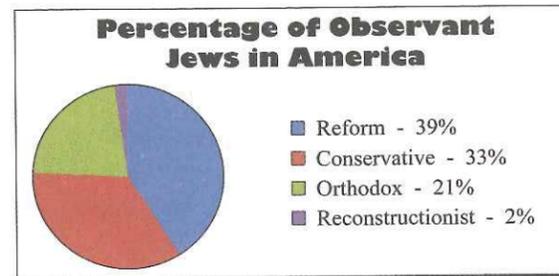


Fig. 4.2. Percentage of observant Jews in America.

Reform Judaism

The first of these movements is Reform Judaism. Although it began in Germany in the eighteenth century, it has thrived in America. One of its key documents, the Pittsburgh Platform, was the result of a conference attended by many rabbis in Pittsburgh in 1885. An excerpt from the document represents some of its radical views on Jewish customs:

We hold that all . . . Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.³⁴



Fig. 4.3. Map of the world in the nineteenth century AD, when modern Judaism was developing in Europe and in America.

33. The percentages of the religious denominations below come from Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 267.
34. "The Pittsburgh Platform," in Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 506.

As can be seen, Reform Judaism advocates a radical program of reform and modernization of the Jewish religion into contemporary culture. In this way, there are many similarities between Reform Judaism and liberal Protestantism. Both emerged at the same time in the same area for the same reasons. They were both responses to traditional expressions of their religions and the rapid changes taking place in society. These movements rejected the notion that God had inspired the Bible, affirmed complete gender equality, emphasized ethics and social justice, and abandoned those practices that were seen as antithetical to adaptation and assimilation into contemporary culture. At the same time, they shared many common values with their mother religions and did not want to wholly sever ties with them. Instead, they wanted to modernize and contemporize, and propel their religions into the modern world in ways that aligned with critical scholarship, science, and advances in technology.

Orthodox Judaism

The second religious Jewish movement is (Modern) Orthodoxy. It is the most traditional of the various forms of Judaism and is a continuation of the Judaism practiced by most Jews before the Enlightenment. Orthodox Jews believe that the *halakha* or Jewish laws and customs are completely binding. They regard them as given by God. Although they highly value the study of Torah, Orthodox Jews do not by any means reject secular learning and education. Instead, they seek to hallow secular learning, not flee from it. As for actual practices, Hebrew is spoken in Orthodox services, men and women are divided during worship, people are not allowed to drive their cars on Shabbat (or Sabbath), and men and women must wear head coverings and dress modestly.

In addition to Orthodox Judaism, there is a related group called the ultra-Orthodox or the Haredi. The ultra-Orthodox are the most conservative and traditional of the Jewish religious groups. Unlike the Modern Orthodox, however, they eschew secular learning for themselves (understanding secular learning to be the domain of non-Jews) and focus on studying Torah. They believe it binding on their families to populate the earth—which is the first of the biblical commandments (Gen. 1:28)—and have four times as many children as their Jewish counterparts.³⁵ I once walked through Mea Shearim, the famous Haredi neighborhood in Jerusalem, where the men and boys were distinctly dressed in white

35. Benjamin Blech, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alpha, 2003), 315.

The word *halakha* ("path") refers to the entire body of Jewish law. This includes the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic interpretations, and other traditions and customs. All religious forms of Judaism are centered on determining how to interpret, observe, and adapt the *halakha*.

and black with black hats, and where large posters warned outsiders of entering with immodest clothing.

Conservative Judaism

"Reform [Judaism] declared that Judaism has changed throughout time and that Jewish law is no longer binding. Orthodoxy denies both propositions. . . . Conservative Judaism agrees with Orthodoxy in maintaining the authority of Jewish law and with Reform that Judaism has grown and evolved through time." —Rabbi Robert Gordis

Blech, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism*, 321.

The Conservative movement is the response to Reform and Orthodox Judaism. It began in nineteenth-century Europe, but has flourished in the United States. It is "conservative" from the perspective of the Reform rather than the Orthodox. Stated positively, it is "conservative" in the sense that it seeks to conserve and preserve the *halakha* or Jewish laws, but is willing to make modifications when necessary. Like Reform Judaism, the Conservative movement believes that the Jewish religion must be adapted to contemporary culture; like the Orthodox, it believes that the commandments are central. This means that Conservative Judaism is caught between two important yet competing stories of Judaism: the Reform on the left and the Orthodoxy on the right.

One good example of how Conservative Judaism straddles the fence between its two sister denominations centers on the topic of driving to the synagogue during Shabbat. In Exodus 35:3 the Jews are commanded: "You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." Practically speaking, this means that Orthodox members of synagogues are not allowed to start their cars on Shabbat (by "kindling" a fire) and thereby driving to the service. Whereas Reform Jews would generally see this commandment as unrealistic in our driving culture (and therefore not necessary to modernize), Conservatives would seek to conserve or preserve this commandment until necessity demanded otherwise. As the interpretation goes, Conservatives decided that it was permissible to drive on Shabbat for the practical reason that many Jews lived too far from the synagogue to walk, so it was better to kindle a fire and attend the service than to literally observe the commandment and miss the service.

Reconstructionist Judaism

The last movement in Judaism is the most recent as well as the smallest. Unlike the other religious movements, it is the only one that was forged in America. The architect of this movement was Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1993), who was active in the Conservative movement although he grew up Orthodox. Reconstructionists typically understand Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization," to use Kaplan's words. This means that the emphasis is on preserving the Jewish culture as a civilization. Put bluntly, the Jewish culture is more important than

Jewish belief. Or as one rabbi states, "Reconstructionist Judaism isn't so much concerned with God as it is with Jews."³⁶ Whereas Conservative Judaism is a middle way between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism shares many commonalities between Conservative and Reform Judaism.

Movement	Emphasis
Reform	Ethics
Orthodox	Law
Conservative	Tradition
Reconstructionist	Culture
Secular	Ethnicity
Zionist	Jewish statehood

At the same time, there are key differences. For instance, Reconstructionism can appear just as observant as the Orthodox because many observe the *halakha* even though they do not believe they are binding. Reconstructionists are more likely to observe the dietary laws and follow other traditional customs than the Reform.³⁷ However, Reconstructionism is perceived to be more "liberal" ethically or theologically than the Reform. Reconstructionism, for example, not only ordains women to the rabbinate (as do the Reform and Conservatives but not traditionally the Orthodox), but also ordains gays and lesbians. What's more, Reconstructionists reject the notion that the Jews are a "chosen people" as well as other traditional Jewish beliefs such as expectation of a future Messiah.³⁸

The Unifying Factor

In addition to the four religious movements discussed above, I would be remiss if I did not state again that many Jews do not even believe in God's existence, let alone attend a synagogue or believe that the *halakha* or Jewish laws are binding. They are called "secular Jews," and there is no real stigma attached to this classification. Although this sounds strange to many Christians, it does not to Judaism. Indeed, secular Jews are just as much a part of Judaism as are religious or observant ones.

36. *Ibid.*, 323.

37. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 233.

38. *Ibid.*, 62.

Given this great diversity, you may be wondering what it means “to be a Jew.” This is a difficult question to answer; each of the religious and secular movements would respond to it in divergent ways. But two things come to mind. The first response is that Judaism—however we define it—is more focused on deeds than on creeds. As one Jewish rabbi states it, “It is not so much what we believe, but rather what we do, that defines us as Jews.”³⁹ Practically speaking, the locus of this question—however we answer it—should concentrate less on defining Jews as *believing* in certain things than on *doing* certain things. Jews emphasize action over belief.

This leads us to a second response, which I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter: Judaism can be defended and defined as a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, or a civilization. It is only after we understand Judaism as an identity *rather than strictly as a system of belief* that we will begin to comprehend what it truly means “to be a Jew.” Although Jewish identity traditionally meant being born to a “Jewish” woman, today it means many different things. Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, for instance, affirm that one can be considered Jewish from the father’s side, while Orthodoxy has always affirmed that anybody can become a “Jew by choice” by fully converting to Judaism and following the Jewish laws.

Part 5: Worship Practices

The Jewish life is punctuated by regular practices and observances. These range from daily prayers to weekly rituals to yearly festivals. Of all the world religions, Judaism is perhaps most aware of and in tune with sacred space and sacred time. The two principal places where sacred space is most manifest for Jews are the synagogue and the home. The first of these, synagogues, are variously called temples and shuls. The essential structure of the synagogue reflects the physical arrangement of the former Jewish temples. Central to a synagogue is the ark, which houses the Torah scrolls. This is a reminder of the ark of the covenant. The *bimah* or altar, which is another important component to Jewish synagogues, is a platform from which the Torah is read.

There is a long tradition of Jews’ having three daily services at synagogues, which reflect the sacrificial system of the temple periods. Synagogues also have weekly Sabbath or Shabbat services, which occur on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. A typical service includes reading from the Torah, singing or responding orally out of the prayer

39. Rabbi Jerome Epstein, “The Ideal Conservative Jew: Eight Behavioral Expectations,” in Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 522.

The Jewish tradition has always been a dance, or perhaps a wrestle, between the old and the new. And it is this give and take that keeps it vital.

book, bowing and standing (when the Torah passes by), and saying prayers and blessings. Depending on the denomination, the primary or secondary language (for the liturgy) may be in Hebrew. In Orthodox synagogues, men and women are separated during worship and men are expected to wear *kippot* or hats and women are expected to wear head coverings. Men are also required to wear *tallitot* or prayer shawls. In other Jewish movements, customs vary widely from synagogue to synagogue. If you ever attend a synagogue, my advice to you is to wear modest clothes and to observe whether other people are wearing hats or prayer shawls, and not to be shy about asking how to respect the customs of the synagogue.

Besides public worship, the center of Jewish life is in the home. Many Jewish homes have a *mezuzah* (“doorpost”), which is a case hung next to a door filled with a parchment of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9). These homes may also have a *menorah* or seven-branched lampstand, the Bible, and perhaps other Jewish books. Two regular rituals practiced in the home are celebrations of Passover and of Sabbath. The Passover meal or *seder* is celebrated annually to remember Israelite emancipation out of Egypt. It is an exciting night observed at the home where everyone is able to participate. The other home ritual is observing Shabbat, which begins on Friday evening and ends Saturday evening. Shabbat is the highlight of the Jewish week, and specific preparations are made—lighting candles, singing, eating certain food, and drinking wine. There are also special ways to end Shabbat on Saturday evening.

Part 6: Point of Contact

A few years ago, I was friends with a Jewish young man from work. We talked about many different things over the course of our time together. Sometimes I would talk to him about religion. When I did so, I always tried to bring our conversation to some story or event in the Old Testament, since I assumed that he—as a Jew—was familiar with these stories and events. One day he told me that he was not at all familiar with the stories and that he did not see them as particularly significant to his Jewish identity.

Because Christians affirm the authority of the Hebrew Bible, many of us believe this is the best place to begin a religious conversation with our Jewish brothers and sisters. This is based on the assumption that Judaism is equivalent to the Hebrew Bible. Yet the truth is that Judaism has developed and progressed over the centuries just as Christianity has. And although I am not discouraging anyone from talking about the

Synagogues are generally administered by elected members who make up a council. The rabbi (which is an earned and not a hereditary title) leads the synagogue. Priests and Levites (both hereditary titles) are honored in Orthodoxy, but not usually in other Jewish movements.

“The Sabbath is a day of rest for the sake of life . . . It is not an interlude but the climax of living.”
—Abraham Heschel

Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 14.

Hebrew Bible with Jews, it has been my experience that Jews are more readily interested in other items of discussion.

One of the concerns I have experienced most often in conversations with Jewish individuals has to do with identity. I have spoken with several Jewish people whose primary hindrance to Christianity is the supposition that they cease to be Jewish if they become Christian. This is understandable in many ways, since Christianity has become a “Gentile” religion through and through. Although it emerged out of Judaism in the first century AD, Christianity quickly became an international and ethnically diverse religion. At the same time, Christianity is less about losing one’s prior identity and more about gaining another identity, namely, of one who is, in the words of the Jewish apostle Paul, “in Messiah.” Stated differently, Jews do not lose their Jewish identity or heritage if they become Christians. On the contrary, as Jesus himself said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus also said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Jesus’ mission in life was not to abolish Jewish identity but rather to complete and amplify it.

This is the case for all people groups—Jewish ones included. When I became a Christian, for instance, I did not lose my identity as an American or as a son or as a brother. Rather, I began to understand that my identities as an American and as a son and as a brother are best understood from the lens of my primary identity as a Christian. My Christian identity illuminated and informed my identity as an American. I forever came to be defined by my identity “in Messiah.” I am a Christian before I am anything else. This is the same for Jewish people. Jesus does not demolish one’s former identity; he fulfills it.

Discussion Questions

1. How should Christians understand the Jewish religion given that Christianity emerged out of this religion and culture? How should Christians relate to Jews, especially in view of the extreme brutality that many Jews have experienced over the centuries under the authority of a culture that was “Christian”?
2. What is rabbinic Judaism? Why is it so important in the history of Judaism? What events led up to the emergence of this movement, and how has it changed the Jewish religion? What would Jesus have thought about this movement when it emerged in the second half of the first century AD?

3. Discuss the major branches of Judaism. Why are they so different? What is similar about the different branches of Judaism and the different branches of Christianity?
4. Based on the fact that many Jewish people today are not religiously observant and many don’t even believe in God, is it possible to be a “Christian atheist”? Why or why not?

Further Readings

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