



Chapter I

THE EMERGENCE OF JUDAISM TO 650 C.E.: A NARRATIVE OVERVIEW

Earliest Beginnings

The ancient ancestors of the Jews were the Israelites—relatively insignificant players in the several millennia of history in the Ancient Near East, who enjoyed an independent existence as a united and then a divided kingdom in the tiny land of Canaan or Palestine from about 1000 to 586 B.C.E. In 586 B.C.E., the last of the Israelites were conquered by the Babylonians and sent into exile. In the ancient world, such an event would usually spell the end of a particular ethnic-national group. Yet, despite the demise of their national-political base in 586 B.C.E., some Israelites survived and emerged into the modern period with a continuous identity and historical consciousness.

Known as Jews in the centuries following the exile, they carried with them the sacred literature (the Hebrew Bible), ideas, and traditions that laid the foundation for the three major religions of the Western world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The ancient Israelites were profoundly influenced by the great civilizations of the lands of the Ancient Near East: southern Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and the central areas of the Fertile Crescent including the Levant region (Canaan and Syria), home to the kingdoms of the ancient Israelites. The first eleven chapters of the biblical book of Genesis, the so-called *primeval history*, owe a great deal to Ancient Near Eastern mythology. The creation story in Genesis 1:1—2:3 shows

great similarities with the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*, while the story of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:25—3:24) has clear affinities with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Babylonian and Assyrian epic in which the hero embarks on a search for immortality. The story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6:5—9:17) is an Israelite version of an older flood story found in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Atrahasis* and also incorporated in a modified form in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The ancient Israelites and later Jews understood their relationship with God to be played out on the stage of history, and thus much of Israel's sacred literature—the Hebrew Bible—takes the form of a national history. The myths in Genesis 1–11 span twenty-five hundred years and serve as a cosmic and universal prologue for the national history that

begins in Chapter 12. The rest of Genesis (Chapters 12–50) covers just four generations of one family represented in the Bible as the earliest ancestors, or patriarchs and matriarchs, of the Israelites: Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah), their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, their son Jacob and his wives Rachel and Leah, and Jacob's twelve sons and one daughter.

Set in the second millennium Levant, the dramatic stories of Genesis 12–50 recount the migration of Abraham and Sarah from Ur in Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan, a journey depicted as commanded by God; Abraham's efforts to produce an heir; the marriage of Abraham's son Isaac to Rebekah, an active and purposeful matriarch who secures the birthright for her younger son Jacob; the rivalry between Jacob, a classic trickster type,

Personalities in Judaism I.I ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Abraham. Originally called Abram ("exalted father"), Abraham (popularly understood to mean "the father of multitudes") appears as a semi-nomadic tent dweller whose wanderings took him through the central hill country of Palestine and the Negev. With his numerous flocks, silver, gold, slaves, and private army, Abraham is depicted as a figure of some stature negotiating alliances and dealing with powerful figures and kings. He is most strongly associated with the divine promises of nationhood and a national territory in Canaan—promises solemnized in what has come to be known as the Abrahamic Covenant and symbolized by the mark of circumcision that is instituted with Abraham. The biblical stories depict Abraham as an exemplar of faith because he believed in God's promises despite their seeming absurdity, and as a model of obedience because he stood ready to bind and sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command. Postbiblical Jewish tradition builds on these themes, representing the Binding of Isaac as only the last in a series of ten trials establishing Abraham's faith and obedience. In the midrash, Abraham is portrayed as the first monotheist and "friend of God," a zealot for Yahweh

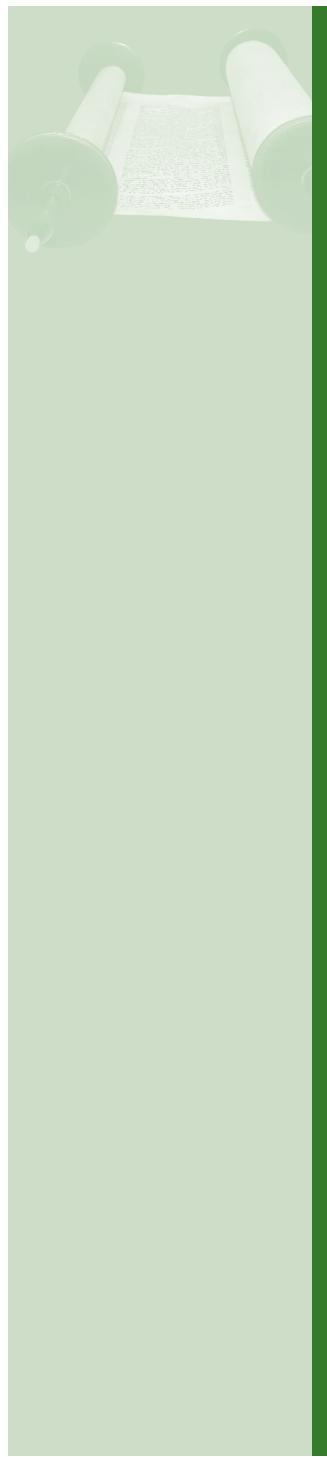
who destroyed the idols in his father's house as the first battle in a campaign against idolatry. A true and faithful follower of Yahweh, Abraham is said to have obeyed all of the commandments, even though they had not yet been revealed through Moses. Legends praise him for his hospitality to strangers and success in proselytizing. In rabbinic tradition, Abraham is referred to as both priest and prophet.

Sarah. Wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac, Sarah (at first Sarai, meaning "princess") is the first of Israel's four matriarchs, three of whom struggled not only to conceive but subsequently to secure the inheritance of the divine promise for a particular son. Her introduction in Genesis 12 is accompanied by a pronouncement of her barrenness. Whether this datum is intended to magnify the virtue of Abraham's belief in the divine promise of progeny or conversely to explain his readiness to deliver Sarah to foreign kings (Pharaoh and King Abimelech of Gerar) and procure offspring by other means, is unclear. In any event, Sarah's barrenness prompts her to offer her Egyptian handmaid Hagar to Abraham (such surrogacy was common in the Ancient Near East and Egypt) who bears a son (Ishmael) in Sarah's stead. Later, Sarah miraculously conceives, as had been previously promised by a divine visitor, and gives birth to Isaac whose name, a play on "laughter," reflects Sarah's laughing response to the divine visitor's prediction that she would bear a son. Hagar's high-handed treatment of Sarah creates tension and leads ultimately to the expulsion of the slave-girl and her child. In postbiblical Jewish tradition, Sarah is extolled for her extraordinary beauty. She is described as a prophetess and is said to have joined Abraham in extending hospitality and in proselytizing. Many traditions attribute her death to shock upon hearing of the Binding of Isaac.

For the distinction between literary and historical biography and a brief discussion of the problems of historical verification of biographical information for characters featured in biblical and rabbinic texts, please see the Preface.

and his older brother Esau; Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel; and the birth of Jacob's one daughter and twelve sons, from whom the twelve tribes of Israel will descend. The final section of the book of Genesis (37:1—50:26) contains the story of Joseph, the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons, born of his favorite wife Rachel. Joseph is betrayed by his jealous brothers, who sell him to slave traders on their way to Egypt. Joseph's descent into Egypt and

stunning rise to political power set the stage for the reformation of his brothers' characters and eventually the descent of all the Israelites into Egypt in search of food during a time of famine. They are said to live peacefully and prosperously in Egypt for some generations until a Pharaoh rises who does not know Joseph and all he had done for Egypt. This pharaoh enslaves the Israelites and embitters their lives.



Personalities in Judaism 1.2 ISAAC AND REBEKAH

Isaac. The second of the patriarchs, born of Abraham and Sarah when they were one hundred years old and ninety years old respectively, Isaac—whose name is derived from the root for “laughter”—is understood to be the fulfillment of the divine promise of progeny to Abraham. It is Isaac who inherits the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Little is reported of Isaac—no details of his childhood are given other than his birth and the feast celebrated on the occasion of his weaning. Like Abraham, Isaac was a semi-nomad, though his wandering was confined to southern Canaan. The central episode in Isaac's life is reported in Genesis 22, when Abraham takes Isaac, on God's command, to Mount Moriah (held by tradition to be the site of the future Temple) to offer him as a sacrifice. Isaac is bound to an altar but spared at the last moment when an angel intervenes. His passive character is evident in the story of his betrothal and marriage to the lively and active Rebekah. In his declining years, blind and enfeebled, Isaac is tricked by his wife and younger son Jacob and inadvertently gives the blessing and birthright of his elder son Esau, to Jacob. Postbiblical tradition emphasizes Isaac's virtue by imagining his willing submission to the sacrificial knife. Although the sacrifice was not carried out, numerous traditions assert that merit accrued to Isaac and his descendants for the deed. Likened to the Passover offering, Isaac's virtual sacrifice is cited as the reason for God's election of the Israelites, his forgiveness of the sin of the golden calf and other acts of beneficence. Because God's mercy is aroused by the sight of Isaac's ashes heaped up on the altar, the Binding of Isaac is mentioned in prayers of penitence and figures centrally in the liturgy for Rosh HaShanah (New Year's Day) ushering in the ten-day period of repentance that culminates in Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

Rebekah. The sole wife of Isaac, mother of twins Esau and Jacob and sister of Laban, Rebekah appears from the first as an energetic and purposeful woman. Seeking a wife for his son Isaac, Abraham sends his gift-laden servant to kin in Aramaean territory to the east. There the servant encounters Rebekah, who impresses him with her hospitality and industry. She agrees to the marriage and returns with the servant to Canaan. Like other biblical matriarchs, Rebekah is barren for many years, conceiving only after Isaac's prayer on her behalf. Experiencing great pain during the pregnancy, Rebekah is told by God that twins struggle in her womb. Each will become a great nation and the elder will serve the younger. This story may serve to explain Rebekah's preference for Jacob and her scheme to trick Isaac into giving the blessing of the

firstborn and the inheritance of the divine promise to Jacob rather than Esau. Rebekah protects Jacob from Esau's wrath by sending him to her brother Laban, ostensibly to seek a wife. In postbiblical tradition, Rebekah is praised as a prophetess, insightful enough to understand that the birthright should fall to Jacob rather than the wicked Esau.

In contrast to the mythic material in Genesis 1–11, Genesis 12–50 is often referred to as *historical narrative*. This is not to say that the patriarchal stories are a historically accurate representation of the events they describe. The stories have a striking folktale quality. The biblical authors develop psychologically complex characters, weave dramatic plot lines, and employ many of the tools of the *literary* trade, such as dialogue, wordplay, parallelism, and allusion. The result is a work of great literary artistry and imagination that does not pretend to be and should not be read as objective history.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view the Bible as *only* a fanciful work of the imagination. At some level, the biblical narrative extending from Genesis 12 through the end of 2 Kings tells the foundational story of a real people, and thus serves as an important record of that people's *reactions to* and *interpretations of* its national experience. The Bible's goal, ultimately, is didactic. The biblical narrators were concerned to show what they believed to be the finger of God in the events and experiences of the Israelite people. The patriarchal narratives express the fundamental conviction that God had acted in history, setting in motion a chain of events that would bind a nation to him forever. Thus, although the historicity of the events described in the Bible are far from certain, the role that these

stories and their continued interpretation played in shaping the national religious culture of the ancient Israelites and later Jews is quite certain.

The Emergence of Israel— The Bible and Archaeology

Exodus 1:1—15:21 contains the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt, Moses' birth and exposure to the Nile River, his rescue by Pharaoh's daughter and upbringing in Pharaoh's own palace, God's call to Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, Pharaoh's stubborn resistance to Moses' demand through ten devastating plagues, and the Israelites' escape through the parted waters of the Red Sea. In Exodus 15:22—17:16, Moses leads the Israelites to Sinai, a mountain in the wilderness, where they will enter into a covenant relationship with the God who liberated them. The Israelites agree to abide by the rules and moral instruction (*Torah*) conveyed to them by Moses and in so doing they will become God's people—"a kingdom of priests and a holy nation set apart from the other nations" in its singular devotion to the teachings of God (Exodus 18:1—24:18). Chapters 25–40 detail the construction of a sanctuary, a portable tent-like structure that houses the Ark of the Covenant (a box containing two tablets inscribed with



Personalities in Judaism 1.3 MOSES

As noted in the introduction, the historicity of Moses cannot be ascertained. We therefore confine ourselves to a brief summary of the life and character of Moses as it is presented in the Bible and in postbiblical and rabbinic literature. The son of Amram and Yocheved of the tribe of Levi, Moses was born in Egypt during a period of oppression of the Hebrew slaves by Pharaoh. The story of Moses' birth and exposure to the Nile river contains generic motifs found in the birth story of Sargon of Akkad, Cyrus of Persia, and the god Horus. Yet, the ascription of foreign birth to a national hero and the presence of numerous Egyptian names among the early Levites (the name Moses is itself Egyptian), suggests some historical basis for the traditional association of Moses with Egypt. Moses is raised in the house of Pharaoh after being rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. Several incidents in his youth foreshadow his role as liberator of the oppressed. When he sees a Hebrew slave being beaten he intervenes and kills the aggressor; a deed that causes him to flee to Midian in the desert. There he drives off some rough shepherds harassing a group of women drawing water from a well. He marries one of the women—Zipporah, daughter of the Midianite chieftain variously identified as Reuel, Hobab, and Jethro. While tending flocks in Midian, Moses experiences a theophany. He sees a bush that burns but is not consumed, and hears a voice that commands him to redeem Israel from Egypt. In this narrative, God identifies himself as Yahweh, leading scholars to associate Moses with the introduction of Yahwism proper. The antiquity of Yahweh-worship and the association of Yahweh with a mountain (Horeb/Sinai) are difficult historical questions. But according to the biblical narrative, Moses is understood to be the first messenger of Yahweh sent with signs to effect his will.

The Exodus story features a battle of wills between Moses and Pharaoh, with Moses finally leading the Israelites across a miraculously divided Sea of Reeds to safety. The Israelites journey to Mount Horeb/Sinai where Moses serves as the intermediary in the conclusion of a covenant between Yahweh and the newly formed nation. He is said to write down the detailed terms of the covenant and also to deposit a copy of the Decalogue carved on stone tablets in a special Ark of the Covenant. Moses continues to receive additional ritual, religious, and moral injunctions and later consults God in four difficult cases in which the law is not clear. In addition to his role as the mediator of God's laws and warnings to Israel, Moses is credited with establishing several central Israelite institutions: The administrative organization of the people into units of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands governed and judged by appointed officers in accordance with the advice tendered by his father-in-law Jethro; the construction of

the tabernacle (portable Sanctuary); the establishment of the system of sacrificial worship; the inauguration of the Israelite cult and cultic calendar; and the investiture of the priesthood.

Critical scholarship points to the many inconsistencies and chronological difficulties that inhere in the traditions regarding Moses. Certainly, later legal, cultic, and traditional materials of diverse origin have been assembled and represented as issued by God to Israel through the mediation of Moses. This literary conceit—ascribing all of God's revealed teachings to a single moment and mediator—is a precedent for the later tendency of postbiblical and rabbinic Judaism to represent new teachings and legal developments as the natural unfolding of the original revelation to Moses at Sinai.

The relationship between Moses and Yahweh is the most intimate divine-human relationship to be found in biblical narrative. Though he is not referred to in the Pentateuch as a prophet, Moses is described as Yahweh's servant and as a man of Yahweh. As Yahweh's servant he carries the divine word to the nation, rebuking them when they have erred and exhorting them to obey the terms of the covenant. Conversely, as the representative of the nation he intercedes on Israel's behalf, praying for mercy and turning back Yahweh's jealous wrath when it threatens to destroy the people. Moses alone enters the cloud encasing Yahweh to speak with him and the biblical text eulogizes him by saying that "never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out, face to face ... for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel" (Deut 34:10, 12). Yet for all his heroism and virtue, Moses is clearly a human and a flawed one at that, denied entry into the Promised Land for having exhibited impatience or lack of faith at an incident recounted in Numbers 20:1-13.

In postbiblical writings, Moses is portrayed in line with the ideological commitments of later authors and communities. Philo describes Moses as king, legislator, priest, and prophet—a divine man of extraordinary learning and reasoning capacity, with superhuman physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual gifts. For Josephus, Moses exemplified the classic features of the virtuous man, ruled entirely by reason and never by the passions (such as fear, jealousy, or anger). Josephus represents Moses as the most ancient and exalted lawgiver, the inspiration of later Greek philosophers and lawgivers. Pseudepigraphic works claim Mosaic authorship to establish the authoritativeness of their teachings (e.g., *Jubilees*, which purports to be a revelation to Moses over and above the *first law* recorded in the Pentateuch). In rabbinic writings, Moses' role as a teacher and sage is highlighted above all. Dubbed "Moshe Rabbenu" (Moses our rabbi, or teacher), Moses is described as the scholar *par excellence* and the vast corpus of rabbinic teachings are understood as deriving from the original revelation to Moses at Sinai. Rabbinic texts avoid ascribing divine or even semi-divine powers to Moses perhaps in reaction to the Christian divinization of Jesus.

the Ten Commandments) and in which sacrificial worship and divine communication take place. After a forty-year journey through the wilderness, a new generation of Israelites are said to arrive at the Jordan River—the eastern border of the land of Canaan—where they prepare to cross over and occupy the land promised to them by God. Moses dies without entering the Promised Land, and leadership of the people passes to Joshua. The biblical books of Joshua and Judges relate the story of the conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites, the division of the land among the tribes, and the early years of the settlement.

The historical value of the story of the exodus from Egypt—whether and when such an event occurred—and the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites has exercised scholars for generations. Second millennium Egyptian records mention foreigners entering the eastern Nile delta for food and water in times of famine and working on royal building projects, as the

Israelites are said to have done in the Bible. A later Egyptian inscription (the stele of Merneptah) mentions a nonsedentary people named Israel in the land of Canaan by 1220 B.C.E. It is *possible* that some type of exodus of foreign slaves from Egypt—much smaller in scale than indicated in the biblical materials—took place in the thirteenth century B.C.E. and that some of these slaves may have ended up in Canaan. Nevertheless, the biblical account of the exodus shows evidence of a long process of transmission, revision, and literary editing and cannot be taken at face value. Its purpose is didactic and ideological rather than strictly historical. More important than historical verifiability is the conviction of the ancient Israelites who received and transmitted these traditions that God had rescued them from bondage and concluded a covenant that articulated the nation's aspirations. Exodus does not pretend to be objective history. It is a celebratory myth of origins explaining Israel's

Personalities in Judaism 1.4

JOSHUA



Son of Nun of the tribe of Ephraim, Joshua is depicted in biblical texts as Moses' successor, leading the Israelites into the Promised Land and overseeing the distribution of the land to the tribes of Israel. Joshua first appears as a warrior fighting against the Amalekites. He next appears as Moses's attendant, accompanying him as he ascends and descends Mount Sinai and standing guard at the Tent of Meeting, when Moses would speak with Yahweh. Joshua and Caleb were among the 12 spies sent to reconnoiter the land of Canaan. Only they opposed the negative report of the other spies, so only they were privileged to enter the Promised Land. On Yahweh's instruction, Moses appointed Joshua as his successor, transferring his wisdom and authority by laying his hands upon him. The book of Joshua recounts Joshua's role in conquering the land and apportioning the tribal allotments.

The Joshua materials are historically very problematic. There is little archaeological evidence for the conquest as described in the book of Joshua, leading some scholars to doubt the existence of Joshua altogether. Others concede that the literary account is not entirely reliable and reflects later interests and ideology but still credit Joshua with an early leadership role. Without adjudicating this debate we can assess the role and function of Joshua in biblical and later tradition. Many passages model Joshua on Moses. Like Moses, Joshua leads the people across a body of water that parts miraculously (in the season of Passover, no less). He encounters Yahweh in a theophany strongly resembling the theophany at the burning bush and he mediates a covenant renewal ceremony. In other respects, the portrait of Joshua mirrors the portraits of later kings, especially King Josiah. Thus, Joshua is a transitional figure in the story of Israel's leadership. In rabbinic tradition, Joshua is deemed as a prophet worthy to succeed Moses.

special relationship with God, a theological interpretation of the great events that were believed to bind Israel and her God Yahweh (which is the presumed pronunciation of YHWH) together forever.

Did a group of escaped slaves invade and conquer Canaan in the mid-thirteenth century B.C.E., establishing the nation of Israel? The biblical account is self-contradictory on this point, and archaeological research does not support the picture of a rapid and wholesale conquest. Archaeologists have found hundreds of small sites that were newly established in the thirteenth to eleventh centuries B.C.E., in places that the Bible identifies as strongholds of Israel. However, because these settlements are in their material culture (pots, jars, houses, etc.) entirely Canaanite, many scholars believe that they were established by disaffected Canaanites who for some reason chose to withdraw, establish their own settlements, and worship a liberator God. They may have been

joined by immigrants—as this was a period of great migrations throughout the Ancient Near East—and by escaped slaves. Scholars have suggested that these slaves may have brought with them the story of a marvelous escape from Egypt understood at some point to have been the doing of Yahweh (probably a pre-Israelite deity worshipped in regions south of Canaan), and the mixed group that would emerge in the late thirteenth century as the nation of Israel adopted the national story of the Exodus as its own.

The Hebrew tribes themselves were likely still in the process of formation, but the tribal structure of Israelite society that would develop would be strengthened by the natural division of the land into geographically distinct districts. The religious center and symbol of this tribal confederation was the peripatetic shrine housing the Ark of the Covenant. There was no supertribal government—the twelve tribes were bound together by their mutual covenant with the deity. In times of national

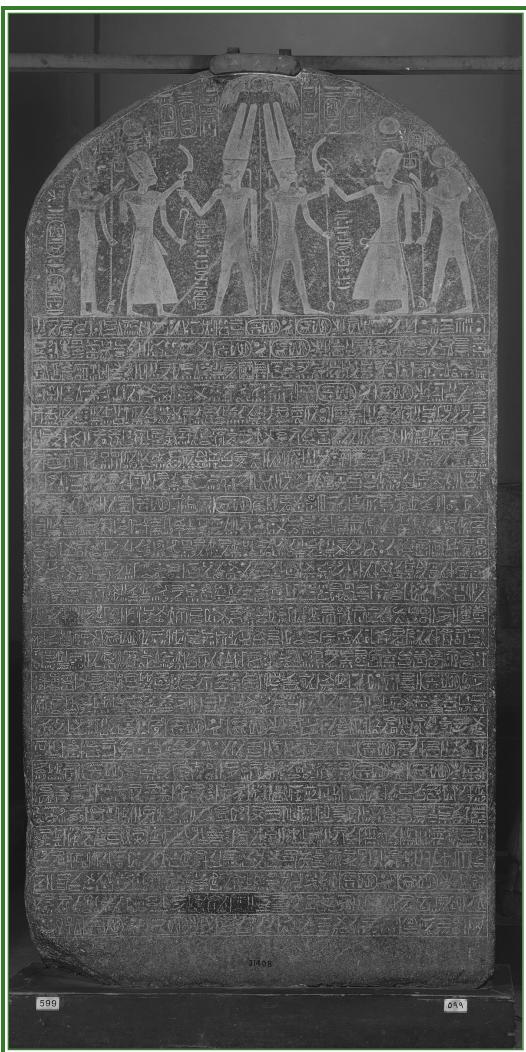


FIGURE I.1. *The Victory Stele of Merneptah. This is the first extra-biblical text to refer to a people known as Israel, dwelling in Canaan. Twelfth century B.C.E.*

crisis the tribes would act together. The book of Judges describes several inspired leaders (judges) said to be sent by God when Israel's enemies threatened. Particularly troubling were the Philistines who arrived in Canaan

from the Aegean islands at the beginning of the Iron Age (1200 B.C.E.). With their superior technology, the Philistines expanded north and east and by the mid-eleventh century constituted a serious threat to Israelite control of the land.

Partly in response to the Philistine threat, Israel changed its form of government from tribal confederacy to monarchy. Saul was anointed king by the prophet Samuel around 1025 B.C.E. But it was Israel's second monarch, King David, who consolidated his rule over all Israel and brought relative peace to the region. The Bible touts the reigns of David and his son Solomon as a golden age. Solomon's construction of a great Temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem (ca. 950 B.C.E.) inaugurates the so-called First Temple Period, which lasts until the destruction of 586 B.C.E. However, as life in the royal court became increasingly lavish under Solomon and the power of the state increased, so did the burdens on the lower classes in the form of heavy taxation and the much-hated corvée (forced labor on state projects). Many viewed the increasing social and economic schisms as a violation of the older traditions of Hebrew tribal society united by covenant with Yahweh and guided by prophets and priests rather than kings. Over the next centuries, prophetic figures such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah excoriated the wealthy for their insatiable greed, exploitation of the poor, and social injustice.

When King David's son and successor King Solomon died in 922 the structure erected by David fell into two rival states of lesser importance—Israel (comprising ten tribes

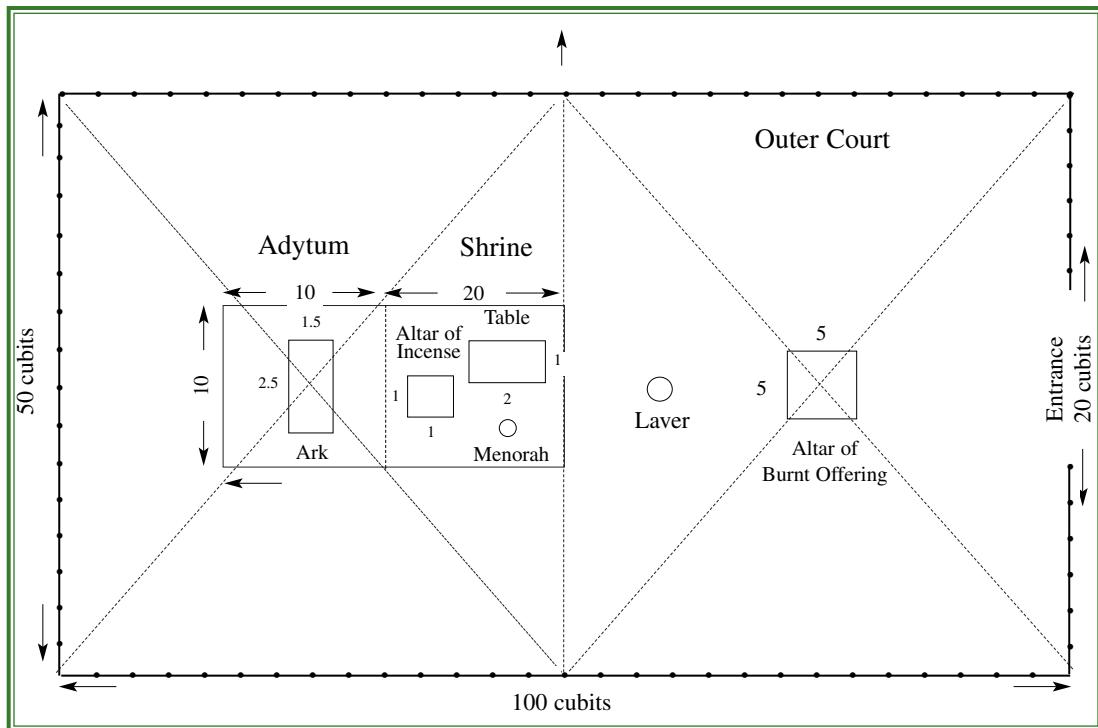


FIGURE 1.2. *Israelite sanctuary. This schematic drawing shows the sanctuary as described in the Pentateuch.*

in the north) and Judah (including the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south), each with its own king. The names of many kings of Israel and Judah are verified in Assyrian sources. Sometimes the two kingdoms were at war; sometimes they formed an alliance against outside enemies. But two centuries later the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians (722) and much of the population was exiled to Assyria only to disappear from the pages of history. The southern kingdom of Judah, though still viable, was reduced by the Assyrians to tributary status. Judah was finally

destroyed in 586 by the Babylonians who had defeated the Assyrians and assumed control over the Ancient Near East. The Temple was destroyed and the population decimated by death and exile.

The exiles were for the most part members of the Judean ruling class and skilled artisans. Those left behind in Judah eked out a subsistence living. While some exiles surely assimilated into mainstream Babylonian culture, others viewed recent events as confirmation rather than disproof of the sovereignty of Israel's God who had chosen to punish Israel



Personalities in Judaism 1.5 DAVID AND SOLOMON

David. Youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, David rose to become the second and greatest king of Israel, reigning from ca. 1005 to 965 B.C.E. Although a reliable reconstruction of a *historical David* is not possible, the biblical sources provide a rich literary portrait of a complex and extraordinary man. The biblical book of Ruth contains a genealogy that links David to a Moabite woman (Ruth) on the one hand and the union of Judah and his Canaanite daughter-in-law Tamar on the other. The line of David continues through all the kings of Judah, and the New Testament claims that Jesus is descended from David.

David's beginnings are humble—as an insignificant shepherd inexperienced in warfare he is singled out by the prophet Samuel and anointed as king. The spirit of the Lord is said to rush upon him mightily, symbolizing the transfer of power and favor from King Saul to David. In the royal court, David plays music that soothes the troubled king, and becomes the latter's armor bearer. In another story, David proves his military worth by defeating Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, with only a slingshot and stones. David's successes earn him the love of Saul's children Michal (whom he marries) and Jonathan. But Saul's jealousy is kindled and he plots against David even as David's fortunes continue to rise. David is forced to flee, eventually taking refuge among the Philistines who hire him as a mercenary. During this period he finds support among the disaffected and distressed. Saul's supporters continue to pursue David despite two remarkable incidents in which David chooses to spare Saul's life. From his base in the town of Ziklag, David curries favor with the notables of Judah hoping to win their support in his struggle against Saul. When Saul is killed in a battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa, David and his band go to Hebron where he is anointed as king and reigns for seven and a half years. However, his attempts to rule over all the Israelite tribes are foiled by a rival king—Ish-bosheth the son of Saul. When the latter is murdered, David is anointed for the third time, this time as king of both Judah and Israel. He captures the centrally located city of the Jebusites, establishing it as his capital—Jerusalem—and ruling from there for some thirty-three years.

David enjoyed a series of military successes over the Philistines, Moabites, Aramaeans, Edomites, and others. According to the biblical text his kingdom was extensive, stretching from the river of Egypt in the west through much of the Transjordan and approaching the Euphrates in the east, though modern scholars have cast doubt on the reliability of this claim. David established a centralized state modeled in part on Canaanite cities and appointed administrative officials. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and built an altar to Yahweh on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite in order to turn the city into a sacred

capital for the nation. Although he hoped to build a House for the Lord, the task was left to his son. Instead, David is told through his prophet Nathan, that Yahweh has promised David a sure “house” (a dynasty) that will last forever. The promise of a ruler of the house of David as king in Israel is known as the Davidic Covenant and is the basis for the later belief that Israel’s messiah will be a Davidide.

David’s later life is marked by sin and family tragedy, beginning with his sexual liaison with a married woman Bathsheba, whose husband Uriah is killed at David’s behest. The child of this union dies, as punishment for David’s sin, but a subsequent child—Solomon—will eventually rule as David’s successor. In the meantime, however, tensions build among the northern (Israelite) tribes as a result of David’s imposition of a permanent central authority and dynasty in Jerusalem. The law of the king, with its taxes and corvée (a levy of forced labor), its standing army and civil bureaucracy, is contrary to older tribal traditions. A series of crises ensue, including a rebellion led by David’s son, Absalom. Absalom has himself crowned at Hebron and David is forced to flee. Following Absalom’s death, David is restored to power only to confront another rebellion led by a Benjamite named Sheba (2 Sam 20). A final contentious struggle for the throne between his sons Adonijah and Solomon mar David’s declining years.

In postbiblical tradition David is praised as a skilled musician (the composition of the psalms is ascribed to him), a poet, and a godly king. Already the book of Chronicles presents an idealized portrait of David as devoted to God, omitting any mention of his major flaws and sins. Rabbinic texts emphasize the unique status of David’s monarchy, specifically, the eternal nature of the dynasty he established. Rabbinic legends make much of David’s extraordinary physical strength, poetic genius, musical skill, and his knowledge of Torah and halakhah. Some texts criticize David, particularly for his affair with Bathsheba, but others acquit him of all blame.

Solomon. Son of King David and Bathsheba, Solomon is anointed as the third king of Israel in David’s lifetime even though he is the tenth of David’s seventeen sons. There are no references to Solomon outside the biblical text, and scholars differ sharply in their view of the historical merits of the biblical material. While Solomon’s reign (ca. 965 to 928 B.C.E.) is certainly idealized as a golden age, the basic portrait of a prosperous and peaceful nation engaged in diplomacy rather than expansionism seems plausible. Solomon’s reign commences with the bloody elimination of opponents and enemies. His kingdom is said to be extensive, affording control over lucrative trade routes and bringing in tribute in the form of precious metals, cloth, spices, and horses. Illustrating this point is the famed visit of the Queen of Sheba and her retinue with camels laden with spices, gold, and precious stones. Under Solomon, Israel enjoyed great prosperity and close relations with other kingdoms, sealed by the king’s many marriages to foreign



women, numbering in the hundreds. Solomon undertook construction of public buildings and fortifications as well as a magnificent Temple and palace complex in Jerusalem, emphasizing the divine election of both the House of David and the city of Jerusalem (Zion). Such projects led to an increased tax burden as well as the institution of the corvée and the duty of the citizenry to supply provisions for the royal court, including horses and chariots. Acts of rebellion against the House of David broke out in the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam leading ultimately to the secession of the ten northern tribes of Israel.

The Bible praises Solomon as a wise king and judge and postbiblical traditions credit Solomon with great works of poetry and wisdom literature. Rabbinic legends view the building of the Temple as his most important act, a deed achieved through all manner of miracles. Nevertheless, Solomon is heavily criticized for his violation of the biblical laws regarding kings—the multiplication of wives who worshipped foreign gods, and the amassing of gold, silver, and horses—and for an excessive rationalism that led him to disregard laws whose purpose he could not fathom. According to these legends, Solomon's sins cost him dearly and he spent his final years as a mendicant. Jewish tradition maintains that he authored the Song of Songs in the passion of his youth, the book of Proverbs in the wisdom of his middle years, and Ecclesiastes in the despair of his old age.

for her many sins in violation of the covenant. As we shall see, the community of the exile played a key role in the eventual transformation of the nation of ancient Israel into the religion of Judaism.

The Second Temple Period (539 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)

The Persian Period (539–332 B.C.E.)

In 539 B.C.E. the Babylonians were defeated by Cyrus of Persia, whose empire stretched from Egypt, through Asia Minor to eastern Iran. Cyrus held to a policy of allowing deportees from regions conquered by the Babylonians to return to their native lands. According to the book of Ezra, in 538 B.C.E. Cyrus authorized

the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem and the return of the Temple vessels, a decree supported by archaeological findings. In addition, the exiles would be allowed to return to Yehud—the name of the Persian province of Judah—and establish a kind of Commonwealth under Persian hegemony in what scholars refer to as the period of the Restoration. The Second Temple was completed between 521 and 515 B.C.E., inaugurating the Second Temple period that extends until the Temple's destruction by the Romans in 70 C.E. During this period hegemony over the land of Israel passed from the Persians, to the Greeks (332 B.C.E.), and after a period of Jewish independence (142–63 B.C.E.), finally to the Romans.

Leadership in the Persian period is associated with Nehemiah and Ezra, two prominent

diaspora Jews who may have had the backing of the Persian king. The small community of Yehud was beset with problems. Frequent conflicts with the neighboring territories of Samaria, Geshur, and Ammon, as well as internal conflicts, threatened the community's very survival. Ezra and Nehemiah instituted reforms and zealously promoted a renewed commitment to the Mosaic covenant.

Increasingly, community life was organized around the Torah book.

The Hellenistic Period (332–167 B.C.E.)

Alexander of Macedon's conquest of the Ancient Near East was concluded in the 320s B.C.E. In Alexander's time tens of thousands of Greeks and Macedonians migrated to all parts of his vast empire. Greek culture

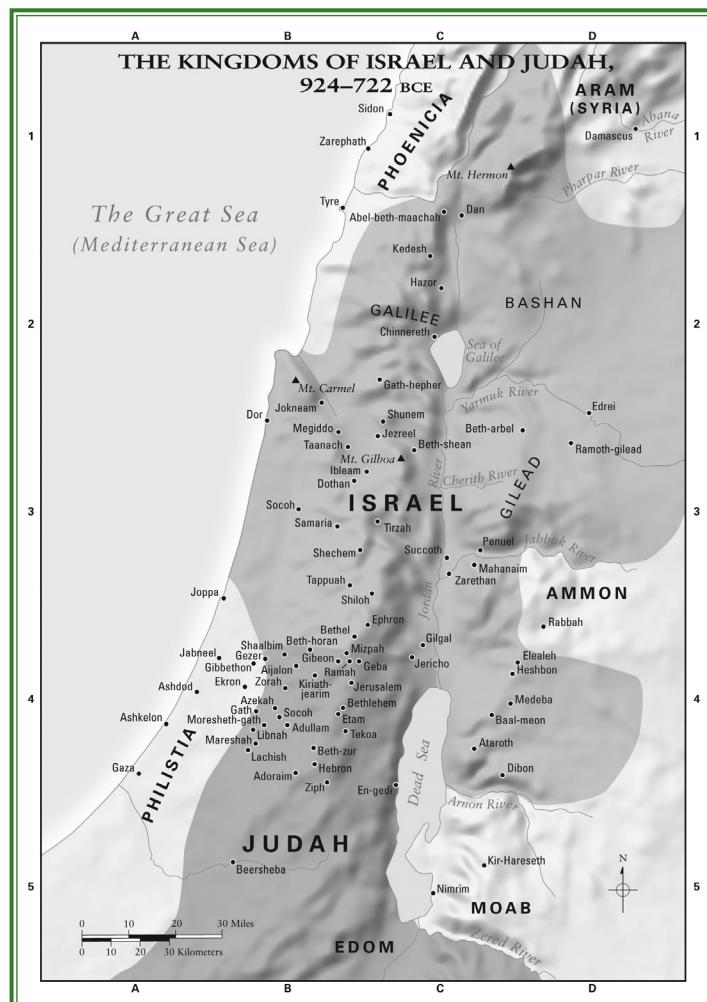


FIGURE 1.3. *The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, 924–722 B.C.E.*

flourished from Italy to Central Asia until the rise of Islam in the seventh century. In political terms, the Hellenistic period in Palestine extends from 332 to 167 B.C.E., when the Jews asserted their political independence from the Greeks. In cultural terms, however, the Hellenistic period in Palestine extends until the rise of Islam, for even under native Jewish rule, Roman rule and later Byzantine rule, Jews in Palestine were thoroughly immersed in Hellenistic *culture*.

Rulers of the Hellenistic period encouraged the construction of new cities and the conversion of old cities into towns with Greek institutions such as: the assembly of citizens, the election of magistrates, educational athletic centers (the gymnasium), civic cults honoring the Olympian gods as well as local deities. In addition, there was a wide adoption of the Greek language, of Greek dress, material culture, art, and modes of thought, particularly among the upper middle classes of the Ancient Near East. That Jews participated in and were deeply influenced by Hellenistic culture is attested in an array of writings expressing new ideas, and in the formation of sectarian movements with diverse understandings of God's will for Israel: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and messianic and apocalyptic movements.

After Alexander's death in 324, his generals fought for control of the empire. By 301 Egypt was held by Ptolemy, while Mesopotamia and the Levant (Palestine) were held by Seleucus. However, the Ptolemies occupied most of the Levant and for a century the two great powers struggled for control of the region, the Seleucids finally prevailing by 198 B.C.E.

The struggle had a significant impact on the internal politics of Jerusalem and Judah, with pro-Ptolemaic and pro-Seleucid factions in conflict. After gaining control of Judea in 198, the Seleucids rewarded the pro-Seleucid faction by providing support for the Temple, granting tax concessions, and confirming local autonomy. But the early second century B.C.E. saw a struggle over the office of high priest in which various contenders for the position paid the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes, for his support. Problems arose when a man named Menelaus attempted to raise money to buy the king's support by taking treasures from the Temple. Fighting broke out between the supporters of Menelaus and a certain Jason, who favored establishing Jerusalem as a polis. Antiochus suspected a revolt, recaptured the city, and plundered the Temple in 169–168 B.C.E. He garrisoned troops in Jerusalem and reorganized the Temple under pagan rites to accommodate his soldiers. The Temple was rededicated to Zeus Olympius (the Syrian god Baal Shemem) and Menelaus presided as high priest over the proceedings. Many Jews were outraged, however, and the suppression of traditional Jewish observances, such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, prompted a full-scale revolt known as the Maccabean revolt.

The Maccabean Revolt and the Hasmonean Period (167–63 B.C.E.)

The revolt was led by Judas Maccabeus of the Hasmonean family and his sons. Among the rebels were Hasidim or "pious ones," whose goal was to purge the Temple of its pagan

pollution and restore it to Yahweh. This was achieved in December, 164 B.C.E.—an event commemorated by Jews to this day in the Festival of Hanukkah. During the revolt many zealots were tortured and killed, generating the first written accounts of Jewish martyrs, that is, persons who willingly accept death rather than violate the injunctions of their religion against, for example, eating pork or offering sacrifice to the king's god.

The Hasidim, concerned only about the pure worship of Yahweh and not about national independence, broke with the Hasmoneans

once it was clear that the latter were bent on the further goal of national independence. Though they lost the support of the Hasidim, the Hasmoneans met with military success, assisted in their efforts by a mutual defense treaty with Rome. In 142 B.C.E., independence from the Seleucids and expulsion of their army was achieved. The Hasmonean family ruled the small kingdom of Judea for several generations, assuming the offices of both king and high priest even though the high priesthood was a hereditary office to which they had no legitimate claim. The Hasmoneans ruled

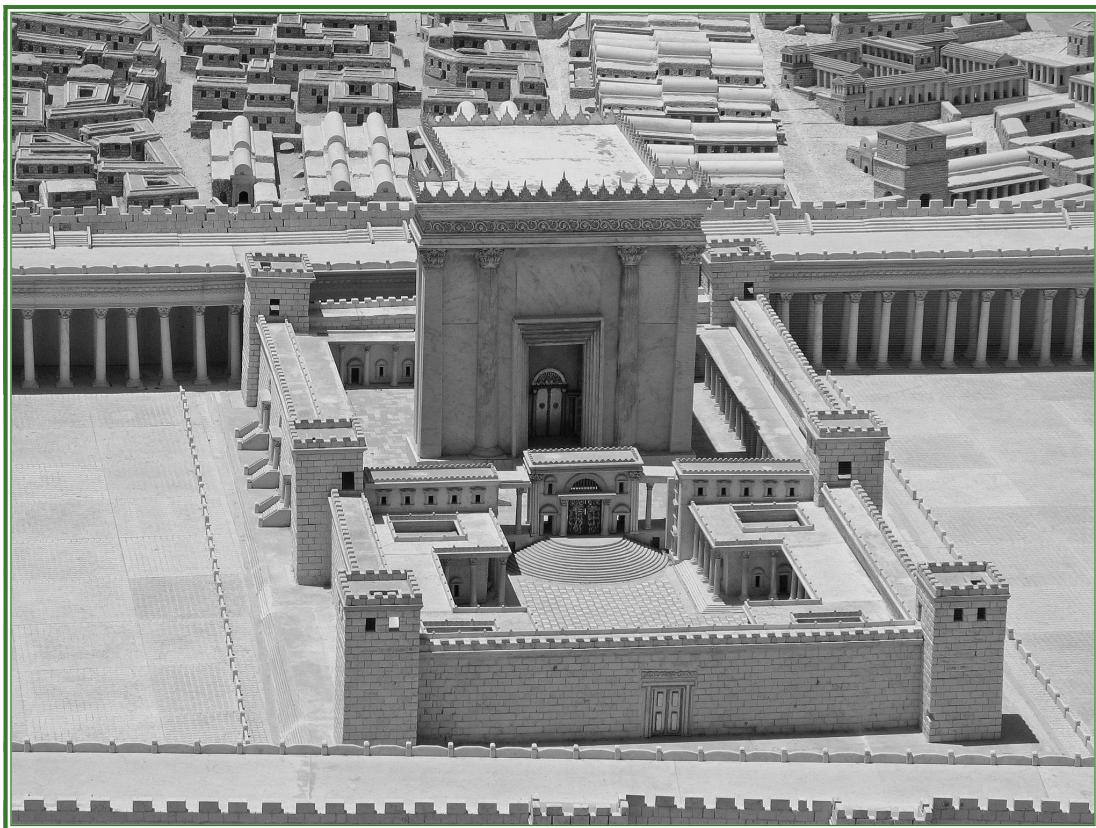


FIGURE 1.4. *Model of Herod's Temple. This scale model of the Second Temple at the time of King Herod the Great (ca. 20 B.C.E.) is located at the Holy Land Hotel in modern-day Jerusalem.*

until Pompey's armies captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. and established Roman hegemony.

The Roman Period (from 63 B.C.E.)

Under Roman rule Jews had some semblance of autonomy and religious independence. However, the Judean kings, princes, and high priests were all appointed by Rome and were expected to bear allegiance to Rome. Major segments of the Jewish population were

unwilling to relinquish the political independence they had experienced under the Hasmoneans, and opposition to the Romans was manifest from the outset. Many Jews never ceased to view Roman rule as illegitimate, and the hope for a *messiah* (anointed leader), who would defeat the enemy and restore the nation, burned bright in some quarters. From 63 to 40 B.C.E., Judea was a vassal state of Rome, but great civil and political

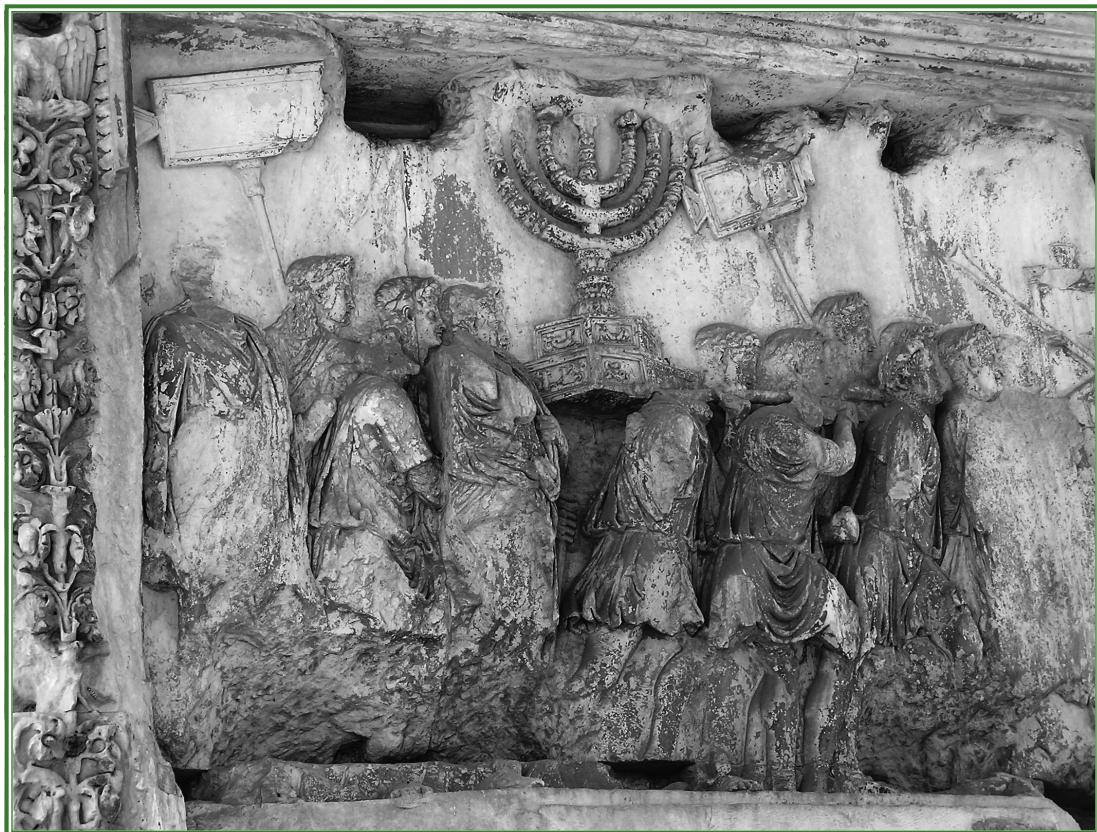


FIGURE I.5. Panel from the Arch of Titus. Built near the Roman Forum in 81 C.E., the arch commemorates Titus's capture and sack of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The scene depicted here shows a triumphal procession bearing treasures from the Jerusalem Temple, including the seven-branched golden candlestick (menorah).

unrest led the Romans to appoint a local loyalist king—King Herod. Herod ruled from 37 to 4 B.C.E. and undertook extensive and ambitious building projects including a magnificent renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem. However, he was hated by many Palestinian Jews not only for his unswerving loyalty to Rome but also because he was viewed as an illegitimate king. He was not from the house of David, which had been promised perpetual sovereignty by Yahweh; indeed, his Jewish lineage was suspect since he was descended from a family of forced converts. In 6 C.E., Rome opted for a plan of direct rule for Judea as a Roman province headed by Roman governors. But relations between the Jews and the Roman authorities deteriorated, and the Emperor Caligula's demand that his statue be set up in the Jerusalem Temple almost provoked a rebellion.

Finally, in 66 C.E., a full-scale war did break out resulting in massive slaughter, the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and a permanent transformation of Jewish life. Although the Temple was not the exclusive center of Jewish religious life, it nevertheless served critically important symbolic and ritual functions. It was the only site of the collective worship of the entire nation and the focus of great religious events, particularly the three pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). In addition, the Temple was a forum for lectures and the dissemination of ideas and the seat of the Sanhedrin (high court). The Sanhedrin was a legislative and judicial body of seventy or seventy-two members that convened in a

special area of the Temple and held authority in matters of law and religion in Jewish life. The destruction of this central institution was an event of major significance.

Messianic agitation continued in the ensuing decades climaxing in the Bar Kokhba Revolt. When Hadrian decided in 132 to turn the Holy City of Jerusalem into a Roman colony renamed Aelia Capitolina, zealots and messianists rebelled ready to fight a new war. Simon bar Kosiba (also Kokhba), believed by some to be a messiah, commanded the army and was head of an interim rebel administration. But after a dreadful and bloody war the rebellion was crushed. The Roman government decided that a radical solution was necessary. They expelled Jews from in and around Jerusalem. They suppressed two central religious practices—circumcision and the teaching or study of Torah—and engaged in persecution for two or three years after the war. When Hadrian died in 137 he was succeeded by Antoninus Pius who opted for a more lenient, tolerant policy. He repealed most of the oppressive edicts.

But the Jewish population had been hard hit, decimated by two wars and rising emigration. The collapse of the community's central institutions in combination with severe economic problems eroded adherence to a Jewish way of life. The Romans imposed direct rule after the Bar Kokhba revolt, replacing local rulers with Roman officials. All legal authority and political power was in the hands of the Roman state and its representatives, and even in the Jewish cities of Palestine, public life was predominantly pagan in character.

Yet during this period a small and peripheral group with some connection to pre-70 scribes and Pharisees preserved and developed a Torah-centered Judaism. It would be at least two centuries before these sages, or rabbis, would begin to win broader influence and even judicial authority over the general Jewish populace as a result of Patriarchal patronage. The Patriarch was the chief representative of the Jews to the Romans, whose power and prestige grew considerably through the third and fourth centuries. The patriarchs appointed rabbis as judges and religious functionaries, and in the fourth through sixth centuries the rabbis reached out to the broader Jewish community, preaching in synagogues and serving as teachers. The major works of the Palestinian rabbinic movement include a collection of legal teachings and disputes known as the Mishnah (ca. 220 C.E.), a further commentary and elaboration of the Mishnah known as the Palestinian Talmud (ca. 380 C.E.) and sundry works of biblical exegesis (or Midrash), liturgical compositions, and mystical speculation.

Christianity and the Jews

Christianity began as a movement within the Jewish community. A small number of Palestinian Jews and Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews centered in Jerusalem believed that a Jewish man named Jesus put to death by the Romans in the early first century C.E., was God's anointed (messiah); as such he would reappear for the ultimate redemption of the

Jewish people. These early Jesus-peoples identified themselves as Jews, conducted themselves as Jews, and worshipped the God of Israel in the Temple. Gentiles who wished to join this Jesus movement adopted Jewish religious identity and practice (observing the many laws of the Torah, including circumcision, and dietary and purity regulations). Members of this early community headed by James, the brother of Jesus in Jerusalem, did not view belief in Jesus' messiahship as the negation of Judaism and the laws and commandments of the Hebrew Bible, but as a natural part of it. It was Paul, a Jew active in the second half of the first century, who did the most to bring the new movement to non-Jews. Paulines believed that Christianity's vocation was its mission to the Gentiles and that this mission would be eased without the requirement to observe the laws of the covenant. Paul did not allow Gentiles to become circumcised, to adopt the Jewish dietary system, or obey the commandments of the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, there soon existed a variety of Christian sects with greater and lesser degrees of antagonism toward the covenantal religion of the Hebrew Bible.

As the Pauline version of Christianity gained in strength, and increasing numbers of non-Jews joined the church, hostility and antagonism toward Jews increased. These negative attitudes, as dangerous as they were, were a limited threat in the pluralistic society of the early second and third centuries. But with the creation of a Christian state and society in the fourth century,

long-standing theological and cultural hostilities were translated into proscriptions that had the force of law. With the rise of monastic movements and waves of religious emotionalism, attacks on non-Christians became more energetic. Monks were particularly zealous in the war against both paganism and Judaism. Successive Christian emperors lobbied by a powerful church passed increasingly severe legislation against the Jewish community.

With Christianity as the official faith of the Roman Empire, Judaism gradually assumed a position of legal inferiority. In general the anti-Jewish legislation followed a certain consistent line: Jews should be allowed to survive but dispersed, few in number, abased and poor because then they served as a testimony to the truth of Christianity. Hence Christian doctrine supported legal harassment and subjugation of the Jews. The Code of Justinian in 527 C.E. contained discriminatory legislation that was to influence European legal systems for centuries. The term *heretic* was redefined to include Jews, and Jews were entitled to no real legal protections. The Justinian code also declared that the canons of the church had the force of law. Synagogues were taken over as churches and there were instances of forced baptism. Jews in Caesarea rioted, but were severely suppressed. Yet, despite the marginalization and hardship (or perhaps because of it), many Jews chose to constitute themselves as religious communities formed around synagogues, and in the fourth to sixth centuries numerous synagogues were built in Palestine. The synagogue and local community became the chief organizing

institutions of Jewish life in late antiquity and remained so until the modern period.

Byzantine Christian rule of the Holy Land ended in 637 with the Muslim conquest which brought generally better conditions for the Jews. Nevertheless, the Jewish community in Palestine was by this time dwarfed—numerically, intellectually, and spiritually—by the Jewish community of Babylonia.

The Babylonian Jewish Community

In the ancient period, Jewish communities flourished outside the land of Israel, particularly in Alexandria, Egypt and in Babylonia to the east. The community in Babylonia was outside the sphere of Greek, Roman, and ultimately Christian dominion. Although the Babylonian Jewish community confronted problems and persecutions of its own, its relative freedom from subjugation to a Christian state and from the economic, political, and religious hardships that prevailed in Palestine was largely responsible for its development into a vibrant center of Jewish intellectual and cultural life, until it finally surpassed the Palestinian community in its leadership of world Jewry.

Israelites first arrived in Babylonia during the time of the exile in 586 B.C.E. In later periods there was some immigration from Palestine, but it was not until the Hadrianic persecutions after the Bar Kochba revolt in the 130s C.E. that large numbers of scholars made their way to Babylonia and established a home there. Over the next several centuries as

the status of Babylonian scholarship grew in prestige, immigration increased.

From 140 to 226 C.E., the Parthian-Arsacide dynasty ruled Babylonia. The Parthians permitted the establishment of a civil authority among the Jews of Babylonia so that by the end of the second century there was an exilarch in Babylon just as there was a patriarch in Palestine. The exilarch was a high government official in the Parthian administration and had military resources and direct access to the throne. In 226 the Parthian empire fell to the Sassanians, an Iranian peoples. The Sassanians established a state church (Zoroastrianism or Mazdeanism) and attempted to centralize the faith of the nation. Other religions were persecuted: Brahmans, Shamans, Buddhists, Christians, and Jews. This initial period of persecution was relieved by emperor Shapur I, who favored a policy of toleration, and Jews worked out a *modus vivendi* with the Persian regime, articulated in the famous principle “the law of the land is law.” Scholars generally understand this principle to mean that the Jews agreed to observe the rules of the state in all civil affairs in exchange for the freedom to run their internal community affairs according to Jewish law. Despite some periods of persecution initiated by religious zealots (the Zoroastrian priest Kartir at the end of third century, the emperor Yazdegird II in the fifth century), Jews in Babylonia generally fared better than the Jews of Palestine.

In the early Sassanian period, the exilarch, an aristocratic grandee, played a major role

in Jewish communal life and exercised considerable judicial authority. The rabbis were exilarchic bureaucrats, local judges, and administrators. However, as the rabbinic movement expanded and developed through the fourth to sixth centuries, it became increasingly independent. Rabbis saw their authority as deriving from their knowledge of Torah rather than the exilarch’s support. By the end of the Talmudic period (seventh century C.E.), the exilarch had faded from view and large-scale rabbinic academies called *yeshivot* (sing. *yeshivah*) provided the Babylonian Jewish community with its distinctive character and culture.

The curriculum of the rabbinic academy centered on the Mishnah, a collection of primarily legal traditions and disputes on all aspects of civil, criminal, personal status, and religious law produced in Palestine and carried to Babylonia in the early third century. Generations of Babylonian sages discussed the Mishnah and related teachings, ultimately producing a compendious supercommentary known as the Babylonian Talmud. Rabbinic or classical Judaism is the Torah-centered way of life that finds expression in the vast sea of materials produced by Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis of the classical age (70–630 C.E.), most prominently the Talmud of Babylonia. This classical rabbinic Judaism achieved a remarkable degree of cultural hegemony in Jewish communities worldwide, a hegemony that, despite local variations, withstood serious challenge well into the early modern period.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 How do the stories of Genesis 1–11 differ from those of Genesis 12–50?
- 2 How do historians understand the relationship between the events narrated in Exodus and the historical experience of early Israelites?
- 3 Describe the reasons for and results of the transition of Israel's government from tribal confederacy to monarchy.
- 4 In the Second Temple period, how did the Jewish population of Palestine fare under the Persians? The Greeks? The Romans? In what way did the experience of Jews in Palestine resemble and differ from that of the Jewish population of Babylonia?
- 5 How did the relationship between Judaism and Christianity change from the time of Jesus to the Muslim Conquest?