

The term Judaism refers to an evolving *religious* tradition most, but not all, of the adherents of which are *ethnically* Jewish. While religious elements dominate Jewish history and civilization, they are not identical with it. This book does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of the history and civilization of the entire Jewish people (the Jewish *ethnos*). Rather, its focus is on *Judaism*—the religious traditions, texts, practices, and ideas developed among and nurtured by Jews through late antiquity—with attention to the historical, cultural, and ideological circumstances contributing to their emergence.

The period that saw the consolidation of the ethnic-religious tradition Judaism in its classical form runs from approximately 200 C.E. to the seventh century C.E.¹ However, the roots of classical Judaism stretch back for more than a millennium before this period. The historical experiences and traditional literature of the ancient Israelites (ancestors of the Jews dating from approximately 1300 B.C.E.) are the well-spring from which classical Judaism

emerged. Any study of classical Judaism must begin therefore with a survey of the religious ideas, traditions, and practices of the ancient Israelites and their relation to Ancient Near Eastern civilization generally. These ideas, traditions, and practices are available to us primarily through an anthology of writings known as the Hebrew Bible (roughly corresponding to the Protestant Old Testament).

After surveying the biblical sources and related extra-biblical evidence (Chapters 2 and 3), we will examine the development and transformation of the ancient Israelite heritage by a variety of Jewish groups in the centuries before the first century C.E. (Chapter 4). This in turn will set the stage for an account of the gradual rise of classical rabbinic Judaism, which was to become increasingly influential from the fourth century C.E. on (Chapter 5). By the end of our period (late seventh century C.E.), classical rabbinic Judaism—particularly as developed in Babylonia—had established itself as the normative tradition of the Jewish people (Chapter 6). A final chapter surveys

¹Throughout this book, the abbreviations C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) will be employed instead of the corresponding abbreviations A.D. (Anno Domini) and B.C. (Before Christ). So for example the year 586 B.C.E. = 586 B.C. and the year 220 C.E. = 220 A.D.

Judaism's manifestations and transformations to the modern period.

This volume is a textbook designed to lay out the major contours of its subject matter, rather than a monograph presenting original research. The work draws upon and synthesizes a vast body of scholarship on biblical Israel and rabbinic Judaism. In particular, the presentation of biblical Israel is indebted to the writings of Michael Coogan, Moshe Greenberg, Yehezkel Kaufman, Jonathan Klawans, Jacob Milgrom, Nahum Sarna, and the excellent scholarly essays in *The Jewish Study Bible* edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler. The presentation of the Second Temple period and rabbinic Judaism is indebted to the writings of Shaye J. D. Cohen, Daniel Boyarin, Seth Schwartz, Jeffrey Rubenstein, and Richard Kalmin as well as the present author. Full bibliographic details of the major works of these scholars can be found in the Annotated Bibliography. Generalized references to “scholarly opinion” in the body of the text summarize the insights and research of these and other scholars.

Throughout the book, the reader will find descriptions of a number of important literary and historical figures in Jewish tradition (see *Personalities in Judaism*) as well as a sampling of primary sources from biblical and rabbinic literature, with commentary (see *From a Classic Text*). A brief glossary of selected terms is followed by an extensive annotated bibliography. An index for easy reference to specific topics in the text concludes the book.

A Note about Personalities in Judaism

Conventional biographical sketches of central figures in the emergence of Judaism from ancient Israel cannot be written due to the nature and limitations of our sources. Scholars hold radically opposed views on the historical usefulness of the biblical traditions. Some dismiss the patriarchs, the matriarchs, and the central characters in the story of the Exodus and entry into Canaan as the fabrications of a much later era. Even those who maintain that the stories have ancient roots acknowledge that they are literary rather than historical compositions.

The increasing historical verification provided by extra-biblical sources after the turn of the first millennium B.C.E. affords a greater confidence in the actual historical existence of key figures (such as the kings of Israel and Judah, prophets like Jeremiah and the later priest-scribe Ezra). Nevertheless, extracting reliable biographical information from the biblical materials concerning these figures is, again, fraught with difficulty. In the Hellenistic period we have good information on Philo and even better information on Josephus—both of whom authored works that have been preserved for us. But rabbinic figures present familiar problems—our information about Hillel, Shammai, R. Akiva, R. Ishmael, and other sages comes from sources that are not historiographical in nature.

Because conventional biographies of the key figures in biblical Israel and later Second

Temple and rabbinic Judaism are in most cases not possible, we offer here a summary of the *literary representation* of several important figures. For biblical characters, we describe the character's depiction in the Biblical text followed by a brief description of his or her depiction in postbiblical tradition and classical Judaism.

These sketches are presented throughout the volume, beginning with the most legendary and literary figures—the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Hebrew Bible—and ending with figures whose actual existence is more certain but whose biographical details remain, for the most part, unavailable or unverifiable. The patriarchs and matriarchs are the founding fathers and mothers of biblical Israel and, ultimately, the Jewish people. The Hebrew Bible and later Jewish tradition limit the title *patriarchs* (*avot*) to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the title *matriarchs* (*imhot*) to Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. The patriarchs are represented as descendants of Noah's son Shem through Eber, nomads originating in Ur and moving with their flocks of asses to Haran, Canaan, the Negev, and Egypt. Note that in this book, R. is used to abbreviate Rabbi, Rav, and Rabban—honorific titles for rabbinic sages. The name Rabbi standing alone refers to Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi.

Terms, References, and Citations

Throughout this book, the terms *Hebrew*, *Israelite*, and *Jew* will be used with termin-

ological precision. The term *Hebrew* is the name employed in early biblical sources to designate the most ancient ancestors of the Jews. It is primarily an ethnic and linguistic term denoting persons who spoke Hebrew, a Canaanite dialect. The Hebrews are thought to have established themselves in the land of Canaan (roughly modern-day Israel) by about 1200 B.C.E. The term *Israelites* (literally, *the children of Israel*) is generally used to refer to the twelve Hebrew tribes who inhabited Canaan, eventually forming themselves into a united kingdom around 1000 B.C.E. The kingdom of Israel later split into a northern and southern kingdom, destroyed in 722 and 586 B.C.E. respectively. Falling under Persian rule at the end of the sixth century, the area around Jerusalem was named Yehud and the name given to its restored inhabitants was *Yehudites* or Jews (singular *Yehudi* = Jew). Centuries would pass before the term Jew was understood to designate an adherent of the tradition of Judaism, rather than an inhabitant of the province of Yehud. A complex relationship between the ethnic and the religio-cultural components of Jewish identity continues to the present day.

In this work, references to the Israelite and Jewish deity will be capitalized as *God*, not in order to enshrine the theological belief in a single divinity, but to make it clear that the object of our discussion is the deity of Jewish tradition rather than a generic deity (god).

Citations of biblical texts (primary documents 1-7) are taken from *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According*

to the *Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988). This translation now appears in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Citations of Babylonian Talmud (primary documents 8c, 10b, 10c, 10d, 11, 12, 13c) are based on the translations that appear in *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isadore Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935–1952), though modified upon consultation with the original sources. Citations of other rabbinic sources are based on the translations that appear in the following works, though modified upon consultation with the original sources: *Rabbinic Stories*, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (New York: Paulist, 2002), primary sources 5.1a

and b; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), primary source 5.5a; *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), primary source 5.5b. Other translations are those of the author.

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