

OVERVIEW OF JUDAISM

Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions, starting nearly 4000 years ago in the Sumerian city of Ur. Judaism is the oldest **monotheistic** religion in the world.

HOW JUDAISM BEGAN A man named Abram and his wife lived in the city of Ur. Judaism teaches that God made a covenant with Abram. (A covenant is a promise made between two or more individuals.) In the *covenant*, Abram agreed to worship only God, and God agreed to make Abram and his descendants God's chosen people. (*Descendants* means kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, etc.)



With the covenant, God changed Abram's name. He became Abraham, meaning "father of many." His wife Sara was renamed Sarah. Her new name means "princess" or "noblewoman." God promised Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would live in a land God chose for them. This is the area of modern-day Israel and Palestine.

Centuries later, Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments. **"Do not take the name of the Lord in vain"** is not specifically about cursing. It is more serious than that. Abram and Sara took the name of the Lord into their own names, because both name changes added the "H" sound to their names. The "H" sound stands for the sound of breath, meaning spirit or life. This was the name the Israelites used in naming God. So when Abram became Abraham and Sara became Sarah, they "took the name of the Lord." To do it "in vain" would mean to not take it seriously. So the Ten Commandments told the Israelites not to "take the name of the Lord in vain" – not to **say** God was part of their lives but then live like it didn't matter.

The Jewish scriptures say God promised that Sarah would have a son. But years passed and Sara still they had no children. They were worried about how God could create a nation of people descended from them when they were childless.

Since Sarah was too old to have children, she did something that was **not** totally weird back then but would be **very** weird now: she "gave" her husband Hagar, her servant, to make a baby. Hagar became pregnant and had a son named Ishmael.

Through a miracle, Sarah later became pregnant and had a son named Isaac. Sarah now had her **own** son and she resented Hagar and Ishmael. She demanded that Abraham get rid of

them. Abraham sent Hagar and her little boy off into the desert by themselves. Jewish scripture teaches that God protected Hagar and her young son. God was angry with Abraham and Sarah for not believing his promise that Sarah would have a child. But God **did** use Abraham's son Isaac to make Abraham the father of the Jewish people.



JEWISH BELIEFS Judaism teaches that there is only one God, a belief called monotheism. It also teaches that the Jews are God's chosen people. Some Jews believe this means they were chosen to show the world that monotheism was the right belief. (Their neighbor cultures were polytheistic in ancient times.) But there is no one belief about what it means to be "chosen."

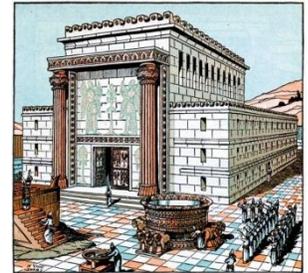
Gods in ancient polytheistic cultures were often angry and dangerous. The God worshipped by the ancient Jews was different. He was merciful, but he also had strict laws for how the Jews were to treat each other and honor God. The most important of those laws are The Ten Commandments, which are said to be given to Moses by God. There are also many laws in the Jewish scriptures (the Torah).

Traditional Jewish food laws are very strict. For example, Jews are not to eat any pork products, and they are not to mix dairy and milk items in cooking. Any meat they eat must be butchered by someone specially trained and also approved by the Jewish rabbi. Food prepared in this way is called "kosher" food.

WORSHIP AND SCRIPTURE Jews traditionally rest on the Sabbath, which in Judaism begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. Jews worship in a building called a synagogue (although some synagogues use the name “temple”). Their scriptures are the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), the Neviim (books written by the prophets), and the Ketuvim (other writings). All of these are found in the Old Testament, a term used by Christians but not by Jews.

THE PROMISED LAND Jews believe that they were given a special land in ancient times. That land is where Israel and Palestine are now, and many Jews believe that it is still Jewish land no matter who is already living there.

King David created a Kingdom of Israel around 1000 BCE. King Solomon had the Temple of Jerusalem built in 960 BCE. But Israel was in a region that was a major route between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Armies that were attacking each other tramped across Israel through the years. In 720 BCE, the Assyrians took over the northern part of the kingdom. In 587 BCE, the Babylonians defeated the southern part of the kingdom and destroyed the Temple. Most of the Jews in Jerusalem were



taken to Babylon as captives, leaving only a few people behind to farm the land.

Around 516 BCE, the ancient Jews were allowed to return and they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Other ancient kingdoms controlled Israel/Palestine through the years, including Ancient Greece and Ancient Persia. After about 80 years of freedom, the Roman Empire conquered the area. About 130 years later, in 70 CE (AD), Rome destroyed Jerusalem, including the Temple. Thousands of Jews were carried away into slavery by the Romans, and many fled the area to be safe.

Jews in Europe were often treated badly by Christians. But the worst treatment the Jews of Europe suffered was during World War II. Hitler and the Nazis tried to kill all Jews in Europe. They were able to kill 6 million before the war ended.

After World War II, the United Nations took land from the people of Palestine and created a Jewish homeland. That land is called Israel. While many Jews live in Israel, there are also large numbers in other countries. More Jews now live in the United States than live in any other country, including Israel.

Many Jewish people are very religious, but many are not. Being Jewish is not just a religion; it is an ethnic identity. Jews are connected to one another by a unique history that goes back thousands of years.

IMPORTANT DAYS

A very important time in the life of a Jewish child is the coming-of-age ceremony called **Bar Mitzvah** (“son of the commandments”) or **Bat Mitzvah** (“daughter of the commandments”). This event for 13-year-old Jewish children means they are able to fully participate in Jewish religious rituals and are responsible for obeying the laws of God.

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year. Jewish holidays follow the ancient Jewish calendar. Depending on the year, Rosh Hashanah can fall anywhere from early September to early October.

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement. This is a day for fasting (not eating), praying, and asking forgiveness of sins.

Hanukkah (Chanukah) is the Festival of Lights. It celebrates the victory that kicked the Greeks out of Jerusalem and the cleaning of the Temple. It has become a major Jewish holiday in countries where Christians are the main religion. Hanukkah falls close to Christmas, and it gives Jewish children a holiday of their own when Christmas is dominating the lives of their friends.

Passover is a 7-day festival celebrating the time Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt where they had been slaves.