

History of World Religions

The Axial Age: The Mediterranean



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Beginnings

The Jewish religion, or what is referred to as Judaism, evolved from the writings of the **Tanakh**.

Judaism, a **monotheistic religion**, worships a God through words (prayer, sermons, the reading of scripture) in synagogues.

Religious worship and instruction falls under the direction of **rabbis** (teacher).

The Tanakh is not a single book but rather it is an **anthology of texts** composed over a **span of many centuries**.

The Tanakh has was designed to convey a **religious message** and must not be interpreted **solely as a historical record**.



The Leningrad Codex/Leningradensis

The oldest complete Hebrew bible still preserved.

The Tanakh

Jewish tradition divides the *Tanakh* into **three sections**. It is composed of a total of **twenty-four books**.

The title *Tanakh* is the Hebrew **acronym** for the three sections of the Hebrew canon:

Torah (law)

Nevi'im (prophets)

Ketuvim (writings)



Torah Scroll - University of Bologna

Oldest Torah dated 800 years old

The Torah

1. **Genesis.** Background for the emergence of the people of Israel, from the creation of the world through the lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) and matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel) up to the death of Joseph in Egypt.

2. **Exodus.** Slavery in Egypt, then liberation. Covenant at Sinai, revelation of God's commandments, construction of the Tabernacle for formal worship. Story of the Golden Calf: Israel's first lapse into idolatry.

3. **Leviticus.** Rules for maintenance of ritual purity and proper conduct of sacrifice; also for creation of a holy community. First description of dietary laws and the festivals of the year.

4. **Numbers.** Census in the desert prior to the march toward the Promised Land. Incidents in the course of that march, further legislation.

5. **Deuteronomy.** Moses' farewell address: review of his career, summary of God's commandments, warning of the consequences of disobedience. Moses dies at the edge of the Promised Land.

Nevi'im (Prophets)

The Early Prophets. Despite its traditional name, this section actually contains very little prophecy. Instead, it mainly continues the narrative beyond the death of Moses.

6. **Joshua.** Israel's conquest and initial settlement of the Promised Land.

7. **Judges.** The next several generations. Disloyalty to God brings foreign oppressors; repentance brings liberation.

8. **1 and 2 Samuel.** The last of the judges and the first of the kings of Israel up to David's death.

9. **1 and 2 Kings.** The history of the kingdoms through their destruction.

The Later Prophets. These are the great orators and writers of the Bible.

10. **Isaiah.** The historical Isaiah lived around 700 BCE, but much in this book seems to date from a later time, during the Babylonian Exile and perhaps even later.

11. **Jeremiah.** Lived around the time of the Exile; the book contains significant biographical narrative along with Jeremiah's orations.

12. **Ezekiel.** Contemporary with Jeremiah, but lived and prophesied among the exiles in Babylon.

13. **The Twelve.** Twelve much smaller books of prophecy, attributed to writers who lived over a span of several centuries. Only Jonah contains significant narrative.

Ketuvim (Writings)

14. **Psalms.** A collection of 150 religious poems, many attributed to King David.

15. **Proverbs.** A collection of wisdom teachings, largely attributed to King Solomon.

16. **Job.** A story of righteousness tested by suffering.

17. **Song of Songs.** A love poem attributed to King Solomon. Read in synagogues on Passover.

18. **Ruth.** A brief narrative of loyalty and love set in the days of the judges; the origins of the dynasty of King David.

19. **Lamentations.** Poems on the destruction of Jerusalem, attributed to Jeremiah.

20. **Ecclesiastes, or Qohelet.** Philosophical musings, attributed to King Solomon.

21. **Esther.** Intrigue at the royal court of Persia; the Jews narrowly defeat the evil designs of a powerful enemy.

22. **Daniel.** Stories about loyal Jews in the royal courts of Babylon and Persia; also visions of the end of history.

23. **Ezra-Nehemiah.** Jewish leaders and their achievements in the period after the Babylonian Exile.

24. **1 and 2 Chronicles.** Retelling of Israel's history from the time of King David through the return from the Babylonian Exile.

Human failures and human suffering

The Tanakh begins with the creation of the world by **G-d**. Because of its monotheistic nature, the Hebrew G-d does not work in **conjunction with other gods to create the world.**

In contrast to other creation stories, **the Hebrew G-d creates through speech**, “by simply by commanding step by step that the cosmic order come into being.”

G-d creates too created humans in the form of **Adam and Eve**. Initially, both Adam and Eve lived under **the protection of G-d.**

Eventually however, Adam and Eve **transgressed** when they ate the fruit of the “tree of knowing good and evil” and thus were “expelled into the world of hard labor, **the world of sex and birth and death.**”

As one historian has concluded, “the very act of learning the difference between good and evil brought **suffering into the world.**”



Cathedral of Monreale - Palermo

Erected by King William II (1167/71-1189)

Etiology and concepts

The early texts of the *Tanakh* have been subjected to centuries of **theological interpretation**. As a result, a series of concepts have been extracted from these sources. These include:

The doctrine of **original sin** (humans are born into a state of sin)

The coming of **death to humans**.

The notion that humans have **moral choice** in each and every age.

The Tanakh early texts are **etioloical** rather than “prescriptive or normative as they are trying to **explain how or why something is the way it is.**”



Head of King David
Date: ca. 1145
Geography: Made in Paris
Culture: French

A history of human failure

The early texts of the *Tanakh* record the inability of **humans to live as they should**.

For example, Adam and Eve had two sons named Cain (a farmer) and Abel (a shepherd). Cain would be **the first human born** and the **first human to commit murder** when he killed his brother and thus “violated G-d-endowed sanctity of human life.”

For many historians, this act of violence also represents the tensions between **sedentary and nomadic lifeways**.



Mishneh Torah
Illuminator: Attributed to Master of the Barbo Missal (Italian)
Artist: Maimonides (Cordova 1135–1204 Egypt)
Artist: Nehemiah (active northern Italy, mid-15th century)
Date: ca. 1457

Addressing the questions

Continued human transgressions lead to the **destruction of the world** through a flood. Only Noah/family, deemed righteous by G-d, were **spared** and this insured that the **world will continue after its purification**.

Noah's descendants would begin to grow in numbers, but then they built the famous **Tower of Babel** against G-d's will and thus they were forced to speak **different languages and dispersed throughout the world**.

Through these stories the content of the *Tanakh* attempts to **address basic questions about human existence and culture**. For example,

Why don't we all speak the same language?

Why do people have to work so hard for their food?

Why do people die?

Why is the sexual urge so powerful and childbirth so painful?

Why are women subordinate to men?



Building of the Tower of Babel

Bedford Hours (1414-1423)

The journey to Canaan

According to the *Tanakh*, a man named **Abram**, whose origins were in the city-state of Ur, was instructed by G-d to establish a settlement in the **land of Canaan**. The *Tanakh* never makes clear why specifically Abram was chosen, however it does indicate that like Noah he was a righteous man.

Abram eventually settled in Canaan and received “G-d’s promise or **covenant** that his descendants would inherit that land and become there a great nation [and] the mark of this covenant would be the ancient rite of circumcision, performed on the body of every baby boy in the first week of his life.”

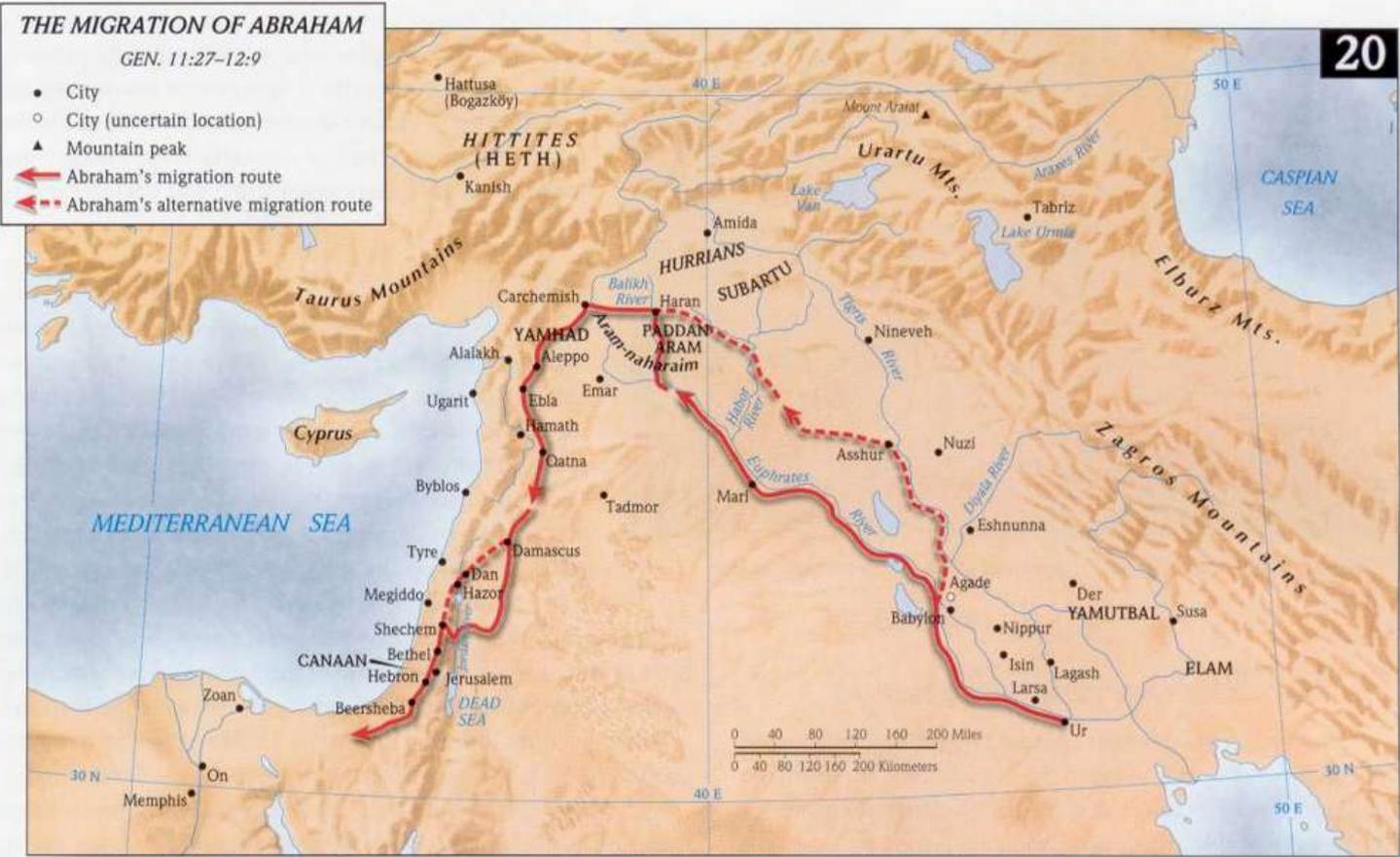
Abram received a new name, “**Abraham**, as a sign of G-d’s special care for him . . . [and]. . . son and heir Isaac was not born until Abraham was 100 years old.”

Isaac would have a son named **Jacob (Israel)** and “in the next generation Jacob’s four wives bore him a total of **twelve sons and one daughter**.”



Ur - Mesopotamia

The journey to Canaan



The coming of Moses and a covenant renewed

Eventually a **famine** would drive the family of Jacob from the land of Canaan into **Egypt**. It is during their stay in Egypt that Jacob and his followers would be **reduced to slavery**.

While in Egypt, Jacob and his people suffered greatly until G-d sent **Moses** to free them from bondage. Thus the descendants of Jacob “became the **free people of Israel**, a nation of twelve tribes named after Jacob’s twelve sons.”

The now Israelites were **led by Moses into the Sinai** desert where “G-d’s own voice spoke to them and gave them the laws by which they were to live.”

Israel thus became G-d’s own nation through a covenant. However, soon after renewing the covenant “the people forfeited their own hopes by betraying their obligations and violating the commands of G-d.”



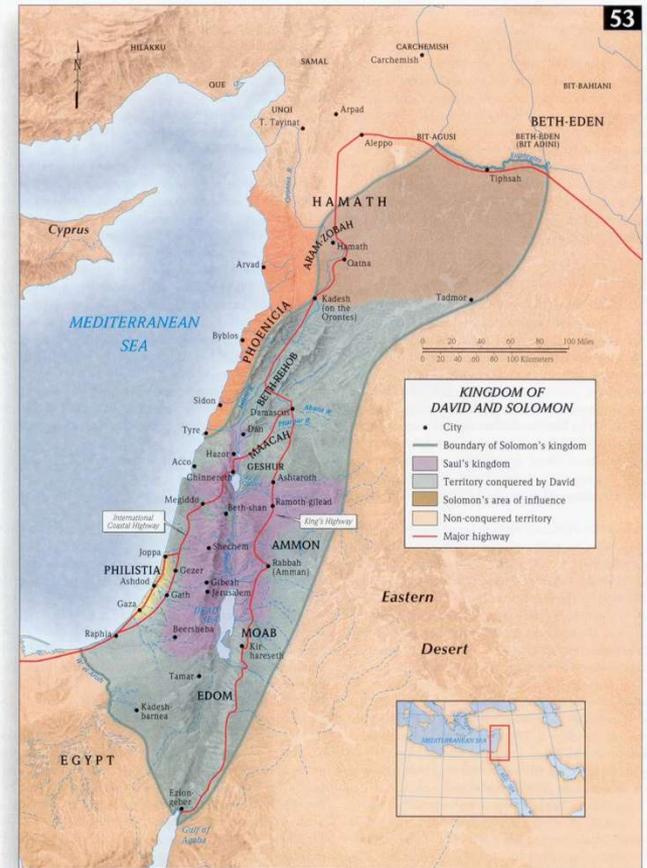
The kingdom of David

Eventually, the **twelve tribes** of Israel came together and under the rule of **King David. Solomon**, “famous for his wisdom, who built the first permanent Temple to G-d in the new royal capital, Jerusalem.”

The stability of this kingdom was tested when **ten tribes out of twelve rebelled** against the royal family thus leaving only David’s own tribe of **Judah** (Kingdom of Judah) for his descendants to rule.

The **kingdom of Israel**, composed by the ten rebellious tribes, was eventually destroyed by **Assyrian Empire** in 722 B.C.E. David’s own kingdom of Judah would also be conquered and the Temple built by Solomon destroyed in 587 B.C.E. by the **Babylonian Empire**. As a consequence of this turn of events, Judah’s leadership was exiled in Babylon. These events opened up the era of the **Diaspora**.

With time, a group of exiles managed to return the land of Israel and rebuild a holy community based on devotion to G-d’s word and the teachings of Moses. For many , the **Diaspora had come to an end**.



Basic teachings of Judaism

The narrative just given “establishes certain conceptions that remained central to the emerging Jewish religion. For example,

The narrative identifies “the G-d of the Jews as the **creator and sole ruler** of the universe.”

The narrative “asserts Israel’s claim to a **special relationship** with this God and explains how this relationship came to be.”

The narrative “depicts the **Jewish way of life and the Jewish national homeland** as gifts from G-d and gateways to holiness for those who abide by G-d’s demands and teachings.”

The narrative “contains a **stark warning** that those who depart from those teachings or who resist those demands unavoidably bring down disaster for themselves and those around them. ”



Basic teachings of Judaism

In addition to the *Tanakh*, there is the *Shloshah-Asar Ikkarim*, the ***Thirteen Articles of Faith***, taken from Judaism's 613 commandments found in the Torah and compiled by **Maimonides** (1138-1204). Maimonides refers to these thirteen principles of faith as "the fundamental truths of our religion and its very foundations."

Belief in the existence of the Creator, be He Blessed, who is perfect in every manner of existence and is the Primary Cause of all that exists.

The belief in G-d's absolute and unparalleled unity.

The belief in G-d's noncorporeality, nor that He will be affected by any physical occurrences, such as movement, or rest, or dwelling.

The belief in G-d's eternity.

The imperative to worship Him exclusively and no foreign false gods.

The belief that G-d communicates with man through prophecy.

The belief that the prophecy of Moses our teacher has priority.

The belief in the divine origin of the Torah.

The belief in the immutability of the Torah.

The belief in divine omniscience and providence.

The belief in divine reward and retribution.

The belief in the arrival of the Messiah and the messianic era.

The belief in the resurrection of the dead.



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Early Autograph Draft of Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed

(Circa 1185 – 1190)

The rise of monotheism

Undoubtedly, scholars will more than likely never truly be able to trace the development of monotheism in any detail.

We have explored the rise of monotheism from an **evolutionary and revolutionary perspective**.

However, many believe that monotheism was influenced by the **basic covenant notion**, “that religion was a key element in what today would be called identity: you were what you worshiped [and] the diverse tribes of Israel nurtured an ever-stronger shared national identity, an ever-stronger loyalty to YHWH as national god was both an important symptom of this development and an important force driving it along.”

Thus this fusion between “theology and national pride ultimately gave rise to monotheism.”



Bowl Fragments with Menorah, Shofar, and Torah Ark