

Chapter 11

The Origins of Judaism

EQ: How did Judaism originate and develop?

11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn about a group of people who lived northeast of Egypt. These people were known as the Israelites, later called Jews.

Jewish civilization developed gradually after about 1800 B.C.E. and continues to flourish today. The people who became the Jews originally lived in Mesopotamia. Around 1950 B.C.E., they moved to Canaan. Canaan was located on a strip of land extending along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Israelites, sometimes called Hebrews, were the ancestors of the Jewish people. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people and is one of the world's most influential religious traditions.

The origins of Judaism and its basic teachings and laws are recorded in its most sacred text, the Torah. The word *Torah* means “teaching.” The Torah consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. This bible is also called the *Tanakh* (TAH-nahkh). In addition to the Torah, the Hebrew Bible includes two collections of texts known as the Prophets and the Writings. Christians use a version of the Hebrew Bible as their Old Testament.

In this chapter, you will find out about the origins, or beginnings, of Judaism. You will read about some of the early history of the Jewish people, as told in the Hebrew Bible. You will also meet four leaders of the ancient Israelites—Abraham, Moses, and kings David and Solomon (SAH-leh-mehn)—and learn about their contributions to the development of Judaism.

11.2 What We Know About the Ancient Israelites

Historians rely on sources of information such as artifacts and writings, including the [Torah](#) and the other parts of the Hebrew Bible. From such sources, scholars have learned much about the ancient [Israelites](#) and the development of [Judaism](#).

The Torah The Torah contains written records and teachings of the Jews, and 613 commandments that direct moral and religious conduct. As often happened in ancient times, accounts of the history of the Jewish people were handed down orally from generation to generation. Later on, these stories and [traditions](#) were written down. Besides the Torah and the other parts of the Hebrew Bible, historians look at additional sources of information about events and ideas in early Jewish history. Historians often examine archaeological artifacts as well as written records to gain a better understanding of life in this time period.





The Early History of the Israelites According to the Torah, the ancestor of the Israelites was a man named Abraham who lived near Ur in Mesopotamia. Around 1950 B.C.E., Abraham and his family migrated to Canaan, a region of land along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Settling in Canaan, the Israelites herded flocks of sheep and goats. About 1800 B.C.E., according to the first book of the Torah, a famine forced many Israelites to flee from Canaan to Egypt. For a while, the Israelites prospered in Egypt, but **eventually** they were enslaved. In time, one

of their leaders, Moses, led the Israelites in their escape from Egypt.

For 40 years, says the Torah, the Israelites traveled in the wilderness, until they settled once again in Canaan. By 1000 B.C.E., the Israelites had set up the kingdom of **Israel** in Canaan. Israel was ruled by King David and then by his son, King Solomon. David united the Israelites into one kingdom. Solomon built a magnificent temple in the capital city. When Solomon died, in about 930 B.C.E., the kingdom of Israel separated into two kingdoms—Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

11.3 Important Jewish Leaders

The Hebrew Bible tells of the lives of early Jewish leaders. Four key leaders were Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon.

Abraham Abraham is called the “father of the Jews.” One central idea of Judaism is the belief in a single God. According to the Torah, it was Abraham who introduced this belief to the Israelites, ancestors of the Jews. This was a new idea in the ancient world. At that time, most people worshiped many gods and goddesses.

According to the Torah, God first spoke to Abraham, telling him to move his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan. God also promised to make Abraham the father of a great nation and to bless this nation. Abraham did as he was told, and his descendants became known as the Jewish people.



Moses The greatest leader of the Israelites was Moses. The Torah tells how he led his people out of **slavery** in Egypt. Moses told the Israelites that God would lead them to Canaan, the “promised land,” in exchange for their faithful obedience.

Moses also gave Judaism its **fundamental** teachings. The Torah tells how God gave Moses ten important commandments, or laws, engraved on two stone tablets. These teachings became the **foundation** of Judaism. The books of the Torah are also called the Five Books of Moses.

Kings David and Solomon After escaping from Egypt and traveling in the wilderness, the Israelites returned to Canaan. It was here that they created a united kingdom, called Israel, during the reigns of King David and his son, King Solomon.

King David established [Jerusalem](#) as a holy city and the capital of Israel. King Solomon built Jerusalem's great First Temple. To the Israelites, and later the Jews, the city of Jerusalem and its Temple became powerful [symbols](#) of their faith in God. You will now learn more about each of these four important leaders. Let's find out what the Hebrew Bible tells about them.

11.4 The Life of Abraham: Father of the Jews

Some scholars believe that Abraham, originally named Abram (AY-brum), was born about 2000 B.C.E. in Ur in Mesopotamia. The people of Ur worshiped many gods. But Abram came to believe that there was one true God. This belief would set Judaism apart from other ancient religions. Abram's special relationship to God would become the foundation of the Jewish faith.

Abraham's Covenant with God According to the Torah, the faith that would become Judaism began with a sacred agreement, or [covenant](#), between God and Abram. When Abram was about 50 years old, the Torah says that God visited him. God said to him,

“Leave your own country and your father's house, and go to a country that I will show you.” God promised to make Abram the father of a great nation of people.

Abram obeyed. Around 1950 B.C.E., he gathered his many relatives and went west into the land of Canaan.



The Torah says that when Abram was 99 years old, God spoke to him again: “I will make a covenant between myself and you.” God promised to love and protect Abram's descendants, meaning Abram's children and the generations that would follow. In return, Abram agreed that he and his people would always devote themselves to God.

To mark their covenant, the Torah says, God gave Abram a new name, Abraham, which means “father of many.” God also promised the land of Canaan to Abraham's people. For Jews, Canaan became the “promised land.” According to the Torah, the covenant meant that Jews would set an example by their actions for how God wanted people to live.

Abraham's Descendants Many years earlier, before Abram left the city of Ur, he had married a beautiful woman named Sarai. She endured many hardships as she traveled with her husband to Canaan and Egypt. As the years passed, she did not have any children.

The Torah says that God promised that Abraham's wife would have a son. God gave Sarai a new name, Sarah, which means “princess.” A year later, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. The Torah says that she was 90 and Abraham was 100 years old when their son was born. As Isaac's mother, Sarah was the ancestress of the Jewish people.

According to the Torah, the Jewish people are descended from Abraham and Sarah, through their son Isaac and his wife



Rebekah. Rebekah gave birth to Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel. The descendants of Jacob, Abraham's grandson, were the Israelites. They flourished as a nation made up of 12 tribes.

Abraham made many contributions to the development of Judaism. He introduced the belief in a single God. Because of his covenant with God, Jews believed that they should set an example of how to live. Their reward was the promised land. These beliefs became a central part of Judaism.

11.5 The Life of Moses: Leader of the Israelites



Moses was a great leader of the Israelites. The Torah tells how Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and gave them God's laws and teachings to live by.

The Exodus from Egypt By the time of Moses, in the 1300s B.C.E., a large group of Abraham's descendants were living in Egypt. There, the Torah says, the Israelites "increased in number and became very powerful." Fearful of their growing strength, the pharaoh forced them into slavery. According to the Torah, God told Moses, "I will send you to the pharaoh, and you

shall free my people."

Moses went before the pharaoh, the Torah continues, and told him to let the Israelites go free. When the pharaoh refused, God punished Egypt with ten terrible plagues. Finally, the pharaoh gave in. Moses began to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

According to the Torah, the pharaoh soon changed his mind. The Egyptian army chased after the Israelites and nearly caught up with them at the edge of the Sea of Reeds. But Moses raised his staff (walking stick), says the Torah, and the waters of the sea parted. The Israelites crossed safely to the other side. When the Egyptians tried to follow, the waters flooded over the army, drowning the soldiers. The Israelites escaped.

The Torah calls the flight from Egypt to freedom the **Exodus**, which means "departure." The Exodus became a central event in the history of the Jewish people.

The Ten Commandments As it is told in the Torah, after the Israelites left Egypt, they traveled through a wilderness for 40 years. During this time, God gave Moses the laws and teachings that became the foundation of Judaism. Some of these laws are called the **Ten Commandments**.

The Torah says that Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the "Mountain of God." Alone, Moses had gone up the mountain to pray. He returned carrying two tablets of stone. Engraved on the tablets were the Ten Commandments.

Some of the commandments listed the Israelites' duties to God. For example, one commandment was, "You shall have no other gods besides me." This commandment reminded the Israelites of their promise to worship only one God. Another commandment told the Israelites to set aside one day a week, the Sabbath, for rest and worship.

Other commandments laid down basic moral teachings (ideas about the right way to live). For example, one said, "You shall honor your father and mother." Other commandments forbade stealing, lying, and murdering. The Ten Commandments stated some of Judaism's basic teachings. The Torah says that by obeying God's commandments, the Jewish people would fulfill their part of the covenant with him. Their responsibility was to make God's moral teachings known to the world. In turn, God would protect them.

Moses made several key contributions to the development of Judaism. First, he led the Exodus out of Egypt. Jews have celebrated this event ever since to remember the journey from slavery to freedom and as proof that God watched over them. Second, Moses gave Judaism some of its most fundamental laws and teachings, which Jews and Christians call the Ten Commandments. Third, Moses forged the Israelites into a united Jewish people devoted to a single God.



11.6 The Lives of David and Solomon: Kings of Israel

After their travels in the wilderness, the Israelites settled once more in Canaan. The Hebrew Bible describes how they built a kingdom, called Israel, and the great First Temple during the reigns of two kings, David and Solomon.

David Expands the Kingdom of Israel In David's time, about 1000 B.C.E., the Israelites were at war with a rival people, the Philistines (FIH-lih-steenz). According to the Hebrew Bible, the Philistines promised to be the Israelites' slaves if an Israelite could beat their fiercest warrior, the giant Goliath (guh-LIE-uhth).

As it is told in the Hebrew Bible, David was not yet a grown man, but he was outraged at Goliath's mockery of God. Bravely, he stepped forward. His only weapon was a slingshot. With one mighty throw, he felled Goliath with a stone.

David's courage and faith were rewarded when he became king of the Israelites after the first king, Saul, fell in battle. According to the Hebrew Bible, God said, "The Israelite kingdom will remain with him and with his children and his children's children forever."

As king, David completed the defeat of the Philistines as well as other enemies. He united the Israelites into a single nation known as Israel. He created a strong central government. He gave the new kingdom its own army, courts, and officials. David himself served as the nation's chief priest. He was also a poet and a musician. Many of the Psalms in the Writings in the Hebrew Bible are attributed to David.

David chose Jerusalem as the capital city. Under his rule, this city became the center of Israel's political and religious life. David brought the Israelites' most sacred object, the Ark



of the Covenant, to Jerusalem. The Ark was a wood and gold chest that held the tablets of the Ten Commandments. As the home of the Ark, Jerusalem became a holy city.

Solomon Builds the Great Temple of Jerusalem After David's death, his son, Solomon, became king about 965 B.C.E. Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant and to serve as the center of Jewish worship. According to the Hebrew Bible, he told God, "Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name."

Building the First Temple in Jerusalem was King-Solomon's major achievement. He also strengthened the kingdom of Israel by making treaties with neighboring kingdoms. And he increased foreign trade and developed industries such as copper mining and metal working. Solomon was also a poet. The Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in the Writings in the Hebrew Bible are attributed to him.

Kings David and Solomon made major contributions to Judaism. They laid the foundation for kings to govern the Jews for more than 400 years. David established Jerusalem as a holy city. Solomon built the great First Temple of Jerusalem. Because of the acts of David and Solomon, Jerusalem would always be the most holy city to the Jews, as well as a powerful symbol of their faith.

