

Judaism

Judaism is the oldest surviving monotheistic religion, traditionally believed to have been founded by Abraham, a caravan trader living in the eastern Mediterranean in the 2nd millennium B.C.E. Abraham made a covenant (pact) with God that his descendants would worship one god only, and God promised Abraham in return that his descendants would be His “Chosen” people. Abraham had two sons, the first, Ishmael, by his servant Hagar, and the second, Isaac, by his wife Sarah. The Jews trace their lineage through Isaac, whom they believe to be Abraham’s favored son.

The Jews have always been a minority group, living among many peoples who believed and behaved differently than them. Yet their impact upon the peoples of the Mediterranean and later, the peoples of the world, is undeniable. They were the first people to worship exclusively one god, and their belief system later spawned two other great monotheistic traditions, Christianity and Islam. They also gave the world the most advanced and systematic legal code it had ever seen, beginning with the Ten Commandments.

In addition to worshipping God, Jews also reserve special places of honor for many prophets and teachers, including Moses, who gave them the Ten Commandments, as well as David, Solomon, and Isaiah. Their most sacred text is the Torah (the Pentateuch), which is also the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. These books, which contain 613 laws, emphasize behavior over belief. In other words, one’s actions, especially following the religious laws, are the most important indicator of a person’s faith. This emphasis on action and legality also

lead to a great tradition of debate within the tradition, such that not every Jew interprets the laws in the same way.

Most Jews remained in the Middle East, especially Palestine, until the year 73 C.E., when the Jews incurred the wrath of the Roman Empire by staging a revolt against its rule and were forcibly expelled from their homeland. Different families and groups migrated to different regions, creating what modern Jews call the Diaspora (the situation of Jews living away from their homeland, dispersed in far-flung communities).

Today Jews live all over the world. Some major groups are the Ashkenazic Jews (those who live in Eastern Europe or Germany), the Sephardic Jews (those who live in Spain or Portugal), and the Mizrahi Jews (those who live in North Africa or Asia). These different groups have necessarily developed distinct cultural identities, developing their own foods, musical traditions, languages, and even religious rituals. Yet a startling number of practices remain constant. Jews across the world worship God on Saturdays (the Sabbath) in Temples and Synagogues, focus upon the Torah for inspiration, and celebrate important holidays such as Yom Kippur, Hannukah, and Passover. Many maintain a deep connection to their Middle Eastern homeland; in fact, the connection to Palestine has been renewed during the 20th century due to the partial reclaiming of Palestine as a national country for the Jewish community.

Israel, as this nation is called, has become the focus of the difficulties in the Jewish/Muslim relationship. Both Jews and Muslims (as well as Christians) consider this area to be their holy land, and though many Jews explain their right to the land by their original existence on it over 2000 years ago (and by the belief

that God promised it to them), for much of the time since their expulsion, the land has also been home to Muslims. The two communities have had a difficult time sharing this land that is so sacred to each, and violence has inflamed passions on both sides.

Christianity

Christianity was originally a tiny offshoot of Judaism, founded by a poor Jewish carpenter called Jesus, who was believed by his followers to be the Messiah (the Son of God). Little is known about Jesus' life: he was born in Palestine, probably around 4 B.C.E., grew up in nearby Nazareth, and after teaching and preaching for a period of less than three years, he incurred the wrath of the ruling Roman administrators and was crucified in 28 C.E.

The brevity of his career and the poverty of his station, however, belie the enormity of the message he brought to his followers. Christians believe that Jesus came to earth in order to die for their sins: his death on the cross meant that God would accept believers even if they had not been able to follow all of His laws. This was a dramatic restatement of the Jewish emphasis on behavior rather than belief. Whereas Jews were working diligently to follow the 613 laws found in the Torah, Christians were now told that only two commandments were essential, that they "love God with all their heart and soul and mind," and that they should "love their neighbors as themselves." Simply stated, Jesus emphasized the power of belief over the power of acting perfectly. Yet Christians still maintain a great part of the heritage they inherited from their Jewish forbears. The Hebrew Bible is the Christian Old Testament; Christians date the beginnings of their faith to Abraham and honor the great Jewish prophets such as Isaiah and Moses; and they trace their line through Abraham's son Isaac.

Perhaps the other greatest development in the early history of the Christian church was the work of Paul, one of Jesus' disciples and also the

church's first great theologian. Paul declared the Christianity was a universal religion and was therefore open to people other than Jews. He proselytized to Gentiles (non-Jews) in areas all over the Mediterranean region, from Greece to Rome, and precipitated the explosive growth of Christianity as a religion that could appeal to people from all over the world. Yet in spite of the young religion's popularity, Christians were persecuted for almost three hundred years throughout the Roman Empire. In 324 C.E., though, the fortunes of the church changed when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Over time, as Christian communities grew up in different regions, the church began to fracture, and today there are three major branches of the church, divided by differences not only in doctrine, but in politics, languages, holiday celebration, and ritual. The Roman Catholic Church, the one that Constantine founded, is the largest of these groups. The Protestant Church, another branch, grew out of the protest movements of Martin Luther in Europe in the 16th century, and has since divided again into countless denominations. The Eastern Orthodox branch was part of the Roman Catholic tradition until a political schism in 1054 C.E., and as such shares much of the ritual and doctrinal foundations of the Catholic church.

Today Christians look to the Bible, both the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament (writings about Jesus and the early Christian church) as their sacred book. They worship God on their Sabbath, which is Sunday. They generally believe in and afterlife in either heaven or hell, and they always emphasize the

importance of faith. Their major holidays include Christmas, which celebrates Jesus' birth, and Easter, which celebrates his resurrection, and most Christians worship weekly in churches, which can be anything from great cathedrals to small rooms. Though Christian communities are no longer concentrated in the Middle East, small Christian minorities continue to exist there (the Coptic and Armenian Christians, for example), and Christians living in other parts of the world still consider such cities as Jerusalem and Bethlehem to be sacred.

Islam

Islam, the most recent of the great monotheistic traditions, was founded in the 7th century C.E. in Mecca (a trading center on the Arabian Peninsula) by the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad, an orphan from birth and successful businessman, began receiving messages from Allah (the Muslim word for God) as a young man, and over the course of many years communicated these transmissions to people who wrote down God's words. The result is the Qur'an, an astounding collection of narrative, poetry, and song that is the sacred text of the Muslims and considered to be the direct word of God. The Qur'an states that Islam is the natural and final correction to the earlier Jewish and Christian traditions; while Judaism and Christianity both contain great truths within them, Islam corrects the misunderstandings that those religions have and gives a final version of God's plan for the world. Muslims, for instance, believe in and honor all of the old Jewish prophets, but they do not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, (though they do revere him as a great prophet). They look to Abraham as the founder of their faith, but trace their lineage through Ishmael, the son of Hagar who settled in Arabia, rather than Isaac, the son who begot the Jews.

One of the primary differences between Muhammad and the prophets who preceded him is that Muhammad was a political as well as religious leader. When he first received the Qur'an from Allah and began preaching His message to his neighbors in Mecca, people did not listen to him. So he, along with a small group of followers, moved to Medina and founded their own city there. After some years of spreading Allah's message and

gaining followers, Muhammad returned in triumph to Mecca as a military leader. He conquered the city, and most of its residents converted to Islam. This pattern quickly repeated itself elsewhere. Muhammad was known as a wise and just ruler, and though he never forced those peoples he conquered to convert to his religion, they usually did. By the time of his death, Islam was already on its way to creating a religiously-based empire that at the height of its power would stretch across much of Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has splintered into various groups over the centuries. (Certainly the Muslims living in different continents, speaking different languages, and interacting with different cultures have developed differently.) The major division within Islam is that between the Sunnis and the Shiites. Though the division, as is often the case, started primarily because of political differences (there were differences of opinion as to who should succeed Muhammad after his death), the two sects have, over the centuries, adopted many different rituals and beliefs. A third branch of the faith, called Sufism, is a mystical tradition, and emphasizes the experiential aspects of belief (*experiencing* Allah) over the dogmatic or legal aspects.

In spite of the differences among the three major branches of Islam, however, there are still five generally agreed upon principles of faith, often referred to by Westerners as the "Five Pillars of Islam." The first of these pillars is the statement of faith "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet." This is the essential statement of monotheism, as well as acknowledgment that Muhammad is the

greatest and last of God's prophets. The second pillar is prayer, specifically five times daily. Muslims around the world stop whatever they are doing at the prescribed times of day to turn towards Mecca and offer their prayers. (On Fridays, their most sacred day, many offer their prayers in mosques). The third pillar is charity; Muslims must give to those who are in need. The fourth is fasting during Ramadan, the holiest month on the Islamic calendar, and the fifth is a pilgrimage to Mecca, required of all who are physically and financially capable.

Islam's recent history has been marked by the relative decline of the areas in which it has traditionally thrived. In particular, much of the Middle East was colonized and controlled by Christian powers from Western Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries. Then after the European colonizers retreated, most notably after World War II, they helped create the Jewish nation of Israel in the midst of an area considered sacred to many Muslims. Because of this conflict, as well as others, Islam is often perceived as having a difficult relationship with the West and with the other great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity.

Timeline for Judaism

2000-1700 B.C.E Abraham (Ibrahim), a caravan trader in Southern Mesopotamia, founds a new faith based upon one God. His faith is the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

930 B.C.E. King Solomon builds the first temple for the Jews in Jerusalem.

550 B.C.E. The Old Testament is compiled.

73 C.E. The Roman Empire crushes a Jewish rebellion in Palestine and bans Jews from Palestinian territories. The Diaspora (a community of people living outside of their native land) becomes a fact of life for Jews for almost 2000 years.

375 C.E. The Talmud, a book focusing on the intricacies of Jewish law, is composed.

638 C.E. Muslims gain control of Jerusalem and allow Jews to return to the city.

1896 C.E. Theodore Herzl's "The Jewish State," heralds the birth of Zionism (the movement to reclaim Palestine as a Jewish homeland.)

1903 C.E. The Jewish National Fund begins purchasing land in Palestine.

1929 C.E. Palestinian Arabs and Jews clash over differences in religious traditions and religious rights concerning the Wailing Wall (called al-Buraq by Muslims.)

1945 C.E. The Holocaust and World War II leave over six million Jews dead and encourages broad international support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

1948 C.E. Palestine is divided in order to establish the state of Israel, a homeland for the Jews.

Timeline for Christianity

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550 B.C.E. The Old Testament is compiled.

4 B.C.E. Jesus is born.

28 C.E. Jesus is crucified.

40 C.E. Paul, a Jew from Tarsus, declares Christianity to be a universal religion meant for people all over the world, rather than just Jews, and begins proselytizing to Gentiles (non-Jews).

70-100 C.E. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are written.

324 C.E. Constantine converts to Christianity and renames the Roman Empire the “Holy Roman Empire.”

397 C.E. The New Testament is compiled.

1095-1291 C.E. Crusaders from Europe briefly capture Jerusalem but eventually lose it to Saladin’s Muslim forces.

1483-1546 C.E. Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, preaches a return to the fundamentals of Christian faith and a reliance on faith without the mediation of clergy or good works.

1492 C.E. Columbus “discovers” the New World and begins Spanish (and Christian) colonization.

1815-1900 C.E. Christian Europe colonizes much of Muslim Middle East and Africa.

1919-1984 C.E. Colonies in the Middle East and Africa gradually win back their independence and create their own governments.

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4 B.C.E. Jesus is born.

570 C.E. Muhammad is born in Mecca

622 C.E. Muhammad emigrates from his home in Mecca to Medina with a small group of followers. This is the traditional date for the beginning of Islam as a religion, and Muslims measure their time from this date forward, just as Christians measure their time from Jesus' birth (A.H. means *Anno Hijira*, "in the year of the emigration.")

630 C.E. Muhammad returns triumphantly to Mecca with many followers. The citizens of Mecca accept Islam and start worshiping one God.

655 C.E. Islam begins to spread throughout North Africa.

711 C.E. Muslims spread their faith and their political domination as far as Spain in the west and India in the east.

1095-1291 C.E. Muslims fight to maintain control of their lands in the Middle East against Crusaders from Europe.

1453 C.E. Ottomans conquer Constantinople and change its name to Istanbul.

Circa 1800 C.E. Approximately 30 percent of Africans forced into slavery in the United States are Muslim.

1918 C.E. The end of World War I brings the final defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the last of the Islamic Empires.

1948 C.E. Palestine is divided in order to establish the state of Israel, a homeland for the Jews.

1979 C.E. The Iranian Revolution results in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the first attempt at an Islamic state in the modern era.