

Short History of the Jews

HOW JUDAISM BEGAN

The story of the Jewish people began in the Middle East over four thousand years ago. In 2000 BC the Patriarch Abraham renounced idolatry and established monotheism, the worship of one God. He settled in Canaan, the land promised to the Jews by God. Abraham's wife Sarah bore him a son, who they named Isaac. Abraham was also the father of Ishmael, by Sarah's maidservant, Hagar.

THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL

Isaac was the father of Jacob, also known as Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, who became the leaders of the twelve Hebrew tribes: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin.

Joseph's elder brothers were envious of his high status within the family, and sold him into slavery in Egypt. There, Joseph rose to prominence and became an advisor to Pharaoh. When famine struck Canaan, Jacob, his sons and their families moved to Egypt, where they were reunited with Joseph.

But by 1550 BC, their fortunes had changed. All Hebrews became slaves and were subject to persecution, including the execution of their newborn sons.

MOSES AND THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT

In the 13th Century BC, Moses emerged as the leader of the Hebrews. As a baby he had been discovered in a basket on the Nile and adopted by the royal household. Moses asked Pharaoh to release the Jews from bondage, but was repeatedly refused. Ten plagues descended upon Egypt and Pharaoh relented. The young Jewish nation, led by Moses, left Egypt and set out for Canaan – the Promised Land of their forefathers that in future would always be referred to as the Land of Israel. Their departure, which is estimated to have occurred 1280 BC, has ever since been known as the Exodus.

Forty years of wandering in the Sinai desert passed before the Jews entered the Land of Israel. During this time, the first five books of the Jewish sacred scriptures – commonly referred to as the 'Tanakh' or the 'Old Testament' – were written. These incorporated the fundamental laws that would govern every aspect of Jewish daily life from that time onwards. They would later also help to inspire the emergence of other great world religions, including Christianity and Islam.

RETURN TO CANAAN

The Israelite Period began around 1230 BC with the Hebrew conquest of Canaan. At first, the country was governed by charismatic leaders known as the Judges. Later, a system of hereditary monarchy was established, with Saul anointed the first King in 1025 BC. He was succeeded by David, who built the national capital at Jerusalem. David was succeeded by his son Solomon (965 – 922 BC), who was responsible for the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. The reigns of David and Solomon are considered to be one of the greatest eras in Jewish history. Between them, David and Solomon also authored a number of holy books that were later incorporated into the Hebrew Bible - Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and the Song of Songs.

In 586BC the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II captured Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed and most of the Jews were forced into exile and slavery. Babylon in turn was conquered in 540 BC by Cyrus, king of Persia, who allowed the Jews to return.

REBELLIONS AND SURVIVAL

In 538 BC the rebuilding the Second Temple began. It was dedicated in 515BC and the country experienced peace for the next 200 years. At the end of the 4th Century BC, Alexander the Great destroyed the Persian Empire and took control of Jewish Judea. After his death, his empire was divided. When the Greek rulers tried to eradicate Judaism and impose their own religion on the Land of Israel, Judah the Maccabee led a revolt that culminated in the Jews defeating the Greeks and regaining their independence in 164 BC.

ROMAN RULE

The Maccabean period was succeeded by civil war. This was crushed by Pompey, who captured Jerusalem and divided the Jewish state into Judea and Galilee. In 37 BC Herod was appointed King of Judea, and ruled for 32 years. His death was followed by a Jewish uprising, which was brutally suppressed.

The subsequent years were filled with tumult and revolt. In 67 AD, the Jews rose in revolt against their Roman overlords. The revolt ended in tragic defeat. In 70 AD, Jerusalem fell after a long siege and the Second Temple was destroyed. All that remained of the Temple was a section of the Western Wall. Known as the Wailing Wall or the Kotel, it still stands to this day, and is one of Judaism's holiest sites.

The Jews ultimately dispersed throughout the known world, although a minority continued to live in their Biblical homeland and a few were able to migrate there over the centuries. From the late 1800s onwards, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews began resettling the land in increasing numbers. Today, Israel is home to just under half of world Jewry.