



THE ORIGINS OF JUDAISM

FROM CANAAN
TO THE RISE OF ISLAM

ROBERT GOLDENBERG

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The Origins of Judaism provides a clear, straightforward account of the development of ancient Judaism in both the Judean homeland and the Diaspora. Beginning with the Bible and ending with the rise of Islam, the text depicts the emergence of a religion that would be recognized today as Judaism out of customs and conceptions that were quite different from any that now exist: special attention is given to the early rabbis' contribution to this historical process. Together with the main narrative, the book provides substantial quotations from primary texts (biblical, rabbinic, and other) along with extended side treatments of important themes, a glossary, short biographies of leading early rabbis, a chronology of important dates, and suggestions for further reading.

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For my children,

Alex, Shifra, and Jacob

The Origins of Judaism

FROM CANAAN TO
THE RISE OF ISLAM

ROBERT GOLDENBERG

Stony Brook University



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Abbreviations and References

All translations of biblical and rabbinic texts are the author's own except where otherwise indicated. Translations from Greek normally follow the *Loeb Classical Library* edition, though occasionally with modifications, again except where otherwise indicated. Biblical texts are cited by chapter and verse according to the Hebrew text; it should be noted that Christian translations follow the ancient Greek and Latin versions and sometimes display different chapter divisions. Rabbinic texts are cited as follows:

Mishnah (sometimes abbreviated M.) and Tosefta by tractate, chapter, and paragraph.

Jerusalem Talmud (sometimes abbreviated J. or JT) by tractate, chapter, and paragraph, also by page and column in the first Venice edition.

Babylonian Talmud (sometimes abbreviated B. or BT) by tractate and page (nearly all editions since the sixteenth century have used a standard pagination). It should be noted that a page number designates both sides of the leaf; these are distinguished by the letters *a* and *b*.

Midrash Rabba by section and paragraph.

Sifre by book (1 for Numbers, 2 for Deuteronomy) and section.

NOTE: Transliterations of personal names, literary titles, and the like are often phonetic rather than technical. In particular, letters with diacritical marks such as š often omit those marks.

A Note of Introduction

THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF JUDAISM out of its biblical roots, a story that took well over a thousand years to run its course. When this book begins there is no “Judaism” and there is no “Jewish people.” By the end, the Jews and Judaism are everywhere in the Roman Empire and beyond, more or less adjusted to the rise of Christianity and ready to absorb the sudden appearance of yet another new religion called Islam.

It may be useful to provide a few words of introduction about the name *Judaism* itself. This book will begin with the religious beliefs and practices of a set of ancient tribes that eventually combined to form a nation called the *Children of Israel*. Each tribe lived in a territory that was called by its tribal name: the land of Benjamin, the land of Judah, and so on. According to the biblical narrative, these tribes organized and maintained a unified kingdom for most of the tenth century BCE, but then the single tribe of Judah was separated from the others in a kingdom of its own, called the *Kingdom of Judah* (in Hebrew *yehudah*) to distinguish it from the larger *Kingdom of Israel* to its north. Thus the name *Israel* was essentially a national or ethnic designation, while the name *Judah* simultaneously meant a smaller ethnic entity, included within the larger one, and the land where that group dwelt for hundreds of years. In ancient times, the single word *Israel* was never used to designate a territory; for that purpose the phrase *Land of Israel* (*Eretz Yisra’el*) was always employed.

To complicate matters further, there was another self-designation, *Hebrews*, that was used by Israelites only when they were speaking to outsiders or by outsiders when referring to the people of Israel. That term eventually gave its name to the language in which most of the

Jewish Bible is written, the language still spoken in the modern state of Israel today.

The last king of Israel was overthrown, and the kingdom was destroyed, in 722 BCE during an Assyrian invasion. Most of the population were carried off by the conquerors, but some escaped down into the surviving Kingdom of Judah, where they were welcomed (with some hesitation) as fellow Israelites. Over the next century, as Assyrian power faded, the Kingdom of Judah expanded and brought much of the former Israelite territory under its control. Now, for the first time, it was possible to use *Judah* and *Israel* as synonyms.

From around this time (the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE), various words that later meant *Jew* or *Jewish* begin to appear in our biblical sources. In a narrative from the time of King Hezekiah¹ the language of the Kingdom of Judah, which moderns would call *Hebrew*, is called *yehudit*, or Judahite, as distinct from *aramit* or Aramean (later Aramaic), a more widespread language spoken throughout much of the Near East.² In addition, the people of Judah are more and more often called *yehudim*:³ in modern English this word is often translated as “Jews,” and that is its meaning in modern Hebrew as well. But within the Bible the term never lost its specific connection to the tribe or the kingdom or the territory of Judah.

In 586 BCE the southern Kingdom of Judah was destroyed in its turn, this time by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, and the leadership of the realm was carried off to exile in Babylon. In 539 BCE, Babylon in turn was vanquished by the growing Persian Empire, and the exiles from Judah were allowed to return home. (Many declined the offer and voluntarily remained in exile.) Under the Persians, the territory was called *Yehud*, and then, as one conquest followed another, *Ioudaia* in Greek and *Iudaea* in Latin. In rabbinic writings of the second and third centuries CE, the term *yehuda* still designates the particular territory of ancient Judaea. In rabbinic parlance the larger Jewish homeland, embracing Galilee to the north and other territories as well, was always called the Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisra’el*.

As *yehudim* (Greek *ioudaioi*, Latin *iudaei*) spread out into the Mediterranean world, they preserved their ancestral identity and thus maintained a strong link with their ancestral homeland. In Hebrew they called themselves *yisra’el*, but in Greek or Latin they

were “people from Judaea.” In Greek or Latin the language of the Bible was called *Hebrew*, and by extension the Jews themselves were sometimes called *Hebrews*. It is not clear whether *ioudaioi* and *hebraioi* suggested different connotations in Greek or were used interchangeably.

* * *

Ancient Jews, the people this book has set out to discuss, rarely used the term *Judaism*, or its equivalent in any ancient language, to identify their way of life; it was only in modern times that Jews adopted that word. In Greek, the word *Ioudaismos* roughly means “the way Jews live,” and it was normally used by outsiders when speaking of Jewish customs.⁴ More particularly, early Christian writers began to use the term to designate the way of life against which their own new religion was struggling to define itself.⁵ “The emergence of Judaism” thus means the historical development of a way of life that came to be associated with a people called *Judaeans* or *Jews*.

This book will trace that emergence, beginning with the beliefs and practices of a set of Near Eastern tribes living in their native land. Conquered by successive foreign armies, surviving remnants of those tribes had to adapt their ancestral laws and customs to the wishes of foreign empires. Increasingly dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, they had to adapt a way of life that began as the native culture of people living in their own land to the pressures of living in other countries. As their nation lost its political freedom, the religious dimensions of their shared heritage grew in importance, until finally most onlookers saw them as a widely scattered religious community that once had enjoyed political significance but did so no longer. Defined by their religious customs (some of which would strike modern observers as cultural patterns and not strictly religious at all), the Jews preserved the hope of national restoration but could do nothing to bring that hope to reality. Their God would have to do that for them in the fullness of time.

The focus of this book, however, will remain on religious phenomena: texts, customs, beliefs, modes of leadership. Judaism is an ethnic religion, a religious heritage tied to a specific ethnic or national identity, so it will be impossible to trace the history of the religion without also keeping track of the history of the nation. However, the rise and

fall of kingdoms and empires, the names and dates of battles and of kings, will receive only as much attention as is needed to present the circumstances under which religious developments took place. Some coverage of these other matters will be necessary, but it should never distract the reader from a more central concern with the Jews themselves and their way of life.⁶

* * *

This book was designed for two distinct audiences: undergraduate students in university courses and nonacademic lay readers. Academic specialists may find it useful in their teaching, but this book is not primarily intended for them. For that reason, presentation of evidence is suggestive rather than comprehensive, though readers can consult the Suggestions for Further Reading at the end of the volume to learn more about key issues: those Suggestions indicate both primary sources – where the ancient evidence can be located – and secondary sources – places where modern scholars have considered that evidence and figured out ways to interpret it.

The Jewish religion has seen much contention in its long history. Jews have disputed among themselves and do so still. Others have disputed with the Jews and do so still. Some of the ancient disputes have subsided; others remain bitter and passionate. Some of the modern disputes continue ancient battles; others revolve around new concerns. Some of the disputes involving Jews have turned violent or even murderous; others have remained “wars of words.” This book will aim to remain neutral in its treatment of all such quarrels, though, of course, the author’s own opinions and preferences will unavoidably be visible from time to time.

Readers of this volume will note that certain key primary texts, and consideration of certain key issues and themes, have been removed from the main text and printed by themselves in boxes. This allows the main text to flow more smoothly and provides isolated materials for focused classroom discussion, writing assignments, and the like. It is hoped that instructors will find this useful and that private readers will not be disturbed in their enjoyment of the narrative.

The Prehistory of Judaism

THE JEWISH RELIGION (JUDAISM) EMERGED OUT OF THE writings of the Hebrew Bible, but it is not actually to be found in those writings. Judaism is a religion that worships God¹ through *words* – prayer, sermons, the reading of scripture, and the like – in buildings called *synagogues* under the leadership of learned *rabbis*. The Bible knows something of prayer but nothing of the rest: the Bible portrays a religion centered on a single building commonly called the *Temple* and led by hereditary *priests* who worship through *actions* – elaborate sacrificial rites and other ceremonies of purification and atonement. The transition from that earlier religion to one that modern people would recognize is the story line of this book.

Almost all our information about the early parts of this story comes from the pages of the *Bible*² (see “What Is in the Bible?”). The Bible is actually not a single book; it is an anthology of materials that were written over a span of many centuries – perhaps as much as 1,000 years – in two different languages and in at least two different countries. Not surprisingly, its writings show a variety of styles and a variety of outlooks on many important questions (see Chapter 2). This diversity of content allowed later readers to find many different messages in its pages and to apply those messages to the great variety of situations that they faced. This flexibility is the key to the Bible’s remarkably long success at sustaining individuals and communities of faith over more than two millennia.

However, from the historian’s point of view, the Bible presents a very difficult problem. Many, perhaps most, of its narratives were written long after the occurrences they describe (the story begins with the creation of the world!), and almost nothing in the Bible can be

WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE?

Jewish tradition divided the Bible into three sections containing a total of twenty-four books.

I. 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.

II. The Prophets

- a. **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.

Note: The books now cited as numbered pairs were originally single works. They were divided by copyists in the Middle Ages on account of their great size. This is not the case with the numbered books of the New Testament, which are separate documents.

b. 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.

Hosea	Obadiah	Nahum	Haggai
Joel	Jonah	Habakkuk	Zephaniah
Amos	Micah	Zechariah	Malachi

III. The 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.

The *Five Scrolls*, so called because they are liturgically read on specified holidays (this grouping reflects later synagogue practice and is not a formally recognized section of the Bible).

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. Read on the Feast of Weeks.

19. Lamentations. Poems on the destruction of Jerusalem, attributed to Jeremiah. Read on the Ninth of Av, anniversary of the destruction of the Temple.

20. Ecclesiastes, or Qohelet. Philosophical musings, attributed to King Solomon. Read on the Feast of Booths.

WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE? (continued)

21. **Esther.** Intrigue at the royal court of Persia; the Jews narrowly defeat the evil designs of a powerful enemy. Read on Purim. This is the only book of the Bible in which God is never directly mentioned in the Hebrew text.
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. Largely a revision, but sometimes a straightforward repetition of the Books of Samuel and Kings. In recent times the Hebrew acronym *Tanakh* (Torah, *Nevi'im* [prophets], *Ketuvim* [writings]) has been used to designate the entire twenty-four-book collection.

* * *

The Christian tradition, following the custom of ancient Greek-speaking Jews, arranged these books differently, in two sections (not formally separated) containing prose narrative and poetic compositions, respectively. The order was as follows:

Genesis	1 and 2 Kings	Ecclesiastes
Exodus	1 and 2 Chronicles	Song of Songs
Leviticus	Ezra	Isaiah
Numbers	Nehemiah (a separate book)	Jeremiah
Deuteronomy	Esther	Lamentations
Joshua	Job	Ezekiel
Judges	Psalms	Daniel
Ruth	Proverbs	The Twelve
1 and 2 Samuel		

confirmed from any other ancient source of information. As always with uncorroborated information, the modern observer is in no position to judge the Bible's historical reliability, in no position to measure the distance between description and event, in no position to read the Bible's stories and figure out what (if anything) really happened.³ The

Bible can therefore not be read as a historical record: instead, it must be understood that biblical narrative is a distillation of national memory that has been designed to convey a religious message. The Bible's religious message is loud and clear, but we cannot always know how the described events would have appeared without the religious purpose that now shapes the narrative, or indeed how the authors of the Bible learned about those events in the first place.

Then can we modern readers not learn history from the Bible at all? Of course we can, just not in the way we can learn history from archives or other official documents. The key to learning history from the Bible is to focus attention *not on the content of the stories but on the stories themselves: Who told them? Why? How did the people who told these stories understand them? What truths did they find in them? What lessons did they seek to convey?* People have been reciting these narratives for well over 2,000 years; that by itself is a historical fact of enormous importance. After a brief summary of the narrative itself, it will be possible to think about those questions.

The Biblical Narrative

Early developments. The Bible begins with the creation of the world by Israel's God.⁴ This is not a god who struggles or collaborates with other gods, as in the myths of other peoples; the God of Israel creates the world alone, without effort or difficulty, simply by commanding step by step that the cosmic order come into being. Into this world the Creator places all living species, including a human pair named *Adam* and *Eve*. Adam and Eve could have lived carefree under God's protection in the *Garden of Eden*, but they transgressed: there was a single tree in the garden, the "tree of knowing good and evil," whose fruit they were told to avoid, but they ate that fruit and as a result were expelled into the world of hard labor, the world of sex and birth and death. The very act of learning the difference between good and evil brought suffering into the world.

The early chapters of the Bible contain several other dramatic depictions of human beings' inability to live as they should. Adam and Eve had two sons named *Cain* and *Abel*, and one murdered the other. Sexual immorality and violence became widespread. Five generations after Cain, another murder occurred. By the tenth generation,

God was so disheartened that he destroyed the whole creation in a flood; only one righteous man (*Noah*) and his family were preserved in order to make a new beginning. But Noah too disappointed: on emerging from the ark in which he rode out the flood, he planted a vineyard, became drunk, and brought sexual humiliation on his family.⁵ Noah's descendants again grew numerous, but then they built the famous *Tower of Babel* in rebellion against God's wishes. Forced as a result to speak different languages, they scattered around the world: the idyll had gone sour.

The modern reader can easily see that these narratives attempt to answer basic questions about the nature of human existence: 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? All ancient cultures told such stories, and modern scholars can compare the biblical versions with others that circulated in the ancient world, thus setting Israel more firmly in the cultural context of the ancient Near East.

But such comparisons do not explain why the Bible itself was preserved or how this particular version of those stories came to dominate our own civilization. Only the next stage in the narrative explains that.

God makes a choice. After twenty generations of human history, God suddenly instructed a man named *Abram*, from a family with roots in Mesopotamia, to travel to the distant land of Canaan and settle there. As it happened, Abram's father had set out for this very destination years earlier but had never reached his goal; now Abram could complete his father's journey and fulfill a divine mission at the same time. The Bible never quite accounts for God's choice of this man; we are told that he was righteous, but we are not told (as was said of Noah) that he was the only righteous man of his generation.

Whatever the reason for God's choice, the results were momentous. Abram settled in Canaan and received God's promise or *covenant* that his descendants would inherit that land and become there a great nation. 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. As a token of his new status Abram received a new name, *Abraham*; as a sign of God's special care for him, his son and heir *Isaac* was not born until Abraham was 100 years old. Isaac in time became the father of *Jacob*, who was also called *Israel*, and in the next generation Jacob's four wives bore him a total of twelve sons and one daughter.

A famine drove Jacob's family out of their destined homeland, and they settled in Egypt. One of Jacob's sons, *Joseph*, had after many adventures developed a plan to rescue Egypt from the effects of this same famine, and had therefore risen to great power in the land; under their famous brother's protection, the family multiplied and thrived in their new home. Eventually, however, a new king lost sight of his nation's debt of gratitude; suspicious of the Israelites' numbers, he reduced them to slavery.⁶ They suffered greatly until finally God remembered their ancestral covenant and sent a new leader, *Moses*, to help them escape their bonds. God (and Moses) performed many wondrous acts, inflicting many "plagues" upon the stubborn Egyptians; finally, after the terrifying death of every firstborn son in Egypt, the people were allowed to leave. Even now, however, the king regretted letting them go and tried to pursue them: in a final miracle, the people crossed the sea on dry land but the pursuing Egyptians drowned while trying to follow them. Thus the descendants of Jacob became the free people of Israel, a nation of twelve tribes named after Jacob's twelve sons, a people nearly 2 million strong.⁷

The decisive covenant. Moses led the people into the desert of *Sinai*. There, from a mountaintop, God's own voice spoke to them and gave them the laws by which they were to live. God offered to renew his covenant with them as a people, and they enthusiastically agreed. Israel became God's own nation. They were now living under God's protection and subject to God's rule and God's judgment. The nation's fate would now depend on their loyalty to God and the covenant, on their obedience to God's commands.

Moses climbed the mountain and spent forty days and nights in God's own presence; when he returned, he brought with him the word of God written on stone tablets. He placed these in a special container, and to house this sacred chest he built a movable shrine

where the people could encounter their God and worship him. However, almost at once, a soon-familiar pattern made its first appearance: time and again, the people forfeited their own hopes by betraying their obligations and violating the commands of God.⁸ By the time of his death, Moses had become thoroughly disillusioned with his own people; in his farewell address, he warned them that continued disobedience would bring disaster in the end.

The people in their land. Out of loyalty to the covenant, God led the people through the desert for forty years and then brought them into the Promised Land. Again they continually betrayed the covenant by worshiping other gods. Without Divine protection they were repeatedly overrun and oppressed by foreign invaders. Each time, under pressure of suffering they would repent: God would rescue them from their enemies, but soon they would lapse once more.

After a few generations, the tribes combined their forces and built a kingdom under the heroic *David*. David was followed by *Solomon*, famous for his wisdom, who built the first permanent *Temple* to God in the new royal capital, *Jerusalem*. Through the *prophets* God gave assurance that David's family would sit on Israel's throne forever, but the old patterns of disloyalty kept returning; ten tribes out of twelve rebelled against the royal family, leaving only David's own tribe of *Judah* for his descendants to rule; in both kingdoms, the wealthy oppressed the poor and the worship of other gods persisted. The kingdom of Israel, embracing the ten rebellious tribes, was destroyed by Assyrian conquerors in 722 BCE. Then David's own kingdom of Judah was wiped out, Solomon's Temple was demolished, and the nation's leaders were carried off to exile in Babylon (the *Babylonian Exile*) in 586 BCE. It appeared that the holy covenant had collapsed.

But now the remnant of the people carried out a genuine reform of their ways. At last they abandoned their attraction to false deities; at last they accepted the authority of the one true God. A group of exiles returned to the land of their forebears and rebuilt the Temple. Under the leadership of *Ezra*, *Nehemiah*, and the last of the prophets, they dedicated themselves anew to building a holy community based on devotion to God's word and the teachings of Moses. Backsliding continued, of course, but no longer dominated the national life.

The troublesome people of Israel had become the holy nation of the Jews.⁹

* * *

It bears repeating that the preceding narrative cannot be verified as history. Most characters in the biblical saga do not appear in the historical writing of any other ancient nation; most incidents in this saga are not recounted in any other ancient document. The importance of the story lies not in the question of whether *the events took place*, which cannot be determined, but in the certainty that *the story was told* time and again, over countless generations: *this* fact, of the greatest importance, is beyond all question. The epic narrative just summarized has shaped the consciousness of Jewish men and women since the dawn of Jewish history.

The biblical narrative establishes certain conceptions that remained central to the emerging Jewish religion. The story identifies the God of the Jews as the creator and sole ruler of the universe. It asserts Israel's claim to a special relationship with this God and explains how this relationship came to be. The story depicts the Jewish way of life and the Jewish national homeland as gifts from God and gateways to holiness for those who abide by God's demands and teachings; on the other hand, it also 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. These ideas form the context for understanding the formal structures of ancient Israelite religion.

The Religion of Ancient Israel

In their private lives, the people of early Israel seem to have been very like their neighbors. The economy was largely rural, based on agriculture and herding.¹⁰ Biblical law presumes the existence of slavery, but scriptural narrative never mentions slaves outside the households of the very rich. Similarly, in theory, men could take multiple wives, but very few did so except for the exceedingly wealthy. Polygamy was expensive, and few could afford to maintain a large household; moreover, husbands and wives often developed ties of affection that left no room for parallel relationships. Biblical law takes for granted the

existence of polygamy, but scripture actually reports very few cases of polygamous households.¹¹

When women married, they came into their husbands' households. They might retain ties of affection to the families of their birth, but their legal identity was now determined by their marriage.¹² For this reason, biblical law took care to provide for widows: not only did such women often lack material support, they also had no secure legal identity in society.¹³ Biblical law repeatedly outlaws marriage with foreign women; sometimes the reference seems limited to the non-Israelite native peoples of the Promised Land, but sometimes the prohibition seems absolute. Nevertheless, the law also recognizes that a soldier might fall in love with a woman captured in war (Deuteronomy 21:10–14), and scripture recounts several noteworthy cases of Israelite men marrying foreign women.¹⁴ Since women took on their husbands' legal identity at marriage, Israelite women who married foreign men probably disappeared from Israelite society. To be sure, the Bible provides not a single instance of a woman who did this, but this may simply confirm that such women went off with their husbands and were gone.

Worship of a national god was typical of the Near East, but in other cases this was usually combined with reverence for the forces of nature, such as rain and storm or love and fertility, that seemed to rule people's lives; similarly, even in Israel, the idea that worship should be limited to one god met heavy resistance for generations. See Chapter 2 for further discussion.

Biblical narrative says almost nothing about the religious lives of private individuals. On special occasions people offered sacrifices to God, but it is hard to tell if the formal biblical rules of sacrifice applied to such private offerings. In addition to large-scale public altars, did private homes contain specific locations for domestic offerings? We cannot tell. We do not know whether marriage or the birth of a child was marked by religious ceremonies other than standard thank-offerings or the postpartum purification-offerings that are specified in Leviticus 12. We also cannot tell whether great festivals were marked by home rituals as well as the great ceremonies performed at public shrines.¹⁵

In any case, as with all ancient peoples, Israelites' public worship centered on *sacrifice*, the gift to God (usually by destruction)

of some object of value. Biblical law provides detailed regulations for the proper offering of sacrifice: a suitable object of value (usually an animal, but sometimes grain or wine or olive oil), the correct occasion (sometimes required by the calendar or by an occurrence in one's own life such as the birth of a child, but also possibly the result of a spontaneous vow), the necessary procedures, the appropriate personnel.

As time went on, the right to offer sacrifice came to rest with hereditary priests (Heb. *kohanim*); national memory traced this priesthood back to Aaron, the brother of Moses, but this ancestry cannot be verified. Indeed, various biblical passages suggest that at an early time the priestly role could be assigned on a different basis; most importantly, the tradition suggests that before the inherited priesthood started, this role was filled by the firstborn son of every household. This tradition is clearly related to the narrative tradition that Israelite firstborns were spared when the firstborn of Egypt were all killed in the tenth and final plague.

For a while, there were local shrines and groups of local priests scattered across the country (Figure 1), but in the time of King *Josiah* (late seventh century BCE) all sacrificial worship was centralized at a single location (the Temple) in the capital city of Jerusalem. This shrine had been constructed under King Solomon about 300 years earlier, but scripture mentions renovations and other changes over the centuries. We cannot tell for sure what the Temple or its ceremonies were like in Solomon's own time (the descriptions may incorporate information from later on), but by its last years the shrine had become an important national institution, a focus of pride and veneration. Its loss in 586 BCE was considered a divine punishment and a national catastrophe.

From an early time, the Israelite religion had developed a calendar of festivals (see "The Biblical Calendar"). Of these, probably the earliest (and most famous) is *Passover* (Heb. *Pesach*), still in modern times an annual celebration of Israel's escape from Egyptian bondage. This spring holiday featured the annual offering of a new (*paschal*) lamb and the careful avoidance of all leavened food products for a week. Careful reading of the biblical materials (see especially Exodus 12–13) suggests that these observances may already have been ancient celebrations of the arrival of spring, but now a new level of meaning



1. **A preexilic altar in Arad.** This altar was found in a preexilic Israelite fortress at Arad near the Dead Sea. In construction – a square structure of uncut stone – it combines features of the instructions given in Exodus 20 and 27, but the pictured altar has no horns, as required in 27:2; it is possible that horns existed but were broken off, but this can no longer be determined. (Photo courtesy of Tim Bulkeley, University of Auckland, New Zealand)

was attached to these; in addition to acclaiming their god as lord of *nature*, the Israelites identified major events in their *history* as the work of his mighty arm. This pattern of reaching beyond the eternal, unchanging world of natural cycles to find religious meaning in the unique events of history was one of Israel's great contributions to Western thought. In a similar way, the fall harvest *Festival of Booths* or *Tabernacles* (Heb., *Sukkot*) receives a historical explanation through reference to events that actually are never recounted in the biblical narrative (see Leviticus 23:43).

Over the course of time, however, the most striking feature of the Israelite calendar turned out to be not an annual feast at all but the weekly Sabbath day when productive labor was forbidden. As far as we can tell, no other culture in the ancient Near East had a seven-day week.¹⁶ Theories abound as to the origins of this idea, but we can simply note its prominence. God himself is said to have instituted

THE BIBLICAL CALENDAR

The earliest biblical evidence reflects a variety of calendar systems in ancient Israel; these are not fully compatible, so they must reflect either variation in local custom or (more likely) different stages in Israel's cultural development. Unfortunately, the evidence does not allow modern scholars to reconstruct these stages in any detail.

One calendar, apparently lunar, used names for the months, though only four such names have survived: most of these appear in the narrative of Solomon's construction of the Temple (1 Kings 6–8). A year of twelve lunar months lasts only 354 days, and several annual festivals (see the following description) had clear seasonal associations, yet there is no evidence explaining how the people who used this calendar kept those festivals from slipping out of season. (In later centuries the authorities occasionally added a thirteenth month in the spring to make sure that Passover did not fall too early.) For centuries, lunar months were declared based on actual observation of the new moon; the fourth-century rabbinic leader Hillel II is reported to have dispensed with this system and to have instituted mathematical formulas for determining lunation. See Chapter 8, especially “Early Rabbinic *Taqqanot* and *Gezerot*.”

Another calendar only numbers the months, starting with the month of the spring equinox, the month in which Passover falls. This may have been a solar calendar similar to those known from ancient Egypt and elsewhere, consisting of twelve thirty-day months and one extra day every quarter to complete exactly fifty-two weeks. Use of this calendar may explain why Genesis 1:14 indicates that the heavenly bodies serve to mark off days and years but says nothing about months.

The seven-day week is an entirely artificial unit; attempts to link this unit to the phases of the moon or to features of the Babylonian calendar have not been successful. Except for the Sabbath, the days of the week too are numbered, not named: the modern Hebrew language still has no names for the other days of the week.

From an early time, the Israelites celebrated annual festivals at certain key seasons of the year. In later years, three such festivals were marked by pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, and were apparently conceived from an early time as an annual cycle. Most famous of these was the spring *Passover* festival, connected to the *Festival of Unleavened Bread*. Combined, these festivals served to commemorate the Israelites' escape from

THE BIBLICAL CALENDAR (continued)

Egyptian slavery in the days of Moses. The observances may originally have been separate: the offering of a lamb on the fourteenth day of the first month, followed by a week-long abstention from leavened or fermented foods beginning on the fifteenth. From an early time, however, these two were combined into a single great celebration. A later report suggests that shortly before the Second Temple was destroyed, over 1 million pilgrims would gather in Jerusalem each year to celebrate this festival (see Josephus, *Jewish War*, 6.424).

Seven weeks later, the beginning of the harvest season was marked by a briefer festival; over time this observance too acquired a historical dimension as the anniversary of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Finally, the great autumn harvest festival was marked by the construction of booths in the fields where people would eat and sleep. These booths were probably utilitarian in origin: when every hour counted, farmers did not want to take time each day to travel between their villages and their fields. In time, however, the *Festival of Booths* or *Tabernacles* became another token of historical memory, recalling Israel's forty years of wandering in the desert before the liberated slaves reached the Promised Land (Leviticus 23:43).

An additional pair of holidays was celebrated every fall, though evidence of their actual observance only comes from the later biblical period. The fall new moon marked the beginning of the civil year, and the tenth day thereafter became an annual day of atonement marked by fasting and elaborate ceremonies. Initially this day seems to have focused on the Temple itself, and served once a year to purge the shrine of any accidental defilement of its holiness, but eventually the annual Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) became the holiest day of the year, celebrated by Jews all over the world.

Later books of the Bible added several new holidays to the calendar. The Book of Esther instituted the early spring holiday of *Purim* to celebrate Persian Jews' escape from the evil designs of a hostile royal minister. The prophet Zechariah, toward the very end of the biblical period, hints at a series of fasts throughout the year that must have commemorated disastrous events from earlier times (Zechariah 8:19).

On the other hand, certain observances appear to have dropped out of practice. The offering of a sheaf of wheat every spring inaugurated the