Rethinking Religion: Judaism

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1 Introduction

1.1 The covenant with God

Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion. According to its holy book, the *Tanakh*, the origin of Judaism began with the covenant between God and a man called Abram (later Abraham), who lived in the ancient city Ur over three thousand years ago (around 1,200 BCE).[1] At an unknown date, Abram left Ur and moved north to the city Haran where, at the age of 75 years, he was spoken to by God. As recorded in the *Tanakh*, the first part of God's covenant was for Abram to leave Haran and move to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12: 1). The *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) is also known to Christians as the Old Testament (OT) because for them it is supposedly the precursor to the New Testament.

Figure 1. God's covenant with Abraham

The second part of the covenant was God's promise to make Abraham and his descendants a great nation (Genesis 12: 2) and "*all the land which thou seest, I will give to thee, and to thy seed forever*" (Genesis 13: 15).[2] The land in question was, of course, already inhabited, which meant that God was in fact giving Abraham the land of the *"Cineans and Cenezites, and Cedmonites and the Hethites, and the Pherezites, the Raphaim also, and the Amorrhites, and the Chanaanites, and the Gergezites and the Jebusites*" (Genesis 15: 20; 2 Ezra: 8).

Later, when the Israelites were camped in the plains of the Moabites and before they crossed the river Jordan to go into Chanaan, God instructs Moses "*destroy all the inhabitants of that land (...) but if you will not kill the inhabitants of the land, they that remain shall be unto you as nails in your eyes, and spears in your sides*" (Numbers 33: 52-55). God adds, somewhat chillingly, "*and whatsoever I had thought to do to them, I will do to you*" (Numbers 33: 56).

The third part was God's instruction for males to be circumcised, "*that it may be a sign of the covenant between me and you*" (Genesis 17: 11). In accordance with the scriptures, centuries later, the baby Jesus (a Jew) would be circumcised too (Luke 2-21).

Because Abraham is the foundational figure to both Christianity and Islam, Judaism is also described as the oldest Abrahamic religion.

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[1] Ur was a Sumerian city-state in ancient Mesopotamia, believed to be located near modern-day town of Nasiriyah in southern Iraq. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ur

[2] The covenant is repeated in Genesis 17: 2-10 (*"…and thou shalt be a father of many nations … And I will give to thee, and to thy seed, the land of thy sojournment, all the land of Chanaan for a perpetual possession…"*).

1.2 Definition of a Jew

Who is a Jew? It might seem a strange question to ask, as the short and obvious answer would be that a Jew is someone who professes the Jewish faith. However, the question is a persistent one and according to Rabbi Morris Adler, "no other people worry so much about their identity as the Jews" (Adler, 1964). It is also a question that has attracted many different answers.

In ancient times, according to the Book of Ezra, the Jews were descendants of the people taken into captivity in Babylonia (by King Nebuchadnezzar) who later returned home to Judea after being released (by King Cyrus). More specifically, the Jews were those who remained faithful to the Laws of Moses and separated themselves from the "unclean", "people of the lands" who committed "abominations" (1 Ezra 9-1).[3] Ezra's definition of a Jew was evidently very narrow, and excluded the many people who remained in exile in Babylonia or Egypt who also considered themselves to be Jews. The same would be true of all people scattered during the diaspora that continued throughout Jewish history. Thus, a Jew must be more than living in a particular land.

Back in the days of the Roman empire, there were converts to the religion. As the historian Tom Holland put it, "in an age where more Jews spoke Greek than Hebrew, it was perfectly possible for a Greek – or indeed anyone else – to become a Jew. Nowhere was this more evident than in Alexandria, the original cosmopolis; but increasingly, wherever there were synagogues, there converts were to be found as well" (Holland, 2019, p.60). The most famous convert was Ruth, a Gentile Moab woman, who married into a Jewish family (who had sojourned from the city of Bethlehem into the land of Moab). When Ruth's husband and father-in-law abruptly died (Ruth 1: 3-5), she accompanied her mother-in-law (Noemi) back to Bethlehem, declaring "for whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go, and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. *Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God*" (Ruth 1:16).[4, 5]

Whereas to be a Jew in antiquity involved elaborate juggling of religious, ethnic and political affirmations (Biale, 2002), in modern times a Jew is officially defined as "a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion", for example, as codified in the Law of Return.[6] Conversions do take place, for example within Liberal Judaism movement (Goldstein *et al,* 2017)[7]. A recent prominent convert is Ivanka Trump.[8] However, Judaism is a non-proselytising religion, and conversion to Judaism is "generally discouraged", according to some writers (Starr-Glass, 2008).

Ultimately, being a Jew should mean adherence to the tenets of Judaism – belief in God and the Covenant, following the *Talmud*, and celebrating the Jewish festivals and holy days. However, people's views regarding exactly what constitutes being a Jew are diverse and Jewish identity cannot be considered immutable (Biale, 2002, p.xxi).

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[3] The so-called abominable people, whom the Jews should avoid and not marry their women (to not take "strange wives") were the Chanaanites, Hethites, Pherezites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorrhites (1 Ezra 9: 1; Ezra 10: 1-9). The Jews, of course, transgressed (1 Ezra 10-10).

[4] Ruth later married a man called Booz (Ruth 4: 9-10).

[5] According to Dempster (1997b), the mention on Bethlehem is quite deliberate and "in the wider context of the canon it is a lightning rod for Messianic hope", in the sense of introducing the future King David (i.e. the great grandson of Ruth).

[6] https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1950/en/34127 (see section 4B. Definition).

[7] https://www.liberaljudaism.org/conversion-faq/

[8] https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2017/politics/state/ivanka-trump-religion/

1.3 Israel

Any review of Judaism, of its beliefs, culture and traditions, must inevitably broach the subject of Israel, which lies at the heart of the Jewish historical narrative. Ostensibly, the millennia-old dream of returning to the "Promised Land" was fulfilled back in 1948-49 when, after five decades of political Zionism, the State of Israel became a member of the United Nations. However, as most of the world is sadly aware, the modern history of Israel has not brought about an enduring peace in the Middle East. Indeed, since the 1947-49 civil war, there has been the Six-Day War (1967), two Intifadas, the Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon (2006), and currently the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza that began in October 2023 and yet to be ended.[9]

The state of Israel is the only country in the world with Judaism as its official state religion. Inside the country, Israel has an estimated 81% Jewish majority. As for the non-Jewish residents of Israel, most are ethnically Arab and identify religiously as Muslims (14%), Christians (2%) or Druze (2%). Of course, it should be forgotten that not all Israelis are religious, and in fact some 40% identify as secular.

Most Jews today live either in North America (primarily the United States) or in the Middle East / North Africa region, almost exclusively in Israel. In fact, 85% of Jews worldwide live in one of these two countries.[10]

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider in any depth the modern history and political dimensions of the State of Israel. However, several issues, some undoubtedly contentious, are discussed in the sections below.

1.4 Structure of report

Following this Introduction, the essay is divided into the following sections:

Section 2 presents a brief overview of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) and its three major parts, the Torah (Law), the Nevi'im (Prophets) and the Ketuvim (Writings). It also considers the Greek version of the *Tanakh* known as the Septuagint.

Section 3 presents an overview of the doctrine of Judaism as embodied in the *Talmud*. It considers aspects of Jewish culture and customs from the prayer book (siddur), circumcision and Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals to language, food and festivals.

Section 4 considers the history and spread of Judaism from its ancient days and the diaspora to the founding of the State of Israel in the 20th century. It includes consideration of Zionism.

Section 5 presents a Discussion of various issues concerning Judaism from God and the Bible stories that underlie the Talmud to its many rules and prohibitions. Several distinctive characteristics of Judaism are identified, and finally (what this author considers to be) the tragedies of the religion.

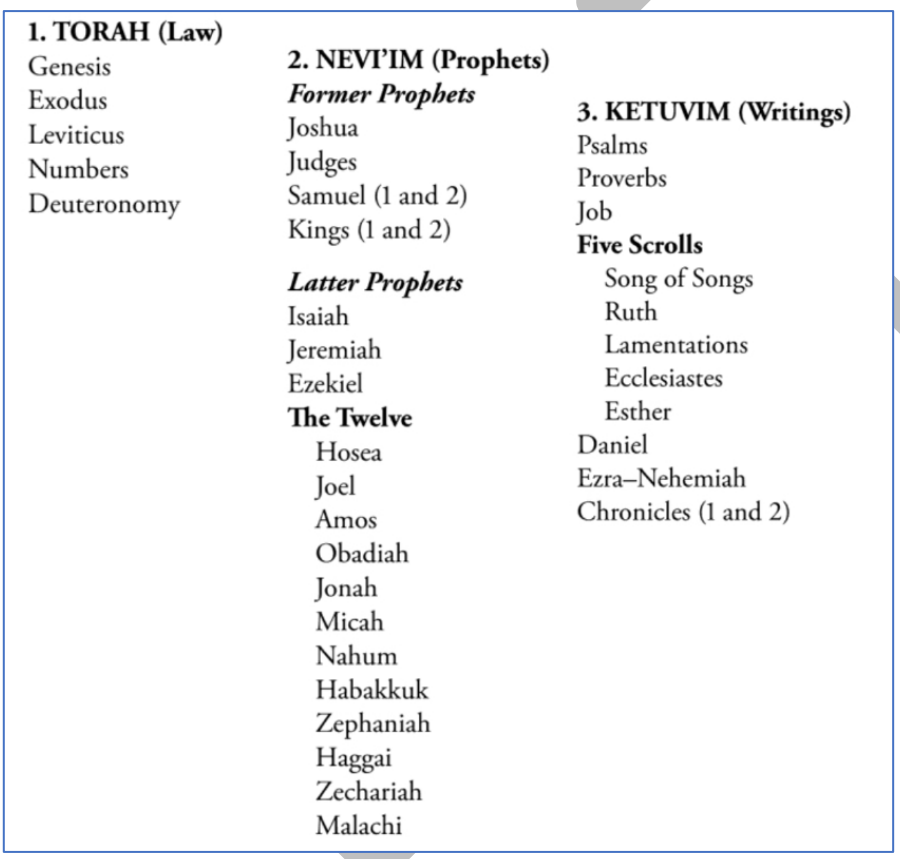
Section 6 presents the Conclusions of the essay.

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_involving_Israel#Wars_and_other_conflicts
[10] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/jewish-population-change/

2 Hebrew bible

2.1 Origins

The Hebrew bible or the *Tanakh* recounts the ancient history of the Israelites in Canaan and neighbouring lands (e.g. Moab) in the southern Levant, who were variously ruled over by the Persian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian empires. In particular, it includes the story of the Israelites' famous exodus from (oppression in) Egypt, their return to the land of Canaan (the 'Holy Land'), their defeat and exile in Babylon, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem[11] and so on. The *Tanakh* was written at different times between about 1200 and 165 BC, but the history may go back to 1500 BC or even earlier.[12] As it was written long before Jesus Christ appeared (hence 'BC'), it follows logically that it does not say anything about him (apart from a few brief and dubious prophecies that a Messiah will one day appear).[13]



1. TORAH (Law)
Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

2. NEVI'IM (Prophets)
Former Prophets
Joshua
Judges
Samuel (1 and 2)
Kings (1 and 2)

Latter Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

3. KETUVIM (Writings)
Psalms
Proverbs
Job
Five Scrolls
Song of Songs
Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra–Nehemiah
Chronicles (1 and 2)

Figure 2. Three divisions of Hebrew Bible in Judaism (Brettler, 2010)

In the Western Christian world, the *Tanakh* is of course better known as the Old Testament (OT) in the Bible (see Table 1). The use of the terms 'Old' and 'New' by Christians implies that the NT had in some way continued or superseded the OT, but this reflects the bias of Christianity. From the Jewish perspective there is no OT, there is only the *Tanakh*.[14]

[11] The First or Solomon's Temple was built in 957 BCE and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Second Temple was completed in 515 BCE and fell to the Roman Siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
[12] For brief historical summary, see: https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsMiddEast/CanaanMoab.htm
[13] E.g.: "*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel*" (Isaias 7:14)
[14] According to Tom Holland, it is possible that the categorisation of the various Jewish holy books – what Jews today call the *Tanakh* and Christians the Old Testament – derived originally from the way that they were catalogued in the library of Alexandria (Holland, 2021, p.38).

Judaism			**Tanakh** *Torah* / *Nevi'im* / *Ketuvim*			*Tanakh (Hebrew)* *Septuagint (Greek)*
Christianity	Western	Catholic	**Old Testament**		**New Testament**	*Vulgate (Latin)* *Douai-Rheims (English)*
		Protest-ant	**Old Testament**		**New Testament**	*Lutheran (German)* *KJV (English)*
	Eastern Orthodox		**Old Testament**		**New Testament**	*EOB (Greek)*

Table 1. Different versions of the Bible

As shown diagrammatically in Table 1, there is also an important physical difference between the *Tanakh* (OT) and the NT of Christianity, in that the latter is far shorter than the former. This significant difference is often underappreciated and overlooked.

The *Tanakh* is, of course, more than a dry, historical account of the ancient Israelites – it is also a compilation of extraordinary stories, which still capture the imagination (see 5.1.3 below).

2.2 Law, prophets and writings

As indicated diagrammatically in Figure 2, the Tanakh consists of three major parts: the Torah, the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim. The Torah, meaning law or instruction, is essentially God's revealed teaching or guidance to the Jewish people; more broadly, the teaching is for humankind as well. The Torah is usually restricted to the first five books of the *Tanakh* (hence the Pentateuch in Christianity): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.[15] These are the books traditionally ascribed to Moses, the recipient of the original revelation from God on Mount Sinai.

The written Torah is preserved in all Jewish synagogues on handwritten parchment scrolls that reside inside the ark of the Law (Figure 3). They are removed and returned to their place with special reverence. Readings from the Torah form an important part of Jewish liturgical services.

Yet, a religion based upon static texts, however holy, cannot easily adjust to the ever-varying conditions of daily life. That Judaism has endured is largely due to traditions of biblical interpretation known as the "Oral Torah" (Baskin and Seeskin, 2010).

Figure 3. Example of the Torah.

[15] Jewish, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant canons all agree on their order.

The second part of the *Tanakh* is known as the Prophets, which is divided into two main groups, the Former and Latter prophets. The Latter prophets are subdivided into the Major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and twelve Minor prophets. The Prophets is essentially a long, narrative history of the Jewish people. It begins (Joshua) with their arrival in the Promised Land and an attack on the city of Jericho whose walls are made to famously fall down from the noise of trumpets and shouting (Joshua 6: 5).[16] It ends with the Books of the Maccabees, which recounts the battles fought under the command of Judas Machabeus. The First Book includes the incident of dedicating the altar for eight days (1 Maccabees 4: 56-59), which is celebrated by the annual Hanukkah festival (see 3.4).

The third part of the *Tanakh* is known as the Writings (Ketuvim) and its most diverse part. The various Books (see Figure 2) can be broadly grouped as follows:

- Poetry: Psalms (hymns), Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon).
- Wisdom: Proverbs (ethical wisdom), and Job (theology of suffering).
- Historical narratives: Ruth, Lamentations (Jerusalem destruction), Ecclesiastes, Esther (Purim story), Ezra-Nehemiah (return from exile) and Chronicles (recap of history).
- Apocalyptic visions: Daniel.[17]

2.3 Septuagint

In antiquity, most Jews around the world did not speak Hebrew, but instead simply the language of the country in which they live, which led to producing the Greek version of the *Tanakh* known as the Septuagint.[18] In addition to making the scriptures available to the new generation of Jews in the diaspora who could no longer read Hebrew, the Septuagint also satisfied the curiosity of Greek-speaking Gentiles concerning what these strange Jews believed. The translation did not happen all at once, but over a period of a century or two or even longer (Pelikan, 2005).

The Septuagint is an important holy scripture because it contains the *Apocrypha*, a group of texts that include additions to the books of Esther, Jeremiah and Daniel, but chiefly books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and two (or three) books of the Maccabees. Although Jewish in origin, the books are integral parts of the (Greek) Septuagint. Why they are not also in the Hebrew *Tanakh* "is not easy to explain" (Pelikan, 2005, p.71).

As part of the Septuagint, the *Apocrypha* have played a far more important role in Christian rather than Jewish history. They are part of the Christian Bible in both Western Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, but not the Protestant Bible. Some Protestant traditions reject them outright; others regard the Apocrypha as non-canonical books that are useful for instruction.[19]

Not only were Christians the main beneficiaries of the Septuagint, but its historical significance for Judaism must be recognised as having been in some ways a largely negative one. Some Jews later came to regret the translation of their scriptures into Greek because of its use by Christians to prove various doctrines such as the virgin birth of Jesus.

[16] God helps the Israelites to defeat their enemies including killing many of the Amorites by making large hailstones (Joshua 10: 11).
[17] The location of the book of Daniel in the Writings is in distinction to various Christian Bibles that place Daniel among the Major Prophets due to its prophetic nature according to common Christian theology.
[18] The Latin word for seventy (LXX), supposedly based on the legendary number of (70+) translators.
[19] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocrypha

The Gospel of St. Matthew famously declares that a *virgin* shall give birth to a son, Emmanuel (Matthew 1: 23), as had been prophesised in the Old Testament (Isaiah 7: 14). But whereas the Septuagint uses the word *parthenos* ("virgin") the original Hebrew bible simply says a *young woman* will give birth without specifying her exact status or implying a virginal conception.

2.4 Spreading the word

The Hebrew Bible is undeniably one of the most well-known, widely published books in the world. Even if it is primarily and better known as the 'Old Testament' of the Christian Bible, the numerous stories within it still capture the imagination, which speaks of their powerful messaging, and even if the language of the Bible is often "foreign" (Pelikan, 2005).[20]

The Bible served as one of the richest sources for narrative art in the Middle Ages. It provided familiar stories – such as those of the creation of the world and Noah's Ark – and held up heroes such as David and Solomon for emulation. Medieval readers turned to the Bible not only for inspiration and moral guidance, but also as a source of entertaining tales and historical information such as Moses and the Brazen Serpent (Figure 4). When the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes, the Lord ordered Moses to set a bronze serpent on a pole, so that those who gazed upon it might be saved.[21]

Figure 4. Moses and the brazen serpent.[22]

Renaissance painters also created many Old Testament scenes, including:

- Michelangelo: scenes from Genesis on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, such as the Creation of Adam and the Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden.
- Caravaggio: Depicted the story where God tests Abraham's faith, The Sacrifice of Isaac.
- Rembrandt: numerous scenes, including Belshazzar's Feast, which dramatizes a story from the Book of Daniel, and Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law.
- Artemisia Gentileschi: scenes like Judith and Holofernes, a story from the Book of Judith.

[20] Pelikan gives the example of "The Lord is my shepherd", an agricultural idiom that most urban dwellers, young or old, find incomprehensible, especially if the said shepherd "is sentimentalised into a figure that no ancient shepherd and no sheep whether ancient or modern would be able to recognise" (Pelikan, *ibid, p.230*).

[21] Christ draws an analogy between this specific event and his imminent crucifixion: "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up. That whoever believes in Him may not perish, but may have life everlasting*" (John 3: 14-15).

[22] https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/105VW2

In the 20th century, the Bible occupied a prominent place in the paintings of Marc Chagall, reflecting his Jewish heritage. For more than fifty years, Chagall continued his work of depicting biblical episodes in a poetic and spiritual dimension, inspired by his desire to compose an allegorical message of universal peace.[23]

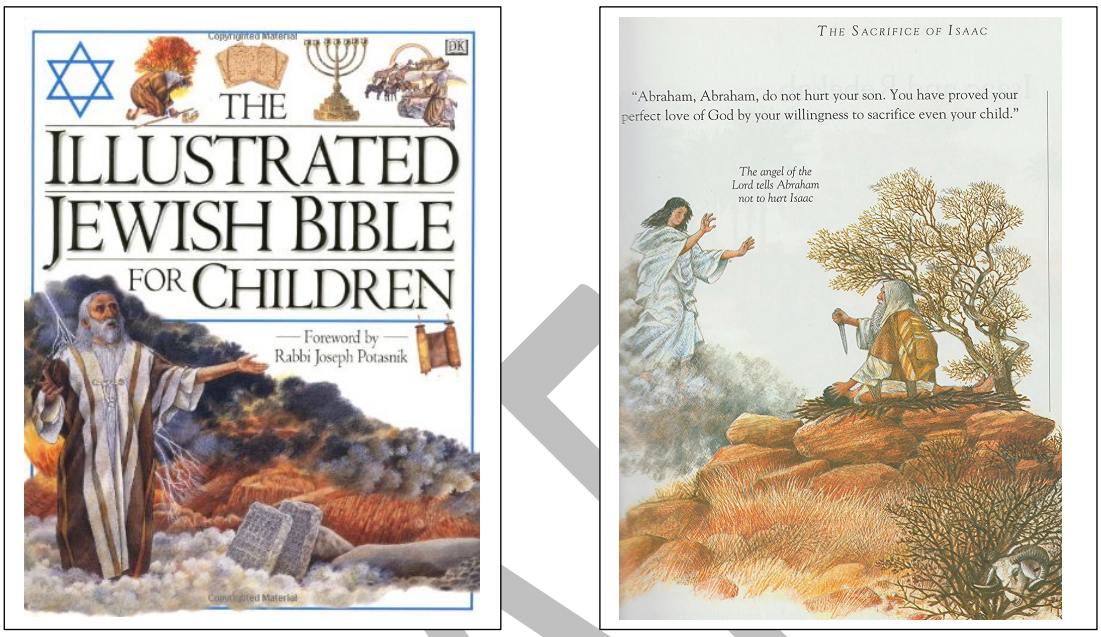


Figure 5. Jewish Bible for children and sample story (Hastings, 1994)

Numerous books for children, usually illustrated, confirm the Bible's enduring appeal (see Figure 5).[24] Typically, they are full of stories such as the baby Moses in a basket, Joseph and his multi-coloured coat who is betrayed by his jealous brothers, Jonah swallowed by the whale (Jonah, 2:1), the fight between David and Goliath, love and betrayal between Samson and Delilah (Judges, 16:1), and so on.

The Bible has also been the subject of numerous cinematic films including Hollywood blockbusters such as Exodus: Gods and Kings and Noah.

Figure 6. Poster for the film Noah

[23] https://musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/chagall/en

[24] Books for Christian children typically include lots of Old Testament stories in addition to those about Jesus.

3 Doctrine

3.1 Talmud

The Babylonian *Talmud*, or simply *Talmud*, is the core source of Jewish learning, an immense body of law compiled by Jewish scholars (rabbis) between the 3rd and 8th centuries before the Arab conquest of the Near East. There is a separate, smaller Jerusalem or Palestinian *Talmud*, which predates the Babylonian *Talmud* by about a century.[25]

The foundation of the *Talmud* is the *Mishnah*, a concise collection of rabbinic legal rulings compiled ~200 CE. Even in its eventual written form the *Mishnah* continues to be identified by the rabbis as the "oral tradition". The Talmud also incorporates the *Gemara*, a detailed written commentary on the *Mishnah*, but the latter is deemed to be superior in authority to it (Pelikan, 2005, p.73). The Talmud is important because it essentially defines Judaism. The rabbis of the Talmud instruct Israel, the holy people, on how they are to read the Torah inclusive of the written part (Neusner, 1991). The Babylonian Talmud seems to reflect the society in which it came into being (Starr-Glass, 2009). The Palestinian Talmud is a considerably smaller compilation from the Jewish academies of Israel.[26]

The Talmud is an encyclopaedic work, divided into six Orders (*Sedarim*), dealing not only with legal arguments, prevalent custom, and social observation, but with almost every conceivable subject. Each *Seder* containing multiple tractates (*Masechtot*), numbering 63 in total (Figure 7). Each tractate is divided into chapters (*Perakim*) numbering 523 in total. Each chapter is further broken into paragraphs or *Mishnayot*.

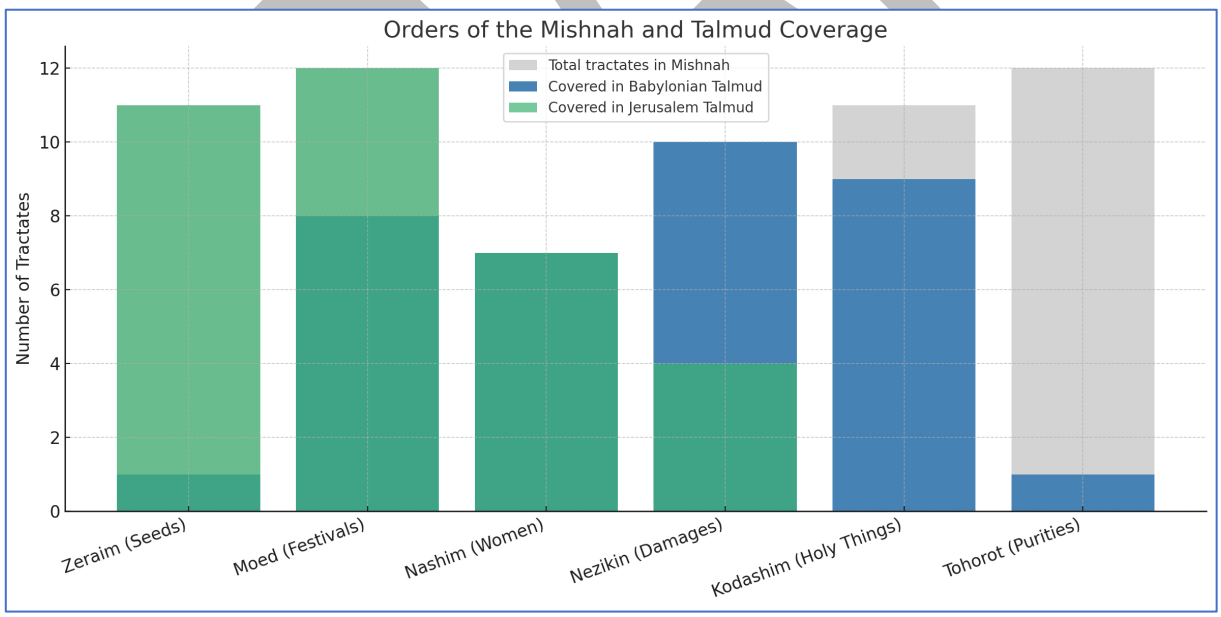


Figure 7. Number of tractates in Talmud as a function of six Orders (Sederim)

The six Orders of the *Talmud* are: Zeraim (seeds or agriculture); Moed (festivals or holidays); Nashim (women or family law); Nezikin (damages); Kodashim (holy things or sacrifices); and lastly Tahorot (purities).

[25] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem_Talmud

[26] The Babylonian Talmud consists of 37 tractates (~2,711 folio pages). The Jerusalem Talmud: consists of 39 tractates, but shorter and incomplete.

Importantly, the Talmud provides the interpretation and application of the 613 biblical commandments (*mitzvot*) although some Jewish scholars give a lower number.[27] The Talmud does not provide a definitive list of these divine commandments, but the list compiled by the famous rabbi Maimonides (aka Rambam)[28] in the Mishneh Torah is the most widely accepted one. Several websites that provide a convenient listing of the commandments although the exact order and groupings might differ.[29, 30]

The 613 commandments are typically divided into 248 positive commandments (the do's) and 365 negative commandments (the do not's).[31] Regarding the written Torah, the commandments have been extracted from the five Books as follows: Genesis (2), Exodus (110), Leviticus (243), Numbers (58), and Deuteronomy (200).

The Talmud has been translated into English and many books including old 20th century texts, are available online.[32,33] The Talmud is also easily available via a non-profit organization known as *Sefaria*, which provides free access to a library of "3000 years of Jewish texts" and their interconnections, digitised both in Hebrew and in translation.[34]

3.2 Customs and rituals

Like most other religions, Jewish life has its own distinctive customs (e.g. male circumcision, Bar/Bat Mitzvah), its rituals that punctuate daily life (e.g. Shabbat, prayers, preparing kosher food, men wearing the kippa on their head), and its many festivals (e.g. Rosh Hashana, Hanukkah). As might be expected, customs show considerable diversity reflecting different cultural experiences in Jewish history.

Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews are the two major ancestral groups within Judaism, distinguished by their historical origins, cultural traditions, and some specific religious practices. Ashkenazi Jews' ancestors came from Central and Eastern Europe, and they historically spoke Yiddish. Sephardi Jews' ancestors originated in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), and their name comes from the Hebrew word for Hispania. Today Ashkenazim (plural for Ashkenazi) constitute more than 80 percent of all the Jews in the world, vastly outnumbering Sephardic Jews.[35] In the early 21st century, Ashkenazi Jews numbered about 11 million. In Israel the numbers of Ashkenazim and Sephardim are roughly equal.

Whilst the Ashkenazim and Sephardim share core Jewish beliefs and practices, there are considerable variations among each group, i.e. their customs, languages, prayer styles, and some dietary laws. Furthermore, Jewish customs found in the Yemen, Bukhara (Uzbekistan), Cochin (India) and Ethiopia seem remote and exotic to most Western Jews (Starr-Glass, 2009).

[27] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments
[28] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides
[29] https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/756399/jewish/The-613-Commandments-Mitzvot.htm
[30] https://www.jewfaq.org/613_commandments
[31] The number of 613 is given in the *Talmud*, Yevamoth 47b – see https://www.chabad.org/torah-texts/5448955/The-Talmud/Yevamot/Chapter-4/47b
[32] 1916 edition https://archive.org/details/neweditionofbaby0002unse/page/n37/mode/2up
[33] https://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/talmud.htm
[34] https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud
[35] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ashkenazi

3.2.1 Siddur

The *siddur* is a Jewish prayer book typically used in synagogue services, but also an essential part of daily life for Jews around the world. Its name, *siddur*, comes from the Hebrew root "seder," meaning "order," reflecting its structured approach to prayer and spiritual practice. Compiled over centuries, the key sections include:

- **Daily prayers**. Morning (Shacharit), Afternoon (Mincha), and Evening (Ma'ariv) Prayers: These daily services connect Jews with a regular spiritual rhythm, beginning the day with gratitude, continuing with afternoon reflection, and ending with evening blessings.
- **Shabbat Prayers**. Special prayers and songs for Friday night and Saturday morning honour the sanctity of Shabbat. The Kabbalat Shabbat and Amidah prayers, among others, infuse the day with peace and celebration.
- **Holiday Prayers**: Specific prayers and liturgies for Jewish festivals and High Holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach (Passover), and others, helping guide the worshipper through unique seasonal themes and rituals.
- **Blessings and Psalms**: Blessings for food, travel, health, and other daily aspects of life remind us to find gratitude and sanctity in every moment, while Psalms provide poetic expressions of praise, supplication, and reflection.

The siddur is not just a book of words, but a means of connecting with God, and the Jewish community, offering the worshipper a moment to step out of daily distractions and focus on what is important. For many Jews, the *siddur* also connects them to generations of Jews who have recited the same words, creating a powerful sense of continuity and shared faith. Not surprisingly, there are there are many types of *siddurim* (plural for *siddur*) tailored to different communities and practices, such as Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Chabad.[36] There is also the Open Siddur Project.[37]

Figure 8. Siddur prayer book

[36] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siddur
[37] https://opensiddur.org/compilations/liturgical/siddurim/kol-bo/authorised-daily-prayer-book-aka-the-singer-siddur/

3.2.2 Bar/Bat Mitzvah

The Bar Mitzvah (for a boy) or Bat Mitzvah (for a girl) signifies the age at which the young person is considered a full adult member of the Jewish community and is therefore legally and religiously obligated to observe all the commandments (*mitzvot*) of the Torah.[38]

In an observant Jewish setting, the young man (aged about 13 years old) will not only carry the Torah and read from it, but also wear the *T'fillin*. This is a small, square leather box attached by leather straps to the head and the upper part of the arm (Figure 9). The box contains selected passages from the Torah.

Figure 9. Young boy carrying the Torah during his Bar Mitzvah (Paris synagogue, 2013)

3.2.3 Food

Judaism has laws on what food can or cannot be eaten. The laws are largely based on the Book of Deuteronomy (14: 3-20), which distinguishes "clean" animals like oxen, sheep and goats that have cloven feet and chew the cud from "unclean" beasts like the camel, hare and pig that have no hooves. Similar distinctions are made for birds (birds of prey are considered unclean), for fish (all that have fins and scales are considered clean) and for insects - "*everything that creepeth, and have little wings shall be unclean*" (Deuteronomy 14: 19).

Food that can be eaten is known as *kosher* whereas forbidden food is called *treif* or *trefah* (see Figure 10).

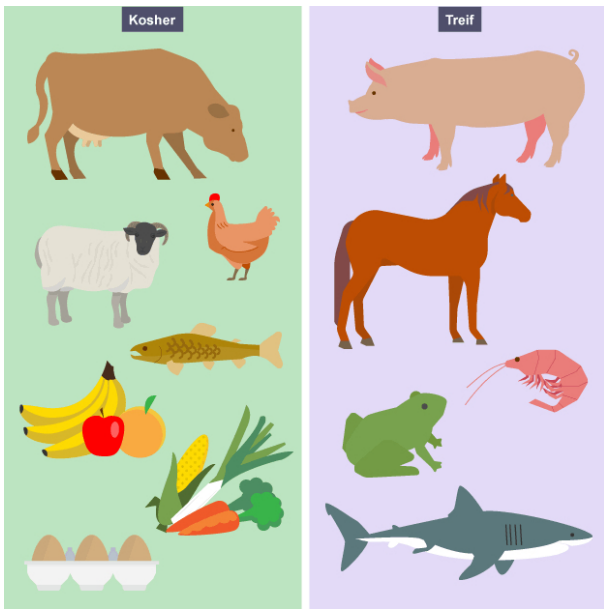


Figure 10. Food considered clean (kosher) or unclean (treif)

As well as following the above guidance, Jews believe that to be kosher, animals must be slaughtered in a humane way. Some Orthodox Jews might have separate utensils and perhaps fridges for the preparation and storage of meat and dairy products.

[38] The Christian 'confirmation' in comparison, is a sacrament at which a baptized boy or girl receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit to strengthen their faith. Though it usually occurs in their early teens, it is not inherently a coming-of-age rite, or one with any legal significance.

3.2.4 Circumcision

As noted earlier (1.1), part of the covenant between God and Abraham, was the instruction for males to be circumcised, "*that it may be a sign of the covenant between me and you. An infant of eight days old shall be circumcised...*" (Genesis 17: 11-12; Leviticus 12: 8). No further explanation for this ritual is given in the *Torah*, but in the *Nevi'im* the story is recounted of Joshau preparing the Israelites to conquer the land of Canaan beginning with the circumcision of both men and children (Joshua 5: 2-8).[39] By this act, God says to Joshua, "*I have taken away the (re)proach of Egypt"* (Joshua 5: 9), which is interpreted as meaning that circumcision has removed (literally cut away) the disgrace of slavery in Egypt (Biale, 2002).

Moreover, the term "uncircumcised" is either associated directly with the Philistines, e.g. 1 Kings, 1 Samuel 18: 25 ("*the king desireth not any dowry, but only a hundred foreskins of the Philistines to be avenged of the king's enemies*"), or more often is a synonym for them, e.g. Judges 15: 18 ("*fall into the hands of the uncircumcised*"), 1 Kings/1 Samuel 14: 6 ("*let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised*"), and 1 Kings/1 Samuel 31: 4 ("*draw thy sword and kill me lest these uncircumcised come and slay me and mock me*"). The prophet Jeremiah, lamenting the miseries of the Israelites for their sins, tells us that the nations Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab "*...are uncircumcised in the flesh, but all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart*" (Jeremiah 9: 26).

Regarding the history of circumcision, these passages in the Bible indicate that the ritual was prehistoric, i.e. using flint stone for cutting (Exodus 4: 25; Joshua 5: 2). Further investigations of its antiquity suggest that circumcision was known to the inhabitants of North Syria during the early 3rd millennium B.C, and west of the Euphrates that would eventually lead in time to the Hebrew patriarch Abraham. Thus, the concept of circumcision probably migrated from north to south (Egypt), not the other way around (Sasson, 1966).

The ritual of circumcision is often held at the family's home, but some people prefer the synagogue, in either case witnessed by family and community members. It is performed by a mohel (circumciser), usually an observant Jew, on the eighth day after birth unless there are medical reasons to prevent it happening. It is still very prevalent within Jewish communities, but there is a small but increasing minority of parents turning away from the practice.[40, 41]

Although from an historical point of view, the Jews of ancient Israel were not the only people to practice circumcision, it nonetheless "crystallized into one of the most prominent boundary markers of Jewish identity" (Biale, 2002, p.61).

3.3 Language

While Hebrew is the historical and liturgical language of Judaism and is widely spoken in Israel (see below), most Jews around the world today do not speak Hebrew, but instead simply the language of the country in which they live. This was also true in antiquity, which led to producing the Greek version of the *Tanakh* known as the Septuagint (see 2.3 above). The translation did not happen all at once, but over a period of a century or two or even longer.

[39] The practice of circumcision had been neglected during the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness.
[40] https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/circumcision-rites-in-israel
[41] https://www.parents.com/baby/care/jewish-circumcision/

Hebrew is still used today in religious ceremonies. In particular, in the coming-of-age *Bar-Mitzvah* (or *Bat-Mitzvah*) held in a synagogue, the young boy (or girl) is expected to read and speak some Hebrew from the Torah, regardless of the speaker's everyday language.

Sephardi communities came into being as a result of the forcible expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. They settled along the coast of North Africa, Bulgaria, Salonika, Venice and Turkey. Many of them still speak a smattering of old Spanish dialects mixed with Hebrew (Ladino).

Many Ashkenazi Jews speak a *lingua franca* based on old German with many Hebrew and local (e.g. Russian) language borrowings, which is more commonly known as Yiddish.[42]

3.4 Festivals

In addition to its many daily and weekly rituals and customs, Judaism is characterised by a number of important festivals throughout the religious calendar year (see Table 2). All such festivals are holy and many of them involve fasting although, not unlike Christianity, they are often collectively referred to as holidays.[43]

The basis for all the celebrations is to be found in the Torah. Leaving aside the important weekly *Shabbat* (Sabbath), the holy days are *Pesach* (Passover), *Shabuot* (Pentecost), *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year's Day), *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles). So that observant Jews use these days to focus on the spiritual life, as far as possible, it is forbidden to work, which means no household tasks as well as no gainful occupation.

Pesach (Passover)
This festival celebrates the exodus (or deliverance) of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Of special significance is the *seder* meal, which includes various food and drinks. Jews avoid eating normal bread and other leavened foods because the Jews who fled Egypt didn't have time for bread to rise before leaving, so it baked hard in the hot sun resembling crackers (hence matzah). The festival also includes reciting the *Haggadah*.[44, 45]

Rosh Hashanah
This festival is the Jewish New Year, which occurs in September or early October. Technically, Jews have several 'new years', for example *Tu BiShvat*, which celebrates the trees (and supposedly coincides with the flowering of the almond tree in Israel).[46] But Rosh Hashanah is the principal New Year of the Jewish calendar, celebrating the creation of Adam and Eve (humanity's progenitors). The word Rosh Hashanah literally means "head of the year."

Yom Kippur
This festival is the Jewish "day of atonement", which occurs in late September or early October, after Rosh Hashanah. It is a day when Jews remember the things they regret doing the past year and pledge to do better in the next year. It's one of the High Holidays

[42] Although Yiddish uses the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, employs many Hebrew words, and is written from right to left, it is a different language. The word 'Yiddish' comes from the German Jüdisch, meaning 'Jewish'.
[43] https://www.chabad.org/holidays/default_cdo/jewish/holidays.htm
[44] Haggadah means "telling," as its primary purpose is to facilitate the retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It also guides participants through the *seder* meal, indicating when and how each rite is performed.
[45] https://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=treefriend&id=1151&f=subject
[46] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu_BiShvat_seder

Figure 11. Sukkot festival

Sukkot

This festival is a weeklong Jewish holiday that comes five days after Yom Kippur. Sukkot celebrates the gathering of the harvest and commemorates the miraculous protection God provided for the children of Israel when they left Egypt. Of all the Jewish holidays, Sukkot is the only one whose date does not seem to commemorate a historic event.

During Sukkot Jews who observe the festival construct small makeshift huts (*sukkot*) topped with thatched roofs in which they dwell, either partially or fully, during this seven-day Jewish holiday.

Hannukah (or Chanukah)

This festival celebrates the victory of the Maccabees, Jewish freedom fighters, who routed the Syrian-Greeks from the Holy Land and restored the Temple service. When the Maccabees returned to the temple to re-dedicate it to Jewish practice, they found only enough oil to light the menorah (a candelabra that traditionally never went out) for a single day. Miraculously, after they lit the menorah and sent messengers to get more oil, it lasted the entire eight days until a new shipment of oil arrived at the temple.

Hence the nine-branched Chanukah or Hanukkah candelabra. Eight of the nine branches hold candles (or oil lamps) that symbolize the eight nights of the festival; the ninth, central branch holds a candle, which is used to light the other eight (one candle per night). Chanukah is considered a minor Jewish holiday no matter how much kids love it![47]

[47] https://www.chabad.org/kids/article_cdo/aid/354748/jewish/Chanukah.htm

Calendar of Jewish festivals and holy days
2023-2028 / 5783-5789

		2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Asara b'Tevet Fast of 10 Tevet		Tue 3 Jan	*[22 Dec 2023]*	Fri 10 Jan	*[30 Dec 2025]*	*[20 Dec 2026]*	Sun 9 Jan
Tu Bishvat New Year for Trees		Mon 6 Feb	Thu 25 Jan	Thu 13 Feb	Mon 2 Feb	Sat 23 Jan	Sat 12 Feb
Ta'anit Esther Fast of Esther		Mon 6 Mar	Thu 21 Mar	Thu 13 Mar	Mon 2 Mar	Mon 22 Mar	Thu 9 Mar
Purim Festival of Lots	Eve	Mon 6 Mar	Sat 23 Mar	Thu 13 Mar	Mon 2 Mar	Mon 22 Mar	Sat 11 Mar
	Day	Tue 7 Mar	Sun 24 Mar	Fri 14 Mar	Tue 3 Mar	Tue 23 Mar	Sun 12 Mar
Ta'anit Bechorot Fast of the Firstborn		Wed 5 Apr	Mon 22 Apr	Thu 10 Apr	Wed 1 Apr	Wed 21 Apr	Mon 10 Apr
Pesach Passover	Eve	Wed 5 Apr	Mon 22 Apr	Sat 12 Apr	Wed 1 Apr	Wed 21 Apr	Mon 10 Apr
	1st Day	Thu 6 Apr	Tue 23 Apr	Sun 13 Apr	Thu 2 Apr	Thu 22 Apr	Tue 11 Apr
	2nd Day	Fri 7 Apr	Wed 24 Apr	Mon 14 Apr	Fri 3 Apr	Fri 23 Apr	Wed 12 Apr
	Intermediate days	Sat 8 - Tue 11 Apr	Thu 25 - Sun 28 Apr	Tue 15 - Fri 18 Apr	Sat 4 Apr - Tue 7 Apr	Sat 24 - Tue 27 Apr	Thu 13 - Sun 16 Apr
	Eve	Tue 11 Apr	Sun 28 Apr	Fri 18 Apr	Tue 7 Apr	Tue 27 Apr	Sun 16 Apr
	7th Day	Wed 12 Apr	Mon 29 Apr	Sat 19 Apr	Wed 8 Apr	Wed 28 Apr	Mon 17 Apr
	8th Day	Thu 13 Apr	Tue 30 Apr	Sun 20 Apr	Thu 9 Apr	Thu 29 Apr	Tue 18 Apr
Shavuot Festival of Weeks	Eve	Thu 25 May	Tue 11 Jun	Sun 1 Jun	Thu 21 May	Thu 10 Jun	Tue 30 May
	1st Day	Fri 26 May	Wed 12 Jun	Mon 2 Jun	Fri 22 May	Fri 11 Jun	Wed 31 May
	2nd Day	Sat 27 May	Thu 13 Jun	Tue 3 Jun	Sat 23 May	Sat 12 Jun	Thu 1 Jun
Shivah Asar b'Tammuz Fast of 17 Tammuz		Thu 6 Jul	Tue 23 Jul	Sun 13 Jul	Thu 2 Jul	Thu 22 Jul	Tue 11 Jul
Tisha b'Av Fast of 9 Av	Eve	Wed 26 Jul	Mon 12 Aug	Sat 2 Aug	Wed 22 Jul	Wed 11 Aug	Mon 31 Jul
	Day	Thu 27 Jul	Tue 13 Aug	Sun 3 Aug	Thu 23 Jul	Thu 12 Aug	Tue 1 Aug
Rosh Hashana New Year	Eve	Fri 15 Sep	Wed 2 Oct	Mon 22 Sep	Fri 11 Sep	Fri 1 Oct	Wed 20 Sep
	1st Day	Sat 16 Sep	Thu 3 Oct	Tue 23 Sep	Sat 12 Sep	Sat 2 Oct	Thu 21 Sep
	2nd Day	Sun 17 Sep	Fri 4 Oct	Wed 24 Sep	Sun 13 Sep	Sun 3 Oct	Fri 22 Sep
Tzom Gedaliah Fast of Gedaliah		Mon 18 Sep	Sun 6 Oct	Thu 25 Sep	Mon 14 Sep	Mon 4 Oct	Sun 24 Sep
Yom Kippur Day of Atonement	Eve	Sun 24 Sep	Fri 11 Oct	Wed 1 Oct	Sun 20 Sep	Sun 10 Oct	Fri 29 Sep
	Day	Mon 25 Sep	Sat 12 Oct	Thu 2 Oct	Mon 21 Sep	Mon 11 Oct	Sat 30 Sep
Sukkot Festival of Tabernacles	Eve	Fri 29 Sep	Wed 16 Oct	Mon 6 Oct	Fri 25 Sep	Fri 15 Oct	Wed 4 Oct
	1st Day	Sat 30 Sep	Thu 17 Oct	Tue 7 Oct	Sat 26 Sep	Sat 16 Oct	Thu 5 Oct
	2nd Day	Sun 1 Oct	Fri 18 Oct	Wed 8 Oct	Sun 27 Sep	Sun 17 Oct	Fri 6 Oct
	Intermediate days	Mon 2 – Fri 6 Oct	Sat 19 – Wed 23 Oct	Thu 9 – Mon 13 Oct	Mon 28 Sep – Fri 2 Oct	Mon 18 – Fri 22 Oct	Sat 7 – Wed 11 Oct
Shmini Atzeret Eighth Day of Assembly	Eve	Fri 6 Oct	Thu 23 Oct	Mon 13 Oct	Fri 2 Oct	Fri 22 Oct	Wed 11 Oct
	Day	Sat 7 Oct	Fri 24 Oct	Tue 14 Oct	Sat 3 Oct	Sat 23 Oct	Thu 12 Oct
Simchat Torah Rejoicing with the Torah	Day	Sun 8 Oct	Sat 25 Oct	Wed 15 Oct	Sun 4 Oct	Sun 24 Oct	Fri 13 Oct
Chanukah Festival of Dedication	1st Night	Fri 8 Dec	Thu 26 Dec	Sun 14 Dec	Fri 4 Dec	Fri 24 Dec	Tue 12 Dec
	8th Night	Fri 15 Dec	Thu 2 Jan	Sun 21 Dec	Fri 11 Dec	Fri 31 Dec	Tue 19 Dec
Asara b'Tevet Fast of 10 Tevet		Fri 22 Dec	*[10 Jan 2025]*	Tue 30 Dec	Sun 20 Dec	*[9 Jan 2028]*	Thu 28 Dec

Day on which work is not permitted Fast day

Table 2. Calendar of Jewish Festivals and holy days (Board of Deputies of British Jews)

4 History and spread of Judaism

4.1 Origins

According to the *Tanakh*, Judaism began in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) over 3,000 to 3,500 years ago (~1,200 BCE) with a personal covenant between God and a man called Abraham who is considered the patriarch of the Jewish people. However, it is Abraham's grandson Israel (also known as Jacob) who is traditionally seen as responsible for the formation of the Israelite nation through his descendants, the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Later, God revealed his laws – the famous Ten Commandments – to the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai, and from which numerous other commandments (*mitzvot*) are derived (see 3.1, 5.2).

The time span covered by the history of the people of Israel in the main body of the *Tanakh* is approximately 1000 years. It begins with their exodus from Egypt (after ~1300 BCE) and concludes with the Return to Zion (before 400 BCE). The Jews returned to their homeland to rebuild the First (Solomon's) Temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed during the siege of the city by Nebuchadnezzar II in 587 BCE. The Temple's destruction and the Jews' subsequent Babylonian captivity were events that were seen as a fulfilment of biblical prophecies. In 539 BCE, the Persian king Cyrus the Great issued an Edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and the Land of Judah, which was made a self-governing Jewish province under the new Persian Empire (see Figure 12). At the other end of the *Tanakh*, the Books of Maccabees provide some additional dates for the period between Ezra and the New Testament.

Even in the earliest phases of Jewish history, the ancient Israelites were probably most often a minority among the Canaanite and other Near Eastern peoples who inhabited the land of Canaan. In fact, culturally and perhaps even ethnically, the Jews were descended from the Canaanites (Biale, 2002, pxviii).

Some individual events and persons in that history can be matched up with what is known of ancient history from other sources. For example, Cyrus the Great (600–530 BC) and Nebuchadnezzar II (642–562 BC), who figure prominently in the biblical narrative, are recognizable historical monarchs whose lives are knowable from ancient historians and other sources, including cuneiform inscription and tablets. However, most of the assignments of occurrences in the *Tanakh* to corresponding dates in the Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Syrian, and Greek calendars are arbitrary and hypothetical (Pelikan, 2005, p.30-31).

At the heart of the Jewish historical narrative has been the belief in the "Promised Land". However, except for Abraham residing briefly in Canaan before a famine forced him to move to Egypt (Genesis 12: 10), for most of its history this belief has been unfulfilled.

Leaving aside the question of the veracity of some of the events in historical the timeline of Judaism, a useful snapshot of the main events is shown in Figure 12.

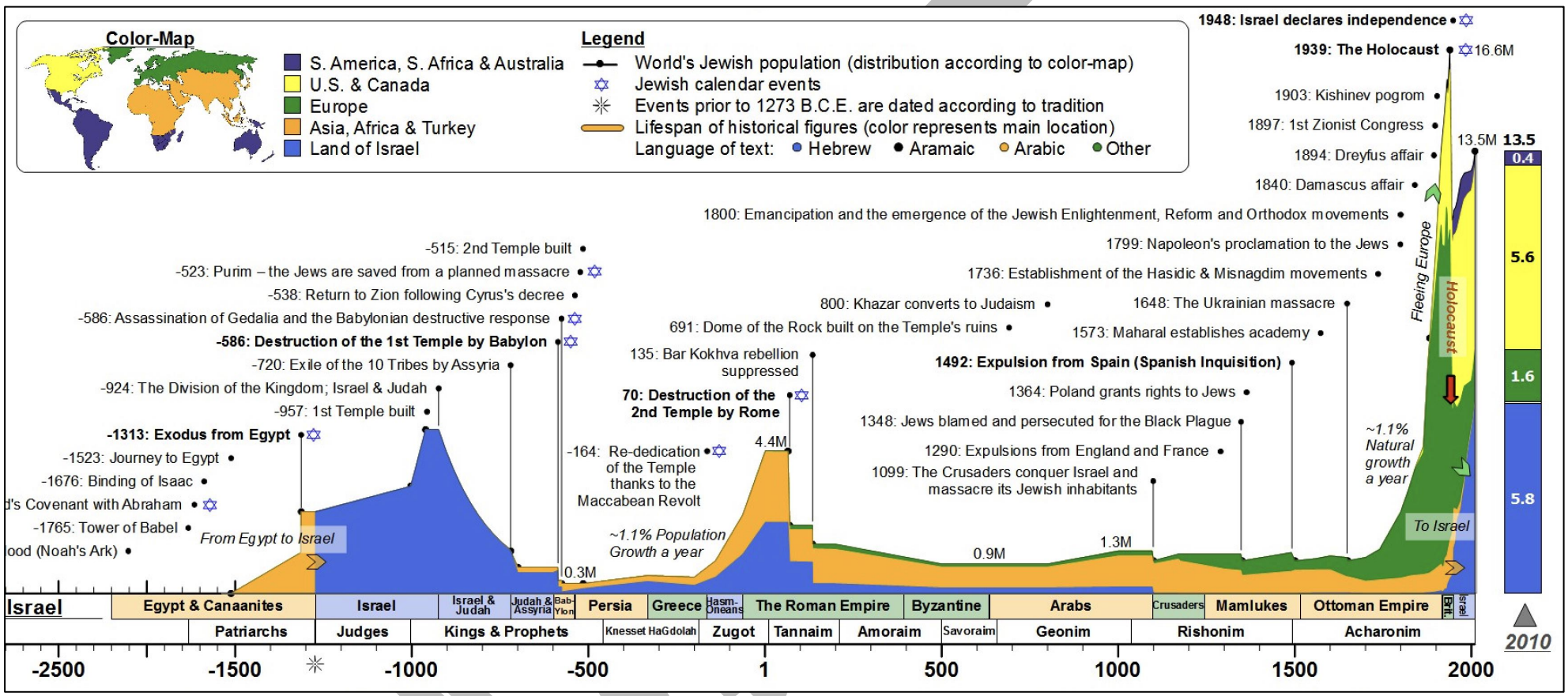


Figure 12. Timeline of Jewish history and heritage (Rabinovici).

4.2 Dispersion and expulsion

Jews were dispersed throughout most of the Greco-Roman world, a phenomenon that acquired the Greek name "diaspora" (Pelikan, 2005).[48] In the diaspora, Jews everywhere lived in circumstances where pagan power held sway (see Figure 13). The Jews did not await Alexander (the Great) as they had found their way to Syria and Egypt, and to the lands of the Tigris and Euphrates well before. The Greek Diaspora had brought the Jewish one in its wake. Jews migrated to the new (Greek) settlements and expanded communities in substantial numbers, and within a few generations they had installed themselves all around the Mediterranean and beyond (Gruen, 2002, p.78).

The Sephardi (or Sefardi) were members or descendants of the Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal from at least the later centuries of the Roman Empire until their persecution and mass expulsion from those countries in the last decades of the 15th century. Of the estimated 1.5 million Sephardic Jews worldwide in the early 21st century, the largest number were residing in the state of Israel.[49]

After Alexander's death (BCE 323), Palestine came under the control of the Ptolemies of Egypt (including Cyprus and Cyrene) for about a century.[50] The Seleucid monarchs held power in Syria and Phoenicia from the beginning of the 2nd century BCE. The Maccabean rebellion ushered in a Jewish dynasty, the Hasmonaeans, followed by the house of Herod. The ancient homeland of Judaea was renamed Palestine by the Romans, and later reconsecrated as Christian 'Holy Land'.

The Jews were dispersed throughout the Middle Ages, and they remained dispersed throughout the modern era until the Zionist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine (see 4.5). However, during this period the Jews underwent a series of *expulsions.* As shown in Figure 14, Jews were expelled from England, France, Spain and Germany, which led to resettlements in the Netherlands, Poland, the Ottoman empire and across Northern Africa. Against all odds, the resettled Jews did survive, which remains the most remarkable feature of their history (Milfull, 2007).

As Biale (2002) notes, the Mekhilta[51] tells us that the ancient Israelites were preserved as a distinct people in Egypt for four reasons because they: kept their names; maintained their language; resisted violating the Biblical sexual prohibitions (i.e. did not inter-marry); and refrained from "idle gossip" (i.e. understood as not collaborating with the gentile government).

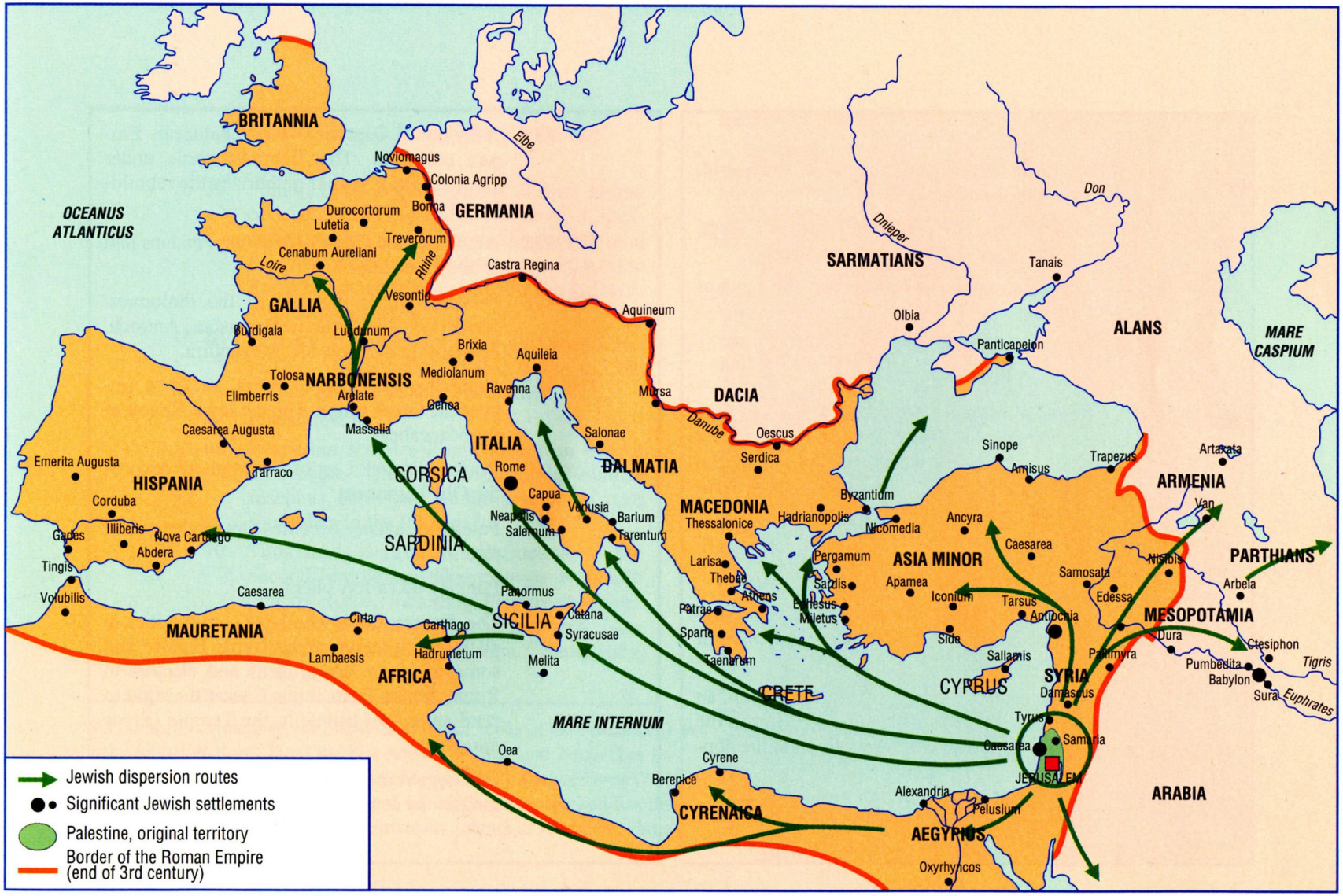
However, according to historian David Baines, this conception of Rabbinic Judaism flourishing in splendid isolation from its Greco-Roman surroundings "is impossible to maintain" because it was precisely in their profound engagement with the non-Jewish cultures of their environment that the Jews constructed their distinctive identities. But this engagement involved two seeming paradoxes – creating a separate Jewish subculture at the same time as "borrowing and even subverting motifs from the surrounding culture" (Baines, 2002).

[48] This term is used now for any scattering of a population, for example, from the emigration of Russians (to Western Europe, China, and America) after the Revolution of 1917, and of the Palestinian people. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_diaspora

[49] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sephardi

[50] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemaic_Kingdom

[51] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_literature



JEWS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE (C. A.D. 300) ▲

Figure 13. Jewish dispersion routes (circa A.D. 300)

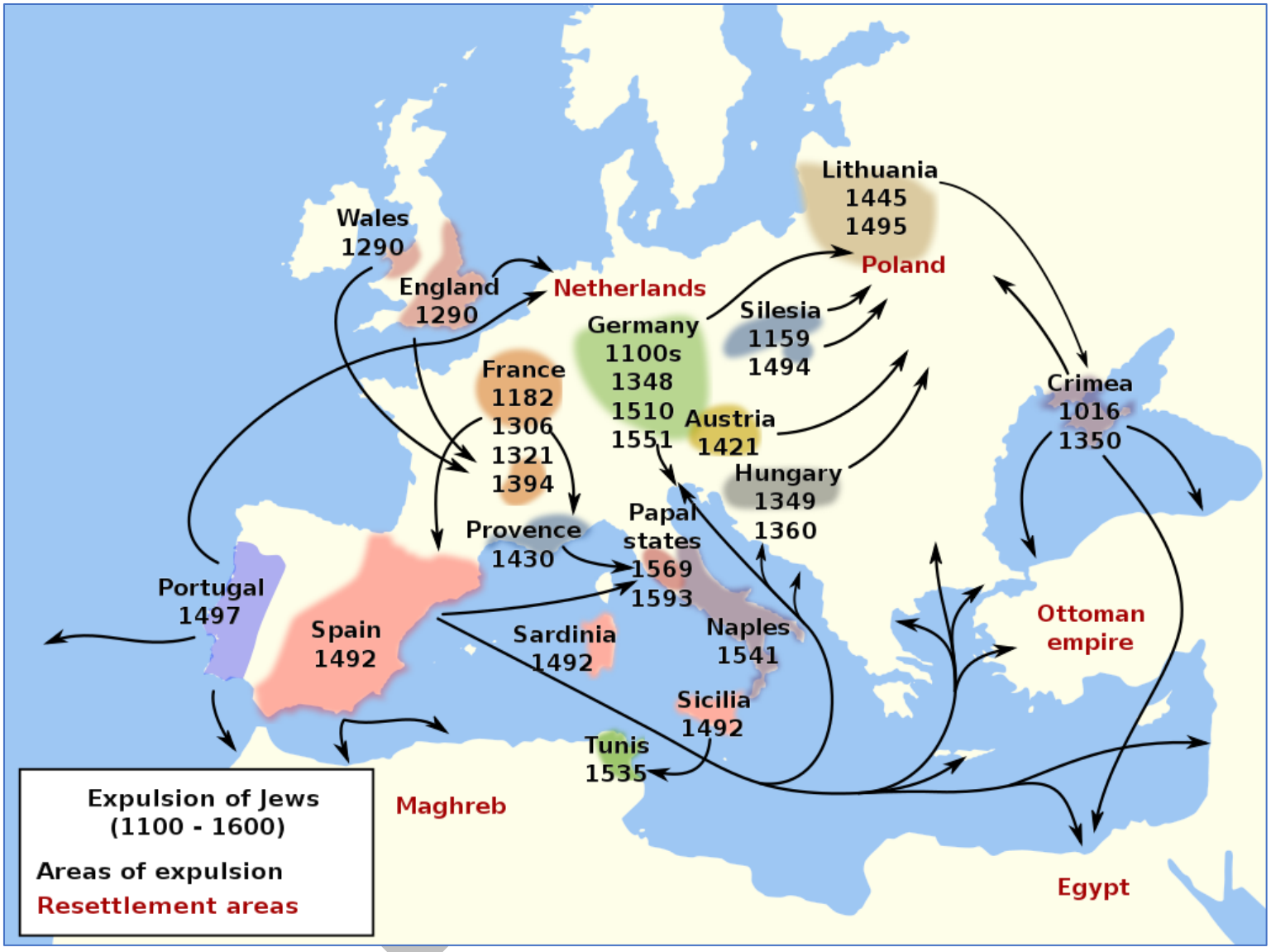


Figure 14. Expulsion of Jews in Europe (1100-1600)

4.3 Persecution and integration

During their long history, the Jews people have suffered almost continuous persecution. Antisemitism has been called history's oldest hatred (Phillips, 2018). The persecution has been due to a mix of religious, economic, cultural, and racial factors, from being the scapegoats for killing Jesus and practicing 'different' customs to Christianity (e.g. Sabbath, kosher diet), to being accused of killing children, poisoning water wells or for nefarious moneylending (Paris, 1853; Baring-Gould, 1914; Hyams, 1996).

Jews were subject to many restrictions throughout most of European history, and most Jews were isolated in residential areas from the rest of the society. The Jewish emancipation, for equality and the repeal of previous discriminatory laws against Jews, had to wait until after the Age of Enlightenment and the concurrent Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*).[52] The *Haskalah* marked the end of the use of Yiddish, the revival of Hebrew and an adoption of European languages. For example, at the end of the 17th century, wealthy Jews in Germany taught their children German and French to facilitate business and social contacts with non-Jews. By the 1790s, French had become the language of the Jewish elite while German was the spoken language of the middle class. In the Netherlands, Jews gave up Yiddish in favour of Dutch. However, Orthodox Jews were against the *Haskalah* from the start because it went against traditional Judaism and challenged both rabbinic orthodoxy and the role of *Talmud* in education. After emancipation there was a rise in assimilation, but also in Jewish nationalism. Much of this nationalism was fostered by antisemitism and led to aspirations for redemption by a natural, human effort, which was the start of modern Zionism (Schoenberg, 1998-2026).

Ironically, the timing of Jewish emancipation was not entirely of benefit to the Jews because it came about exactly when Enlightenment cosmopolitanism had effectively ended. By the second quarter of the 19th century, resistance to the dominion of the machine took the form of a militant cult of history, religion, nature and nation, against which the Jews seemed to personify the opposite. For centuries the Jews had been vilified for standing apart from the rest of humanity, locked into their own obscurantist, anti-social Rabbinic ways. Now they were attacked for the opposite reason – for emerging all too quickly into the rest of society, casting themselves as the greedy ushers of modernity. For the growing number of Jewish haters, including Wilhelm Marr who coined the term 'anti-semite' as the principle around which a new political force should be organised, this was irrefutable evidence of the Jewish conquest of Europe (Schama, 2017).[53]

Thus, despite the Jewish emancipation, antisemitism was far from over, and would reach its horrific climax in the Holocaust and extermination of millions of Jews by the Nazis in World War II.[54] The Nazis saw the Jews as an inherently inferior race and a threat to racial purity. Obviously, such brutal, murderous persecution significantly reduced the growth of the Jewish population in the modern era, which is only now back to the same level it was 80 years ago.

[52] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_emancipation
[53] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Marr
[54] Why the Jews: History of Antisemitism. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

4.4 Impact on other religions

4.4.1 Christianity

In the early centuries after Christ's death, Christianity rejected many of the distinctive cultural practices of Judaism (e.g. circumcision, dietary laws, etc.).[55] The main distinctive factor was perhaps that Christianity promoted itself as a universal religion for all – the Jews claimed to be God's chosen people, but Christ said, no, all are chosen. Interestingly, in the 2nd century, Marcion of Pontus or Sinope, declared that Christianity was in complete discontinuity with Judaism and entirely opposed to the scriptures of Judaism.[56, 57] Moreover, the teachings of Jesus were incompatible with the actions of Yahweh, the ancient and belligerent god of the Israelites as described in the *Tanakh*. But, quite evidently, Marcion's views did not prevail (and ultimately, he would be excommunicated from the church in 144 as a heretic).

The term 'Judeo-Christian' is very familiar to people living in the Western world. Broadly speaking, it denotes the values and traditions that are shared by the two respective religions and underlie the culture of Western civilisation. Because Christianity incorporated the *Tanakh* into its canon, it has meant that the two religions have been permanently bound or linked together, even if that link has historically manifested itself as persecution of the Jews.

Despite the evident historical hostility of other religions towards Jews, it is undeniable that during its long history Judaism has had a profound effect on Western civilisation, covering the whole range of human experience and leaving an "indelible stamp" (Finkelstein, 1949). More recently, the term is frequently used (by Christians) to draw a line between imagined Christian values and liberal "political correctness" or a perceived threat of Muslim immigration. In the US in 2017, President Trump declared, "*We are stopping cold the attacks on Judeo-Christian values (…) They don't use the word "Christmas" because it's not politically correct (...) Well, guess what? We're saying "Merry Christmas" again*" (White House, 2017).

However, Trump's remark is revealing of the historical biases of Christianity because Jews do not, of course, celebrate Christmas! (Why would they?) As the historian Tom Holland put it, when referring to the West, what is really meant "…is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts assumptions (…) no less true for Jews or Muslims than it is for Catholics or Protestants" (Holland, 2019, p.xxv). Whether intentionally or not, it seems that it was the close relationship with Christianity that ensured the history and traditions of Judaism have remained known.

4.4.2 Islam

The Qur'an, (Koran) meaning recitation, is the sacred book of Islam. According to Muslim tradition, it was revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad in separate revelations over the major portion of his life at Mecca and at Medina.[58] While Islam shares many stories of prophets with Christianity and respects Jesus as a major figure, Judaism had a profound impact on the structural, legal, and theological foundations of Islam.

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[55] In St. Paul's epistle he condemns circumcision as "despoiling of the body of the flesh" (Colossians 2: 11) and also says "*let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink or in respect of a festival day or of the new moon or of the sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come*..." (Colossians 2: 16-17).

[56] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcion-of-Pontus

[57] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcion_of_Sinope

[58] Being the verbatim Word of God, the text of the Qur'an is valid for religious purposes only in its original Arabic, cannot be modified, and is not translatable, although by necessity non-Arabic interpretations exist.

For example, both religions share a rigid, uncompromising concept of a single, indivisible God. Both are law-based religions, with Islamic Sharia having a similar, detailed regulatory function on daily life to Jewish *Halakha*. Both have similar dietary and hygiene laws that prohibit pork, require specific slaughter methods (Halal/Kosher), etc (Solomon, Harries and Winter, 2005).

The Qur'an frequently refers to the "People of the Book", i.e. primarily meaning the Jews, but also Christians), and hence the reason that Islam is regarded as one of the three Abrahamic religions (Cohen, 2020). The Qur'an also incorporates many stories from the Hebrew Bible and key figures such as the patriarch Abraham and Moses.

4.5 Zionism and Israel

The history of *political* Zionism is usually associated with the publication of Theodor Herzl's pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* in 1896, and the first Zionist congress shortly thereafter (1897).[59, 60] The term Zionism itself was first used publicly by Nathan Birnbaum in Vienna in 1892 (Laqueur, 1972). But Herzl had precursors in Germany, Russia, and in other countries, whose writings reflected the longing for the ancient homeland, the anomaly of Jewish existence in central and eastern Europe, and the need to find a solution to the 'Jewish question'. One such forerunner was Leon Pinsker, who in 1882 anonymously published an impassioned pamphlet, *Auto-Emancipation*, calling for a refuge for Jews, in particular Russian Jews who were facing unrelenting hostility.[61] Pinsker organised a movement called the Lovers of Zion, which held the first public meeting of Zionists 13 years before the well-known First Zionist Congress.[62]

The emergence of Zionism in the 1880s and 1890s can be understood only against the general background of European and Jewish history since the French Revolution on one hand, and the spread of modern antisemitism on the other hand.[63] The use of the term "pogrom" became common in the English language after a large-scale wave of anti-Jewish riots swept through south-western Imperial Russia (present-day Ukraine and Poland) from 1881 to 1882 when more than 200 anti-Jewish events occurred in the Russian Empire.

The most notable of them were pogroms which occurred in Kiev, Warsaw and Odessa. They changed perceptions among Russian Jews and indirectly gave a significant boost to the early Zionist movement. The event that triggered the pogroms was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II (in 1881) for which some blamed "agents of foreign influence," implying that Jews committed it.[64] Historically, Imperial Russia had had very few Jews until it acquired territories with large Jewish populations from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire from 1772 to 1815.

[59] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Judenstaat
[60] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Zionist_Congress
[61] The pamphlet was originally published in German. An English translation was later published in 1906.
[62] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katowice_Conference
[63] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zionism
[64] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pogroms_in_the_Russian_Empire

According to Johnson (1988, p.374), before the Russian pogroms, the great majority of Jews saw their future as assimilation in one form or another, but after the Russian horrors some Jews began to look for possible alternatives. Of course, Zionism was not new – it was as old as the Babylonian exile. For more than a millennium and a half, every Jewish generation, in every Jewish community, had contained one or two who dreamed of Zion. For example, in 1852 Rabbi Judah Alkalai published his 'Harbinger of Good Tidings' promoting the idea that the Jewish people should organize to return to the Holy land, Israel (Elkali, 1852).

The five decades of Zionist activities after Herzl (and Pinsker) culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel when it formally became a member of the United Nations in 1949.[65] However, the fact cannot be ignored that the membership was preceded by two years of conflict following the UN proposed Palestine 'Plan of Partition' in 1947.[66, 67] According to Laqueur (1972), a good case could be made that this date marks the end of the history of the Zionism, but that is of course not what has happened...

[65] United Nations General Assembly Resolution 273 was adopted on May 11, 1949.
[66] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Partition_Plan_for_Palestine
[67] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1947%E2%80%931948_civil_war_in_Mandatory_Palestine

5 Discussion

The preceding review raises many questions about the religion of Judaism, which this section will attempt to address. First, how Judaism views its God is considered, and the relationship that Jews believe they have with that God. Second (5.2), a closer look is taken at the *Talmud* and the commandments (*mitzvot*) that are derived from it, and which dictate how Jews should conduct their daily lives. Third (5.3) a number of Jewish characteristics of Judaism are identified: what it means to be a Jew (which is far from straightforward), the 'community of tradition', the undoubted resilience of Jews, the Jewish view of life after death, and finally the myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Finally, the discussion concludes (5.4) with what the author considers the tragedies of Judaism.

5.1 God and the Bible

5.1.1 Nature of God

One of the key doctrinal beliefs in Judaism (and in Christianity) is that an all-powerful, omnipotent God created the universe and everything in it. As it says in Genesis, "In the beginning God created heaven, and earth". Over the next six days, this God created light, the earth and the seas, plants and animals, and of course us, man and woman. To the extent that God is described in the Bible, he appears mysteriously as "a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), or "a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush" (Exodus 3:2).[68] Indeed, apart from the symbolic burning bush, there are no physical depictions of God in the typical the children's book (e.g. Figure 5). But the exact nature of this God is unclear.

On the one hand, according to Professor Stavrakopoulou, a closer inspection of the *Tanakh* reveals that God was far from being bodiless and was in fact "startlingly corporeal (...) a human-shaped deity, who walked and talked and wept and laughed. A god who ate and slept and felt and breathed (...) a supersized, muscle-bound, good-looking god, with supra-human powers, earthly passions, and a penchant for the fantastic and the monstrous". On the other hand, that ancient God has long been theorised away and replaced by the lifeless, abstract deity that is worshipped by Jews (and Christians) today (Stavrakopoulou, 2021).[69]

Indeed, the famous physicist Albert Einstein, a passionate Jew, most definitely saw God in the abstract. For Einstein, Judaism is "*concerned almost exclusively with the moral attitude in life and to life (...) the Jewish God is simply a negation of superstition, an imaginary result of its elimination*" (Einstein, 1935). Similarly, in the writings of the well-known Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, there is no mention of the Biblical "monstrous" God, but rather a God who is "on the side of freedom and human dignity" (Sacks, 2000).

[68] The famous 'burning bush' incident when God instructs Moses to lead the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan.

[69] Prof Stavrakopoulou presents a brilliant, forensic analysis of the Biblical texts. As I read her book, I lost count of the number of times I had to pause and check the text in my own Bible – did it really say that? OMG, it did!

5.1.2 Relationship to God

The stories in the Bible (see 5.1.3 below) reveal the close relationship between God and the Israelites. They also reveal the strange nature of that relationship in the sense that the people repeatedly "do evil" *displeasing* their God, are duly punished, who ask for forgiveness and are saved, and then displease God all over again. For example, the Israelites are at one time oppressed by the Assyrians. "*There was great weeping and lamentation (...) they cried to God saying we have sinned (...) have thou mercy on us*" (Judith, 7:18-20). Luckily, a widow called Judith, with God's assistance, comes to the aid of the Israelites. She uses her beauty and charms, which God had cunningly increased "*so that she appeared to all men's eyes incomparably lovely*" (Judith, 10:4) to get close to the Assyrian general Holofernes. [70] Then, while Holofernes slept, she chopped off his head with two strikes of his own sword (Judith, 13:8-10).[71] Judith and her maid slip away from the camp with the decapitated head in a sack, which she then holds aloft to display to her people when back in the city (Judith, 13:19).

Recall (see Figure 5) that God commanded Abraham to kill his son Isaac, which God prevents only at the last moment. Whilst this is usually interpreted as God testing Abraham's faith, the other interpretation is of a God who is needlessly cruel and sadistic. Other incidents in the Bible point to the same conclusion: Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt for looking behind her at Sodom and Gomorrha (in the process of being destroyed by God); a man called Oza (or Uzzah) is struck down dead by God because Oza had touched the Ark (containing the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments) even though Oza had done so to prevent the Ark from falling off a cart (2 Samuel, 6:6-7). Lastly, God forbids Moses to enter the Promised Land because he had struck a rock with his staff (instead of speaking to it) to bring forth water. In sum, the Israelites' relationship to God looks more like one of blind obedience in fear of being killed or punished on a whim rather than one of mutual love and respect.

5.1.3 Bible stories

As noted earlier (2.4), the Bible is undeniably one of the most well-known, widely published books in the world. It served as one of the richest sources for narrative art in the Middle Ages inspiring the work of (Christian) painters in the Renaissance, which has continued to the present day.[72] It has even inspired the construction of a full-size replica of Noah's Ark built in Kentucky USA, as extraordinary as it is utterly preposterous.[73] However, according to historian Jaroslav Pelikan there is an "appalling ignorance" of the Bible. If people read what the Bible actually says, it "would lead them to find most of what it says even more strange than the world of the synagogue and church" (Pelikan, 2005, p.228-9).

The story of Noah's Ark is a well-known Bible story, but it also serves as a salutary example about how stories in the Bible are retold and sentimentalised. Supposedly Noah is a "timeless story of courage, sacrifice and hope", but no-one, Rabbi or ordinary Jew, really questions why God commits an act of genocide against his own creation – "*I will rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will destroy every substance that I have made, from the face of the earth*" (Genesis 7:4).

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[70] Is this the first instance in recorded history of a facelift or beauty treatment being given by a deity?

[71] The assassination of Holofernes is graphically illustrated in a painting by Caravaggio: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Beheading_Holofernes_(Caravaggio)

[72] Virtually all known prominent Renaissance painters were Christian, as the practice of painting was generally restricted to members of the Christian guilds. Jewish artists were extremely rare.

[73] See Ark Encounter.

In several stories in Judges, the Israelites repeatedly 'do evil', which of course angers God each time. For example, "*the children of Israel did evil again*" (Judges, 3:12) and God responds by strengthening Eglon, King of Moab, who then overthrows Israel. The Israelites cry for help (again) and God obligingly provides another saviour, this time known as Ehud (or Aod, Ayoth). Then Ehud, "*who used the left hand as well as the right*" (Judges, 3:21) sneakily arranges to see Eglon alone and stabs him to death (see Figure 14). Arguably, it was God who had in effect stabbed Eglon in the back!

Figure 15. King Eglon is stabbed to death by Ehud[74]

Predictably, after Ehud dies, "*the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord*". Predictably, God delivers them up into the hands of another enemy, this time Jaban, King of Chanaan. As before, the Israelites whine for help and this time God sends a prophetess called Debbora who urges Barac to do battle with Jaban. Barac defeats Jaban's army and pursues the fleeing commander, Sisera. But before Barac catches him, Sisera is killed by a woman called Jael (see Figure 16) who hammers a nail "*through his brain fast into the ground*" (Judges, 4:21).

Figure 16. Sisera is hammered to death by Jael (by Lambert Lombard, 1530-35)

In response to the argument that the Biblical stories are largely allegorical, not be taken too literally, the fact remains that the stories are cherished and retold to children as if they were true (see Figure 5). The stories are, of course, also the source texts for the commandments (*mitzvot*), which are taken very seriously.

[74] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eglon_(king)

5.1.4 Chosen people

A recurring theme in Jewish liturgy is that the Jews are a "chosen people", i.e. that they have been especially chosen by God not only to be bound together by a covenant, but to fulfil the mission of proclaiming God's truth among all the nations of the world. The idea is expressed in many passages of scripture, e.g. "*For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people of his own possession, out of all the nations that are on the face of the earth*" (Deut. 14:2). The term chosen people is a free translation of the biblical terms *ʿam segullah* ("treasure people") and *ʿam nahallah* ("heritage people"). As the historian Tom Holland put it, "...only the Jews had dared entertain such a novel, such a blasphemous conceit" (Holland 2019, p.54).

Supposedly, modern Judaism has toned down the historic exaltation of the Jewish people and the concept of a chosen people, and instead stresses the prophetic idea of Judaism's world mission. The concept that the Jewish people are a "consecrated brotherhood" destined to be purified by suffering toward the carrying out of some yet-unknown mission remains fundamental to Judaism in the 20th century. It has continued to reinforce Jewish morale, self-discipline, and religious devotion in the face of the Holocaust and other destructive impacts on world Jewry in the modern era.[75]

Even if modern Judaism has changed its outlook, the belief that the Jewish people were in some way special, was always a peculiar belief in the first place given its incompatibility with its own Biblical stories. Accepting that the ancient Israelites were indeed punished by God because they repeatedly "did evil", the persecutions that the Jews have endured over past millennia must also have been punishments from God. Moreover, given that God *did* on many occasions save the Jews from oppression (in response to their pleading for help) the fact that God *did not* save millions of Jews from the Holocaust, must mean:

a) God abandoned his chosen people (for reasons unknown) although it is inconceivable that the Jews had committed an evil so great that they deserved extermination, or

b) God has no special interest in the Jews contrary to what they have always believed, or

c) God never existed in the first place.

5.2 Rules and prohibitions

The Ten Commandments, famously given by God to the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai, are well known across the Western world and are central to Judaism, as they are to Christianity (in the Old Testament). Whereas Christianity stuck with the original 'Ten' plus one extra ("*a new commandment I give unto you: that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another*", John 13: 34), Jewish scholars formulated the *mitzvah*, the 613 commandments that are part of the *Talmud* (see 3.1). As noted earlier, the *Talmud* is the core source of Jewish learning, an immense body of law compiled by scholars (Rabbis), and is binding for Judaism in a way that no single commentary corpus is for Christianity.[76]

[75] https://www.britannica.com/topic/chosen-people

[76] The closest parallels in Christianity to the *Talmud* are probably the Patristic writings of the early Church fathers (Augustine, Jerome, Origen) and scholastic traditions of commentary and canon law, but there is no one work that holds the same central role across all of Christianity.

Yet many if not most of the 613 commandments are not, or cannot be, observed today in the sense that they are either outdated (in some cases antediluvian), offensively improper or irrelevant to modern society. Examples of such commandments are those relating to: Temple sacrifices, offerings and services; the death sentences of criminals by stoning, burning and strangulation; the treatment of slaves; the treatment of lepers and their leprous clothing; the prohibitions against sorcery, acts of magic and death to wizards; and so on.

According to Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, writing in 1931, only 273 commandments (77 positive, 194 negative) could be observed by Jews of the 20th century and particularly in the diaspora (Kagan, 1990). According to other writers, in fact there are only between 60 to 70 commandments that can be performed today (in the 21st century) including some that are unique to those people who inhabit the land of Israel (Starr-Glass, 2009). The commandments that Jews can and *do* observe today, in addition to the basic 'Ten Commandments' are those concerning the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony (3.2.2) including binding *T'fillin* on the head and arm (see Figure 9), kosher food restrictions (3.2.3), male circumcision (3.2.4), observing festivals (3.4), and not working on the Sabbath. Arguably, the commandment for soldiers, equipped with their personal spade, to dig a hole in the ground (outside their camp) over which they sit and "go for the necessities of nature" (Deuteronomy 23: 12-14)[77] is still performed today, but hey, who really knows? There are also common practices such as men wearing the *kippah* that are not commandments, but a custom that has evolved over time into a binding sign of Jewish identity.

The *mitzvot* clearly show how Judaism expects its followers to conduct their daily lives with various and detailed rules of behaviour, prohibitions, rituals and customs. The thrust of these "might be construed as narrow and legalistic" (Starr-Glass, 2009), but I would go further and describe them at best as arbitrary and unnecessary, and at worst absurdly archaic. An example of the latter is circumcision, which even given its long historical roots remains a strange, if not bizarre way to solemnize a sacred bond with the one's God, and even if the surgical operation itself is very brief and the (helpless) infant has no recollection of it.[78]

Regarding kosher food (3.2.3), the rules seem an entirely arbitrary dietary restriction. About the commandment for men to grow (and never cut) their beards or sidelocks (see Figure 11), again it is not something that is really necessary in any spiritual sense, but instead a way for certain Jews – the ultra-Orthodox Haredi – to very showily demonstrate their piety.[79]

The *mitzvah* are also sometimes glaringly inconsistent with each other. For example, there are numerous commandments to kill one's enemies, famously the Canaanites, which is contrary not only to the principal commandment not to murder, but also contrary to the commandments not to take revenge or bear a grudge. Perhaps even more incongruously, there is a commandment not to change (add to or take away from) the Torah (Deuteronomy 13: 1), which is self-evidently contrary to what Rabbis have allowed to happen in practice.

[77] https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.23.13?lang=bi&aliyot=0
[78] Body piercing and tattoos are not uncommon in other religions, but are carried out on adults.
[79] https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.19.28?lang=bi&aliyot=0

5.3 Distinctive characteristics

5.3.1 Jewish identity

As noted in the Introduction (1.2), the definition of being a Jew has attracted many different answers. For some writers, being a Jew means to have lineage with the people or house of Israel and therefore to be in possession of a soul or *neshama* (Starr-Glass, 2008). For Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, being Jewish was something collective and historical (as opposed to private and personal) and "*being part of an extended family (...) connected by bonds of kinship and responsibility (...) enmeshed in a network of relationships that connected me to other people, other places, other times*" (Sacks, 2000). For David Baddiel, well-known author, comedian and television presenter, being Jewish is an ethnic and cultural identity and nothing at all to do with God, especially as Baddiel also considers himself an atheist (Baddiel, 2023)![80]

5.3.2 Community of tradition

A recurring theme in Jewish liturgy is that the Jews are a "chosen people". Thus, recalling the original covenant between God and Abraham (1.1), "*Judaism represents a covenant between God and all His created world, in which the people of Israel are the instrument through which contact and communication is to be established*" (Starr-Glass, 2009, p.46).

Even if Judaism has toned down the more extreme claims that the nation of Israel has "special intimacy with God", and does not see itself as inherently superior or privileged, it remains very distinctive. According to the late, Rabbi and theologian Jonathan Sacks, the distinctive feature of the Israelites was its emphasis on family and education, and "*that a people achieves immortality not by building temples or mausoleums, but by engraving their values on the hearts of their children, and they on theirs, and so on until the end of time*" (Sacks, 2000).[81]

Albert Einstein, the most famous and influential theoretical physicist of the 20th century, who was also a passionate Jew, saw Judaism as a "community of tradition" with two distinctive characteristics or traits.[82] The first of these characteristics is the bond of the social ideals of justice, mutual aid and tolerance among all men. The second characteristic is the high regard that Jews hold for "*every form of intellectual aspiration and spiritual effort. (...) These standards and ideals find expression in small things as in large. They are transmitted from parents to children; they colour conversation and judgment among friends; they fill the religious scriptures; and they give to community life of the group its characteristic stamp. It is in these distinctive ideals that I see the essence of Jewish nature*" (Einstein, 1950; p.249-50).

Yet the fact cannot be ignored that today the population of Jews – the community – remains relatively small, numbering only 15 million people (or 0.2% of the world population). Even allowing for the catastrophic effects of the Nazi genocide against the Jews (during WWII), the Jewish population remains disproportionately small compared to Christianity's 2.4 billion followers (31%) or even Buddhism's 500 million followers (6.5%).[83]

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[80] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/09/the-god-desire-by-david-baddiel-review-not-quite-losing-my-religion

[81] https://rabbisacks.org/

[82] According to Humanists UK, Einstein was a "passionate humanist" (https://heritage.humanists.uk/albert-einstein/) but this is a gross misunderstanding of Einstein's beliefs and wishful thinking on the part of Humanists UK. True, Einstein was an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association, like many other distinguished scientists at the time, but he never spoke or wrote about humanism.

[83] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust

Interestingly, according to the famous physicist Albert Einstein, Judaism is not a creed and he even expressed doubt that it could be called a religion in the accepted sense of the word: “Judaism is thus no transcendental religion; it is concerned with life as we live it and can up to a point grasp it, and nothing else” (Einstein, 1935).

5.3.3 Resilience

Any diaspora appears in the form of travel, migration and immigration, but this of course does not always occur voluntarily. Diasporas are often dictated by political persecution, economic necessity and, at its most extreme, enforced migration in the form of slavery. The Jewish diaspora was not the first in history. There have been other diasporas throughout history involving different peoples across the world, but arguably the Jewish one does possess some unique characteristics (Winant, 2007). As historian Paul Johnson remarked, “no race has maintained over so long a period so emotional an attachment to a particular corner of the earth’s surface. But none has shown so strong and persistent an instinct to migrate, such courage and skill in pulling up and replanting its roots” (Johnson, 1988, p.4).

Central to the notion of any diaspora is the notion of an original “homeland”, however distant in time and geography, and however vestigial, which binds the diasporic community together and gives it part of its identity. The Messianic promise of return played a central role in preserving and sustaining Judaism over these centuries. It provided the most persuasive argument for not being absorbed into the gentile societies in which Jews lived (Milfull, 2007).

Although the Holocaust features prominently in the telling of Jewish history, it is worth noting that persecution is not the inevitable result of exile and dispersion. As Winant (2007) points out, dispersed people are of course vulnerable to persecution, but there is also a richness to diasporic life and diasporic communities that should not be overlooked.

Whatever the exact reasons for the persecution of the Jews (4.3), their survival testifies to their extraordinary resilience. The ancient Egyptians believed that their kingdom was destined to survive forever and that the people of Israel had been “laid to waste”.[84] But, it was the lowly Israelites who prevailed and all that remains of that Egyptian civilisation is their pyramids and hieroglyphics (wondrous though there are). In that counterintuitive reversal of fortunes, whether through accident or design, the ancient Israelites discovered the real "secret of eternity" (Sacks, 2000). That is, instead of building temples or mausoleums, a people could achieve immortality by building houses of prayer and study, by education, and by families imprinting their values on the hearts of their children, and they on theirs, until the end of time (Sacks, *ibid*).

[84] See inscription about Israel on famous Merneptah Stele: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele

5.3.4 Life after death

In contrast to other monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism is far less focused on matters of life after death, heaven and hell. What is considered more important to Jews is how they live their lives on Earth, especially in the context of the community of tradition as discussed above (5.3.2). For Judaism, the afterlife is known as *Olam Ha-ba* ('World to Come') where the souls of the righteous are said to go after they take leave of this world. However, the term *Olam ha-ba* is not from the Hebrew Bible, where it does not appear, but instead is a term that is found in the Talmud, i.e. written by the Rabbinical scholars and sages who interpreted the Biblical texts. The Talmud teaches that there are two worlds or states: *Olam Ha-ba* (World to Come) in contrast to *Olam Hazeh* ('this World').

According to the Talmud, the *Olam ha-ba* will be radically different from life in this world, and, perhaps surprisingly, will lack many of the pleasures associated with the living: "*In the World-to-Come there is no eating, no drinking, no procreation, no business negotiations, no jealousy, no hatred, and no competition. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads, enjoying the splendour of the Divine Presence*" (Berakhot 17a).[85] This more naturalistic description of the World-to-Come was intended to counter rabbinic and folk traditions of heavenly rewards that consist of gold and other precious items (Schwartz, 2004).

The World-to-Come is closely related to the concept of heaven, but is more of a spiritual realm rather than fixed place. Having said that, Judaism speaks of the Garden of Eden, *Gan Eden*. The one on Earth was the one that was inhabited by Adam and Eve; the other is the heavenly garden, which is a synonym of Paradise. Judaism also speaks of *Gehanna*, a place of purification or temporary punishment for the soul, but not the eternal hell of Christianity, which allows for cleansing before "ascending".

5.3.5 Relationship to other Abrahamic religions

As noted earlier (4.4.1), the term 'Judeo-Christian tradition' is very familiar to people living in the Western world. It clearly implies it has ancient historical roots, but in fact it appears to be largely a 20th century creation, more specifically from 1930s America and then becoming more widespread during World War II. In those years, American democracy, with it respect for freedom and dignity of the individual, was often contrasted with Nazi despotism. Later, during the early years of the Cold War, the Judeo-Christian tradition became enshrined in the fight against "godless of the USSR" (Silk, 1984).

If the two religions share a tradition, how can it be, as Cohen (1969) asked, that Judaism has remained not only independent of, but unassimilated by the doctrinal vision and historical pressure of Christianity? Whilst it is true that the two religions share some of the same holy scriptures (see 2.1), for Judaism there has only ever been the Hebrew *Tanakh* and the Christian New Testament has had no role to play in Jewish values and tradition. From their very beginnings the Judaic and Christian worlds scarcely intersected and there is not now and there has never been a meaningful dialogue between them (Neusner, 1991). In sum, the conception of a Judeo-Christian tradition is in fact a myth.

[85] https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.17a.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

Regarding Islam (4.4.2), Judaism clearly had a profound impact on the foundations of Islam. However, in contrast to Judaism's relationship to Christianity, there has never been any historical Judeo-Islam tradition, real or mythical. In fact, as noted in the Introduction (1.3), the modern history of Israel has not brought about an enduring peace in the Middle East. Moreover, because Islam (Sunni Muslim) is the dominant religion in the region (Israel being bordered by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian territories) the conflicts have sadly heightened tensions between the Jewish and Muslim worlds, including the perpetuation of antisemitism and Islamophobia. It is well known that many countries today still do not even recognise the State of Israel and do not accept Israeli passports.[86]

5.4 The tragedies of Judaism

5.4.1 Curse of the Promised Land

At the heart of the Jewish historical narrative has been the belief in the "Promised Land". For most of its history this belief has been *unfulfilled* until the State of Israel was created, i.e. formally established by the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948, and then being admitted to the United Nations as a full member state in 1949.[87]

However, as noted above (4.4.2) the modern history of Israel has not brought about an enduring peace in the Middle East. To make matters worse, in September 2025 the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory said in a report that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.[88] The Commission urges Israel and all States to fulfil their legal obligations under international law to end the genocide and punish those responsible for it.[89]

What is less well known, or conveniently forgotten, is that not every Jew was in favour of creating a Jewish state in the first place. For example, in the words of Einstein,

> *"I should much rather see reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish state. Apart from practical consideration, my awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish state with borders, an army, and a measure of temporal power no matter how modest. I am afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain – especially from the development of a narrow nationalism within our own ranks, against which we have already had to fight strongly, even without a Jewish state. We are no longer the Jews of the Maccabee period. A return to a nation in the political sense of the word would be equivalent to turning away from the spiritualization of our community which we owe to the genius of our prophets" (Einstein, 1938).*

Perhaps, as remarked by the (late) historian David Biale, rather than bringing an end to centuries of Jewish wanderings, the nation of Israel may be only the latest phase in an endless cycle of leaving and returning (Biale, 2002).

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[86] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Israel#States_that_do_not_recognize_Israel

[87] https://israeled.org/israel-declaration-independence/

[88] https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds

[89] The Commission has been investigating the events on and since 7th October 2023 for the last two years, and concluded that Israeli authorities and security forces committed four of the five genocidal acts defined by the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The genocidal acts were committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as a group.

5.4.2 Antisemitism has not gone away

Today, as noted about the continuing conflicts in the Middle East, antisemitism has far from disappeared. In the West, it seems that antisemitism has been given a new lease of life, based on far-right demonstrators in Charlottesville brandishing "Jews will not replace us" placards[90] to attacks on synagogues in Sweden[91], arson attacks on kosher restaurants in France[92] and a spike in hate crimes against Jews in the UK (Phillips, 2018).[93] In 2025, the situation is no better. For example, according to the Community Security Trust (CST), the charity that protects British Jews from terrorism and antisemitism, it recorded 1,521 antisemitic incidents across the UK in the first half of 2025 (CST, 2025). In fact, antisemitism remains so prevalent that Jewish members of the Green Party felt it necessary to publish guidance (Jewish Greens, 2025). The guidance draws on the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA, 2020).[94]

One glaring reason for the continuation of antisemitism is the aggression of Israel towards its Palestinian neighbours, which at best is considered cruel and inhumane and at worst genocide. There is no disputing that Jewish people have endured persecution during *their* long history, but ever since its homeland was created, the State of Israel has had little if any sympathy for the Palestinian people, who would of course like a land of their own (or to be more precise, the return of their land that was stolen). Sadly, as the (late) author and essayist Maya Angelou put it 30 years ago, "...look at Israel, they know what it is to suffer and yet they don't feel that for the Palestinians" (Forna, 1986). A lot more could be said on the subject, but it is way beyond the scope of this essay.

5.4.3 Peoples of the Book – war and peace

As stated in the Introduction, Judaism is the world's oldest of the three Abrahamic religions, and its patriarch Abraham the foundational figure to both Christianity and Islam. Although the relationships between them are usually seen against a background of earlier Crusades, *jihad* and pogroms, in the past the three peoples of the Book have at times, albeit briefly, peacefully coexisted, difficult though it is to imagine today. As historian Jaroslav Pelikan put it, it should not be forgotten that occasionally "*Jews, Christians and Muslims, by the power of the Book and in the heritage of Abraham, the father whom they shared, managed to transcend their separations without losing their identities*" (Pelikan, 2005).[95]

The historian William Dalrymple has written and spoken extensively about the history of the Middle East region, particularly Palestine (Dalrymple, 1998; 2025a). He asserts that the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities who made up approximately 95% of the population in pre-mandate Palestine, coexisted in a relatively peaceful, cosmopolitan and pluralistic society even sharing sacred spaces and without the communal violence that characterized later periods. That was all changed by the British 1917 Balfour Declaration, which promised a Jewish homeland, but failed to protect the rights of existing communities. Dalrymple views the Balfour Declaration as the beginning of the tragedy for the Palestinians (Dalrymple, 2025b).

[90] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/16/charlottesville-neo-nazis-vice-news-hbo
[91] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/14/opinion/sweden-antisemitism-jews.html
[92] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-42622329
[93] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/01/antisemitic-incidents-in-uk-at-all-time-high
[94] https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/
[95] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaroslav_Pelikan

6 Conclusions

1. Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion. The Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) is one of the most well-known, widely published books in the world, even if it is primarily and better known as the 'Old Testament' of the Christian Bible. The numerous stories within it still capture the imagination, which speaks of their powerful messaging.

2. Despite the persecution of Jews throughout their long history, it is undeniable that the religion of Judaism has had a profound effect on the development of Western civilisation. However, the "indelible stamp" that Judaism made has largely been effected through *Christianity*. As the historian Tom Holland put it, when referring to the West, what is really meant "…is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts assumptions (…) no less true for Jews or Muslims than it is for Catholics or Protestants".

3. Despite the two religions sharing certain holy scriptures, Judaism is completely different to Christianity. From their very beginnings, there has never been a meaningful dialogue between the Judaic and Christian worlds. The oft-heard reference to a Judeo-Christian tradition is in fact a myth.

4. The question of Jewish identity and what it means to be a Jew is a persistent one and has attracted many different answers. For some (eg Rabbi Sacks) being Jewish is something collective and historical. For others (eg author, comedian David Baddiel) being Jewish is an ethnic and cultural identity and nothing at all to do with God.

5. Compared to other major world religions, the number of adherents to Judaism remains very small, only 15 million. Although Judaism is a non-proselytising religion and could never be expected to have as many adherents as Christianity or Islam, it has surprisingly few even compared to Buddhism, which has 500 million followers. This fact would seem to contradict God's promise (covenant) to make Abraham and his descendants a great nation, although it could be argued that Israel is amongst the global top military powers.

6. The *Talmud* is the core source of Jewish learning, an immense body of law compiled by Jewish scholars (rabbis) between the 3rd and 8th centuries. It essentially defines Judaism dealing not only with legal arguments, prevalent custom, and social observation, but with almost every conceivable subject.

7. The *Talmud* provides the interpretation of the 613 biblical commandments (*mitzvot*) that instruct Jews how to conduct their daily lives. However, most of these commandments are not observed today because they are either irrelevant to modern society or offensively outdated (e.g. temple sacrifices, death sentence by stoning, treatment of slaves, treatment of lepers). Even those commandments that are observed (e.g. circumcision, kosher food) seem entirely arbitrary. The commandment for men to grow (and never cut) their beards and sidelocks, is not necessary in any spiritual sense, but instead a way for certain (ultra-Orthodox) Jews to very showily demonstrate their piety.

8. A recurring theme in Jewish liturgy is that the Jews are a "chosen people", recalling the original covenant between God and Abraham. Even if Judaism has toned down the more extreme claims that its nation has special intimacy with God to fulfil its world mission, it remains a very distinctive conceit.

9. At the heart of the Jewish faith is the 'community of tradition', which emphasises family, education, bonds of kinship, tolerance between all peoples, and so on. However, its moral teachings stand in stark contrast to the behaviour of its Biblical God who committed acts of genocide, murder, cruelty or petty-minded malevolence against his creation. That monstrous God has, of course, been largely forgotten and theorised away to be replaced by the lifeless, abstract deity that is worshipped by Jews (and Christians) today.
10. At the heart of the Jewish historical narrative has been the belief in the "Promised Land". For most of its history this belief has been *unfulfilled* until the State of Israel was created in 1948-49. However, as most of the world is sadly aware, the modern history of Israel has not brought about an enduring peace in the Middle East. Moreover, antisemitism has far from disappeared.
11. As a corollary to the last point, what is less well known, or conveniently forgotten, is that not every Jew was in favour of creating a Jewish state in the first place, including the famous physicist Albert Einstein who wrote:

    > *"I should much rather see reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish state. Apart from practical consideration, my awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish state with borders, an army, and a measure of temporal power no matter how modest. I am afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain – especially from the development of a narrow nationalism within our own ranks, against which we have already had to fight strongly, even without a Jewish state. We are no longer the Jews of the Maccabee period. A return to a nation in the political sense of the word would be equivalent to turning away from the spiritualization of our community which we owe to the genius of our prophets" (Einstein, 1938)*

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