

community is entitled to follow its own interpretations of the law, leaving judgment to God, many believe that their own community's interpretations are superior to the others, leading to a number of conflicts among these "siblings" throughout history.

Employing a "history of religions" ("HR") methodology, our survey of the three major monotheistic traditions includes the following.

- **The history of the tradition.** How did it begin? How did it change over time? What major groups evolved within each tradition, and how do they stand today? We base this history on both religious (or "sacred") sources and scholarly sources from outside the traditions (secular sources), and will note when there are significant discrepancies between the two kinds of source.
- **The teachings of the tradition.** We shall include both metaphysical teachings (teachings about gods, souls, survival of death, etc.) and moral teachings (teachings about what is right and wrong).
- **The rituals of the tradition.** As we saw in Chapter 2, rituals are systematically repeated actions that are believed to please a deity (god) or accomplish a goal such as healing. This is their religious purpose. Scholarly secular analysis demonstrates that rituals also promote group solidarity and reinforce the beliefs and the values of the group. We shall highlight both aspects of ritual.

We shall conclude the chapter with comments about how Religious Studies has impacted the monotheistic traditions.

Unit I Judaism

We call Judaism, Christianity, and Islam a family because they all trace their origins to the experiences of a man named Abraham, believed to have lived almost four thousand years ago, and they share many stories, beliefs, and moral rules. (We shall look at the youngest member of this family, Baha'i, in Chapter 9.)

Over the centuries, some members of each of these traditions have been hostile to members of the other two. In a series of invasions of the Middle East beginning in the late 11th century known as the Crusades, European Christians killed thousands of Muslims and Jews. In 1492, the king and queen of Spain declared that all non-Christians living in Spain had to convert or leave the country. There have also been similar conflicts within each of the monotheistic traditions. In 1208, for example, Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against the Cathars, a group of Christians in Southern France, whom he declared heretical. Many people today are aware of the current conflicts between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims in Iraq. Fewer are aware that in Israel today there are often legal battles between Orthodox Jews and Jews who are not Orthodox.

Despite all the conflicts within and between various Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups, however, they have a great deal in common. All of them started in the Middle East and are based on what are believed to be God's words (revelation) as recorded in scripture (sacred or holy writings). The Christian New Testament accepts the Hebrew Bible and builds on it, and Islamic scripture – the Qur'an (archaic: Koran) – accepts and builds on



both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as "People of Scripture" or "People of the Book."

For all three traditions, there is only one God, who created the world, loves his creatures, and has given people certain orders or "commandments" (things they must do) as well as prohibitions (things they must not do). All consider God to be far above and beyond human characteristics, but each of the traditions generally uses the masculine singular pronoun "he" when referring to God. He is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), just, and merciful. And God will judge people at the end of time based on their obedience to his commandments and prohibitions.

These three traditions also share a linear view of time and history. Time begins with the creation of the world and goes in just one direction, like an arrow in flight, so that each moment in history happens just once. (This contrasts with the cyclic view of time in South Asia, as we shall see in Chapter 7.)

For the People of the Book, God revealed himself at specific times in history, and he has spoken through many prophets. The messages of the prophets in all three traditions are the major sources for people's understanding of who they are, why they were created, what they are supposed to do and what they must not do, and what will happen to them when they die.

The Torah, the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament

The foundation for the worldview in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is in the **Torah**, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. "Bible" comes from the Greek word for "book," *biblos*, but the Bible is not one book. It is a collection of books written at different times and places for different reasons. It is more like a small library than a single book. As we saw in Chapter 3, biblical scholars have researched the language, style, and sources for the text in excruciating detail. They have determined that most of it was circulated in oral form for centuries before being written down. The story of Saul, the first king of the Israelites, for example, happens in the 11th century BCE, but it was probably first written down in the 6th century BCE. Other parts of the Hebrew Bible were written down much later.

There were no printing presses at that time, of course, so even when the stories were written down, they were copied by hand any number of times and circulated among communities. Scholars believe that both the oral transmission of stories, and the hand copying of manuscripts, once the stories were recorded, could well have led over time to some variations in the accounts. Some scholars suggest that this is why scriptures as we now know them sometimes contain more than one version of the same event. They believe that when the people who recorded the scriptures (scribes) encountered variations in the story of an event in oral or hand-written versions, they simply included all the variations, rather than trying to determine which were the "true" versions. That is, many scholars believe that scribes considered the overall themes of the stories more important than the details. For example, there are two creation stories in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew

Bible. In Chapter 1 of this book, God makes things by speaking. He creates light, for instance, by saying, “Let there be light.” He makes Adam and Eve by saying, “Let us make humankind in our image.” In Chapter 2, God creates things in a different order and he makes people by shaping them out of dirt, rather than by speaking. Nevertheless, the story of creation is considered to be a single story of the divine origin of all that exists.

Scholars have also determined that the various books of the Bible served different purposes. While Genesis contains mostly stories that explain the origin of the world, the human race, and the people of Israel, the Psalms are not stories but religious songs addressed to God. The book of Joshua is mostly history. Leviticus presents rules for the people of Israel to live by, such as the prohibition on eating pork and shellfish. Ecclesiastes is a philosophical essay on how hard it is to make sense of life. The book called Song of Songs is about romantic love, and does not even mention God.

Over time, different religious groups collected and copied different scrolls (hand-written copies of the texts). In the early centuries of the common era, some writings were put onto codexes, flat sheets bound together like books. The religious authorities – the rabbis – also looked through the many scrolls and codexes and decided which ones would be included in the **canon**, the group of writings considered authentic, what we now call the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible presents a history of the human race from creation to classical times. It starts with God creating everything in six days and resting on the seventh. He creates the first humans, Adam and his mate Eve, puts them in a beautiful garden, and gives them dominion over all other creatures. However, he tells them not to eat from the tree at the center of the garden, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They disobey him and so are expelled from the garden. From then on, their lives, and human life generally, will be a struggle: childbirth will be painful, they will have to work hard, and they will die.

This story of Adam and Eve is taken literally by some, while others read it as an explanation of how it is that human beings – alone among all creatures – have the ability to make terrible mistakes as they attempt to progress through their lives. Another way to put that is to say that the story describes the fact that human beings – again, unlike other creatures – have the right and responsibility to make choices; they have free will. The first human beings chose to violate their creator’s command and were therefore punished. Scholars see in the story a perfect example of one of the major goals of religious stories: providing an explanation for suffering and death (see Chapter 2).

Later generations of human beings continue to violate God’s commands and make bad choices. God becomes so disgusted that he decides to wipe out the human race with a flood. However, then he has mercy on the family of Noah, and saves them, along with animals to repopulate the earth after the flood.

The next major event, and the one central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is that God chooses one man, Abram, to be the father of a new nation that will have a special relationship with him. He tells Abram to leave his home in Ur in today’s Iraq and “go to a country that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, I will bless you.” (Genesis 12:1–2) Though this one group are God’s “Chosen People,” they will also serve as role models for the rest of the human race. “By you all the families of the earth will bless themselves.” (Genesis 12:3) Abram moves to Canaan, where at first he is an outsider. However, then God makes

a covenant (agreement) with him. If he and his descendants will worship God and follow his laws, he says, “I will give you and your descendants after you the land in which you now are aliens, all the land of Canaan.” (Genesis 17:8) God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and, as a sign of the covenant, commands that all the males in his household be circumcised. And though Abraham and his wife Sara are very old, God promises them a son.

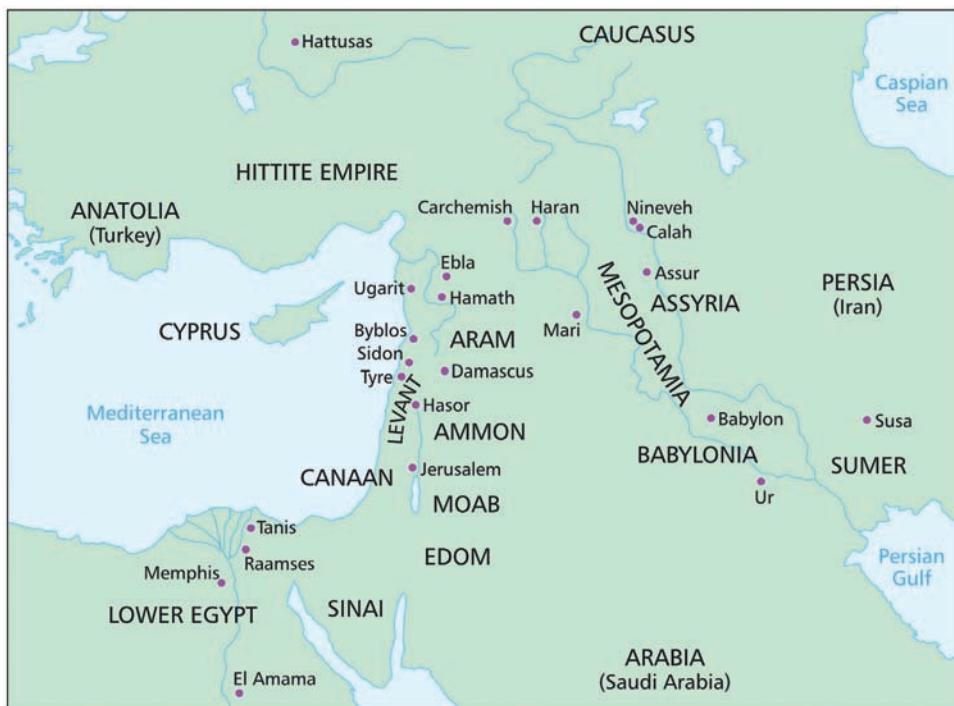
Abraham and Sara are at first skeptical about the possibility of having a child. Sara suggests that Abraham and their maid Hagar might be able to reproduce, and this they do. Hagar’s son is named Ishmael. However, then Sara also gives birth to a son. She banishes Hagar and Ishmael, and Sara and Abraham then concentrate their attention on their son Isaac.

God then tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son. Abraham agrees, but at the last minute an angel appears and substitutes a ram as the sacrificial animal. As we shall see, there is disagreement between Jews and Muslims about which son was involved in the near-sacrifice. In the Jewish telling, it is Isaac, with whom God later renews the covenant, promising that “I will make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky; I will give them all these lands.” (Genesis 26:4) Isaac’s son Jacob is given the name “Israel,” which means “the one who wrestled with God,” and this becomes the name of the people he leads. Jacob has twelve sons, and they become the heads of the twelve tribes of the people of Israel.

Famines cause the descendants of Jacob to leave Canaan for Egypt, where they are slaves for four centuries. As their oppression worsens, a great leader arises, Moses. God tells him to lead his people out of Egypt and back to Canaan. To force Pharaoh (the Egyptian ruler) to release them, God inflicts terrible plagues on the Egyptians, the last of which is the slaughter of their firstborn children. The Hebrews mark their doorposts with lamb’s blood, so that this plague skips their houses or “passes over” them. It is this event that the feast of Passover commemorates. The escape of the Hebrews from Egypt is called the Exodus (meaning “emigration”), and this is also the name of the biblical book describing it.

A note about dates: The Hebrew Bible does not specify dates for most events, although, as we saw in Chapter 5, the Judaic calendar places the events described in the Book of Genesis – in particular, the creation of the world and the first humans – some 5770 years ago. As we have seen, scholars consider the earth and the human species much older than that. The difference between the two is a good example of the contrast between “sacred history” and literal or “secular history,” a distinction that scholars of religion are careful to highlight. For example, we have no evidence apart from sacred history of the lives of the specific people mentioned in the Hebrew Bible up to this point in our story: the Exodus. We do know there were countless nomadic tribes in the Middle East, and that periodic wars and droughts caused some tribes to wander far from their traditional pasturelands, so the emigrations from Iraq and Canaan would not have been unusual. Indeed, scholars trace the term “Hebrew” to its root meaning, “immigrant from the other side of the river.” Further, comparing historical evidence from Egypt with the accounts given in the Hebrew Bible, scholars place the emigration from Egypt back to Canaan around 1300 BCE.

Back to sacred history: The journey across the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land of Canaan takes forty years, according to scripture. During this time, God appears to Moses at Mount Sinai and gives him a set of laws, including the Ten Commandments. These laws will be supplemented in subsequent books of scripture, particularly Leviticus and Deuteronomy. All the laws together are known as Mosaic Law, and it will become the constitution of the



MAP 6.1 Map of the Ancient Near East.

people of Israel. Next to the establishment of the covenant with Abraham, God's communication of the Law to Moses is the central event in the history of Judaism.

The Israelites finally enter Canaan, but not until Moses has died. His protégé Joshua leads them into the land of Canaan. However, there are many groups already living there. God directs his people to undertake a series of battles against the Canaanites. In the first two, the Israelites (the "people of Israel," another name for the Hebrews) are commanded to exterminate the inhabitants of the cities of Jericho and Ai. When they win battles, they say that God is blessing them for obeying him, and when they lose battles, they say that God is punishing them for disobeying him. However, they eventually prevail over the local inhabitants, and cease their nomadic lifestyle.

After Joshua, the people of Israel are no longer led by tribal leaders (people descended from Abraham and Isaac), but instead by people well versed in the law. They are called judges. However, finding themselves content with settled life, the people want to become a kingdom, like other settled groups. God agrees, and Saul becomes the first king. However, when Saul displeases God, David replaces him as king. By this time – which scholars place around 1000 BCE based on archaeological evidence – the twelve tribes have coalesced into two major groupings. The northern ten tribes are identified as the Tribes of Israel, and the southern two tribes are called the Tribes of Judah. David creates a united kingdom of the tribes of Israel and Judah. His son Solomon succeeds him as king and builds a temple in Jerusalem that becomes the center of worship. The united kingdom does not last long,



Is This Religion?

Scholars search early Hebrew scriptures in vain for terms that correspond to the modern term “religion.” The term translated as religion is *din*, but this term actually means “judgment” (see Chapter 1). The law delivered by God to the people of Israel through Moses is not limited to any particular part of life. It pertains to all aspects of life – devotion to God, family and social relationships, and practical aspects of life such as nutrition and making a living, as well as governance. As nomadic people living in tribal communities, they had no need to accommodate other people’s ways of doing things. Scholars hypothesize that the distinction between religious (or sacred) and non-religious (or secular) aspects of life developed only gradually, as people changed from nomadic to settled life. In settled communities (villages, towns, cities), tribal groups had to interact with others who had their own norms. In some cases the interaction took the form of violent competition for dominance. The most successful settlements were those in which diverse groups developed space for multiple “lifestyles” – to use modern terminology. To do this, they identified certain areas of the law, such as worship and family matters, as pertaining only to them. Over centuries, these areas of life would be reserved for “religious law.” Other aspects of life, such as economic and political, became “neutral” – or secular – territory, in which diverse peoples would negotiate and reach compromises acceptable to the majority. We shall see examples of this pattern throughout our survey of religious traditions.

though. When Solomon dies, the northern tribes become the kingdom of Israel, and the southern tribes become the kingdom of Judah.

By this time in the story, the people of Israel have had three kinds of leader: patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; judges; and kings. They will still have kings for several centuries, but around 900 BCE a new kind of religious leader emerges, the prophet. A clear example of one of Weber’s ideal types (see Chapter 3), the prophet’s power and authority are not inherited, but come from the voices he hears and the visions he has, along with his charisma in communicating these experiences to the people. Early prophets included Elijah, Elisha, and Nathan. Later prophets included Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

A central message of the prophets to the people is that they must be faithful to one god. Since the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites have referred to this god as YHWH or Yahweh, since this is how he identified himself to Moses during one of their conversations (Exodus 3:14). The reason the prophets had to insist on one god is that the people had other gods, as well. The Hebrew Bible tells us that two fertility gods, Baal and Asherah, also had altars within the temple in Jerusalem. (2 Kings 23:4–13) Baal, also called Tammuz, is an agricultural god of death and rebirth. Asherah is a fertility goddess who, like Baal, is mentioned in numerous ancient sources in addition to the Hebrew Bible. Although we have



FIGURE 6.2 Clay figure of Asherah.

Z. Radovan/BibleLandPictures.

no archaeological evidence of the temple itself, numerous figurines of Asherah have been found, so we know that she was represented as a tree on the bottom and a woman on the top. King Solomon is famous for building the first Temple in Jerusalem, but the Bible indicates that he built shrines for Asherah, as well. (2 Kings 18:22)

As the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah are threatened by powerful empires around them, they become more loyal to Yahweh. The constant message of the prophets is that the Israelites are not following Yahweh's laws, and will suffer great punishment if they do not return to his ways. The First Book of Kings (18:19–40) tells how the prophet Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to a contest. Each side prepares the wood for a sacrificial fire, kills a bull and cuts it up, and places the pieces on top of the wood. However, instead of lighting the fire, they will pray to their gods to light it for them. The prophets of Baal pray to him for hours, but no fire appears. Elijah mocks them, suggesting that "he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." Then Elijah prays to the God of Abraham and

the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon [a river valley], and killed them there.

Despite such dramatic displays by the prophets, the people of Israel do not turn completely to Yahweh, and catastrophe does come. In 722 BCE the Assyrians – a Semitic people from Mesopotamia – conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, killing thousands and driving many refugees into the southern kingdom of Judah. (These tribes are known as the Lost Tribes of Israel; subsequent history focuses on the Tribes of Judah, from which we get the term "Jew." However, alternate sources indicate that not all members of the northern tribes were killed or dispersed. The Samaritans [see below] claim to be among their descendants.) The prophet Jeremiah presents his theodicy (see Chapter 2): this disaster was God's punishment for disobedience. Afterwards, worship of Yahweh increases in the southern kingdom, and prophets and kings suppress the worship of all gods other than Yahweh. Hezekiah, who was king at the time of the Assyrian invasion, destroys images associated with other gods, and concentrates the worship of Yahweh at the temple in Jerusalem. A few years later, King Josiah bans all worship that is not in the temple. He also goes through the temple and gets rid of all the altars and shrines dedicated to Asherah, Baal, and other gods, along with their priests. From then on, the people of Israel are largely monotheistic and their worship is based strictly in the temple.



Names for God

The Hebrew Bible employs a number of terms commonly translated as "God." In the earliest books, the term "Elohim" is most common. Elohim is a plural form of the term "El." Scholars interpret its plural form as a special usage like the "royal 'We'" – a usage appropriate for royalty, although Elohim is sometimes used in reference to generic spiritual beings (1 Samuel 28:13) or to gods other than the One God. (See, e.g., Genesis 6:2, Exodus 20:3.)

The singular form "El" is the designation for the god of the ancient religion of Canaan. In a temple in Syria dating from 2300 BCE, he is described as the oldest or supreme or father of the gods. He is the husband of the important goddess Asherah, although El is used extensively for the One God in Psalms and the Book of Job. The term sometimes appears as El Shaddai, "God of the mountains" or "God Almighty." Many scholars believe that El is the name given to the god of Abraham.

YHWH or YHVH – the Tetragrammaton ("four letters") commonly written as Yahweh, may have been the name of an ancient Canaanite storm god (referenced in Psalm 29). However, it is also considered God's designation of himself. It is the first person singular of the Hebrew verb "to be." In Exodus 3:14 God answers Moses' question as to his identity, using this term twice: "I am what I am" or "I am that I am," or simply, "I am." In Exodus 6:2–3, God explains, "I revealed myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai but was not known to them by my name YHWH."

Still, YHWH is not like a normal name. Jews believe it conveys a truth about God so profound that it may never be known fully by human beings. Reflecting the infinity (unlimited-ness) and ineffability (unspeakable-ness) of God, the term is considered sacred and not to be pronounced. It is never used in Jewish religious rituals. Instead, the term Adonai, meaning "my Lord," used throughout the Hebrew Bible to express the greatness and power of God, is the most common designation for God in Jewish rituals. Ha Shem or Hashem – "the Name" is the term used most commonly by Jews outside of prayer. Like Adonai, ha Shem allows people to avoid using the Tetragrammaton and thus violating its sanctity.

Christian scriptures, written in Greek, use the term *ho theos* (Deus, in Latin translation) in unambiguous reference to God, the one God. However, God is not considered a name; it is a designation of the supreme being. Human beings can know what God has revealed about himself but, being infinite, "God" cannot be defined (or "delimited") as would be the case if "God" were a normal name. Therefore, as in Judaic practice, descriptive terms such as Lord, King, and Father are commonly used.

Islamic scripture, the Qur'an, is written in Arabic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew. The term for God, *al-ilah*, "the [only] god," is very similar to the

Hebrew *el*. *Al-ilah* is pronounced “allah” and that is how it is transliterated in the Latin alphabet. However, again, Allah is not considered a personal name. There are countless attributes of God, and these are sometimes called “names.” According to one tradition, God has 3000 names. The angels know 1000 of them; the prophets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus know 1000 of them; the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels each contain 300; and the Qur'an contains 99. The last name – the greatest – is known only to God.

Nonetheless, things worsen for the kingdom of Judah when in 586 BCE the Babylonians invade Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and take the leaders east to Babylon. Although they are far from home, many of the Israelites prosper there. With no temple, they can no longer base their religion on sacrificing animals and other temple rituals. So they turn to other activities, such as writing down the books that would later be called the Bible. The **Babylonian Captivity**, as this period is called, lasts about fifty years, and then another emperor, Cyrus of Persia, defeats the Babylonians (for which the prophet Isaiah [45:1] dubbed him “messiah”). Cyrus lets the Jews return to Jerusalem and live according to their own law, but they are still under Persian control. Not all the Jews do go back to Jerusalem. Those who stayed in Babylon have descendants there, in Iraq, even today.

Those who go to Jerusalem build a Second Temple. (The remains of the Second Temple are a sacred site in Jerusalem, known as the Western Wall; some Christians call it the Wailing Wall.) Now without a king, they are led by Ezra and Nehemiah, appointed by the Persians to govern the Jews. According to tradition, the books of the Hebrew Bible are organized and edited in this time by a group of scholars called the Great **Synagogue** (assembly), organized by Ezra. In 444 BCE Ezra officially announces the Law of the Torah as governing the people of Israel. From then on, the main religious acts in Judaism are following the Torah and studying it. Rituals of sacrifice are still held in the new temple, but they are not as important as they were in the first temple. And Jews could perform public prayer anywhere there is a **minyan**, a quorum of ten Jewish men, rather than only in the temple.

The people of Israel in Jerusalem live under Persian domination for two centuries, but they yearn for independence. Prophets have apocalyptic visions. As we saw in Chapter 2, “the apocalypse” refers to the events associated with the end of the world as we know it, and scholars often interpret stories associated with this event as reflections of anguish and a sense of helplessness. The fact that the Jewish prophets during this time had visions of God destroying the world and creating a new one in which the Israelites are rewarded and God’s enemies are destroyed clearly fits this profile. Before the apocalypse, the prophets predict, God will send a great king, descended from King David, to defeat his enemies and restore peace and justice. A man was made a king by being anointed (dabbed with oil), and so this hoped-for king is called the **Messiah**, which means “the Anointed One.”



In 331 BCE, the Persians are defeated, not by a Jewish Messiah but by Alexander “the Great” from Greece. Life under Greek rule turns out to be no better than life under Persian rule. By this time the Greeks control the entire Middle East and Egypt; the Jews are ruled first by a Greek governor from Egypt, then one from Syria. In 168 BCE the Greek Syrian governor changes the temple from one dedicated to the worship of Yahweh into one dedicated to Zeus, the supreme Greek god. In 166 BCE there is a Jewish rebellion against this **sacrilege** (violation of a sacred object), led by the Maccabee brothers. They rededicate the temple to Yahweh, an event commemorated in the feast of Hanukkah. For the next century, Judah is an independent state, but not a strong one, and then in 63 BCE the Romans make it part of their empire, calling it Judea.

The History and Teachings of Judaism

The story just outlined is about the ancestors of those who now call themselves Jews, as well as Christians and Muslims. All three groups trace their roots back to Abraham and accept the Torah as God’s revelation. The story of Judaism as a tradition separate from Christianity and Islam begins in the first century of the Common Era.

The First Five Centuries

In the first century, according to first-century historian Josephus, there were a number of schools of thought among Jews. The most popular were the **Pharisees**. They were largely from the middle class, and drew followers from middle and lower classes. Those familiar with the Christian Gospels have heard the Pharisees described as nitpicking hypocrites, but these slurs were written long after the time of Jesus, when his followers were splitting away from Judaism. In Jesus’ time, most Pharisees did not interpret scripture or the Mosaic Law narrowly and rigidly. Instead, they wanted to make the law reasonable and something that people could follow. So they said that some rules are more important and some less. In making moral judgments, they considered people’s intentions, and not just their outward behavior. They were not just concerned with “the letter of the law.” In these ways, they were like Jesus. Like him, too, they believed in a Messiah, a new world that would be governed by God, a resurrection of the dead, and a final judgment.

The Pharisees said that in addition to the written law – the Torah of scripture, God had revealed to Moses an oral law – or Oral Torah – that was then passed down from generation to generation in commentaries about the written law. This oral law would eventually be written down as the **Talmud**, as we shall see.

The **Sadducees** were a second group. In contrast to the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus, they were in the upper class of Judean society and they cooperated with the Romans. They conducted the operations of the temple, and wanted everything done “by the book.” Disagreeing with the Pharisees, they denied the resurrection of the dead, because it is not taught in scripture. They also denied that there was an Oral Torah. This group disappeared around 60 CE.

The **Essenes** were Jews who withdrew from society to live in monastic communities (groups living apart from the mainstream population, pursuing spiritual matters) under strict



FIGURE 6.3 Yochanan Ben Zakai Synagogue in Jerusalem's Old City. AKG Images/Israelimages.

rules of priestly purity. What we know about the Essenes comes mostly from their writings in the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, documents found by two Palestinian shepherds in caves near the Dead Sea in the 1940s. (Following the initial discovery, archaeologists began systematic excavation of the area and within ten years had identified some 900 scrolls.) The Essenes considered themselves the true faithful children of Israel, and they hoped to reconquer the promised land from gentiles (non-Jews) and Hellenized Jews (those who had adopted Greek ways).

There were other schools of thought, as well, including those messianic Jews who believed Jesus was the messiah. It may sound odd to count them as Jews, but Jesus was indeed Jewish and thought of himself as Jewish, as did his **disciples**, as his followers (or students) are usually called. Even today, there are messianic Jews who believe that Jesus is the messiah. (There are perhaps 250,000 messianic Jews in the United States, and some in Israel, although, as we shall see, not all Messianic Jews believe Jesus was the messiah.) However, the fourth group mentioned by Josephus was the **Zealots**, revolutionaries who conducted guerrilla warfare against the Romans. They launched a revolt in 66 CE, which the Romans crushed, destroying the Second Temple in 70. A second Jewish revolt in 132–135 was also put down, killing perhaps half a million Jews and destroying almost a thousand villages. This time the emperor rebuilt Jerusalem as a Roman colony and banned Jews from entering it.

From then on, the Jews were in **diaspora**, a Greek word that originally meant a scattering of seeds, but now means the dispersing of people from their homeland. Within a century, Jews were settled as far west as Spain and as far east as India. By this time, the followers of Jesus no longer considered themselves Jews, and the Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots had

disappeared. So there was one kind of Judaism left, that of the Pharisees. Theirs was the foundation of the Judaism led by rabbis that we still have today.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, as after the destruction of the First Temple, worship could not be centered in a temple or in Jerusalem. And sacrificing animals was obsolete. Jewish practices had to be portable, so that they could be conducted anywhere that Jews might find themselves. This portable form of Jewish practice had been developing since the Babylonian Captivity. It consisted of following the Mosaic Law, praying, and studying the Torah. Judaism was now carried out mostly in people's homes and in meeting places called synagogues.

"Torah" is perhaps the most important word in Judaism. It has a range of meanings. In the narrowest sense, it is the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. In a wider sense, Torah is the Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible. The Bible is also called Tanakh, which is an acronym in Hebrew formed from the first letters of the three parts of the Hebrew Bible – the Torah (the first five books), the Nevi'im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings) – hence *TaNaKh*.

In a still wider sense, Torah includes the Written Torah (the Bible) and the Oral Torah (Talmud). According to the Pharisees, the Oral Torah is the part of God's revelation at Sinai that Moses did not write down but passed on to his successors by word of mouth. They in turn passed it on to their successors. When it was eventually written down, the Oral Torah took the form of the **Mishnah** and the **Gemara** (see "Law and Life" in box below). The Gemara consists of commentaries on the Mishnah.

There are two major talmuds. The first is the Talmud of Jerusalem, which was compiled around 400 CE. A second, more sophisticated Talmud was compiled around 600 CE in Babylon (Iraq), where many Jews continued to live after the end of their captivity there. Since 600, rabbis have added more comments to these texts, creating even richer talmuds.

The Talmuds are commentaries on the law, which covers all aspects of life. It contains all Jewish teaching about what is right and wrong, what should and should not be done, including rules about cleanliness, suitable foods, and cooking.

The Talmuds became the heart of Jewish education. Students learned what important rabbis had said about various questions, and learned to debate in favor of and against various positions. Today in **yeshivas**, Jewish schools, students pair up to interpret and debate the traditional questions. On a typical page from a Talmud, there is at the center a passage from the Mishnah outlining the opposing positions of early rabbis Hillel and Shammai on some rule. Above this is a passage from the Gemara offering comments by later rabbis. Then around the edges of the page are still more comments.

With the Bible and the Talmuds, the Jews now had a rich body of texts that guided every aspect of life. Being Jewish meant studying these texts, following the law as presented in them, and thus making their lives holy.

The Middle Ages (500–1500 CE)

In the fourth century the Roman emperors made Christianity legal and then made it the official religion of the Empire. With their new power, Christian leaders often treated Jews harshly. John Chrysostom, one of the most revered of the **Church Fathers** (influential thinkers in the early centuries of Christianity, whose views are considered authoritative; also known as



Law and Life

The Mishnah is a law code written about 200 CE that interprets the **mitzvot** – the plural of **mitzvah**, “commandment.” For example, the Mishnah discusses the kinds of work that are prohibited on the Sabbath (the “seventh” day, commemorating the day on which God rested after creating the world). The Bible does not prohibit “work” in general on the Sabbath. It prohibits *melachah*, which is the word used in Genesis for God’s creating the world. Since God rested from *melachah* on the seventh day, the rabbis reasoned, we should rest from similar kinds of work. The rabbis also found the word *melachah* in Exodus 31, where it is applied to the building of the sanctuary. There God emphasized that no one should engage in *melachah* on the Sabbath – under penalty of death. So the rabbis concluded that what God meant in banning *melachah* on the Sabbath were the kinds of work involved in building the sanctuary. What kinds of work were these? The rabbis came up with this list of thirty-nine kinds:

- | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 1. Sowing | 16. Spinning | 31. Cutting hide up |
| 2. Plowing | 17. Weaving | 32. Writing two letters |
| 3. Reaping | 18. Making two loops | 33. Erasing two letters |
| 4. Binding sheaves | 19. Weaving two threads | 34. Building |
| 5. Threshing | 20. Separating two threads | 35. Tearing a building down |
| 6. Winnowing | 21. Tying | 36. Extinguishing a fire |
| 7. Selecting | 22. Untying | 37. Kindling a fire |
| 8. Grinding | 23. Sewing two stitches | 38. Hitting with a hammer |
| 9. Sifting | 24. Tearing | 39. Taking an object from the private domain to the public, or transporting an object in the public domain. |
| 10. Kneading | 25. Trapping | |
| 11. Baking | 26. Slaughtering | |
| 12. Shearing wool | 27. Flaying | |
| 13. Washing wool | 28. Salting meat | |
| 14. Beating wool | 29. Curing hide | |
| 15. Dyeing wool | 30. Scraping hide | |

Ultimately, the rabbis counted 613 mitzvot.



“Doctors” of the Church), said that because the Jews had killed Jesus and Jesus was God, the Jews had killed God. Because of this offense, Chrysostom said, God rejected the Jews once and for all, so that they were a doomed people who deserved to suffer. This comment ignores the historical fact that Jesus was executed by the Romans and not “the Jews,” of course, but such anti-Jewish arguments became common across Christian Europe in the Middle Ages. Many church synods (meetings of bishops) passed laws surprisingly similar to the laws that Hitler created in Nazi Germany. In 306 the Synod of Elvira prohibited Christians from marrying Jews, or even eating with them. The Synod of Clermont in 535 banned Jews from holding public office. A synod in Toledo, Spain in 681 ordered the public burning of the Talmud and other Jewish books. Other synods forbade Christians from visiting Jewish doctors, and said that Jews could not be plaintiffs against Christians in court, or serve as witnesses against Christians. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, a meeting in Rome to which all bishops were invited, declared that Jews had to mark their clothing with a special badge. The Synod of Breslau in 1267 set up compulsory ghettos – areas where Jews were required to live. The Council of Basel in 1434 said that Jews were not permitted to obtain university degrees.

As we shall see, Christianity underwent a revolution in the 16th century called the Protestant Reformation. It was designed to correct what its leaders saw as deviations from Christian principles in the actions of the Roman Christian rulers. However, unfortunately, anti-Judaism remained a feature even of “reformed” Christianity. Here are some of Martin Luther’s proposals:

What then shall we do with this damned, rejected race of Jews? ... First, their synagogues or churches should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it.... Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed.... Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer-books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught. Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more.... If however we are afraid that they might harm us personally ... let us drive them out of the country for all time. (Luther 1543, Part XI)

While Jews suffered great discrimination in the Middle Ages and later in Christian Europe, they did much better in areas ruled by Muslims. As we shall see, in the 7th century, Islam arose on the Arabian Peninsula and spread west across North Africa to Spain, and east to India and beyond. The Muslims rejected the claim that the Jews had killed Jesus or God. Their theology, like Jewish theology, was a simple monotheism with no division of God into three persons. They accepted the Torah as God’s revelation. And many of their laws were similar to Jewish laws, such as their prohibition on eating pork and other dietary rules. Jews did especially well in Spain while it was governed by Muslims from 711 to 1492. There they made up more than 5% of the population (in the United States today Jews are around 2% of the population).

One of the most important Jewish thinkers, Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), lived in Muslim Spain. In this relatively open multicultural environment, there was a great deal of interaction between Jews, Christians, and Muslims – interaction that included discussions of religious matters. In this context, Maimonides felt compelled to extract basic Jewish beliefs from the Mishnah. He identified 13 basic Jewish beliefs:



1. God is the perfect Creator of all things.
2. God is one in a unique way.
3. God is not physical.
4. God existed before everything else, and exists after everything else.
5. God and only God is to be worshipped.
6. Prophets are special creatures who speak for God.
7. Moses is the greatest of the prophets; he spoke to God face to face.
8. God revealed the Torah to Moses.
9. The Torah is complete.
10. God knows all human actions.
11. God rewards and punishes people in this life and in the world to come.
12. The Messiah will come.
13. The dead will be resurrected.

Many rabbis initially rejected Maimonides' novel, philosophical approach, so different from the traditional style of commentary on the law. However, these thirteen basic principles eventually were accepted by the majority and remain central in Judaism to this day.

Another approach to Judaism that arose in the Middle Ages was the mystical tradition known as **Kabbala**. Its most famous document is the Zohar, "The Book of Splendor," written in Spain around 1275 by Moses de Léon, who claimed that it came from a rabbi of the 2nd century. The Zohar is a mystical commentary on the first five books of the Bible, and discusses the nature of God, the universe, human souls, and good and evil. In the Zohar, God is described as complex rather than simple, and dynamic rather than unchanging. God has emotions. What is more, God has male and female aspects, and they must be joined to maintain harmony in the universe.

A later movement spawned by mystical Judaism was **Hasidism**, which arose in Eastern Europe in the 18th century. It emphasized the emotional side of religion, so that music, dancing, and states of ecstasy could be part of worship. This tradition centered around a leader who had a simple, pious love of God. Hasidic Jews believe that this holy man has a special relationship to God, and following his teachings will bring blessings. The most famous contemporary Hasidic group is the Lubavitcher movement of Rebbe Menachem Schneerson (d. 1994) of Brooklyn, New York. Since his death in 1994, many of his followers have thought of him as the Messiah.

The Modern Period (1750 to the present)

The Enlightenment

Until the 18th century, all Jews were what we would today call Orthodox. They believed that the entire Torah was revealed by God in just the words we have now, so that whatever it says is literally true. They followed the rules in the Mosaic law and lived apart from Christians in Europe. However, in the 18th century new developments in European philosophy, science,



FIGURE 6.5 Rebbe Menachem Schneerson. Z. Radovan/
BibleLandPictures.

and culture changed the lives of many Jews, much as they changed the rest of European culture. The general name for these changes is the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment within Jewish culture is called **Haskelah**.

The Development of Reform Judaism

The intellectual and political changes brought by the Enlightenment influenced Jewish thinkers in the 18th century. With the flowering of democracy, North American and some European governments granted civil and political rights to Jews. This led many Jews to reject their traditional segregation from the rest of society. In the 19th century, more and more Jews stopped thinking of themselves as outsiders; they wanted to live as full citizens of their countries. They stopped dressing in special ways and speaking in Yiddish, a dialect of German traditionally used by European Jews. They pursued careers in law, medicine, and university teaching. They began to integrate into the cultures where they lived and immerse themselves in the intellectual and cultural life of their nations. Many came to prominence, including some of the scholars mentioned in this study – such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Emile Durkheim.

As Jews began to integrate into their national cultures, some aspects of the traditional laws receded in importance. Indeed, the changes in European society brought by the Enlightenment led to a rethinking of Judaic practice that resulted in Reform Judaism.

Reform Judaism is a movement that started in Germany and France in the 19th century, but flourished in the United States. Whereas traditional Judaism had emphasized the Talmud, Reform Jews emphasized the study of scripture. And instead of reading the Bible as word-for-word dictation from God, they read it in a new way. (As we shall see,



The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a broad set of intellectual developments that accompanied socioeconomic and political changes in Europe, beginning in the 17th century. Four significant areas experiencing change were (1) cosmology, our understanding of the universe, (2) epistemology, our understanding of how we know, (3) ethics (or morality), and (4) political thought. All these developments had important consequences for religion.

First were changes in cosmology. From ancient times through the Middle Ages, people thought of the earth as the center of the universe, with the sun, the moon, and the stars circling around it. This, of course, made humans feel important. A few passages in the Bible seem to back up this geocentrism (earth-centered view), and the 2nd-century thinker Ptolemy made it into a complete system of astronomy. However, starting around 1500, astronomers such as Copernicus and then Galileo proposed that the earth moves around the sun. With the invention of better telescopes, scientists came to see that the universe is immense, and that the Earth is far from the center of everything. This realization challenged the geocentrism of the Bible.

Second were changes in epistemology, the study of knowledge and belief. In the ancient and medieval world, the authority of revelation was taken for granted. People believed something was true based on who said it was true – a characteristic of oral cultures. Revelation, considered to be the word of God, was the ultimate source of truth. Those who were accepted as legitimate interpreters of revelation, such as rabbis and priests, were also respected authorities. On issues on which scripture was silent, the word of non-religious authorities was often taken as definitive. Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, said that heavy objects fall faster than light objects, for example, and people accepted this as the truth. However, when the traditional belief that the sun goes around the earth was questioned, people started asking what other traditional beliefs might be incorrect. Instead of taking Aristotle's word for it that heavy objects fall faster, Galileo dropped balls of different weights from the top of a ship's mast, and found that they hit the deck at the same time. Such experiments were the start of the modern scientific method, in which the basis of certainty is not an individual's or an institution's word. Instead, reason, based on empirical observation and experimentation, became the source of certainty.

If experts such as Aristotle and Ptolemy could be wrong about physics and astronomy, what about experts in matters of religion? Should people accept the interpretations of scripture offered by the religious authorities, or were individuals – using their own reason – able to understand scripture's teachings? For that matter, how do we know that the version of scripture we are reading was copied correctly? Are we sure that we know the exact meanings of the words in scripture, especially if we are reading a translation from an ancient text?

A third major development in the Enlightenment was in people's understanding of right and wrong – ethics or morality. In the Hebrew Bible, doing what is right is doing what God commands, and doing what is wrong is doing what God forbids. Ethics is a matter of obedience and disobedience. (As we saw in Chapter 3, this is known as "Divine Command" Ethics.) This understanding was questioned by Enlightenment thinkers. They reasoned that when God commands something, either he has a reason for giving that command or he has no reason. If God gives commands for no reason, then he is a despot or an autocrat, terms with a rather negative connotation in Enlightenment Europe. Since people think of God as good, it must be that God gives commands for a reason. Furthermore, most divine commands – such as those calling for honesty and concern for the needy, and those forbidding murder and theft – obviously serve to benefit human beings. So, as Enlightenment thinkers examined issues of right and wrong, they looked for the effects of actions on people, for the ways an action would harm or benefit someone. If there were rules that benefited ancient people but would not benefit people today, Enlightenment thinkers tended to consider these rules as no longer applicable. They must have been beneficial at some point in human history, but they were no longer pertinent. They had become obsolete.

There were also changes in political thought. Before the 18th century, the standard understanding of how leaders got their authority was that God gave it to them. This idea came to be called the Divine Right of Kings, but it goes back at least to the Bible, where God chooses Saul, then David, and so on. In the Christian New Testament, Paul says that all authority is from God (Romans 13:1). However, 18th-century thinkers, many of them devout Jews and Christians, developed a new view of political authority – democracy or "rule by the people." Enlightenment thinkers argued that the authority to govern people comes from those people themselves. A government that ruled without this authority would not be legitimate. This idea led to a number of revolutions, including the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. It is in this context that we begin to see a clear distinction drawn between religious and political authority – and with it, a distinction between religion and politics.

Christian scholars were doing the same thing.) In this perspective, the Bible was indeed divine revelation, but it was not taken as literal history or science. It was read as a guide for people living in specific cultures and historical eras, as a source of wisdom about purposeful human existence. Reform Jews also changed their synagogue rituals to be more accessible to the congregation. Instead of Hebrew, they used the vernacular, the local language.

In the new Reform movement, as in traditional Judaism, the most important feature of religion was ethics. However, the emphasis was now on the ethical principles of the





Kashrut

Judaic dietary laws are known as *kashrut*. This is the system of rules about what foods are acceptable and unacceptable, and how certain foods must be prepared. Of the animals that live in the water, only those that have both fins and scales are acceptable. So fish are **kosher** (proper), but clams, oysters, and lobsters are *trefa* (or *tref*, literally meaning meat that was killed by wild animals rather than being properly slaughtered, but generally applied to all food that is forbidden). Of the four-legged animals that live on land, only those that have split hooves and chew the cud may be eaten. So sheep and cattle are kosher, but not pigs or foxes.

Acceptable animals must be slaughtered according to a specific ritual called *shehitah*. The slaughterer says a prayer and then draws a razor-sharp knife across the animal's neck to sever the main arteries. Blood may not be eaten, so after most of the blood is drained from the carcass, it is soaked and salted to eliminate any residual blood.

A prohibition in Exodus 23:19, Exodus 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21 says, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." From this passage, the rabbis derived the rule that meat and dairy products may not be eaten at the same time, or even be prepared together. Further, a household should keep separate dishes, cutlery, and table linens for serving meat and dairy products.

Many Jews follow modified kosher laws, such as avoiding pork and shellfish, but not keeping separate dishes and utensils for meat and dairy.

Muslim dietary laws concerning meat are virtually identical to those of Jews. Acceptable meat is called **halal** (as opposed to forbidden or **haram** meat). In areas without halal butcher shops, Muslims often shop for kosher meat.

These rules were derived from the Bible, mostly the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. As we saw in Chapter 4, anthropologist Mary Douglas thinks that these prohibitions were based on the Bible's categories for things God created. The "unclean" animals are those that do not fit neatly into the Bible's categories.

Enlightenment, which were moral rules that any reasonable person could discover. Many of the 613 mitzvot were seen as obsolete in Reform Judaism. God wants us to tell the truth, be honest in our business dealings, help the poor, and be concerned about social justice. However, whatever purpose had been served by, for example, the rule against *shatnes* – wearing clothing made of two materials – that rule is now obsolete. So the ethics of Reform Judaism looked much like the ethics of other religious groups influenced by the Enlightenment. Central was an emphasis on social justice. Instead of worrying about observing 613 rules, Reform Jews had a simpler ethics captured in the ancient

prophet Micah's saying, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:80)

While Reform Judaism was at first strongest in Germany, various branches of government there would recognize only a single kind of Judaism, and this was usually traditional Orthodoxy. However, in the United States, with its strict separation of religion and politics (or church and state), there were no such restrictions, and Reform Judaism was able to flourish. In 1885, American Reform Jews gathered in Pittsburgh to draft a statement of principles. We can summarize them this way.

1. Every religion attempts "to grasp the Infinite," and in every book of revelation there is "the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man." Judaism has developed "the highest conception of the God-idea."
2. The Bible records the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priests of the one God. This makes the Bible "the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction." Modern scientific discoveries are not incompatible with the teachings of the Bible, which was written at a time when people did not understand as much as we do now about how nature works.
3. The 613 Laws of Moses were designed for "the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine." Many of these laws are no longer "adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization," and do not "elevate and sanctify our lives." The only parts of the Mosaic Law that are still binding are the general moral laws.
4. All the Mosaic and rabbinical laws that "regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."
5. The time of "Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men" is approaching. "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state."
6. Judaism is "a progressive religion," changing over time to spread the message of monotheism and morality. Christianity and Islam grew out of Judaism, and "we appreciate their providential mission, to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth." "We extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men."
7. While Judaism teaches that the soul is immortal, "We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward."
8. Social justice is the central concern in Judaism. "In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the



basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”

The Central Conference of American Rabbis met in 1937 in Columbus, Ohio. Under the impact of the horrific persecution of Jews in Europe, they revised parts of the Pittsburgh Platform. They re-emphasized the idea that Jews are a people, bound by a common history and religious heritage. They also stressed the importance of the synagogue and encouraged the use of Hebrew in liturgy.



Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786)

The Father of Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment



FIGURE 6.6 Moses Mendelssohn. Imagno/Getty Images.

The first Jew to become widely known across Europe was Moses Mendelssohn. He studied not only his own tradition, but also the Enlightenment thinkers of the time. His brilliance was recognized in 1763 when he entered a literary contest and won the Prize of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, defeating the philosopher Immanuel Kant. While traditional Judaism had emphasized the Talmud, Mendelssohn said that the Bible should be the basic text in Jewish education. He helped to write a translation of the Bible into literary German, and within a generation most Jewish households in central Europe had a copy of this Bible. Two of Mendelssohn's grandchildren – Felix and Fanny – had outstanding careers as composers of music.

Conservative Judaism

By 1880 Reform Judaism had become the most popular form in the United States, and if the population had simply grown without immigration, then the number of more traditional Jews would have dwindled even further by the mid-20th century. However, between 1880 and 1920 there was a huge Jewish immigration into the United States from Russia, Poland, and Eastern Europe. These people were mostly traditional Jews whose religious views had not been affected much by the Enlightenment. They did not want to drop traditional customs and laws. As they moved into American cities such as New York, however, many did see the appeal of being a part of the culture around them. And so many, while not becoming Reform Jews, became less traditional than Orthodox Jews, those who stayed committed to the traditional interpretations and practices of Jewish life. By the early 20th century, there was a new kind of Judaism for them. It was called Conservative Judaism in the U.S. and **Masorti** (traditional) Judaism elsewhere. It would keep many of the traditional elements of Judaism – Hebrew as the language of prayer, kosher dietary laws, observance of the Sabbath – but would let people adapt themselves to modern culture and to science. In 1902 in New York, Solomon Schechter founded the Jewish Theological Seminary to train rabbis in the new Conservative movement.

Reconstructionist Judaism

One of the more influential rabbis at the Jewish Theological Seminary was Mordechai Kaplan (d. 1983), who taught there for over fifty years. Born in Lithuania, he started his career as an Orthodox rabbi. Judaism, he said, “is the sum of everything about Jewish people,” not just their religious beliefs and rituals. He promoted the idea of Jewish community centers, where the whole culture of Jews would be fostered. He especially wanted to reach the many secularized Jews he saw all around him, people who had stopped observing religious rituals but who still considered themselves Jewish.

In 1922 Kaplan founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, and in 1934 he published *Judaism as a Civilization*. Gradually he developed a new form of Judaism that he called Reconstructionism. The major difference between this movement and Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism is its **religious naturalism**, the tendency to stress ethical values and spirituality as natural parts of human life, rather than stemming from supernatural sources. Kaplan taught that God is not a supernatural person, but a force or energy that improves human life. “God is the power that makes for salvation,” the sum of all natural processes that allow humans to live meaningful, fulfilled lives. Kaplan wrote that “to believe in God means to take for granted that it is man’s destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society.” (Kaplan quoted in “Reconstructionist Judaism,” <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/15963>). He also rejected the idea that the Jews are God’s Chosen People. This claim, he said, only alienates Jews from the rest of humankind.

For many Jews, Kaplan’s naturalism was incompatible with the Torah as revelation from a personal God, and so Reconstructionist Judaism has never attracted many members. Worldwide, there are fewer than 100 Reconstructionist synagogues. In 1945 the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada accused Kaplan of “atheism [and]



heresy,” and of “disbelief in the basic tenets of Judaism.” He was excommunicated and his *Sabbath Prayer Book* was burned during a ceremony at a hotel in New York City.

The Rituals of Judaism

Jewish life centers on sanctifying everyday life – that is, making it holy. The center is the family, and so many rituals are observed in the home, such as the weekly Sabbath dinner, the Passover Seder, and Hanukkah celebrations.

The *shabas*, or Sabbath, is observed each week from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. Members of the family finish their work on Friday afternoon, bathe, and put on fresh clothes. After sundown, the family gathers in the home for a meal prepared earlier. The food is blessed and there are other prayers. On Friday evening or Saturday morning the family goes to the synagogue or temple in the morning, where they worship and hear readings from the Torah. Orthodox Jews follow the traditional laws forbidding work during the Sabbath. Since driving is considered work, Orthodox and Conservative Jews often walk to the synagogue for services. Many consider turning on electrical devices to be work, and so they use pre-set timers.

The most important object in any synagogue or temple is the Torah scroll. It is kept in the **ark**, an ornated cabinet at the front of the hall where a lamp burns to mark its presence. An important part of the service is opening the curtains in front of the ark and removing the Torah scroll to read it to the congregation.

Like most traditions, Judaism has rituals to mark the major events in life. Eight days after a boy is born, there is the **bris**, circumcision. The transition to adulthood is marked by a **Bar Mitzvah** for boys and a **Bat Mitzvah** for girls (in non-Orthodox communities) at age 12–13. *Bar* means son, and *Bat* means daughter; *Mitzvah* means commandment. So Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah means that the young man or woman is now bound by the law. While no ceremony is required to mark this transition, and none is mentioned in the Talmud, over the last century most Jewish families have chosen to have a ceremony in a synagogue or temple, and then a reception in a party setting. At Sabbath services the young man or woman is called up to recite a blessing over the Torah reading, and perhaps to lead the congregation in prayers. They may also give a short speech that begins, “Today I am a man/woman.”



FIGURE 6.7 At his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, a young man holds the Torah Scrolls. © CapturedNuance/iStockphoto.

There are also rituals for Jewish weddings, such as having the couple stand under a **chuppah** or canopy, and having the groom crush a glass with his foot at the end.

At death there is a simple ceremony and burial in a plain pine coffin. Jewish law forbids embalming and requires that the body be buried within 24 hours. Just before the funeral begins, the immediate relatives of the deceased tear their garments, or the rabbi may hand them torn black ribbons to pin on their clothes, to symbolize their loss. Traditionally, after the burial, there is a seven-day period of mourning called **sitting shivah**.

In the Jewish calendar, there are several feasts associated with the seasons. The New Year is **Rosh Hashanah** in the fall. Then nine days later is **Yom Kippur**, the Day of Atonement. Together, these Days of Awe, also called the High Holy Days in the U.S., mark the season of penitence. Also in the fall is **Sukkot**, the Feast of Tabernacles, a harvest festival for which the family builds a shelter outside, covers it with branches or fronds, and eats their meals inside it. Then in December is **Hanukkah**, which commemorates the victory of the Jews rebelling against their Syrian overlords in the second century BCE. In the spring is Passover, the celebration of the liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt, as told in Exodus. At a special dinner called the **Seder**, the family eats unleavened bread to commemorate the speedy exit of the Hebrews from Egypt. The wine is blessed and there are special prayers.

Judaism Today

Today there are 13.3 million Jews worldwide. Half live in the Americas, with some 6.5 million in the U.S. About 37% live in the State of Israel and 12% in Europe and Russia. In the U.S., according to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, 35% of Jews identify themselves as Reform, 26% as Conservative, 10% as Orthodox, and 2% as Reconstructionist. In the United Kingdom there are about 350,000 Jews. Some 20% are Reform or Liberal, an approach to Reform Judaism that developed in the U.K.

As we have seen, Judaism has changed significantly over the centuries. Indeed, until the late 15th century, there was no such term as “Judaism.” There were Jews, of course, and the laws by which they lived. They were a people – spread across the globe and thus diverse in culture, but related nonetheless by being members of “a great nation” who struggled to maintain fidelity to the one God. However, the term “Judaism” refers to an ideology (set of ideas) reinforced by practices and rituals and supported by institutions. It was coined in Europe, as a parallel to the term “Christianity” – a term coined only a few centuries earlier to refer to the *raison d'être* for “Christendom” (Christian religio-political institutions and the vast domains they governed). As we saw in Chapter 4, this kind of terminology signals what Peter Berger would call “objectification” or “reification” of a people’s way of life – making the dynamic flow of a people’s ways of acting and thinking “into a thing” (from the Latin *res*, “thing”). We shall see in the next section that the reification of Christianity led to a kind of rigidity: significant changes in the structure of Christianity became difficult at best. They often required revolutionary action.

However, this is not the case in Judaism. There have been many interpretations of Judaic teachings, and diverse interpretations coexist among Jews today. While most religious Jews accept the traditional language of God, covenant, Israel, Messiah, and the World to Come,



they are flexible in their interpretations of these words. Reconstructionist Jews do not believe in a personal God, for example, and neither do some Reform Jews, including rabbis. Conservative Judaism requires belief in God, but leaves the description of “God” quite open. Similarly, the Messiah is understood by many Jews to be a better time in the future, rather than a liberating king. And many do not believe literally in an apocalyptic World to Come, or even in a personal life after death.

Yet the core teaching of Judaism from ancient times to the present remains that the people of Israel were chosen by God to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” God established a covenant with Abraham and renewed it with Moses at Sinai, and the “people of Israel” – Jews – are bound by it today. As God’s People, they have a special responsibility, and by carrying out this responsibility they make their lives holy and set an example for the rest of the world to follow.

Unit II Christianity

The History and Teachings of Christianity

Origins

What we now call Christianity was started by Jesus of Nazareth in the first century. From birth to death, he was a Jew and presented himself as a Jewish reformer. He did not call himself “Christ” – this is a title used later by his followers. “Christ” is the English form of *Christos*, the Greek translation of “messiah,” meaning “one who is anointed (as king).” As we saw, the idea that a messiah would come to liberate Jews from foreign oppressors became important in the centuries before Jesus’ birth. The Messiah, it was said, would be a Jewish king descended from King David.

What we know about Jesus’ life comes mostly from what was written about him, decades after his death, in the **gospels**, from the Old English word for “good news.” Biblical scholars (see Chapter 3) disagree about the exact dating of the gospels but generally agree that they were written at least forty years after the events they describe. Biblical scholars also generally agree that none of the Gospels was written by people who knew Jesus personally, even though two of the four gospels are attributed to the friends of Jesus whose names they bear: Matthew and John. Still, working with scripture and other historical documents, scholars believe they can discern some facts about Jesus’ life and teachings.

Jesus grew up in the lower class in Nazareth, a town in Galilee in the northern part of Palestine (the name the Romans had given to the parts of the land of Canaan between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, now known as the state of Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza). When he was about thirty, Jesus began preaching about “the kingdom of God,” “kingdom” here being a translation of the Greek word for “reign” or “rule.” (Although Palestine was ruled by Rome at the time, the language of learning was still Greek. The gospels were therefore written in Greek.) The Kingdom or Reign of God would be a world in which people lived the way God has told them to live.