

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



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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



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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.

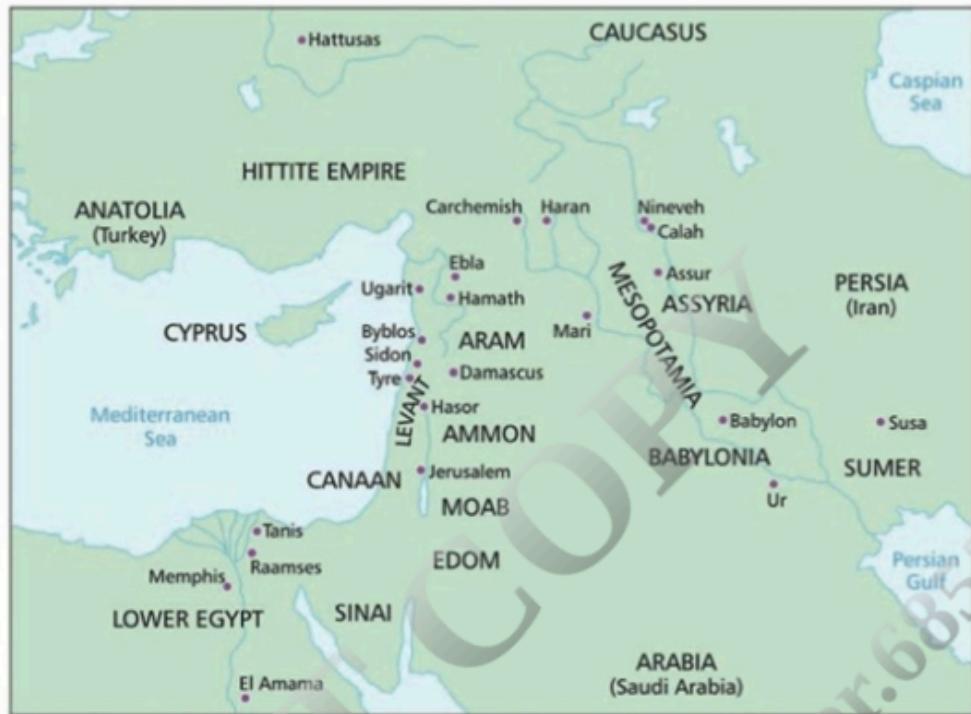
Abraham and Sara are at first skeptical about the possibility of having a child. Sara suggests that Abraham and their maid Hagar might be able to reproduce, and this they do. Hagar’s son is named Ishmael. However, then Sara also gives birth to a son. She banishes Hagar and Ishmael, and Sara and Abraham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



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## 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.”



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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