

Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-4a Jewish Religious Belief and Its Evolution

Book Title: World Civilizations

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## 7-4a Jewish Religious Belief and Its Evolution

From the time of the kingdom of Saul, a great god known as *Yahweh* (YAH-way; Jehovah) was established as the Hebrews' chief deity, but he was by no means the only one. In Samaria Yahweh was eventually relegated to an inferior position, but in Judea Yahweh's cult gradually triumphed over all rivals, and this god became the only deity of the Jews of Jerusalem.

By the 600s the Judean Jews, under the influence of a whole series of great prophets—including Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Isaiah—came to believe themselves bound to Yahweh by a sacred contract, the Covenant (promise), given to Moses during the Exodus. The contract was understood to mean that if the Jews remained constant in their worship of Yahweh and kept the faith he instilled in them, they would eventually triumph over all their enemies and be a respected and lordly people on Earth. The faith that Yahweh desired was supported by a set of rigid rules given to Moses by Yahweh on Mount Sinai, from which eventually evolved a whole law code that governed every aspect of Hebrew daily life. Known to later Jews and Christians as the *Ten Commandments*, these moral regulations have been adapted to different social circumstances.

The Jewish faith was one of the earliest attempts to formalize an ethical system and to link it with the worship of supernatural deities. *Ethics* is the study of good and evil and determining what is right and wrong in human life and conduct. Yahweh's followers gradually came to regard him as an enforcer of correct ethical actions. Those who did evil on Earth would be made to suffer—if not in this world, then in the one to come. This belief was not unusual; other religions had made at least some moves toward punishment of evildoers. The laws of Yahweh, however, also assured believers that the good would be rewarded—again, if not in this life, then in the eternal one to come.

How did people know whether they were doing good or evil? One way was by following the laws of Yahweh. Increasingly, though, they could also rely on the knowledge of what was right and what was wrong that Yahweh imprinted in every heart: conscience. The Ten Commandments were particularly the Jews' property, given to them as a mark of favor by their lord and protector Yahweh. But Hebrews believed that Yahweh had given a conscience to all men and women everywhere, and insofar as they followed conscience, they were doing the Lord's work and possibly gaining eternal salvation.

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