

7-4c A Changing Theology

In the centuries after the fall of the monarchies of Samaria and Judea, the Jews' conception of Yahweh changed in several significant ways that were linked to their political relationships with others. After losing their independence, the Jewish people went through a long spiritual crisis. Their hope for a triumph over their enemies was not realized. Indeed, quite the contrary happened. The Babylonian Captivity (586–539 B.C.E.) was a particular low point. Many Jews never returned, having been seduced by the “Great Whore” Babylon into the worship of Mesopotamian deities, as had their erstwhile cobelievers in Samaria. After Persian king Cyrus released them, those who returned were the “tried and true” who had been tested and, strong in their faith, had survived. They rebuilt the destroyed temple and restructured their theology. Aided by new interpretations of the Covenant (the *Talmud* [TAHL-muhd]), the Jews reappraised and made precise the nature of God and their relationship to him.

During this period after captivity, the image of Yahweh took on clearer lines. Not only was Yahweh the only god, he was also the *universal* god of all. Whether or not the Gentiles worshiped him, he was their all-powerful judge and would reward or punish them (mostly the latter) as they conformed or not to the demands of conscience.

God was a *just* god, who would reward and punish according to ethical principles, but he was also a *merciful* god who would not turn a deaf ear to the earnest penitent. His ways were mysterious to men, such as the sorely tried Job in the Bible, but they would someday be seen for what they were: righteous and just.

God was an *omnipotent* and *omniscient* (all-powerful and all-knowing) master who could do whatever he desired, always and everywhere. The Creator of nature, he stood outside his creation, transcending it. There were no other opposing forces (gods) that could frustrate his will, but in his wisdom, Yahweh had granted his creature Man free will and allowed the principle of evil to arise in the form of the fallen angel, Lucifer (or Satan). Humankind could ignore conscience and the Law and choose evil, much as Zarathustra had taught. If they did, they would face a Last Judgment that would condemn them to eternal punishment and deprive them of the fate that Yahweh desired and offered: salvation in blessedness.

Finally, Yahweh gradually came to be a *personal* deity in a way that no other ancient god had been. He could be prayed to directly; he was observant of all that affected a man's or a woman's life. His actions were not impulsive or unpredictable. He wanted his people not as slaves but as friends. The relationship between God and Man is meant to be one of mutual love. In a sense, God needed Man to complete the work of creation.

The promise that Yahweh had given Moses to preserve the Jews as a people was what held the Judean Jews together after the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. But, inevitably, some of them, including many of the learned men (*rabbis*), came to think of this promise as one aimed not at simple preservation but at a counterconquest by the Jews of their enemies. Instead of being a contemptible minority in the empires of the mighty ones, these Hebrews believed that they would become the mighty and would bend others to their will.

The Dead Sea Scrolls.

These historic documents were found in a cave above the Dead Sea in 1947. The scrolls have been largely deciphered in recent years and have proven a rich source of knowledge of Jewish society and customs around the first century c.E.



Habakkuk Commentary, columns 5-8, Qumran Cave 1, 1st century BC (parchment) / The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel / Bridgeman Images

In this way grew the hopes for a [messiah \(\(meh-SIGH-yuh\) A savior-king who would someday lead the Jews to glory.\)](#) (meh-SIGH-yuh), a redeemer who would take the Jews out of their humiliations and make them a people to be feared and respected. In this manner the message of the Lord speaking through the great prophets was distorted into a promise of earthly grandeur rather than a promise of immortal salvation for those who believed. Recently discovered evidence suggests there were several individuals in the first-century B.C.E. whom some Jews took to be this messiah. When Jesus appeared, claiming to be the messiah and speaking of his kingdom “which was not of this earth,” there was disappointment and disbelief among many of those who heard him.

By the time of the Roman conquest of the Near East, in the first century before Christ, some of the Jewish leaders had become fanatical, believing in the protection of mighty Yahweh against all odds. These [zealots \(\(ZEH-luts\) Jewish religious extremists at the time of Jesus who opposed Roman occupation and used guerilla methods and assassination to drive them \(the Romans\) out of Israel and Judea.\)](#) (ZEH-luts) were unwilling to bend before any nonbeliever, however powerful he might be. This caused the tension between the Jewish nation and the Roman overlords to eventually result in war and the second diaspora—the forced emigration of much of this small nation from their ancestral home to all corners of the Roman Empire.

Wherever the Jews went, they took their national badge of distinction with them: the unerring belief in their identity as the Chosen and their particular vision of the nature of God and his operations in the minds and hearts of humans. This was a vision of the relationship between the deity and his creations that few other people had: mutually dependent, ethical, and just, but also merciful on the Lord's side; submissive but not slavish on Man's side. It was the relationship between a stern-but-loving father and a sinful-but-dutiful child. The mold for the evolution of Christianity had been formed. All that was needed was the appearance of the long-rumored messiah who would fulfill the promise that the Chosen would someday enter glory.

Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-4c A Changing Theology

Book Title: World Civilizations

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