Judaism

Judaism is the oldest religion of the western world and has influenced Christianity and Islam. There are approximately fifteen million Jews throughout the world.

The Hebrews were the ancestors of the Jewish people and trace their ancestry to Abraham, who left his home in the Mesopotamian city of Ur in about 2200BCE. The Hebrews were different from others of their time, because they were monotheistic; they believed in only one god. The Hebrews believed they had a special relationship with their God and they were his chosen people.

The Hebrews established a nation they called Israel on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. About 1300BCE, many Hebrews moved to Egypt to escape a famine. A famine is a great hunger. At first, the Hebrews were treated well in Egypt, but in time they were enslaved by the Egyptians. According to Hebrew tradition, God sent ten deadly plagues to Egypt when the Egyptians would not release the Hebrew slaves. When the Hebrews did escape, tradition states the Moses, the leader of the Hebrews, parted the Red Sea for just enough time to allow the Hebrews to pass. Once the Hebrews reached the other side, tradition states the waters returned and the Egyptian army drowned. After their escape across the Red Sea in 1250BCE, God revealed Ten Commandments to Moses. The Ten Commandments formed the basis of Mosaic Law and are the model for both Jewish and Christian moral thought.

The Hebrews returned to Israel, but they were conquered by several other cultures. In time, most of the Hebrews were forced to leave Israel, beginning a period known as the Diaspora. The Hebrews were forced to live as minorities in many different lands until the creation of the Jewish nation of Israel in 1948.

Jewish people had often faced severe mistreatment. European Jews were ordered to leave Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella, and faced organized massacres called pogroms in many nations, particularly in Eastern Europe. In this century, as many as six million Jews were murdered in what we now call the Holocaust, where the Nazi party in Germany attempted genocide, or the planned killing of a whole group of people because of their religion or nationality.

Jews worship in synagogues lead by a rabbi. Rabbi is a Hebrew word that means “master.” Their holiest period is the weekly Shabbat, which lasts from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. Other important Jewish holidays include Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur (a Day of Atonement or confession), Simchat Torah (celebrating receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai), Chanukah (a celebration of a military victory), and Passover (a remembrance of the time the Hebrews lived in Egypt).

The Torah is the most holy book of Judaism. The Torah is also holy to Christians, who include it as the Old Testament of their Bible. The Talmud is another holy book in Judaism. The Talmud is a collection of the laws and customs others of the Jewish people.

Most Jews live in the United States (5.8 million) and Israel (4.8 million). Europe was once home to millions of Jewish people, but most of the survivors of the Holocaust immigrated to other nations. Today only 2.3 million Jews remain in Europe.
The most recognized symbol of Judaism is the six-pointed Star of David. Jewish legend says that a Hebrew king named David went into battle with the hexagram on his shield. Later, when Jews were minorities in Christian and Muslim nations, they were forced to wear the star on their clothing to identify themselves.

Today you will see the hexagram used to identify synagogues and Jewish organizations. The symbol that was once used to separate Jews from the rest of society is not flown on the flag of Judaism’s homeland, Israel.

The Ten Commandments

The following is from the Revised Standard Version of the Christian Bible.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his [donkey] or anything that is your neighbor’s.