Judaism

Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions, and certainly the world's oldest and first monotheistic religion. Its origins date back nearly 4000 years to the Sumerian city of Ur. Judaism is an incredibly important religion in history as it gives rise to the world's other two major monotheistic religions — Christianity and Islam.

Origins of Judaism

* A man named Abram and his wife Sara lived just outside the Sumerian city of Ur.
* Jews believe that God appeared to Abram and made a **covenant** (mutual agreement) with him. Abram agreed to worship only God, and God agreed to make Abram & his descendents His chosen people.
* God renamed Abram, **Abraham** (father of multitudes) and Sara, **Sarah** (mother of nations). God also promised Abraham & his descendents a special land, and Abraham and Sarah left Ur and traveled to the promised land of **Canaan** (modern day Israel).

Basic Beliefs

* Jews are **monotheistic**, which means they believe in only one god.
* Jews believe that they are God's chosen people, and that they were given a special land to inhabit (Israel). There is a belief in original sin — that man is born sinful, and can only be cleaned through sacrifice.
* The Jewish God differed from other gods found at the time — He was merciful, but required a strict code of ethics & behavior.
* The guide for Jewish behavior can be found in the Ten Commandments and the numerous laws found in the Torah.
* Jews rest on the Sabbath, which runs from sundown Friday night to sundown Saturday.
* Finally, Jews believe that a Messiah (savior) is coming to rule the world in peace and glory.
### Sacred Symbols & Books

- The most recognizable Jewish symbol is the *star of David* — a six-pointed star. This star is found on the Israeli flag.
- Another common symbol is the *menorah*, which is used to celebrate Chanukah.
- Jews worship in a temple known as a *Synagogue*, and often read passages from the *Tanakh* aloud. The Tanakh is an acronym for the 3 Jewish holy books — the *Torah* (first 5 books), the *Nevi''im* (writings of the prophets) & the *Ketuvim* (writings). Christians refer to the Tanakh as the Old Testament, but Jews do not.

### Sects of Judaism

- **Reform Judaism** — Jews began integrating more into society. They began adapting themselves & some of their practices to the society they lived in. Many American Jews began having services in English to allow more integration.
- **Orthodox Judaism** — Opposed Reform Judaism, and warned Jews to anchor themselves to traditional ways. They have a strict interpretation of the Tanakh, and closely observe the Sabbath and all dietary laws. Only men are rabbis.
- **Conservative Judaism** — Rests between Reform & Orthodox Judaism. They believe it is important for Jewish law to adapt to contemporary life, but believe traditions should not be compromised.

### History of the Jewish People

- The history of the Jewish people is a relatively tragic one. The highlight of their past was the unified Kingdom of Israel established by King David around 1000 BCE, and the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Solomon in 960 BCE.
- The kingdom was divided into northern & southern parts. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians around 720 BCE, and the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Jews were intentionally scattered throughout the Middle East, an action known as the *Diaspora*.
- In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and dispersed the Jews who had gathered there throughout their Empire. (A second diaspora.)
- Jews were routinely persecuted in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, but in modern times it is the Holocaust that stands as the most tragic example of *anti-Semitism* (anti-Jewish feeling).

### Impact on Lives

- One of the biggest impacts on the lives of believers is on diet. Jews are not to eat any pig products, and they are not supposed to mix meat and milk products. They are supposed to eat *Kosher* (blessed by a rabbi), but not all Jews follow these dietary rules.
- Jews are also supposed to keep the Sabbath, which begins Friday night. For Orthodox Jews, this means that they must prepare all food ahead of time, and must live close enough to the local temple to be able to walk.

- Another rite of passage that is observed is the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Jewish teens celebrate this around their 13th birthday. It includes ceremonies in the Synagogue where they read from the Torah, then have a party afterward.