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978-0-521-60628-8 - The Origins of Judaism: From Canaan to the Rise of Islam

Robert Goldenberg

Excerpt

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## A Note of Introduction

THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF JUDAISM out of its biblical roots, a story that took well over a thousand years to run its course. When this book begins there is no “Judaism” and there is no “Jewish people.” By the end, the Jews and Judaism are everywhere in the Roman Empire and beyond, more or less adjusted to the rise of Christianity and ready to absorb the sudden appearance of yet another new religion called Islam.

It may be useful to provide a few words of introduction about the name *Judaism* itself. This book will begin with the religious beliefs and practices of a set of ancient tribes that eventually combined to form a nation called the *Children of Israel*. Each tribe lived in a territory that was called by its tribal name: the land of Benjamin, the land of Judah, and so on. According to the biblical narrative, these tribes organized and maintained a unified kingdom for most of the tenth century BCE, but then the single tribe of Judah was separated from the others in a kingdom of its own, called the *Kingdom of Judah* (in Hebrew *yehudah*) to distinguish it from the larger *Kingdom of Israel* to its north. Thus the name *Israel* was essentially a national or ethnic designation, while the name *Judah* simultaneously meant a smaller ethnic entity, included within the larger one, and the land where that group dwelt for hundreds of years. In ancient times, the single word *Israel* was never used to designate a territory; for that purpose the phrase *Land of Israel* (*Eretz Yisra'el*) was always employed.

To complicate matters further, there was another self-designation, *Hebrews*, that was used by Israelites only when they were speaking to outsiders or by outsiders when referring to the people of Israel. That term eventually gave its name to the language in which most of the

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Jewish Bible is written, the language still spoken in the modern state of Israel today.

The last king of Israel was overthrown, and the kingdom was destroyed, in 722 BCE during an Assyrian invasion. Most of the population were carried off by the conquerors, but some escaped down into the surviving Kingdom of Judah, where they were welcomed (with some hesitation) as fellow Israelites. Over the next century, as Assyrian power faded, the Kingdom of Judah expanded and brought much of the former Israelite territory under its control. Now, for the first time, it was possible to use *Judah* and *Israel* as synonyms.

From around this time (the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE), various words that later meant *Jew* or *Jewish* begin to appear in our biblical sources. In a narrative from the time of King Hezekiah<sup>1</sup> the language of the Kingdom of Judah, which moderns would call *Hebrew*, is called *yehudit*, or Judahite, as distinct from *aramit* or Aramean (later Aramaic), a more widespread language spoken throughout much of the Near East.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the people of Judah are more and more often called *yehudim*:<sup>3</sup> in modern English this word is often translated as “Jews,” and that is its meaning in modern Hebrew as well. But within the Bible the term never lost its specific connection to the tribe or the kingdom or the territory of Judah.

In 586 BCE the southern Kingdom of Judah was destroyed in its turn, this time by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, and the leadership of the realm was carried off to exile in Babylon. In 539 BCE, Babylon in turn was vanquished by the growing Persian Empire, and the exiles from Judah were allowed to return home. (Many declined the offer and voluntarily remained in exile.) Under the Persians, the territory was called *Yehud*, and then, as one conquest followed another, *Ioudaia* in Greek and *Iudaea* in Latin. In rabbinic writings of the second and third centuries CE, the term *yehuda* still designates the particular territory of ancient Judaea. In rabbinic parlance the larger Jewish homeland, embracing Galilee to the north and other territories as well, was always called the Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisra'el*.

As *yehudim* (Greek *ioudaioi*, Latin *iudaei*) spread out into the Mediterranean world, they preserved their ancestral identity and thus maintained a strong link with their ancestral homeland. In Hebrew they called themselves *yisra'el*, but in Greek or Latin they

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were “people from Judaea.” In Greek or Latin the language of the Bible was called *Hebrew*, and by extension the Jews themselves were sometimes called *Hebrews*. It is not clear whether *ioudaioi* and *hebraioi* suggested different connotations in Greek or were used interchangeably.

\* \* \*

Ancient Jews, the people this book has set out to discuss, rarely used the term *Judaism*, or its equivalent in any ancient language, to identify their way of life; it was only in modern times that Jews adopted that word. In Greek, the word *ioudaismos* roughly means “the way Jews live,” and it was normally used by outsiders when speaking of Jewish customs.<sup>4</sup> More particularly, early Christian writers began to use the term to designate the way of life against which their own new religion was struggling to define itself.<sup>5</sup> “The emergence of Judaism” thus means the historical development of a way of life that came to be associated with a people called *Judaeans* or *Jews*.

This book will trace that emergence, beginning with the beliefs and practices of a set of Near Eastern tribes living in their native land. Conquered by successive foreign armies, surviving remnants of those tribes had to adapt their ancestral laws and customs to the wishes of foreign empires. Increasingly dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, they had to adapt a way of life that began as the native culture of people living in their own land to the pressures of living in other countries. As their nation lost its political freedom, the religious dimensions of their shared heritage grew in importance, until finally most onlookers saw them as a widely scattered religious community that once had enjoyed political significance but did so no longer. Defined by their religious customs (some of which would strike modern observers as cultural patterns and not strictly religious at all), the Jews preserved the hope of national restoration but could do nothing to bring that hope to reality. Their God would have to do that for them in the fullness of time.

The focus of this book, however, will remain on religious phenomena: texts, customs, beliefs, modes of leadership. Judaism is an ethnic religion, a religious heritage tied to a specific ethnic or national identity, so it will be impossible to trace the history of the religion without also keeping track of the history of the nation. However, the rise and

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fall of kingdoms and empires, the names and dates of battles and of kings, will receive only as much attention as is needed to present the circumstances under which religious developments took place. Some coverage of these other matters will be necessary, but it should never distract the reader from a more central concern with the Jews themselves and their way of life.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

This book was designed for two distinct audiences: undergraduate students in university courses and nonacademic lay readers. Academic specialists may find it useful in their teaching, but this book is not primarily intended for them. For that reason, presentation of evidence is suggestive rather than comprehensive, though readers can consult the Suggestions for Further Reading at the end of the volume to learn more about key issues: those Suggestions indicate both primary sources – where the ancient evidence can be located – and secondary sources – places where modern scholars have considered that evidence and figured out ways to interpret it.

The Jewish religion has seen much contention in its long history. Jews have disputed among themselves and do so still. Others have disputed with the Jews and do so still. Some of the ancient disputes have subsided; others remain bitter and passionate. Some of the modern disputes continue ancient battles; others revolve around new concerns. Some of the disputes involving Jews have turned violent or even murderous; others have remained “wars of words.” This book will aim to remain neutral in its treatment of all such quarrels, though, of course, the author’s own opinions and preferences will unavoidably be visible from time to time.

Readers of this volume will note that certain key primary texts, and consideration of certain key issues and themes, have been removed from the main text and printed by themselves in boxes. This allows the main text to flow more smoothly and provides isolated materials for focused classroom discussion, writing assignments, and the like. It is hoped that instructors will find this useful and that private readers will not be disturbed in their enjoyment of the narrative.

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## The Prehistory of Judaism

THE JEWISH RELIGION (JUDAISM) EMERGED OUT OF THE writings of the Hebrew Bible, but it is not actually to be found in those writings. Judaism is a religion that worships God<sup>1</sup> through *words* – prayer, sermons, the reading of scripture, and the like – in buildings called *synagogues* under the leadership of learned *rabbis*. The Bible knows something of prayer but nothing of the rest: the Bible portrays a religion centered on a single building commonly called the *Temple* and led by hereditary *priests* who worship through *actions* – elaborate sacrificial rites and other ceremonies of purification and atonement. The transition from that earlier religion to one that modern people would recognize is the story line of this book.

Almost all our information about the early parts of this story comes from the pages of the *Bible*<sup>2</sup> (see “What Is in the Bible?”). The Bible is actually not a single book; it is an anthology of materials that were written over a span of many centuries – perhaps as much as 1,000 years – in two different languages and in at least two different countries. Not surprisingly, its writings show a variety of styles and a variety of outlooks on many important questions (see Chapter 2). This diversity of content allowed later readers to find many different messages in its pages and to apply those messages to the great variety of situations that they faced. This flexibility is the key to the Bible’s remarkably long success at sustaining individuals and communities of faith over more than two millennia.

However, from the historian’s point of view, the Bible presents a very difficult problem. Many, perhaps most, of its narratives were written long after the occurrences they describe (the story begins with the creation of the world!), and almost nothing in the Bible can be

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## WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE?

Jewish tradition divided the Bible into three sections containing a total of twenty-four books.

## I. The Torah

1. **Genesis.** Background for the emergence of the people of Israel, from the creation of the world through the lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) and matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel) up to the death of Joseph in Egypt.
2. **Exodus.** Slavery in Egypt, then liberation. Covenant at Sinai, revelation of God's commandments, construction of the Tabernacle for formal worship. Story of the Golden Calf: Israel's first lapse into idolatry.
3. **Leviticus.** Rules for maintenance of ritual purity and proper conduct of sacrifice; also for creation of a holy community. First description of dietary laws and the festivals of the year.
4. **Numbers.** Census in the desert prior to the march toward the Promised Land. Incidents in the course of that march, further legislation.
5. **Deuteronomy.** Moses' farewell address: review of his career, summary of God's commandments, warning of the consequences of disobedience. Moses dies at the edge of the Promised Land.

## II. The Prophets

- a. **The Early Prophets.** Despite its traditional name, this section actually contains very little prophecy. Instead, it mainly continues the narrative beyond the death of Moses.
6. **Joshua.** Israel's conquest and initial settlement of the Promised Land.
7. **Judges.** The next several generations. Disloyalty to God brings foreign oppressors; repentance brings liberation.
8. **1 and 2 Samuel.** The last of the judges and the first of the kings of Israel up to David's death.
9. **1 and 2 Kings.** The history of the kingdoms through their destruction.

*Note: The books now cited as numbered pairs were originally single works. They were divided by copyists in the Middle Ages on account of their great size. This is not the case with the numbered books of the New Testament, which are separate documents.*

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**b. The Later Prophets.** These are the great orators and writers of the Bible.

10. **Isaiah.** The historical Isaiah lived around 700 BCE, but much in this book seems to date from a later time, during the Babylonian Exile and perhaps even later.

11. **Jeremiah.** Lived around the time of the Exile; the book contains significant biographical narrative along with Jeremiah's orations.

12. **Ezekiel.** Contemporary with Jeremiah, but lived and prophesied among the exiles in Babylon.

13. **The Twelve.** Twelve much smaller books of prophecy, attributed to writers who lived over a span of several centuries. Only Jonah contains significant narrative.

Hosea	Obadiah	Nahum	Haggai
Joel	Jonah	Habakkuk	Zephaniah
Amos	Micah	Zechariah	Malachi

**III. The Writings**

14. **Psalms.** A collection of 150 religious poems, many attributed to King David.

15. **Proverbs.** A collection of wisdom teachings, largely attributed to King Solomon.

16. **Job.** A story of righteousness tested by suffering.

**The Five Scrolls,** so called because they are liturgically read on specified holidays (this grouping reflects later synagogue practice and is not a formally recognized section of the Bible).

17. **Song of Songs.** A love poem attributed to King Solomon. Read in synagogues on Passover.

18. **Ruth.** A brief narrative of loyalty and love set in the days of the judges; the origins of the dynasty of King David. Read on the Feast of Weeks.

19. **Lamentations.** Poems on the destruction of Jerusalem, attributed to Jeremiah. Read on the Ninth of Av, anniversary of the destruction of the Temple.

20. **Ecclesiastes, or Qohelet.** Philosophical musings, attributed to King Solomon. Read on the Feast of Booths.

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**WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE? (continued)**

21. **Esther.** Intrigue at the royal court of Persia; the Jews narrowly defeat the evil designs of a powerful enemy. Read on Purim. This is the only book of the Bible in which God is never directly mentioned in the Hebrew text.

22. **Daniel.** Stories about loyal Jews in the royal courts of Babylon and Persia; also visions of the end of history.

23. **Ezra-Nehemiah.** Jewish leaders and their achievements in the period after the Babylonian Exile.

24. **1 and 2 Chronicles.** Retelling of Israel's history from the time of King David through the return from the Babylonian Exile. Largely a revision, but sometimes a straightforward repetition of the Books of Samuel and Kings.

In recent times the Hebrew acronym *Tanakh* (Torah, Nevi'im [prophets], Ketuvim [writings]) has been used to designate the entire twenty-four-book collection.

\* \* \*

The Christian tradition, following the custom of ancient Greek-speaking Jews, arranged these books differently, in two sections (not formally separated) containing prose narrative and poetic compositions, respectively. The order was as follows:

<b>Genesis</b>	<b>1 and 2 Kings</b>	<b>Ecclesiastes</b>
<b>Exodus</b>	<b>1 and 2 Chronicles</b>	<b>Song of Songs</b>
<b>Leviticus</b>	<b>Ezra</b>	<b>Isaiah</b>
<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Nehemiah</b> (a separate book)	<b>Jeremiah</b>
<b>Deuteronomy</b>	<b>Esther</b>	<b>Lamentations</b>
<b>Joshua</b>	<b>Job</b>	<b>Ezekiel</b>
<b>Judges</b>	<b>Psalms</b>	<b>Daniel</b>
<b>Ruth</b>	<b>Proverbs</b>	<b>The Twelve</b>
<b>1 and 2 Samuel</b>		

confirmed from any other ancient source of information. As always with uncorroborated information, the modern observer is in no position to judge the Bible's historical reliability, in no position to measure the distance between description and event, in no position to read the Bible's stories and figure out what (if anything) really happened.<sup>3</sup> The



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Bible can therefore not be read as a historical record: instead, it must be understood that biblical narrative is a distillation of national memory that has been designed to convey a religious message. The Bible's religious message is loud and clear, but we cannot always know how the described events would have appeared without the religious purpose that now shapes the narrative, or indeed how the authors of the Bible learned about those events in the first place.

Then can we modern readers not learn history from the Bible at all? Of course we can, just not in the way we can learn history from archives or other official documents. The key to learning history from the Bible is to focus attention *not on the content of the stories but on the stories themselves: Who told them? Why? How did the people who told these stories understand them? What truths did they find in them? What lessons did they seek to convey?* People have been reciting these narratives for well over 2,000 years; that by itself is a historical fact of enormous importance. After a brief summary of the narrative itself, it will be possible to think about those questions.

## The Biblical Narrative

**Early developments.** The Bible begins with the creation of the world by Israel's God.<sup>4</sup> This is not a god who struggles or collaborates with other gods, as in the myths of other peoples; the God of Israel creates the world alone, without effort or difficulty, simply by commanding step by step that the cosmic order come into being. Into this world the Creator places all living species, including a human pair named *Adam* and *Eve*. Adam and Eve could have lived carefree under God's protection in the *Garden of Eden*, but they transgressed: there was a single tree in the garden, the "tree of knowing good and evil," whose fruit they were told to avoid, but they ate that fruit and as a result were expelled into the world of hard labor, the world of sex and birth and death. The very act of learning the difference between good and evil brought suffering into the world.

The early chapters of the Bible contain several other dramatic depictions of human beings' inability to live as they should. Adam and Eve had two sons named *Cain* and *Abel*, and one murdered the other. Sexual immorality and violence became widespread. Five generations after Cain, another murder occurred. By the tenth generation,

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God was so disheartened that he destroyed the whole creation in a flood; only one righteous man (*Noah*) and his family were preserved in order to make a new beginning. But Noah too disappointed: on emerging from the ark in which he rode out the flood, he planted a vineyard, became drunk, and brought sexual humiliation on his family.<sup>5</sup> Noah's descendants again grew numerous, but then they built the famous *Tower of Babel* in rebellion against God's wishes. Forced as a result to speak different languages, they scattered around the world: the idyll had gone sour.

The modern reader can easily see that these narratives attempt to answer basic questions about the nature of human existence: Why don't we all speak the same language? Why do people have to work so hard for their food? Why do people die? Why is the sexual urge so powerful and childbirth so painful? Why are women subordinate to men? All ancient cultures told such stories, and modern scholars can compare the biblical versions with others that circulated in the ancient world, thus setting Israel more firmly in the cultural context of the ancient Near East.

But such comparisons do not explain why the Bible itself was preserved or how this particular version of those stories came to dominate our own civilization. Only the next stage in the narrative explains that.

**God makes a choice.** After twenty generations of human history, God suddenly instructed a man named *Abram*, from a family with roots in Mesopotamia, to travel to the distant land of Canaan and settle there. As it happened, Abram's father had set out for this very destination years earlier but had never reached his goal; now Abram could complete his father's journey and fulfill a divine mission at the same time. The Bible never quite accounts for God's choice of this man; we are told that he was righteous, but we are not told (as was said of Noah) that he was the only righteous man of his generation.

Whatever the reason for God's choice, the results were momentous. Abram settled in Canaan and received God's promise or *covenant* that his descendants would inherit that land and become there a great nation. The mark of this covenant would be the ancient rite of *circumcision*, performed on the body of every baby boy in the first