

Definition: **Judaism** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

## 1.

the Jewish religion, deriving its authority from the precepts of the Old Testament and the teaching of the rabbis as expounded in the Talmud. It is founded on belief in the one and only God, who is transcendent, the creator of all things, and the source of all righteousness, and in the duty of all Jewish people to bear witness to this belief.

Judaic *adjective*

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### Summary Article: **Judaism**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(jō'dəɪzəm, jō'dē-), the religious beliefs and practices and the way of life of the Jews. The term itself was first used by Hellenized Jews to describe their religious practice, but it is of predominantly modern usage; it is not used in the Bible or in Rabbinic literature and only rarely in the literature of the medieval period. The word Torah is employed when referring to the divinely revealed teachings of Jewish law and belief. *Judaism* is used more broadly, including also the totality of human interpretation and practice. Thus, one may speak of “secular Judaism,” referring to an adherence to values expressed by Judaism but removed from any religious context. The most important holy days in Judaism are the weekly Sabbath, the major holidays of Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkoth (see Tabernacles, Feast of), *Simhat Torah*, Passover, and Shavuot, and the minor holidays of Hanukkah, Purim, and *Tisha B'Av*.

### The Early Period

The history of Judaism predates the period to which the term itself actually refers, in that Judaism formally applies to the post-Second Temple period, while its antecedents are to be found in the biblical “religion of Israel.” The Bible is no longer considered a homogeneous work; the many traditions represented in it demonstrate variance and growth. While the historicity of the patriarchs' existence and of Moses as the giver of all laws is under question, certain dominant themes can be seen developing in this early period that have importance for later Judaism.

Central to these themes is the notion of monotheism, which most scholars believe to have been the outgrowth of a process that began with polytheism, progressed to henotheism (the worship of one god without denying the existence of others), and ended in the belief in a single Lord of the universe, uniquely different from all His creatures. He is compassionate toward His creation, and in turn humans are to love and fear (i.e., stand in awe of) Him. Because God is holy, He demands that His people be holy, righteous, and just, a kingdom of priests to assist in the fulfillment of His designs for humankind and the world.

Israel's chosenness consists of this special designation and the task that accompanies it. God promises the land of Canaan to Israel as their homeland, the place in which the Temple will be built and sacrificial worship of God carried out. The holy days were the Sabbath, Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkoth; and circumcision, dietary laws, and laws pertaining to dress, agriculture, and social justice characterized the structure of the biblical religion. Three types of leaders existed during this period: the priest (*kohen*),

who officiated in the Temple and executed the laws; the prophet (*navi*), to whom was revealed God's messages to His people; and the sage (*hacham*), who taught practical wisdom and proper behavior. There was developing already in this early period a belief in the ultimate coming of God's kingdom on earth, a time of peace and justice. To this was added, after the destruction (586 B.C.) of the First Temple and the Babylonian captivity (which many saw as the consequence of idolatry and which may have been responsible for the final stage of the development from polytheism to monotheism), the expectation of national restoration under the leadership of a descendant of the Davidic house, the Messiah.

## **The Postexilic Period**

It was after the Babylonian captivity (not later than the 5th cent. B.C.) that a compilation of earlier texts and oral traditions was made, forming the canon of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Subsequently 34 other books were added to form the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, though the canon was not finalized until perhaps as late as the 2d cent. A.D. The Torah was traditionally attributed to Moses, and study of the Torah was accompanied by expositions and explanations in which the Oral Law, as distinct from the Written Law (the Torah text), is rooted. While it is widely held that the Pharisees further developed the Oral Law, in opposition to the literalness of the Sadducees, it is inconceivable that the latter group could have administered the biblical laws without reinterpreting them in accordance with a changing world, or in the face of a lack of specificity in the text.

The Babylonian exile had exposed the Israelites to new ideas, and it is to that period that the notions of identifiable angels (such as Michael and Raphael), of the personification of evil (Satan), and of the resurrection of the dead can probably be traced. The conquests of Alexander the Great once again brought the Jews into contact with new ideas, most significantly that of the immortality of the soul. Conflict arose within the community of Israel concerning the level of Hellenization acceptable, out of which came the revolt of the Maccabees against the Seleucid rulers of Syria and their Judean sympathizers. The resulting martyrdom of many gave added impetus to the belief in collective resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul after the body's death. These concepts were wed in such a way that while the body awaited its resurrection, the soul was seen as living on in another realm. This new development in no way supplanted the earlier notion of earthly reward; life on earth, however, was viewed by many as preparatory for the next.

As the conditions of life deteriorated, apocalyptic beliefs grew—national catastrophe and the messianic kingdom were seen as imminent events. Some groups (see Essenes; Qumran) fled into the desert to lead righteous lives in anticipation, while others followed claimants to the mantle of Messiah (most notably Jesus). Out of these numerous ingredients came both Christianity and classical, or rabbinic, Judaism.

## **After the Destruction of the Second Temple**

Developing over a period of five centuries (until c.A.D. 500), rabbinic Judaism completed the process already underway, which saw the replacement of the Temple by the synagogue (the Second Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70), of the priest by the rabbi, and of the sacrificial ceremony by the prayer service and study. Basic to these changes was the redaction and codification of the Oral Law (see Mishna; Talmud) and the Midrash, which, as outgrowths of the biblical religion, centered on the relationships between God, His Torah, and His people, Israel. Emphasis was placed upon study of the Torah (in its broadest sense) as the most important religious act, leading to an understanding of the

proper way of life; upon the growing need for national restoration in the face of continued Exile from the Promised Land; and upon the function of this world as preparatory for the World to Come (*Olam ha-Bah*), while not devaluing the importance of life in this world.

Daily life was sanctified by the emphasis in Jewish law (*halakah*) on the ritual fitness of foods (*kashrut*), the recitation of blessings for a variety of mundane acts, and the daily, weekly, monthly and annual cycles of prayer. Rites for the personal life cycle came to include circumcision of male infants at the age of eight days, signifying their induction into the covenant between God and Israel; the recognition of thirteen years as the age of majority for religious responsibilities (see Bar Mitzvah); marriage; and funeral rites. During the medieval period, these trends continued and were basic to the several important codifications of the legal material and to the many biblical and Talmudic commentaries that were composed at this time (most notably by Rashi and Maimonides).

## The Middle Ages

The kabbalah flowered during the Middle Ages, combining older trends in Jewish mysticism with Neoplatonism and other ideas. The kabbalists retained the idea that the totality of God's nature is ultimately beyond human grasp ("Ein Sof" [Heb., literally,=without end] as the "Nothing"), yet, in keeping with tradition, held to a vision of a personal God who exists as the active, creative, and sustaining force within the cosmos ("Ein Sof" as the "Everything"). Spain was a major center of kabbalistic thought, which after the expulsions and forced conversion in 1492, spread and became more central to Jewish life in the Mediterranean world. Palestine then became the center of kabbalism, especially as it was developed by Isaac Luria and others.

A Jewish philosophy developed in answer to the questions raised by the exposure to Greek thought as distilled through the Islamic natural philosophy and metaphysics. Central to these issues was the conflict between reason and revelation: whether revelation was necessary if all could be ascertained through reason, or whether reason was imperfect and revelation was God's assisting humans to know the truth. Maimonides argued that one can say nothing positive about the personal nature of God, which is beyond human comprehension; one can only indicate what He is not (thus, the statement that God is wise says only that God is not ignorant, not how wise He actually is).

While the Jewish Middle Ages is usually defined by scholars as extending at least into the 18th cent., there was a Jewish counterpart to the general European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th cent., and figures such as Judah Abravanel were influenced by contemporary European philosophic currents. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 led to the Jews of N Italy, S France, and the Levant coming under Sephardic influence (see Sephardim), and these events provoked much messianic and kabbalist speculation, culminating in the spectacular career of the self-proclaimed Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi.

The Amsterdam community of Marranos (those Jews forced by the Inquisition to adopt Christianity, but who continued to practice Judaism in secret, and many of whom later emigrated and returned to the Jewish fold) often provided a liberalizing influence on Orthodox Judaism, most significantly in the person of Baruch Spinoza, a Jew excommunicated for his unsparing critique of Rabbinic Judaism. The reaction to Sabbatianism and philosophical liberalism caused a hardening of rabbinic orthodoxy, but the Jewish world of the 18th cent. remained turbulent. It produced both the great traditionalist rabbinic figure Elijah ben Solomon and the untraditional figures of Baal-Shem-Tov, the founder of Hasidism (which Elijah himself fought against), and Moses Mendelssohn, the spiritual progenitor of later reformers whom Elijah's spiritual descendants repeatedly condemned.

## The Reform Movement and Zionism

The emancipation of European Jews in the early decades of the 19th cent. brought with it the problem of maintaining claims of distinctiveness, of being “chosen,” and at the same time wishing to participate in the general society. First dealt with by the Reform leaders of Germany (most notably Abraham Geiger), this problem was met directly in Eastern Europe, giving rise to the Haskalah movement, whose members (e.g., Nachman Krochmal) sought to revitalize Jewish life by recreating it along the lines of the best in European culture.

In the late 19th cent., Zionism promised a return to the Holy Land. This again created problems for the traditionalists whose religious ideas were rooted in the Diaspora, and many of whom opposed any movement to build a secular Jewish state in the Holy Land. Eventually, an Orthodox wing of Zionism did emerge. For many Jews still unanswered is the question of whether a full Jewish life is possible in exile, or whether residing in Zion is essential. Theologically, Zionism posed the problem of whether Jews can work for the messianic return or whether this would be counter to another traditional belief that saw humanity awaiting the divine intervention.

## Modern Judaism

Ultimately, it was the *halakah* (the law) that divided Judaism in the 19th cent. The Orthodox hold both the written law (Scriptures) and the oral laws (commentaries on the legal portions of the Scriptures) as authoritative, derived from God, while the Reform do not see them as authoritative in any absolute sense, but binding only in their ethical content. While Orthodox Jews maintain the traditional practices, Reform Jews perform only those rituals that they believe can promote and enhance a Jewish, God-oriented life. In 1999, however, leaders of American Reform Judaism reversed century-old teachings by encouraging but not enforcing the observance of many traditional rituals. The “historical school,” or Conservative movement, attempts to formulate a middle position between Orthodox and Reform, maintaining most of the traditional rituals but recognizing the need to make changes in accordance with overriding contemporary considerations. Conservative Jews believe that the history of Judaism proves their basic assumptions: that tradition and change have always gone hand in hand and that what is central to Judaism and has remained constant throughout the centuries is the people of Israel (and their needs), not the fundamentalism of Orthodoxy nor what they consider the abandonment of traditions by Reform. The related Reconstructionist movement of Mordechai M. Kaplan holds Judaism to be a human-centered rather than a God-centered religious civilization.

Also part of contemporary Judaism are the several Sephardic traditions maintained in Israel, France, Canada, and the United States by immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa and by European Sephardim in Europe and the Americas; the several Hasidic groups in Israel and the United States; the religious and secular Zionists in Israel and the Diaspora; the unorganized secular Jews, who maintain an atheist's or agnostic's adherence to Jewish values and culture; and those unorganized Jews who seek a religious life outside the synagogue. These many positions represent the most recent attempts at defining the “essence of Judaism,” a process that has been continuous throughout the ages, variously emphasizing one of the three major components of Judaism (God, Torah, Israel) over the remaining two.

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