

Judaism

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Starting from the Hellenistic period, when outside observers first attempted to write about the “other” in a dispassionate manner, Greek writers observed the unique monotheism of Judaism, noting how this aspect of their religion singled out Jews from all other peoples that the Greeks had encountered. The reports that reached philosophers such as Theophrastus and Megasthenes (c. 300 BCE) led them to consider the Jews a nation of philosophers. The Jews, they wrote, were stubborn believers in a singular god who was both the god of Israel and the god of the world. Other writers noted that the Jews insisted on certain practices that were strange to the Greeks: circumcision, abhorrence at consuming pork, and a kind of insular culture that was at odds with what the Greeks believed to be their own open-mindedness. Such traits were considered by some observers as both peculiar and the reason for what they called perhaps unconsciously describing their own elitism Jewish misanthropy, lack of patriotism (toward Greek culture), and general disregard for humankind outside of their own nation.

The Greeks thus articulated both a kind of attraction and repulsion toward Judaism. Despite such ambivalence, however, many Romans (to the dismay of their ruling classes) were fascinated by this religious civilization. Large numbers either converted or “Judaized,” meaning that they adopted Jewish customs such as holiday observance and food habits without enduring the circumcision that was required for full conversion. Roman writers noted that Judaism’s popularity was based on its great antiquity, its written scriptures, its deep sense of morality, and its monotheism.

Thus both impact and controversy have been associated with Judaism from the period of antiquity. What is absolutely clear is that Judaism had an overwhelming influence on the premodern history of the world west of the Indus River, and an enduring impact on the entire world in the modern period. The impact of Judaism on world history is both direct and felt through its relationships with the conquering religious civilizations, first of Christianity and then Islam.

Impact of Origins

Judaism emerged out of a religious civilization that is often referred to by scholars as “biblical” or “Israelite” religion [au 1: **instead of equating the entire civilization with the religion, would it be correct to say either 1) “emerged out of a religious tradition that is often referred to by scholars...etc.” or 2) “emerged out of a religious civilization based on what is often referred to by scholars as ...etc.”?**]. As such, what we today call Judaism must be distinguished from its older forms. In fact, Judaism is only one of the heirs of biblical religion, as are all the faiths in the family of religions referred to as Christianity. Biblical religion itself is multifaceted, since it evolved for centuries during the historical period represented in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). It has become evident to scholars that biblical religion was not always purely monotheistic, for it reflects tensions between those who would allow rituals associated with figurines representing other powers or deities and those who would accept nothing other than the one god, the God of Israel (1 Sam. 26:19, 1 Kings 11, 2 Kings 23).

It is clear, however, that the people that called itself Israel (from the biblical figure Jacob, who was also called Israel Gen. 32:29) was the first community to take on the doctrine of monotheism successfully. It is likely that the concept of monotheism existed among individuals before the emergence of the people of Israel. Even powerful and influential individuals such as the pharaoh Akhenaton (mid-fourteenth century BCE) may have been monotheists or proto-monotheists, but no entire community succeeded in adopting monotheism prior to ancient Judaism. This is perhaps Judaism’s greatest legacy to

world history. It established a theological paradigm that would have a profound impact on the nature of all subsequent religions, whether monotheistic or not.

Election

Ancient Israel saw itself as a small and beleaguered monotheistic people living in a world of countless foreign nations, all sharing the temptation of worshipping multiple deities (Deut. 7:7). Out of this awkward and precarious social and political situation, coupled with a feeling of obvious theological uniqueness, emerged an impression, and then a doctrine, of election, of being chosen by the one and only true god to represent and worship him unreservedly and unconditionally (Deut. 7:6-8). Throughout the Hebrew Bible we find the message that all the nations of the earth worship their sets of gods, but only Israel worships the One God, the God of the entire world. Election, therefore, became deeply ingrained into the Israelite consciousness. Ironically, despite or perhaps because of Israel's beleaguered position in relation to the mighty nations and empires of the ancient world, its unique community commitment to monotheism engendered the feeling that only it was uniquely elected to carry out the will of the true God. Israel was God's royal nation (Exod.19:5, Deut.7:6, 14:2, 26:18), and a holy nation (Exod.19:6, Deut.14:2, 21). Israel was God's chosen people (Deut.7:6, Isa. 43:20, 45:4, Pss. 33:12, 132:13, 135:4).

Covenant

The special relationship of election is symbolized by an institution called "covenant" (*b'rit* in Hebrew). The term actually refers to a host of formal or legal relationships in the Hebrew Bible ranging from agreements between two individuals (Gen. 21:22-33, 1 Sam. 18:3) to pacts between nations (1 Kings 5:26, 20:34). But one special type of biblical covenant agreement came to define the relationship between the only community of monotheists and the only true God. Forged between God and Israel, this is the "covenant par excellence," an institution found throughout the Hebrew Bible and a unique contribution of Israelite religion. The covenant was first rendered between God and Abraham's family (Gen. 17). It was reaffirmed with the biblical patriarchs (Gen. 26:23-24, 28:10-15) and then at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19, 24) between God and all the extended families and clans of Israel that were redeemed from Egyptian bondage. This divine covenant was extended even to non-Israelite peoples who escaped along with Israel in the redemption from Egypt (Exod. 12:38).

The concepts of election and covenantal relationship with God originated with ancient Israel and its religion, but these traits became intimately associated with monotheism in general. Election and covenant, therefore, are not only essential to Judaism, but are intimately associated with Christianity and Islam. Early Christians came to articulate their religion as representing a "new covenant" between God and a "new Israel," namely, those who accept the particular self-definition of Christianity. Christians, therefore, become the new "chosen," with only those who had chosen Christ as savior able to achieve their own salvation (1 Cor. 11:23-32, Heb. 8-9). Although less prominent in Islam, covenant (*'ahd* or *mithaq*) also defines the relationship between God and a newer community of believers. But Islam is less exclusionary in that it accepts, in theory, the salvation of prior communities of righteous believers (Quran 2:62, 5:72). Nevertheless, Muslims are defined in the Quran as a kind of elect, the most moderate or a "middle community," chosen to be witnesses (Quran 2:143), and "the best community brought forth for humankind" (Quran 3:110).

Election and covenant, closely associated with Israel and Judaism and an integral part of all expressions of monotheism, can be viewed as divisive traits. The legacy of Israelite religion is not, however, all exclusion and division. The inclusive and compassionate aspects of the universal religious imperative in Western religions also seem to have originated in ancient Israel.

Compassion For the "Other" and Repairing the World

The exclusivist aspects of monotheism in Israelite religion were always in tension with inclusionism, as defined by care for the stranger and a sense of responsibility toward others. Thus, although Israelites may

have considered themselves to be the only people in the ancient world that truly respected the one God of the universe, God was nevertheless the God of all, including those who did not recognize him. Israelite monotheism thus required care and concern even for those outside of Israel, and this responsibility was articulated through the concept of *imitateo dei*, emulating God, because the creator of all the world must be good: “For the Lord your God is God supreme...who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:17<N>19 [au 2: please provide version used for this and all other direct quotes from Bible. If the same version is used throughout, then it only needs to be provided the first time.]).

Social Justice

Codes or lists of formalized social precedents (customs) and formulaic duties existed before the emergence of ancient Judaism. These are similar to what today would be called law (obligations to state, society, and private individuals). The ancient Mesopotamian “codes” of Ur-Nammu (twenty-first century BCE), Eshnunna (c. 1800 BCE), and Hammurabi (mid-eighteenth century BCE) [au 3: provide some idea what civilizations these belonged to?] existed long before the legal and social requirements enumerated in the biblical parallel, the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20<N>23). This pre-Israelite material was as closely associated with a sense of societal justice as that found in the Hebrew Bible. That is, offences would be termed criminal when they were considered inimical to the well-being of society as a whole, and sanctions were imposed by the public authority rather than the injured party or a powerful private individual (the latter might be termed “family justice” and was not law).

On the other hand, the prebiblical codes maintained a sharp tripartite division of society into an upper level of free men, a class of state dependents, and a slave caste. There was no expectation of social mobility between these classes, and the rights, responsibilities, and sanctions in the codes reflected this rigid division. In contrast to the previous systems, the biblical codes extend the rights of the elites to all layers of society: “You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you (Deut. 16:18<N>20)” and “You shall have one standard for the stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God” (Lev. 24:22).

Civic Duty and Responsible Behavior

Another of Judaism’s most important legacies, found not only in its sister expressions of monotheism but also in democracies and all forms of responsible government, is the idea that people are responsible to one another. Individuals are accountable, not only for themselves but also for others. This is represented by the term, and the concept, *Torah* (meaning “teaching”), which has sometimes been misunderstood as a rigid code of Israelite law. It should be likened more to a set of behavioral expectations for ritual and social behavior, centered around the idea that the individual is responsible to the group and the group to the individual. That the entire nation is punished by God for the misbehavior of the few is a foundation of Israelite law and referenced throughout the Hebrew Bible. All the people were witnesses at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and all are therefore responsible to ensure that the Torah teaching is upheld. This is the essence of the Israelite system, which is based upon a balance between individual and community and between freedom and responsibility (Deut. 29<N>30).

From Israelites to Jews

The true origin of the Israelites [au 4: changed to avoid possible confusion with the Jewish homeland] remains uncertain. While some have suggested that it lies in Mesopotamia or Egypt, recent scholarship places it within Canaanite society, suggesting that Israel symbolizes a monotheistic trend in Canaanite

culture originating perhaps as early as the second millennium BCE that eventuated in an independent identity. The danger of assimilation back into the old and familiar ways of Canaanite culture is a constant theme of biblical literature, and the nations “here at hand” (Deut. 20:15) in the land of Canaan always represent the most dangerous threat to Israel’s distinctive identity and existence.

But the tribes of Israel were not always purely monotheistic, and the journey into the kind of theology we would recognize today as monotheism did not end until the exilic or post-exilic periods after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Prior to that time, such seminal statements as “Who is like you among the gods” (Exod. 15:11) suggest that while ancient Israelite theology required obedience to the God of Israel, it did not deny the possibility of other gods existing as well. It may have been the realization that the God of Israel could be worshipped even in Babylonian exile that solidified the tendency toward monotheism and convinced the exilic community that there was one God who created the universe, and that the same one God maintained it.

Israel had divided into two separate nations with independent monarchies and centers of worship shortly after the reigns of kings David and Solomon (c. 900 BCE). The northern kingdom, composed of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrian empire in 721 BCE and never recovered. The southern kingdom, formally made up of the large tribe of Judah and the small tribe of Benjamin (but including parts of other tribes and peoples as well), was destroyed a century and a half later by the Babylonian empire. But the Babylonians were soon overtaken by the Persians, who were friendly to the exiles from the tribal areas of Judah and Benjamin. The Persians invited the exiles to return from their banishment to the east and reestablish themselves in the ancient land. The overwhelming majority of survivors were from the large tribe of Judah, so the returnees joined with those who remained and were soon known as Judeans, or Jews (biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah), though Jews throughout history have also referred to themselves as Israel, Israelites, or the people or nation of Israel (Hebrew: *b^eney yisra'el* or *`am yisra'el*).

The Judean community, like its parent, the intertribal community of Israel, remained small in numbers relative to the great empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt. But as a result of the conquests by the Mesopotamian powers and the dispersion of the Israelite tribes, Jewish communities began to establish themselves in many parts of the Mediterranean basin. The largest communities remained in Mesopotamia and Judea, but significant communities grew up also in Egypt, Anatolia, Greece, and North Africa.

These communities did not look like Jewish communities of today, for they practiced a kind of ancient Judaism that was still oriented toward temple worship with sacrifices and burnt offerings. In some places such as Elephantine, an Egyptian island community in the Nile, they established their own temples independent of the Temple in Jerusalem. In others closer in proximity to Jerusalem, the communities joined in the annual pilgrimage festivals to the Jerusalem Temple and worshipped according to the systems described in the Bible.

The Hebrew Bible conveys the message that monotheism always survived precariously and, aside from the Persians, was resented by the nations of the world. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Canaanites, Midianites, and Aramaeans all opposed the Israelites’ stubborn worship of one god only. The reason for Israel’s isolation in this regard appears quite simple. When traveling, for example, it was a common practice among polytheists to make offerings to the gods of the local area or people. It was considered a common courtesy and expected polite behavior, and to peoples who worshipped multiple deities, it created no theological problem to make a token offering to foreign gods. Not so Israel, which was commanded to worship only the one God of Israel, the God of the universe. The Hebrew Bible indicates that it was quite expected that other peoples worship their national gods or even other people’s gods (Judg. 11:23-24), but Israel was allowed to worship only the one God (Jer. 44:1-10).

This situation continued into the Hellenistic period that began with the invasion of Alexander in the 330s BCE, and into the Roman occupation of Judea [au 5: okay?] that began three centuries later. The Judeans remain a small community and largely without power aside from a few generations under the rule of the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty of kings. Finally, in 70 CE, after a major Judean revolt against Roman imperial rule, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed a second and final time, never to be rebuilt.

By this time, Jews had been dispersed throughout the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds and brought their religion with them. Monotheism, the theological core of ancient Judaism, survived the vicissitudes of history, but the religious rituals and worship that articulated that basic theology evolved and changed over the centuries. The repeated destructions of the Jerusalem Temple put an end to the sacrificial system, but the core idea of a singular god endured. However, the geographical dispersion, influence of multiple cultures, and internal cultural change brought new ideas into biblical Judaism. This eventuated in a synthesis that gave birth to factions or parties, sects, and eventually new religious movements. One of these was the Jesus Movement that began in Judaism and became the starting point out of which the family of Christian religions emerged.

Judaism of the Rabbis

Another was a movement that emerged around a core group of leaders steeped in an oral tradition of Judaism that existed parallel to the sacrificial system and written scripture of the Bible. Those leaders we know of were almost all men, though it is clear that women were also instrumental in the transmission of oral lore. They could be described as traditionists, and included the Pharisees as well as others. Later, they were known as rabbis. When the long process of recording the oral tradition ended in the sixth century CE, it became known as the Talmud.

This form of Judaism is called Rabbinic Judaism, and all expressions of Judaism today, aside from one tiny group known as Kara'ites, derive from the Judaism of the rabbis and their great source of authority, the Talmud. This Judaism existed in exile for close to two millennia, even in the core land of Judea, which was governed by non-Jews. Rabbinic Judaism always represented the stranger in the lands of others. It is quietist and highly intellectual, relying more on the survivability of its adherents and the wits of its leaders than directly on the biblical God acting in history. Unlike Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism requires little dogmatic theological belief beyond that in the unity of God, and salvation is presumed for all who live a pious life of good deeds.

One of Rabbinic Judaism's great contributions to world history has been its unique ability to adapt to multiple environments within a world hardly tolerant of diversity, religious or otherwise. Its stubborn existence in both Christian and Muslim worlds required all religious leaders, thinkers, and politicians to consider and respond to the Jews, the quintessential "other" in their midst. This required repeated reevaluation of the meaning of self in relation to the other of Judaism, and resulted in the growth of theologies, laws, and various religious and secular sciences in both Jewish and non-Jewish civilizations.

At the same time, the Jews' lack of political power throughout this period required that their religion consider a larger range of possibilities than the religions of political powers who could enforce their will by the sword. The argumentation in Jewish literatures tends not to arrive at any final conclusions. Every issue and point can and should be revisited and reexamined, and new meanings are always possible. The huge written compendium of the Talmud and its interpretation contain complex discussion and argument over topics that range from folk medicine to legal theory, property law, family law, and business ethics. The emerging literatures that epitomize Rabbinic Judaism stressed the need for a deep and universal intellectual engagement with the divine word in Bible and Talmud, and this foundation of Judaism encouraged a very high per capita involvement in reading and education.

In the Modern World

In the modern period, when Jews were eventually released from their restricted status in the West and were allowed to enter the universities and engage in the professions and sciences, their religious culture provided the intellectual training that would result in contributions far above their per capita representation. To provide one striking example, Jews make up less than one hundredth of 1 percent of the world population, yet they account for some 18 percent of the Nobel Prizes awarded in the twentieth century. There is no need to list the many contributions of Jews to the arts, science, literature, and music. Some of the ideas that were incubated in premodern Judaism have come to the fore in contemporary postmodern thought. These include aspects of literary deconstruction and concepts of exile, both of which have had a major impact on current intellectual discourse.

Judaism, like all religions, encompasses more than a theological system of beliefs. It is best described as a religious civilization, and this civilization has had a foundational influence on world civilizations west of the Indus River for two millennia. Its influence comes not only from its own direct contribution, but also through the contribution of the religious civilizations that emerged from or associated themselves with it. Monotheism, the belief in the universality and unity of the divinity, is the very core of Judaism, and religions that preach monotheistic theologies have not only encompassed the Western and Mediterranean worlds, but now reach deeply beyond into Africa and Eastern Asia. Although representing a tiny fraction of the human population, Jewish religious civilization has remained of great significance in world history.

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