

# Biblical Period of Jewish History

(19<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE)

"Biblical Period of Jewish History." *ReligionFacts.com*. 30 Nov. 2016. Web. Accessed 24 Oct. 2020. [www.religionfacts.com/biblical-judaism](http://www.religionfacts.com/biblical-judaism)

The period of Jewish history designated by some historians as "Biblical Judaism" is the centuries covered by the narratives of the Tanakh, from the creation and primitive history of mankind to the last of the prophets in the 4th century BCE. The Tanakh tells the history of the Hebrew people from a religious viewpoint, beginning with the creation of mankind and ending with the words of the last of the prophets in the 4th century BCE.

The Tanakh follows the Hebrew nation as it experiences cycles of favor and discipline by God. {1} God establishes successive covenants with humanity (Adam, Noah and Abraham) and issues an extensive set of laws (through Moses) by which the Hebrews are to be set apart as God's people. When they stray, God sends prophets and invading armies to bring them back to himself. "It is this particular claim-to have experienced God's presence in human events-and its subsequent development that is the differentiating factor in Jewish thought." {2}

## Abraham and the Patriarchs (19th or 18th century BCE)

The biblical book of Genesis begins with a single, all-powerful God creating the world out of chaos in six days, with human beings created on the sixth day. Genesis goes on to chronicle an ancient history in which mankind repeatedly turns away from God and to immorality until God destroys the earth with a flood. God then makes a covenant with Noah, the one man saved from the flood, that he will never destroy the earth again.

The specifically Hebrew element of biblical history begins with Abraham, who is considered the founder of the Jewish religion. However, he does not discover God but is rather called by the God who is already known into a covenant, in which God promises to many descendants and the land of Canaan.

Modern scholarship has identified significant differences between the religion of Abraham and the patriarchs and the later Israelite religion of Moses. Historians note that the God of Abraham is referred to using generic, not specifically Israelite terms (namely, various forms of El), the Mosaic issues of divine jealousy and idolatry are virtually absent, and God's role is as a kind of patron deity who has bestowed his favor on Abraham.

The religion of the patriarchs was simple, and centered on the agreement between Abraham and God. Religious practice consisted of sacrifice and prayer at a sacred altar, stone pillar,

or sacred tree. Circumcision was the defining mark of the religious community. Its eschatology was the promise of land and many descendants.

### **From Egypt to Sinai: Moses and the Covenant**

According to the Bible, a famine caused the Hebrew tribes to migrate to Egypt, where they were eventually enslaved. God rescued them from bondage, under the leadership of Moses, by afflicting the Egyptians with 10 plagues then drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea to allow the Hebrews to escape. At Mount Sinai, God established the nation of Israel (named for Abraham's grandson Jacob) as his own, and gave them the terms of his covenant with them.

He then sustains the Israelites through 40 years of journeying in the wilderness before leading them into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. Central to all these events is Moses, who fulfills many leadership roles, including religious, political, legislative and military. This general sequence of events is accepted by most scholars as historically reliable. As one source explains, "To disallow these events would make their centrality as articles of faith in the later religious beliefs of Israel inexplicable." {3}

Mosaic religion centers on the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The covenant required exclusive loyalty to Yahweh, who rescued them from bondage in Egypt. Worship of other gods, veneration of idols (even of Yahweh), and magical practices are prohibited. **Rituals and festivals are established to celebrate God's historical and continuing provision.**

### **Conquest of Canaan and the Judges**

The conquest of Canaan is narrated in the biblical book of Joshua, with miraculous events (walls fell at a shout, the sun stood still) rivaling those of the Exodus. The process of occupation has been judged by scholars as more complex than that described in Joshua, incorporating a combination of military victories and treaty agreements.

After the conquest of Canaan, Israel was led by leaders called "judges," during which time the Israelites are described as repeatedly falling into idolatry and apostasy. Figurines discovered in the Israelite levels of archeological digs in Palestine support such a report. {4} At the same time, numerous altars to the God of Israel sprung up, and the Levites rose to the priesthood to conduct sacrifices at many of them. The ark of the covenant was housed and carefully protected at the Shiloh sanctuary, which was staffed by priests of the family of Eli.

### **The United Monarchy under Saul, David and Solomon**

To maintain occupation of the Promised Land, it became necessary to have centralized authority and organized armies that could hold off external enemies. Two diverging views

of the prospect of a monarchy arose: a rejection of God's kingship (1 Sam. 8-12) or a God-given way to defend Israel (1 Sam. 9:16). The former view is represented by the prophet-judge Samuel, who reluctantly crowned the first king.

Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, was made king (in c. 1020 BCE) after defeating the Ammonites. He ruled from his hometown of Gibeah, a few miles north of Jerusalem. Saul's reign was marred by conflicts with the prophet Samuel, who held ongoing authority over the kingship. King David, Saul's successor, solved these problems by combining religious and political authority in one person (David and his descendants) and in one place (the city of Jerusalem).

David was succeeded by his son Solomon, whose history is recorded in 1 Kings 1-11 and 2 Chronicles 1-9. Solomon succeeded his father on the throne in early manhood, probably about sixteen or eighteen years of age. His father chose him as his successor, passing over the claims of his elder sons. His elevation to the throne took place before his father's death, and is hastened on mainly by Nathan and Bathsheba, in consequence of the rebellion of Adonijah.

During Solomon's long reign of 40 years the Hebrew monarchy gained its highest splendor. This period has well been called the "Augustan age" of the Jewish annals. In a single year he collected tribute amounting to 666 talents of gold, according to 1 Kings 10:13. The first half of his reign was, however, by far the brighter and more prosperous; the latter half was clouded by the idolatries into which he fell, mainly, according to the scribes, from his intermarriages. According to 1 Kings 11:3, he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. As soon as he had settled himself in his kingdom, and arranged the affairs of his extensive empire, he entered into an alliance with Egypt by a marriage with the daughter of Pharaoh.

### **The Divided Monarchy and Exile**

After Solomon's reign the nation split into two kingdoms, Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). Israel was conquered by the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser V in the 8th century BCE. The kingdom of Judah was conquered by a Babylonian army in the early 6th century BCE. The Judahite elite was exiled to Babylon, but later at least a part of them returned to their homeland, led by prophets Ezra and Nehemiah, after the subsequent conquest of Babylonia by the Persians. Already at this point the extreme fragmentation among the Israelites was apparent, with the formation of political-religious factions, the most important of which would later be called Sadducees and Pharisees.

### **The Hasmonean Kingdom and the Destruction of the Temple**

After the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great, his demise, and the division of Alexander's empire among his generals, the Seleucid Kingdom was formed. A deterioration

of relations between Hellenized Jews and religious Jews led the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes to impose decrees banning certain Jewish religious rites and traditions.

Consequently, the orthodox Jews revolted under the leadership of the Hasmonean family, (also known as the Maccabees). This revolt eventually led to the formation of an independent Jewish kingdom, known as the Hasmonaean Dynasty, which lasted from 165 BC to 63 BC. The Hasmonean Dynasty eventually disintegrated as a result of civil war between the sons of Salome Alexandra, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II. The people, who did not want to be governed by a king but by theocratic clergy, made appeals in this spirit to the Roman authorities. A Roman campaign of conquest and annexation, led by Pompey, soon followed.

Judea under Roman rule was at first an independent Jewish kingdom, but gradually the rule over Judea became less and less Jewish, until it became under the direct rule of Roman administration (and renamed the province of Judaea), which was often callous and brutal in its treatment of its Judean subjects. In AD 66, Judeans began to revolt against the Roman rulers of Judea. The revolt was defeated by the Roman emperors Vespasian and Titus Flavius. The Romans destroyed much of the Temple in Jerusalem and, according to some accounts, stole artifacts from the temple, such as the Menorah.

Judeans continued to live in their land in significant numbers, and were allowed to practice their religion, until the 2nd century when Julius Severus ravaged Judea while putting down the bar Kokhba revolt. After 135, Jews were not allowed to enter the city of Jerusalem, although this ban must have been at least partially lifted, since at the destruction of the rebuilt city by the Persians in the 7th century, Jews are said to have lived there.

Various responses developed to Roman rule, ranging from armed revolt (the Zealots) or withdrawal from the world (the Essenes) **to a renewed focus on preserving tradition in a new situation (the Pharisees)**, to integration with Greek society (the Sadducees) and thought (Jewish Neoplatonists).

**Article Info:** "Biblical Period of Jewish History." *ReligionFacts.com*. 30 Nov. 2016. Web. Accessed 24 Oct. 2020. <[www.religionfacts.com/biblical-judaism](http://www.religionfacts.com/biblical-judaism)>

## References

1. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." (*Amos*, c. 8th cent. BCE)
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3. *Ibid.*, "Judaism: The Mosaic period."
4. *Ibid.*, "Judaism: The period of the conquest and the settlement of Canaan."
5. Tracey R. Rich, *Judaism 101*.
6. George Robinson, *Essential Judaism (Pocket Books, 2000)*.
7. "Jewish history." *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_history)>; Some text from this source has been incorporated into this article.

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