

# Ancient Jewish History: A Teacher's Guide

## Overview

There are two parts to this document. This first part outlines key points that should be covered in lessons on ancient Jewish history. The second part fills out these points in a narrative summary of Jewish history from Biblical origins through the Roman period.

## Note

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## Key Points

- 1) Abraham and Moses are key figures in Judaism.
- 2) Jewish tradition teaches that the Exodus is the formative event in Jewish history.
- 3) Kings David and Solomon had great accomplishments, historical impact, and religious significance.
- 4) The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious life and its location is the holiest place in Judaism.
- 5) The Babylonian Exile was a transformative event.
- 6) Judah, later called Judea, was ruled by various foreign powers and repeatedly attempted to regain independence.
- 7) Rome destroyed the Second Temple, exiled the majority of the Jewish population of Judea, and changed the province's name to try to minimize the Jewish connection to the area.
- 8) After the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbinic Judaism emerged as Jews developed new religious practices and interpretations that remained grounded in ancient traditions.

## Summary of Ancient Jewish History: Biblical Origins through the Roman Period

According to Jewish and Christian traditions, Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob are the fathers of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Bible, which Christianity adopted as the Old



Testament, states that approximately 4,000 years ago Abraham became the first person to reject idolatry and to practice monotheism, the belief in only one God. This source also describes how Jacob led his family to Egypt to escape a famine and how his descendants were eventually enslaved. These descendents, the ancestors of the Jews, are called Israelites, or the Children of Israel, because Jacob's name was changed to Israel.

The Hebrew Bible states that after many years of slavery in Egypt, God sent Moses to lead the Israelites to freedom. After forty years of travel through the wilderness, they eventually returned to their ancestral homeland, the Land of Israel. On their journey, the Hebrew Bible states, God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai and gave the Israelites a code to live by – including the Ten Commandments. According to Jewish tradition, this is the origin of the Torah.

The escape from slavery in Egypt, called the Exodus, is the seminal event of Jewish history. It is one of the prime examples of God's power in Jewish literature and is the most commonly referred to event in Jewish prayers. The Hebrew Bible's calls to pursue a just society references the Exodus by explaining that "you were strangers in Egypt" and thus know what it means to be treated unfairly. The Exodus is also a source of inspiration for other cultures' liberation struggles (The Institute for Curriculum Services' *Using Popular Music to Close Lessons on Jews and Judaism* addresses this topic).

The Israelites originally lived in a tribal society. In times of crisis, the Hebrew Bible states that God provided great men and women, called judges, to lead all the tribes. These include Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Eventually, the Israelites decided that they needed a permanent king like other nations. As a result, the religious leader Samuel appointed the first king, Saul.

The second king, David, expanded the United Kingdom of Israel, established a dynasty, and made Jerusalem the capital around the year 1000 BCE. He is remembered as an exemplar of religiosity and as a model for later kings. Many of the psalms in the Hebrew Bible's *Book of Psalms* are attributed to him.

David's son, Solomon, built the First Temple in Jerusalem, the most sacred place in Judaism and the center of Jewish religious life throughout its existence. He also increased the United Kingdom of Israel's power. He is remembered as an exceptionally wise individual, which is the origin of the expression "wise as Solomon." Several Biblical books are attributed to him: the *Book of Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs*.

After Solomon's death, the United Kingdom of Israel split into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In 722, the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel and deported its population. As a result, subsequent Jewish history focused on Judah; the words Jew and Judaism come from this word. The Jewish homeland, as distinct from a political entity, continued to be referred to as "The Land of Israel" throughout this period and this terminology continues to be used by Jews today.

Descendents of David ruled Judah from the capital of Jerusalem until it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. This was a transformative event in Jewish history. In addition to ending the political independence of the Jewish kingdom, the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and exiled the population to Babylon. This began Diaspora Judaism – the existence of sizable Jewish communities that lived outside of the Jewish homeland. The existence of large



Jewish communities outside of the Land of Israel became a permanent feature of Jewish life. This helped prepare the Jewish people to adapt to changes experienced centuries later under Roman rule by providing models for Jewish life that were not tied to Temple practices and the specific geography of the Land of Israel.

After defeating the Babylonians, the Persian King Cyrus allowed the exiles to return and rebuild their temple. The rebuilt temple is called the Second Temple. Many Jews remained in the Diaspora where they had built new lives and vibrant communities. Judah remained under foreign domination until the second century BCE when the Jews regained their independence. However, as Rome gained power, it exerted its influence over the Jewish state beginning in 63 BCE. In 6 CE, it was incorporated into the Roman Empire as the province of Judea.

Jews rebelled repeatedly in an attempt to regain their independence, but without success. In the year 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, the holiest place in Judaism and the center of Jewish religious life. When the Romans began building a temple to one of their gods on the Temple ruins in 131 CE, Jews rebelled again. This time the majority of Jews in the province were killed, exiled, or sold into slavery. In an attempt to wipe out the Jewish connection to the land, the Romans changed its name from Judea to Palestine in 135.

Jews responded to the loss of their homeland and the destruction of the Second Temple by remaining grounded in and adapting their ancient traditions. During the siege of Jerusalem, a sage named Yochanan ben Zakkai sneaked out of the city in a coffin to negotiate with the Roman military commander, Vespasian. He managed to convince Vespasian to protect the city of Yavneh and the Jewish sages there. These scholars laid the groundwork for what became Rabbinic Judaism.

Rabbinic Judaism built upon Jewish tradition while adjusting to new realities. Temple ritual was replaced with prayer service in synagogues. This built upon common practices of Jews in the Diaspora dating back to the Babylonian exile. Although worship in the Temple was impossible after its destruction, Judaism continues to revere its location as the holiest place on earth and Jews turn towards it during their prayer services.

Jews expressed the pain of losing their homeland by quoting traditional texts such as the Hebrew Bible's Psalm 137: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour." Through sacred texts, prayers, songs, folktales, and artwork, Jews continued to express their connection to their ancestral homeland while creating new homes in Southwest Asia, North Africa, Europe, and beyond. At the same time, they affirmed that Judaism's religious teachings and values were relevant wherever they lived. These teachings and values include an emphasis on social justice, loving one's neighbor, and taking care of those in need. They are drawn from Jewish tradition and sacred scripture, which Jews continued to study, discuss, and interpret to find lessons on how to live their lives.

