

Judaism and Western Civilization

Overview

This resource consists of:

- 1) A short student reading about Judaism's influence on Western Civilization with prompts for filling out a worksheet
- 2) A worksheet with primary source quotes from sacred Jewish texts that students connect to the reading
- 3) An answer sheet for teachers

Note

Please download the latest version of this lesson before using it. ICS frequently updates, revises, and strengthens its materials. Sign up at www.icsresources.org/register to be notified of major updates, new materials, and events in your area. Please send questions, suggestions, and requests about ICS educational materials to bchaika@icsresources.org.

Goal

- 1) Students will be able to discuss Judaism's influence on Western Civilization.

Materials

Each student will need:

- 1) *Judaism and Western Civilization Student Handout*
- 2) *Judaism and Western Civilization Worksheet*



Judaism and Western Civilization

“The Laws of Moses as well as the laws of Rome contributed suggestions and impulse to the men and institutions which were to prepare the modern world; and if we could have but eyes to see... we should readily discover how very much besides religion we owe to the Jew.”

- U.S. President Woodrow Wilson

Judaism has had a profound influence on Western civilization. Much of this influence comes from Jewish ideas and values that were transmitted to Christianity, which developed from Jewish roots. Jesus of Nazareth, his disciples, and the first leaders of the Christian Church were all Jewish. The Jewish Bible was incorporated into the Christian Bible as the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, many principles and teachings that are important in Judaism are also important in Christianity. These common ideas are known as the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Christianity spread, it popularized these important ideas. As a result, moral and ethical ideas developed by Judaism helped shape Western ideas about law, morality, and social justice.

Judaism influenced other areas of Western civilization including religious belief, literature, and weekly schedules. For example, monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, spread from Judaism to the Western world. Western literature includes and often alludes to the Hebrew Bible and the Ten Commandments, sacred texts that originated in Judaism. Even the modern weekend has Jewish roots in the idea of a weekly day of rest.

The oldest teachings in Judaism are recorded in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. The books of the Hebrew Bible were written at various times; the most recent predate the 2nd century B.C.E. The Talmud reached its final form c. 500 C.E., but its origins are much earlier. After the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E., Jewish scholars began to record ancient teachings and laws so they would not be lost. These ancient teachings are the core of the Talmud.

These texts reveal the Jewish roots of several key ideas in Western Civilization. Please read the following five prompts. After reading each prompt, identify the quotes on the *Judaism and Western Civilization Worksheet* that reflect the idea discussed in the prompt. Then answer the question at the bottom of the page.

Prompts:

- 1) *Individual Worth*: One of the defining characteristics of Western civilization is recognition of the importance of each individual. Every person is believed to have worth and to deserve a life of dignity. In Jewish literature, this idea is first expressed in the first chapter of the first book of the Hebrew Bible which says that people are created in the image of God. Because of this, every person is valuable. This idea was not common in the ancient world, where an individual's social status often determined one's importance and value. Identify the quotes that show this Jewish value by writing *Individual Worth* in the space provided.

- 2) *Rule of Law*: The importance of every individual is also a factor in Western civilization's commitment to the rule of law, the principle that the law applies to everyone no matter how powerful or where they are from. Identify the quotes that show this value in Jewish texts by writing *Rule of Law* in the space provided. Please note that the next prompt addresses the idea of a fair trial; avoid labeling quotes about a fair trial as *Rule of Law*.
- 3) *Fair Trial*: The idea that trials must be fair is closely connected to belief in the rule of law. The Hebrew Bible and Talmud include numerous statements that emphasize the importance of fair trials and a wide variety of provisions to help ensure that trials are fair. Many of these provisions became key legal principles in the Western world. Jewish roots of legal principles have even been referenced by the U.S. Supreme Court. Identify the quotes that reflect the importance of fair trials in Judaism by writing *Fair Trial* in the space provided.
- 4) *Charity*: Giving charity is an important value in Western civilization that was not emphasized in most ancient cultures. Jewish texts record that ancient Jewish leaders were horrified by Roman indifference to the poor. In Judaism, on the other hand, supporting the needy is obligatory. Identify the quotes that reflect the importance of giving charity in Judaism by writing *Charity* in the space provided.
- 5) *Healing the World*: The final principle of Western civilization discussed in this handout is the idea that society can improve and individuals have an obligation to strive to make the world a better place. In Judaism, this idea is called *Tikkun Olam*, or Healing the World. Identify the quotes that reflect the importance of this idea in Judaism by writing *Healing the World* in the space provided.

Short Answer Question:

In the introduction and prompts, you read about several significant elements of Western Civilization that have roots in ancient Judaism. In addition to common religious elements such as monotheism and the importance of The Hebrew Bible and the Ten Commandments, these elements include:

- 1) The idea of a day of rest / weekend
- 2) The idea that every individual is important
- 3) The idea of the rule of law
- 4) The idea that fair trials are crucial
- 5) The idea that people should help the less fortunate
- 6) The idea that people have a responsibility to make the world a better place

In the space provided at the end of the *Judaism and Western Civilization Worksheet*, please write a short paragraph explaining which of the six elements listed above you think is most important for a community to have and why.

Judaism and Western Civilization Worksheet

Follow the instructions from the student handout to fill in this worksheet.

Quotes:

- 1) _____
"Love your neighbor as yourself."
(Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 18:19)
- 2) _____
"Whoever saves a single life it is as if he saved an entire world."
(Talmud, Sanhedrin 45)
- 3) _____
"It is not your obligation to complete the task [of improving the world], but neither are you free to desist [from doing all you can]."
(Talmud, Pirke Avot 2:16)
- 4) _____
"[The king should] observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws. Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction."
(Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 17:20)
- 5) _____
Charity is equal in importance to all other commandments combined."
(Talmud, Bava Bartha 9a)
- 6) _____
"There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you."
(Hebrew Bible, Exodus 12:49)
- 7) _____
"You shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute in favor of the mighty – nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute."
(Hebrew Bible, Exodus 23:3)
- 8) _____
"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"
(Talmud, Pirkei Avot 1:14, quoting Hillel, a 1st century BCE sage)
- 9) _____
"Do not disdain any person. Do not underrate the importance of anything - for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is nothing without its place in the sun."
(Talmud, Pirkei Avot 4:3)

Judaism and Western Civilization Answer Sheet

Quotes:

- 1) Individual Worth
“Love your neighbor as yourself.”
(Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 18:19)
- 2) Individual Worth
“Whoever saves a single life it is as if he saved an entire world.”
(Talmud, Sanhedrin 45)
- 3) Healing the World
“It is not your obligation to complete the task [of improving the world], but neither are you free to desist [from doing all you can].”
(Talmud, Pirke Avot 2:16)
- 4) Rule of Law
“[The king should] observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws. Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction.”
(Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 17:20)
- 5) Charity
Charity is equal in importance to all other commandments combined.”
(Talmud, Bava Bartha 9a)
- 6) Rule of Law
“There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.”
(Hebrew Bible, Exodus 12:49)
- 7) Fair Trial
“You shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute in favor of the mighty – nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute.”
(Hebrew Bible, Exodus 23:3)
- 8) Healing the World
“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”
(Talmud, Pirkei Avot 1:14, quoting Hillel, a 1st century BCE sage)
- 9) Individual Worth
“Do not disdain any person. Do not underrate the importance of anything - for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is nothing without its place in the sun.”
(Talmud, Pirkei Avot 4:3)



