

## Chapter 12

# Learning About World Religions: Judaism



## Chapter 12

# Learning About World Religions: Judaism

***What are the central teachings of Judaism, and why did they survive to modern day?***

### 12.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn about key Jewish teachings. You will also discover how Judaism was preserved after most Jews were driven from their homeland.

The kingdom of Israel split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah after the death of King Solomon in about 930 B.C.E. Weakened by this division, the people were less able to fight off invaders.

Israel was the first to fall. In 722 B.C.E., the Assyrians conquered the kingdom and took its leaders to Mesopotamia. The people of Israel were sent to many lands. In 597 B.C.E., another Mesopotamian power, Babylon, invaded Judah. Babylon's king, Nebuchadrezzar (neh-byuh-kuh-DREH-zehr), laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. The Jews, as they came to be known, fought until their food supplies ran out. With the Jews weakened by starvation, the Babylonians broke through the walls and **captured** the city. In 586 B.C.E., Nebuchadrezzar burned down Solomon's great Temple of Jerusalem and all the houses in the city. Most of the people of Judah were exiled as captives to Babylon.

The Babylonian Exile was the start of the Jewish Diaspora (die-AS-puh-ruh). The word *diaspora* means "a scattering over a wide area." This was the first exile of most of the Jewish people from their homeland.

Yet the Jews were able to keep Judaism alive. In this chapter, you will first learn about four important Jewish teachings. Then you will read about why the teachings of Judaism have **survived** to modern day.



This boy reads from the Torah during his bar mitzvah, a coming of age ceremony for Jewish children.

◀ A detail of a historic synagogue in Prague, in the Czech Republic

**polytheism** the belief that there are many gods

**monotheism** the belief that there is only one God

**Talmud** the collection of ancient Jewish writings, or commentaries, that interpret the laws and teachings of the Hebrew Bible, or *Tanakh*

Jews around the world gather for Passover Seders (SAY-derz). They eat special foods as they read from Haggadahs (ha-GAH-dahz) to retell the story of the Exodus.

## 12.2 The Central Teachings of Judaism

The religious and moral ideas of Judaism have had a lasting effect on Western civilization. Let's look at four central teachings of Judaism that remain very influential today.

**Monotheism** Most people in ancient times believed in many gods. This belief is called **polytheism**. The Israelites, later called Jews, were different. They believed that there is only one God, a belief called **monotheism**. Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion.

Judaism teaches that God is the **source** of morality (standards of right and wrong). These ideas of right and wrong had not always been known in ancient civilizations. Jews learn about and follow their religion by studying their sacred texts. Through study and prayer, many Jews feel that God is close to them in their daily lives.

**Following Jewish Teachings** Following the teachings in the Hebrew Bible and the **Talmud** (TAHL-muhd) is central to Jewish life. The Torah **instructs** Jews about how to lead moral lives. For example, Jews are taught to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Among Judaism's oldest laws and teachings are the Ten Commandments. The commandments tell how to lead upright and honorable lives. For example, one commandment tells Jews to set aside a holy day, the Sabbath, every week. The Sabbath, a day of rest and prayer, is still practiced not only by Jews, but also by followers of other world religions, including Christianity

and Islam. The commandments also lay down standards of right and wrong, such as “You shall not steal” and “You shall not murder.”

Over time, Jewish religious leaders developed a larger set of laws and teachings. For example, there were rules about what foods to eat. Many religious practices began, such as the festival of Passover. These holy days celebrate the Exodus—the freeing of the enslaved Israelites from Egypt. Jews observe these rules and practices in different ways.



**Equality and Social Justice** Beginning with the Ten Commandments, Judaism has always been concerned with a code of **ethics**, or moral values of right and wrong. Two important values that have influenced many societies are equality and social justice.

Unlike some other ancient civilizations, the Israelites did not view their leaders as gods. They believed that there is only one God, and even kings had to obey God's laws and teachings. Judaism teaches that God considers all people equal.

Belief in equality goes hand in hand with a concern for social justice. Many stories and sayings in the Hebrew Bible, or *Tanakh*, teach about treating everyone fairly. For example, one passage says, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor." Caring for the less fortunate people in society is a basic value in Judaism.

**The Importance of Study** Studying the Hebrew Bible, and especially the Torah, is very important in Judaism. Jews also study interpretations of the Hebrew Bible made by scholars and rabbis, or religious teachers.

In ancient times, those rabbis and scholars who were interpreting the basic teachings of the Torah made decisions that were passed down orally. In the 200s C.E., Jewish scholars began to write the Talmud, which contains this oral tradition along with academic analyses. The Talmud became a basic source of Jewish law. Later on, rabbis wrote their own studies of both the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, continuing the tradition of interpreting the teachings of Judaism.

Throughout history, Jews have kept their reverence for study and learning. Many Jews learn about Jewish history, law, and traditions through reading and discussion. They also pass on their knowledge to other members of the faith.

**ethics** a set of moral principles or values

Jewish people today continue to read, study, and discuss the Torah as one way of understanding and practicing their religion.



**exile** to banish or expel from one's own country or home

**Jewish Diaspora** the scattering of the Jewish people outside their homeland, beginning about 586 B.C.E.

## 12.3 Foreign Rule and the Jewish Diaspora

The invasion of Judah in 597 B.C.E. and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 B.C.E. threatened the survival of Judaism. Thousands of Jews were **exiled** in Babylon. By this time, the Israelites had become known as Jews. Members of the Israelite tribe of Judah called themselves "Judaeans," and their homeland, Judah. The name was later shortened to "Jews."

The **Jewish Diaspora** had begun. From this time on, the followers of Judaism were **dispersed**, or scattered, in many lands. Those who did return home found their land dominated by foreign rulers. It would not be easy to keep Judaism alive.

**Rule by the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks** The Jewish captives lived in Babylon for about half a century. From then on, Jews outside their homeland prayed to return. During this exile in Babylon, men the Jews believed to be great prophets rose up to encourage the people to remain faithful to Judaism.

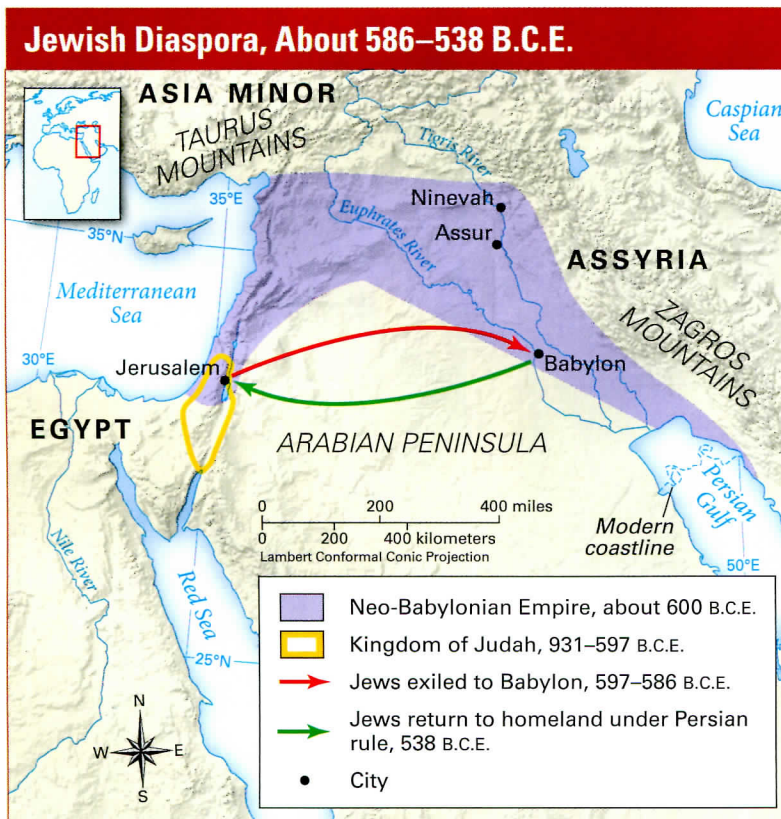
In 539 B.C.E., the Persians conquered the Babylonians. The Persian king, Cyrus, ended the Jews' exile. Many Jews returned to Judah, where Cyrus allowed them to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and to practice their religion. The rebuilt Temple

Many Jews were exiled from their homeland to Babylon at the start of the Jewish Diaspora.

became known as the Second Temple. Other Jews stayed in Babylon.

For nearly 400 years, Judah was ruled by foreigners. After the Persians came the Greeks. Often, the foreign rulers were harsh.

One Greek ruler, Antiochus (an-TIE-uh-kuhs), tried to force the Jews to worship idols of Greek gods in the Second Temple. In 168 B.C.E., the Jews rebelled and started a war that spanned more than 20 years. During that war, in the year 164 B.C.E., they drove the Greeks from Jerusalem and reclaimed and rededicated the Temple. Jews today celebrate Hanukkah (HAH-nuh-kuh) to honor this victory and the rededication of the Temple.





**Rule by the Romans** For about 80 years after the war with the Greeks, the Jews lived as an independent kingdom in Judah, now called Judea. Then, in 63 B.C.E., they fell under Roman rule.

The Romans were building a great empire, and they were quick to act against any sign of rebellion. More than 50,000 Jews were brutally executed under Roman rule. But the Romans did allow the Jews to practice their own religion and to govern some of their own affairs. In 22 B.C.E., the Romans appointed King Herod to rule all the Jews. Herod announced a big project to expand the Second Temple in Jerusalem, on an even grander scale than Solomon's Temple. The work took 46 years to complete.

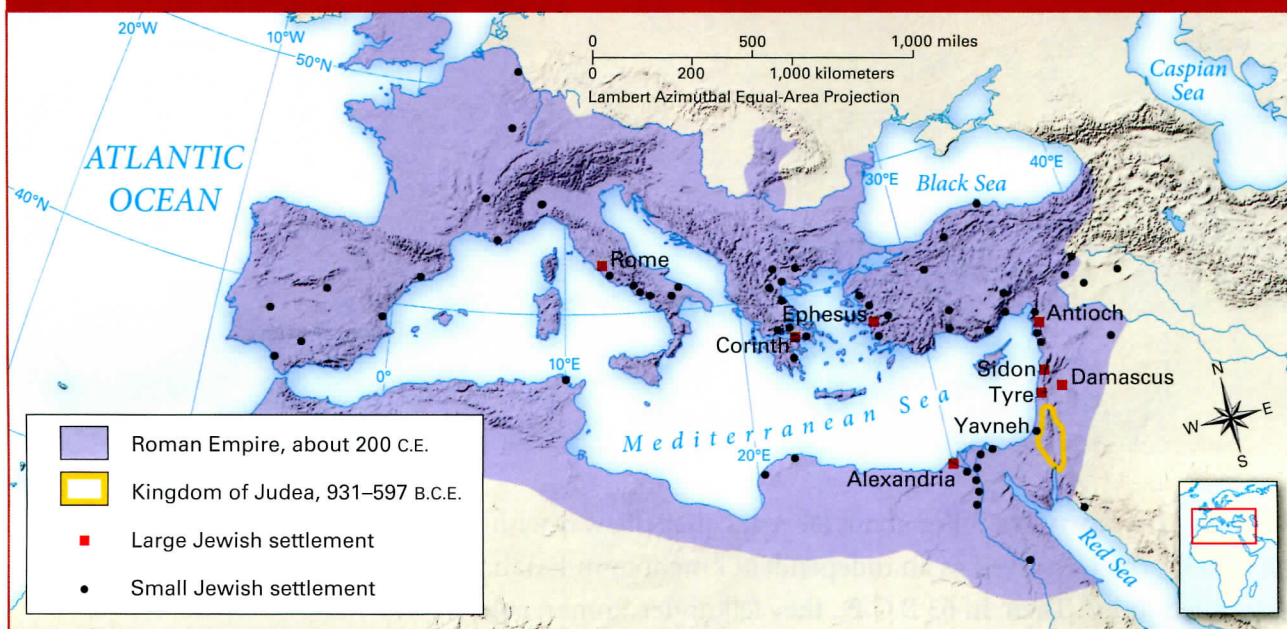
In 66 C.E., the Jews rose up against the Romans. For three years, they managed to keep the Romans out of Jerusalem. Then, in 70 C.E., a Roman military leader named Titus led an army of 60,000 soldiers against the Jews. The Jews fought back fiercely, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. They watched in horror as the Romans destroyed the great Temple in Jerusalem. All that was known to remain of the Second Temple was its western wall. To this day, Jews consider the Western Wall their most sacred place.

In 135 C.E. the Romans put down another Jewish revolt. This Roman victory began the final exile of the Jewish people from their homeland. The Romans seized Jewish land and forbade the Jews from entering Jerusalem. Although some Jews always remained in the land of Israel, thousands were sent to other parts of the Roman Empire.

The Jews had lost their homeland and their holy city. Yet Judaism not only survived, it flourished. Next, you will learn how the Jews preserved their faith and way of life.

The Western Wall in Jerusalem was once a part of the network of walls that surrounded the Second Temple. This Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Today, Jews come from all over the world to pray at the wall.

## Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire, About 200 C.E.



After the Romans put down the Jewish revolts, they forced most Jews into exile in many parts of the Roman Empire.

### 12.4 Preserving the Teachings of Judaism

After losing control of their homeland, their holy city, and the great Temple that was the heart of their faith, the Jews faced a great struggle to preserve their religion. They were exiled throughout many gentile, or non-Jewish, lands. With creativity and dedication, they found ways to keep Judaism alive.

**Rabbi Yohanan ben Zaccai** One rabbi who helped preserve Judaism was Yohanan ben Zaccai. When the revolt against Rome began in 66 C.E., ben Zaccai feared for the future of Judaism. He worried that if the rabbis died in the fighting and the Temple was destroyed, Judaism might not survive.

Ben Zaccai begged the Jews to surrender to save Judaism. When they refused, he decided to approach the Romans for help.

Ben Zaccai had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. He met with a Roman general named Vespasian (vuh-SPAY-zhee-ehn), and gained permission to open a Jewish school, with the help of other rabbis, in the town of **Yavneh** (YAHV-neh).

When Jerusalem fell, Yavneh became the center of Jewish learning. At their school, Ben Zaccai and the other rabbis taught new rabbis. Teachers came from many places to study at Yavneh. Then they returned to their communities to share what they had learned. In this way, the rabbis at Yavneh made sure that Jews still had leaders to guide them.

**Yavneh** an ancient city in Israel that became a center for Jewish learning

**New Teachers and Practices** In addition to training other rabbis, the rabbis at Yavneh introduced new practices. These new ways ensured that the teachings of Judaism would be passed on.

The rabbis made the synagogue important. A synagogue is a house of worship. It is also a place to study, to meet, and to gather socially. Synagogues made Jewish communities stronger.

The rabbis also created a religious service for synagogues. Prayer and study of sacred texts became a new way to worship God without the Temple rituals. Today, Jews, Christians, and Muslims follow this model for services. In these ways, Yohanan ben Zaccai and other rabbis helped Judaism to adapt and flourish even after the destruction of its central holy site in Jerusalem.

These new practices helped Jews preserve their religion in communities around the world. Over the centuries, rabbis studied and commented on Judaism's sacred texts, and developed other new practices. Jews have faced prejudice and persecution, but they have kept their faith.

In 1948, a new Jewish state, Israel, was created in part of the lands once ruled by David and Solomon. Jews from many places settled in their ancient homeland. For other Jews around the world, Jewish traditions have enabled their religion to thrive.



In the tradition of Rabbi ben Zaccai's first school, scholars today continue to learn and to share their understanding in Torah study groups like this one.

## Chapter Summary

**In this chapter, you learned about how Judaism was preserved in the Diaspora.**

**The Central Teachings of Judaism** Earlier religions believed in polytheism. Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion. The Hebrew Bible and the Talmud present a code of ethics with teachings that focus on social justice. Jews pass on learning to others.

**Foreign Rule and the Jewish Diaspora** After Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., most Jews were exiled to Babylon. When the Persians defeated Babylon in 539 B.C.E., many Jews returned to Judah under Persia's rule. Later, the Greeks and then the Romans ruled Judah, now Judea. The Jews fought the Romans in 66 C.E. and in 135 C.E. The Romans put down these revolts and exiled most of the Jews.

**Preserving the Teachings of Judaism** During the Jewish Diaspora, Jews wanted to preserve their religion. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zaccai set up a center of Jewish learning in Yavneh. His rabbis taught other rabbis, who shared their knowledge at home. Ben Zaccai made synagogues a center of Jewish life and created a new religious service. These new practices preserved Judaism. In 1948, the Jewish state of Israel was created in lands once ruled by David and Solomon.