Judaism

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, a religion that has its roots in the near-Eastern beliefs and practices of the Israelites. The connection, and disjunction, between the Jewish people and the multiple Judaism of history make the religious system difficult to define. Importantly, not all Jews participate in some form of formal Judaism—it is quite possible to be a Jew and still belong to another religion, or no religion. Nonetheless, it is impossible to understand Judaism without examining the role of the Jewish people, because the idea of the Jewish people, and the history and myth concerning this people, is an essential building block for all forms of Judaism. There are currently upwards of thirteen million Jews in the world, with about forty percent of these Jews living in North America, and another forty percent residing in Israel.

Despite being anchored in a social group, there are many forms of Judaism and even more types of Jewish belief. Thus is difficult, if not impossible, to determine Judaism through its dogmas or articles of faith. There have been Jews that believe in heaven, others that believe in reincarnation, and others that believe that after death nothing happens at all. There are Jews that have believed God is a person, others who believe that God is part of the world, and those who believe that God is an idea. Thus, rather than defining Judaism as a set of dogmas, it is better to view it as a collection of practices, stories, and commitments. One way of expressing this is that Judaism, as compared to, say Christianity, is a religion where practice is more important than belief—beliefs are important, but not as central for Judaism as some other religions. Another way to say the same thing is that Judaism is a religion of revealed laws and myths, and not one of revealed doctrines. Thus the working definition of Judaism given here will focus upon the early myths and history of the Jewish people.

Judaism, as an ideal or single religious system now, is considered to be the first of the Abrahamic faiths (followed by Christianity and Islam), even though each of the three religions interprets the figure of Abraham rather differently. An important aspect of traditional Judaisms is the belief that the Jewish people stretches back in an uninterrupted line to Abraham. It is also assumed that the Jewish tradition stretches back to Moses, a religious and political figure who established the laws of the Jewish people, and, more importantly, established a covenant, or
agreement, between the Jewish people and God. Much of the Bible relates stories about the relationship between the Jewish people and God, with special emphasis being placed on the kingdom of Judah. The term ‘Judaism’ is derived from the Hebrew *Yehuda*, the name for the residents of the kingdom of Judah.

Biblical History and Myth

Traditionally, Jews viewed the biblical stories as their own unbroken history. The stories of the Torah or Hebrew Bible are important not only because they grant authority to the tradition, but also because they ground the all-important idea of a covenant with God that operates within history and shapes historical and political events.

The earliest Bible stories concern all of humanity, including a covenant with Noah, which is assumed to apply to all peoples, wherein God promises not to destroy humanity and certain basic moral obligations are established. The scope is then narrowed to Abraham and the patriarchs, to whom God promises a large number of descendants, or nations, and (in one version of which) the ritual of circumcision is established. From there, the story moves to that of the Jewish people proper. The hero of this story is the prophet and politician, Moses, who organized a slave-revolt and led the enslaved Israelites out of servitude. The story of leaving slavery under the guidance of Moses is re-enacted every year in the Jewish ritual of Passover. During this ritual God is thanked for leading the Jews out of Egypt and establishing a covenant with them. This is an excellent example of the Jewish relationship to the historical: on the one hand, the relationship to God is grounded in a historical action, and on the other this action is intended to ground an eternal (and therefore no longer historical) agreement. The repetitive re-enactment of the event through a ritual of remembrance combines both of these types of time.

This covenant with the Israelites (via Moses) is more complicated than the previous two covenants with Noah and Abraham and has more stipulations. The well-known story is that Moses went up a mountain (Mount Sinai) where God gave him a set of commandments, including the famous ten commandments or Decalogue. An essential corollary of the Mount Sinai story is the idea of the *oral Torah*: traditional Rabbinic Judaism claims that in addition to the written laws discussed in the Bible, God gave Moses a second set of laws. This second set is called the oral law, and was, supposedly, passed down from teacher to student until it was
written down as the *Mishnah* during the Roman Period (more on this in a moment). The belief that the oral Torah is as nearly authoritative as the written Torah is central to Rabbinic Judaism, as the Rabbis are the keepers of the oral law and use it to interpret the written.

As the story continues: while Moses was gone for forty days receiving the laws, the Israelites became nervous and created a calf out of gold, which they began to worship. Moses came down from Mount Sinai, saw the worship of the statue, grew angry, broke the tablets, and then led a group of loyal Israelites to slaughter many of the calf-worshippers. Moses then went up the mountain and received the law again. This episode of the golden calf is mentioned here because it is a second essential corollary to the Exodus story and will be dealt with below under the heading of *idolatry*. The prohibition against worshipping statues, images, and other gods is a basic component of all normative forms of Judaism.

After this episode, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, until they ended up settling Israel and building a temple to God in the city of Jerusalem. From here, the story treats the rise of the kingdom of Israel, with King David being the most famous of Israel’s leaders. The rise and fall of Israel’s kingdoms is taken as reflecting their specific relationships to God. When following the covenant and not worshipping other gods, things go well for Israel. When the covenant is not followed, things go poorly. Eventually, the Kingdom broke into two, with the southern kingdom of Judah—again, the root for the word ‘Jew’—outlasting the northern kingdom of Israel, which was destroyed in 720 BCE. However, Judah itself did not last long. Judah, and Jerusalem with it, was captured by the Babylonian empire around 589 BCE, whereupon it ceased to be an independent kingdom. The temple was destroyed.

The Babylonian Exile and the Persian Period

The destruction of the first temple and the exile of many of the Judeans and Israelites into the Babylonian lands was a trauma that in many ways inaugurated the basic features of what we might call classical Judaism. It was, crudely speaking, a practice run for the more significant second exile that followed the collapse of the second temple in 70 CE. It is difficult to underestimate what a shock the destruction of the state religion and its temple must have been for the Israelites: in order to survive in the Babylonian empire, it was necessary to develop a theology where God’s “resting place” or “home” was not permanent. Equally important: the
Babylonian exile occurred in stages and had several centers. Some people remained in Judea, others fled to Alexandria (in Egypt), and others still were taken to Babylon (Mesopotamia). This led to a series of independent developments of the Israelite religion, not all of which were compatible with each other. This became an issue after Babylon fell to the Persian empire.

The Persian state allowed the exiles to return to Judea, to recuperate their local traditions, and to re-build a temple, thus inaugurating what is called the Second Temple Period. While often dated to 538 BCE, this return was neither a quick nor simple process and led to a series of debates and confrontations between those who never left (the “people of the land”) and those who had been living in Egypt and Babylon. The controversies and developments of the Persian period are the foundation for much later Judaism. While the covenant metaphor was already in place by the Persian period, it is here that we first definitively find the “creation of a law book and the concept of scripture,” along with the establishment of the Torah or Pentateuch.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{i}}}\

It is also in the Persian period that the basic contours of \textit{monotheism} were settled and disseminated. The development of a book that can travel, and so maintain the basic features of a religion in the absence of a temple or central government, lies at the heart of all Jewish development. Arguably, the exile and reconstitution of the Israelite religion is the beginning of Judaism in a historical sense (even if Judaism draws heavily upon the stories and histories of earlier times). The very fact that a temple can be destroyed and re-built, and that this process can be recorded in writing, ensures that a temple can no longer be viewed as the permanent, or even central, foundation for a religion. Thus it is in the Persian period that Judaism, alongside of its temple worship, begins to develop a “religion of the book.” During the exile, the book sustained Israelite practice. In the Persian period, the book became not only a sustainer, but an actual focus, of religious practice and belief. The centrality of the book inflects all future Jewish development. After the destruction of the second temple, the book and its interpretation became the primary bases of Jewish religiosity.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{ii}}}\

Hellenism and the Roman Destruction of the Second Temple

With the fall of the Persians to Alexander the Great, the Jewish people fell under the sway of Hellenistic culture. Of chief importance for us here is that Hellenistic culture was one of translation, both literal and cultural. It was during the Hellenistic period that the Torah was
translated into Greek (the Septuagint), an act that had wide sweeping ramifications. On the theological side, what is interesting here is that not only can the religious work travel in space (unlike the temple), but it can also travel between different languages and cultures. On the historical side, the Septuagint allowed the cultural survival of Jews outside the small province of Palestine. The Hellenistic period was ended by the Maccabean revolt, which initiated a brief term of self-rule called the Hasmonean period. The most important early sects of Judaism originate during this period, the most important of which (for our purposes) are the Pharisees. Rabbinic Judaism, which took shape in the first centuries of the Common Era, views the Pharisees as their antecedents and the maintainers of the above-mentioned oral tradition.iii

The Roman period begins with the conquest of Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Pompey in 63 BCE. The most important religious developments occurred after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, with the establishment of a new religious center outside of Jerusalem in the city of Yavne. It was here that a new emphasis upon the oral law was developed. Of course, the temple had been destroyed before. Hence there was some hope of return. Accordingly, the leaders at Yavne initially spent their time merely sustaining and developing the oral traditions as they saw them. However, after the Bar Kokhba revolt, around 130 CE, the Romans decimated Judea and attempted to wipe out all vestiges of the Jewish tradition. Thereupon it was clear that the temple would not be re-built, and a new strategy was employed: writing down the oral traditions. The decision to write down the traditions in order to preserve them was monumental. It eventually led to the development of the Mishnah (around 200CE), an essential text for Judaism. The Mishnah is modeled on Roman law codes. It sought to preserve the basic systems of worship and governance as developed by Pharisaic Judaism. The almost complete lack of relation to the Bible is striking, and, indeed, the attempts to establish relationships between the Mishnah and the Bible would dominate normative Jewish thought for many centuries.

The Diaspora and the Talmud

With the destruction of the second temple Jewish history becomes fractured, complex, and more or less impossible to account for in a short essay like this. Further, the political and historical developments after the exile are no longer stitched into the religious imagination of Judaism with the same intensity. The exile (or galut) is the last historical event to be theologized and
memorialized for all Jews, at least until the twentieth century. Of course, Judaism continued to operate in history, but historical events became less important as symbols for Judaism as a religion. Textual and religious practices began to replace more straightforward political developments.

After the destruction of the second temple and the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Jewish people developed a system of religious authority that was intended to function in non-Jewish countries. This system, which evolved into Rabbinic Judaism, was primarily developed in Babylon over the course of about 800 years. Jews fleeing Israel joined up with those who had remained in Babylon and established a community that dominated Jewish development for almost a millennium. The move to Babylon consecrated the Jewish shift from temple to community worship, with textual study becoming a chief form of devotion.

As mentioned, with the fall of the Temple, the oral law was put into writing (the Mishnah). Arguably, the next great Jewish literary achievement was the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli,) a voluminous work that is hard to categorize. The Talmud is a work of interpretation formed around the Mishnah. In it, a section of the Mishnah is placed at the center of a page, and around this are recorded the arguments and interpretations of many generations of rabbis. While some of the Talmud is taken up trying to establish connections between the Mishnah and the Torah (both the oral law and the written law), much of it is tangential and obscure for outsiders. On the one hand, it seems to be a commentary on the Mishnah, but given the diversions, arguments, and stories that fill its pages, it is clear that the Talmud is not a commentary in any normal sense. On the other hand, the Talmud is a law book, but this is complicated by the fact that there are countless contradictory positions recorded in it. Arguments with contradictory premises and conclusions are piled up, one upon the other. It is clear that the people who put the Talmud together were unconvinced that there is a single position on many laws, and so many different positions are recorded. This approach, which seems confused and contradictory for people who are not trained in the art of reading the Talmud, gives the work an incredible flexibility, allowing it to be adapted to changing political, cultural, and economic circumstances.

Arguably, after the Talmud, it becomes more or less impossible to establish an exact location for the various developments in Jewish thought and practice. Instead we have a number of centers whose work intermingles and conflicts as the level of global dispersion increases.
Basic Doctrines, Institutions, and Rituals

Still, among the basic doctrines, institutions, and ritual practices of Judaism, the following clearly lie at the center of the Jewish traditions and so deserve some comment here: covenant, the chosen people, the Sabbath, the synagogue and home, the Torah and its interpretation, covenantal monotheism, and idolatry.

In the most general terms, a covenant is an agreement between at least two parties, where at least one of the parties agrees to follow certain rules. The covenant is one of the basic ways that the Jewish theological imagination establishes a relationship between historical time and sacred time. The actual covenant agreements occur in historical time (loosely speaking), but, once they have been made, they apply independent of historical transformations. The Bible contains many such covenants, most of which are modeled on Near Eastern suzerainty treaties. These were treaties, usually between a vassal and a monarch, where one power is dependent upon the other superior power. God played the role of the superior power or monarch in the theological notion of covenant. Of the many covenants in the Bible, arguably the most important one is the one established at Sinai between God and the Israelites. Known as the Mosaic covenant, it is this covenant that establishes the privileged position of the Jewish people and the primacy of the religious law (both oral and written) given to Moses. The key features of the traditional interpretation are that with this covenant the law is given, the Jewish people are established as the chosen people, and the Sabbath is established.

As already noted, later Judaism dramatically augments the laws recorded in the Bible with a set of rules and interpretations known as the oral law. These laws, and not merely the ones written in the Bible, are considered binding for Jews. More interestingly, while Moses is the one to actually meet with God and establish the covenant, the covenant is made with all Jews, regardless of whether or not they had been born yet. It is precisely here that the notion of a Jewish people, or chosen people, becomes clear.

Unlike, say, in many forms of Protestant or Evangelical Christianity, for Judaism the law and salvation are first and foremost a collective or social affair, that is, they involve the whole of the Jewish people (or all people, in some liberal interpretations) and not just the fate or eternal destiny of a single soul. As a consequence of this collective model of salvation, the Jews are “set apart” by God as a holy people. What this status of being chosen by God actually means is open to interpretation. Theologically, it presents difficulties that have generated several solutions. For
instance, Judah Halevi (1075-1141), a medieval Spanish poet-philosopher, suggested that Jews are metaphysically different from other peoples, that is, that they are in essence different from other peoples. In a more rationalist vein, Moses Maimonides held that the Jewish law is the best law, and that obeying these laws makes the Jews special (there is nothing intrinsically different about their souls, then). Modern liberal interpretations follow this general notion and stress the idea that Judaism is not superior to others, but that the tradition is nevertheless valuable and can act as an example for other groups and communities. Of especial interest in this particular model of covenant is the idea that the Jews, as a chosen people, are to be a “nation of priests.” While there is a hierarchy established between the Jews and other nations (with the Jewish nation or people being superior or above the others), this notion seriously limits the establishment of any hierarchy within the Jewish nation itself.

The Mosaic covenant’s anti-hierarchical aspect and the link between sacred and profane time is most clearly expressed in the establishment of the Sabbath (from the Hebrew shabbat, meaning “to rest”). The Sabbath is a day of rest that occurs every seven days, which, as is noted in chapter 4 of the textbook, echoes and re-enacts God’s resting in the biblical creation story. Here the “historical” event of the covenant and the event of creation are made into a cyclical event that sets the rhythm for social and family life. The Sabbath is anti-hierarchical because of the fact that everyone rests, rich and poor, master and slave.

An interesting sociological note. It has been argued that the Sabbath is partly responsible for ensuring Jewish social cohesion. The suggestion here is that the fact that everyone rests at the same time ensures that communities spend some time relating to each other outside of the world of competition and production. The social glue provided by the Sabbath is even greater in orthodox communities. It is standard practice for most practicing Jews to visit the synagogue on the Sabbath. Many orthodox Jews do not drive during the Sabbath, and, because of this, it is necessary that they live within walking distance of their synagogue. This ensures that orthodox communities live more or less within walking distance of each other.

The synagogue (from the Greek, synagōgē) has been the place for communal Jewish worship for Jews since the collapse of the Second Temple. Synagogues existed before the fall of the second temple and served various social roles, including functioning as inns. The collapse of the temple led to a kind of spatial crisis: where was one to worship? The synagogue and the home became the two new zones for ritual activities—the former for public observance and the
latter for private observance. After the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, the synagogue took on its contemporary role as a place of worship, somewhat analogous to the Christian church. However, the synagogue is by no means exclusively a place of worship. Synagogues also function as kitchens, community spaces, and study halls. Hence the Yiddish word *shul*, referring to a synagogue explicitly as a school.

The synagogue as a place of social or communal worship is complemented by the home, which has an equally important place in Jewish religious activities. The public Sabbath service is complemented by the equally (if not more) important ritual of the Sabbath meal, which is held on Friday night and has its own ritual requirements. The religious importance of the home is most evident during the holiday of Passover, since the Passover meal is the ritual center of the holiday.

In Hebrew, the word “Torah” means “teaching.” Almost all Jewish ritual and learning is in some way related to Torah and its interpretation, but this is by no means confined to the Bible. The word Torah can certainly refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but it can also refer to Jewish teaching in general (including the oral Torah,) Jewish law and observance, even, in a mystical sense now, a pious person (who is said to have “become Torah”). It is best not to see these as competing or exclusive meanings: Torah is a powerful concept precisely because these different meanings and nuances bleed into one another. Thus the law is present in the book, which is present in the pious person, and so on. While, arguably, the first five books of the Bible have a privileged place in this set of meanings, the interpretation and living out, as it were, of these books is also essential to understanding the idea.

As mentioned above, the oral law was written after the fall of the second temple, with no real reference to the written Torah. The Talmud draws connections between these two authority structures, with neither the Mishnah nor the Torah really having priority over the other. This act of interpretation and relation thus gives the interpreter a certain form of authority found in neither source of the law. The importance of interpretation, in conjunction with the multiple meanings of the word Torah, is thus worked back into the original text itself. This is a subtle point, and it extends far beyond abstract theology. The text of the Torah itself, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, contains *interpretations of its own contents*. The Greek for Deuteronomy means “second law,” and the book ends the Torah by “repeating” many of the stories and legal constructions found in the first four books. This is no straight repetition, however. It is one that
interprets, and transforms, what it is repeating. If only for this internal biblical reason, it is a serious mistake to see interpretation as something essentially different from the text itself. Rather, the scriptural text and its interpretation is all one process.

Finally, we come to the central subjects of monotheism and idolatry. Monotheism, the belief in a single God, is a characteristic shared by many religions, of course. For Judaism, however, monotheism occupies a central role because of the central idea of covenant: Judaism is a religion of “covenantal monotheism.” It is not merely the case that there is one God. It is also the case that a contract and a loyalty oath has been formed with this one God. In fact, as is noted in the textbook, it is not at all clear that monotheism, in the strictest sense, was central to the religion of the Israelites, nor to many contemporary sects of Judaism. The rule against worshipping other gods seems to imply that other gods actually exist. For this reason, many scholars prefer to use the term “monolatry” when referring to the Second Temple period and early Judaism, that is, the exclusive worship of one God within a recognition that there are other competing gods.

However, while monotheism in its most extreme sense may well be misapplied to the Second Temple, the Israelites at this time did have an injunction against images of gods and denied the worship of other gods, and, as one scholar has put it, “[b]y most peoples definition, this is monotheism.” In any case, the defining characteristic of Jewish monotheism is its covenantal aspect. Hence the importance of two of the main Moses stories: leaving Egypt, and the revelation at Mount Sinai. In both cases what is at issue is the forming of a contract. The first sets the stage and provides justification for the second.

In the text of the Torah, the basis of monotheism is thus not a belief in God’s oneness, or the belief that there is one God. It is instead about the political liberation of a people, who, instead of deciding to submit to a new political power, instead submit to the authority of a covenant. This had, and still has, immense political implications. As one scholar has written, by elevating the law “to the status of divine law, monotheism freed people from the illusion that without a king to dispense them justice, they would be at one another’s throats.” Rather than assuming that the law needs a human enforcer, covenantal monotheism creates the possibility for a law and social structure that excludes authority figures.

For this reason, covenantal monotheism has another side: exclusive monotheism. For many types of Judaism, the exclusionary part of monotheism is almost as important as its
covenantal aspect. In the Mosaic covenant, what is important is not as much that the Israelites recognize that there is one God—which is really more of a philosophical idea—but that they exclude or negate all other gods, which is more of a political or theological idea. This is tied to the idea of covenant, because loyalty matters more than the fact that God is one. However, it is important to note that as Judaism ages the role of monotheism as an idea becomes more and more central. This is especially the case in the works of Jewish philosophers, for whom God’s oneness is often an essential building block for their theological systems.

However, even in later forms of Judaism, the exclusionary aspect lives on in the prohibitions against idolatry, meaning the worship or use of images or statues of gods. While the history of the ban on idols is complicated, it can be found in its basic form in the above story of the golden calf. In this story, Moses returns from forming a covenant with God only to find the Israelites worshipping a statue, ostensibly, because they were worried he wasn’t coming back, and could not stand to be left alone for an extended period of time. This results in a set of horrific punishments. Arguably, the problem here is not the worship of other gods (the calf is not a god), but the lack of allegiance to the covenant with God. This prohibition against showing allegiance to images of other gods lasts long after the idea of monotheism assumes a central role in the Jewish traditions.

Jewish Souls, Salvation, and the Messianic

Much as the covenant with God matters more than any particular idea about what God is, Jewish practice and peoplehood matters more than any particular philosophical or theological beliefs. Jewish models of the soul are a good example of this. While the idea of the soul exists in even the earliest forms of Judaism, what the soul is takes many and often contradictory forms. The Hebrew Bible is interesting for the almost complete lack of references to anything like an afterlife, which is particularly odd given the obvious Egyptian influences upon Israelite culture. The soul is mentioned often in these texts, but in a direct relationship with the body. It is almost never considered as a distinct thing or essence, as a “separable soul.” The Hebrew words translated as soul (neshamah and ruah) both mean, quite literally, breath. When the body ceases to breathe, the soul (breath) has left, and that is more or less the end of the story for the Hebrew Bible.

Which is not to say that it is the end of the story for the Jewish traditions. By the time of
the writing of the Mishnah, and certainly by the rabbinic period, belief in some kind of afterlife was commonplace. What this meant, however, differed very widely from group to group and even from person to person. Common to many, if not most, of these versions is the belief that the soul leaves the body at physical death and will be returned to it in the messianic period, a time of judgment and salvation when the dead are resurrected. But even these notions are clearly related to the biblical insistence that there is a close connection between the soul or breath and the body: the tradition tends strongly to imagine one in relation to the other.

What happens to the Jewish soul in the period before the messianic period has an almost shocking number of interpretations, including sleeping in a depository, wandering like a ghost, studying in heaven, becoming part of a great mind (especially in philosophical circles), or even reincarnating as another person or animal (especially in kabbalistic and other mystical circles). What is interesting is that, despite the many beliefs about the soul, no one position ever became the orthodox, or even the standard, view. A plurality of positions and beliefs is the rule, not the exception, here.

Even more than the soul, the idea of the messiah (in Hebrew: mashiah, meaning “anointed,” a term originally referring to the ritual whereby kings were anointed with oil) is a concept that emerges after the completion of the Bible. Like so much else, the concept has multiple and diverse interpretations. In most readings, the messiah is a descendant of King David who will eventually re-establish the Davidic kingdom of Israel. Arguably, this idea is established to make sense of one of the many covenants in the Bible—the Davidic covenant—where God promises to maintain the Davidic kingdom forever. This, obviously, did not happen. The idea of the return of a descendent of David (the Messiah) is one way of dealing with this historical difficulty. However mundane or political the beginnings of this concept may be, the idea of the messiah eventually develops into various notions that the coming messiah does not merely re-establish the kingdom of Israel but actually inaugurates an entirely new type of world, be it one of perpetual peace, one where Israel rules over other nations, or countless other variants. Common to most of these beliefs is that time and history will change in the messianic era: no longer driven by war or acquisition, time and history will instead be governed more directly by religious principles.

As the types of messianic time multiplied, so did the number of messiahs. It is a commonplace in rabbinic thought that there will be two messiahs, one from David, another from
Joseph. While the role these two messiahs play differs, it is usually the case that the Joseph messiah comes first to prepare the way for the David messiah.

Modern liberal Judaism have largely supplanted the idea of the messiah with the more obviously political idea of the messianic. In this way, liberal Judaism seeks to maintain the basic structure of Jewish temporality, which has hope in a future time where political unrest and violence cease, without believing in the specifically privileged place that Israel has in this historical drama. The messianic time thus becomes a reason for pursuing social justice. This idea, along with the many others that exist, testifies to the wide variety of interpretations of ideas that Judaism not only allows but seems to actively encourage.

Present Concerns

As mentioned above, as with most ancient and highly diversified religious traditions, it is exceedingly difficult to identify which Jewish creations are central to the development of Judaism in its full spectrum. For instance, whereas the Jewish rationalist philosophies of Saadia Gaon (882-942) and Maimonides (1135-1204) are central for some forms of Judaism, they are borderline heresies for others. Similarly, while Kabbalah and other forms of Jewish mysticism inform the tradition and many of its ritual practices, for many Jews these are little more than romantic nonsense. Similarly, Zionism, the belief in the importance of a Jewish state, may well guide the politics and life of many Jews, but for many others it has little or nothing to do with the Jewish religion.

However, it would be remiss to end a historical sketch of Judaism without mentioning two events of the twentieth century: the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel. While the religious significance of these two events is open to debate, they have had a demographic effect that will almost certainly affect the future development of Judaism. Simply put, after the near destruction of European Jewry and the creation of a state dominated by Jews, many smaller centers of Jewish culture have dissolved. Today, unlike much of the so-called middle ages, there are two major centers of Jewish authority: Israel and North America. In Israel, the Jewish religion, no longer operating as a minority, has come to take on a different valence as it occupies the position of dominance. In North America, Jews are a minority, but a minority that is more or less fully accepted by the democratic and pluralist state. In both cases, Judaism is not operating in a persecuted position.
The segregation and persecution of Jews in the past ensured a degree of group cohesion and enabled a kind of “internal” authority. At least in North America now, the old structures of rabbinic authority, historically rooted in the ability of the rabbis to interpret the Talmud and apply these interpretations in small segregated communities, is no longer operative. The rise of orthodoxy, secular Zionism, and contemporary Hasidism (a form of Jewish piety or mysticism that developed in Eastern Europe) can be fairly viewed as responses to the fragmenting of the authority of Judaism over Jewish people. It would be overly hasty to claim that the meaning of these developments is clear, but it is certainly the case that for the centers in both Israel and the U.S. the roles of Judaism in determining Jewish identity, and vice versa, are in the process of changing.

The challenges to rabbinic authority are most evident in the rise of differing Jewish religious movements and denominations in the modern world. Judaism has always been composed of many different groups that have had very different approaches to the religion and its meaning. During the second temple period, there were at least three major groups (the Saducees, Pharisees, and Essenes), but, after the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, there appears to have been very little sectarian conflict throughout the medieval period. This is not to say that all Jews and Judaisms were the same: it is rather to say that they identified as one large group, with a shared law, however differently it was put into practice in local communities and regions. One of the great strengths of Rabbinic Judaism was its ability to incorporate diverse cultural and religious forms within the same whole. Despite significant ethnic and theological differences, one could safely say that Rabbinic Judaism was the religion of the Jewish people. The one—very significant—exception to this was the rise of Kairite Judaism in the 9th century. The Kairites (Hebrew for “readers”) rejected the oral law (discussed above) and, accordingly, both the Talmud and the Mishnah. However, after a few centuries, the Kairites were largely reabsorbed into mainstream Rabbinic Judaism (today, there are approximately 30,000 Kairites).

The hegemony of Rabbinic Judaism also began to suffer serious challenges in the seventeenth century with the rise of the Messianic Sabbatean movement. While short lived, the Sabbatean mystical vision of the world directly challenged the rabbinic understanding of time and the law. This was followed quickly by the twin movements of Haskalah, a group of enlightenment scholars and philosophers following the work of Moses Mendelssohn, and Hasidism, a group of mystical pietists following a charismatic teacher called the Baal Shem Tov.
None of these three movements initially saw themselves as heterodox. While all three were attacked by the rabbinic authorities, it is not clear that any of them sought to replace the rabbis’ power structure. Hasidism, in particular, understood itself as an orthodox form of Judaism and today is seen as such by many Jews.

This began to change more radically in the nineteenth century, with the rise of the Reform movement in Germany. The Reform movement was intended to change Jewish law and ritual in order to accommodate the demands of modernity on both a cultural and intellectual level. Reform Judaism had many causes and goals, but its basic goal was to develop a Judaism that was a religion—and not a nation or ethnicity—that could be incorporated into the modern nation-state. It was also important to the early German founders that Reform Judaism be able to do justice to modern history and science, which required the abandonment of certain (supposedly) traditional beliefs. But most importantly, from a sociological perspective now, is the fact that Reform Judaism insisted that individuals be allowed to determine for themselves what parts of Jewish Law were binding. This was unacceptable to the older rabbinic authorities, who insisted that only they could determine what was binding, and what not. This created a schism, perhaps best marked by the founding of a special Reform school and seminary in 1870, between the Reformers and the Orthodox.

This schism did not just create the Reform movement. It also resulted in the idea of Jewish “orthodoxy,” which now referred to those who were not reformers. That is to say, Orthodoxy was formed in opposition to Reform, much as the Reform was formed in opposition to the Orthodox.

The break inaugurated by the Reform movement was followed by the creation of several other denominations. One of the most important of these was the Conservative movement, a group that seeks to walk a middle path between the Reform and the Orthodox schools of thought and practice. The Conservative movement was formed in explicit opposition to Reform, which was seen by its founders as “going too far.” Following this, several other smaller groups have formed (such as the Reconstructionist and Renewal Judaisms), each with its own institutional structures and lines of authority. All of these groups are “rabbinic” insofar as they have rabbis, but each group has its own seminaries and Yeshivas (or seminary-schools). Each group, moreover, has its own power structure, and none recognize the authority of the others.

Orthodoxy as well has many internal divisions, from the many so-called “Ultra-
Orthodox” sects, which reject basic tenets of modern life and seek to return to a much more traditional reading of the Torah, to the Zionist Modern Orthodox, who seek to establish a rapport with modern life while maintaining traditional Jewish laws. The future of many of these groups is unclear. It is likely that several will combine or absorb each other, while new groups will continue to be formed through irreconcilable disagreements. However, whatever the case might be, it is clear that the old rabbinic authority has given way to a plurality of Jewish structures that will develop their own forms of worship and tradition into the future.

Glossary:

Covenant  An agreement or contract where one or both parties agree not to do certain acts.

Decalogue  Often known as the 10 Commandments, a list of basic rules found in the Torah. According to Jewish myth, these were given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Galut  The Hebrew word for exile.

Halakhah  The Hebrew word for law. Literally means ‘the way’. Most of these laws are binding only for Jews.

Hassid  The Hebrew word for piety. Often refers to members of a stringent Jewish sect.

Idol/Idolatry  A material object or person that is worshipped. Idolatry is the act of worshipping an object. It is often unclear to outsiders if an object is being worshipped, or if it is a symbol for something else (that is being worshipped).

Kabbalah  A Jewish form of mysticism. The word literally means ‘tradition’ or ‘receiving’.

Messiah  One or more figures who are to appear near the end of historical time to usher in a new age of universal peace.

Mishnah  The basic code for Rabbinic law.

Midrash  A method of interpretation, where the different meanings of words are used to develop multiple interpretations of a text.

Monolotry  The worship of one god.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monotheism</td>
<td>The belief that there is only one god.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosaic</td>
<td>Referring to Moses, his time, or the laws associated with him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noachide</td>
<td>The rules and laws that are binding for non-Jews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passover</td>
<td>An important Jewish holiday, marking the escape from slavery in Egypt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharisee</td>
<td>An ancient Jewish sect. Rabbinic Judaism views the Pharisees as their antecedents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi</td>
<td>The Hebrew word for ‘my master’. Used to address teachers or scholars of Torah. Eventually this position became very similar to that of a Christian priest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruah</td>
<td>The Hebrew word for spirit. Also means breath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Septuagint</td>
<td>A very important Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabbat</td>
<td>The day of rest that marks the end of the work-week. Shabbat is currently marked from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synagogue</td>
<td>A Greek word for ‘meeting place’. A place for Jewish ritual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talmud</td>
<td>A text of Jewish law and stories, based around the Mishnah. There are two Talmuds (one from Jerusalem, one from Babylon). The Babylonian Talmud is the more authoritative of the two.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanakh</td>
<td>The complete Hebrew Bible. An acronym of Torah, Nevi'im ('Prophets') and Ketuvim (the 'Writings')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torah, Oral</td>
<td>The rules and laws not found in the Tanakh. According to tradition, these rules were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and passed down from teacher to student since then. The Mishnah is their first major written codification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torah, Written</td>
<td>The Hebrew word for ‘teaching’. Used to refer to the first five books of Moses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zionism</td>
<td>A political movement that seeks the establishment and preservation of a nation-state in Israel/Palestine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^3\) *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 82.
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