

Chapter 15
Early Judaism
By Tim Callaway

Chapter Summary

To understand how Jews view creation, we must look not to the Bible alone but to that vast collection of interpretation known as the Talmud. The Jewish view of creation places the original act long before the story found in the book of Genesis. The Torah is personified as a female figure who, in communication with God, planned everything from the beginning. This emphasis upon the Torah is central to an understanding of Judaism and is a source of misunderstanding for Christians who see things differently.

Jews read the biblical narratives differently than Christians. The story of Abraham can be seen as the founding story of Jewish origins, yet the most important event for Jews is the revelation of the Torah or giving of the law to Moses (Exodus 19). Along with the Torah came the obligation to enter into covenant, an idea based upon the ancient Near Eastern practice of conquerors and kings who entered into binding relationships, or covenants, with subject peoples. At the core of a covenant was the idea of obedience. So, in creating a covenant between himself and his people, God makes his demand that his people fulfill their obligations to him in return for his blessings. In this scenario, the Torah is God's instrument for the creation of a covenantal people and is the true heritage of his people. The Torah, then, is far more than law to Jewish believers; it is a guide to life.

The Torah represents both the Pentateuch (five books of Moses) and their teachings as understood within the context of other Jewish scriptures/tradition. It is a dynamic source of life and legislation that speaks to each generation anew. Therefore, Jews have a duty to preserve the Torah and interpret it correctly. Early interpretations were codified in the first centuries of the Christian era to create the Babylonian Talmud, which forms one of the great sources of Jewish self-understanding.

The Hebrew Bible consists of the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Scriptures, but also includes a number of books called the Apocrypha. The first complete set of Hebrew Bible manuscripts dates from the tenth century AD and is known as the Masoretic text.

Against the background of the revelation of the Torah, the stories of creation, Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham form a pattern of events related to the birth of Israel as the people of God. These stories have two main themes: (1) the establishment of an everlasting covenant by God with Abraham and his legitimate descendants, and (2) the obligation of living a blameless life before God, the sign and seal of which is circumcision.

The Jewish understanding of history is chronicled in the Old Testament of the Bible essentially up until the time of the return from Babylonian captivity (538 BC) when the Jews were permitted to return to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem. A second temple was built and a priestly cult established that dominated the religion of the people.

Judaism underwent further changes following the conquest of the entire Near East by Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). So great was the influence of Greek rulers on the Jews in cities like Alexandria that many abandoned the Hebrew and Aramaic languages so that Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in what is known as the Septuagint. Shortly thereafter, Judea was annexed

by the kingdom of Syria and its Seleucid rulers who were Greek. One of their kings, Antiochus Epiphanes, determined to unify his empire under one religion and sought to suppress Jewish worship and transform the Jerusalem temple to a Greek one. In 166 BC a rebellion broke out under the priestly Maccabee family resulting in the independence of Judah, an event Jews today remember in the festival of Hanukkah.

During this period of political independence, Jewish groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and teachers encountered in the New Testament were established. Civil war broke out, with the Roman general Pompey called in to act as arbitrator in 63 BC. As a result, Judea became a puppet state of Rome. Various apocalyptic movements calling for the expulsion of the Romans and establishment of the kingdom of God became more intense following the death of Herod the Great (37–4 BC). Pontius Pilate's successor, Florus, (AD 64) provoked the deadliest rebellion in Palestine.

Exasperated with the Jews, Florus allowed his troops to run riot in Jerusalem, executing a number of Jewish leaders. Jewish rebels retaliated by murdering Roman Jews and wealthy citizens who favored Rome. Shortly after Nero's death in AD 68, Jerusalem was attacked, the Jewish population severely punished, and the temple destroyed. Subsequent war resulted in the death of around one million Jews.

The destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, together with a whole system of sacrifices, religious pilgrimage, and the supporting priesthood, provoked one of the most significant religious transformations in all of history. Yet Jewish rebellions went on for several centuries throughout the Roman world. The net result was that Jews became associated with the worst kind of terrorism and seen as capable of the grossest cruelties.

A new generation of Jewish scholars arose to make the study of the Torah the central feature of Jewish worship, compiling laws and rules known as the Midrash. The mid-fourth century Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud a century later became the foundation for what was to become known as Rabbinic Judaism. The rise of Islam in the seventh century AD posed new challenges to Judaism which continued for the next 500 years.