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1. Jerusalem: The Hebrews


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1. Jerusalem: The Hebrews

Abstract

Long the political and religious center of the Hebrew people and for a brief time the chief center of Christianity, the city of Jerusalem has been chosen to represent the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western Civilization. Jerusalem is older than Rome, possibly even older than Athens (as far as habitation by the Greeks is concerned), and it will be helpful to keep that fact in mind. Solomon lived perhaps before there was a city of Rome. The kingdom of Judah fell almost a century before the Persians attacked Greece. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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JERUSALEM

1. The Hebrews

Long the political and religious center of the Hebrew people and for a brief time the chief center of Christianity, the city of Jerusalem has been chosen to represent the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western Civilization. Jerusalem is older than Rome, possibly even older than Athens (as far as habitation by the Greeks is concerned), and it will be helpful to keep that fact in mind. Solomon lived perhaps before there was a city of Rome. The kingdom of Judah fell almost a century before the Persians attacked Greece.

The Hebrews were a small and, in their time, a rather insignificant group of people in the Ancient Near East. What is known about them during the early period of their life comes largely from their Bible (the Christian Old Testament), whose history was written to convey a particular point of view: that all events reflect divine purpose in the affairs of men. The historian of today finds that he cannot write as accurate an account of the Hebrews as he would wish. Two big questions remain unanswered for him. What kernel of truth lies behind the highly interpreted record of Hebrew history and which is the best way to look for it? How can the historian evaluate that record adequately when so little is known of the authorship and dates of most of the Old Testament books, which are believed to have been edited and reedited over a period of about one thousand years? In the nineteenth century many scholars dismissed large segments of the Old Testament as purely mythical. More recently, archeological discoveries in and near Palestine have tended strongly to confirm the general accuracy of the historical record as it is presented, but not as yet in anything like the detail the historian would prefer to have.

Of a different stock from the Greeks and Romans, the Hebrews may well have originated in the Arabian desert, lived for a time in Mesopotamia, and then under Abraham began occupying Palestine (or Canaan) early in the second millenium B. C. They were primarily herdsmen. They had a loose tribal organization, within which there were strong and closely knit family ties. The Hebrew patriarchy is, in many ways, comparable to the Greek polis. Some, but not all, of the Hebrews seem to have gone into Egypt, possibly to escape famine and possibly in connection with invaders of that country. Several hundred years later, about 1250 B. C. and after the invaders had been expelled, some of the descendants of these Hebrews, under the leadership of Moses, began a slow migration to the east. During the long sojourn in Egypt they had not been assimilated completely by the more advanced culture around them, a trait which they were to continue to display in later years.

[By our standards Palestine was not much of a promised land. Nevertheless, it was not to be had simply for the asking, either by the returning Hebrews or by their kinsmen who had remained on or just within its borders. A long period of hard fighting ensued, during which the Hebrews were often sorely divided among themselves. Eventually, in the hope that it would help them win and hold their conquest, they elected their first king, Saul. His successor, David, administered a final defeat to the other immediate contenders for Palestine and made the captured city of Jerusalem his capital. The Hebrews under David (c. 1005 - c. 965 B. C.) and Solomon (c. 965 - c. 925 B. C.) reached the height of their political power. Palestine was normally at the mercy of stronger powers to the south and east, but at the moment there were no strong powers on the horizons. David and Solomon had tried with considerable success to make a state out of the separate tribes, with royal officials and an army, palaces, and a temple. But both rulers taxed their subjects heavily and used forced labor to complete their ambitious projects. After Solomon's death, there was a revolt from which two kingdoms emerged: the rebel, Israel, in the north and Judah in the south. Israel was larger, more accessible to the trade routes, and more commercial. Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, was more compact and remote. However, when new empires arose in the east both kingdoms fell: Israel to Assyria in 722 B. C. and Judah to Chaldea in 586 B. C.]

The Chaldeans punished Judah for its stubborn resistance by destroying the city of Jerusalem and carrying off into captivity perhaps as many as 10,000 of its leading citizens. By the time the Persians captured Chaldea in 539 B. C. and offered to allow the Hebrews to return to Palestine, not all of them were interested in accepting the offer. Life in Babylon had its pleasant aspects for those who had adapted themselves to Chaldean society. But again there was a remnant, and they had waited long and faithfully for this day. Those who did return, joined by a few of the exiles from Israel, rebuilt the temple and eventually the walls of Jerusalem, although not without many tribulations and disappointments. Persian overlordship remained until Alexander's conquest in 332 B. C. Later, Palestine fell to one of the successor states and in 63 B. C. to the Romans.

[At no time during the long period just described did the Hebrews display those precise qualities which enabled the Greeks and the Romans to make their particular cultural contributions in the fields of philosophy, art, science, government, or law. Hebrew energies were devoted to pioneering in another direction: to developing a monotheistic religion with ethical and ceremonial connotations.]

[It took the Hebrews a long time to arrive at their mature understanding of their God. Given the sources with which they must work, scholars are still not in agreement on the steps by which this was accomplished, just how long these steps took, or the extent of outside influence, such as Egyptian or Mesopotamian, on the end result. Early in their history the Hebrews

came to believe that the Lord (or Jehovah) was their only God, but not necessarily the only God. In what was the reverse of the usual procedure at the time among other peoples, who sought out their deities, this God had chosen to reveal Himself to men. Abraham had entered voluntarily into a covenant with God, promising to walk blamelessly before Him. In return, God promised to protect Abraham and his family and to make of his seed a great nation. His descendants renewed this covenant and it was not forgotten by those Hebrews who sojourned for several centuries in Egypt. In fact, it may well have been the very thing which gave them enough cultural cohesion to enable them to keep their identity in the midst of Egyptian splendor.]

During the long wandering which followed the Exodus, a most important development took place in the meaning the Hebrews attached to the covenant. Moses, whose powers of leadership held his people together at this critical juncture in their history, proclaimed what was in effect a new covenant -- one between God and His chosen people. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became the God of Israel, and so he remained throughout the rest of Old Testament history. According to Moses, God declared that He would lead the Hebrews into the promised land, help them defeat their enemies, and then bless them with peace and prosperity. This concept of the covenant relationship, with its religious and political implications, was undoubtedly one of the strongest factors in pulling the divided Hebrew people together as they entered upon a new experience, quite different from that in Egypt: the experience of conquering and possessing Palestine.

A covenant is a contract, and incident to a contract there are mutual obligations. God's pledges had to be met by pledges on the part of His chosen people. Their obligations were summed up briefly in the Ten Commandments, which the Hebrews believed the Lord had given to Moses on Mount Sinai. These enjoined upon them the performance of two main types of responsibilities. The first dealt with the worship of God and was illustrated by the command: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. The second dealt with man's relationship to his fellowmen, illustrated by the command: Thou shalt not steal. As time went on, these obligations were further enumerated in a host of rules and regulations (such as are found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers), governing ritual, cleanliness, economic dealings -- in fact, every aspect of a man's life.]

A contract cannot be broken with impunity except by mutual consent. The Hebrews were certain that God would fulfill His promises to them. Would they fulfill theirs to Him? Would they "keep covenant"? Of this they were not so certain, although they were sure that transgression on their part would inevitably lead to punishment. Another name for this transgression is sin, which to the Hebrew was not comparable to a simple error of judgment arising from ignorance as it was for the Greek. The Old Testament story of the sin of Adam is an account of man's wilful disobedience to God's command and the consequences of that

disobedience. This concept of sin -- transgression of the will of God -- is distinctively Hebrew.

The idea of sin perplexed many Hebrew thinkers. If a man sinned, he would be punished. If he obeyed the law, he would prosper. It was as simple as all that. But they observed that this explanation failed to account for some of the very obvious facts of their earthly existence. In one of the most profound commentaries on this subject ever written, the author of the book of Job concluded that the precise connection between sin and suffering really was beyond human understanding. There was another and related perplexity. Does God visit His wrath on the whole Hebrew people or on the transgressors only? This was a difficult question to ponder, and it was not always answered in the same way. For a long time the primary concern of Hebrew writers was not with the individual but with the whole Hebrew people in the midst of a hostile world. Consequently, the answer was that punishment fell on all because it was merited by all. Defeat in battle at the hands of the Assyrians was clearly the price all had to pay for their sins; God was using the Assyrians to that end.

In the centuries following the division of Solomon's kingdom, during most of which time the Hebrews were in continuous difficulty with their more powerful neighbors, there rose up among them a series of prophets, unique for their time, whose influence on the subsequent standards of morality has been profound. These prophets believed that they had been called by the Lord, not primarily to predict the future, but to interpret and reinterpret His will, to remind the people over and over again of their duties under the covenant. They were not priests; they worked individually; and generally they seem to have been reluctant to assume the prophetic burden, for such is what it usually turned out to be.

The prophetic writings of the Old Testament show that in the minds of Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and the others, the Hebrew religion stood in need of several broad changes of emphasis. The first dealt with the theme of social justice. In explaining how the Hebrews would fall on evil days unless they repented, the prophets declared that the parts of the covenant which were broken most frequently were those which dealt with the ethical obligations of Hebrews to each other. To the prophets, these moral breaches were no less sins than were failures to observe correct ritual. Micah summarized the duty of men as he saw it in these frequently quoted words:

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

"Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the first of my body for the sin of my soul?"

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does

the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? **J**

This involves a second emphasis -- the stress of some of the prophets on the individual rather than on the nation, as was characteristic of previous Hebrew thought. Every Hebrew, these prophets insisted, was equally bound to the covenant obligations, whether he be king or commoner, priest or layman, rich or poor. He was bound to obey them in spirit as well as in letter. From his equal obligation to obey there arose his dignity and equality before God and man.

The third emphasis dealt with the greater stress of the prophets on the universality of the Hebrew God, a point which is still in dispute among scholars. It is easy to understand how Hebrew thinkers might have changed the conception of their God to one that He was the only God. [Whether it actually happened in quite the following way probably cannot be proved. The Hebrews believed that God punished breaches of the covenant. One way in which He did this was by bringing down the enemies of the Hebrews upon them. If, let us say, He could use the Chaldeans to punish the Hebrews, He must have some power over the Chaldeans. If He has power over them, He must be their God, too. The prophets could not conceive of any other adequate explanation. But God had chosen to reveal Himself only to the Hebrews. Ultimately He would reveal Himself to other men, but they would be able to come into fellowship with Him only by entering the Hebrew covenant relationship.]

The five centuries between the end of the exile and the birth of Christ were crucial for the development of Judaism (we shall call the Hebrews Jews from this time on and their religion Judaism) and, incidentally, for the later development of Christianity as well. To begin with, the Jews were no longer confined to a small area in Palestine. Particularly during the Hellenistic period, but even before, they had found their way into almost every important part of the Mediterranean world. This dispersion, which is known as the Diaspora, might have resulted in their complete assimilation by the cultures in which they located. Once again, however, enough of them retained the tenacity necessary to preserve many of the distinctive characteristics which arose from their conviction that they were God's chosen people.

In the synagogue, the post-exilic Jew had an institution which helped him to keep alive his feeling of uniqueness by bringing regular worship and religion-centered education into virtually every community in which he lived. The restored temple in Jerusalem, with its ritual sacrifices being offered continuously, was the religious center of Judaism. A devout Jew hoped to be present at its services on at least a few occasions in his life, perhaps during one of the numerous holy

days and festivals (such as Passover or Pentecost) to which the temple leadership had given added meaning as one way to bind together Jews everywhere into one religious community. But it was in the synagogue, facing toward Jerusalem, that they met regularly on sabbath and feast days for prayers and for the reading and interpretation of the scriptures. The synagogue is the obvious prototype of the Christian congregation of a later day.]

[The most important figure in the Palestinian Judaism of this period was the priest, whose power was political as well as religious. It is correct to describe the Jewish polity at this point as theocratic, because the high priest was the chief official of the state as well as of the church. The priests were determined to preserve the religious, and beyond that the cultural, identity of the Jewish people. They tried to do this by insisting upon meticulous regard for the temple ritual and strict obedience to the details of the Jewish law. Perhaps second to the priests in importance were the scribes, who were found both in Palestine and in the lands of the Diaspora. Their original function was to copy the scriptures. Later, it was broadened to include teaching and interpreting the law, both in its written and oral forms. In this way they played a key role in keeping alive Jewish customs and traditions. In Palestine the work of the scribe tended to reinforce priestly control. Elsewhere, it followed a more independent course, with the scribes often stressing the necessity of interpreting the law more liberally to meet changing circumstances.]

Contemporary with the rise of the post-exilic priest and scribe was the beginning of the process of canonizing which resulted in the completion of the Hebrew Bible. Most, if not all, of the books as finally accepted were the product of editing and reediting over a long period of time. The earliest to be considered sacred scripture (about 400 B. C.) were the first five books, known as the Pentateuch or the Torah and containing the sum and substance of the Jewish law. About 200 B. C. the prophets were added. Then, about A. D. 90 the canon was finally completed by the acceptance of other books.

About a century and a half before the birth of Christ, several groups or parties coalesced within Judaism, of which three will be mentioned here. The Pharisees represent the continuing orthodox strand with its emphasis on strict adherence to the written and oral law and aloofness from Hellenistic and Roman influences. Many scribes were Pharisees. The Sadducees were less concerned with their uniqueness as Jews. They accepted only the written law as found in the Torah, in the belief that anything beyond this would set them off unnecessarily from the Hellenistic world. The third group was the Essenes, a small, monastic, celibate, and communistic community which has figured prominently in connection with the recent discoveries of the Dead Sea scrolls.

Before turning to the next section, it will be wise to pause long enough to consider the mature understanding of their God at which the Jews finally arrived. He was believed by them to be a person, though invisible to men and not to be thought of as possessing a human body. Because God was a person as men are persons, it was possible to have meaningful relations with Him. In other words, it was possible to have a covenant, voluntarily entered into, and presumably for mutual benefit. At least within the limits of this covenant God was not capricious -- a fact to which men have often returned in their thinking about Him. Also, since God and man share personality, it was not farfetched for the Hebrews to call themselves the sons of God.

To the Hebrews, God was the creator and preserver of the universe. He existed before the universe and the creation of everything was an act of choice on His part. Because He also is the preserver, nothing ever happens which is really beyond his ken. Therefore, to the Hebrew history was not an endless repetition, not cyclical, as the Greeks had suggested. History was the working out in time of the will and purpose of God. We can understand why the Hebrews believed that history had meaning. Through it God had revealed Himself and was either teaching or punishing His chosen people. History was for the Hebrew what nature was for the Greek. It is accurate to characterize the Hebrew God as transcendent -- He was apart from and could be distinguished from the world; He was not to the world as the sun is to its rays. At the same time He was also immanent. Although apart from man's world He was not aloof, but worked in it and through it. Furthermore, He was concerned with the lives of men and women. Some religions have emphasized either one or the other of these characterizations of the Deity. The Hebrews combined them and conceived of God as both transcendent and immanent.

The Hebrews believed that God had chosen to reveal Himself to them and that this was indeed the only way in which they could come to know Him. The revelations to Abraham and Moses were the central facts of history. The Hebrews believed that there was no natural bond, such as the faculty of reason, joining man and God, by means of which man could rise in thought to reach ultimately to God. Because of this, faith was more important than reason. One does not argue the existence of the God of the Hebrews; one accepts Him. The Old Testament is peppered with statements like: "Thus saith the Lord" or "the word of the Lord came to me, saying..." The Hebrews never tried to incorporate into their religion a rational, consistent philosophy. They saw no need for it. There were few abstract terms in their vocabulary.

To the Hebrews, God the creator and preserver of the universe was also the creator and preserver of the moral order. This order took the place that the natural order occupied for the Greek, and its law the place of Greek scientific law. God was the righteous, just, merciful, forgiving, and loving sovereign. He demanded these qualities in every individual among

His chosen people. It is possible to have a religion without ethical content. Greek polytheism is an example. It is possible to have an ethical system rationally arrived at without supernatural aids, such as that of Socrates or Plato. The ✓ Hebrews were certainly not the first people ever to connect religion and ethics, but they were the first to develop the relationship into an indissoluble one. The end of man for the Hebrew was not contemplation, but action.

Finally, the Hebrews were confident that God would take care of His own. They believed that there was such a thing as Divine Providence. It was God's part of the covenant agreement. As we have seen, before the fall of Israel and Judah the prophets explained the lot that befell the Hebrew people in terms of their sinfulness. After the exile, there were those who believed that God's chosen had suffered enough and that their redemption was soon coming. Some looked for a Messiah -- an anointed one -- who would be God's agent in inaugurating an era of peace and prosperity for the Jews. Others believed this desired end would come about without the necessary appearance of one central, unmistakable figure. A few Jewish thinkers, especially the Pharisees, began to look for the resurrection of the dead and for a future state of rewards and punishments, in which God would settle finally all accounts arising under His covenant.

Such was the conception of God which the Hebrews held by the end of the Hellenistic period. With only a few changes, it was taken over by the Christians.

Mystery religions