

The History of the Ancient Hebrews

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The Humble Beginnings of the Ancient Hebrews

The influence of the Hebrew people is strikingly evident in today's societies and the ideologies prevalent in Western culture. Their faith is spread throughout the world, and their historical legacies occupy roles within the minds of Jew, Christian, Muslim, and atheist alike. What were the roots of this ancient group? How did the journey that they had undergone during their first three thousand years shape their beliefs and structure? These are all questions deserving of a thorough exploration.

From the sacred writings of the Hebrews, the *Torah*, one is able to obtain valuable information about their early pre-Exodus history for which there had been few other written records. The story of this people initiates in Mesopotamia, in the city of Ur, where a group known to the more settled classes as "*habiru*", or semi-nomads who dwelled mostly on the outskirts of the Sumerian region, became increasingly alarmed at the instability that had begun to permeate the Mesopotamian region.

This was a time of the decline of Sumer and the gradual overrunning of the region by Aramaic tribes related to the *habiru*, but hostile to the interests of the latter. The Hebrews (their name originating from the term, *habiru*) were moderately affluent pastoralists to whom a massive conflict would only bring material devastation.

According to the Book of Genesis, one of the most prosperous Hebrews, named Terah, resolved to act upon his displeasure with the situation by departing from the region in search of greater stability. Writes Dr. Anthony Silvestri, "Terah and his extended family left Ur in Mesopotamia and traveled to Haran in Syria. While in Haran, one of Terah's sons, Abraham, was told by his god to leave Syria for another place which will be given to him and his descendants forever. Abraham and his wife Sarah responded and left for Canaan, in Judea."

While Terah still adhered to the old polytheistic faith, Abraham became the innovator of a religion that would shape the world. Abraham himself possessed the resources to support the small group of followers and relatives that had gathered at his side, being, according to Helen Chapin Metz, "a wealthy semi-nomad who possessed large flocks of sheep, goats, and had enough retainers to mount small military expeditions." From these humble beginnings, the Jewish people and culture emerged. A tribe of nomadic pastoralists would grow to become a powerful nation and a major cultural influence in Western civilization.

The History of the Ancient Hebrews from the Time of Abraham to the Migration into Egypt

The Hebrew sacred writings speak of Abraham, initially a tribal elder (so states Josephine Kamm), as the founder of the Hebrew national identity following his communication with God, which reportedly reached a climax when God ordered the sacrifice of Abraham's son, Isaac, after which He demonstrated His mercy by sparing Isaac's life as a result of Abraham's obedience to any celestial dictum, no matter how extreme.

The story of Abraham and Isaac relates a fundamental religious conviction of the capacity of a single supreme force to determine the correctness of action and the necessity of mere mortals to demonstrate their appreciation and devotion to this force's chosen courses of action, for they will, according to the Hebrew writings, benefit from them in the end as "God's chosen people." It also demonstrates the progressive monotheistic rejection of the horrors of human sacrifice. Kamm states that "Abraham was shown by God that human sacrifice was wrong. The Hebrews therefore substituted an animal or an offering of fruit, grain, or oil." With this initial measure, already an unprecedented improvement upon the past, the Jewish faith began to develop as a revolutionary new force.

The son of Isaac, Jacob, also known as Israel (or "Champion of God"), became the founder of the early Hebrew social system, each of Israel's twelve sons becoming the chieftains of a subdivision of the Jewish people, one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. As their numbers gradually increased as a result of alliances and intermarriage with the members of local Canaanite communities, Hebrew influence eventually spread throughout "the land of milk and honey." However, in approximately 1650 B.C., a famine struck their territories, leading to a massive wave of emigration south, toward the Nile Delta. This occurred, according to Kamm, within Jacob's lifetime.

Egypt, at this time, was plunged into internal squabbling, disarray, and wave after wave of foreign domination. Thus, no efficient security system existed to prevent the Hebrews from settling there and initiating agricultural and pastoralist enterprises. Being distant relatives of both the Babylonians and the Hittites, as well as the then Hyksos masters of Egypt, the Jews possessed ample skill in iron working and the creation of wheeled vehicles that had placed them on an equal footing with the Hyksos.

Thus, the Hyksos sought to forge an alliance with the Jews and recruit their talents to serve their ends. Hebrew craftsmen, herders, and farmers prospered during this period, and one of the sons of Jacob, Joseph, served as a pharaonic vizier, bestowing upon the ruler essential advice aimed at avoiding a drought similar to the one experienced by Canaan a short time prior. For several generations, the Hebrews dwelled in Egypt under conditions of relative comfort and affluence. Silvestri writes that "Hebrews were given the land of Goshen to herd their flocks, and became a prosperous and productive part of Egyptian society."

The History of the Ancient Hebrews from Their Enslavement in Egypt to the Exodus

In 1585 BC, a wave of liberation efforts by a native Egyptian army of Pharaoh Ahmose I expelled the Hyksos occupants of Egypt using the latter's own techniques, iron swords and shields along with chariots possessing spiked wheels.

The era of the New Kingdom had begun in Egypt, with a sharp rise in the nationalism of the Egyptian people and, according to Dr. Anthony Silvestri, "a renewed resolve never to be dominated by foreigners again." The Jewish population of Egypt was largely peaceful and possessed ample holdings within the country, thus unable to readily depart.

Josephine Kamm believes that the prosperity of the Hebrews "aroused the enmity and envy of the Pharaohs. The Pharaohs therefore made slaves of the Hebrews and forced them to work on their tremendous building projects."

The Jews became detained in the country and degraded to the status of manual laborers, their efforts dominated solely by service to the Egyptian state. This shift in their treatment appalled numerous Hebrews and brought about gradually strengthening currents of discontent.

As the Egyptian Empire expanded, eventually into Canaan, this slavery became ever more deeply rooted, and the Hebrew people assimilated over generations into the Egyptian social order.

A Jew of noble descent by the name of Moses was an ardent believer in the need of his people to possess their own cultural identity, dominated by their own God. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses attempted to negotiate with Pharaoh Ramesses II for the emancipation of Hebrew slaves and their departure from Egypt. However, unwilling to lose a significant chunk of his labor force, Ramesses refused, after which the Biblical account relates the unleashing of the "plagues" upon Egypt, including a widespread famine and the death of every Egyptian first-born male child.

Although this may seem exaggerated, it was at approximately this time that the eldest surviving child of Ramesses II perished suddenly and of unknown causes. This may be the historical root of the Biblical account. However, whatever the trigger, a vast majority of the Hebrews soon absorbed the enthusiasm which rendered them capable of following Moses in his quest to escape Egyptian dominance.

There are disputes concerning the precise dates of the occurrence of the Exodus. Kamm places an estimate near 1290 B.C.; however, this was the approximate beginning of Ramesses' reign, and the death of his eldest son had occurred some thirty years later, near 1260 B.C. The later estimate may be more reliable, as demonstrated by Egyptian records of the event. Had the foremost estimate been correct, Joshua's campaigns would have occurred during the years of 1250-1225, while the Egyptians place their confrontation with the Jews upon the latter people's emergence into Canaan at 1220 B.C.

The Ten Commandments and Forty Years in the Sinai Peninsula

Crossing the Red Sea onto the Sinai Peninsula, Moses reportedly received the Ten Commandments from God. These became the key precepts of all monotheist faiths that followed. Even today, every one of us has been exposed to the moral framework of "Thou shalt not kill", "Thou shalt not steal", and "Thou shalt not commit adultery" to name but a few.

The Ten Commandments are key pillars not only of Judaism but of Western Culture in general. Although certain practices, such as idolatry, are in theory tolerated by secular governments (as they ought to be), murder, theft, and adultery remain the most atrocious moral transgressions.

Instituting the Ten Commandments as laws and at least aiming to realize them in everyday practice, the Hebrews finalized their journey toward a distinct national identity.

Dr. Anthony Silvestri suggests that the Hebrew god, known as Adonai, Yahweh, or Jehovah, may be a carryover of the pharaoh Akhenaton's (ruled 1354-1337 BC) first innovation in the realm of monotheism, the Sun Disk God, Aton. It may well be that during their imprisonment the Hebrews became Egyptianized to the extent that their oral cultural traditions, such as the legacy of Abraham (which was not recorded until the advent of Moses and, more comprehensibly, the reign of Solomon) have gradually become subject to absorption of certain Egyptian concepts compatible with their already existing heritage.

This remains a plausible hypothesis, yet there is still no conclusive evidence to state with certainty anything but this: the experiences of Moses finally bound the Hebrews together into a culture with a solid ideological foundation. The Jewish priesthood became initiated at this time with the elder brother of Moses, Aaron, as the first High Priest.

The pursuit by the army of the new pharaoh, Ramesses's son Merneptah, ensued, and, according to Helen Chapin, "a victory stele dated 1220 B.C. relates a battle fought with the Israelites beyond the Sinai in Canaan." This occurred following the forty years of aimless wandering described by the Bible as punishment for the Jewish people's worship of a golden calf whilst God had crafted his covenant with Moses atop Mount Sinai.

Josephine Kamm provides a broader reason for this "divine punishment": "They had been slaves for so long that they were sullen and scared and resentful of any authority." A new generation would need to mature before a transition to self-governance and adherence to the new religion could be finalized.

Invasion of Canaan

Around 1220 B.C., the Five Books of Moses were reportedly created, outlining the precise intentions of God in terms of the behavior of his people. These books became known as the Jewish "Law", or, translated into the Hebrew language, the *Torah*.

Moses himself did not survive to witness the arrival of his people in the "Promised Land," which was by that time inhabited by polytheistic peoples of a semi-urbanized mode of existence. They were located on the outskirts of Phoenician metropolises such as Tyre and Sidon to the north, and shared certain aspects of Phoenician religion, including the worship of Ba'al, a fertility deity, as their chief god.

According to the Book of Joshua, God ordered a Hebrew warrior to subjugate these peoples, cleanse Canaan of idolatry and reclaim the land lost to the Jews in the famine four centuries earlier. The campaigns of Joshua underwent a climax at the Siege of Jericho that resulted in the obliteration of the town with the exception of a woman who had before sheltered two Israelites from arrest by the city's king.

Helen Chapin Metz writes that "the conquest of Canaan under the generalship of Joshua took place over several decades. The biblical account depicts a primitive, outnumbered confederation of tribes slowly conquering pieces of territory from a sedentary, relatively advanced people who lived in walled cities and towns. For a long time the various tribes of Israel controlled the higher, less desirable lands, and only with the advent of David did the kingdoms of Israel and Judah come into being with a capital in Jerusalem."

The geographical features of Canaan at last permitted the Hebrews to rely on agriculture as their dominant source of food and to withdraw the herding of cattle to a mere supplement. The "land of milk and honey" is so named for the particularly high fertility of its soil, hydrated by the Jordan River to the east, and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, from which spring numerous minor rivers. This enabled the development of relatively large cities in the area several centuries prior to the advent of the Hebrews.

Archaeological evidence at the ruins of Jericho, for example, points to a foundation date near 6000 B.C. Other natural boundaries of Canaan include the Dead Sea to the southeast, the semi-mountainous, semi-barred Sinai Peninsula to the southwest, and the minor Sea of Chinnereth to the northeast. Nevertheless, due to its productivity and abundance of arable land, the region had since the Neolithic era and continuing into the present day allured numerous ethnic groups, which was a key factor in the inception of bloody conflicts of which Canaan has never been cleansed.

Wars Against the Philistines

After the conquest of Canaan, the first threat to the stability of the Twelve Tribes of Israel came during a period of semi-collectivist government that was, according to Dr. Anthony Silvestri, headed by a council of elders.

Large bands of warriors bearing iron weapons emerged from the Mediterranean Sea near 1100 BC, overrunning both Egypt and Palestine (the new name of the region stemming from the name of the invaders, the Philistines) and establishing rule by systematic coercion and tribute extraction.

For the purpose of resisting the tide of "Sea Peoples," every tribe appointed temporary political and military leaders, or Judges, who headed the Hebrew armies. Following a defeat at the Battle of Aphek (around the year 1040 BC), however, many Hebrews realized that a nationally unified force would be the only means of driving back the occupants.

Silvestri writes that "the Israelites decided that the old system of government by council was no longer viable, and they adopted the tried and true near-eastern monarchy. Their first king, Saul, began as a success against the Philistines, but then became mentally deranged."

Helen Chapin Metz describes the brevity of Saul's regime, "To unify the people in the face of the Philistine threat, the prophet Samuel anointed the guerilla captain Saul as the first king of the Israelites. Only one year after his coronation, however, the Philistines destroyed the new royal

army at Mount Gilboa, near Bet Shean, southeast of the Plain of Jezreel, killing Saul and his son Jonathan."

The actual length of Saul's reign is disputed, and *The Cultural Atlas of the Bible* exposes varying estimates, ranging from two years to thirty-two. Helen Chapin Metz seems to be an advocate of the lesser extreme.

It was then that the figure of David entered the historical spotlight. David, a former shepherd who had served as a mercenary for the Philistines and was well aware of their attributes and tactics, had been selected, due to his previous contributions to the armies of Saul, which included his triumph in a duel against Goliath, a renowned Philistine warrior. *The Cultural Atlas of the Bible* states that "at the time of Saul's death (with whom David had quarreled as a result of Saul's suspicions of David's designs toward kingship) David was spared from having to fight against the Israelites, and in the period that followed Saul's death he became king of Judah, ruling from Hebron presumably with Philistine approval."

The Reigns of David and Solomon

King David would not content himself with being a mere vassal of the Philistines. In a series of brilliant military campaigns, he unified the Tribes of Israel, subdued nearly all Canaanite resistance, and captured from the Jebusites their city of Jerusalem (in 995 B.C.), which he transformed into his capital, a formidable base of operations for cleansing the land of the Philistines and stretching his rule as far as Damascus.

David's reign produced numerous accomplishments on the domestic front as well. Anthony Silvestri reveals that under David "Israel became the leading state between Egypt and Mesopotamia. King David formally made the worship of Adonai the state religion. He centralized the monarchy at Jerusalem. He transformed the Ark of the Covenant to its new home in Jerusalem. David was Adonai's adopted son, charged to shepherd and rule over God's people."

The Northern Hebrew tribes had at last submitted to a system of centralized authority, and through their land David commissioned the construction of roads to Tyre in order to establish major trade routes with the Phoenicians. Despite his power, David constantly remained conscious of his duties to God and, according to Chapin Metz, "believed that the ultimate authority rested not with any king but with God." After his death in 961 B.C., a stable and territorially expanding state was inherited by his youngest son, Solomon.

Solomon was, unlike his father, a believer in worldly manifestations of divine authority. He constructed the famed First Temple of Jerusalem in the honor of God, and relocated the Ark of the Covenant into its confines. He became the author of numerous Biblical verses and undertook an effort to compile the various religious legacies of the Jewish people into a single piece of writing, which became the foundation for the Bible.

Silvestri suggests that this was a lengthy effort undertaken by numerous scholars and writers who "tried to make an intelligible whole out of the chaotic mass of legends, songs, cultic practices, prayers, sayings, proverbs, and laws that made up the traditions of the twelve tribes."

Solomon also expanded trade relationships and alliances with many of his neighbors. However, signs of gradual decline were on the horizon. *The Cultural Atlas of the Bible* describes this: "The life of the court was sumptuous. Against this, parts of David's empire began to split away, and Solomon even ceded to Tyre Israelite cities in the coastal plain north of Acco to pay for his building works."

The Disintegration of the Hebrew Kingdom and the Rise of the Prophets

The prosperity and extravagance of King Solomon's rule (oddly enough, Solomon was also the alleged author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, which shuns worldly goods for divine favor!) ended with his death in the year 922 B.C., although estimates are varied on that matter, ranging from 928 to 921 B.C.

The Ten Northern Tribes refused to remain vassals of Solomon's son Rehoboam after the latter refused to converse with them regarding their grievances against governance concentrated in the south. Splitting away from Rehoboam's Kingdom of Judah, they formed their own state, "Israel", with a capital in the city of Samaria (the descendants of this state became known as the Samaritans), which reverted to blatant idolatrous worship of the very golden calves which Moses had so fervently condemned five centuries earlier.

The Bible explains through this fact "Israel's" downfall two hundred years following its formation from a massive Assyrian invasion. In 724 B.C., the Assyrians devastated the Israeli capital of Samaria and permanently deported the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel."

Josephine Kamm states that "the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah were much more vulnerable than they had been in the past. They were seldom at peace even with one another, and they were powerless to resist the might of the neighboring empires... It was during this period that the prophets of the Old Testament delivered their messages, thundering against kings and nobles who rejected their religion and oppressed the poor, and pleading with them to be just and merciful."

Helen Chapin Metz believes that "the destruction of the north had a sobering effect on the south. The prophet Isaiah eloquently proclaimed that rather than power and wealth, social justice and adherence to the will of God should be the focus of the Israelites."

Isaiah preached that a ruler must possess genuine affection for his subjects in order to remain at the throne, and that power built upon intimidation would eventually collapse, as such a foundation is an unreliable one.

Following Isaiah emerged a series of prophets whose teachings were aimed at altering the Hebrews' way of life toward one more in accord with God. Kamm explains that "Jeremiah and Isaiah realized only too well that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah could not possibly withstand an attack from outside powers; and in the end they were proved right."

However, either the advice of the prophets remained unheeded, or it possessed not the potency to dispel the coming tide of foreigners that would gradually drain away from the Hebrews their own

sovereign state, or it committed the fallacy of advising a spiritual detachment from the world instead of the implementation of material security for the "Chosen People" on Earth.

The Babylonian Captivity

In the year 597 B.C., the Neo-Babylonian Armies of Nebuchadnezzar II overran Jerusalem and placed Palestine in the position of a Babylonian vassal and tributary.

The prophet Jeremiah presented cautious warnings about wrath to come if the Jews were to rise up in revolt. According to Helen Chapin Metz, "Jeremiah had stated that Israelites did not need a state to carry out the mission given to them by God. Ezekiel voiced a similar belief: what mattered was not states and empires, for they would perish through God's power, but man."

However, the Hebrews committed themselves to a national uprising in 589 B.C. in an attempt to preserve the sovereignty of the state of Judah. They were brutally suppressed by the Babylonian armies, who unleashed their vigor upon Jerusalem and sacked the temple, thus destroying the epicenter on the Hebrew culture, herding its people into Babylon to coerce them into performing tasks of menial servitude.

For fifty years, the Hebrews had but their sacred writings to rely upon prolonging their culture. The existence of these records had become ever more crucial as a result, and finishing touches were made during this time to the *Torah*.

Due to the absence of a Temple, the Jews initiated the practice of the Sabbath, a holy day during which they would gather in an indoor or outdoor location in order to read from the holy books and pray to their deity.

It was then that all sacrifice had been abolished from the Jewish religion and replaced rather by extensive "communication" with God through prayers and meditation. The Sabbath tradition later evolved into weekly congregations at a concrete place of worship, a *synagogue*, the Greek word denoting first the religious assembly itself but later the building in which the assembly was conducted.

In 539 B.C. Persian forces of Emperor Cyrus I (the Great) intimidated the Babylonians into surrendering their holdings to him, after which Cyrus emancipated the Hebrew slaves and granted them permission to traverse his realm as they wished, encouraging their return to Jerusalem.

Cyrus writes in the *Kurash Prism*, "I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris the sanctuaries of which had been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned them to their habitations."

The Bible, in the Book of Ezra, also possesses words of praise for Cyrus. "In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word

of mouth and in writing: "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him! Let everyone who has survived, in whatever place he may have dwelt, be assisted by the people of that place with silver, gold, and goods, together with free will offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem."

Recovery from the Babylonian Captivity and the Reigns of Nehemiah and Ezra

Despite their new-found emancipation at the hands of King Cyrus of Persia, numerous Jews resolved to remain in Babylon. However, a substantial portion took advantage of Cyrus's decree and returned to their homeland to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem in 515 B.C. and continue expanding their theological writings.

However, Dr. Anthony Silvestri claims that the First Exile crippled Judah for the remainder of its existence. "After the captivity, Israel was merely an insignificant temple state within three successive huge empires." The rulers during that time shifted toward the spiritual focus of the prophets rather than the material aspirations of the kings before them.

Nehemiah, his reign beginning in 445 B.C., according to Josephine Kamm, "wished to end the exploitation and oppression and deprivation of the poor by the rich" and instead to create a state where there would exist a universal justice permitting all classes to prosper without impinging upon each other's prosperity. This is an interesting parallel to the modern Western ideal of Capitalism, which also holds as a desirable state one that permits uncontrolled affluence.

Following the rule of Nehemiah, however, a more radical ruler, Ezra, acquired authority. Ezra, as states Kamm, "was a priest in charge of religious life. He wished to end the lax approach toward religion." Ezra, a fundamentalist of sorts, imposed restrictions designed to preserve the "purity" of the Jewish faith. He instituted dietary laws that prohibited the consumption of swine's flesh. Ezra also conducted the separation of mixed families within the region, considering ethnic purity a necessity for God's "Chosen People."

This created immense opposition to Ezra's governance by remaining Samaritans, who had over generations re-assimilated themselves into the religious traditions of the Judeans.

Kamm reveals that these displeased individuals devised a new conception that "God is not merely the God of the Hebrews but of all peoples." They had in their frequent utility the myth of Ruth, a Moabite who had twice married Hebrews and became a direct predecessor of King David.

In remote regions of Canaan, mixed marriages continued to occur. However, the holy writings of the Jewish faith still contain a formal prohibition of interbreeding between Hebrews and those not of their nationality. If this has had any effects, the most conspicuous would be the relative insulation of Judaism over the ages from becoming permeated by foreign practice, such as the

half-worship of Ba'al and associated religious festivals, which numerous Samaritans had undertaken.

The Hellenistic Period and the Revolt of Judas Maccabeus

Persian rule was overthrown by the invasion of the Macedonian armies of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. Helen Chapin Metz relates that "Alexander destroyed the Persian Empire but largely ignored Judah. After Alexander's death, his generals divided – and subsequently fought over – his empire."

The squabble held as its two chief participants the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt, which was apathetic toward Jewish religious practices and tolerant of them, and the Seleucid dynasty of Syria/Mesopotamia, which desired to impose the Greek polytheism upon the Jewish people, and, more importantly, to rob them of the religion that formed their cultural identity in order to create tributaries less capable of organized resistance.

King Antiochus IV, in the year 175 B.C., invaded Palestine from Syria, overthrew the scattered and inefficient Egyptian administration, and destroyed the Second Temple eight years into the war. This, contrary to the ruler's expectations of panic, sparked a massive outrage among the Hebrews, who rose in revolt, headed by the nobleman Judas Maccabeus.

To retaliate, Antiochus mandated sacrifices of swine's flesh in all the standing Jewish shrines, which further sparked the antagonism of the Hebrews. For some twenty years, a guerilla war was waged until Seleucid rule became thoroughly undermined and Jerusalem was regained.

Allegedly, upon rebuilding the Temple and igniting the sacred Menorah, Judas and his followers witnessed an inexplicable occurrence as the oil with which they had supported the lights endured for seven more nights than expected. This evolved into the tradition of Hanukkah, a sacred holiday aimed to celebrate the supposed devotion of God to the plight of the Hebrews.

Maccabeus ascended to power and alongside his brother, Simon, organized the Hasmonean dynasty, which was a theocratic order rather than a monarchy, the ruler possessing a vast majority of his powers in the realm of worship, fulfilling the role of High Priest. The Hasmonean dynasty had as its first ruler a priest by the name of Mattathias, from the settlement of Modin to the northwest of Jerusalem.

Chapin Metz states that "Despite priestly rule, Jewish society became Hellenized except in its generally staunch adherence to monotheism. Although rural life was relatively unchanged, cities such as Jerusalem rapidly adopted the Greek language, sponsored games and sports, and in more subtle ways adopted and absorbed the culture of the Hellenes."

This in no manner eradicated the Hebrews' cultural identity but rather acted as a filtration process by which those aspects of Greek culture were diffused into Judea that were not mutually exclusive with the religious doctrines of the Hebrews.

The Roman Occupation

After the successful revolt of Judas Maccabeus, the new Hebrew Hasmonean Dynasty endured moderate prosperity, although the effects of Greek culture were often combated by violent terrorists and mass agitators known as *zealots*, who advocated a far more orthodox adherence to the Covenant of God than the sacred writings suggested.

This continued for little over seventy years, after which Palestine fell to the legions of Gnaeus Pompey the Great from Rome, which, in 64 B.C., had been summoned by one of the Hebrew factions that sought to place its representative on the throne.

However, Pompey abolished the kingship altogether and bestowed upon a man of his choice the title of High Priest. Roman occupation of Jerusalem exhibited ominous beginnings and would intensify into a force that would deal the final blow to the existence of an independent Jewish state, a blow whose impact would linger for the following two thousand years.

Largely, early Roman administrations did not intervene with the religious freedoms of the Jews, and were supported by a majority of the population and aristocracy, featuring as their most prominent representative Herod, who was installed in a position of kingship and ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.

Herod ordered the construction of a colossal temple on the famed hilltop overlooking the city, various reconstructions of which have been recently undertaken. He also commissioned the creation of two palaces for himself. Palestine was annexed into the Roman Empire in the year 6 B.C.; however, it retained jurisdictional independence through the Sanhedrin, a council of learned elders that governed practical aspects of Jewish life.

Local Sanhedrins were present within every community and subject to control by the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrins became mediums for the enforcement of imperial precepts but also crafted their own legislature. This state of affairs, however, did not satisfy the zealots, who were radically opposed to the Roman occupation, however tolerant the latter had been, and committed occasional raids and acts of overt violence in the hopes of bringing about a withdrawal of the legions.

This, however, merely increased Roman pressure on the Jews, leading to atrocities performed against such peaceful preachers of divergence as Jesus Christ, who, as a result of his radical (but non-violent) teachings was crucified in the year 33 C.E.

The zealots themselves gained gradual influence over the population and initiated a full-scale uprising in 66 C.E. General Vespasian's Roman legions suppressed the rebellion city by city. Upon the ascent of Vespasian to the Imperial throne, his son Titus undertook the task of bringing order to the region.

Revolts Against Rome and the Dispersal of the Jews

In suppressing the Jewish uprising which began in 66 C.E., the Romans were assisted by the former rebel general and historian Josephus Flavius, who composed a comprehensive account of the rebellion from both sides.

Although this is the only such record, it served to greatly enhance posterity's knowledge and understanding of this civil war. It was due primarily to an overly fervent sentiment present within both sides against the other that the conflict intensified, culminating in the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

While the Jewish people became bound by far more stringent and intolerant regulations, the zealots, the sect responsible for the uprising (whose members occasionally raided Jewish civilian settlements along with Roman army bases), concealed themselves atop the elevated fortress of Massada. When the Roman legions initiated construction of a massive ramp to ascend this final bastion of resistance, the zealots, instead of committing themselves to a last stand, committed a mass suicide, murdering males, females, and children alike.

With the zealots dead, it was the Jewish people who bore the burden of Roman government, much unlike that of the earlier years. This time the occupation, especially under the administration of Hadrian (ruled 117-138 C.E.), who assumed a far less accepting stance toward the Jewish faith itself than any of his predecessors, began to systematically restrict the cultural traditions of the Hebrews.

While Vespasian had permitted religious study and even commissioned the founding by Rabbi Yohanan Ben-Zakki of an academy at Yibna, Hadrian sought to abolish Judaism altogether, interpreting it as a threat to Roman domination of Palestine. The city of Jerusalem underwent a name alternation to "Aelia Capitolina" and, according to David Lipman, was singled out by Hadrian for "the building of a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount."

This outraged a neo-zealot activist, Simon Bar Kochba, who, due to the mounting Roman oppression, gathered a far more formidable support movement than the various raiding parties that had initiated the previous civil war. Lipman refers to Bar Kochba as "a ruthless general. Stories describe his method of selecting troops: they had to cut off one of their fingers to prove their dedication. Even if just a legend, it certainly describes a dedicated fighting force."

The Bar Kochba Revolt gained momentum during its first two years, culminating in the brief liberation of Jerusalem and the establishment of a makeshift administration that even minted its own currency.

Lipman describes the turning of the tides, "Hadrian was forced to call in his greatest general, Severus, who had been busy subduing the Britons. Rather than engaging the Jewish armies directly, Severus surrounded the Jewish strongholds and systematically starved out the Jews."

Bar Kochba himself found his existence cut short at the Siege of Beitar in 134 C.E. With the suppression of the rebellion came a final Romanization of Jerusalem and a prohibition for all

Jews from visiting the city with the exception of one day within every year (the anniversary of the Temple's destruction, as states Helen Chapin Metz), when they would be permitted to mourn beside the Wailing Wall, the sole remnant of the Great Temple. The academy at Yibna was abolished.

With this, the dispersal of the Hebrew people was complete. They migrated to various corners of Europe and Asia to pursue, in small isolated groups, a variety of trades for a living and carry on their religious doctrines from one generation to the next until the re-establishment of a Jewish state in 1948.

The Legacy of the Ancient Hebrews: Contributions to Western Civilization

The legacies of the ancient Hebrews are of utmost significance to the societies of present days. Aside from the obvious literary contributions of the Torah, the Old Testament, and the accounts of Josephus Flavius, all crucial works for the understanding of ancient history, the Hebrews shaped the very core of Western ideology and civilization.

Author Thomas Cahill has recently produced a historical account, *The Gifts of the Jews*, which explores in depth the contributions of early Judaism to the thought patterns and social structure of present-day orders. A review of his work states that "Within the matrix of ancient religions and philosophies, life was seen as part of an endless cycle of birth and death; time was like a wheel, spinning ceaselessly. Yet somehow the ancient Jews began to see time differently. For them, time had a beginning and an end; it was a narrative, whose triumphant conclusion would come in the future. From this insight came a new conception, that of men and women as individuals with unique destinies – a conception that would inform the Declaration of Independence – and our hopeful belief in progress and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today."

The West would not have been quite the same without Jewish contributions that inaugurated concepts such as absolute morality, self-improvement, and the striving to comprehend the forces that shape one's existence. These innovative notions permitted the Hebrews to endure throughout millennia of oppression and foreign dominance and reform their state into today's Israel, one of the top ten nations in the world in terms of military might and economic sophistication.

Legacies of the Hebrews, however, also include some darker concepts, including a rigid patriarchal structure which had endured even in such advanced countries as the United States in some form or another until the creation of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Silvestri describes the Jewish family as one where "the father had the ultimate authority of life and death over his household. Women were relegated to the private realm. They had some power over their families, yet they were totally excluded from public life. Female role in religion as goddesses and priestesses was curtailed after the renewed commitment to the sole male god, Adonai. Laws kept women at home." Jim West mentions that husbands were referred to as "lord" and "master of the house", and perceived their wives as subjects designed to bear children.

Nevertheless, the people of Israel today have abandoned patriarchy in order to remove this stain from their legacy. The Israeli army is the only force that mandates the drafting of both genders

into its ranks (whether or not one may explain this via the presently heated situation within the region that endangers the sovereignty of Israel or state that the draft is itself a repugnant practice is beside the point). This serves as an example of the Jewish culture's flexibility and willingness to, in the true fashion of Western peoples, promote what is functional and abandon what is destructive. This is a key factor in the survival and the Hebrews and their lasting contributions to today's world.

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Gennady Stolyarov II (G. Stolyarov II) is an actuary, science-fiction novelist, independent philosophical essayist, poet, amateur mathematician, composer, and Editor-in-Chief of [The Rational Argumentator](#), a magazine championing the principles of reason, rights, and progress.

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