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What Do You Know About Judaism? - Part 1
The History of the Jews

By Tal Davis

Most people in the United States are acquainted with someone who is Jewish. That makes sense since an estimated 7.5 million Jews now live in this country. About 392,000 also live in Canada. About 7,021,000 live in the state of Israel (out of a total population of 9.5 million). The 2021 DellaPer-gola's World Core Jewish population estimate was 15.2 million worldwide. Other countries with significant Jewish populations include France (490,000), the United Kingdom (297,000), Russia (228,000), Argentina (185,000), and Germany (118,000). The largest number of Jews in the USA live in New York (1.6 million), California (1.2 million), Florida (635,000) and New Jersey (480,000). These figures include religious, nonreligious, and cultural/ethnic Jews.

So while we may know some Jews personally, and may know something about them as a people-group, most Christians do not know much about what they believe. In fact, most Christians have various misconceptions about what they believe. In this two part series we will review the history, traditional religious practices, and the state of modern Judaism.

Short History of the Jewish People

The early chapters of the Bible record how God chose particular individuals to whom He revealed Himself and His ways, one of whom was Abram (Gen. 12). God changed Abram's name to Abraham and chose him to become the father of a great nation who He would raise up to be His representative people on earth. God gave a plot

of land to Abraham for this people to settle upon in the middle-east in the region that is now known as Palestine (Gen. 15-17). This was about 2100 B.C.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac had a son Jacob (later changed to Israel). The family of Abraham, through Jacob's familial line, would become that special people who would represent Him and faithfully transmit knowledge of God to the rest of the world. They would be called Israelites or the Hebrews.

Eventually Jacob had twelve sons. One of them, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers. But, because of his brilliant mind and ability to interpret dreams, Joseph became an important official in the Pharaoh's court. As a result, Joseph was able to rescue the Israelites (or Hebrews) from a terrible famine (Gen. 37-50). The Israelites migrated to Egypt where, around 1700 B.C., they eventually were harshly enslaved. After about 400 years, God rose up another man, Moses, to lead His people out of bondage and back to the land promised to Abraham (Exo. 1-12). This was in the decades after 1300 B.C.

For forty years the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and Palestine. During that period, God revealed to Moses the moral laws and religious practices He intended for the people to follow to remain in fellowship with Him. They included the Ten Commandments, other specific laws, and an extensive system of sacrifices to be performed in the Tabernacle (Tent of Meeting). Later, in the time of King Solomon, these sacrifices were transferred to the Temple in Jerusalem. After the forty years, Moses successor, Joshua, led the next generation of Israel-

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ites to enter and conquer the land of promise and settle there around 1200 B.C. The land was subdivided into eleven regions, each populated by descendants of each of Jacob's twelve sons (except one, the Levites, whose descendants were the priests). The totality of the new nation became known as Israel.

When the nation of Israel was first established, it was run as a theocracy led by a series of divinely appointed judges from about 1200 B.C. to 1020 B.C. Eventually, however, the people of Israel demanded God give them a king like the pagan nations surrounding them. God finally relented and gave them what they wanted, but he also allowed them to suffer the consequences of their choice. The first king of Israel was Saul, who was a miserable failure. God then shifted the kingly line from Saul's family to a brave shepherd named David who claimed the throne at Saul's death. David was followed as king by his son Solomon.

After the death of Solomon (about 922 B.C.), the unfairness and corruption of his successor son, Rehoboam, angered the people of most of the tribes. In the decades after Solomon, the kingdom of Israel eventually split into two separate rival realms: The Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern kingdom of Judah. They were called Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews.

As the years passed, both kingdoms rebelled against God, so He allowed them to be conquered by outside nations. This culminated in 586 B.C. when Jerusalem fell and the people were taken into exile into Babylon for seventy years.

In due time, the Jewish people were able to return to Israel and set up life again, but were successively ruled from the outside by the Baby-

lonians, the Persians, and the Greeks (led by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.). Nonetheless, the Jews rebelled against the Greek Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus. So, for about a 100 years, they reestablish independent self-rule under a new line of Jewish kings called the Hasmoneans (165-63 B.C.). (These events are recorded in the non-canonical books of I and II Maccabees in the Apocrypha written in the 2nd century B.C.)

Jewish national autonomy came to an end when the Roman general Pompey occupied the land in 63 B.C. and annexed it into the Roman Empire. The Romans did, however, allow the Jews to maintain a line of Jewish kings who were subservient to the Roman provincial governors. During this period, from around 60 B.C. through A.D. 70, Jesus was born, lived and died (ca. 6 B.C.-ca. A.D. 28), the New Testament church was born, the books of the New Testament were written, and Christianity began to spread across the Roman Empire.

In the late A.D. 60s, the Jews once again tried to throw off the yoke of foreign domination. However, in A.D. 70, the powerful Roman army put down the rebellion and totally destroyed the Jerusalem temple. That marked the end of the Jewish sacrificial religious system, which was never restored. At that point, some Jews continued to live in Palestine, but under tighter control. Many others were scattered throughout the Roman empire where they managed to maintain their ethnic and religious heritage through local congregations called synagogues.

Then, in A.D. 132, the Jews once again rebelled to try and expel the Romans. The emperor at that time, Hadrian, sent in his legions and totally defeated the rebellion. To punish the rebels and make sure this would not

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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happen again, Hadrian changed the name of Jerusalem to *Aelia Capitolina*, turned it into a pagan city, and banned the Jews from living there. With that, the Jews were permanently sent into exile throughout the world, and any possibility of Jewish independence in their own homeland was completely lost for nearly two millennia.

In the centuries following this Jewish dispersion (called the *Diaspora*), they spread throughout the world – some as far as India in the east and Africa in the south. For 1900 years most of the remnant Jews tried to live in peace in non-Jewish nations across the Roman Empire and the various empires that developed after it fell. Unfortunately, time and again they faced severe repression in many of the countries where they lived.

Many such persecutions took place in the 19th and 20th centuries in western Europe and Russia. The most egregious attack on the Jews was by the Germans under Nazi rule before and during World War II. Millions of European Jews were shipped to concentration camps where they were forced into slave labor for the German war effort. Moreover, as many as six million Jews were systematically killed in an effort to rid Europe of them in what the Nazis called "the final solution." For modern Jews this horrible period of time, which they appropriately call "the Holocaust," has become the most significant point for their historical identity.

Following World War II, many of the surviving Jews in Europe returned to their homes, but a great many had nothing to return to. Nonetheless, in the immediate post-war years some amazing events transpired that changed the fate of Jews and the world forever. To understand these events we have to go back a bit in time.

Beginning in the 19th century, a movement emerged among some Jews to create a new Jewish homeland somewhere in the world. During that century, many Jewish families began to migrate to Palestine, which at that time was under Turkish rule as part of the Ottoman Empire. During that same period, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), an Austrian Jew, founded the World Zionist Organization whose goal it was to create an independent homeland for the Jewish people where they would be free from persecution.

During the First World War, the British drove the Turks out of Palestine and took over as its rulers under a League of Nations mandate. Consequently, they officially gave the Jews permission to begin work toward establishing a homeland in that region. After World War II, in response to the atrocities against the Jews in the Nazi death camps, world opinion favored the establishment of a Jewish state.

So, in 1948, when the British withdrew from Palestine, the Jews living there immediately declared their independence as the state of Israel. A citizen of Israel is called an Israeli. The United Nations quickly recognized its sovereignty as a nation and its borders. The new neighboring middle-eastern Arab countries surrounding Israel, however, refused to recognize its autonomy and started a war to push the Jews out of the land. The Israelis, however, despite overwhelming odds and being greatly outnumbered, defended their new land successfully. Over the course of several decades afterward, in 1956, 1967, and 1973, Arab nations tried again to defeat the Israelis to push them into the sea. All attempts failed and so Israel still stands today as a free democratic Jewish state.

So this concludes our short history of the Jewish people. In the next install-

ment we will examine the current religious life and beliefs of Jewish people around the world, and especially in the United States.

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