

a short history of the jews

A Short History of the Jews: From Ancient Origins to the Modern Era

The story of the Jewish people is one of remarkable resilience, profound faith, and enduring cultural impact, spanning millennia and continents. From their ancient origins in the land of Canaan, through periods of both great prosperity and devastating persecution, Jewish history is a tapestry woven with threads of divine covenant, legalistic tradition, and a persistent yearning for homeland. Understanding a short history of the Jews offers insight into the development of monotheism, the shaping of Western civilization, and the complex dynamics of identity and belonging in a diverse world. This exploration will delve into the foundational narratives, the establishment of the kingdoms, the trials of exile and diaspora, the intellectual and religious flourishing in various centers, and the modern reemergence of a Jewish state, highlighting the enduring spirit of a people who have profoundly influenced global history and culture.

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The Patriarchal Era and the Exodus: Laying the Foundation

The narrative of a short history of the Jews begins with the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to tradition, God established a covenant with Abraham, promising him descendants and a promised land. This

foundational story emphasizes a unique relationship between God and a chosen people, central to Jewish identity. Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, migrated to Egypt, where they eventually fell into servitude. The pivotal event of the Exodus, led by Moses, marks the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and their journey to Mount Sinai. Here, God revealed the Ten Commandments and the Torah, the core of Jewish law and belief, solidifying their identity as a distinct religious and national group.

Abraham and the Covenant

Abraham, revered as the father of the Jewish people, is central to the covenantal narrative. His willingness to follow God's command, even to the point of sacrificing his son, demonstrates profound faith. This covenant established a unique bond between God and Abraham's lineage, promising land and posterity, themes that would resonate throughout Jewish history. The concept of divine election, while a cornerstone of Jewish identity, also laid the groundwork for future interactions and tensions with other nations.

The Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah

The liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, as recounted in the Book of Exodus, is a watershed moment. Moses, as the divinely appointed leader, guided his people through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. The reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai represents the formalization of the covenant and the establishment of the legal and ethical framework for Jewish life. This period cemented the idea of a people bound by divine law and collective destiny, shaping the religious and social fabric of the nascent Israelite nation.

The Era of the Judges and Early Kings: Establishing a Land and Leadership

Following the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan, the Israelites were governed by a succession of Judges, charismatic leaders who rallied the tribes during times of crisis. This period, while marked by intermittent periods of divine deliverance, also saw internal conflict and external threats. The desire for a more centralized authority led to the clamor for a king. This transition marked a significant shift in the governance of the Israelites, moving from a confederation of tribes to a monarchy, with profound implications for their national development and their relationship with God, as warned by the prophet Samuel.

The Period of the Judges

The Judges, such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson, were often military leaders who delivered the Israelites from oppression. This era highlights the challenges of consolidating a people in a new land, facing constant pressures from surrounding nations like the Philistines and the Canaanites. The cyclical nature of apostasy, oppression, and deliverance characterized this period, reflecting ongoing struggles to remain faithful to their covenant.

The Rise of the Monarchy: Saul, David, and Solomon

The appointment of Saul as the first king signaled the establishment of a unified monarchy. King David, a pivotal figure, expanded the kingdom, captured Jerusalem, and established it as the capital. His reign is often considered a golden age. King Solomon, David's son, further solidified the kingdom and built the First Temple in Jerusalem, a central site of worship and national identity. This era saw the consolidation of political power and religious centralization, but also the seeds of future division.

The United Monarchy and the Divided Kingdoms: Prosperity and Division

The reign of the united monarchy, particularly under David and Solomon, brought a period of relative peace and prosperity to the Land of Israel. Jerusalem became a flourishing center of religious and political life. However, Solomon's later years saw a decline in his devotion, and after his death, the kingdom fractured. This division into the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south had lasting consequences, weakening the nation and making it vulnerable to foreign powers. A short history of the Jews must acknowledge how internal strife impacted their external security.

The Zenith of the United Kingdom

Under King David, the Kingdom of Israel achieved its greatest territorial extent and political influence. Jerusalem was established as the capital, and the Ark of the Covenant was brought to the city, symbolizing its spiritual centrality. King Solomon's reign continued this trajectory, marked by extensive building projects, including the magnificent First Temple, and a flourishing of trade and diplomacy. This era represented a high point of Israelite self-determination and national pride.

The Division into Israel and Judah

Following Solomon's death, the ten northern tribes, under Jeroboam, seceded from the southern Kingdom of Judah, ruled by Rehoboam, Solomon's son. This schism weakened the nation significantly. The Northern Kingdom of Israel, often characterized by more radical departures from religious norms, eventually fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE. The Southern Kingdom of Judah, while facing its own challenges, maintained a more consistent adherence to traditional worship, centered at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Babylonian Exile and the Second Temple Period: Resilience and Reconstruction

The Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the destruction of the First Temple marked a traumatic turning point, leading to the Babylonian Exile. For the Jewish people, this was a period of profound spiritual and

national crisis. Yet, it also fostered a new sense of communal identity, with a greater emphasis on prayer, study of the Torah, and synagogue worship as alternatives to Temple sacrifice. The return of many Jews to Jerusalem after Persia conquered Babylon allowed for the rebuilding of the Temple, initiating the Second Temple Period. This era saw the development of Jewish law, the compilation of scriptures, and the rise of various religious sects, all crucial elements in a short history of the Jews' evolving religious practice.

The Babylonian Exile

The exile of the Judean elite to Babylon profoundly reshaped Jewish life. Stripped of their land and Temple, the exiled Jews relied on their shared heritage and religious observance to maintain their identity. Synagogues emerged as centers of communal prayer and Torah study, a practice that would continue and flourish throughout the diaspora. This period fostered a deeper introspection and a renewed commitment to the covenant, even in the absence of their homeland.

The Second Temple Period

The decree of Cyrus the Great in 538 BCE allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The Second Temple, while not as grand as the first, became the spiritual heart of the Jewish people. This era was characterized by the consolidation of Jewish law, the formation of the canon of Hebrew scriptures, and the emergence of diverse religious movements, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, each with their own interpretations of the Law and their vision for Jewish life. The Hellenistic influence, followed by Roman rule, brought new challenges and opportunities, shaping the religious and political landscape.

The Diaspora: Dispersion and Adaptation

Following periods of conquest and upheaval, including the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jewish communities became increasingly dispersed across the globe. This era of diaspora, or exile, saw Jews establish communities in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Despite living outside their ancestral homeland, Jewish people managed to preserve their religious and cultural traditions, often adapting them to new environments. The development of rabbinic Judaism, with its emphasis on Halakha (Jewish law) and communal organization, was crucial for maintaining Jewish identity and continuity through centuries of dispersion. This sustained adaptability is a hallmark of a short history of the Jews.

The Destruction of the Second Temple and its Ramifications

The Roman suppression of the Great Revolt in 70 CE resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple. This catastrophic event led to a massive displacement of Jewish populations, marking a significant turning point towards a more widespread and prolonged diaspora. The loss of the Temple as the central site of sacrificial worship necessitated a radical

reorientation of Jewish religious practice, with the synagogue and rabbinic scholarship taking center stage.

Jewish Life in the Roman Empire and Beyond

In the aftermath of the Temple's destruction, Jewish communities flourished in various parts of the Roman Empire, particularly in Alexandria and Rome. These communities often maintained vibrant cultural and intellectual lives, contributing to the broader societies in which they lived. The development of Aramaic and Greek translations of Jewish texts, along with the expansion of rabbinic literature, facilitated the transmission of Jewish tradition across geographical and linguistic boundaries.

Early Medieval Diaspora Communities

As the Roman Empire declined and new powers emerged, Jewish communities continued to adapt and thrive in different regions. In Sasanian Persia, Babylonia became a center of Jewish scholarship, producing the Babylonian Talmud. In the Byzantine Empire and the early Islamic caliphates, Jewish communities also developed distinct cultural and religious traditions, engaging in trade and intellectual pursuits. These diverse experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of the Jewish diaspora.

Medieval Jewish Life and Intellectual Achievements: Flourishing in Diverse Cultures

The medieval period witnessed significant Jewish intellectual and cultural achievements, often within the context of vibrant, albeit sometimes precarious, communities in Christian Europe and the Islamic world. In Islamic lands, Jewish scholars, poets, and philosophers, such as Maimonides, produced groundbreaking works in philosophy, medicine, and Jewish law, often engaging with and contributing to the rich intellectual currents of these societies. In Christian Europe, despite periods of persecution and expulsion, Jewish communities developed their own legal systems, cultural practices, and mystical traditions, exemplified by the Kabbalah. This era demonstrates the capacity of Jewish people to contribute significantly to intellectual discourse while navigating complex societal challenges.

Jewish Life in the Islamic World

Under Islamic rule, Jewish communities often experienced periods of relative tolerance and economic opportunity, known as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. Jewish scholars and poets flourished, producing influential works in philosophy, science, and literature. Figures like Maimonides, whose philosophical work "The Guide for the Perplexed" synthesized Jewish theology with Aristotelian philosophy, and Judah Halevi, whose poetry celebrated Jewish faith and longing for Zion, are testaments to this era's intellectual vitality. Jewish communities in Babylonia, under the Abbasid Caliphate, also continued to be centers of rabbinic learning.

Jewish Life in Christian Europe

In Christian Europe, Jewish life was more complex and often marked by discrimination. While some rulers offered protection and economic opportunities, leading to the growth of communities in Germany, France, and England, these protections were often precarious. Jews faced legal restrictions, forced conversions, and accusations of ritual murder and host desecration. Despite these challenges, medieval Ashkenazi (German) Jewry developed its own rich traditions of Talmudic study, legal commentary, and mystical thought, laying the groundwork for future developments.

The Development of Jewish Mysticism: Kabbalah

During the medieval period, particularly in Safed, a significant mystical tradition known as Kabbalah emerged. Kabbalistic teachings explored the divine realm, the nature of God, and the human role in the cosmos. Works like the Zohar provided a complex symbolic language for understanding Jewish scripture and tradition, influencing Jewish spirituality for centuries to come and offering a different dimension to a short history of the Jews.

The Age of Enlightenment and Emancipation: Shifting Paradigms

The Enlightenment in the 18th century brought new ideas about reason, tolerance, and individual rights, which began to influence the status of Jews in Europe. The movement for Jewish emancipation sought to grant Jews equal rights and integrate them into broader European societies. This period saw a decline in traditional rabbinic authority in some quarters and the rise of new movements within Judaism, such as Reform Judaism, which sought to modernize Jewish practice and belief. However, emancipation was not uniform, and anti-Jewish sentiment persisted, often resurfacing with increased intensity in new forms, such as racial antisemitism.

The Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment)

The Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, began in Germany in the late 18th century and spread throughout Europe. Maskilim (adherents of the Haskalah) advocated for secular education, the adoption of vernacular languages, and participation in gentile society. This movement aimed to bridge the gap between traditional Jewish life and the modern world, leading to significant changes in Jewish education, literature, and intellectual pursuits.

The Struggle for Emancipation

Throughout the 19th century, Jewish communities in Western Europe gradually gained civil rights and political equality. This process of emancipation varied by country, with France and Great Britain leading the way. Emancipation offered opportunities for Jews to enter professions, participate in public life, and contribute to national culture. However, it also brought internal debates within Jewish communities about assimilation and the preservation of Jewish identity.

The Rise of Modern Jewish Movements

In response to the challenges and opportunities of the Enlightenment and emancipation, various modern Jewish movements emerged. Reform Judaism sought to adapt Jewish rituals and beliefs to contemporary society, while Orthodox Judaism emphasized adherence to traditional law. Conservative Judaism emerged as a middle ground, seeking to balance tradition with modernity. These movements represented diverse approaches to Jewish identity in the modern world.

Modern Jewish Movements and the Rise of Zionism: A Renewed Focus on Nationhood

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a surge of modern Jewish movements and the powerful resurgence of Zionism. As the dream of emancipation faltered in many parts of Europe, replaced by rising waves of antisemitism, particularly in Eastern Europe, the idea of a Jewish homeland gained momentum. Zionism, advocating for the establishment of a Jewish state in the ancient Land of Israel, provided a compelling answer to the question of Jewish survival and self-determination. This period saw the development of secular and religious strands of Zionism, laying the groundwork for the political and practical steps towards nationhood.

Antisemitism in the Modern Era

Despite the promise of emancipation, modern antisemitism emerged, often characterized by racial and political theories that blamed Jews for societal ills. Pogroms, violent attacks against Jewish communities, became a tragically common occurrence, particularly in Tsarist Russia. This persistent persecution fueled the desire for a more radical solution than assimilation or civic rights.

The Birth of Modern Zionism

Theodor Herzl, a journalist and playwright, is widely considered the father of modern political Zionism. His pamphlet "The Jewish State" (1896) articulated a vision for a Jewish homeland and called for organized political action to achieve it. The First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, marked a pivotal moment, establishing the World Zionist Organization and setting the agenda for the reestablishment of a Jewish national center.

Early Zionist Efforts and Immigration to Palestine

Following the Zionist Congresses, pioneers began immigrating to Ottoman Palestine, working to establish agricultural settlements and urban communities. These early Zionist pioneers, known as the Yishuv, faced numerous challenges, including economic hardship, political obstacles, and conflicts with the local Arab population. Their efforts, however, laid the physical and ideological foundation for future statehood.

The Holocaust and its Aftermath: Unprecedented Tragedy and Lasting Impact

The 20th century brought the most devastating chapter in a short history of the Jews: the Holocaust. During World War II, Nazi Germany systematically murdered approximately six million Jews, an act of genocide unprecedented in its scale and intent. The systematic persecution, dehumanization, and extermination of Jews across German-occupied Europe left an indelible scar on the Jewish people and the world. The aftermath of the Holocaust presented profound questions about memory, justice, and the future of Jewish survival, directly contributing to the urgency for a Jewish homeland.

Nazi Persecution and the "Final Solution"

The rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s saw the implementation of discriminatory laws, the Kristallnacht pogrom, and the gradual stripping of Jewish rights. The "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," as conceptualized by the Nazis, was the systematic annihilation of European Jewry. This involved the establishment of ghettos, forced labor, and extermination camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau, where millions were murdered in gas chambers.

The Experience of Survivors

The survivors of the Holocaust carried the weight of unimaginable loss and trauma. Returning to societies often indifferent or hostile, they faced the daunting task of rebuilding their lives. Many shared their testimonies, becoming crucial witnesses to the horrors they endured, ensuring that the memory of the Holocaust would be preserved and taught to future generations.

The Impact on Jewish Identity and the World

The Holocaust fundamentally altered Jewish identity and consciousness. It intensified the desire for security and self-determination, making the establishment of a Jewish state a paramount concern. The world's response to the Holocaust also led to a greater awareness of the dangers of unchecked prejudice and the importance of human rights, shaping international law and discourse.

The State of Israel and Contemporary Jewish Life: Continuity and Challenges

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, a direct consequence of the impetus created by the Holocaust and the culmination of Zionist aspirations, marked a profound turning point. For the first time in nearly two thousand years, a sovereign Jewish state existed, providing a refuge and a homeland for Jewish people. However, the creation of Israel also led to ongoing conflict with its Arab neighbors and presented new challenges for Jewish identity and practice in the modern world. Contemporary Jewish life is characterized by the vibrant diversity of its global communities, its

continued engagement with tradition, and its ongoing dialogue with the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Establishment of the State of Israel

Following the UN Partition Plan of 1947 and the end of the British Mandate, Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948. This event was met with joyous celebration by many Jews worldwide, fulfilling a centuries-old dream. However, it also triggered the first Arab-Israeli War, shaping the region's geopolitical landscape for decades to come.

Aliyah and the Ingathering of Exiles

Since its establishment, Israel has welcomed millions of Jews from around the world through the concept of Aliyah, the return of Jewish people to their homeland. Jews from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Ethiopia have made their homes in Israel, creating a diverse and multifaceted society. This ingathering of exiles is a central tenet of modern Zionism and a defining characteristic of contemporary Israeli life.

Diversity in Contemporary Jewish Life

Today, Jewish people live in diverse communities across the globe, each with its unique cultural expressions and religious practices. From the large Jewish populations in the United States and France to smaller communities in Asia and Africa, Jewish identity is expressed in myriad ways. Modern Jewish life encompasses a wide spectrum of religious observance, cultural engagement, and political perspectives, continuing the rich and evolving narrative of this ancient people.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of a Short History of the Jews

A short history of the Jews reveals a remarkable journey of faith, resilience, and cultural endurance across thousands of years and vast geographical distances. From the foundational covenant with Abraham and the liberation of the Exodus, through the trials of exile and dispersion, to the intellectual flourishing of the Middle Ages and the modern era's quest for self-determination, the Jewish people have consistently navigated challenges with a deep commitment to their heritage and identity. The establishment of the State of Israel stands as a testament to this enduring spirit, offering a contemporary chapter to an ancient story. The legacy of the Jews, marked by profound contributions to religion, philosophy, science, and the arts, continues to shape the world, demonstrating the powerful impact of a people bound by history, tradition, and an unwavering sense of purpose.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is considered the foundational event in Jewish history?

The foundational event in Jewish history is widely considered to be the Covenant between God and Abraham, as described in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible).

When did the Exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai occur?

The Exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai are traditionally dated to around the 13th century BCE, though exact dating is debated by scholars.

What was the significance of the First Temple in Jerusalem?

The First Temple, built by King Solomon, served as the central place of worship and sacrifice for the Israelites for nearly 400 years. Its destruction by the Babylonians marked the beginning of the Babylonian Exile.

What period followed the destruction of the First Temple?

The period that followed the destruction of the First Temple was the Babylonian Exile (586–538 BCE), during which many Jews were exiled to Babylonia. This era was significant for the development of synagogue worship and the codification of religious texts.

What role did the Second Temple play in Jewish history?

The Second Temple was rebuilt after the return from Babylonian Exile and served as the center of Jewish life and religious practice for over 500 years. It was a period of significant cultural and religious development, but also of political turmoil.

What led to the destruction of the Second Temple?

The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE after a major Jewish revolt. This event marked the end of the Temple-based sacrificial cult and led to the beginning of the Rabbinic period and the Jewish diaspora.

What is the significance of the Rabbinic period?

The Rabbinic period, which began after the destruction of the Second Temple, saw the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud, which became central texts guiding Jewish law, ethics, and practice, adapting Judaism to life in diaspora.

What was the Enlightenment period's impact on Jewish

communities?

The Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, in the 18th and 19th centuries, promoted Jewish integration into secular European society, advocating for secular education, modern languages, and reform within Jewish religious practice.

What is Zionism and when did it emerge?

Zionism is a nationalist movement that emerged in the late 19th century, advocating for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the historical Land of Israel. It gained momentum due to rising antisemitism and nationalist aspirations.

What is the significance of the Holocaust in Jewish history?

The Holocaust (Shoah) was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during World War II. It remains a pivotal and tragic event in Jewish history, profoundly impacting Jewish identity, memory, and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of 9 book titles related to a short history of the Jews, with descriptions:

1. A History of the Jews by Paul Johnson

This comprehensive yet accessible work traces the entire sweep of Jewish history from its ancient origins to the late 20th century. Johnson explores the unique experiences of the Jewish people, their enduring cultural and religious traditions, and their interactions with various empires and societies throughout millennia. The book delves into the intellectual, social, and political forces that have shaped Jewish life and identity. It is known for its engaging prose and broad historical scope.

2. The Essential Diaspora: A History of the Jewish People by Nora Levin

Levin's book offers a sweeping narrative of the Jewish diaspora, charting the migration and experiences of Jewish communities across the globe. It examines the challenges and triumphs of Jews living outside their ancestral homeland, highlighting their contributions to diverse cultures. The work emphasizes the resilience of Jewish identity and continuity amidst dispersion. It's a valuable resource for understanding the global dimension of Jewish history.

3. Judaism: A Very Short Introduction by Martin Goodman

This concise volume provides a clear and insightful overview of Judaism's history, beliefs, and practices. Goodman skillfully navigates the complex development of Jewish thought and observance from ancient times to the present day. It serves as an excellent starting point for readers seeking a foundational understanding of Jewish heritage and its evolution. The book effectively distills key concepts and historical periods.

4. The Jews of Khazaria by Kevin Alan Brook

Brook's work investigates the fascinating history of the Khazar Khaganate, a medieval Turkic empire that converted to Judaism. The book meticulously

explores the evidence for this conversion and its implications for Jewish history in Eastern Europe. It sheds light on a significant, though often overlooked, chapter in Jewish presence and influence beyond the traditional Middle East. The research is thorough and presents a compelling case for Khazar Jewry.

5. The Chosen: The Hidden History of 1940s Israel by Ben Hecht

While focused on a specific period, Hecht's book offers a crucial look at the formative years of modern Israel and the clandestine efforts that led to its establishment. It details the political machinations and armed struggle that defined the pre-state era. The narrative highlights the determination and sacrifices made by those striving for a Jewish homeland. It provides a gripping account of a pivotal moment in Jewish history.

6. The Oxford Handbook of Jewish History edited by Naomi Segal and Eva Etkes

This extensive collection brings together scholarly essays from leading experts on various aspects of Jewish history. It covers a wide range of chronological periods and geographical regions, offering in-depth explorations of specific themes and developments. The handbook serves as a comprehensive reference for students and scholars seeking advanced insights into the multifaceted nature of Jewish historical experience. It showcases diverse perspectives and cutting-edge research.

7. A Short History of Jewish People by David P. Gonzalez

This book aims to provide a digestible yet informative account of Jewish history for a general audience. It covers the major epochs and significant events that have shaped Jewish civilization, from biblical times through the modern era. The author focuses on making the narrative accessible and engaging, highlighting key figures and movements. It's a good entry-level text for those new to the subject.

8. The Jewish Way: Leading the High Holidays by Rabbi Irwin Kula and Rabbi Sue Schrader

While focusing on religious observance, this book implicitly touches upon the historical development of Jewish traditions and their continuity. It explores the meaning and practice of key holidays, offering insights into the historical context that shaped these rituals. The work connects contemporary Jewish life with its long historical trajectory. It demonstrates how history informs present-day Jewish identity and practice.

9. A Social and Religious History of the Jews, Volume 1: Ancient Times to the Roman Empire by Salo Wittmayer Baron

This monumental work, the first of many volumes, provides an unparalleled, in-depth exploration of Jewish history. Baron meticulously examines the social, economic, and religious life of Jewish communities from their earliest beginnings up to the end of antiquity. His scholarship is foundational, offering detailed analysis of the forces that shaped Jewish existence and interactions with the wider world. It is an indispensable resource for serious students of Jewish history.

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