JUDAISM
FROM 2000 BCE
Judaism, one of the oldest surviving religions, developed from the beliefs of the people of Canaan, in the southern Levant region, more than 3,500 years ago, and is closely connected to the history of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, tells not only the story of God's creation of the world, but also the story of his special relationship with the Jews. God's agreement, or covenant, with the Jewish people began with God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great people. God told Abraham that his descendants must obey him and adopt the role of circumcision as a sign of the covenant. In return, God would guide them, protect them, and give them the land of Israel. Abraham was rewarded for his faith with a son, Isaac; in turn he had a son, Jacob, who, the Tanakh relates, was the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Together, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are known as the Patriarchs—the physical and spiritual ancestors of Judaism. The Tanakh recounts how Jacob and his descendants were enslaved in Egypt, and then led to freedom by Moses under God's command in the Exodus. As part of Moses' covenant with God, he received the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) on Mount Sinai. Moses took his people back to the Land of Israel, where they settled once again. Later, God appointed David—the anointed one, also known as Messiah—as king, from whom came the belief that a descendant of him, the Messiah, would come to bring in a new age for the Jewish people. David's son, Solomon, built a permanent temple in Jerusalem, symbolizing the claim of the Jewish people on the Land of Israel. But twice the Jews were forced from their Promised Land and the temple destroyed: first by the Babylonians in the 6th century BCE, and again after they had returned and fallen under Roman rule in the 1st century CE.

The Diaspora
As a result of foreign rule, the Jewish people became a widespread diaspora. Some Jews, later known as the Sephardim, settled in Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Middle East, but the majority, the Ashkenazim, formed communities in Central and Eastern Europe. Inevitably, the geographical separation led to differences in the way Judaism developed between the groups, and various different religious traditions evolved. In Spain, a Golden Age of Jewish thinking flourished between the 10th and 12th centuries, which produced great philosophers such as Moses Maimonides. This was also the centre in the Middle Ages, of interest in the more mystical aspects of Judaism, known as kabbalah. In Eastern Europe, a number of the more isolated small Jewish settlements, the heder, and the kaddish, which served as response, pressed for the formation of a Jewish state, and matters were brought to a head in the aftermath of the Holocaust with the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Oppression and identity
Largely because of their position as displaced immigrants and their distinctive faith, Jews have been widely persecuted throughout their history. In many places, they have been isolated in ghettos, and suffered violent vilification and attacks. From the 18th century on, countries such as the USA and France granted them full rights, and there was a movement towards greater integration. However, this posed a question of identity. Were the Jewish people a religious, ethnic, cultural, or national group? Zionism, which was in response, pressed for the formation of a Jewish state, and matters were brought to a head in the aftermath of the Holocaust with the formation of the State of Israel in 1948. Today, it is difficult to assess how many followers of Judaism there are, because many who identify themselves as Jews are not actively religious. However, it is estimated that there are more than 13 million Jewish people in the world, the majority of them living in either North America or Israel.
I WILL TAKE YOU AS MY PEOPLE, AND I WILL BE YOUR GOD

GOD’S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL
The covenant, or contract, with God is the central concept of Judaism, and dates back to the beliefs of the Israelites, an ancient Middle Eastern people. In fact, Jews view themselves as bound to God by a series of covenants. The Abrahamic covenant was the first, specifically singling out the Israelites as God’s chosen people, while the later Mosaic covenants (mediated by Moses) renewed this initial bond. The Israelites, sometimes called Hebrews, were a people who occupied part of Canaan, roughly equivalent to modern Israel and Palestine, perhaps as early as the 16th century BCE. Around 1200 BCE, during a period when this part of the world was subject to Egyptian rule, an inscription was carved that contains the first mention of "Israel" as a people. In the 8th century BCE, many of the Israelites were forced into exile in Babylonia. During this period of exile, much of the Hebrew or Jewish Bible was composed. It sets down the history of the Israelites and the origin of their religious beliefs.

The first covenant
Like many peoples in the ancient Middle East, the Israelites were polytheists, worshiping a "nation god," one whom they viewed as offering them protection. Jews were later to deem their God’s name too holy to pronounce and did not preserve its original vowels, so it became known only by its four consonants: YHWH (probably pronounced "Yahweh"). YHWH was also known by several other names, including El and Elohim, meaning "God."

Abraham’s loyalty was tested when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac. However, at the last moment, God sent an angel to stop Abraham, as shown in this 18th-century painting.

According to the Book of Genesis, the first of the five books of the Torah (the first section of the Hebrew Bible), it was by God’s decree that the Israelites first settled in Canaan. He called on a man, Abraham, born in the Mesopotamian city-state of Ur (in modern-day Iraq) and commanded him to travel to a place named Canaan, which was to become the Israelite homeland. The Torah recounts that in Canaan, God established a covenant with Abraham, which took a similar form to a type of royal grant that kings of the time handed out to loyal subordinates. It stipulated that, as a reward for Abraham’s loyalty, God would grant him many descendants who would inherit the land. As a sign of this compact, Abraham and all the male members of his household were circumcised. To this day, Jewish boys are circumcised on the eighth day after their birth as a sign that they are parties to this pledge.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. God blessed Ishmael, promising that he would become the father of a great nation. But it was Isaac that God chose to inherit the covenant from his father, appearing to him directly. Isaac in turn handed down the covenant to his son Jacob, who in turn received the name "Israel" from God and handed the covenant down to all his offspring.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are known as Israel’s patriarchs, because they represent the first three generations included in the covenant with God.

The covenant at Sinai
The Torah relates that when Canaan was struck by famine, Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt, where their descendants were subsequently enslaved. Several generations later, when the Israelite population in Egypt had increased, God appeared to Moses, an Israelite raised in the Egyptian court, to lead the people out of slavery and back to the land of Canaan. The Israelites’ escape from Egypt (the Exodus) involved many miracles: God struck the Egyptians with plagues that included afflicting them with boils and turning the Nile to blood, and he split the Red Sea so that the Israelites could pass through. With these miracles, God demonstrated his power, and his loyalty to the covenant with the patriarchs.

After liberating the Israelites from Egypt, and before leading them into Canaan, God brought...
them to a mountain called Sinai, or Horeb. Moses ascended the mountain to speak to God, and a new covenant was established between God and the entire people of Israel. This covenant at Sinai recalled God’s salvation of Israel and promised the Israelites that they would be God’s “treasured possession” if they observed the commandments he had given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

According to the Torah, God spoke these commandments aloud from the top of Mount Sinai, which was covered by cloud and fire, while all the people of Israel listened from below. Tradition has it that these commandments were inscribed personally by God onto the two stone tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain, although the Torah is not consistently clear on this point. Moses broke the tablets in anger when he saw that the Israelites had built a false god, a golden calf, while he was on the summit. He returned to Mount Sinai to have a new set of stone tablets inscribed, and these were placed in a gilded chest called the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was equipped with staves so that it could be carried by the Israelites as they continued to Canaan.

The commandments

The most famous commandments in the Sinai covenant are the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue. The Decalogue comprises the most fundamental rules of Israel’s covenant. It prohibits the worship of other gods or the depiction of God in physical form; it says that each week the Israelites must observe a sacred day of rest, the Sabbath; and it prohibits certain actions, such as murder and adultery.

In addition to the Decalogue, the Torah includes numerous laws that God is said to have conveyed to the Israelites indirectly through Moses, both at Sinai and on other occasions. These laws also form part of the covenant. According to a calculation in the Talmud (rabbinic interpretation of the Torah), there are a total of 613 commandments in the Torah. They address many aspects of the Israelites’ life in Canaan. Some constitute what we would consider civil law, describing systems of government, regulating property disputes, and setting guidelines for dealing with cases of murder and theft, among other matters. Others relate to the construction of a sanctuary for worshiping God, and establish sacrificial rites to be performed by a hereditary priesthood. Still others direct the behavior of individual Israelites, instructing them on matters ranging from what they may eat, and whom they may marry, to the fair and charitable treatment of their fellow citizens. Generally, the commandments were aimed at establishing a society that was just, by the standards of the day, and distinctive in its service of God.

The final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, describes a third covenant between God and Israel, established in the land of Moab (in modern-day Jordan) before the Israelites entered Canaan. Deuteronomy tells that God commanded Moses to make

The covenant with Noah

In addition to God’s covenant with Israel, the Torah also tells of a covenant between God and all living beings. God made this covenant with Noah, whose family survived a primordial flood that wiped out most life on Earth. This covenant stipulated that God would never again destroy the world by flood. Like Israel’s patriarchs after him, Noah was also promised many descendants who would fill the Earth. The sign of God’s covenant with Noah was the rainbow, which would thereafter serve as a reminder of God’s promise of safety. Later Jewish tradition understood the Noahide covenant to include seven commandments, which were incumbent on all humankind. These “Noahide laws” forbade idolatry, murder, blasphemy, theft, sexual immorality (such as incest), and consuming forbidden flesh, and required courts of justice to be set up.
The Israelites’ loyalty to God was tested by 40 years of exile in the desert. This is commemorated in the festival of Sukkot, in which temporary huts are built to resemble their desert homes.

The promise of the land, although conditional, remains eternal: the Israelites might lose the land for a time due to their sins, but they need not lose hope of returning.

The “Chosen People”
The Torah offers little in terms of explanation as to why God chose the patriarchs and their descendants, yet it emphasizes that by virtue of their covenantal relationship with him, the Israelites are privileged above other nations. The authors of the Bible did not view the Israelites as inherently superior to other people—but on the contrary, they often describe them as sinful and unworthy—but they clearly perceived Israel’s status as special. As Jews came to believe that their god was the one God who ruled the whole world, their status as God’s chosen nation took on even greater significance.

Throughout history, Jews have struggled to understand why God chose them and what this choice implied about their place in the world. One ancient tradition suggests that, rather than God choosing Israel, Israel chose God. This tradition maintains that God offered the commandments to all the nations of the earth, but all except Israel rejected them, finding them too burdensome. In accordance with this view, the Israelites’ status is not a result of choice on God’s part, but a product of free will. At the same time, it seems to deny freedom of choice by holding individuals responsible for the decisions of their ancestors.

The meaning of Jewish history revolves around the faithfulness of Israel to the covenant.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, Polish-born US rabbi

Some Jewish mystical traditions with origins in the Middle Ages suggest a different perspective, asserting that the souls of Jews were chosen at the time of creation and are qualitatively superior to those of non-Jews. However, prominent thinkers from the major modern denominations of Judaism (Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) emphatically reject any claims of essential difference between Jews and non-Jews. Modern Jewish thinkers tend to view the covenant instead as imposing a mission on Jews to live in accordance with God’s will and thereby convey God’s truth to the world. Some have suggested that Israel is not unique in having been chosen by God, and that other peoples may have been chosen to fulfill other missions. Some liberal Jews reject the idea of “chosenness” on the grounds that it presupposes superiority over other people and encourages ethnocentrism.

Joining the covenant

Traditional Judaism maintains that status in the covenant is transmitted from parent to child through the maternal line; so the child of a Jewish mother is automatically Jewish and bound by the commandments. This inherited status cannot be forfeited: a Jew who does not observe the commandments has violated the covenant, but he or she remains a Jew. On the other hand, it is possible for a non-Jew to become Jewish through conversion. Under rabbinic law, a convert to Judaism must accept the Jewish commandments and be immersed in a ritual bath (and if male, be circumcised), at which point he or she, assumes all the rights and duties of a Jew.

Traditionally, conversion to Judaism involves a commitment to a strict regimen of observance. Today, progressive Judaism places greater emphasis on individual autonomy in determining Jewish identity and its obligations. In both Reform Judaism in the USA and Liberal Judaism in the UK, the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers are accepted without formal conversion if they self-identify as Jewish.

In spite of varying beliefs and practices, the concept of the covenant remains central to all streams of Judaism. It represents and defines the individual Jew’s purpose in the world, linking him or her to the Jewish people across the span of history, and to the Jewish God.

How an individual joins the covenant depends on the faith, or otherwise, of his or her parents. Judaism does not actively seek converts, but accepts those who show commitment and sincerity.

If you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples.

Exodus 19:5

If your mother is Jewish and your father is not, then you are Jewish, and can never be not Jewish.

If only your father is Jewish, some modern denominations will accept you without conversion.

If neither of your parents is Jewish, you may convert to Judaism, following the correct rituals.
BESIDE ME THERE IS NO OTHER GOD FROM MONOLATRY TO MONOTHEISM

IN CONTEXT
KEY SOURCE: Second Isaiah
WHEN AND WHERE: c.640 BCE, Babylon/Judea
BEFORE: c.1000 BCE, The Song of the Sea, a poem in the Bible's Exodus, proclaims YHWH supreme over other gods

The earliest authors of the Jewish Bible seem to have acknowledged the existence of many gods, but insisted that the one whose name is rendered as YHWH was the greatest among them, and that the Israelites should worship only YHWH. It appears, then, that, at some time during the biblical period, the Jewish people moved from this exclusive worship of one god among many (known as monolatry) to the belief that only one god existed (monothedism).

YHWH rules all nations
In addition to the views of the Bible's authors, archaeological evidence suggests that the early Israelites worshipped a variety of regional gods. The prophets of the god YHWH, whose writings comprise a large portion of the Bible, harshly rebuked the people for this practice. It is not clear whether the prophets were all true monotheists, but they did believe that YHWH was supremely powerful and ruled over all nations.

Around this time, the earliest clear articulation of monothedism in the Bible emerged, in a collection of writings known as "Second Isaiah." It emphasizes that YHWH created, and rules over, the world alone. Israel's restoration is a sign of YHWH's control over history, which is both transcendent and personal. He determines the actions of kings but also leads his people to salvation like a shepherd guiding his flock.

Second Isaiah
The biblical Book of Isaiah claims to be the work of a prophet by that name who lived in the late 8th and early 7th centuries BCE. However, the latter portion of the book deals with the Jews' return from exile in Babylon in the 6th century BCE. Modern scholars refer to this section as "Second Isaiah" or "Deuteristic Isaiah" and attribute it to one or more 6th-century writers.

Second Isaiah echoes the language and themes of the first part of the book, while also introducing new ideas and motifs, including explicit monotheism. Like earlier prophetic works, it interprets Israel's exile as punishment for the people's sins, but proclaims that the punishment has ended and it will be followed by everlasting glory when Israel finally embraces YHWH alone.

Many scholars believe that the final portion of the book was written later and constitutes a "Third Isaiah."
The Messiah will redeem Israel
The promise of a new age

Throughout much of their recorded history, the people of Israel were ruled by kings. A ritual called "anointing", in which oil was poured on the monarch's head, functioned much like a coronation and served to indicate God's election of the ruler, who was referred to as God's anointed one, or in Hebrew, 'Messiah'. Originally, the term Messiah was used for any anointed leader. But over time it came to refer to a specific ruler who would arise in the future and rescue Israel from its enemies, ushering in a golden age—the Messianic Era. Jewish tradition offers much speculation as to the events that would characterize the Messianic Era, but most agreed that it would be a period of brotherhood and glory on earth, when delinquenties and miracles would be commonplace, swords would be beaten into plowshares, and the wolf would live with the lamb.

Some traditions speculated that the Messiah would be an earthly ruler (with a close connection to God), others that he would be a heavenly figure appointed in a time before creation itself. Similarly, a number of traditions envisioned the Messianic Era to be part of the normal course of history, while for others it was a miraculous time when God's spirit would reign on earth.

A Messiah from David's line
One of the first kings of the united monarchy of Israel and Judah was a man named David, who reigned from around 1025 to 955 BCE. According to the Bible, David was instrumental in uniting the people of Israel and defending them against the Philistines. The Bible relates that God loved David, referring to him as his "son", and established an agreement or covenant, with him, promising that his descendants would rule over Israel forever.

However, the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BCE, exiling most of its inhabitants and destroying the Temple. And so...
David's dynasty came to an end. The fall of the kingdom might have suggested that God had broken his covenant with David. Yet the people of Judah continued to hold out the hope that, some time in the future, a descendant of David would once again rule over Israel as God's Messiah.

**Foretold by prophets**

Even before the fall of the monarchy, some of Israel's prophets predicted that a king descended from David would unite the two kingdoms and rescue them from their enemies. Although these prophesies were written in different periods and some referred to specific historical kings, later generations interpreted them as foretelling the advent of a future Messiah. After the Babylonian conquest, some prophets foretold that the people would eventually return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. A few envisioned that the nations of the world would one day recognize Israel's God and come to worship him in Jerusalem. These visions of a glorious future were not unconditional, however. The prophets believed that Israel's misfortunes were God's punishment for the sins of the people and its leaders, and that future restoration would only be possible if Israel repented.

**Foreign rule**

The prophets' visions were partly realized when the Persian king Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and allowed many Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. Indeed, Cyrus is acknowledged in the Bible as the "Lord's Messiah." However, a lengthy period of domination by foreign powers, including the Greek and Roman Empires, followed the return of the Jews to the homeland. During this time, they turned again to biblical prophesies about the Messiah and an age of national restoration.

The Jews drew on prophetic traditions that envisioned a great battle between the forces of good and evil, in which God would emerge triumphant and sinners would be punished. Jewish apocalyptic works of this period, which include the Dead Sea Scrolls, offer elaborate descriptions of battles and the accompanying plagues and tribulations that would precede the advent of the Messiah: floods, earthquakes, the darkening of the sun and moon, and the falling of the stars from the sky. These events came to be known as the "birth pangs of the Messiah," since for all the agony that they would cause, they were also a precursor of the Messianic Era, when evil would be banished from earth, the rule of oppression would be swept away, and people could live free of distraction and crime.

**The Dead Sea Scrolls**

In 1947, a Bedouin goat herder discovered a cache of buried scrolls in a cave in Qumran, on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. The scrolls are thought to be the writings of the Essenes—an ancient Jewish sect—that had been hidden when members of the sect fled the Romans during the Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE. The Essenes rejected the priesthood that was then in control of the Jerusalem Temple and formed a community in the desert, where they waited the end times, apparently believing that they alone would be redeemed in the Messianic Era, which would usher in a new, pure temple and priesthood. The scrolls include the earliest known manuscripts of nearly every book in the Hebrew Bible as well as a wealth of later Jewish literature, and they have contributed greatly to our understanding of Jewish thought in the period.

**Some Jewish thinkers maintain**

that the return of the diaspora and the rebuilding of Jerusalem will be the two most important preludes to the coming of the Messiah.

**Appearance of the Messiah**

Every so often throughout history, an exceptional individual would appear whom some people thought might be the Messiah. One such person was Jesus of Nazareth, known to his followers as "Christ," from the Greek word for "Messiah." Jesus' followers, who became known as Christians, continued to believe that he was the Messiah after his execution by the Romans, but most Jews rejected this claim.

Another messianic claimant was Simon Bar Kokhba, who led a revolt against the Romans in 132 CE. His revolt was a colossal failure, which effectively brought an end to Jewish life in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Those Jews who were not killed were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, and many were sold into slavery.

The failure of this and later revolts against Roman rule and the loss, again, of the Jewish religious center in Jerusalem brought new relevance to the prophesies from the Babylonian exile.

**Resurrection and afterlife**

The Messianic Era was originally envisioned by some traditions as a time of natural restoration, when life would be restored to those who perished. Later, however, it was generally believed that there would also be a time of judgment for every person, living or dead, when the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished.

The Hebrew Bible says little about life after death. Most early biblical authors shared the ancient belief that the dead lived on in the underworld, but offered little detail on the subject. Many Jews came to believe that a person's ultimate fate depended on his or her conduct in life. Some said that the righteous lived on in Paradise while the wicked were condemned to a place of torment, called Gehenna. Others emphasized a final judgment in the Messianic Era, when the dead would be resurrected. Both ideas persisted in Jewish belief, and both the Messianic Era and the individual afterlife are commonly referred to as the "World to Come."