Chapter 3

Jewish

Traditions

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Chapter Overview

In this chapter of your textbook, Michele Murray presents a detailed exploration of the origins, history, and practices of, as well as the cultures associated with, the world’s Jewish traditions. Murray pays special attention to the diversity of different ways of being Jewish in the modern world, and explains the historical events and forces that have contributed to such heterogeneity. Although the focus of the chapter is primarily on the historical analysis of the Jewish tradition, Murray also reflects on the philosophical, theological, and mystical themes that have risen to prominence within Judaism.

One cannot develop an understanding of the history of the Jewish peoples without also coming to grips with the radical ideas upon which their identity has been built. The prime example of this is conveyed by the innovative theological position articulated in the Hebrew Bible wherein God is presented as an active force in the historical development of the ancient Israelite community. The conceptual framework derived from the idea of a monotheistic, historical God (one who intervenes in human history) is what undergirds Jewish covenantal theology, which asserts that the Jewish community became God’s “chosen people” in exchange for their willingness to observe certain religious laws and commandments (*mitzvot*). This focus on following religious law and the commensurate concern for living an ethical life, in turn, necessitated the careful study of key religious texts, which were traditionally interpreted as the revealed word of God. One can see these related themes (history, covenant, law, and scripture) reflected throughout Murray’s exploration of Jewish history and ritual practice. Indeed, the majority of Jewish history has struggled with the meaning of the covenant, and the rights and responsibilities of both parties, the Jewish people and God, which is implied by this relationship.

Given the antiquity of Judaism, as well as the variety of different traditions and identities included within that category, it poses as a model of gradual, cumulative religious development by which religious scholars are most intrigued. From the tradition’s beginnings as the religion of a nomadic tribe, it gradually transformed into an institutionalized, temple-based religion with an extensive system of sacrifices, a hereditary priesthood, and an elaborate collection of laws and commandments pertaining to ritual purity.

In response to interactions and confrontations with various other nearby civilizations, the tradition transformed again, this time through the influence of the prophets, who argued that the subjugation and exile of the Israelite people under various imperialistic foes were the direct result of the immorality of the Israelite people and their failure to honour their duties under the covenantal relationship.

In the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 ce), the rabbinical tradition—centred on the task of extending, reinterpreting, and transmitting the teachings of the Hebrew Bible in light of new social conditions—came to central prominence within the Jewish Diaspora. This represents a seminal movement away from material ritualism toward a scriptural-based spirituality.

With regard to contemporary Judaism, Murray does an excellent job of explain how the migration of Jews led to the establishment of three distinct Jewish cultures rooted in the geographical areas in which they settled: the Mizrahim being those descended from the Jews who remained in Babylon after the captivity, now referring more broadly to Jews of Middle Eastern origin; the Sephardim being those who trace their lineage to the Jewish communities established in the Iberian Peninsula under tolerant Islamic rule, later expelled by the Christian re-conquest; and the Ashkenazim, those whose ancestors settled in northern and western Europe.

Murray also describes the ways in which the displacement and persecution of Jews within these territories at the hands of both state officials and civilians alike led to the politicization and organization of Jewish nationalist movements (Zionists) who advocated for the creation of a modern Jewish state. The establishment of the state of Israel became a reality in 1948 after the horrors of the Holocaust.

Murray’s discussion of the political dimension of Jewish culture affords an excellent opportunity to think about different forms of Jewish identity, both religious and secular. The idea of multiple, equally authentic, expressions of Judaism paved the way for the emergence of the five modern branches of Judaism—Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Re-constructionist, and Humanistic—that encompass ideologies ranging from scriptural literalism to outright atheism. Issues of gender and sexuality also come into play in contemporary Jewish discourse, with debates over inclusion and exclusion of women as religious specialists, and the status of gays and lesbians under Jewish law. All of these questions are oriented in some fashion toward the question of what it means to be a Jew, and all of the debates, no matter how rancorous, are evidence of a strong living tradition, which remains vibrant thousands of years after its founding.

In relation to the study of Western religions, a scholarly engagement with Judaism is absolutely fundamental. Although Judaism is a relatively small world religion (approximately 14 million Jews worldwide), its monotheistic teachings, founding figures, and sacred texts (especially the Hebrew Bible) represent the foundation upon which Christianity and Islam were built. As such, the careful study of Judaism can reveal various intriguing trends within the development of monotheistic theology in all three traditions.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* understand that Jewish sacred texts were written from multiple perspectives, over a long period of time, and how they can be interpreted differently by a variety of different audiences;
* understand that the Jewish peoples’ historical narrative is linear and comprehensive; however, when read in a critical, scholarly manner, elements of the narrative are often at odds with one another due to how the biblical texts were collected and edited;
* comprehend the ways in which the Babylonian Exile, Persian rule, Hellenization, and Roman occupation all exerted forces of acculturation upon the Jewish tradition and how, in turn, the Jewish people’s traditions and culture influenced that of the imperial civilizations
* understand that the Romans’ destruction of the Second Temple in 70 ce radically altered the ritualistic and institutional dimensions of Judaism, eventually leading to the development of rabbinic Judaism amongst the Diaspora;
* recognize that the covenantal relationship and obedience to God’s Law/Torah is at the core of the Jewish religious identity;
* understand the various ways in which the interpretative practice of textual commentary (Mishnah, Gemarah, Talmud, etc.) operate as resources for identity development and authentication;
* appreciate how the loss of a homeland led to the migration of Jewish groups throughout Europe and the Middle East, where Jewish communities were established and religious and cultural traditions were both preserved and reinvented;
* understand how the categories of Mizrahim, Sephardim, and Ashkenazim apply to Diaspora communities;
* develop a familiarity with the *Shema*, which may be described as the central expression of Jewish faith and its attendant monotheism, found in the book of Deuteronomy: :Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One”;
* understand how the history of the Jewish people has been characterized by the struggle to maintain their culture and religious practices in the face of forces of persecution, repression, and appropriation;
* comprehend how the Jewish struggle has led to the development of a great deal of intellectual dynamism and heterogeneity with the tradition itself, allowing for the development of new, different, and sometimes antagonistic, expressions of Judaism.

Key Terms

AggadahAnecdotal or narrative material in the Talmud; see also *halakha*. (p. 110)

Ashkenazim Jews of northern and eastern Europe, as distinguished from the Mediterranean Sephardim. (p. 114)

britHebrew term for covenant, the special relationship between God and the Jewish people. (p. 91)

Diaspora“Dispersal,” the Jewish world outside the land of ancient Israel; it began with the Babylonian Exile, from which not all Jews returned. (p. 97, 114)

Documentary HypothesisThe theory (1894) that the Pentateuch was not written by one person (Moses) but compiled over a long period of time from multiple sources. (p. 89)

Exile The deportation of Jewish leaders from Jerusalem to Mesopotamia by the conquering Babylonians in 586 bce; disrupting local Israelite political, ritual, and agricultural institutions, it marked the transition from Israelite religion to Judaism. (pp. 97)

ExodusThe migration of Hebrews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, understood in later Hebrew thought as marking the birth of the Israelite nation. (p. 89)

Gemarah The body of Aramaic commentary attached to the Hebrew text of the *Mishnah*, which together with it makes up the *Talmud* (both the *Jerusalem Talmud* and the *Babylonian Talmud*). (p. 110)

HalakhahMaterial in the *Talmud* of a legal nature; see also *aggadah*. (p. 110)

Hasidim“Pious ones”; applied to two unrelated groups of loyal or pious Jews: those who resisted Hellenism militarily in second-century-bce Palestine, and the mystically inclined followers of the Baal Shem Tov in eighteenth-century Poland and their descendants today. (pp. 120-122)

Hebrew Bible The sacred canon of Jewish texts, known to Jews as the *Tanakh* and to Christians as the Old Testament. (p. 85)

Holocaust“Burnt offering” or “burnt sacrifice”; one of the ancient sacrifices mandated in the Hebrew Bible. The term has more recently been applied to the persecution and murder of 6,000,000 European Jews by the Nazis before and during the Second World War (1939–45). (pp. 134-140)

KabbalahThe medieval Jewish mystical tradition; its central text is a commentary on scripture called the *Zohar*, compiled by Moses ben Shemtov of León (d. 1305) but attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, a famous second-century rabbinic mystic and wonder-worker. (pp. 117-120)

kosherTerm for food that is ritually acceptable, indicating that all rabbinic regulations regarding animal slaughter and the like have been observed in its preparation. (p. 125 )

Maimonides, Moses (1135–1204) One of the most famous Jewish philosophers and legal scholars of the Islamic age. (pp. 114-115)

messiahFrom the Hebrew *Mashiach*, “anointed [one].” (p. 95)

midrashCommentary on scripture. (p. 87)

MishnahThe Hebrew summary of the oral law—inherited from Pharisaism and ascribed to Moses—arranged by topic; edited by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi before 220 ce, it has an authority paralleling that of the written Torah. (p. 110)

mitzvahA commandment; in the Roman era, the rabbinic movement identified exactly 613 specific commandments contained within the Torah. (p. 157)

Mizrahim Jews of Middle Eastern ancestry, as distinguished from Ashkenazim and Sephardim. (p.114 )

PentateuchThe first five books of the Hebrew Bible, ascribed by tradition to Moses but regarded by modern scholars as the product of several centuries of later literary activity. (p. 85-86)

rabbiA teacher, in Roman times an expert on the interpretation of Torah; since priestly sacrifices ceased with the destruction of the Temple, the rabbi has been the scholarly and spiritual leader of a Jewish congregation. (p. 102)

rabbinic movement The legal teachers and leaders, initially Pharisees, who became the dominant voices in Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and eventually become the rabbis as we know them. (pp. 105-106)

SabbathThe seventh day of the week, observed by Jews since ancient times as a day of rest from ordinary activity. (pp. 131-132)

Sephardim The Jews of the pre-modern Mediterranean and Middle East, as opposed to the Ashkenazim of northern and eastern Europe. (p. 114)

SeptuagintThe Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, made in Alexandria in Hellenistic times. (p. 98)

Shema The oldest and most sacred fixed daily prayer in Judaism. (p. 129)

synagogueThe local place of assembly for congregational worship, which became central to the tradition after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. (pp. 105-106 )

TanakhThe entire Hebrew Bible, consisting of Torah or law, Nevi’im or prophets, and Ketuvim or sacred writings, and named as an acronym of these three terms. (pp. 85)

TorahA word meaning “teaching” or “instruction”; applied most specifically to the Law of Moses (the Pentateuch) but may also refer to the entire scripture, including commentaries, and even the entire spiritual thrust of Jewish religion. (pp. 85-86)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. In what ways might one identify as a Jew?
2. How would you, as a scholar, describe the Hebrew Bible as a text?
3. Why is the covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and their God seen as revolutionary by scholars of religion?
4. How did the rabbinic movement rise to prominence after the destruction of the Second Temple?
5. What were the Jewish responses to the Enlightenment period in Europe? What were some of the way that the character of contemporary Judaism has been shaped by those responses?

Reflection Questions

1. Why might obeying religious laws associated with diet be an important part of religious practice?
2. What other diasporas can you identify in the world, and in what ways has their history paralleled that of the Jewish Diaspora. Are there any common themes?
3. What sort of pressures do you think a community might face when its members are bound to a contract with God? Do you think such an agreement is fair?
4. What elements from Jewish culture are present in your own life?
5. Do you think that genocide, on the scale of the Holocaust, could be perpetrated in the contemporary western world?

Research Paper Topics

1. Describe the two different creation stories (in Genesis) as they pertain to gender. Analyze what, if any, repercussions the selection of one story over the other as normative might have had in the historical constitution of gender within the Jewish tradition.
2. Describe and discuss the impact of Hellenization within the Jewish tradition. Illustrate your discussion with examples from religious, linguistic, and political perspectives.
3. How has the monotheistic imperative been received historically amongst Jewish peoples? What movements within the Jewish tradition have sought to address either the lack of commitment to the one God, or have attempted to define the character of singular divinity?
4. Compare and contrast the treatment of Jewish communities under Christian and Muslim rule respectively. How did Jewish thought and culture either benefit or suffer under these different regimes?
5. What was the significance of the Gaonic period for the ways in which Jews engage with sacred texts? What current text-based practices are rooted in this period?
6. Describe the emergence of the Hasidim movement within Judaism. Present an analysis of the possible impetus behind the movement’s popularity.
7. Select two of the five modern branches of Judaism and present a comparative analysis identifying both points of contrast and points of continuity.
8. Undertake a historical analysis of the emergence of modern (from the nineteenth century forward) anti-Semitic propaganda and political action in the west. Identify and analyze the potential political, economic, ethnic, and religious motives underlying these campaigns, which alienated and persecuted Jews.
9. Describe and analyze the ways in which marriage has been traditionally constituted within the Jewish tradition, and detail the ways in which Jewish ideas about marriage have been transformed in the modern period.
10. Identify three different responses to the Holocaust from within the Jewish tradition. Present an analysis of how these different responses contrast with one another, and how they have been received more broadly amongst different Jewish communities.

Additional Resources

*Judaism 101* is an online encyclopedia of Judaism covering orthodox Jewish beliefs, people, places, language, scripture, holidays, practices, and customs. <http://www.jewfaq.org/index.htm>

Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. 2003. *Judaism: History, Belief and Practice*. New York: Routledge. (Also see this books companion website: <http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/0415236614/default.asp>)

De Lange, Nicholas, and Miri Freud-Kandel. 2005. *Modern Judaism: An Oxford Guide*.Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* <http://www.globethics.net/web/1657777>

Jewishfilm.com. Highlighting notable films and videos of Jewish interest.

<http://www.jewishfilm.com/>

What is “being Jewish?” <http://www.beingjewish.com/>

Judaism and Jewish Resources. A website that lists a variety of resources related to Judaism. <http://shamash.org/trb/judaism.html>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. The concept of Jewish identity is at the heart of much of the current discourse and debate within, and between, Jewish communities across the world. For some people who identify as Jewish, a commitment to the Jewish religion, an observance of Jewish laws, and an ability to trace one’s matrilineal Jewish heritage are all necessary features of being a Jew. For others, however, the notion of Jewish identity is tied to culture and history, and religious commitment is simply an option. For others still, being Jewish is rooted in a genre of ethnic nationalism, which demands a commitment to the Jewish nation state; whether or not one actually resides in Israel, it is perceived as a universal Jewish homeland and thus deserving of support from all Jews. All of these different groups identify as Jewish, leading to tensions and disagreement regarding each group’s respective claim to legitimacy. (pp. 76–77)
2. Although within the Jewish religious tradition the Hebrew bible is normatively referred to as a cohesive text expressing divine revelation, scholars of religion assert that it is a compendium of 24 separate texts, compiled over a period of 800 years and issuing from many different authors. The evidence upon which this scholarly framework is based pertains to the disparity of different content (e.g., prose, poetry, song, legal writing, chronicles of supernatural events, etc.). Further, the “documentary hypothesis,” articulated in the nineteenth century by Julius Wellhausen, argues that based upon a critical analysis of style, vocabulary, and theology the “five books of Moses” are derived from four different authors, or schools of authors. Scholars continue to interpret and debate aspects of the Hebrew Bible’s historicity; however, there is complete scholarly consensus regarding the human, rather than divine, origins of the works. (pp. 79–83)
3. Central to the idea of the covenant between the Jewish people and God is the notion of being “chosen.” However, the concept of a God, or Gods, choosing a people in and of itself is not what is so remarkable. That the Jewish people equally chose God in this narrative is what draws scholarly interest. The reciprocal nature of the covenant between the Jewish people and God necessarily includes sets of rights and responsibilities on the part of both parties; as would be the case in most legal contracts. Thus, while God could make demands of the Jewish people, the Jewish people could likewise make demands of God. Scholars discern within the moral code prescribed by God for the Jewish people, the seed of the ethical impetus which has come to characterize much of Judaic religion, as well as the Christian and Islamic faiths which followed. (pp. 83–87)
4. Although already in existence prior to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 ce, the rabbinic movement’s rise to prominence was tremendously accelerated by the loss of the ritualistic base of the Jewish religion. The focus on text-based spirituality, commentary, and interpretation that characterized rabbinic activity became central in Jewish Diaspora continuities. Rabbis focused on liturgical prayer, textual study, and ethical practice. This transformation allowed for Jews to continue to honour their religious commitment, even to intensify their commitment, anywhere in the world, and often under very difficult circumstances. (pp. 99–102)
5. The primary Jewish response to the European Enlightenment is represented by the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment). This intellectual, spiritual, and political movement was rooted in the desire on the part of European Jews to adapt Jewish practice and philosophy to the events of modernity—the rise of liberalism, the focus on rationalism, and the easing of restrictive prohibitions upon Jewish communities. The ideal of the Haskalah was the reconciliation of being both a committed Jew, and a fully modern citizen. The intellectual, spiritual, and political reorganization of Judaism, which began in earnest with the Haskalah, continues to unfold and its effects can be observed in the development of the five modern branches of Judaism, the successful establishment of the modern state if Israel, and the emergence of a specific rights-based discourse within Jewish communities regarding gender and sexuality. (pp. 116–142)