



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## A Comparative Study of Religions

J.N.K. Mugambi

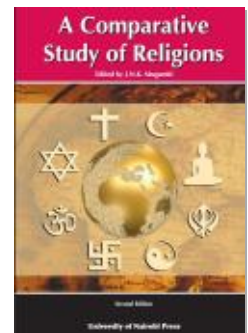
Published by African Books Collective

Mugambi, J.N.K.

A Comparative Study of Religions: Second Edition.

African Books Collective, 2010.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/39862](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39862).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39862>

## The Evolution of Judaism

*B.J. Ekeya*

### **Introduction**

The main religious heritage of the Jewish people wherever they happen to be in the world is Judaism. It is an ancient religion with 4000 years of history. It has given rise to Christianity and Islam but has remained distinct and separate from its daughter religions.

In this chapter we shall outline the first phase of the historical development of Judaism. Judaism cannot be studied in isolation from the Jewish people. It is the religion of Judaism that gives the Jewish people their distinctive character.

The word “Judaism” has two meanings:

1. It denotes the entire civilization, past and present, of the Jewish people. By the entire civilization is meant all the secular and sacred elements of the culture, history and social institutions of the Jewish people.
2. It also denotes just the religion of the Jewish people.

### **The Land and its People**

Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Jewish people, is also called Canaan, the land of promise or Israel, the holy land. The people are called Israelites, Jews, Hebrews. At present, this land is mostly in the modern Jewish state of Israel.

To the religion of Judaism, Palestine and the Hebrew language are sacred. The reasons for this regard are as follows:

1. It was in the land of Canaan, and in the Hebrew language that God's revelation was given to the people of Israel through the prophets.
2. Hebrew language dominates in the worship of the Jewish people. For the strict traditionalist, all worship is done in Hebrew, for the modernist, worship is done partly in Hebrew.
3. Jewish religious rites and observances were formed in the holy land. The consciousness of Canaan pervades every phase of the religious life of the Jews wherever they happen to be.
4. There is a strong belief among Jews everywhere that Israel and Hebrew have a role to play in the destiny of the world and of all nations. The belief is that, when all the Jews dispersed all over the world have been repatriated into the holy land, it will become the centre from which all the nations of the world will be taught the law of the Lord and how to live in peace.

## **The Historical Development in Judaism**

There are two phases which can be considered as distinct in the development of Judaism: the pre-Christian and post-Christian phases.

### **The Pre-Christian Phase**

The earliest phase of the rise and development of Judaism can best be understood by identifying the people who were ancestors of the Jewish people. Table 2 gives a comprehensive summary of this history.

From Table 2, we can deduce the historical development of Judaism, from its earliest times to the dawn of the Christian Era.

About 2000 years before the Christian Era, Abraham, the founder of the Jewish people, migrated from Mesopotamia to

Canaan, the land which later came to be called the land of Israel or Palestine.

Jacob, also called Israel, a grandson of Abraham, migrated to Egypt with his twelve sons, to escape a famine. They multiplied while there, and were enslaved probably by Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II.

Moses, one of their own, who had received an Egyptian nobleman's upbringing and education, led the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai. There, God entered into Covenant with the whole people. From that time on the people of Israel knew the God of their ancestors by the name of Yahweh. There on Mt. Sinai, the people received the core of the law, and their religion was historically launched. It was on Mt. Sinai too that Moses became the historical founder of their religion.

The wanderings, wars, errors and settlement of the Israelites became an expression of their relationship with God. They became conscious of themselves as a people chosen by God, not because they were in any way superior to other peoples, but in order to fulfil a particular mission which God had chosen for them. They were to make known the one God to all the nations.

Moses died in the desert. Joshua led the people to conquer Canaan. In time they settled and mingled with the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan.

David and Solomon welded them into a monarchy after conquering the Philistines, their most troublesome enemies. Solomon ambitiously increased their wealth and greatness, by use of forced labour, which fermented dissent among some of the tribes which made up the nation. Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem, thus making the capital the centre of worship.

After the death of Solomon, ten tribes led by Jeroboam I, a man in charge of Solomon's forced labour, broke away from the tribal confederation to form a Kingdom, the northern Kingdom, also called the Kingdom of Israel. The Southern Kingdom, also called the Kingdom of Judah, remained loyal to the House of David with

Jerusalem as the capital. The two kingdoms never became united again.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Assyria invaded the northern Kingdom and transported the best of its citizens to Assyria as exiles. They never really returned. In their place, other people were brought in. These people were later known as Samaritans.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC the Southern Kingdom, Judah, was invaded by the Babylonians and the best of the citizens were taken into Babylon as exiles. The Babylonian exile was a period when the religion of the Jewish people was purified.

Before the Assyrian and Babylon Exiles in 722 and 586 respectively, great prophets arose in Israel. They were the nation's great religious leaders and teachers. They endeavoured to teach the people the true religion of Yahweh, their God. In their own times, the prophets were not listened to. Their writings, however, were preserved. When later the destruction of the nation and subsequent loss of political autonomy vindicated the teachings of the prophets, the Law of Moses along with the prophetic utterances and teachings, were used by the teachers who came after the exile, Ezra and Nehemiah, to instil a new chart into the people.

The Persian Empire which conquered the Babylonian, freeing the exiled nations to return to their own homelands, was in turn conquered by the Greeks. Greek civilization and religion were imposed upon all the conquered peoples. Under the leadership of the Maccabees, the Jews fought against the Hellenization and the threatened destruction of Judaism. Despite the Greek threat, on the whole, Greek influence opened the Jewish people to a much wider view of the world. For one thing, for the first time, their sacred literature was translated into Greek, the Septuagint version of the Bible.

The Roman Empire conquered the Greek empire in 63 BC, towards the close of the first century BC. Rome appointed puppet Kings, the Herods, to rule Palestine which had become a Roman

Province. These puppet Kings were under the direct control of Procurators, the most notorious of whom was Pontius Pilate. It was during the Roman domination around 6 or 7 BC, that Jesus Christ was born and was later killed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate around AD 30.

In AD 70 the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed under the emperor Titus. This ended for all time the Jewish worship centre at Jerusalem. In AD 135, the Bar Kochba revolt was crushed under emperor Hadrian. The Jews were led to Rome in chains and scattered all over the world. It was the final dispersion of the Jewish people and the end of the first phase of the development of their religion, Judaism.

**Table 2:** History of Judaism from 2000 BC – 30 AD

<b>Dates BC</b>	<b>General Historical World Context</b>	<b>Hebrew Personalities and Movements</b>	<b>Sacred Literature</b>
4000 -2000	Stone Age, Writing Invented: Egypt-Old Kingdom Palestine-Early Bronze Age	Abraham's ancestors as nomads in Mesopotamia	Bible Popular account of creation
2000-1850	Egypt-middle kingdom. Egypt controls Syro-Phoenician coast not interior	Amorites growing importance Abraham arrives into Canaan	Genesis 12 Akkadian poems of creation and of the flood. Emmuma Klish and Gilgamesh Epic
1700-1560	1 <sup>st</sup> Babylonian Dynasty (Amorite)	Hammurabi and His Code. The patriarchs in Egypt	Law Code of Hammurabi Genesis 12-50
1300-1200	Ramses II Pharaoh in Egypt	Hebrews in forced labour. Moses and Exodus. The Law received on Sinai	Exodus, Numbers, Deutronomy, Joshua
1200	Philistine occupy Palestine coast	Joshua Invades Palestine	
1200-1010 1010-970	Rise of Assyria under Tiglethpileses I	Judges. Saul becomes King of Israel conquers Jerusalem and establishes it as capital	Judges, I Samuel, 2 Samuel, I Kings 1-11, I Chronicles 1-9
970-931	Resin King in Damascus	Solomon builds the temple	

931-721 722	Continued rise of Assyria: Invades Israel and deports its inhabitants.	Kingdom divided into Judah and Israel. Prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah active	I Kings 12-22, 2 Kings 1-17, 2 Chronicles 10-28, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah.
716-587	Decline of the Assyrian power and the rise of Babylonian power.	Activities of the Prophets Zephaniah, Nahum, Habbakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jerusalem is captured by Nebuchadnezzar and the people deported into Babylon	2 Kings 18-25, 2 Chronicles 29-36, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55
555-336	Rise of Cyrus King of Persians. He conquers the Babylonians and issues an edict of all exiles back to their homelands.	Exiles return from Babylon and start the Building of the second Temple, led by Nehemiah and Ezra. The prophets Hagai, Zechariah, Malachi and Joel are active	Ezra-Nehemiah, Zachariah, Malachi, Job, Proverbs, Songs of Solomon, Ruth, Psalms, Joel
336-323	Rise of the Greek Empire ad Hellenistic conquest under Alexander the Great	Alexandria was founded later to become an important Jewish settlement	Jonah, Tobit
333-63	Spread of Greek Civilization Antiochus IV Epiphanes in power.	Translation of the Law into Greek Palestine under the Seleucids. The Great Persecution of the Jews and their resistance led by the Maccabees. The rise of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sectarian Sect of Qumran.	The Septuagiant or Greek translation of Hebrew sacred writings, Ecclesiasticus, I Macabees 2 Macabees Daniel, Judith The Qumran manual of discipline
63	The rise of the Roman Empire under Pompey and later, Julius Ceasar.	Pompey conquers Jerusalem. Palestine becomes Roman Province, ruled by the Herods, puppet kings appointed by Rome. Rise of the Zealots who try to overthrow Roman rule.	Book of wisdom
7-6 ca AD 30	Birth of Jesus Christ Death of Jesus.		

## **The Post-Christian Phase of the Development of Judaism**

The final destruction of the Temple in AD 70 was a decisive event in the life of the Jewish people and Judaism. The destruction of the Temple affected the newly formed Christian faith. Each had to discover alternative ways of worshipping God without the Temple. The destruction of the Temple left the Jewish nation in a state of deep despair. The question many asked was: Why did God permit this to happen to His people?

Jews, Christian and the Romans all gave one answer: Israel as a nation had sinned. They could not, however, agree on the nature of sin.

- The Romans described the sin as the inconvenient rebellion against imperial Rome.
- The Jews said that Israel's sin was the war itself.
- Christian Jews of Jerusalem held that the destruction of the Temple was God's punishment for the people's rejection of Jesus Christ.

The Jews needed something to fix their mind onto in recompense for the tragedy. Jewish apocalyptists promised a speedy intervention by God to redeem His people; for just as surely as he had permitted the catastrophe, He would redeem. Meanwhile, what should the people do while awaiting God's redemption?

In AD 425, the emperor Theodosian II abolished the office of Patriarch, thus bringing to an end whatever was left of Jewish autonomy as a nation within their own homeland. The center of Judaism shifted to Babylon where quite a large population of Jews, who had not returned to Palestine after the Babylonian exile, had established itself. Jewish scholarship continued and the German and Babylonian Talmud were produced. The Talmud is the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish people over many centuries.

The 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries saw the rise of Islam. When Mohammed founded Islam in AD 622, he hoped that the Jews, many of whom



lived in Arabia, would support him. When they remained aloof, he drove them out of Medina. Those who remained had to pay a heavy tribute to him. After Mohammed's death in AD 632, his immediate successors, the Caliphs, expelled all the Jews and Christians from their territories. When the Arabs under Omar embarked on their conquest of the Mediterranean world, the attitude of Islam to the Jews changed. They were allowed to exist and could practise their religion.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Islam conquered Spain. Jews followed at the foot of the Arab conquerors and established themselves there. There followed a golden time for the Jews when Spain became the center of Judaism. From the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century until the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> AD 1075–1141, persecution of Jews by the Berbers occurred. In 1492, Jews were expelled from Spain. They sought refuge in Italy, France, England, Germany, Poland and other European countries.

Wherever the Jews migrated and settled, they brought with them their distinctive religion and civilization. Their adherence to the tradition of their ancestors made them distinct and separate from the rest of the people with whom they lived and interacted.

Neither persecution nor threatened annihilation induced them to abandon their religion and civilization. In Europe they suffered numerous indignities and persecutions, but always they remained distinctly Jewish.

For a time during the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries Poland was tolerant towards the Jews. Here Yiddish, which is a mixture of Polish, German and Hebrew, developed as a language commonly spoken. Poland became, during this time, the centre of European Judaism. It was here too that Hasidism arose.

Hasidism was the movement of those Jews characterized by a particular dress and custom. They believed in their leader, the Hasid, whom they regarded as a very holy man, a direct mediator of Grace to his people. Hasidic worship is characterized by joy, song and dance as a celebration of God's goodness.

Anti-semitism, the animosity that non-Jews have towards the Jews, has dogged their steps during the many centuries of their stay in Europe. This anti-Semitism flared up in persecutions, mass murders, segregation into ghettos and expulsions. Jews have always been a minority, distinguished by their religion and culture. They formed a vulnerable scapegoat, to which rulers conveniently directed the wrath of their subjects.

Christians have not been exempt from anti-Semitism. The 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> Century crusades are marked by gross indignities and persecutions of Jews by Christians. Whenever Crusader zeal burned in Europe and Palestine by exterminating its oldest opponents, the Jews, the inquisition was another, Jewish blood flowed. The exterminators felt that they were doing Christianity a noble such example of misdirected Christian zeal against the so-called enemies of Christianity.

Whenever the atmosphere permitted it, the Jews developed in the arts and sciences which happened to be prevalent at the time. The enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, with its emphasis on reason, challenged Judaism. It caused its adherents to subject it to reason. One result of this is Moses Mendelssohn's translation of the Pentateuch and Psalms into German, the language of culture and learning at the time.

Within Judaism itself, there were movements to update it. Reform Judaism, a movement started by Abraham Geiger, was an attempt to hold back Jews from defecting (under the influence of the French revolution) in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Some people within Judaism felt that the Reform Judaism was watering it down, so Orthodox Judaism was re-emphasized. The leader of this movement was Rabbi Raphael Hirsch.

After the discovery of America in 1492, Judaism went to the New World along with everyone else who was seeking a new homeland. There too Jews established distinctive Jewish Communities. Great migrations to the US occurred before World War I.

The persecution of Jews continued. In World War I it was the Jews of Russia who suffered the worst massacres. The number of Jews in Russia was greatly reduced. Henceforth the greatest number of Jews was to be found in America after World War I.

1860–1904 saw the rise of Zionism. Spearheaded by Theodore Herzl, Zionism was conceived to be the answer to anti-Semitism. Herzl became convinced that anti-Semitism was not just religious prejudice, but racial as well. The one answer he could see was to reorganize the Jews into a nation with an autonomous center of their own.

This center was to be Palestine. Resettlement of the Jews into their ancient native land began. Hebrew was resurrected by Eliezer ben Yehuda as the official language of the new settlers. There was divided opinion about the idea of settlement even among Jews, particularly among those who held on to the view that Palestine should not be settled before the Messiah returns. Hitler's massacre settled the issue. Everyone saw the creation of a Jewish homeland as the only hope for the continued and future survival of the Jewish people. In AD 1948 the Jewish state of Israel was created. In Israel Judaism in its various forms continues to thrive in orthodox, conservative and reformed movements.

### **Activity**

1. Outline the historical development of the religion of Judaism.
2. Do you think that Christians are justified in their claims that Judaism has outgrown its purpose?
3. What is the significance of the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel for the world and for the Jewish people?
4. Examine carefully Table 2 on the history of Judaism and make sure you can follow it.