

THE HISTORICAL
EVOLUTION OF JUDAISM

*With Comparisons To
Other Systems Of Thought*

Samuel A. Oppenheim

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Contents

Introduction	6
Chapter One	
The Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Kingly Layers	20
The Patriarchal Layer • Religious Contributions of the Patriarchal Period • The Mosaic Layer • The Kingly Layer	
Chapter Two	
The Prophetic, Babylonian, and Biblical Layers	40
The Prophetic Layer • The Babylonian Layer • The Biblical Layer	
Chapter Three	
The Talmudic Layer and Beyond	63
History • The Talmud • The Talmudic Millennium • The Hasidic Mini-Layer	
Chapter Four	
Theology, Customs, Traditions, Comparisons	107
The Five Books of Moses/Torah • Jewish “Positions” • Jewish Holidays and Holy Days • Judaism and Christianity, and the Evolution of the Latter from the Former	
Chapter Five	
Emancipation, Haskalah, and Modernist Forms of Judaism	164
Emancipation • The Results of Emancipation • Haskalah • Modernist Forms of Judaism • Conservative Judaism	
Appendix I Anti-Semitism	218
Appendix II Zionism	233
Bibliography	249
Index	255

Introduction

*Each man is worth exactly the value of the things
that he has seriously pursued.**

*A page of history is worth a volume of logic.***

Background

This work stems from a weekend in 1985 when my family attended the Bat Mitzvah of a niece in the San Diego area. For those who are not Jewish, a Bar (for a boy) or Bat (for a girl) Mitzvah (i.e., the Son or Daughter of the mitzvah, or commandment/good deed) is somewhat the equivalent of a confirmation in Christianity, i.e., when a young (adult) person becomes a full religious member of the community.

In Judaism this ceremony generally occurs at the age of thirteen for a boy and twelve or thirteen for a girl. The ceremony symbolizes the renewal of the covenant between the ancient Hebrews and God at Mt. Sinai and the continuity of Judaism.

Generally, the person who becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah reads a portion from two of the three parts of the Jewish Bible – the Torah/Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), and a related portion from the Prophets.

*Emperor Marcus Aurelius, 121-180 AD.

**Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1841-1935, in NY Trust Co. vs. Eisner.

The ceremony also demonstrates a second point, namely, the centrality to Judaism and to Jewish life of the Torah, or Teaching, or the Five Books of Moses. We shall see later how this developed and played out in Jewish history and Judaism.

All of this was connected with two other elements, Jewish numerology and the Holocaust. Jewish numerology, or gematriya, is not unique to Judaism. It is the use of numbers to demonstrate the ideas of a religion and to support the beliefs of the believers.

That Saturday morning, although the congregation was only three years old, the Holy Ark held three Torah scrolls (which are written by hand on parchment). Usually Torah scroll covers are bright and beautifully decorated. In that congregation, however, one of the Torahs had a stark black cover with only a Star of David on it. The Rabbi explained that this was a Torah scroll from Czechoslovakia, a survivor of the Holocaust. A survivor?

In the twentieth century the Nazis sought to kill all Jews. But in occupied Czechoslovakia, while destroying the Jews, they sought to preserve the ritual objects of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. They planned, after the war and the destruction of Jews and Judaism, to establish a museum of a dead race/religion. Fortunately, Prague was not badly damaged in the war, and after the defeat of the Nazis this vast collection of Judaica remained intact.

Since almost all Czech Jews had been killed, there was little active use for these materials. Instead, the objects were put on display in a permanent museum – which I had visited the year before – not as a remnant of a destroyed people, but as a tribute to the resiliency of one that still lived.

The Torahs, however, were not put on display. To Jews, Torahs are living documents. Therefore, an effort was made to restore these Torahs, many of which had been damaged, and to find for each one a “home.”

Eventually moved to London, the Torahs, over the years, were restored and sent out to synagogues throughout the world in need of one. The black Torah cover in that San Diego-area synagogue represented the darkness of the Holocaust and the color of mourning, and its sole symbol, the Star of David, represented the star that the Nazis made Jews wear to distinguish

them from non-Jews. (This was an ancient medieval practice that the Nazis resurrected.)

This was all connected to gematriya, which is, at its simplest, a kind of religious dabbling in numbers. Some would call this an occult practice, others a way of buttressing Jewish moral teachings. It turned out that the Torah in this congregation was Number 747, i.e., the 747th restored Torah that had been sent out.

The Rabbi pointed out that if you add up the numbers 7, 4, and 7, it came to 18, which in Hebrew is a holy number. Why? Well, in Judaism each letter of the alphabet has a numerical value. The numerical value of the word the number 18, *chai*, also means life, as in the familiar phrase/toast "*l'chaim*," to life (similar to "Cheers" in English or "Na Zdorov'e" in Russian).

In that congregation, the only time they used that Torah was on the occasion of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In other words, they reserved its use for those young people who were renewing their commitment to life and to Judaism, and also to make up for the many hundreds of thousands of young people who, but for the Holocaust, might themselves have renewed that covenant personally.

Upon returning home the next day, I saw a newspaper article about the first Bar Mitzvah that had taken place in Poland in twenty years, and this also had an impact. In Modesto (California) alone, a very small Jewish community, there were often 10-15 Bar or Bat Mitzvahs a year. But in Poland – which for several centuries before 1940 was the center of Jewish life; in Poland, where 3,000,000 Jews resided before 1940 and fewer than 300,000 in 1946 (after the Holocaust, and with far fewer today), the others having been killed; in Poland, where, according to that article, the average age of the small numbers of Jews who still lived there was 78 (ensuring the demise of Polish Jewry for all intents and purposes) – this was the first Bar Mitzvah in twenty years, and the young man was an American, not a Polish, Jew.

All of this – tradition, Torah, Holocaust, numerology, Poland's demise as a renowned and vibrant center of Jewish life, and the nature of historical change – demonstrated clearly once again the very connectivity, the symbiotic relationship between the history of Jews as a people (some would say a race) and Judaism

as a religion, and how at every stage the two could not really be separated. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate this.

The Approach to the Study

This is a view of the evolution and religious development of Judaism from the perspective of an historian and layman, not a theologian. In this sense it may be similar to Sherwin Nuland's book *Maimonides*, written not by a theologian or historian but a physician.¹

This work is not a scholarly monograph that blazes new ground in uncharted waters. The work freely relies on the scholarly work of others for many basic facts. It is an attempt to describe briefly how Judaism has evolved over time. It seeks to outline the key ideas, customs, and traditions of Judaism and point out their historical sources. It seeks to put Judaism into a context and to compare it mostly within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition but also, in a minor way, with other systems of thought. The author hopes that such an approach will be helpful to those who seek this kind of knowledge.

As an historian, I look at Judaism differently. Judaism, in my opinion, did not come down to us in one whole piece of cloth, as Traditional/Orthodox Jews argue. Thus, in a recent Orthodox translation and exposition of the Torah, the so-called Stone edition of the Torah and the Haftarahs, the main editor, Rabbi Nosson Scherman, begins his introduction by quoting the eighth and ninth of Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith:

8. I believe with complete faith that the entire Torah now in our hands is the same one that was given to Moses, our teacher, peace be upon him.

9. I believe with complete faith that this Torah will not be exchanged, nor will there be another Torah from the Creator, Blessed is His Name.

Rabbi Scherman continues:

These principles are essential parts of the faith of the Jew, and they are also fundamental to the way one studies the Torah. For the attitude of one who approaches a book as the immutable word of God is far, far different from that of one who holds a volume that

was composed by men and amended by others over the years...

In several of his writings, *Rambam* [Maimonides] sets forth at much greater length the unanimously held view that every letter and word of the Torah was given to Moses by God; that it has not been and cannot be changed; and that nothing was ever or can ever be added to it.²

This view of revelation was the normative Jewish approach until the rise of modernist forms of Judaism – what we today call Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist – since the 1800s. Modernist forms of Judaism questioned and question important aspects of the views that predominated for literally millennia.

As regards revelation, for instance, we see a different approach in *Etz Hayim; Torah and Commentary*, a recent translation sponsored by the Union for Conservative Judaism, the group between the traditional Orthodox and the Liberal Reform movement.³

Thus, in a series of explanatory articles at the end of *Etz Hayim* we read that some Conservative Jews believe “revelation... consists of both a divine and a human component,” while other Conservative thinkers “conceive of revelation as the human response to encounters with God.”⁴

The Conservative approach does not differ significantly from that of Reform Judaism, as reflected in *its* translation and commentary on the Torah, the so-called Plaut edition. Its editor, Gunther Plaut, argues for the Reform movement that “the Torah is a book that had its origin in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people” and “proceeds on the premise of human rather than divine authorship,” since “individual authors had a hand in its composition.”⁵

The general views of modernist forms of Judaism are similar to those developments in the secular and scholarly world of biblical criticism that emerged over the past two hundred years. Thus, Robert Alter, a scholar of biblical literature, accepts the view that

what we have, then, in the Five Books is a work assembled by many hands, reflecting several different viewpoints and representing literary activity that spanned several centuries. The redacted whole nevertheless creates some

sense of continuity and development, and it allows itself to be read as a forward-moving process through time and theme from book to book, yielding an overarching literary structure we can call, in the singular version of the title, the Torah. The Torah exhibits seams, fissures, and inner tensions that cannot be ignored, but it has also been artfully assembled through the ancient editorial process to cohere strongly as the foundational text of Israelite life and the cornerstone of the biblical canon.⁶

Perhaps the leading and most recent of these biblical scholars is Richard Elliott Friedman, to whose work we shall return later. Friedman not only argues that the various texts written over centuries were combined into one document, but he argues that the various documents – J, E, P, and D, along with two different redactors, or editors – reflected the specific theological and political views of their respective authors.⁷

These views fit in with my own approach. I see history in general, and Judaism in this case in particular, in terms of a "layer cake." Further, I do not believe that theological events occur in a vacuum; rather, they are part of the historical epoch in which they occur. In this book we shall see the evolution of Judaism into what I call "layers." Each layer, or period of historical evolution, occurred within the framework of specific (or at least perceived) historical events and, to one degree or another, in reaction to those events. Further, each layer added to what had occurred in previous layers. Thus, by the time of the completion of the Talmud, the Jewish Layer Cake was fundamentally "set," although the Hasidic Mini-Layer to be discussed below added a twist, and the Modernist Layer, the one in which we continue to live, viewed the approach to practicing Judaism – but not the fundamental belief system – differently.

One advantage of studying the historical evolution of Judaism is that from it came two religions that would ultimately dwarf Judaism in size – Christianity and Islam. I generally refer to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. Although it often seems difficult in the modern world to connect these faiths, they really have far more in common than most people are willing to believe.

In over forty years of teaching I have come to realize that

most Jews and Christians have little knowledge of the evolution and history of their own religions, and the vast majority of Jews, Christians, and Muslims do not understand the basic similarities and differences, and the degree of historical intertwining, of their respective faiths. Hence, in this work I shall attempt to compare briefly the ideas and approaches of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

We can also see some important similarities in various ways with other systems of thought, such as Hinduism, which was a religion from the beginning, and Buddhism and Confucianism, both of which started out as secular systems of thought but only one of which, Buddhism, became a religion after the Buddha's death.

For me, placing Judaism within the larger spectrum of religious and secular systems of thought is not difficult. To me, most systems of thought – religious and secular – seek the same goal, which is to get people to live a proper life and to survive the difficulties of this life by adhering to rules and standards. Systems of thought also have to deal with the inevitability of our own death. Some systems of thought do this by holding out the promise of heaven or the threat of hell. Secular systems of thought expect people to behave properly without the reward-punishment nexus. From my perspective, it is not that one particular system of thought is better than another (although its proponents generally believe that is the case), but that each is different and has its own approach.

What are the Layers?

I see these layers, in general terms, as follows: the Patriarchal Layer (ca. 2000-1400 BCE), the Mosaic Layer (ca. 1400-1200 BCE), the Kingly Layer (ca. 1100-900 BCE), the Prophetic Layer (ca. 900-400 BCE), the Babylonian Layer (ca. 600-400 BCE), the Biblical Layer (?-perhaps 100 CE), the Talmudic Layer (ca. 200-600 CE, with its Hasidic Mini-Layer after about 1650), and the Modernist Layer (since the 1800s). It was the rise of the Modernist Layer when, for the first time, there was, from my perspective, a fundamental rift in Judaism.

All systems of thought – secular or religious – evolve over time. Buddhism, which started out as a secular system of thought,

evolved into a religion upon the Buddha's death and then split within a few decades into what remain its major divisions today, Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

Christianity also evolved and split. Some would say the first fundamental and long-lasting split occurred between the Eastern and Western churches, what we today call Orthodox and Catholic forms of Christianity, by the late Middle Ages. To me, however, Orthodox and Roman Christianity have much more in common with each other than either has with what, to me, was *the* first major split in Christianity, i.e., the Protestant Reformation that began in the 1500s.

Islam, today the world's second largest religion, split into its two main branches – Sunni and Shi'ia – within decades of Muhammad's death in 632 AD. That split remains and in many ways has intensified and become more bitter in the modern world.

Judaism also split. However, the split in Judaism differed and differs in two ways from those in Islam and Christianity. First, the split into what are today the major components of Judaism – Traditional/Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform – came significantly later, i.e., 2,000-3,000 years after the religion began (depending upon one's starting date). Second, whereas for centuries after the split Catholic and Protestant Christians sought, if they could not get their fellow Christians to accept *their* form of Christianity, to annihilate each other physically, and whereas Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims continue to do so today, Judaism's component groups, while occasionally railing against each other, seldom sought or seek to eliminate, i.e., kill, members of other branches of Judaism.

Finally, we shall see that in each period, or layer, there were both specific historical developments and specific religious elements that were added to and became important components of what would eventually become the layer cake of Judaism, i.e., the completed, or more fully developed, religion.

The Historical Nature of Judaism

It is appropriate to study Judaism within an historical framework because it is an extremely historical religion, and this in a number of ways for our purpose.

First, it is historical because its major events and holi/holy days revolve around concrete historical events. In the words of the late Salo Baron (1895-1989), a, if not the leading historian of Judaism in the twentieth century,

...the Jewish religion has been from the very beginning and in the progress of time has increasingly become an *historical* religion, in permanent contrast to all *natural* religions...From the onset the historical element was so predominant in the religious ideas of the Jewish people that historical (or historico-ethical) monotheism may be regarded as the essential contribution of Israel's religion to the history of human creeds.

Many examples may be cited. It is well known, for instance, that the ancient Israelitic festivals were taken over from the earlier oriental cultures of Canaan and Babylonia. But in each case ancient Judaism changed the fundamental meaning of the festival first by adding to it, then by substituting for its natural an historical interpretation...Passover, the ancient spring festival, became and remained the festival of the Exodus from Egypt...Pentecost, still the 'day of the first fruits' in the Old Testament, was transformed by the early Pharisees into a memorial chiefly of the giving of the Torah... New Year's Day is essentially a memento of the world's creation.

...The exclusively historical sanctions attached during the Second Commonwealth to Hanukkah and Purim (the deliverance from Syrian oppression and the schemes of Haman) have so thoroughly succeeded in obscuring the original natural background of these ancient oriental holidays that modern scholars have experienced great difficulty in their attempts at identification. Even the Jewish Sabbath, whose main origin is in Babylonian astronomy...received quite a novel and profound sanctification by virtue of its connection with the beginning of all history - the day chosen by God for rest after his labors of creation. Nowhere else, except in Judaism and its daughter religion, has the Sabbath received this character of holy and absolute rest.⁸

We can reinforce this by looking at the fourth commandment in its two renderings in the Bible. In Exodus the fourth commandments reads: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and He rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." In Deuteronomy the wording is basically similar, but there is an additional and even more historical justification: "And you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."⁹

Likewise, the only two new Jewish holi/holy days that have arisen in the last century commemorate concrete, twentieth century, historical events. One is Yom Hashoah, or Holocaust Day, to commemorate the massacre of 6,000,000 Jews by the Nazis between 1934 and 1945. The other is Yom Atzmaut, or Israeli Independence Day, to commemorate the rise in 1948 of the first Jewish political state in the Middle East in about 2,000 years.

This in itself represents somewhat of an historical anomaly, or miracle if you wish. If one thinks about the major religions of the world, basically those survived which had a majority of the population in a given geographical region and maintained that situation. Judaism alone of the great religions survived without a state for which it was the official religion, and this between the first and twentieth centuries. Indeed, living without a state in which they were the majority of the population, i.e., the concept of extraterritoriality - *an historical situation* - impacted Jewish thought and lifestyle, as we shall see.

Finally from an historical perspective, it is necessary to point out that we have far less primary source material on the early evolution of Judaism than the historian would like, especially for the first layers to which we shall soon turn.

"Is it so and, if so, so what?"

Early in my career I had a brilliant (but quirky) colleague who, at every faculty colloquium when a faculty member would make a presentation would ask, in practically these words, "Is it

so and, if so, so what?" Decades later, I appreciate his remarks more than I did when he asked me that question on whatever it was I was presenting. (I don't remember the topic, but I've never forgotten the question!)

It seems fair to me to ask this question about this study. This is because, especially in dealing with the earliest layers, we cannot know for sure how the historical events "played out."

After all, even in Christianity, where we are dealing with a certain historical person (Jesus), in a time period when we have much more knowledge of overall events, there is great debate on important elements of the faith. Thus, there is debate as to whether Jesus proclaimed himself the messiah or whether, after his death, his followers claimed this. Likewise, a group of (liberal) Christian theologians, the so-called Jesus Seminar, believes that many of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels (which were, after all, written long after Jesus) were either not said by Jesus or were said differently.

If this is the case with Christianity, what can we say about Judaism (or Hinduism), a religion whose origins go back much earlier in time, perhaps to as early as 2000 BC? Especially in dealing with the earliest and most formative periods of Jewish history, we cannot be certain of what occurred, which is why, earlier, I used the phrase "perceived" historical events. Was there really an Abraham, or Moses? Was there really an Exodus from Egypt? Is Judaism as old as many say it is? If scholars cannot agree on the exact words of Jesus, what are we to say about the exact words and actions attributed to the Patriarchs Moses, Aaron, and others in the Jewish Torah, in which the time span between the alleged events and writing them down was much greater than the period between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the Gospels?

In fact, there are many things about which we cannot be certain. The late eminent British historian of science, and especially medical science, Roy Porter (1946-2002), once wrote that "The historical record is like the night sky: we see a few stars and group them into mythic constellations. But what is chiefly visible is the darkness."¹⁰

Hence, we cannot be sure that we are exactly correct in all the details and that, in fact, "it is so."

That leads to the second part of the question, "so what?" It seems to me that in discussing religions in general, we can take two (or more approaches). One is that of the traditionalist, or, if one wishes, the fundamentalist. These are people who believe that every word found in scripture is sacrosanct, and that not a single brick can be taken from the edifice without undermining the entire structure.

The other, or another, view, and one to which I adhere, is that what is important is not every brick, but the overall edifice. Whether every word or event found in the Jewish Bible/Old Testament is what people actually said or what happened, whether every word and miracle attributed to Jesus in the New Testament is accurate is less important to me than the overall message of that system of thought. It is, it seems to me, the totality of the system's beliefs that bind people to that system over time, and the purpose of which is to help people lead good lives. If the edifice is strong, removing a brick or two should not undermine the edifice as a whole. If it does, the edifice was probably not very strong to begin with.

In that sense, whether every event in (early) Jewish history occurred as traditionalists believe is less important than what eventually emerged, whether, from a traditional viewpoint, it all came from God and was given to the Jews at Mt. Sinai or whether the system evolved over a long and complicated period of time, in what I call layers.

Chapters versus Appendixes

This work is primarily about the evolution of Judaism through what I describe as layers. The last layer to date is the "modernist" layer, and the main text ends there. However, it is difficult to understand the evolution of Judaism and the history of the Jews without a brief explanation of anti-Semitism, which has existed for a very long time, and Zionism, which is relatively new. Neither of these phenomena, however, is an intricate part of any of the layers. Therefore, I discuss them as appendixes at the end of the text because I believe they will give the reader a better overall picture of the subject.

(Jewish) Dating

Why have we been using BCE and CE to designate the dates of the various layers? Well, dating systems also reflect historical developments. The world today tends to use BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini, Latin for "the Year of Our Lord") for two reasons. First, Christianity came to dominate Western Civilization in the centuries after Jesus and is today the largest religion in what we refer to as Western Civilization (and the world). The second reason is that after about 1500 Western Civilization increasingly dominated and ruled much of the *rest* of the world, during which time it surpassed Islam as the religion with the most followers.

One might notice that AD is in Latin and BC in English. That is because the language of the early Church was Latin (or, in the East, Greek). But the early Church, believing that everything important in history really began with Jesus, was uninterested in events *before* Jesus' birth (because they were all pagans) and therefore had no Latin designation for the earlier period. Obviously, BC - Before Christ - came much later.

Other civilizations and religions, however, had and have their own, and different, systems of dating. Thus, the Chinese calendar goes back to approximately 2600 BC. Hence, that calendar is now in the early 4700s. The Muslim calendar dates from Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina (the Hegira) in 632. Hence, to get the correct year in Islam one needs to subtract from the current Western year (i.e., now in the 2000s) 632.

By Jewish calculations, the world is now, as the author writes, in the 5770s. Almost all Jewish calendars have both the Jewish and the secular (or, if you wish, Christian) year. Thus the Jewish year 5771 coincides with the year 2011.

When Jewish scholars in the nineteenth century began the modern study of Judaism, it made no sense to them to designate *Jewish* events with *Christian* dating, and this for a few reasons. First, why should studies of Judaism force themselves into a non-Jewish system of dating? Second, this was especially the case because so much that was important in Judaism and its history occurred long before Christianity even existed. Hence, as alternatives to BC and AD they came up with BCE, Before the Common Era, and CE, or the Common Era. (Of course, the

distinction between BCE and CE was still the Christian system of dating, based on the life of Jesus!) In this work I shall generally try to use BCE/CE when dealing with specifically Jewish subjects and BC/AD when discussing other things.

We may now proceed to the layers.

End Notes

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3. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001). Hereafter cited as *Etz Hayim*.
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5. *The Torah; A Modern Commentary* rev. ed., General Editor W. Gunther Plaut (New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2006), xxxvii. Originally published in 1981.
6. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses; A Translation with Commentary* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), xvi.
7. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit Books of Simon & Schuster, 1987), *passim*. My citations will be to the 1997 Harper Collins edition. Biblical Criticism long ago established that the Torah was comprised of different documents written by different individuals and at different times. Friedman's research, however, has gone much deeper in terms of cementing these views and identifying the possible authors and their motivation.
8. Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (2d. ed., 18 vols., New York, London, and Philadelphia: Columbia University Press and the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952-1983), I: 4-6.
9. Exodus, 20-8-11 and Deuteronomy, 4:15.
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Chapter One

The Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Kingly Layers

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.**

The Patriarchal Layer (ca. 2000-1400 BCE)

Introduction

By layers, again, I mean the process of evolution through which the religion developed into its modern form.

We must again realize that this expression is itself unacceptable to the Traditional/Orthodox Jew, for whom the entire religion was handed down to Moses – both in its written form, the Torah/Five Books of Moses, and its oral form, what later became known as the Talmud – at Mt. Sinai.

We must also remember, on the other hand, that both a modernist interpretation and modern scholarly interpretations are that Judaism did, indeed, evolve over time, or stages, or layers, and that each layer contributed something new and additional, to the final “layer cake” of Judaism, which was essentially intact between 1,500 and 2,000 years ago.

With each of the layers I shall first briefly go over the historical

*Anthropologist Margaret Mead, 1901-1978

context. Then I shall briefly describe what evolved, or was/is believed/perceived to have evolved, during that period.

History

The historical period of the Patriarchal Layer is one of two (along with the Mosaic Layer) about which information is least full and verifiable in important ways. Yet, clearly, it is impossible to ignore the formative period of any religion.

The question is: are the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah – and their families true? Can we believe them, or were they stories that other people made up at a much later date?

This is an old debate. Many biblical archaeologists believe that the *general* story line and course of events that the Torah outlines are essentially correct. According to William Albright (1891-1971), the son of a Protestant minister and perhaps the most famous biblical archaeologist of the mid-20th century,

there is scarcely a single biblical historian who has not been impressed by the rapid accumulation of data supporting the substantial historicity of patriarchal tradition... It is...uncertain to what extent we can adopt the traditional order of events or the precise motivation attributed to them...But as a whole the picture in Genesis is historical, and there is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the biographical details and the sketches of personality which make the Patriarchs come alive with a vividness unknown to a single extrabiblical character in the whole vast literature of the ancient Near East.¹

If Albright represents one firm interpretation, i.e., that the story is generally accurate, there are others at the other end, the so-called Biblical Minimalists, who argue, for example, that "it is now evident that many events of biblical history did not take place in either the particular era or the manner described. Some of the most famous events in the Bible clearly never happened at all."²

In the view of Biblical Minimalists such as Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman, the patriarchal stories are just that – stories. They argue that "there is no recognizable archaeological evidence of Israelite presence in Egypt" before the alleged

Exodus, that "the evidence for a historical conquest of Canaan by the Israelites is...weak," that "the book of Joshua is a classic literary expression of the yearnings and fantasies of a people at a certain time and place," that there was no golden age under David and Solomon, since "the most optimistic assessment... is that tenth century Jerusalem was rather limited in extent, perhaps not more than a typical hill country village," so that "archaeologically we can say no more about David and Solomon except that they existed - and that their legend endured."³

The truth is probably somewhere between these two extremes, and we can make certain suggestions. Even if we accept the view that the Five Books of Moses as we know them were not written down until the 700s and 600s BCE, and even if we accept the view that the entire Torah was finalized only during the Babylonian Captivity or shortly after the return to Judah, that does not mean that nothing occurred before then. Many traditions and stories are handed down for many generations before they are written down. Thus, the late formal writing of the Torah does not necessarily detract from the general correctness of the stories and traditions that generations had handed down.

Further, systems of thought do not arise in a vacuum, or without people. Someone *had* to be the first Jew, i.e., a person who believed in certain ideas that differed from those that had dominated earlier. Thus, even if there was no Abraham, there had to be *someone* who moved from the old beliefs to what would become new beliefs. Thus, even if there was no Abraham, there must have been someone who did what Jews (and Christians and Muslims) attribute to Abraham.

Finally, the minimalist view is less than historically satisfactory in that it fails to address, really, what clearly was a different approach to faith, one that we generally associate with the Patriarchal Age and the family of Abraham.

But why do we use the dates 2000 to 1400 BCE to define the Patriarchal Layer? In part because the city of Ur, from which Abraham allegedly came, was at its prime in the period around and shortly after 2000 BCE. In addition, the lineage given in the Bible would place Abraham in that period.

The origins of Abraham - Abram before his name change - are somewhat confusing historically. We first read of Abram in

Genesis 11:27, where he is introduced as the son of Terah, born in "Ur of the Chaldees," or the Chaldeans. They then go, according to the story, from "Ur of the Chaldees...to the land of Canaan," stopping first in Haran.

What are the issues here? One is why someone from a city – Ur – moves and becomes a shepherd. Another is the term "Ur of the Chaldees." And a third has to do with the relationship of Ur and Haran.

There is no question but that Ur was a city/town in southern Mesopotamia (Greek for the land between the two rivers, i.e., the Tigris and the Euphrates). Ur had been founded by non-Semitic peoples before 3000 BC. Sumerian civilization, centered around cities such as Ur, Nippur, Lagesh, and others, was one of the early great civilizations, developing cuneiform, one of the first forms of writing. In time Semitic peoples entered the area. Indeed, the Akkadians, a Semitic people who occupied the northern part of Mesopotamia, eventually conquered Sumer. This area was also known as Babylonia. Ur, therefore, was an important place.

But it could not have been "Ur of the Chaldees," because the Chaldeans did not arise until much later. Indeed, the first use of the term Chaldeans appears to date from about 880 BCE, although they might have been around before then. It could be that when the Torah was finally written down, in a time when the Chaldeans did exist, that the author(s) presumed that the Chaldeans went farther back in time.

It is also possible that the Ur in Genesis refers to a city of that name farther north in Mesopotamia, perhaps settled by people from Ur in the south and named after that original Ur. This might be plausible because the Haran to which Abram went was much closer to northern Mesopotamia than it was to the original Ur in the south.

Finally, most people prefer the amenities of "city life" to a rural, pastoral, nomadic life of being a shepherd. Yet, according to the story, this is what Abram did, at the behest of God. And with this story Genesis moved from myth toward history, i.e., the beginning of the Hebrew/Jewish people.

As to the closing date of 1400 BCE, it is because we then approach what is also a controversial period, that of the sojourn

of the Jews in Egypt and their acquisition of freedom during the Exodus.

What occurred in this period, or at some point in time, was a very different view of religion, one that was and remains at the base of the entire Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. What were these ideas and changes?

Religious Contributions of the Patriarchal Period

The religions of the ancient Near East were polytheistic and natural. In other words, people worshipped many gods and the gods were gods of nature – the sun, moon, water, etc.

Hence, the first major change, and what lies at the base of Judaism (and Christianity and Islam) was the concept of worshipping only one god, i.e., *monotheism*. Monotheism is at the very center of Judaism: without monotheism, Judaism isn't Judaism. This view was very different not only with the earlier religions of the Middle East, but also from Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, and even the religion of the Greeks and Romans, all of which were polytheistic.

Judaism is a religion in which almost everything can be disputed and debated, but not the concept of monotheism. It is possible to be a Jewish agnostic and to question whether or not God exists. But to deny the existence of God is to be something other than Jewish. Thus, monotheism is at the heart of the Jewish religion. These earliest of Jews worshipped only one god.

We shall see that there is some speculation as to whether Judaism at this stage was *fully* monotheistic or not, but it is clear that whatever form of monotheism it was, it was a step away from the polytheism that dominated religion at that time. (There is no question but that the Hebrews worshipped only their one god. The question is whether or not they were willing to accept that other peoples had their own, and different, gods. We shall return to this when we discuss the Prophetic Layer.)

A second major contribution of the Patriarchal Layer was the concept of a *spirit* as opposed to a *natural* god. The god of the Jews was not the sun, moon, earth, water, or some other physical object. Rather, the Jewish god was a spirit god. This,

too, was different from contemporary religions, and this has also remained central to Judaism ever since.

It is possible that a third contribution of the Patriarchal Layer was the *changed concept of sacrifice*. We must remember that human sacrifice was another aspect of the religions of the ancient world. Jews kept the Middle Eastern concept of sacrifice, but they changed it from sacrificing human beings to sacrificing animals.

In Judaism this idea comes straight from the story in Genesis of the binding of Isaac. God orders Abraham to "Take your son, your favored son [or in some translations, "only," although Abraham has another son, Ishmael, with Hagar], Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you" (Genesis, 22: 2).

This is a succinct and interesting story. For one thing, Abraham, who had pleaded so eloquently on behalf of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, whom he does not know, does not argue with God on behalf of his own son's life but simply does as he is told. Further, Isaac himself does not seem to complain.

Some have interpreted this story as demonstrating that Jews were so zealous for their God that a father would even murder his son. This would later make it possible in the Christian Middle Ages for people to believe that Jews would kill a Christian before Passover to secure the blood of a Christian to prepare *matzo*hs (unleavened bread) needed in the Passover *seder* (or service) and during the entire eight-day holiday.

But this is a *Jewish* story, written *by* Jews, *about* Jews, and *for* Jews. In the Jewish view this is a *moral* story; i.e., the patriarch was prepared to go the distance to show his devotion to God, who simply wanted to test Abraham, and who values life above death and chooses, instead, a ram for the sacrifice.

(We may also look at this in a more light-hearted, sociological-parental vein. A colleague of mine with whom I drove to work for many years and who taught our course in the history of Christianity once surmised that, since Isaac was at that time a teenager, and since teenagers sometimes drive their parents "nuts," perhaps, indeed, Abraham *was*, at least allegorically, ready to kill his son!)

This development also demonstrates a number of things about the evolution of Judaism. It demonstrates, first, that Judaism was in the Middle Eastern mainstream in maintaining the *concept* of sacrifice. But Judaism made two fundamental changes within that general idea. First, Judaism changed from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice, and this type of animal sacrifice would later be the central part of the services in both Temples in Jerusalem.

Second, Judaism changed the *reason* for sacrifice. If one thinks of Mesopotamian religion, people sacrificed out of fear, the fear that the gods would do something terrible to them. In Judaism, however, the idea of sacrifice is positive, i.e., to thank God for what God has given to the Jewish people.

Thus, while keeping an old Middle Eastern religious idea – sacrifice – Judaism changed it in fundamental and important ways.

(We can see this also with the idea of circumcision, another ancient Middle Eastern custom and one with which the story of Abraham also deals. According to Genesis, Abraham was ninety-nine when Sarah bore Isaac [Gen. 17:24]. And God, so the story goes, ordered Abraham to circumcise Isaac as a sign of the covenant between God and the Hebrews. Abraham had Ishmael, Isaac's older brother (by Hagar) circumcised at the same time.

Circumcision was an ancient Middle Eastern custom. However, it was a rite that accompanied the arrival of male puberty, thus making it a sexual rite of passage. Judaism changed this ancient custom. By moving it from the age of puberty to the eighth day, Judaism removed the sexual connotation of circumcision, and transformed the ceremony from a sexual one into a religious rite that signifies and continues the covenant between God and the Hebrew people. And it is interesting that at the time they circumcised Isaac at eight days, Ishmael was 13 [Gen. 17:25], i.e., the traditional age for circumcision in the ancient Middle East.)

We should point out that while it is possible to consider this changed view of sacrifice as coming from the Patriarchal Age, it might have come, instead, from the layer to which we now turn, the Mosaic Layer.

The Mosaic Layer (ca. 1400-1200 BCE)

History

There are some important questions for the historian in dealing with this period, which is just as "fuzzy" as the preceding Patriarchal Layer. Did the Hebrews, or some of them, go down into Egypt? Were the Hebrews enslaved? Was there an Exodus? If there was an Exodus, when did it occur? How many Hebrews left Egypt? Was Moses an historical person or a figment of later imagination? Could Moses have done everything which is attributed to him?

On the one hand there are those who deny the entire set of stories that the biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers outline. Others argue that what the Bible outlines is what actually happened. As is often the case, the truth is probably somewhere between the extremes. And beside the collective memory of the people, there are elements of the story that would seem to indicate at least the possibility that these events occurred.

In terms of Egyptian history, the Middle Kingdom lasted from 2080 to 1640 BC. After the Middle Kingdom came the so-called Second Intermediate Period (1640-1750), which coincided with foreign rule over Egypt. The people who controlled Egypt were western Semites known as the Hyksos. Some believe the Hyksos controlled Egypt between 1800 and 1700 BC, others a bit later (i.e., during the Second Intermediate period). Indeed, the names of sixteenth- and fifteenth-century BC dynasties indicate that they were of Hyksos origin. The Hyksos appear to have set up their headquarters in the Nile Delta, i.e., the area of Goshen in the Bible.

The Hyksos must have been a small minority in the large Egyptian state. Thus, to help them rule, it is not inconceivable that they might have welcomed other Semitic people or peoples, such as the Hebrews, to come to Egypt, settle there, and help them administer the state.

We should remember a few other things. One is that there is reason to believe that not all the Hebrews, i.e., descendants of Abraham, migrated to Egypt; a certain number, perhaps a

substantial number, remained in Palestine. Also, it is clear that the Hebrews who did go to Egypt maintained contact with those who remained behind. Biblical stories tell us of these contacts. Also, upon the return to Canaan the tribes who remained seemed to have worked with the returnees quite easily, indicating an historical linkage, including religious. It is possible, therefore, that some of Abraham's descendants might well have settled in Egypt.

Given these circumstances, it is possible that a Hebrew Semite such as Joseph might have risen to the level of power that the Bible indicates. It is also possible that once the Egyptians rose up and overthrew the Hyksos, they might well have enslaved their former Semitic masters.

If there was an Exodus, when and how did it occur, and how many people did it involve? Many questions remain unclear.⁴

Part of the debate concerns the length of the stay of the Hebrews in Egypt. Genesis 15:13 says it was 400 years and Exodus 12:40 says it was 430 years. But 430 or 400 years from when? If one assumes that the migrations of the Hebrews into Egypt did not occur all at one time, there is a potential problem.

One version is that the Exodus occurred in the period 1450-1430 BCE. This comes from Kings 6:1, which states that 480 years elapsed from the time of the Exodus to the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Now Solomon ruled the second third of the tenth century BCE, so it would be in the 1450-1430 window. This early date seems confirmed by Judges 11:26, which states that 300 years elapsed from the time of the Israelite entry into Canaan to the time of the Judge Jephthah, who was a judge in the second half of the twelfth century BCE.

Most scholars, though, doubt this early date for several reasons. For one, it simply does not seem to conform to Israelite, Egyptian, or Canaanite history. Thus, at that early date Egypt was too strong for the Hebrews to have revolted successfully against them. Likewise, Canaan seems to have been too strong for the Hebrews to have conquered it even if they *had* gotten out of Egypt. The Bible says that during the Exodus the Hebrews encountered such peoples as the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites. The archaeological work of Nelson Glueck showed that at the earlier date Transjordan was uninhabited, but that

only later did these tribes settle there. Hence, the earlier date would seem to contradict the biblical story in an important respect.

Most scholars date the Exodus from the thirteenth century BCE, perhaps around 1270 BCE, the reign of the Pharaoh of Oppression, Ramses the Great (1292-1225 BCE?). They argue that the numbering in Kings is symbolic, and that if you take the twelve generations and assign to them an average of twenty-five years instead of forty – which is more realistic – that you come up with 300 years, plus 975 for Solomon's Temple, and, voila, 1270 BCE! This also seems to fit in with the historical hypothesis that Jacob probably arrived with the Hyksos, around 1700. Thus, 400-430 years would get us into the 1200s.

Finally, the later date fits in with archaeological finds that many settlements were destroyed in the course of the last third of the thirteenth century (the 1200s) in Canaan, and this might well have been connected with the conquest of the land by the returning Hebrews.

What about the numbers of people involved in the Exodus? This clearly seems to me to be an inflated and inaccurate figure. The census figures are 603,550 and 601,730 (Numbers 1:46 and Numbers 26:51). These figures are themselves large for a people alleged to have wandered in the desert for forty years. But this is a figure that is, in reality, and contrary to the accepted figure of just over 600,000 in the Bible, much too low. This is because the figure of about 600,000 represents not *all* the Israelites but of "every male from twenty years old and upward, all that were able to go forth to war" (Numbers 1:20). Hence, it excludes all women – probably half of the population, not to mention all children/youth under the age of twenty, all men too old to fight, and the entire tribe of Levi. If we presume that the number of women was equal to or greater than the men, that would give us another 600,000 or more. One would presume that those under twenty or too old to fight must have represented, let us say, 20% of the population. Hence, it seems likely that the total number of Israelites would probably have been at least 1,500,000. Very frankly, I do not think so many people could have survived in the desert for forty years. But that is my opinion.

Finally we come to the central figure of Moses, the leading

figure in all of Jewish history. Moses, according to tradition, was the first religious teacher and issuer of the Torah, the leader of the Jews to freedom, and the first great prophet. But, was there really a Moses, what did he do, and how unique were his religious contributions as opposed to the possibility that he borrowed from others?

From an historical standpoint, we are devoid of complete, perhaps even adequate information. Almost all our information comes from the Bible. We can say, for instance, that the story of the castaway in the water is unlikely, since the same story appears in the birth stories of Sargon of Akkad and Cyrus of Persia, and an Egyptian myth tells of the concealment of the infant god Horus by his mother among the reeds to protect him.

On the other hand, the part of the story dealing with Egyptian rearing is more possible. Thus, the name of Moses probably came from an Egyptian name such as Ptah-mose. Likewise, the names of other Levites – Phinehas, Merari, Hophni, and perhaps even Aaron and Miriam – are of Egyptian derivation.

Could one person, Moses, have done everything that the Bible and tradition attributes to him? Well, yes. Thus, for instance, Muhammad did everything for Islam, and his historicity is not in doubt. Founders and creators of systems can indeed change the course of history. Thus, it is not inconceivable that a person such as Moses might, indeed, have done all the things we read about in the Bible.

Did Moses borrow some of his ideas? The idea that Moses was not original comes from ideas associated with the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton/Ikhnaton (1375-1360 BCE).

Traditional Egyptian religion was polytheistic but centered around the god Amun, at Thebes. Ikhnaton broke with this and replaced it with a type of solar monotheism centered around the solar disk Aten. Even Albright argues that "it is probable that there is some indirect connection" between Ikhnaton and Moses. He points to the idea of monotheism, the emphasis on teaching, and the stress on one God as creator of all.⁵

But there are clear problems. Thus, Ikhnaton's religious view was actually polytheistic, since Ikhnaton was *himself* a god, so that there were *two* gods, the sun disk and he. Second,