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Steve Singleton

What's the origin of Judaism, according to the Bible?

Part II: Formative events

The origin of Judaism is largely dependent on a few significant historical events, which would certainly include the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the United Kingdom, and the Babylonian exile. We will briefly look at each in turn.

The call of Abraham – The LORD called Abram to leave his country and family for a place the LORD would show him (Gen. 12:1-4; Acts 7:1-4). After the death of his father Terah, Abram set out from Haran in what is now southeastern Turkey and traveled to Canaan (now in Israel).

Over the next 25 years, after starting out on that journey, Abram learned and responded to the faithfulness of God. Sarai was still childless and well beyond the child-bearing years, yet the LORD promised not only that Abram would have an heir, but that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:4-5).

Despite the physical obstacles, Scripture states that Abram "believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). This trust Abram had in the LORD, this unwavering loyalty, became the model for all believers in the LORD who were to follow. Abram became known as the "friend of God" (2 Chron. 20:7; James 2:23) and the "father of the faithful" (Gal. 3:6-9).

The LORD entered into covenant with him, marking the changed relationship by the sign of circumcision as well as by changing Abram's name to Abraham and his wife's name to Sarah (Gen. 17).

God blessed him with wealth and finally with Isaac, the "son of promise." Abraham also received God's promise of land, though during his lifetime, the only real estate he owned was the burial site he purchased at Hebron, the cave of Machpelah.

Isaac, Abraham's heir, continued the semi-nomadic lifestyle of his father and renewed his father's covenant with the LORD. His son, Jacob, or Israel, established the family of 12 sons whose descendants became known as "the twelve tribes of Israel."

The clan becomes a nation – Because of a drought in Canaan, Jacob's entire family moved to the delta region of Egypt, where they stayed for the next 400 years (Gen. 38-50). During this time, the extended family of 70 became a great nation of some 3 million. This is summarized in Deut. 26:5–7:

Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me."

Under the leadership of Moses and Aaron, and by the miraculous intervention of the LORD in the 10 plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites broke free of the slavery they had endured during the final generation of the 400-year period in Egypt (see Exod. 1-15).

The Israelites assembled around Mt. Sinai, where they witnessed the awesome glory of the LORD and entered into covenant with Him who is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Exod. 19 - 24).

The covenant document, inscribed on two stone tablets, is now known as "The Ten Commandments" (Exod. 31:18; 34:1-32). Much of the rest of the Law of Moses is an explanation of these ten principles as they apply in the daily life of the nation.

David and the United Kingdom – For another extended period, after the Israelites entered into and mostly conquered Canaan under Joshua (recorded in Joshua), the 12 tribes remained a loose confederation united mainly by their shared covenant with the LORD. The leadership exercised by what English Bibles have traditionally called "Judges" was sometimes both spiritual and military, sometimes only one or the other, and seldom involved the entire nation (see the Book of Judges).

Toward the end of the ministry of the prophet Samuel, the last of these "judges," the nation demanded a king to lead them, ignoring the aged prophet's warnings of the dire consequences of rebelling against the kingship of God Himself (1 Sam. 8). Under God's direction, Samuel anointed Saul as the nation's first king. After a good beginning, Saul's position and power corrupted him to the point that he flagrantly disobeyed the LORD's direct orders and received from Samuel the LORD's rebuke and rejection (see 1 Sam. 9:1 - 13:14).

Saul's successor, David, did the most to unite the nation, winning victories over all of its enemies in the bordering nations, and extending the territory of the country to include all of the lands God promised to Abraham (1 Chron. 22:18-19). David also

led the nation to a renewal of its worship of the LORD. He set a wonderful example of personal devotion to God (see 2 Sam. 6:1-15; 7:1-29; 22:1 - 23:7; 1 Chron. 29:10-22), despite his dreadful sins (2 Sam. 11 - 20; 24:1-25; 1 Chron. 21:1-28), wrote much of the nation's hymnbook (the Psalms), and prepared the way for a national sanctuary, the temple his son Solomon built that stood for nearly 400 years (1 Sam. 22 - 26; 28 - 29; 1 Chron. 23 - 29).

Ever after, the people looked back to the reign's of David and Solomon as Israel's golden age. They looked forward to the time when the Son of David would arise and restore the nation to its former glory (see Ps. 118:50; Isa. 9:2-7; Ezek. 34:23-24).

Exile in Babylonia – After the death of Solomon, the nation divided, with Judah ruled by Solomon's son Rehoboam and Israel (most of the other tribes) ruled by Jeroboam. Jeroboam led Israel into a perverted worship of the LORD that involved an unauthorized priesthood, different feast days, and official shrines at the northern and southern extremities of the nation, featuring idols resembling calves. Despite the rebukes of prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Jonah, Israel continued in its rebellion against the LORD until the Assyrians destroyed its capital in 721 BCE and carried off many of its citizens into an exile from which they never officially returned.

David's dynasty, meanwhile, continued to rule Judah, though often ruthlessly and wickedly. Although God was very patient with David's line, He did permit the Assyrians under Sennacherib to punish them severely (701 BCE), conquering all of the cities of Judah except Jerusalem (see 2 Kings; 2 Chron.; Isa. 36-39). The deliverance Jerusalem experienced at that time created a spiritual revival under the leadership of the prophets Micah and Isaiah and their patron, King Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's son Manasseh, however, was very wicked and led the nation away from the LORD. Of the kings that followed, only Josiah was devoted to God. The nation slid into apostasy to the point that God, through the prophet Jeremiah, announced that its destruction was unavoidable. The Babylonians, successors to the Assyrians in imperial power, became the overlord of Judah. They removed the upper class of the nation to Babylon in 605 BCE and again in 597. Ezekiel, Daniel, and Daniel's three friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (better known by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) became exiles at this time.

Because Judah renewed her rebellion against the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful ruler laid siege to Jerusalem and conquered her in 586 BCE, taking another group of Israelites back to Babylon.

The fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE marked the end of the First Temple, the one Solomon had built in about 920. For the first time in more than 300 years, the Israelites could not offer sacrifices or worship at the temple in Jerusalem. It was during this period of the Babylonian Exile that their local assemblies, or "synagogues" (from a Greek word that means "come together") became important.

Even after the return from exile and rebuilding of the temple became possible after the Babylonians fell to the Medo-Persian empire (539-516 BCE), the synagogues remained a vital component of Judaism. Not only did the synagogue become a place for the Jews to worship and read the Scriptures, but it was also their school, their civil court, their social assistance center, and their community center.

By the First Century CE, the synagogue was a long-established institution, as demonstrated in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. Jesus and Paul both used synagogue as a center for religious instruction (see Luke 4: 15-30 and Acts 13: 14-48). They understood Christ's church to be the synagogue perfected, reaching its ultimate fulfillment in magnifying God, submitting to Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and in its acceptance of Gentile believers, finally realizing the promise God made to Abraham, "In your offspring, all the nations of the world will be blessed."

Of course, those who rejected Jesus as the Messiah rejected His followers also, and eventually excluded them from their synagogues. This process accelerated after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 CE, this time by Roman legions under Titus. The Jewish Christians, who refused to participate in the Jewish rebellion against Rome, were regarded as not only apostate because of their allegiance to Jesus, but also disloyal to the nation.

As a result, Christianity and Judaism divided, and only in very recent times has anyone made much of an effort to bring them back together again in the Messianic Jews movement.

Want to dive deeper?

1999 Blackaby, Henry T. *Created to be God's Friend: How God shapes those He loves*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson. (Lessons based on the life of Abraham).

1981 Bright, John. *A History of Israel*. 3d ed. Philadelphia: Westminster. The Patriarchs: 87-103; Rise of the synagogue: 436-438.

1982 LaSor, W. S.; Hubbard, D. A.; and Bush, F. W. *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. (The Patriarchs: 88-116; the Exodus and the Law of Moses: 117-189; United kingdom: 227-257; Babylonian exile and post-exile: 403-430; 461-506; 638-658)

"Thirsting for God": Silas—Paul's Second Fiddle



Silas, Paul's second fiddle

Once, when New York Philharmonic conductor Leonard Bernstein was asked what is the instrument in the orchestra most difficult to play, he replied, "Second fiddle." How hard it must be to play consistently in the concert master's shadow! Silas was Paul's second fiddle throughout the second and third missionary journeys.

Silas is an enigmatic biblical figure. He must have been outstanding, for the leaders of Jerusalem appointed him to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch after the conference on circumcision. Luke (the author of Acts) says he was a prophet, and upon arriving in

Antioch, he "said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers" (Acts 15:32).

In Acts 16 – 18, Silas becomes a major character in the drama, joining Paul on his second missionary journey, staying behind in Macedonia to wet-nurse the spiritual babies Paul was forced to leave too soon. After that, Silas mysteriously slips out of sight. Luke never mentions him again in Acts; nor do Paul's letters after those early years.

Silas must have kept on serving behind the scene, where he must have made a big difference. He resurfaces only once, when Peter remarks, "With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you..." (1 Peter 5:12). Some scholars believe that it was Silas who gave First Peter its eloquent language. Second Peter has the rough grammar and wording that are more like what we would expect from an unschooled fisherman like Simon Peter.

What would Paul have accomplished without this man Silas? Would all of his "concertos" been as beautiful, or even have occurred at all? It is hard to say. Because Silas was willing to play second fiddle, his counterpunctal harmonies enhanced Paul's melodies, creating a full-length duet to God's glory. God give us more men and women with the humility and dedication of Silas.

Want to dive deeper?

1985 Bruce, F. F. *The Pauline Circle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 23-28.

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