

Judaism

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, "Ideas and Power: Goddesses, God-Kings, and Sages," in *In the Balance: Themes in World History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 145–62.

Abstract: This essay explores religious ideas that developed not as a means to further the power of dynasties or states, but to contest the established order of things and to challenge the power of rulers and states. Using a diverse array of examples – from Judaism, Buddhism, and Jainism to Confucianism and Greek philosophy – it seeks to explain how these belief systems both emerged from older traditions and offered new ways of thinking about the meanings and functions of human existence.

Introduction

During the first millennium B.C.E., new religious ideas arose that did not focus on god-kings or on the sanction of gods to sustain political power. New belief systems challenged the power of shamans, priests, and god-kings and focused instead on ethical questions of right and wrong or good and evil, on the meaning of human existence and suffering, and on the order of human society. One such belief system was west Asian monotheism. Others included Indian Buddhism and Persian Zoroastrianism. In Greece and China, too, philosophers sought to bring order to their societies through the construction of ethical systems.

West Asian Monotheism: Judaism

From its beginnings among the Hebrew peoples of ancient West Asia, Judaism (from the Israelite kingdom of Judah) was to make a major contribution to the shaping of Mediterranean and European societies. The origins of the Hebrew peoples and the rise of Judaism, like other early histories, must be reconstructed from a variety of different sources, including both archaeology and written documents, which provide uneven coverage and often have huge gaps. Though composed of layers of materials written by different authors for different purposes, the Hebrew Bible, or Torah (the first five books of the Christian Old Testament), remains one of the richest sources for the early history of Judaism.

The Hebrew People

The roots of Judaism can be traced among the semipastoral peoples of Iraq as early as the second millennium B.C.E. The Hebrews, one group among these peoples, moved westward early in the second millennium under the leadership of the patriarch Abraham. According to the Bible, Abraham abhorred the idol worship found in his birthplace, Ur, in Mesopotamia, and

moved his family and herds through the Syrian desert to a new home in Palestine at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, where they continued to worship their ancestral clan divinity. This area was a crossroads between Egypt, Anatolia, Arabia, and Mesopotamia, and the fate of the Hebrew people was closely tied to the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires that shaped the history of the entire region.

Around the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., the Hebrews moved to Egypt, probably as part of the Hyksos (“rulers of foreign lands”) army that invaded Egypt at that time. After the Hyksos were forced out of Egypt, the Hebrews were enslaved. About 1250 B.C.E., following a leader named Moses, the Hebrews fled Egypt and resettled in Palestine. Under the guidance of Moses, Yahweh, originally the most powerful of numerous gods, emerged as the favored god of the Hebrew tribes. Moses claimed that God (Yahweh) had transmitted to him the sacred laws by which the community should live. These were the Ten Commandments, and they were sealed up in a box called the “Ark of the Covenant,” reflecting the covenant, or pact, with God made by the Hebrew people.

The Kingdom of Israel

Under Moses’ successor, Joshua, the twelve Hebrew tribes that traced their descent from Abraham and his sons staked out territory in Palestine, and in the eleventh century B.C.E., Saul became the first king of Israel. Under the rule of his son David (r. ca. 1000–960 B.C.E.), the transition from a tribal confederacy to a unified monarchy was completed. The Ark of the Covenant was brought to David’s new capital of Jerusalem, which became the political and religious center of the kingdom of Israel. The First Temple was built by David’s son and successor, Solomon (r. ca. 960–920 B.C.E.), after which the kingdom split into two, divided between Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

The Assyrians destroyed Israel in 721 B.C.E. and deported many Israelites to the east. It was during this time of tribulation that the teachings of a series of great social and moral critics and reformers – the prophets Ezekiel, Amos, and Isaiah, among others – confirmed Abraham’s tribal god, Yahweh, as not just the most powerful god but the only god. In 587 B.C.E., the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and deported many leading Jewish families to Babylon, along with skilled workers such as blacksmiths and scribes.

Diaspora

This was the origin of the diaspora (Greek for “scattering” or “dispersal”) in which Jews were forcibly deported or fled their homelands to settle elsewhere and establish communities. One of the most important steps in setting up a

new community was the establishment of a synagogue (Greek for “bringing together”), a communal meeting place that served educational and social, as well as religious, functions.

In addition to religious ritual focused on the Temple in Jerusalem or on a synagogue elsewhere, a central issue of Hebrew belief became just and moral behavior among human beings. Such behavior was the result of obeying Yahweh’s laws, while transgression of his laws led to punishment. The eighth-century conquest of Israel by Assyria and the sixth-century captivity of Hebrews in Babylon were interpreted as examples of Yahweh’s punishment for the Hebrews’ misbehavior. In the fifth century B.C.E., the Temple was rebuilt and the Deuteronomic Code was introduced, embodying the laws to be followed by the Hebrew people so that they would not err again. By this time, Judaism was a cosmology based on one god, who was the creator and lawgiver, and on humans, who ideally ruled the earth justly, guided by God’s laws.