

PART II

Early Religions thru Rome

(Chapters 6 - 10)



Johnny Come Lately

Certainly the basics of religion are based in the earliest understandings of humanity, and they still continue in cultures to this day. The early religions, those which we associate with cultures we recognize, are relatively late developments. Still, the foundational ideas we have discussed are the foundational ideas within these systems.

Like Water for Chaos

Water is a constant mythological symbol for chaos or probably more correctly, *not-creation*. Water both gives life and takes it away – the ultimate idea for creation, for not-being to being. The containment of water gives life – the anticipated annual flooding river or the rain from the sky give life; the uncontrolled deluge and the flood take life away. In many myths we see idea of the ‘separating of the waters’, the placing of the waters in their proper place – where they can be life sustaining. Before they are separated there is chaos and not-life afterwards creation can continue.

For the ancients, all land eventually led to water, some fresh some salty, and to water where you could see no end, except where the sky met it in the distance. All land therefore must end in water, even if they had never been to the edge of the land. Water surrounds everything, and it comes from the sky as well, reinforcing the idea that it somehow surrounds *everything*.

Git Yer Program!

We can reduce all of sacred history down to a basic timeline, and so we will. This is the basic religious heritage of the West, roughly in order.

DATE	RELIGIONS
3000 BC	Sumerian, Egyptian
1000 BC	Greek, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Hinduism
600 BC	Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism
100 AD	Christianity
600 AD	Islam

Table 1: Timeline of Religious Development

And so we begin. Every culture brings some measure of Revelation, some aspect to a deeper understanding of the sacred. This is not to say that all Faith is the same, but that Faith, the foundational and single revealed truths, can be found throughout human culture.

For the most part, these are the religions which rotate about the Middle East, especially if we broaden it as cultures develop and come into contact.

Sumeria

For our purposes, the first major players in the region are the *Sumerians*, born in that cradle of civilization, southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) between the Tigris and Euphrates and present during the area’s Chalcolithic (ca. 4300–3300 BC) and Early Bronze Age (ca. 3300-2200 BC). They establish agriculture, cities and city-states, religious building (*ziggurats*) and the first major written language (*cuneiform*). They become the dominant culture in the region for a millennium. As with any developing culture, it does not appear out of nowhere, and we can see from their myths that the Sumerian religion has the usual roots in animism (the worship of nature if you recall) or such things as the wind and water.

The development of what we might begin to call religion is based in the need we have spoken of: that of bringing order to the world, to the mysteries they did not understand. As the notions developed they came to the natural conclusion that a greater force was present and in charge of everyday operations. The forces of nature were originally worshipped as themselves, i.e. as *wind*, as *water*. Over time began the process of *personification* and finally the arrival at a human form associated with those forces. With the Sumerians we really see the idea that gods, in human form, are seen as having *control over nature*, i.e. they are not just the thing itself.

This is a long process and as we look at this overall development we see that the Sumerian myths were mainly passed down through oral Tradition until the invention of writing. Not surprising in itself except that early Sumerian Cuneiform was used primarily as a record-keeping tool (literally census, rolls and inventories); it was not until the late Early Dynastic period (somewhere about 2600 BC) that religious writings first became prevalent in the form of temple praise hymns and incantations, meaning that Tradition and not Scripture was seen as the primary vehicle for Faith for most of their history.

The early temple complexes were small, elevated, one-room structures with a forecourt and a central pond for purification but as the culture stabilized and grew, more elaborate structures were developed. In the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 2900 BC), the small one-room structures developed raised terraces and expanded to include multiple rooms. By the end of the Sumerian civilization, ziggurats were the standard structure for Mesopotamian religious centers, with their elevated central structures, multiple rooms and familiar long staircases. Through all of this, the temples served as cultural, religious and political headquarters until around 2500 BC, and the rise of military kings, after which point the political and military leadership was often moved to a separate (but nearby) palace complex.

Cosmology: In a system which might sound familiar to us, the Sumerian cosmology has the universe as a dome surrounded by a primordial *saltwater* sea and based upon the earth. Underneath this earthen base of the dome, is the underworld and a *freshwater* ocean called the *Apsu*. There was a god of the dome-shaped firmament (*An*) and (his consort) of the underground world (*Ki*) (which was first believed to be an extension of the earth, but which later developed into the separate concept of the *underworld*). Basically the Sumerians thought of the universe as consisting of the two parts: heaven and earth (with the water being the stuff from which the universe springs). Between earth and heavens was a substance known as *lil*, which means 'air' or 'breath'. The moon, sun, stars, and planets were also made of *lil*, but they were luminescent. The sea gave birth to the *an-ki*, which eventually gave rise to life.

From this primal event, the Sumerian pantheon rises out of the union of *An* (heaven) and *Ki* (earth) which produces various gods like Enlil (god of *lil* – air, breath, wind, weather) the leader of the Sumerian pantheon who in turn create other gods who are in charge of their various personification aspects. For instance, Enlil rapes Ninlil (resulting in his banishment to the underworld) and Ninlil has a child from the union named Nanna (god of the moon) and Nanna eventually gives birth to Utu (god of the sun).

As said, these gods are more than mere personifications of physical objects; they are in charge of those physical objects. So eventually for the Sumerians, every intricacy of the cosmos is controlled by a divine and immortal being according to established rules. Each god adheres to the rules of divine authority ensuring that the cosmos keeps functioning according to the plans handed down to them by Enlil. The world below earth was known as the nether world, the place of the dead souls who descend there from within their graves, though in a statement of the development of the culture there were also special entrances in cities. There is a sense of separation between living and dead, an acknowledgement of some difference, but at the same time, there is the understanding that just as the living live on earth, the dead 'live' in the underworld. A person could enter the nether world from one of these special city entrances, but could not leave unless a substitute was found to stay behind and take their place there. There is therefore an understanding of balance, earth/sky, upper world/underworld, life/death.

Ontology: Water is the base element if you will and the waters of chaos give birth to the gods but is not their 'creator'. Water is the representation of being in the sense that things just 'are' (*potentiality*)

the Greeks would tell us), that is, there is no sense of ex-nihilo creation, but at some point the gods come into *being (actuality)* and the world around becomes their personification. As for us, the gods originally created humans as servants for themselves but in an understandable move freed them when they became too much to handle. Still, Sumerians believed that their role in the universe was to continue to serve the gods who had cut them loose (i.e. it is our 'nature' to serve the gods).

The gods of Sumer were human in form and maintained human traits. They ate, drank, married, and fought amongst each other. Even though the gods were immortal and all-powerful, apparently they could be hurt and even killed. From the initial generation of An, Ki, and two other 'high' or 'creator' gods, hundreds of deities were recognized in the Sumerian pantheon. Many were wives, children, and servants of the more powerful deities. The gods were organized into a caste system with initially An, and eventually Enlil at the head of the system as the king of the gods. Enlil developed the broad designs and the rules for the universe and Ninhursag is the mother of all living beings. Under the four creator deities were the seven gods who 'decree the fates'.

Eschatology: There is no real developed eschatology, and pretty much any idea of final judgment is really played out during life.

Soteriology and Liturgy: Created as we were to serve the gods (our sacred purpose), Sumerians devoted much of their time to ensuring favor with the gods through worship, prayer, and sacrifice. The high gods, however, were believed to have more important things to do than to attend to the common man's every day prayers, and so personal gods were devised as intermediaries between man and the high gods. The personal gods listened to the prayers and relayed them to the high gods.

The temple is the center of worship. Each city usually had a large temple dedicated to their patron god with small shrines dedicated to other gods. The sacred world is a place of cycles. Daily sacrifices were made consisting of animals and foods, such as wine, beer, milk, and meats. Sacred time demands daily action but the world shows us special events, and they are treated as *feasts*. These special occasions called for spectacular festivities that would sometimes last for days. The Sumerian calendar was lunar based and so special feasts took place on the day of the new moon and on the day of each phase as well as last day of the month with the most important day New Years. These are all centered on the temple.

The head of the temple was called the *sanga*. The *sanga* was in charge of the temple's day-to-day operation (what we might think of as a deacon today). The *en* was the spiritual leader of the temple and could be a man or woman depending upon the gender of deity. Under the *en* were various priest classes. The role of all of these classes is not known, though there were specific, delineated roles and functions for each class. The city's main temple was usually dedicated to their patron deity. Patron deities often assumed the powers of other deities, which tended to result in confusion and contradiction in the literature of ancient Sumer.

The Babylonians and the Hittites owe much of their own religious beliefs to the Sumerians. We also owe our sense of law to Hammurabi.

Egypt

The other major player is Egypt. As with all cultures, Egypt had its collection of myths which were passed down through the millennia by oral tradition. Most of us have a pretty good understanding of the Egyptian mythos and culture, so we do not want to dwell here too long, except to look at the powerhouse and the effect it has as the longest lasting empire in the region.

Let us start with time. The Sumerians used a lunar calendar, but in the end of the year the 28 day lunar cycle never really cuts the mustard. The Egyptians created the 365 day year which they managed by using Sirius and the Sun, but it was really a 360 day year with a 5 day religious celebration tacked on. We hear the echoes of our earlier discussion about *kiasos*, and I was very cavalier using the term 'tacked

on'. It was not important that it was noon on Thursday in April but that the triptych of the Nile flood cycle had meaning. These five days became time outside of time so to speak.

The Nile even more than the Tigris and the Euphrates captures our sacred sensibilities. The Nile, with its narrow but long band of influence creates a less nomadic culture, that is, a more stable and larger, more connected people. With the combining of the North and South Kingdoms it creates one of the largest contiguous people in the ancient world.¹

Cosmology: Because it is such a large empire, there were several creation myths which developed in various locations in Egypt. For the most part they are all explanations of how light and order was formed in the unordered, unstructured chaos of darkness and timelessness. The various creation myths differ in detail but there is a common concept of 'primeval waters', so we will start there.

Once again and similar to the Sumerians, before the structured cosmos was created there was only darkness which held limitless water known as *Nun*, also called *the Father of Gods*. Out of Nun rose the *creator* of the world *Atum* or the "lord to the limit of the sky", who self-developed into a being standing on a raised mound which became the *Benben*, or the 'creation mound', a pyramid shaped stone. Hence the pyramid-shape being regarded as the dwelling place of the sun god. Atum created the universe (as opposed to Nun, who just...*is*) and is therefore the master of the forces and elements of the universe. Atum created Shu and Tefnut and the other gods, well frankly, in some very strange to us

ways². Shu and Tefnut produced Geb (the earth god) and Nut (the sky goddess) who are married. Shu, who represents air, lifts up Nut on his arms, separating her from her spouse Geb and acts like a barrier between them. Her body forms the sky and is strewn with the stars. She swallows the sun god at the end of every day and during the twelve hours of night he passes through her body until dawn when she gives birth to him on the eastern horizon.

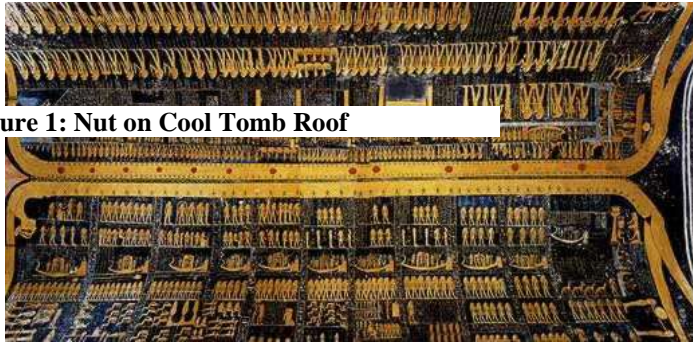


Figure 1: Nut on Cool Tomb Roof

Atum set his daughter Maat (truth, justice, balance) in place of Isfet (chaos). She is the spirit of *applied justice* rather than the detailed legalistic rules. For the Egyptians the universe is first and foremost an ordered and rational place. It functions with predictability and regularity; the cycles of the universe always remain constant, per Maat. Both morally and physically, the universe was in perfect balance. Maat was reality in the sense that she is the solid grounding of reality that makes the Sun rise, the stars shine, the river flood and mankind think (what the Greeks would later call *Divine Wisdom*).

Most of the gods which we recognize, like Isis and Osiris, come later and are linked to the older myths through their mother Nut. There is also the later discussion of whether Amun or Aten is *Re*, the sun god. For the most part, the gods live invisibly within our world, present yet unseen.

Ontology: Atum, not Nun, is the Supreme Being. Atum, for lack of a better word, *develops* out of Nun, becomes conscious, and manifests himself separate from Nun. Nun is pre-existent; always existing yet is not be-ing. Atum auto generates and is being. Atum relates is it as having existence but having no place to stand; there is a certain sense of inertness, of potential but not actuality. Atum is actuality and with him everything comes into be-ing. Atum is not created *ex-nihilio* (from nothing) and creation itself rises out of Nun.

¹ What I am talking about is unconquered people, i.e. pretty much the same race/culture; the Egyptians conquered plenty of other cultures and expanded their empire over a large area.

² References available upon request.

As to the creation of humanity, several myths developed in the New Kingdom. One claimed that Amun (Amen-Re) was the creator of man. Another one has Khnum the ram headed god creating man on his pottery wheel.

Eschatology: While Atum orders the universe, Maat is the practical day-to-day following of that order. In that sense there is not clear eschatology, no defined end of the universe. Still, without Maat, Nun would reclaim the universe. Finding a consistent view of the fate of the soul is difficult, but as we will take the easy road and talk about the idea of the after-life. The soul, after leaving the body gets a new, suited to the after-life body. It is a long and arduous journey full of pitfalls and tests. In the end, the dead is not fully limited to the underworld, and may move freely back and forth, often appearing as a animal. We may hear a bit of the nature of the gods in this understanding.

Ethics: because of the nature of balance as personified by Maat, in the moral sphere as in the physical one, purity was rewarded and sin was punished. In death, one's spirit must be as light as a feather in order to rise up. As a instance of the idea of the balance of justice the heart is actually weighed against a feather on a scale. Any heaviness of heart keep you from your final reward.

Soteriology and Liturgy: Nun is not directly worshiped and there were no temples built to Nun, who is instead *present* in many shrines as the sacred lake or pool symbolic of the non-existence before creation. Eventually the cult of gods grew with the pantheon, and Egyptians worshipped these gods with animal sacrifices and with incense and many processions where people carried the image of the god from one place to another. We have an extensive set of religious songs, or psalms which run the gamut of religious expression and emotional content.

When the Greeks conquered Egypt, they introduced their own gods and the Egyptians did begin to worship them, although they kept on worshipping the old Egyptian gods as well. Of note in the exchange was the Greek (and eventual Roman) adaptation of Isis.

As a whole the belief system embraced totemism, polytheism, and ancestor worship. As said there is an immanent nature to the relationship between the gods and the world, though it is different than we usually think of it. The temple often provides the threshold point between the sacred and the profane but it is not

the only place. The gods do not live in one specific place like a temple or in a transcendent place like a mountain or in heaven, but act through sacred sites, items, animals, or chosen people. Furthermore, the spirits of the deceased, if remembered and honored, could aid and guide the living from the Afterlife. In death they came to guide the spirit to its final place.



Figure 2: Sacred Lake at Karnak

Putting It All Together

With agriculture and urbanization the strictly nomadic lifestyle begins to become the exception rather than the norm. With the development of cities and urban centers, government and bureaucracy develop. With these come standardization of language and with that comes writing.

We also begin to see in cities the devotion of precious effort, resources and design to the building of religious sites, and in even within the urban space, as with the ziggurats. This is a very important point, because we know that there was an increase in violence throughout this time and cities needed walls and armies to protect them showing that the redirection of resource for other purposes was just as important.

Some may want to put these efforts in a different light and see this as the beginning of astronomy, and other such profane purposes, but as with all of these things in the mind of these people it is the

other way around. The sacred is still the most important thing; being in touch with the sacred, developing rituals to compliment the myths and devoting precious resources to it tell us the nature and importance of these things. Astronomy has great import for us today and for these people it is about knowledge as well; not the knowledge of science but the knowledge of the sacred, and via that knowledge right belief and action.

While at this time, most temples are not centers of the town (as they will be in medieval times), they are set upon the highest hill, with the palace close by. There is also a sense of the *consecration*, of being set apart that the sacred informs and guides us, but as with the Sumerians, it also gets to the purpose of life: service to the sacred. The world is still a simple place, but it is a place run by the product of heaven and earth, governed by rules and following those rules, even for the minor gods has grave consequences. For the Egyptians, the sacred moves all about us. The gods, who control all of the functions of nature as well as make judgments about human actions invisibly exist not in heaven but amongst us.

"Your ways, O God, are holy: what god is as great as our God?"

Psalm 77

Eastern

In this case our understanding of 'Eastern' is limited to those cultures which come into contact or provide some influence on Western religious culture, or hold some interesting insight into the nature of religious belief. These, unlike the earlier Egyptian and Sumerian systems, are still being practiced. There is not a sense of similarity in nature for these religions, but we can see both a looking back to the more 'primitive' religions and forward to more modern structures.

Near East and Far East

For simplicity's sake we can divide our chapter by location. We can also split them by nature or maturity or whatever you want to call the foundation and practice contained within these religions. However, the ability of this author to speak for these still existing faiths and systems is limited and should, as with everything else, be taken with a grain of salt.

Along with the taste of that salt we hear the beginnings of moral codes. 'Right' thinking and 'right' action become more than just legal actions and they have more to do with day-to-day living than merely the larger ritualistic context of day-to-day survival.

Shinto

We will start in the Far East. This one is not really a Judeo-Christian influence, at least not in the time frame we are talking about. What it does have are some common features which we have touched on but not really covered, so I will cleverly couch it here and use this as a way to make my point.

Shinto is a Japanese based religion, in that it developed and really is focused there. The essence of Shinto is the deep, ritual devotion and worship of invisible spiritual beings, ancestors, and powers, called *kami*. There is an element of Totemism which we might recognize here. Shinto has writings but no 'canonical' scriptures.

Cosmology: Shinto creation stories tell of the history and lives of the *Kami*. Among them was a divine couple, *Izanagi-no-mikoto* and *Izanami-no-mikoto*, who gave birth to the Japanese islands and their children became the deities of the various Japanese clans. The chief deity is the Sun goddess *Amaterasu Omikami*, one of their daughters, who is the ancestress of the Imperial Family (making her the source of the imperials' claim to being deities). Her descendants unified the country.

Shinto does not split the universe into a natural physical world and a supernatural transcendent world. It regards everything as part of a single unified creation with a visible, phenomenological world and an invisible world with the invisible world regarded as an *extension* of the everyday world and not a separate realm.

Everything Else: Shinto also does have the division between body and spirit, so much a part of Western thought, nor that of separate 'planes' like earth and heaven or world and underworld. Spirit beings exist in the same world as human beings. Consequentially, while religious texts discuss the "*High Plain of Heaven*" and the "*Dark Land*" (an unclean land of the dead), there is no extensive development of the afterlife concept. Still there is some thinking about behavior, summed up in the "*Four Affirmations*":

1. *Tradition and the family:* The family is seen as the main mechanism by which traditions are preserved. Their main celebrations relate to birth and marriage.
2. *Love of nature:* Nature is sacred; to be in contact with nature is to be close to the gods. Natural objects are worshipped as sacred spirits.
3. *Physical cleanliness:* take baths, wash hands, and rinse out mouth often.

4. "Matsuri": The worship and honor given to the *Kami* and ancestral spirits.

Taoism

As with Shinto this is really not a player in early Judeo-Christian development. Taoism is Chinese in origin and dates from the same time-frame as Confucianism. The two systems are often in conflict with Taoism takes a more nature-based path and Confucianism a more social one.

Cosmology: Everything started from a state of *total emptiness* in which nothing stirred. Time does not exist in this primordial state, because there was nothing to measure it against. Essentially, all was a void. Stirred through some unknown impulse, creation began. This first impulse was manifested in the 'primordial polarity' of *Yin* and *Yang*, negative and positive. The interplay of *Yin* and *Yang* is the essential expression Of *Wu Chi* (primal life-force). This interplay is called *Tai Chi* or "Supreme Ultimate Life-force", from the ordering principle that makes cosmic harmony possible. Everything found in the universe, visible or invisible, is the results of the primordial interaction of the *yin* and *yang*. *Yin*, is dark, heavy, and feminine; *yang*, is light, airy, and masculine. *Yin* energy sank to form the earth, *yang* energy rose to form the heavens. Both *yin* and *yang* split further into the *Five Phases*, which can be understood through their associations with things in the physical world: the elements, seasons, and directions.

Everything Else: The *yin* and *yang* energies harmonized to form human beings. Consequently, the human body holds within it the energies of both the earth and the heavens, making us a microcosm/reflection of the order of the universe. The balance of energies is very important, and is the key to happiness. The balance then is with Nature. Whereas Confucianism promotes individual happiness through conformance to ideal social standards, Taoism ties individual happiness to conformance with the underlying pattern of the universe regardless of social structure. This is the 'way' (*Tao*), which can neither be described in words nor conceived in thought. To be in balance, one has to 'do nothing' (*Wu Wei*): nothing strained, artificial, that is, *un-natural*. One must empty oneself and flow with the energies, not fight, 'know', or try to control them but understand that action is spontaneous compliance with the impulses of one's own essential nature (*yin* and *yang*, heaven and earth, etc.).

By emptying oneself of all doctrines, knowledge, and ambition, one achieves unity with the *Tao* and derives from it a mystical power. This power enables one to transcend all mundane distinctions, even the distinction of life and death. Right action is that which keeps oneself and the universe in balance. This may seem foreign to our Western ears, but it is also a tenet of Judeo-Christian mysticism, one we might characterize by the word 'surrender'. One ignores one's own desires and moves to a more balanced relationship, one of self-knowledge and knowledge of the nature of the universe, submitted to the will of God.

Hinduism

Another of the ancient religions, developing sometime around the 10th century BC, Hinduism's name comes from the Persian word *hindu*, or 'river' and can mean "of the Indus Valley" or simply "Indian" as in a geographical designation. While we designate the system as *Hinduism*, Hindus call their religion *sanatama dharma*, 'eternal religion' or 'eternal truth'. Once more we see a religion with a long development over a large area, leading to a variety of practices and beliefs. For brevity's sake we will say that the beliefs eventually coalesced into four basic tenets: *Karma* (deeds, cause and effect), Reincarnation (the constant cycle of re-birth), an idea of an All-pervasive Divinity (God manifested in infinite forms), and *Dharma* (divine law, order).

Cosmology: We have seen so far that for these early systems the universe is not *anthropocentric*, that is, it does not exist for humanity and humanity is not at the center. Hinduism is no exception. Also similarly to other early systems, something exists before creation and so in all the various Hindu traditions the Universe exists before both humanity and the gods. As a note, the Hindu concepts of time

and space rely on the fact that the external world is a product of the ‘creative play’ of *maya* (illusion). This means that the world as we know it is not so much physical as *illusionary*, and ergo so is ‘time’. It is not bound by the physical rules as much as we might think. There are multiple levels of reality and the universe is in constant flux. This understanding of the universe as constantly changing comes from the simple pattern of creation and destruction which in itself pretty much precludes anything static. Yet this understanding also includes a ‘growth’ aspect, that there can also be development, all of which takes place within the larger universe.³

God has three tasks: creation, preservation, dissolution and recreation. As said, the universe itself is ‘timeless’, that is, it does not function through time. By the nature of God, the nature of the universe is one of *eternal* return, renewal, and repetition. Everything that happens has already happened and has happened many times before, though in different guises. “*After a cycle of universal dissolution, the Supreme Being decides to recreate the cosmos so that we souls can experience worlds of shape and solidity. Very subtle atoms begin to combine, eventually generating a cosmic wind that blows heavier and heavier atoms together. Souls depending on their karma earned in previous world systems, spontaneously draw to themselves atoms that coalesce into an appropriate body.*” (*The Prashasta Pada*) We see this thinking brought forward into the West by such thinkers as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche during the 1800’s.

Everything Else: There are four aspects to life’s meaning: *Dharma* - fulfilling one's purpose, *Artha* – prosperity, *Kama* - desire, sexuality, enjoyment, and *Moksha* - enlightenment. The task of humans is find release from the bonds of time and space, to move through the illusion and beyond the rebirth cycle of both themselves and the universe through proper practice of these four aspects. The gods are *manifestations* of things. Living beings are not apart from God, who lives in each and every one of them. There are as many gods as there are believers, that is, they suit the moods, feelings, emotions, and social background of the believers; similarly there are as many spiritual paths as there are spiritual followers.

Tenets	Meaning
Three paths:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • path of works and action • path of knowledge or philosophy • path of devotion to God
Three debts:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • debt to God • debt to sages and saints • debt to ancestors
Four stages of life:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • school years - grow and learn • marriage, family and career • turn attention to spiritual things • abandon world to seek spiritual things
Four purposes of life:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fulfill moral, social and religious duties • attain financial and worldly success • satisfy desires and drives in moderation • attain freedom from reincarnation
Ten commitments:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do no harm 2. Do not lie 3. Do not steal 4. Do not overindulge 5. Do not be greedy

³ The Vedic understanding of the universe is considered ‘scientific’, that is, it is built from observations, albeit of a mystical nature.

Table 2: A Quick Summary of Hindu Simplicity

Buddhism

Buddhism was introduced to the West, as were so many other things, through conquest – Alexander the Great to be specific. He ranged into the Indian subcontinent, and left a Greek influence in his wake. But unlike the conquering, the cultural exchange was a two way street.

Cosmology: Similar to Hinduism, the universe is also an illusion of many different planes. Its origins are well laid out but are hard to grasp. The beginning of the universe as we perceive it is not so much unknown as incalculable, that is, it has no *perceptible* beginning. The phenomenological universe, the one we perceive, consists of an infinity of world systems scattered through boundless space, each coming into existence and passing away within beginning-less and endless time. That is to say, that while time may exist within each existence, it is not related to the universe, which is time-less. In all these realms, beings still go through the cycle of birth and rebirth, subject to the three aspects of existence - *impermanence, suffering, and nothingness*.

Everything Else: In Buddhism, one of the realities of life is *suffering*, if not the main reality. But it is a reality related to an illusion. To break from this cycle of suffering, we have to purify the spirit from all desire and illusion, then we will achieve the state of blissfulness (*Nirvana*) where we no longer come into being, never die, and are not subject to time (we become one with the universe). The ultimate objective of humans is enlightenment which basically means that we have broken free from the ‘continuously flowing’ journey and the illusion of the world. The spirit, which exists in abstract and in an energy-like form, has no beginning and no end (just like the universe) and comes into being, holds on to its status before passing away, only to repeat the cycle again and again, until reaching enlightenment. The universe never leaves this cycle – only humans can transcend this cycle of rebirth and death through the process of enlightenment.

Tenets	Meaning
Three practices:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtue, good conduct, morality • Concentration, meditation, mental development • Discernment, insight, wisdom, enlightenment
Four noble truths:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Suffering exists</i> • <i>There is a cause for suffering</i> • <i>There is an end to suffering</i> • <i>In order to end suffering, you must follow the Eightfold Path</i>
Eightfold path:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wisdom, Discernment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Right Understanding of the Four Noble Truths ○ Right thinking; following the right path in life • <i>Virtue, Morality</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Right speech: no lying, criticism, condemning, gossip, harsh language ○ Right conduct by following the Five Precepts ○ Right livelihood; support yourself without harming others • <i>Concentration, Meditation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Right Effort: promote good thoughts; conquer evil thoughts ○ Right Mindfulness: Become aware of your body, mind and feelings ○ Right Concentration: Meditate to achieve a higher state of consciousness
Five precepts:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not kill 2. Do not steal

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Do not lie 4. Do not misuse sex (celibacy for monks, monogamy for others) 5. Do not consume alcohol or other drugs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>There are more for monks</i>
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Table 3: A Quick Summary of Buddhist Simplicity

Putting It All Together

One of the things we often think about in relationship to religion is the idea of eternity. These systems present a vision of eternity which we can both get our heads around and at the same time is allusive. There is the usual there never was a time when, yet there is not a sense of eschatology, not an end in sight. But there is a difference. In the Far East, there is an understanding of 'beginning' and 'end', and a sense that the world is real, both the physical and the spiritual. In Near East (alright, let us be honest here, India), time is meaningless and the world is illusory. Yet at the same time,⁴ there is a similar thread which runs through them. In these Eastern systems there is less of the idea of God and gods and more of the idea of the interaction of forces; that is to say, less personification or the identifying of specific physical aspects of the universe with specific personalities. Even when they are personified, as in Hinduism, there is not a sense of a fixed designation; merely one where we place labels on different aspects of God and call them gods.

The East reflects many of the cultural understandings of right thinking and actions that also develop in the West. As we saw in the last chapter, these were born and gelled in the same timeframe as Judaism, some around the same time, others slightly later. We might be able to, or at least want to be able to, draw some conclusions from this fact, and the similarities of moral thought. There is, at least, obviously the development of a stability which allows for this thinking. Perhaps it is the general safety and cultural development which draws upon the same sacred sense and produces similarity in systems and thought.

In the end, of interest to us, Christianity was able to make in-roads into many of these cultures; Christians, as late as Thomas Merton drew legitimate insight and inspiration from them.

"Prayer is not controlled. We are the ones controlled, called upon to submit to a mysterious inward process, to be carried beyond ourselves without ever knowing clearly what carries us or where we are going"

Michael Casey, *Toward God*

⁴ No pun intended...at least as far as you know.

Middle Eastern

These early religions are those which we more readily associate with the Judeo-Christian cultures. They rise up and still continue in the great cradle of world religions between the Tigris/Euphrates to the North/East and the Nile to the South/West.

Leitmotif

I know this is not a musical but the *idée fixe* is an appropriate one here. Usually it refers to a recurring theme, associated with a particular person, place, or idea, from the German *Leitmotiv*, literally 'leading motif', or, perhaps more accurately in English, "*guiding motif*". I like that last one. For us it can refer to repeated overall themes like light/dark, good/evil, and sin/salvation.

We are going to start on a different tact with many of the next explorations. Rather than piecing through the different branches of theology, we will begin to examine overall melody of themes and dogmas, trying to get a sense of the development and understanding of revealed truths through the various cultures. Hopefully you will continue to see the branches for the leaves. Through it all runs the light little theme of the sacred, of a world focused not on the profane or the human but the sacred and the divine. These are not nice stories about meaning they *are* meaning.

Zoroastrianism

This ancient religion may not be familiar to most people but its adherents are still practicing their beliefs. It is probably the world's first occurrence of what we would think of as a truly *monotheistic* belief system;⁵ at least it appears to be the first recorded one. While its roots may stretch back an additional 1000 years, officially this religion was founded by Zarathustra⁶ (or in Greek, *Zoroaster*) in Persia (modern-day Iran) sometime around the 6th century BC. It certainly was once one of the largest religions though it has been in decline since the 3rd century after that whole Alexander the Great invading Persia thing. On the surface, and possibly a bit deeper, it appears that many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theological concepts concerning the nature of God, the idea of Satan, and other things like the soul, heaven and hell, free will, the virgin birth of the savior, the slaughter of the innocents, resurrection, the final judgment, etc. in part find some part of their origin in Zoroastrianism.

Thus Spake Zarathustra

While there are no truly existent canonical Scriptures (a significant portion of the writings having been lost, showing once again the resilience of oral Tradition), the most important remaining texts of the religion are called the *Avesta*, containing mostly liturgical rites, from which (along with Tradition) we can glean some dogma. In Zoroastrianism, God ('the Creator' aka *Ahura Mazda*) is *one* and is *all good* (no evil is within or originates from God). Thus, good and evil have *distinct* sources, with evil (*druj*) trying to destroy creation, and good (*mazda*) trying to sustain it. God, while the Creator, is transcendent (not *immanent*) to the world – not part of creation. A series of two-way intermediaries (what we probably would call *angels* or use the term *gods*) exist through whom the works of the one God are evident to

⁵ If you want to argue for the Egyptian Akhenaten, then you would not be arguing for the whole Egyptian system, but you can argue for it.

⁶ Of much later Nietzsche and Strauss fame....

humanity, and through whom worship of God is ultimately returned. We can see several differences from many of the religions we have discussed so far, as well as several ideas familiar to us.

But, as with all of the other long-time systems we have examined, there are developments of theology which are not part of the 'initial' offering. There is the familiar early sense of water as a primary element, and a 'world river' that encircles the earth. The difference from what we have seen so far being that the waters are created *second*, after the initial creation of the sky. They called the waters *Apas*, ('the waters'), but it goes farther, more along the idea of the essence or substance of the waters not so much the waters themselves. The Avestan and Vedic word are both derived from the same stem *ap* (water) hence the idea that they are a shared experience with the Indus culture. In both Avestan and Vedic texts, the waters in all the various forms are represented by the group of divinities bearing that same name. In the later days, the name *Mithra* appears and becomes the focus of several cults. It too seems to develop within the cross culture of the Avestan and Vedic (Persian and Hindi). *Mithra* is the Zoroastrian divinity of covenants and oaths. This puts him into many roles, usually judicial in nature (think legal when you think of contracts and oaths) and he is thought of as an all-seeing protector of Truth, *and* as the guardian of *Apas*. When most superficial discussions on this system take place, *Mithra* (later known as *Mithras*) is usually the identified deity being talked about.

The Force is strong in this one....

Zoroastrianism works not so much from a sense of balance of opposing forces, as might Hinduism or Buddhism, but it does recognize dualities (though they are not necessarily equal forces). God is good, and evil is an *inferior* but *constant* force. This may not seem significant but think about it in terms of the systems we have discussed so far. This is the separation of God from nature, that is, less of a personification and direct identification of God with an object and more of a conceptual God. What we are seeing is the ramifications, not so much of God on farming or fertility, but on metaphysical *meaning*. How do the observations that the world seems like a pretty good place overall affect the view of God? What are the ramifications of an omni-good God? How do you explain evil if everything is basically good? These are subtle changes, which we can explore by looking at some of the dogma.

Let us think about it in overall terms. Good and evil battle on two fronts: *cosmically*, and *morally*. On the cosmic scale this struggle is represented by *Ahura Mazda* and *Angra Mainyu (druj)*, which are as said not two equally opposed forces, but more along the line of God and a chaotic destructive force. God (*Mazda*) created a pristine and pure world, which *Angra Mainyu* continues to attack, which is the road by which 'pure' creation has 'impurity' enter it. Any form of suffering: aging, sickness, famine, natural disasters, death, etc. are the *result* of this attack. This idea of a dualism, even if it is not an equal yin/yang dualism, starts here and informs all of the dualisms we see in other aspects of Zoroastrianism (light/dark, life/death, etc).

The second front (*morally*) refers to the opposition of good and evil *in the human mind* (a microcosmic scale if you will). Just as God created the universe pure, he created a pure mind as well. Symbolically that purity is represented by *fire*, probably from the process of smelting, which removes impurities (purifies) from metals. This fire signifies God's light or wisdom. Light is therefore identified as wisdom, 'illumination', and ultimately as God; darkness is seen as ignorance, evil and chaos. God gives humans free will and this gives us the ability to choose to follow the light (the Good Path) or the darkness (the Evil Path). There are familiar results to this choice. The path of Light and Good leads to peace and ultimately to everlasting happiness in Heaven; the path of Darkness and Evil leads to misery and ultimately to everlasting unhappiness in Hell.

This fire, this light, is truth *revealed*; wisdom and understanding are from God who ultimately revealed the truth through the Prophet, Zoroaster. Much of this revelation is lost as said. The *Avesta* contains seventeen hymns thought to be composed by Zoroaster himself, and the rest are

commentaries on these hymns, written later. It also contains myths, stories and details of ritual observances. It emphasizes the pattern of prayer several times a day, and of the day seen as sacred.

As said, we can see several of these traits in the other main Middle Eastern religion: Judaism.

Judaism

This is really just a brief introduction to some aspects of Judaism and we will return to it in greater detail later. For now, we will examine the basic facets some of which come into play in early Judaism and its interaction with the previously discussed conquering cultures about it. Judaism as we know it is a later development but the terms (Hebrew and Jew) are used interchangeably now. Judaism, like Zoroastrianism is a 'revealed' religion, in that it is believed to be divinely revealed to humanity.

Bruce Feiler has a great book called *Walking the Bible* and early on he describes the Middle East as a large mall, with two anchor stores at either end and a bunch of little stores all in between. It is a great image, because it really does give you a sense of the area. The really big store at the south end of the mall is Egypt, and the anchor store at the north end changes owners frequently but there are always two large empires at either side. Little old kiosk Israel sits smack in the middle and often pays the price of those two empire's aspirations, and similarly her fortunes rise and fall with the rise and fall of each anchor store. So while it can suffer from this arrangement, it also benefits from it; when Egypt expanded into the Negev, it moved the inhabitants from caves to cities practically overnight. When no strong powerhouse exists on either side, then Israel is able to assert herself.

Each empire brought culture and religion to the region, one which was mainly inhabited by nomads, herders and subsistence farmers. Actually the origin of the Hebrew people is unclear. As nomadic Bedouins they have little early material culture or continuity which can inform us. What we do know is that eventually they became established in the area south of the Tigris and Euphrates and north of the Sinai desert. There, in that tiny plot of land, they lived and produced an understanding of God which still affects us today.

Torah and Talmud

We mainly know them through what we know as the 'Bible', from the Greek word *biblios* which means book but not in the form as we understand it. This original written divine revelation of these 'wandering Armenians' is one of the things we most associate with and most benefit from, that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, known variably as the *Torah*, the *Pentateuch*, the *Septuagint*, or the *Old Testament*. The Hebrew word 'torah' (תּוֹרָה) means 'direction' or 'instruction', as, for instance, the instruction of parents (*Proverbs 1:8*), or of the wise (*Proverbs 3:1*). In this sense, with a capital 'T', it means Divine instruction, primarily as given through 'The Law' (as revealed to Moses), and secondarily through the teaching of the Prophets (as individually revealed to them) and the general 'Wisdom' literature. In this sense *Torah* signifies, first and foremost, the *totality* of Jewish doctrine, whether taken as a basis for religious knowledge and conduct, or as a basis for study (this may sound like a later *sola Scriptura* statement but it is not, as we shall see). The word *Torah* then has two uses – one general, meaning *the whole of the Scriptures*, the other special, signifying *specifically* the Pentateuch. This may be confusing but trust me it will work out in the end.



Figure 3: The Torah Scroll

If I recall correctly, it is written on 64 velum pages that are wide enough to fit three columns of text each of which are then stitched together for a seamless appearance. It is written entirely in Hebrew, it contains 304,805 letters, in 5845 verses, in 248 columns all of which must be duplicated *precisely* by a trained scribe. Each column in every copy of the Torah begins and ends with the same word (that is, if column 4 starts with an 'A' and ends with a 'the' then you can guarantee that every copy does as well).

Then the scrolls are sewn onto wooden rollers called *Eitzei Chayim* (trees of life). All of which tells us two things, aside from all of the obvious allusions: that the Scriptures are *very* important and that there is tight control over their production and transfer because they are so important.

In addition to the 'written' Torah (*Tanakh*), there is also 'oral' Torah consisting of the commentaries and the ordinances which are the *practical* implementation of the laws (i.e. *Tradition*). This oral Torah consists of the *Mishna* (the codification of Jewish religious and legal norms), and the *Gemara* (the collection of discussions, commentary, and explanations concerning the *Mishna*). Hence the base sense of 'Torah' (*Divine instruction*), contains both Tradition *and* Scripture. There is a further term *Talmud*, which means 'learning', consists of the *written* oral rabbinic discussions and commentaries on the *Mishna*.

One aspect that this written Scripture culture created was the fact that the Jews were eventually one of the most literate races in the world, at least in their own language. This propensity and education also led to their ability to be adaptive to most other languages, allowing them great access and mobility. Eventually, though sometimes for really bad reasons, there are Jews dispersed in large pockets all around the known world. And when they go they carry with them their sacred Scripture and Tradition.

Pentateuchos

This is the Greek name for the first five books, comprised of the written versions of the oral Tradition of the Hebrews up to the establishment of *Israel*. To restate it, 'Torah' as overall Scripture consists of three parts:

1. *Torah* or *Pentateuch* (ascribed to Moses), the first five books – what we know as *Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy* (hence the Greek) – which contain *The Law*. In the hierarchy of Hebrew Scriptures these books of the Law come first and are foremost.
2. The Prophets (ascribed to individual prophets)
3. The 'Writings' or 'Wisdom' literature (or *Hagiographa*, Greek for 'wisdom writings' – many ascribed to Solomon)

So what we are talking about here is only the first part. In the Talmud the Pentateuch is known as *sefer torath Yahwe Elohim* (or simply *sefer [ha] tora*), meaning '*the instruction of Lord God*' or as we might say it '*the Word of God*'. This is a significant signifier, stating both the understood *revealed* nature of the book and importance of these first five books for understanding God and Israel. Just as we use the Greek word *biblios* (books) the word *Torah* is always used as if the whole work were written as a single scroll for use in ritual, that is to say there was a liturgical/ritual understanding of the purpose of the Scriptures. The reading of 'lessons' in communal worship at the synagogue on the Sabbath (a practice referred to in *Acts 15:21* as being 'ancient' though it is 'late') is a very important aspect of these Scriptures for us to understand. Recall back to our discussion of Myth, Ritual, and Liturgy; divine instruction comes in the *hearing*. Living the myth comes in the *hearing*. The common practice of a three-year cycle of Torah readings within liturgy means that the worshipers *heard* all these Scriptures (*the Law*) *proclaimed*. They therefore had to be able to *read* their Torah for study purposes and as a rite of passage.

We will speak more about this aspect of Law being tied closely to the conception of God.

Prophets

The other books, those which recall the message of specific prophets comprise a large portion of the Hebrew Scripture. Prophecy, as we will discuss is not about prognostication, but about relaying the will/words of God to the people of Israel. Some of these words may have future import, but they are

about the present and not so much about the future except in relation to present actions. While the gift of prophecy certainly includes the ability to see the future, a prophet is far more than just a person with that ability.

Not that there was not a sense of prophet which recalls our popular view. Many surrounding cultures practiced clairvoyance. But in *Tanakh*, a prophet is basically a spokesman for God, a person chosen by God to speak to the people and convey a message or teaching. Prophets were also role models, showing how to be holy, the importance for scholarship, and the effects of closeness to God. They set the standards for the entire community standards that were delivered directly by God. This may seem like an odd role and one counter to the usual vision of prophet (and certainly it did not always go well for the prophet), but we must keep in mind what we have spoken about. Prophets are people who have a special connection to the sacred. They instruct and live that relationship.

So while there are angels, as in Zoroastrianism, there are also human go-betweens who are not just priests or shamans but are actually mouthpieces who speak God's message to their fellow community.

There are specific prophetic writings but many figures are known as prophets, again based on the teaching that a prophet is not just a seer but one who knows and acts upon the will of God. Therefore, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua are prophets as much as are the more familiar ones like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. Some of the prophets are known as 'minor' or 'major' but that has nothing to do with caste or status, and merely refers to the length of the book; i.e. a major prophet is long and a minor prophet is short.

The Writings or Wisdom

Wisdom is a broader term than we think of it; this is not a purely intellectual or rational exercise but one which involves the whole person, mainly because of the nature of humans and their relationship with God. The purpose of Wisdom literature was to enable man live amid all of the questions of life, that is, to give meaning to everyday situations which would allow one to get through them. This 'coping skill' style Wisdom is closely linked to right action, that is, action in concert with the nature of God. This means the emphasis on God-like qualities like discipline, truthfulness, faithfulness, kindness, and honesty. God has provided a fundamental order in the creation of the world, which humans are able to discern through experience; peace and happiness come from compliance with this order.

Hebrew Wisdom literature speaks of the lived experience, that the answers are 'out there' and so encouraged people to go out and discover God's order and plan for themselves through experience of that plan, rather than merely assuming that the plan has a Fate type aspect where one is just carried along. Sometimes that source is within Nature, often it is found within the wisdom of others. Either way it is something to be sought, not waited for.

So, Wisdom literature is not as concerned with the Law as much as with, shall we say common sense or Practical Wisdom. Jewish practical Wisdom knows no separation between faith, experience, or knowledge. Yet, this Wisdom tells us, there is one guiding principle. Although man is sanctioned and encouraged to go out and use his heart and mind to understand, he should never forget his roots. God is the center of everything, and God's revelation, His Law, is the foundation of every avenue of that exploration. Without this anchor, that is, all on our own, we would arrive at incomplete or incorrect links and conclusions. We must always refer back to the Law for true Wisdom, to guide and supply the missing pieces that limited human reason cannot acquire on its own. That is true Wisdom.

Leaving Las Vegas

We will take a moment now and revisit Egypt. According to Hebrew Scripture, they spent some time there, and in a way it is the defining moment for them. On the other side, there is no hard external evidence that they did, but then, they may have been one of many groups hanging out in Egypt and

lumped together by the Egyptians. No matter what the case, we have a myth which puts God squarely in the midst of his people, not completely immanent, but not completely transcendent either.

We are told of Moses, Hebrew by birth but raised Egyptian, meaning that he would have a sense of Egyptian religion, law, and politics.⁷ This background provides him with a unique perspective. He has knowledge of both the Hebrew God *and* of the gods of Egypt. The struggle to release the children of Israel (*nee* Jacob) from bondage is an interesting one, starting with a simple request: let us go for three days and worship our God as we are accustomed. Pharaoh, who really has a schedule to keep, is unwilling to let them go, mainly because they add a simple little caveat to their request – we must take our animals with us to sacrifice. Pharaoh knows a bit about diplomacy and turns down the request, for another simple reason: if you can take your stuff with you, you might not come back. ‘Little ol’ us?’ stutters Moses, ‘why would we do that? Simply grant our request and we will not bother you again!’

Moses knows something that Pharaoh does not. Egyptian gods, while powerful are no match for God so he continues to press his case. Pharaoh, for his part continues to refuse. God then takes on each major Egyptian god, through the plagues, until they are all ‘defeated’ and the god pharaoh himself is therefore defeated, and he sends them on their way. Throughout the process God states repeatedly that *He will be their God and they shall be his people*.

This may seem like a strange statement but the Hebrews had a long history of cultural influence and exposure to multiple religious systems. As we have seen most of these systems are polytheistic, with various and sundry means of accessing the sacred. A major method is through what are known as ‘house gods’, that is, they are based in the spirits physicalized in small, usually pottery, idols which can grant boons. They are totem-like and ultimately represent control, that is, by owning the statue you *control* that god (we might also think of talismans). The God of Israel is no such contained God, but he may be a conglomeration God. We see two main ‘names’ for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, *Elohim* and *Yahweh*, translated ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ respectively. *Elohim* seems to be a god of farmers, herders. He is responsible for Creation and for the rain which sustains it. *Yahweh* is a warrior god, who leads his people into battle, who defeats the Egyptians and various other cultures in the area. After the Exodus we see the melding of these two gods into God, and often see the term ‘Lord God’ or ‘the Lord your God’ or ultimately, in the prophet Elijah’s name, both together in the statement *El-i-jah*, literally *El(ohim) is Yah(weh)*.

Entering The Desert

This brings us to a quick note about *names* in Semitic culture. Names have power. Words have power. We say that to our children, but we are talking just about feelings. What we are talking about here are sacred words. We have to continue to focus ourselves into the idea of myth and sacred which pervades these people (and us for that matter of fact if we are to give theology life). God gives his name to Moses (*Exodus 3:13-14*): ‘*I AM*’. Israel can now ‘call on the name of the Lord’, and he is bound, through this gift of name, to respond. When He says ‘I will be their God’ it is tied to this idea – he gives no other nation this gift. God’s anti-idol position shows that the Name is sufficient, and bespeaks a two way relationship.⁸

So Moses, who has been entrusted with this Name, plays a significant role. God puts Moses ‘as a god’ to pharaoh. Aaron, his brother is his *prophet*. What Moses says (well at least what he tells Aaron to say) is what God says, and holds the same weight and authority. This apparently works well, and Israel is

⁷ Scholars bicker about whether he was a real person or merely a composite, hobbled together to give meaning to the Egyptian thought which had entered Hebraic culture. But we have never no mind, because we are looking at this as *myth*, and therefore *true*, no matter how you want to slice it.

⁸ Think about it. You only give your name to friends, for more reason than that they will not have to shout ‘hey you’ across a crowded room.

released, *with* their herds, and pharaoh is thwarted and his power to control is diminished. The Israelites however, are not as easily mollified. But it is a telling moment; God has given his name, even before he requires anything of the Hebrews. They cry out and he responds, requiring nothing from them. He leads them to Mount Sinai, and *there* he binds them; *He their God, they His people*, sealed with ritual actions and words. The Law is the gift of the Sinai Covenant. It is both the sign and the action of the Covenant.

Covenant is an important idea in the Judeo-Christian system. The Sinai Covenant, while couched within the ancient legal contract system, is different than we might view it today. Legal contracts were caught up in the myth, ritual, theology, and overall religious thinking prevalent at that time. Recall that the world is not a profane place but a sacred place. I know that I keep saying this but we must keep that ***always*** in mind. That dead horse beaten, covenants have several sections:

Preamble:	Identifying the Lordship (one who has the power of life and death) of the Great King (in this case God), stressing his greatness, dominance, and eminence.
Historical Prologue:	Recounting the Great King's <i>previous</i> relationship to his vassal (with special emphasis on the benefits or blessing received from that relationship).
Ethical Stipulations:	Enumerating the vassal's obligations to the Great King (a guide to maintaining the relationship).
Sanctions:	A list of the blessings for obedience <i>and</i> the curses that will fall on the vassal if the covenant is broken.
Succession Arrangements:	Arrangements and provisions for the <i>continuation</i> of the covenant relationship over future generations.

Table 4: Covenant Treaty Structure

Everyone agrees to the terms of the covenant and it is sealed, in this case with sprinkled blood from a sacrificed bull, on the people and on an altar (symbol of God), tying them together in the same blood (blood was considered where the 'life' was). This is very serious stuff, or as William Goldman comments in S. Morgenstern's classic *The Princess Bride*, "*This isn't Curious George Uses the Potty.*" The Sacred is real. God is real. The Covenant is real. The Covenant is an umbrella, stay under it, God says, and you will have benefit of our relationship (especially as I am God and Creator of all things); step out and you are on your own. We are free to choose, even if He is not.⁹

The Law actually contains 615 statutes, though it does contain the *Ten Words*, or the *Decalogue*, what we call the *Ten Commandments*. Technically these are not 'commandments' as we think of the word, nor is there only one version – there are actually two, one in *Exodus* and the other in *Deuteronomy*. That aside, the truer translation of them would be not 'thou shall not...' but more in the context of the Covenant and so along the lines of 'since I am your God and you are my people, it would be *simply impossible for you to even conceive* of doing or not doing these things'. The Law is more about *how we think* than about a strict moral code (though it certainly is that as well).

Putting It All Together

Okay, this was sort of a long one, though there is still more to go. From Egypt and Persia Israel learned many things about God, or to put it better, through their experience with Egypt and Persia God revealed many things to the Hebrews. Ultimately, in the Law, He reveals all, and *Torah* informs everything. The book of Genesis reflects the revelation of the Law, and the myths it relates are preambles to the Law. The other four books are all about the Law and how it orders not only the daily lives of the Hebrews but also their overall culture and structure, from the priesthood to the Temple.

⁹ Technically, He is, but we must see it as a simple choice, one which really does not have to be made it is so simple. True freedom, which God possesses completely, is actually freedom to do the right thing; doing the wrong thing is slavery. This is the promised freedom of the Sinai Covenant.

The Law is about the relationship of God and His people; it informs the cosmology, the ethics, the soteriology, and the eschatology of Judaism. This understanding is contained within both an oral *and* a written Tradition. The Law is not a memory but a *living* entity. The myths and the rituals keep the moment of their giving in front of the Jews and they live in the constant salvation of the Law.

The Hebrew Scriptures are therefore not a modern historical document but are the inspired reflections on the relationship of their God and His people. Certainly historical facts are contained within the pages of Scripture but these are the myths by which the Jews live. They are true descriptions of the relationship of God to His people and that people's response to God. The Law (Torah) and the teachings on the Law (Mishna/Midrash) go hand in hand in helping the Jews to understand and live the Law.

"Unless of course, as is just possible, Judaism itself partly came of it. It is conceivable that ideas derived from Akhenaten's system formed part of that Egyptian 'Wisdom' in which Moses was bred [Acts 7:22]. There is nothing to disquiet us in such a possibility. Whatever was true in Akhenaten's creed came to him, in some mode or other, as all truth comes to all men, from God. There is no reason why traditions descending from Akhenaten should not have been among the instruments which God used in making Himself known to Moses. But we have no evidence that this is what actually happened. Nor do we know how fit Akhenaten would really have been to serve as an instrument for this purpose."

C. S. Lewis, (Psalm 104) *Reflections on the Psalms*

"Let me tell you something that we Israelis have against Moses. He took us 40 years through the desert in order to bring us to the one spot in the Middle East that has no oil!"

Golda Meir, *quoted in The New York Times*

PART I: A Sampling Of The Prayers of Zoroastrianism

PRAYER	TEXT
<i>Ashem Vohu</i> (invocation of Asha)	Holiness (<i>Asha</i>) is the best of all good: it is also happiness. Happy the man who is holy with perfect holiness!
<i>Ahunwar</i> (most sacred manthra of Zoroastrianism)	The will of the Lord is the law of righteousness. The gifts of Vohu-mano to the deeds done in this world for Mazda. He who relieves the poor makes Ahura king.
<i>Kem Na Mazda</i> (exorcism)	What protector have you given to me, O Mazda! While the hate of the wicked encompasses me? Whom but your Atar and Vohu-mano, through whose work I keep on the world of righteousness? Reveal therefore to me your Religion as your rule! Who is the victorious who will protect thy teaching? Make it clear that I am the guide for both worlds. May Sraosha come with Vohu-mano and help whomsoever you please, O Mazda! Keep us from our hater, oh Mazda and Armaiti Spenta! Perish, oh fiendish Druj! Perish, oh brood of the fiend! Perish, oh creation of the fiend! Perish, oh world of the fiend! Perish away, oh Druj! Rush away, oh Druj! Perish away, oh Druj! Perish away to the regions of the north, never more to give unto death the living world of Righteousness!" Homage, with which (are combined) devotion and milk offerings.
<i>The Gah Dedications</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hawan Gah – sunrise to midday To Hawan, Ashavan, the master of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. To Savanghi and Visya, Ashavan, the master(s) of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. • Rapithwin Gah – midday to midafternoon To Rapithwin, Ashavan, the master of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. To Fradat-Fshu and Zangtuma, Ashavan, the master(s) of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. • (Uzerin Gah – midafternoon to sunset To Uzerin, Ashavan, the master of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. To Fradat-Vira and Dakhyuma, Ashavan, the master(s) of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. • Aiwisruthrem Gah – sunset to midnight To Aiwisruthrem that furthers life, Ashavan, the master of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. To Fradat-vispam-hujyaiti and Zarathushtrotema, Ashavan, the master(s) of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. • Ushahin Gah – midnight to dawn To Ushahin that furthers life, Ashavan, the master of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise. To Berejya and Nmanya, Ashavan, the master(s) of Asha, for worship, adoration, propitiation and praise.

<i>Doa Tan-Dorostri</i> (blessing)	<p>In the name of God, the bestower, the giver, the benevolent! May there be health and long life, complete Glory giving righteousness! May the visible yazads and the invisible yazads and the seven Amashaspands come to this fair offering. May this household be happy, may there be blessing! May there be happiness among the people of the religion of Zartosht! We beseech you, Lord, to grant to the present ruler, to all the community, and to all those of the Good Religion, health and fair repute.</p> <p>May so-and-so, [and his wife (or, her husband), and children] live for a thousand years! Keep them long happy, long healthy, and long just! Keep them thus, keep them caring for the deserving! Keep them living and abiding for many years and countless hours! A hundred thousand thousand blessings upon them!</p> <p>May the year be auspicious, the day fortunate, the month propitious in all these years and days and months!</p> <p>For many years keep them worthy to perform worship and utter prayers, to give charity and offerings, being just. May they have health to fulfill all their duties! May they be liberal, kind and good!</p> <p>May it be so, may it be more so, may it be according to the wish of the Yazads and the Ameshaspands!</p>
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PART II: Exodus and Egypt

This view of the story requires an understanding of Egyptian mythology as well as that of Israel. The God of Israel is not only in conflict with Pharaoh, who is seen as a god, but also with the Egyptian pantheon. God has heard Israel's cry and is going to set them free. Two passages point us in this direction (recall that the *Torah* is all five of the first books):

1. ***Exodus 12:12*** – “For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every first-born of the land, both man and beast, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt - I, the Lord!”
2. ***Numbers 33:4*** – “On the Passover morrow the Israelites went forth in triumph, in view of all Egypt, while the Egyptians buried their first born all of whom the Lord had struck down; on their gods, too, the Lord executed judgments.”

What they tell us is important. God is establishing himself as the top God, and that he is establishing a complex and powerful relationship with Israel. This next table gives a possible scenario of this showdown.

God	Domain	Plague
Hapi	god of the Nile	First plague (<i>Ex 7:14-24</i>): The Nile turns into blood, or "bleeds."
Heket	goddess of childbirth, represented as a frog	Second plague (<i>Ex 7:25-29</i>): a swarm of frogs
Hathor	sky-goddess, represented as a cow	Fifth plague (<i>Ex 9:1-7</i>): A pestilence kills Egypt's livestock
Seth	god of wind and storm	Seventh plague (<i>Ex 9:13-35</i>): a hail storm, killing everything in the open, including crops
Min	god of fertility and protector of crops	Eighth plague (<i>Ex 10:1-20</i>): a plague of locusts to devour the remaining crop
Amon-Re	the sun-god, who symbolizes new life every day when he rose in the east, and death when he set in the evening in the west swallowed by Nut.	Ninth plague (<i>Ex 10:21-29</i>): God controls the sun, causing darkness for three days
Osiris	judge of the dead (Pharaoh is considered as his son and therefore a god himself)	Tenth plague (<i>Ex 12:29-30</i>): death of all of the first-born of Egypt

Two more references:

- The serpent was the symbol of Pharaoh's power (recall the crown of Upper Egypt with its gold serpent).
- Aaron, Moses' brother, turns his staff into a snake. When Pharaoh's magicians do the same thing, Aaron's snake devours their snakes (*Exodus 7:13*).

Finally, in Egyptian mythology, when a person died, Osiris would judge how good a person he had been by weighing his heart on a scale against a feather.

- If your heart weighed less than the feather, you were innocent and were allowed to live forever.
- If your heart weighed more than the feather, then you were judged guilty and condemned to oblivion (no afterlife).
- The Pharaohs were perfect and were therefore always judged innocent and allowed to live forever.
- So God 'hardens Pharaoh's heart'; God is not making him obstinate, that is not taking away his free will, but making his heart heavy, or judging him as guilty or sinful and demonstrating his power over the Egyptian gods as their judge.

Jews And Greeks

The Greeks are the pivot point between East and West. There is a certain 'BG' and 'AG' (*before the Greeks* and *after the Greeks*) nature to our Western history as well as our philosophical, political, and religious thought. Even as it will be ultimately shaped by a small ethnic culture from the Middle East, the West owes its very foundation to the Greeks.

The Jews are the other half of that equation, and we mark ourselves religiously with a similar before and after. The Jews run into the Greeks when the latter take over the world; at the same time the Western world meets the Jews.

Judaism

So they were there before the Greeks arrived and, as one might point out, long afterwards as well. Still, it is a big jump between the Exodus and the Alexander. Before we examine the effects of the Greeks let us examine some of the early characteristics of Judaism.

Monotheism: First and foremost, Judaism is a *monotheistic* belief system, meaning that God is a single personification, that all of the objects and forces of the universe are caused by or found within Him. While the Jews did not always hold to that one God, after the Sinai Covenant, Israel as a nation continued to be the people of the one God, 'the God of your fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [Israel]' (*Acts 7:32*). Abraham, the proto-patriarch, comes from Persian culture, out of Ur in Mesopotamia, on the Euphrates. The Zoroastrian idea of one God with many servants was known to him, but he clings to the one God concept and rejects the idol/personal god subsystem. For this decision, God enters into *covenant* with Abram, promising his benefice down through Abraham's progeny. No matter how they act toward Him, God is established as the one God, and Israel is beholden to that one God.

Creation: God, as one, is then the *God of everything*, not just the sun or the sky. Cosmologically, we have seen earlier instances of the 'formless wasteland', the 'waters', the separation of earth, the sky, and the waters; the separation of light and dark; the creation of life. The Hebrew Scriptures give us something else as well; they give us a *second* account of Creation. In the first, humans are created as *part of* Creation; he creates them male and female, just like the rest of Creation, but endowed with the spark of God not given to the rest of Creation ("in our image, after our likeness", *Genesis 1:26*). In the second account, life is created *for* humans; Adam (literally 'dirt') is created from the earth, and receives the spirit of God through God's breath into his nostrils. God then creates to *please* Adam – finally creating Eve to *complete* him. Humans are the crowning achievement of Creation, the last thing created in the first account and the first living thing created in the second account. In both accounts Creation is at the disposal of humanity. People are created not to be servants to God, but to be in relationship with Him – not as equals but having stature with Him, containing within them the 'Divine Spark'.

Covenant: Covenant is the key to understanding everything about Judaism. It is not about the *Ten Words* carved into the rock by God, but about the long-term relationship the Law indicates. Think of the whole spirit of the law versus the letter of the law adage. God creates a series of covenants, each with deeper commitment involving larger numbers of people. They are all about the relationship; those who cling to God have a reciprocal relationship with Him. Technically, after a point, the Covenants all belong to the children of Noah, through the line of Shem to Abraham and then specifically to Isaac, to his second son Jacob (*nee* Israel), then to his 12 sons, whose tribes all end up in Egypt because of their youngest brother Joseph. The Sinai Covenant is given to these 12 tribes (not just the eldest or chosen son as were the earlier ones), and to them is given both the freedom from slavery and the land

promised to Abraham in his covenant. Each of the covenants then hold true within the next covenant, and each speaks to that 'Divine Spark' placed within humans by God at Creation. From this time comes the ritual feast of Passover, the re-living of the moment of salvation, when the myths are told and the understanding of 'memory'.

Kingdom: In a stated anomaly, the Hebrews call for a king, an earthly king, whom God warns will take (tithe) their land and their animals. In a profane sense the king will hold the same power as God. As well as require sacrifice from them, this king will 'rule us and...lead us into warfare and fight our battles' (*1 Samuel 8:20*). The kingdom gives legitimacy to the nation of Israel¹⁰ among the nations, and even seems to go okay for a while, except for the civil wars, military coups, bad treaties and general collapse of the tribes and the loss of 10 of them, the split into a Northern Kingdom (Israel) and a Southern Kingdom (Judah) and the eventual dispersal of the Jews from Palestine. Other than that it was great and we get some cool history. Jerusalem is established (at least moved in to) by David and the Temple is built by Solomon. At this point in Scripture we are outside of the original *Torah (Pentateuch)*. Temple worship becomes paramount and ritual sacrifice centers there and by association Jerusalem becomes the center of the universe (much to the chagrin of folks like the Samaritans). For a taste, see Psalm 87.

Exile: If the Sinai Covenant is a defining moment for the Hebrews, then the Babylonian Exile and Captivity is a crystallizing moment, one which establishes the basis for the Judaism we understand today. This is the time of the prophets with which we are most familiar. Babylon, in need of land and short of attacking Egypt, decides that the fragmented, weak, and insignificant remnants of Israel (well just Judah really) needs to be removed from play and does so quite handily. This period, from about ~580 to 535 BC, radically changes Judaism. The people, driven from the Land and no longer attached to the Temple develop a style of living which does not rely upon the Temple, or the priestly caste for that matter. The development of the rabbinical (*teacher*) system, of the *Mishna* and *Gemara*, and the Synagogue spring from this period, as well as the primary gathering of the canon of Hebrew Scripture. Myths and Wisdom are gathered and redacted; court histories are added, as well as the preaching of the prophets. All of this returns to Israel with the exiles when they are released from captivity and allowed to return through the benevolence of that thorn to the Greeks and victors over the Babylonians, the Persians.

It's Greek To Me

By the time the Greeks arrive on the scene Judaism (from the last remaining kingdom: *Judah*, the one banished to Babylon) has undergone some serious development and a major transition. Released from bondage by Cyrus, they bring back with them a major portion of the canon of Scripture we recognize today, the fledgling Synagogue system and along with a renewed sense of relationship with God a mission to rekindle the sacred connection through standardization, codification and rebuilding, especially the Temple.

The Temple is a fascinating construction, with a courtyard containing the *Altar of Sacrifice*, an inner court, a large interior space and in the back what was called the '*Holy of Holies*', hidden behind a large veil. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year. In the first Temple, that was the residence of the Ark of the Covenant, literally the place where God dwelt among His people. The tablets of the Law were stored within the Ark. You get the sense of the sacred bond this alludes to. The Law is God's Will. God remains with His people through the Law – and they with Him, making this the holiest place on Earth; Mount Zion is the place where Heaven and Earth meet. This is different yet similar to the Greek style of temple, with a large colonnade, and the inner temple housing a large statue of the patron god.

¹⁰ Again, Jacob's name and therefore the collective name of the 12 tribes, the *children of Israel*.

Ruling The World: The Early Years

The Greeks eventually defeated the Persians and for the first time the anchor stone to the north originates in Europe and not in the Middle East, specifically the Mesopotamian watershed. Eventually Alexander captured the Avestan (Hindi) and the Egyptian worlds, meaning that not just to the north but to the south as well was 'one culture', and that culture 'Hellenism' touched multiple religious cultures as well.



Figure 4: The World as Alexander Saw It

Alexander's father, Phillip of Macedonia, solidified and unified the Greek peninsula. He also introduced Alexander to Aristotle, the famous Greek

philosopher when he made him the young Alexander's tutor. By age 20 Alexander had all of the solid foundation you could use to become a powerful and wise ruler, that and the death of his father by the hand of a guard. He certainly had the power, as the empire he conquered shows, and he was curious enough to embrace the cultures he swallowed up, almost to the point of distraction. Unfortunately his short life does not give us the data to bear out the conclusion of long-term success, though the short-term indicators were not good. At his death the operation of the empire fell to his four main generals each dividing it up to more culturally based areas of control. Their success is measurable.

Continuing Influence

The effects of the Greek rule of the known Western World extend even beyond the hey-day of the height of Greek culture. Through the control of the Italian peninsula that influence became the foundation of the later Roman culture as well, long after the point that Greece herself was just a backwater province of the Empire.

Even today we feel the effects of this time. The ability of the West to claim these cultures as we do comes from our common shared Greek beginnings. We cannot take too lightly our basic notion of reality and geographical, political, social, and religious structure which is the legacy of Greece.

All The Gods And Goddesses

So just what is the nature of Greek religious thought? We can start with the statement that is true of many of these later, longer lived cultures: that there was a development of thought and a combining of ideas along the way. At its basis are the usual myths and rituals which we see played out but there is also a 'new' idea, one which may spring from the earlier 'waters' ideas: Fate. Fate is a two edged-belief in Greek culture. There is the sense of the over-arching 'no one, not even the gods, can escape his appointed fate'¹¹ *Fate* which is a force beyond the control of any figure; there is also the sense of the direct fate of humans, which the gods seem to control, often arbitrarily. The *Fates*, personifications of the ideas of Fate, have independence and yet are bound to the actions of the gods. The fate of someone seems set, while at the same time it seems to be part of the fate of the individual that the god should intervene.

Eventually this religious concept of Fate will tie into the philosophical concept of *Logos* or divine will, or what we might call the order in the universe. This connection between philosophic and religious thought is a hallmark of Greek thinking. The two seem to eventually diverge, but they often continue to

¹¹ As the Delphic Oracle told Lyidan inquirers.

inform one another. The ancient Greeks viewed the earth as a flat disk floating on the river of *Ocean*. In philosophic work *Timaeus* by Plato, the world is treated as a living thing, with body and soul.

Aside from the cosmologies of philosopher-scientists like Aristotle, the earliest and primary source for the Greek creation myth is Hesiod's 8th century poem *Theogony*. According to this account, out of the cross between an indeterminate material and a god (Chaos and the Abyss) other divine beings came into existence: *Gaea* (Earth), *Eros* (Love), *Tartaros* (the cave-like space under the earth), and *Erebus* (darkness, fear). The world came into existence when *Gaea* was forcibly separated from her consort *Uranus* (Heaven) for a time during which she gave birth. Unlike the Egyptian myth this separation was accomplished when Uranus' genitals were severed by his son Khronus (or Cronus, the father of the gods – specifically Zeus who defeats Cronos) and thrown into the sea, from which rose Aphrodite.

Well, that is probably enough of that. Progeny is perhaps a weird grab-bag for the Greeks. Like the Egyptians the sense of the god's 'birth' is not as tied to human reproduction as might be the case in other cultures, and therefore has perhaps a more symbolic meaning – at least we can only hope so. Anyway, *Erebus'* sister *Nyx* (Night) draws mists across the heavens to bring night to the world, while their daughter *Hemera* scatters them to bring the day. We can see a certain amount of the dualism here, with one goddess blocking out the *Aither* (shining, blue heaven) and the other revealing it. In this case the bright upper air was regarded as the source of day rather than the sun, which merely moved through it drawn by a chariot.

The Titans like Khronus become the parents to the gods we would recognize like Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. The thing is that really the entities which are considered gods are those which have a closer relationship with humans. In the myths, the gods create humans for entertainment value, beings like them, but that were mortal. Prometheus, who liked the human race and seeing the situation as somewhat lop-sided, distributed gifts to humanity. He stole reason from Athena and fire from the gates of Hephaestus to keep them warm. Prometheus then became the protector of the human race, and shared with it all the knowledge he had. This provided a certain independence from the gods, to whom humanity was beholden really only to keep Fate at bay. Good for us, not so good for Prometheus.

So What?

Where does all of this fit in? In the end it is less about the Greek religious thought and more about her philosophical and political thought. The Greeks began to move past a strictly sacred/profane view of the world. While it continued to heavily inform their thought, there was a more 'intellectual' aspect to the exploration. Gods and religious ritual were still seen as vital to the daily operation of democracy, but there began a philosophical exploration of the world which also began to inform the religious thought. The idea of gods becomes the concept of powers or forces in the universe. Ultimately, what we want to look at is the influence of Greek thought on Judaism. What concepts were accepted and which were rejected. By no means exhaustive or even correct, let us take a moment and consider some concepts.

The timeframe of the conquest of Israel by Alexander puts us squarely into the golden age of Greek philosophy, with its two main players Plato and Aristotle. We will arbitrarily start with Plato, mainly because he has an even greater influence later on. That said one of the things Plato emphasized was the existence of a soul that is *separate and distinct* from the body, a specific *dichotomy*. The soul for Plato was less about its spiritual ramifications and more about its moral and intellectual one. The soul was the seat of wisdom, which implied knowledge and action. He also insisted on its immortality. This immortality implies an afterlife, and in fact for the Greeks, burial rituals were required, in order to allow the soul to have rest and not wander the Earth. The obligation for a moral life was not as tied directly to this afterlife but rested mainly on believing in the gods and the performance of the proper sacrifices and rituals, that is, *living well*. Acting in this manner would avoid reprisals both from gods and other humans and encourage boons from the gods, and presumably, other humans as well. What this means is that

Greek religion, while it contained a concept of an afterlife was not other-world oriented but this-world oriented; any benefits of religious beliefs and actions for the after-life were only peripherally considered, if at all; this attitude would eventually inform the philosopher Epicurus, who pooh-poohed the gods and pointed everything to this life, but that is another book.

So while there is a sense of 'after-life', an active permanence of the soul, the eternal recurrence or reincarnation idea that we saw in Hinduism, is a strange concept to Greek religious thought but does come articulated to us (once again) through philosophers like Plato, who articulates a concept called the *Transmigration of the Soul*. Plato intimates that while eternal, souls do not remember their previous experiences. The soul, once separated from the body, spends an indeterminate amount of time in the 'realm of the Forms' and then assumes another body¹². This idea of Forms takes a small amount of explanation. Plato taught a type of monotheism; that there was one supreme god-like thing (again, more of philosophic concept than religious belief) called the *Form of the Good* which is the 'form' or basis for perfection in everything in the universe. Aristotle, as Plato's disciple, also disagreed with the Greek notion of polytheism because he could not find enough empirical evidence for it. But he also disagreed with Plato as to its nature, stating that the observable universe is sufficient, and instead promoted the concept of a *Prime Mover*, a being which had first set creation into motion, but was not connected to or interested in the universe. Anyway those ideas are for another time; suffice it to say that an idea of renewal of the soul, while not a strictly religious concept, is a part of the cultural consciousness.

Alternately, the Hebrew concept of humanity saw the person as a whole, part *head* and part *heart*, but these were not *separate* from the body. Early Judaism speaks of the netherworld as a place of the dead, but not a place so much of eternal life but just being dead as, for example, in this passage from Isaiah 38:18-19, "*For it is not the nether world that gives you thanks, nor death that praises you; Neither do those who go down into the pit await your kindness. The living, the living give you thanks, as I do today*" or from Psalm 6 "*For who among the dead remembers you? Who praises you in Sheol?*" Basically, when you died you died and any eternal life you had came through your children. A 'barren' wife was a catastrophe and spoke of the displeasure of God. A good life meant many children and many generations of children afterwards. A bad life brought dishonor to all subsequent generations. You 'lived forever' genealogically, and it was best to live well and be remembered well (remember: words have power – the name is everything!). Similar to the Greek notion of Hades¹³, this *Sheol* mentioned above is the biblical term for the underworld where the insubstantial souls of dead dwell. Somewhere about the second century BC, Hebrew Scriptures begin to speak about the possibility of something more, of life *with God after death* (c.f. *Daniel 12:1-3* and *Wisdom 3&4*).

Revolution!

What happened when these two cultures met? At first, not too much. In fact many Jews became 'Hellenized', meaning that they took on Greek thought and practices. Alexander had conquered the region by 333 BC and after his death in about 315 BC the Ptolemaic rulers controlled a chunk of the Middle East (Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Peterea) with the Seleucid rulers controlling the rest. While they installed themselves into power in the region, they generally allowed the Jews to run their own affairs. As a result, the Jews were allowed to maintain their religious beliefs and practices until around 175 BC when the region fell to the Seleucid rulers and Antiochus IV decided to make Israel the staging

¹² The soul, because it is informed by the Forms, has built-in knowledge which must be drawn back out. This is somewhat different than the Hindu thinking where you carry the past lives with you which inform the present.

¹³ Eventually, *Tartaros* became known as the place where the damned were thought to go, a place of torment. A third realm, *Elysium*, was a pleasant place where the virtuous dead and initiates in the mystery cults were said to dwell.

ground for his attacks on Ptolemaic Egypt. He changed the *laissez-faire* policy toward the locals and entered the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to Zeus. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, he issued orders that everyone was to worship the Greek gods, outlawed Jewish customs and crucified anyone who resisted (a nice little trick he had learned from the Persians). He also stole a great deal of valuable Temple ritual artifacts, an act which the still practicing Jews looked upon darkly. When they resisted he eventually tore down the city walls, slaughtered many, ordered Hebrew Scriptures to be destroyed, and he and his soldiers brought prostitutes into the Temple for illicit purposes in order to defile it. He mandated the death penalty for anyone who practiced circumcision, or observed the Sabbath or any of the Jewish religious feasts and ritual sacrifices.

When Antiochus sacked the Temple he erected an altar there to Zeus. Then, on what has approximately been calculated as December 25, 168 BC, Antiochus offered a pig to Zeus on the altar. This triggered a large-scale rebellion of the Jews against the Seleucids. This famous rebellion is known as the *Maccabean Revolt*, and the results of this event are celebrated in the feast we know as *Hanukah*, and chronicled in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. Never really stable, Greek power in the region eventually collapsed under the weight of constant infighting, civil wars, and foreign invasions. The Jews overthrew the Greeks in Judea about 143 BC and remained independent for approximately the next one hundred years.

Resolution!

The Book of Maccabees records another interesting thing: *prayer for the dead*. 2 Maccabees 12:38-46 relates the story of one battle in the revolution where many Jews are killed, and afterwards, when they went to bury the bodies they found amulets to other gods in their tunics, proof that the reason they had died was that they had not fully relied on God. Verses 43-46 are especially important here. “*He then took up a collection among all his soldiers...which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.*” We can see then, after some centuries of Greek rule, a sense of an afterlife beyond Sheol, and not just beyond Sheol but one in which the living may effect change for the dead and looking even further, forward to the day of *resurrection*.

Revision!

The two books of Maccabees are ones some readers may not be familiar with. As said, at first when Palestine was within the Egyptian sector under the Ptolemaic rulers, Jews had a reasonably peaceful existence. Greek becomes the *lingua franca* during this time, and according to the story, sometime around the 2nd century BC, in the recently built city of Alexandria in Egypt a group of about seventy Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Because of this the translation is known as the *Septuagint* (meaning ‘seventy’ and ironically is usually abbreviated using the Latin ‘LXX’). This translation becomes the standard *popular* translation and by the New Testament times both Jews (and therefore eventually Christians) used the Septuagint as well as the Hebrew Old Testament. When the Greek-speaking New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament, they usually used a direct quote from the Septuagint rather than a translation from the Hebrew.

It is only later, about 300 years for the Jews and about 1800 years later for Christians that this changes.

Putting It All Together

The Greeks put the West on the map...well, they drew maps which had stuff on them. Heck let us be honest and say that the Greeks created the map of the Western World. They consolidated many cultures which though they had contact and trade, were kept pretty much separate on political boundaries. With these conquests, the two-way street of cultural exchange became a much broader avenue, a veritable information superhighway. As stability brought larger trade routes and easier mobility within the empire more and more cultures exchanged ideas.

For Israel, who had experienced multiple cultural invasions, the effect was to create two camps: 'Hellenized Jews' and what I will call here 'strict Jews'. The Hellenized Jews tended to be educated (not just in Hebrew but in Greek) and richer, having garnished favor through compromise with the Greek rulers. The Jews who held on to their beliefs tended to be poorer or lower-class. From these groups we see the eventual development of two main politico-religious sects: the *Sadducees* and the *Pharisees*. The Sadducees were eventually made up of those who were pro-political wealthy and powerful. Pharisees were the poor and powerless anti-political traditionalists.

Religion and ruling become a more tightly entwined mess. Religion is seen not as the be-all and end-all of ruling but as a means of standardization *in* ruling. Antiochus is standardizing belief and practices within his political realm for order and control. It is easier to control the minds and hearts of your subjects when you control the teachings and practices of those minds and hearts. Israel had been under Greek rule for more than a hundred years, and Greek customs and ideas were having an influence on the Jews' religion and way of life. Divisions began to appear among the Jewish people. Some Jews not only tolerated this Greek influence but actively encouraged it. In doing so they won favors from the Greek rulers and had themselves appointed to important positions in the Jewish system. Others firmly opposed all Greek influence, particularly the influence of Greek rulers in Jewish religious affairs and did not share in the political bounty.

"King Ptolemy once gathered 72 Elders. He placed them in 72 chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said: 'Write for me the Torah of Moses, your teacher.' God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did."

The Talmud

"The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."

Alfred North Whitehead

Rome

Okay, so technically the Romans stole everything from the Greeks.¹⁴ But they also are the milieu of modern Judaism and Christianity, so we will give them their due, if not more.

But First A Word From Our Sponsors

The Etruscans were the civilization upon which the Romans rose. Much of what the ancient Romans believed has its impetus with them. At the risk of being repetitive, we will just focus on Roman beliefs and not take on the Etruscans. Let us just say the Romans already did that and that is why we know more about the Romans.

Roman Stuff

Rome has a storied history, one that we are or think we are pretty familiar with. Rome herself went through many phases and states which will not be taken into account here. Still, many of the things we associate with Rome are actually innovations of the beliefs and practices of other cultures. If we really want to give them their due then we should look at the Romans as some of the greatest innovators the world has known. Not that there were not new ideas, but the lion's share of Rome's success is due to their ability to truly integrate (or crush) other cultures, much more effectively than any previous empire.

This is probably due in part to the fact that Rome, unlike Alexander's empire, had a center. Like the Greeks before them people built Roman cities everywhere, but there was only one Rome. On the other hand the Greeks were segmented; even their empire was divided as soon as Alexander achieved it and ruled from within the separate provinces. When the Roman Republic rolled into town and conquered the Greek city-states in 146 BC, it moved the Greek world to Rome. It took on the Greek language and practices including Greek religious beliefs (along with many other aspects of Greek culture such as literary and architectural styles) as its own and took them back home to Rome. Through earlier contact, some of the gods, such as Apollo and Bacchus, had already been adopted by the Romans. It is around this time that the ancient Roman deities 'officially' become equated with the Greek gods. Without much fanfare, Jupiter became associated with Zeus, Juno with Hera, Neptune with Poseidon, Venus with Aphrodite, Mars with Ares, Diana with Artemis, and so on. This is not to say that the Romans had nothing original. There was continued belief in deities that existed before its interaction with Greece and weren't similarly associated, like Janus the two-faced and Quirinus patron of the Roman state.

All of this may sound a bit trite, so to appreciate this process we must back up and take a moment to appreciate the Roman's religious sensibility. The first thing is that the Romans were in general less about epics and balance and more about laws and legal contracts. A telling principle they had was "*do ut des*" (known as the 'principle of reciprocity' roughly meaning "I give that you may give"). What it means is that if I do something you do something in return and specifically that if people sacrifice to the gods, in a tit-for-tat, the gods would help them in return. This idea was held true at every level of life, and as the sacred and the profane are reflected in one another the concept is a strong one both religiously and socially.¹⁵ We talked a bit about this concept when we introduced the term *sacrament* way back in Chapter 1. What we see in this is that the Roman religion was more practical and less poetical than the Greek religion. The other thing to know is that early Roman religion was very *totem-based*, built less around mighty gods and their exploits and more around a reliance on spirits who exert good or evil

¹⁴ And the Etruscans.

¹⁵ This, perhaps, but not necessarily, may be the foundation of some of the scenes in *The Godfather*....

influence in daily life which helps to explain why it did not develop great mythologies like the Greeks and was so slow to adopt them.

What that means is that there is a deep-seated sense of *patronage*, that is, Romans saw the gods more as 'patrons', with every Roman god watching over a particular part of life. They each had a job to do, some useful office to perform. The sense of 'household gods', as we discussed previously, means that they were a part of everyday life. There were divinities who presided over events like the birth and nursing of an infant, and at the proper time of birth or infant care they were worshipped, in hope for the reciprocal benefits which they would bestow. Every vocation, every household transaction, every action of daily life had its patron Roman god. This is the thinking which in part lent itself to their 'borrowing' other gods from the cultures they 'encountered'. If there was an established patron god of something then that god could be adopted. So really it is more about the covenant-style relationship than about the Greek sense of Fate.

To The Max

The Romans system of reciprocation meant that they kept the gods happy through ritual worship and sacrifice, and this was pervasive in daily life and on a huge scale at the state level. At their roots, the proper performance of rituals and sacrifices assured the gods would be happy and provide aid. Pure and simple. This is the connection between the Romans and their gods. Whereas the Greeks had the Oracle as the main link between Wisdom and humanity (religiously; philosophically it was different), the Romans practiced this more relational religion. Perhaps as an off-shoot of this, the Romans rites appear more superstitious and broader in nature than those of the Greeks. Along with the intercessory practices and ritual there also developed augurs based on the entrails of different animals which were used to discover good or bad omens, or the will of the gods. Similar to the Oracle sacrificial practices of the Greeks, the practice of auguries was extremely important to the Romans and they were consulted prior to any major undertaking, both public and private, including matters relating to war, commerce, and religion. The understood nature of the universe allowed the gods to take any means to communicate with humanity and so great attention and import was given to dreams and these rites of divination.

Okay, so what this means is that the Roman religion was heavily based on rituals and sacred rites, not that this should be surprising to us. And just as unremarkable, these rituals had become very complex over the years and needed special people to perform them *correctly* especially the larger and grander public ones. And of course, since Roman religion and politics were intermeshed, the major priesthood's were usually filled by distinguished statesmen or generals. But because of the nature of Roman religion, the priesthood developed two forms:

- priests for the general regulation and practice of myths, rites, and rituals
- priests tied to a particular deity

The first makes sense because of the developing intricacy and importance of rituals. To handle this expansion the Romans established a 'college' of *pontiffs* (religious leaders) to regulate worship and perform the larger, more important ceremonies and rites. The *pontiffs* were presided over by one head or high priest called *Pontifex Maximus* (a title eventually and shrewdly assumed by Julius Caesar in order to control worship and therefore within him to consolidate all power). The second for a similar reason and probably as an adaptation of cultures like the Egyptians and Greeks who had priests and temples dedicated to specific gods. This also makes more sense when we look at the fact that the Romans celebrated more feasts than the Greeks. Perhaps close to 20% of their year was spent in feasts and festivals. Again this speaks to the importance and centrality of sacred activities to the day-to-day operation of both individuals and the Empire as a whole. The daily reciprocity of exchange between

humans and gods underscores the importance of gift-giving as a *mutual obligation* of Roman society and points to the contractual nature of Roman life and religion.

So Romans worshipped the gods everywhere, in temples and at home. Temples, except for the Pantheon, were dedicated to a particular god and, like the Greeks', contained a statue of that god. Priests looked after the temple and aided the people who went there to make sacrifices or offerings of food, flowers or money. For larger rituals the *pontiffs* often killed an animal, such as a bull, as part of the sacrifice ceremony. Eventually the Emperors said they were gods too, so everyone had to make sacrifices to the Emperor as well. At home, they worshipped the household spirits that protected the family often in miniature temples, or shrines, within their homes. As at the larger temples, the family would make offerings of food and drink to the household gods, and pray for good luck and protection. There was also a practice of offering food and drink to the dead. Tombs often contained holes in the roof for offerings, as well as patios and internal spaces for ritual meal celebrations. There was a range of

Figure 5: Pantheon Interior

views concerning the existence of an afterlife, as well as what it was like; while there was no one generally accepted view, many felt that the dead continued living in their tombs and could therefore, like the gods and other spirits, influence the fortunes of the living in similar vague and undefined ways which were basically a conglomeration of several of the cultures they had met.

On a short cultural/philosophical aside, the Romans highlighted four main philosophical schools, as eventually laid out by the emperor Marcus Aurelius in the 1st century: *Platonic, Aristotelian, Epicurean*



and *Stoic*. Of the four, Stoicism is the only one we have not touched upon. Stoicism, like all the others, comes to us from Greece. Its name is from the *stoa* or columns in the Agora around which Zeno, the founder of Stoicism taught. Plato took an idealist view of the world, Aristotle a rational one. Where Epicurus' epistemological view embraced feeling and emotion as the foundation of knowledge (we 'know' what we 'sense') and therefore of happiness or virtue as he would call it, the Stoics took the opposite view: emotion was the flaw which produced all suffering. Destructive

emotions, such as anger or jealousy kept us from happiness and therefore had to be kept in check. Logic and reason rule the day. Self-control and fortitude are the means of overcoming these destructive emotions. Stoicism is not just a lack of emotions but is a system based in rationality and action. When thinking about it, associate the character Spock from *Star Trek*.

Judaism Stuff

All of that said we now pick up the story where we left it off. After four and a half centuries of foreign rule under Babylon, Persia, and Greece, the Jews were now under self-rule starting in the latter half of the second century BC. This period, controlled by the Hasmoneans (as the Maccabees became known), lasted for about 100 years. The 'radical', or as some might say 'fundamentalist' nature and thinking behind the Maccabean revolt created a power structure where political, religious and military control were joined at the same time within the ruler, making them king, general, and high priest (very traditionally defined roles in Judaism). This is different from their original tribe-based roles, filtered as that had become through the kingship and the Exile. Even with the concentrated power structure, as with the previous kingdom, this freedom was never really stable; in this case on the one side were the pro-political priests and leaders (the later Sadducees) who were wealthy, powerful and favored by most of the Hasmonean rulers and on the other side were the educated anti-political traditionalists (the later

Pharisees), who were poor, powerless and favored by the common people. The differences between the two parties continued to increase as each concentrated on particular aspects of the Law and developed separate beliefs and practices.

As all good things must come to an end, fighting eventually broke out between two sons, one of whom favored the Pharisees, the other the Sadducees. At that time Rome's power was spreading towards Palestine, and as General Pompey and his army had recently arrived in nearby Syria, both sides appealed to him for help. Pompey brilliantly settled the dispute around 65 BC by leading his army into Jerusalem and taking control of it himself. Still, one of the brothers was given Rome's support and appointed governor and High Priest. He proved to be susceptible to stronger powers and was supplanted by one of his advisors, not of the house, named Antipater. One of Antipater's sons, Herod, proved to be the stronger of two brothers, and by 37 BC, using various means, succeeded in removing any opposition in his path to power.



Figure 6: Herodian Stone in the Wailing Wall

Though not well liked (for some reason), in his 33 year reign he carried out impressive building program of the like not seen since Solomon, including the rebuilding of Samaria, the construction of the port city of Caesarea (dedicated to his patron the emperor). In Jerusalem he built a massive complex including a military fortress, government buildings, a palace for himself and most importantly a magnificent temple, the stone of which (called *Herodian*) is still visible in the bottom seven courses of the Temple Mount retaining wall, especially what is now called the

Figure 7: Herodium

Wailing Wall. Mainly he built strongholds for himself scattered about the region like *Herodium* and *Masada*, to protect his interests (which, given the political situation, was mainly staying alive). Herod divided his kingdom between three of his sons, though they, like their father, only ruled at the pleasure of Rome. The southern and central parts of Palestine (Judea and Samaria) went to Archelaus, whose cruelty prompted the people of Judea and Samaria, in about 6 BC, to ask Rome to remove him and govern them directly. From that time on, that area was ruled by Roman governors, or *procurators*, headquartered some distance from Jerusalem at the somewhat more modern and closer to the cool waters and hot beaches of the Mediterranean, Caesarea. Not that it really mattered as once the Roman army entered Jerusalem they continued to steadily increase their control over Judea.

Now though, with a governor from Rome in charge, the Jews had for the first time to pay taxes directly to the Romans instead of through the Herodian ruler. Rome, a bit more precise about this civil duty, conducted a census to assess this tax, a story you might recognize. As a note here, it is important to note that while one may be a part of the Roman Empire and therefore taxable, one was not necessarily a *Roman citizen*. This particular distinction meant that the protection of Roman law may not extend to individuals or cultures, a right preserved for citizens alone. So this two-edged sword of Roman administration meant that if you were a citizen you had recourse under Roman law if you caused trouble; if you were not a citizen, then you were prone to much more expedient means of discipline.

All The World

There were many Jewish communities scattered about the empire, and had been since ancient Greek times.¹⁶ These groups were not directly associated with those in Judea, and were less focused on the

¹⁶ There are even references to Aristotle meeting a Jew who he considered 'a Greek not only in language, but in soul'. Josephus, the Jewish historian, attributes Aristotle's teachings about God to his encounters with Jews (*Contra Apionem*). The Jewish philosopher Maimonides is credited with the integration of Aristotle into Jewish philosophical thought in the 1100's.

Temple cult, though it remained the desire of every Jew to participate in festivals in Jerusalem. Still, they developed individual characters, often due to the culture in which they found themselves. Above all they continued to be steeped in the regulated traditions of Judaism. This won them converts in cultures which had an increasing desire for a different religious expression. These so-called 'God-fearers' had one distinct disadvantage – as for the most parts Jews were not citizens, these convert were not genetically of the tribes of Israel, so some means was necessary to allow them to practice Judaism. Conversion to Judaism was *relatively* common, at least common enough to have a ritual, and involved a baptism of initiation called *mikveh* (Hebrew for 'the gathering of waters'). *Mikveh* is a particular understanding of water, its destructive/cleansing and restorative powers. *Mikveh* is part of the creation story. The idea of *baptism* (Greek for 'immersion') grew from the ritual washings of the Law. The ritual washings and cleansings commanded in Torah and the other writings eventually formed the basis for the rabbinical *mikveh* laws. The purpose of the *mikveh/baptism* was *spiritual* rather than just a *physical* cleansing. *Mikveh* cleanses the unclean, as God cleanses Israel. This means that the term *baptiso* implies not merely a physical immersion but is aimed more at the spiritual one; one is *immersed* into the Law *through* water, not just *in* water.

This immersion or baptism is not the original means but eventually becomes the means for Gentiles to convert to Judaism. The only scriptural requirement we have comes from Abraham's somewhat more painful covenant circumcision which had no requisite of baptism. Debates on the subject of baptism versus circumcision are recorded in the century spanning the BC-AD transition between two contemporary rabbinic schools: *Shammai* and *Hillel*. Whereas the school of Shammai stressed circumcision alone as the sacrament of initiation, the school of Hillel considered baptism the most important part because it portrayed the *spiritual* cleansing and the beginning of a new life. Within the first decade after the birth of Jesus the Hillelite view was prevalent, as reflected in the Talmudic writings.

On the immersion into Greek thought, we have less to say here, but there is more to come!

Messiah

Throughout it all, the Romans like the Greeks before them had allowed the Jews to continue to practice their own religion and did not force them to adopt the religious-political practices of the Romans. The basic Roman policy was that any culture, whose religion was 'recognized' (read 'older than Roman occupation' or 'national'), was not obligated to adopt Roman practices. This meant that sacrifice to the gods (or the Emperor) was not necessary to stay alive. In addition, Julius Caesar granted Jews freedom of worship *in the city of Rome* after they had helped him at Alexandria. This did not mean they were generally accepted, but it did give them the freedom to legally practice their religion *outside* of Judea. But like many non-Roman cultures, they were eyed with suspicion for not towing the political line.

The spread of Judaism beyond the borders of Israel sets the stage for the spread of Christianity later. By the time Christianity arrives in these far-flung places, Judaism is well established, if not begrudgingly accepted. So, within communities, especially those outside of Israel, there is a mix of citizens and non-citizens as well as a different sense of identity. Tied to Israel but not bound to it, these groups adapted better to Roman rule, and had less of a messianic aspect and more about living the Law. Within Israel, starting with the direct Roman rule, there strengthened the desire for a messiah (from the Greek for '*anointed*') to free them from occupation. During this time there arose a group of rebels to that taxation, somewhat based in their Maccabean past, where any offerings to Rome were considered wrong and against the Law. This group, known as the *Zealots* (from Greek meaning '*admirer*' or '*emulator*', or even '*jealousy*') became yet another political force within Israel. Within this framework develops a greater interest and devotion to the prophetic ideas of a *messiah* or an 'anointed one', meaning someone(s)

selected by God to carry out his will. The concept of *messiah* had many forms, from the Zealots' individual, warrior or king-like savior in the vein of David, to the Pharisaic or Essenes' post-Exilic sense of a 'remnant' or a group of individuals who would be left to 'save' Israel.¹⁷ This political sense of savior mirrored the religious one, and it is sometimes hard to separate the two, and often, as in the case of the Zealots, the religious understanding drove the political action.

Jesus

Into the mix of these parties and Roman occupation comes an itinerant rabbi. Born into the less erudite North and close to a Roman city, Jesus manages to win converts, even among the different groups¹⁸, with a message less aimed at observance of the Law per se and more aimed at the personal immersion in the Law, the relationship with God.

Armed with a prophetic/messianic message (catch-phrase: 'the Kingdom of God is at hand'), Jesus moves through Israel performing miracles and teaching. He challenges Jewish thinking in all of the groups. Against the Pharisees he says '*the Sabbath is for man, not man for the Sabbath*' and '*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites....*' Against the Sadducees, he preaches resurrection and preference for the poor. Against the Zealots he preaches that '*the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force*' and '*turn the other cheek*' and '*render unto Caesar....*' Against the Essenes he preaches a single, individual messiah and salvation for the whole of Creation.

Jesus seems like a radical but he teaches nothing new. He works within the framework of Judaism, synagogue, Temple, Law. There are many opinions about Jesus, some from triumphalist Christians, some from dismissive Jews. It is the contention of this author that the more moderate view is, at least, more historically and religiously desirable. Jesus was obviously a Jew within the framework of early 1st century Judaism, both observant and deeply committed. While he challenges them, he takes no pains to destroy the structures or the beliefs of that time period. He calls for conversion, an age old message of the prophets. He observes the festivals and the Law.

The Law is not limited to the Decalogue, as has been said, but is a way of thinking. When God says "If I am your God and you are my people" he frames the meaning of the words to come. When Jesus says "*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.*"¹⁹ He is only saying what Jews already understood: that the Law can be reduced to the relationships which the Law implies and of which the prophets remind. Everything depends upon that. Perhaps the radical-ness of his message depends more upon the expectations of the people of the messiah rather than the message he bore.

Still, for some reason Jesus is seen as a religious threat and is arrested for sedition, tried by the religious authorities for blasphemy, transferred to the Roman-Jewish authority, Herod, and eventually sent to the Roman authority, Pontius Pilate – the only authority possessing the death penalty. There, for yet more unknown reasons, in the Temple complex built by Herod's father, according to the Christian scriptures, he is scourged, humiliated and then crucified. Some days later his followers begin to claim that he has been raised and that he is the long-expected messiah of Israel. They preach this message to

¹⁷ The name *Pharisees* literally means 'the separated ones'. Most were convinced they alone were God's *true* people and so they kept themselves apart from others while remaining within the society. The Essenes on the other hand literally separated themselves and moved out into the desert, a move for which we thank them because, while doomed, it did give us the Dead Sea Scrolls.

¹⁸ Interestingly enough, two of Jesus' main named followers were a tax collector and a Zealot (Matthew and Simon); must have made for some interesting campfire discussions.

¹⁹ This is further reinforced by Paul in *Romans 13:8-10*;

first to Jews, within synagogues and in the street then they take it on the road, to other Jewish communities around the Holy Land and then around the 'world'.

The End Of The Road

So Judaism and the early 'messianic' Jews (what we would consider 'the early Church') continued on parallel paths in a somewhat uneasy truce, until at some point the Jewish leaders decided to expel the sect from the synagogues, setting them on a dependent yet totally separate development. The Jews were back to practicing a more traditional form of Judaism; the Christians continued to practice Jewish worship but with a decidedly Christian understanding of those practices, expanding it beyond those communities into a purely Gentile world.

For the Jews, this all came to a crashing halt about 40 years later. As effective as Rome was at adapting to local customs, she was just as effective at crushing local customs and customers. [The year



Figure 8: Arch of Titus - the sacking of the Temple

66 saw the beginning of an uprising in Judaea which was brutal in the extreme. The future emperor Vespasian was appointed to crush the rebels, which he and his son Titus were able to accomplish. Four legions were assigned to Judaea; the neighboring province of Syria, also possessed four. This was a mighty military muster in a relatively small part of the empire.] The Zealots, unwilling to work with any non-Jewish authority ran into the problem

many small cultures encountered with Rome: extreme world-wide organization and communication, as well as a massive, well-trained fighting force. Though they put up a fairly effective resistance it was no match for the long-term resources and procedures of the Romans. Finally trapped at Masada (one of Herod's mountain-top fortresses), they chose to die rather than surrender. For their part, Rome, being unsatisfied with that outcome could not let it go and began the systematic leveling of things Jewish, especially Jerusalem. Their salted/scorched-earth policy meant the leveling of Jerusalem and the Temple as well as the dispersal of the Jews from Israel in an event known as the *Diaspora* (Greek for 'scattering'). With its Temple's destruction in 70 AD, Judaism as we know it was born.²⁰

Putting It All Together

The Romans really put us on the map. They basically designed the Western world we understand today. Geographical names, roads, cities, law – you name it they established the precedent for the Western world. That said, what the Romans really brought to the table was stability. A strong central government which was at peace with itself (most of the time) and even when it was not, had a bureaucracy which outlasted them all.

Israel manages through the transition from Greek to Roman occupation, with the Jewish leadership relatively intact. Under the Romans, the practice of Judaism, while not necessarily flourishing is not suppressed, at least not for the first 100 years or so. In fact Jewish communities are expanding all around the empire, and taking on converts. Within this milieu develops the Judaism most people are familiar with from the Christian Scriptures, that is, the Judaism of the last 20 or so years of the ancient

²⁰ For a small insight into the understanding of the character see *Daniel 3:26-45*.

times and the first 70 or so of the new era. There is a mix of rabbinic and priestly worship, with an understanding of a sacred and a practical aspect to the Law.

That is not to say that this Judaism does not bear the marks of all of the last 5 centuries. Concepts, deeper understandings if you will, have developed as to the nature of life, death, and the Law. These concepts have created divisions within Judaism which have given rise to sects which co-exist under a relative truce. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, and the Zealots all make a claim to understanding and living out of the Law. Some see freedom of worship as more important than civil freedom; others see the two equated while others see both as a moot point, because the sacred is completely above of the profane political world. Some see cooperation as the best route; others, revolution.

Into this fray comes an itinerate rabbi, pointing out the best and the worst of these groups. He gathers followers from all groups and all socio-economic levels. He speaks a message most familiar to his audience and he challenges them to re-find their connection with the sacred, and to return back to the true Faith in God. He comes not to un-do the old ways but to 'fulfill' them, give them back the fullness of their meaning. He is a prophet like the prophets of old, speaking of a future based on the present approach to God, speaking of destruction and hope. He is not alone in this, there have been many before and would be many after him, but his becomes a lasting message. He is exchanged for a Zealot who led an assault on a Roman outpost; he is crucified between two other rebels. He is proclaimed 'alive' and his followers begin a journey which will take them from a small back-water province into the very heart of Rome herself.

"Nautius Maximus his name was. Mmm. Promised me the known world he did. I was to be taken to Rome, housed by the Forum. Slaves, asses milk, as much gold as I could eat. Then he, having his way with me he had...VOOM! Like a rat out of an aqueduct."

Mrs. Cohen, *Life of Brian* (1979)

"All right, but apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

Reg, *Life of Brian* (1979)

"Be wise, Judah. It's a Roman world. If you want to live in it, you must become part of it...I tell you, Judah, it's no accident that one small village on the Tiber was chosen to rule the world...It wasn't just our legions...No, it was fate that chose us to civilize the world - and we have. Our roads and our ships connect every corner of the earth, Roman law, architecture, literature and the glory of the human race."

Messala, *Ben Hur* (1959)

"You have the spirit to fight back but the good sense to control it. Your eyes are full of hate, Forty-One. That's good. Hate keeps a man alive. It gives him strength. Now listen to me, all of you. You are all condemned men. We keep you alive to serve this ship. So row well, and live."

Qunitus Arrius, *Ben Hur* (1959)