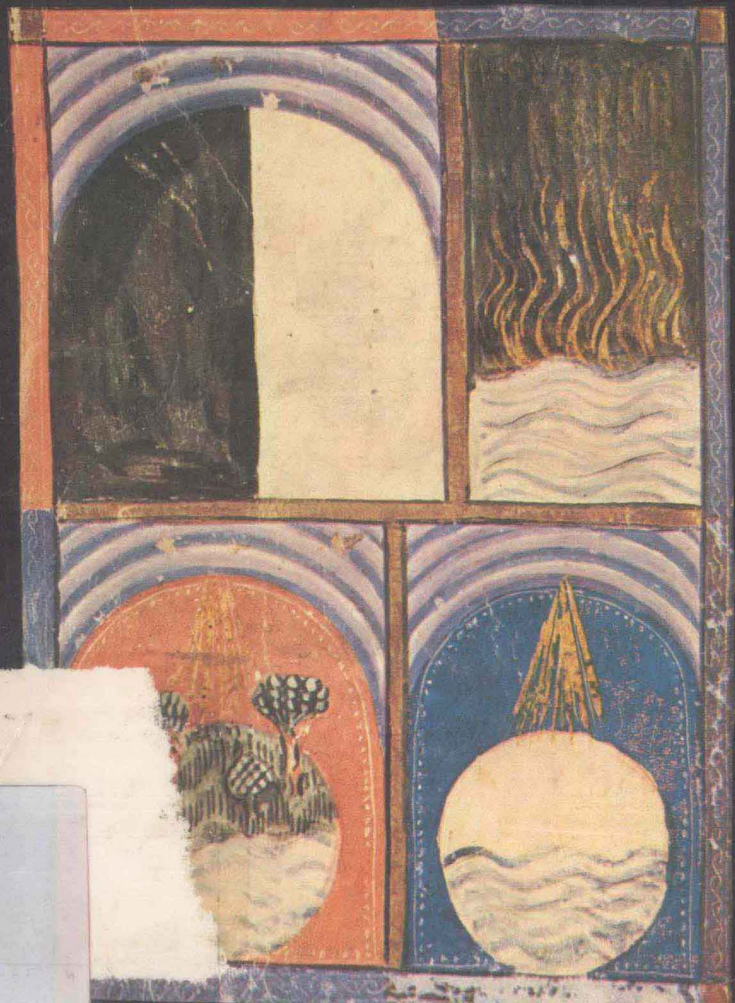




Judaism

a Pelican Original Isidore Epstein





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JUDAISM

A HISTORICAL PRESENTATION

Isidore Epstein



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JUDAISM

Rabbi Dr Isidore Epstein was educated at Jews' College in London – the Jewish theological seminary of the British Commonwealth – and the University of London where he obtained the B.A. Hons. Degree in Semitics (First Class) and the Doctorates of Philosophy and of Literature. After serving for some years as Rabbi of the Middlesbrough Hebrew Congregation, he was appointed in 1928 Lecturer in Semitic Language at Jews' College and became its Principal in 1945. A prolific author, he edited the thirty-six volumes of the Soncino edition of *The Babylonian Talmud in English*, and has written monographs on Jewish medieval scholars, as well as significant works on Jewish religion and ethics of which *Judaism*, in the Epworth Press Great Religions of the East series, is among the earliest, and *The Faith of Judaism* and *Step by Step in the Jewish Religion*, a book for young readers, are the latest. His other writings include contributions to the 1950 edition of *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, of which he was the Advisory Editor for the Jewish sections, and to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1958 Edition). Dr Epstein died in 1962.

TO
GERTRUDE
MY WIFE

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PREFACE

THIS book is by no means a history of the Jews; neither is it an account of the contributions of the Jewish people to human civilization and progress. It is essentially concerned with Judaism as a religious and a distinctive way of life which it seeks to present against a background of 4,000 years of Jewish history from Bible times to the establishment of the modern State of Israel in our own days. Beginning with the migration of Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation, from Ur of the Chaldees, the book proceeds to trace the origin, growth and steady development of Judaism – its beliefs, its doctrines – ethical and religious – its hopes, aspirations, and ideals. It also discusses the spiritual movements and influences which have helped to shape the Jewish religion in its varied manifestations, and describes the contributions made in turn by a succession of prophets, legislators, priests, psalmists, sages, rabbis, philosophers, and mystics, whereby Judaism came to be the dynamic religious force it is today.

The book makes no pretensions to being exhaustive either in scope or treatment. Considerations of space have crowded out episodes and names which would otherwise have figured in the account; but even within these limitations it is hoped that the reader will gain a glimpse into the unique panorama of Judaism, with its vast treasure-house of thought and action, which has succeeded in registering itself in the religion, law, and morals of more than one civilization.

The author is only too conscious that not all his assertions and assessments of the various events, situations, and personages that pass under review in these pages will command the assent of all readers. The traditional standpoint, which he frankly avows, determined in particular his interpretation of the biblical period as well as his appraisal of the Jewish movements, ancient, medieval and modern, of which he treats in this work. At the same time he has sought to set down accurately the facts which he saw fit to select for the purposes of this work, and to be objective as far as possible in his presentation of them.

The footnotes at the end of each chapter give the references as well as additional information relevant to the context, and

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occasionally advance arguments in support of a view adopted in the body of the text. Yet these notes have been kept down to a minimum in order to avoid wearying the reader. A selected bibliography has also been included for the benefit of those who by reading the book may be stimulated to further study. The scriptural passages are cited according to the numeration of the Hebrew Bible, that of the Revised Version being placed within square brackets. References to tractates of the Babylonian Talmud are prefixed by the abbreviation T., and those of the Jerusalem Talmud by T.J.

I.E.

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS

HALF-WAY between Baghdad and the head of the Persian Gulf, some ten miles west of the present course of the Euphrates, where today stands the Mound of Bitumen, called by the Arabs Al-Mukayyar, lay the ancient city of Ur. With a population ranging from 250,000 to 500,000 engaged in agriculture, manufacture, and commerce, the city was the capital of the Sumerian Empire, which during the middle of the third millennium B.C., extended from Assur and Arbela to the Persian Gulf, and from the Lebanon to Susa. British excavations at Ur, directed by Sir Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934, have revealed to the world the high level of civilization and material culture the city enjoyed during the heyday of its existence. But this glory was not destined to last. Elamite hordes sweeping down from their mountain fastness across the Persian Gulf attacked Sumeria, and in 1960 B.C. Ur went down in disaster and shame.

A Sumerian lamentation over the fall of Ur, discovered at Nippur in 1900, describes 'the all-annihilating destruction' wrought by the invaders. The city's walls were razed to the ground, its buildings reduced to ashes, and its very gates filled with the bodies of the slain. Both weak and strong perished by famine or were overtaken in their houses by fire; whilst those who managed to survive were scattered far and wide. Families were broken up. Parents abandoned their children, and husbands their wives.¹

Among those who escaped the cataclysm was an Aramean nomadic family, whose original home had been at Haran,² in north-west Mesopotamia, on the Belikhi, a tributary of the Euphrates, but who for some time, probably attracted by the prosperity of Ur, had taken up residence in that capital city. At the head of this refugee family was Terah, and back to Haran did Terah with his sons and kinsmen make his way. But he did not intend Haran to serve him for more than a mere temporary halting-place. This was a period in which the whole

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region was in a state of turmoil and general unsettlement. While the Elamites were reducing Sumeria from the south-east, the Amorites were overrunning it from the west, and Haran lay on the route of this westerly incursion. Faced with such conditions, Terah might well have felt the impulse to remove himself and his household as far as possible from this centre of unrest; and certainly no better refuge could be found than the secluded hill-country of central and southern Canaan. Terah, however, died in Haran, and the succession to the headship of the family fell naturally to Abram, his eldest son. But Abram had different ideas from his father. Terah, sharing the normal religion of his time, was a polytheist; Abram a monotheist. Terah worshipped a congeries of idols which in all probability included the moon-god, Sin, the chief deity at both Ur and Haran; Abram broke with idolatry and turned to the service of the one and only God whom he recognized as the Creator of heaven and earth.

Monotheistic beliefs and tendencies existed before Abram arrived on the scene. But these had little in common with Abram's monotheism. Unlike the deities of other religions, as for example, the Sumerian high-god Anu and the Babylonian universal-god Shamash, Abram's God was not a Nature god – a sky- or sun-god – subservient to Nature; nor was he a territorial god restricted to a particular locality or country. As the Creator of Heaven and earth and all that is therein, the God of Abram was independent of Nature and of any geographical limitations. Furthermore, unlike other deities, Abram's God was essentially an ethical God to whom the doing of justice and righteousness was of supreme concern.

How Abram first arrived at this conception of God – a conception which had been appropriately described as 'ethical monotheism' to distinguish it from all other forms of monotheism – we are not told. Perhaps he reached it by way of speculative reason, as others have come by their own particular monotheistic conceptions, and his own innate nobility of character, as evidenced by the Biblical story, may have led him to attribute to the Deity he worshipped those very moral qualities which he strove to realize in his own life. Or, possibly

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the whole of his religious faith might have come to him by means of some inner illumination, a mystical experience, a revelation. In any event, his deliverance from Ur proved a turning-point in his spiritual progress. Sensitive to the Divine, he felt his escape was providential, and soon the conviction grew upon him that he had been preserved to the end that he might become the founder of a new nation – a nation which was to bring the knowledge of God to the world, and the blessing which flows from such a knowledge to all the families of the earth.

With this conviction fixed in his mind, Abram detached himself with his wife and household from the heathen environment of Haran,³ and resumed the family trek towards Canaan interrupted by his father's death. But over and above the material motives which had determined his father's choice of that land, Canaan had a special spiritual appeal for Abram in that it was eminently suitable for the fulfilment of the destiny to which he believed himself to have been appointed. Whilst the secluded nature of the hill-country would make it possible for him to serve his God in comparative peace, the position of Canaan on the crossroads through which passed all-important trade routes of the ancient world made it a unique centre for the spreading of his new faith to a multitude of peoples.

Proceeding south along the eastern bank of the Jordan, Abram and his family crossed the river into Canaan and reached Shechem (the modern Balatah, some twenty-seven miles north of Jerusalem), where he learned in a revelation that the land he had entered and chosen as his new home was the very land which had been predetermined in the counsels of God to be given to him and his descendants.⁴ Thence he moved further south through the hill-country towards the Negev, making on his way converts to his new faith. This was, indeed, something revolutionary, as the idea of converting people from evil-doing to faith in God and righteous living was entirely unknown before Abram.

Coming from the other side of the Euphrates, Abram and his family became known in their new surroundings as Hebrews, a term usually derived from a root meaning 'the other side',

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although the identification of this term with the roaming Habiru (or Khabiru), who made their appearance in Western Asia between *c.* 2000 and the eleventh century B.C., is not at all improbable.

After a temporary sojourn in Egypt owing to a famine in Canaan, Abram returned to the Negev and finally settled in the plain of Mamre in the neighbourhood of what later became known as Hebron. There he experienced a revelation confirming what he had divined from the very beginning that his deliverance from Ur was a special act of providence, directed towards a definite purpose: 'I am YHWH⁶ (the Lord) that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees to give to thee this land to inherit it' (Gen. 15. 7). This promise was ratified subsequently by a divine covenant with Abram by virtue of which he was to become the founder of a new nation, chosen by God – chosen for the sake not of domination, but of universal service. This twofold significance of the covenant – national and universal – was further enforced by the rite of circumcision which accompanied and sealed it. Primarily intended as a national mark of consecration to the service of God, the rite provided for the inclusion within its scope of all strangers who were willing to join the Abramic nation in this communion of service (Gen. 17). Furthermore, in order to emphasize the universal element in this national rite, the Patriarch's name, Abram, was changed on his circumcision to Abraham. Literally meaning 'the father of a multitude [of nations]', this new name signified that the promises under the covenant went far beyond those who were the Patriarch's physical descendants, and embraced all the families of the earth, who were to be blessed in him and in his seed.

Abraham's work for God was carried on after him by his son Isaac, and after Isaac by Jacob, with both of whom God renewed the covenant with all the promises it entailed. Jacob, after a mysterious experience of wrestling with an angel, was renamed Israel, a term denoting 'the champion of God'; and this name, essentially religious in connotation, was ultimately to replace the name Hebrew by which the descendants of the Abrahamic family were known.

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Jacob had twelve sons who became the progenitors of the Twelve Tribes, who for some time constituted the people of Israel. With Joseph, one of Jacob's younger sons, the destiny of the Abrahamic family entered the arena of history. Through a combination of events and circumstances Joseph rose from slavery to become Viceroy of Egypt at the time when Egypt was under the domination of the Hyksos (Foreign Chiefs), who had made themselves masters of the country since *c.* 1730 B.C. Of north-west Semitic stock, they were closely akin to the Hebrews, and this made it possible for a Hebrew like Joseph to rise to power in the Egyptian court. Urged by famine in Canaan, his family joined him and was assigned as a place of settlement the district of Goshen near Avaris (later, Tanis), the capital of the Hyksos. The expulsion of the Hyksos invaders by Ahmose about 1580 B.C. brought about a change in the fortunes of the Hebrews who, because of their racial affinities, were suspected of Hyksos sympathies, and before long the former Viceroy's kinsmen, who in the meantime had greatly increased in number, were reduced to a slavery, which as time went on became increasingly inhuman and degrading.

The worst phase of the oppression was inaugurated by the great conqueror Thothmes III (1485-1450), who as a result of a series of brilliant campaigns extended his empire to the upper reaches of the Euphrates, and whose reign was marked by cruel forced building operations. The revolt of the Egyptian semitic subject-states which followed his death, involving the whole of Syria and Palestine, led his son and successor Amenophis II (1450-1421) to institute the most ruthless measures against the Hebrew slaves, whom their oppressors had now every reason to fear more than ever; and nothing seemed at that time to stand between them and their complete destruction.

It was at this critical moment in the history of the children of Israel that there arose for them a national liberator in the person of Moses. The adopted son of an Egyptian princess, identified by some with Hatshepsut, the sister of Thothmes III, Moses was brought up in the royal court, and thus spared the experience of slavery. But his own good fortune did not make