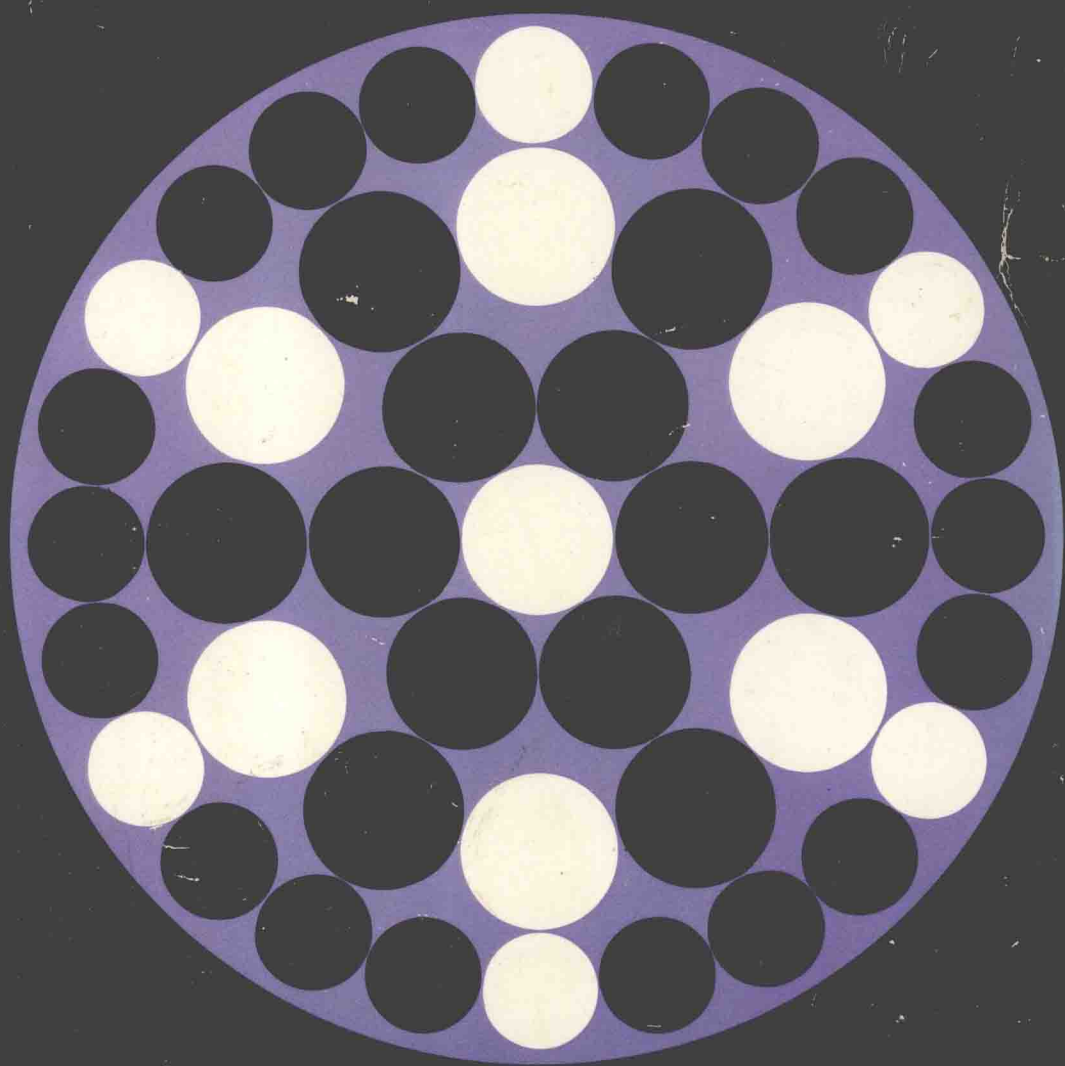


# The Way of Torah

AN INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM  
FOURTH EDITION

Jacob Neusner



THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MAN SERIES

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# The Way of Torah

## *An Introduction to Judaism*

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FOURTH EDITION/COMPLETELY REVISED

**Jacob Neusner**  
*Brown University*

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Religion Editor: Sheryl Fullerton  
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*for Ernest S. and Sarah Frerichs*

Colleagues, friends, companions, with whom it is a joy to share life

## Foreword

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF MAN series is intended as an introduction to a large, complex field of inquiry—human religious experience. It seeks to present the depth and richness of religious concepts, forms of worship, spiritual practices, and social institutions found in the major religious traditions throughout the world.

As a specialist in the languages and cultures in which a religion is found, each author is able to illuminate the meanings of a religious perspective and practice in a community. To communicate this meaning to readers, who have had no special training in these cultures and religions, the authors have attempted to provide clear, nontechnical descriptions and interpretations of religious life.

Different interpretive approaches have been used, depending upon the nature of the religious data; some religious expressions, for example, lend themselves more to developmental, others more to topical studies. But this lack of a single interpretation may itself be instructive, for the experiences and practices regarded as religious in one culture may not be the most important in another.

The Religious Life of Man is concerned with, on the one hand, the variety of religious expressions found in different traditions and, on the other, the similarities in the structure of religious life. The various forms are interpreted in terms of their cultural context and historical continuity, demonstrating both the diverse expressions and commonalities of religious traditions. Besides the single volumes on different religions, the series offers a core book on the study of religious meaning, which describes different study approaches and examines several modes and structures of religious awareness. In addition, each book presents a list of materials for further reading, including translations of religious texts and detailed examinations of specific topics.

During a decade of use the series has experienced a wide readership. A continuing effort has been made to update the scholarship, simplify the organization of material, and clarify concepts through the publication of revised editions. The authors have been gratified with the response to their efforts to introduce people to various forms of religious life. We hope readers will also find these volumes “Introductory” in the most significant sense: an introduction to a new perspective for understanding themselves and others.

FREDERICK J. STRENG  
*Series Editor*

# Introduction

The study of Judaism requires us to survey thousands of years of continuous human existence. The issue of this book is how to define and interpret the continuity of a religion-culture. For over the span of thirty-five hundred years of an ongoing life of a group, much changes, and little, if anything, remains the same. When we speak of "Judaism," therefore, we must ask ourselves what we mean. We wonder how we may define the whole despite the diversity of the parts. One solution to this problem is to take full account of diversity and change. It is not to pretend that many things are really one, but to find a way of describing, analyzing, and interpreting diversity within a realm of commonality. That is to say, there never has been a single encompassing Judaism present beneath the accidents of difference. There have been only diverse Judaisms. But these Judaisms do form a whole in that, seen all together over time and all at once in comparison to other religion-cultures, they do bear traits that distinguish all of them from all others and permit us to identify them as a cogent set of systems.

To give a homely example of the problem exemplified through the study of Judaism, we may ask ourselves how we define the college or university at which we study. Is it only we, here and now? Or is it everyone who has come and will come? Do we define it as only the buildings, not the people? As the faculty, in flux and change? As the alumni, who connect and depart and reconnect? *What* do we define when we say what we think our college or university really is? We have to specify the facts that we require to describe our entity; we have to analyze those facts so as to gain perspective upon them, and that requires us to compare one set of facts to another set of facts of the same kind. We have then to interpret those facts in a broader context of meaning, to make sense of this thing, this college, this university, in its still greater social and historical setting. In philosophy, knowing how to define the river as distinct from the water that rushes by will also tell us what we do when we study Judaism.

The approach I work out here requires us to describe not Judaism as a whole but *a Judaism*, that is to say, a single religious system composed of three elements: a world view, a way of life, and a social group that, in the here and now, embodies the whole. The world view explains the life of the group, ordinarily referring to God's creation, the revelation of the Torah, and the goal and end of the group's life in the end of time. The way of life defines what is special about the life of the group. The social group, in a single place and time, then forms the living witness and testimony to the system as a whole and finds in the system ample explanation for its very being. That is *a Judaism*.

How shall we know when we have a Judaism? The answer to that question draws us to the data—the facts—we must locate and describe, analyze, and interpret. The first requirement is to find a group of Jews who see themselves as "Israel," as the Jewish People who form the

family and children of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, the founding fathers and mothers. That same group must tell us that it uniquely constitutes "Israel," not *an* Israel, the descriptive term we use. The second requirement is to identify the forms through which that distinct group expresses its world view. Ordinarily, we find that expression in writing, so we turn to the authoritative holy books that the group studies and deems God-given, that is, the group's Torah or statement of God's revelation to Israel. Since we use the word Torah to mean biblical books, starting with the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), we must remind ourselves that the contents of the Torah have varied from one Judaism to the next. Some groups regard as holy what other groups reject or ignore. A more suitable word than Torah, therefore, is *canon*, meaning the collection of authoritative writings. The canon contains much of the group's world view and describes its way of life. We of course err if we treat as our sole source of facts only what is in writing. A group expresses its world view in many ways, through dance, drama, rite and ritual; through art and symbol; through politics and ongoing institutions of society; through where it lives, what it eats, what it wears, what language it speaks, and the opposites of all these: what it will not eat, where it will not live. Synagogue architecture and art bear profound messages, powerful visible messages. The life cycle, from birth through death, the definition of time and the rhythm of the day, the week, the month, and the year—all of these testify to the world view and the way of life of the social group that, all together, all at once, constitute a Judaism.

In the long history of the Jews, groups of people who regarded themselves as "Israel"—that is, groups of Jews—have framed many Judaisms. What permits us to make sense of the history of these Judaisms is the fact that, over time, we are able to identify periods in which a number of Judaisms competed and other times in which a single Judaism predominated. The historical perspective therefore permits us to sort out the Judaisms that have flourished, keeping each by itself for the purpose of description, analysis, and interpretation, and also to hold the Judaisms together in a single continuum, over time and space, so that we can make sense of the whole. By recognizing that a given Judaism came into existence at a time in which Judaisms competed, and by understanding that at another point a single Judaism defined the Jews' way of life, world view, and social existence as a distinct entity, we may understand how the diverse facts—writings, theologies, definitions of what matters in the everyday life, and doctrines of the end of time and the purpose of life—fit together, when they cohere, or do not fit together, when in fact they prove discrete.

Let me specify the periods of the history of Judaism. I see four: first, an age of diversity, then a era of definition, then a time of essential cogency, and finally a new age of diversity. Since the definition rests on historical facts of the life of Israel, the Jewish people, I have to list the five facts of political history that mark off everything else.

*The ancient Israelites, living in what they called the Land of Israel, produced Scriptures that reached their present form in the aftermath of the destruction of their capital city and Temple. Whatever happened before that time was reworked in the light of that event and the meaning imputed to it by authors who lived afterward. All Judaisms, from 586 B.C.E. forward, appeal to the writings produced in the aftermath of the destruction of the First Temple. Therefore, we must regard the destruction of that Temple as marking the beginning of the formation of Judaism(s).*

c.E. 70 The Destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the  
Romans

*After 586 B.C.E. the Jews' leaders—the political classes and priesthood—were taken to Babylonia, the homeland of their conquerors, where they settled down. A generation later, Babylonia fell under the rule of the Persians, who permitted Jews to return to their ancient homeland. A small number did so, where they rebuilt the Temple and produced the Hebrew Scriptures. The Second Temple of Jerusalem lasted from about 500 B.C.E. to c.E. 70, when the Romans (by that time ruling the entire Middle East, including the Land of Israel, mainly through Rome's own friends and allies) put down a Jewish rebellion and, in the war, destroyed Jerusalem again. The second destruction proved final and marked the beginning of the Jews' history as a political entity defined in social and religious terms but not in territorial ones. That is, the Jews formed a distinct religious-social group, but all of them did not live in any one place, and some of them lived nearly everywhere in the West, within the lands of Christendom and Islam alike.*

c.E. 640 The Conquest of the Near and Middle East and North Africa by  
the Muslims

*The definition of the world in which the Jews would live was completed when the main outlines of Western civilization had been worked out. Christianity dominated both western and eastern Europe, including the lands west of the Urals in Russia. Islam commanded North Africa and the Near and Middle East, and in later times conquered parts of India and much of the Far East—Malaysia and Indonesia in particular—as well as southern Africa. During this long period of time, the Jews in Christendom and Islam alike ordinarily enjoyed the status of a tolerated but subordinated minority, and were free to practice their religion and sustain their separate group existence. Of still greater importance, both Christianity and Islam affirmed the divine origin of the Jews' holy book, the Torah, and acknowledged Israel's special status among the nations.*

1787 and 1789 The United States Constitution and the French Revolution

*The United States Constitution and the French Revolution marked the beginning of an age in which political change reshaped the Western world. Politics became essentially secular, and political institutions no longer acknowledged supernatural claims of special status accorded either to a church or to a religious community. The individual person, rather than the social group, formed the*



*focus of politics. In the case of the Jews, the turning meant that the Jews would be received as individuals and given rights equal to those of all others, at the same time that "Israel" as a holy people and community would no longer enjoy special status and recognition.*

Now for the history of Judaism by its principal periods of formation, let me offer the following scheme:

The first age of diversity	ca. 500 B.C.E. to C.E. 70
The age of definition	ca. C.E. 70 to 640
The age of cogency	ca. 640 to 1800
The second age of diversity	ca. 1800 to the present

*The first age of diversity* begins with the writing down, in more or less their present form, of the Scriptures of ancient Israel, beginning with the Five Books of Moses. Drawing upon writings and oral traditions of the period before the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., the surviving leaders of that Temple and court, the priests, produced most of the books we now know as the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament" or "Tanakh"). Specifically, these books include first the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses. Then come the prophetic writings from Joshua and Judges through Samuel and Kings and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, as well as the twelve smaller books of prophetic writings. Third are the Writings, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Five Scrolls, Chronicles, and the like. During this same period a number of diverse groups of Jews, living in the Land of Israel as well as in Babylonia, to the east, and in Alexandria in Egypt, to the west, took over these writings and interpreted them in diverse ways. Hence, during the period from the formation of the Torah-book to the destruction of the Second Temple, there were many Judaisms.

*The age of definition*, beginning with the destruction of the Second Temple in C.E. 70, saw the diverse Judaisms of the preceding period give way, over a long period of time, to a single Judaism. That was the system worked out by the sages who, after 70, developed a system of Judaism linked to Scripture but enriched by an autonomous corpus of holy writings in addition. This Judaism is marked by its doctrine of the dual media, according to which the Torah was formulated and transmitted in both writing and memory. The doctrine of the dual Torah, written and oral, then defined the canon of Judaism. The Written Torah encompassed pretty much the same books that the world at large knows as the Old Testament. The Oral Torah added the writings of the sages, beginning with the Mishnah, a philosophical law code produced about C.E. 200, and two massive commentaries on the Mishnah. It also included the two Talmuds, one produced in the Land of Israel about C.E. 400 and called the Yerushalmi, or Jerusalem Talmud, the other produced in Babylonia about C.E. 600 and called the Bavli, or Talmud of Babylonia. In that same age, alongside Mishnah-commentary came systematic work on Scripture. Organized around particular books of the Written Torah, commentaries on Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were written, parallel to works organized around particular tractates of the Mishnah. They

were specifically Sifra, to the book of Leviticus, Sifré, to Numbers, another Sifré, to Deuteronomy. These books contain statements attributed to the same authorities who stand behind the Mishnah. They are to be dated sometime between 200 and 400. Further commentaries, Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah, discursive works on themes in Genesis and Leviticus, were edited between 400 and 450. Pesiqta deRab Kahana, a profoundly eschatological treatment of topics in Pentateuchal writings, was produced at about 450. All of these writings, organized first around the Mishnah and then around Scripture, comprised the first works of the Oral Torah. That is to say, the teachings of the sages, originally formulated and transmitted in memory, were the written-down contents of the Oral Torah that God had revealed—so the system maintained—to Moses at Sinai. During the age of definition, this Judaism of the dual Torah reached its literary statement and authoritative expression.

*The age of cogency* is characterized by the predominance of the Judaism of the dual Torah from the far West in Morocco to Iran and India, and from Egypt to England. During this long period, the principal question facing Jews was how to explain the success of the successor-religions, Christianity and Islam, which claimed to replace the Judaism of Sinai with a new testament on the one side, or a final and perfect prophecy on the other. Both religions affirmed but then claimed to succeed Judaism, and the Judaism of the dual Torah enjoyed success, among Jews, in making sense of the then-subordinated status of the enduring people and faith of Sinai. Though heresies took shape during this long period, the beliefs of the new systems responded to the structure of the established one. Heresies rejected principal doctrines, for example, the doctrine of the dual Torah or of the Messiah as a faithful sage.

*The second age of diversity* is marked not by the breaking apart of the received system but by the development of competing systems of Judaism. In this period new Judaisms came into being that entirely ignored the categories and doctrines of the received system, not responding to its concerns but to other issues altogether. Now the principal question the new systems addressed concerned matters other than those that the received Judaism of the dual Torah, with its powerful explanation of the Jews' status in the divine economy, found urgent. The particular points of stress, the self-evident answers to urgent questions, came at the interstices of individual life. Specifically, Jews needed to explain to themselves how they, as individuals able to make free choices on their own, also found a place within the commanded realm of the holy way of life and world view of the Torah. The issue again was political, but it concerned not the group but the individual. Judaisms produced in modern times answered the urgent question of individual citizenship, just as the Judaism of the long period of Christian and Muslim hegemony in Europe, Africa, and western Asia had taken up the then equally pressing question of the society's subordinated (but in its own view, holy) status as Israel in Islam or in Christendom.

My main interests in this book are (1) to see Judaism as a whole, as a system, and (2) to understand the principal epochs in the history of that system, particularly the second and the third of the three epochs I

have outlined. I want the student to know more than isolated facts about this holiday or that custom. I want him or her to know that within Judaism, holidays, beliefs, practices, and ways of living and of shaping the life cycle all express a single and whole conception of the world, of the human being, of the character of humanity, and of the supernatural meaning of the Jewish people. For Judaism—a Judaism—is not “this and that” but is whole and encompassing. It is a mode of creating and interpreting the world. It is a system of holiness in which each and every element relates to all other elements, and together they form a holy way of life and a holy world in time and beyond. This particular mode of the sacred, moreover, is so shaped as to make sense of and respond to the distinctive human situation of the Jewish people; hence, our attention focuses on the “ecology” of Judaism, a phrase I shall define in a moment. I am certain that when students are able to enter through their imaginations into the human situation of the Jews, they will also grasp in some measure the human meaning of Judaism as a mode of interpreting and shaping that human situation. Beyond that point, as students of religion, we cannot go. For that is the frontier between the realms of interpretation and understanding, which belongs only to the Judaists, the believers and practitioners of Judaism. The distinction between the Judaists, people who live by and believe in a Judaism, and the Jewish people, who are all those born of a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism, becomes important at the end of Part I.

Obviously, by using the word *ecology*, borrowed from the natural sciences, I want to introduce an unusual metaphor into the study of religions. Ecology is a branch of biology concerned with the interrelationships of organisms and their environments. By “ecology of religions” I mean the study of the interrelationship between a religious way of viewing the world and living life, and the historical and social situation of the people who view the world and live life in accord with the teachings of their religion. The Jewish people are a very small group, spread over many countries.

One fact of their natural environment is that they form a distinct group in diverse societies. A second fact is that they constitute solely a faith-community in that they have few, if any, shared social or cultural traits. A third fact is that they look back upon an exceptionally long, and in some ways painful, history.

A world view, to be suitable for the Jews, must make sense of their unimportance and explain their importance. It must deal with the issues of the long history of the group. Above all, it must make sense of the continuing life of the group, persuading people that their forming a distinct and distinctive community is important and worth carrying on. The interplay between the political, social, and historical life of the Jews and their conceptions of themselves in this world and under the aspect of God’s will and Torah constitutes the focus for the “ecological” inquiry that, I think, makes the study of Judaism accessible.

I may have made a mistake in introducing this metaphor—ecology of Judaism—into the intellectual framework of the book. But I think it is important to find language to focus upon the curious interplay between the history of Judaism and the history of the Jewish people, and to do

so without reducing the history of Judaism to a minor detail in the history of the Jewish people. Judaism cannot be studied, or even defined, outside the historical experience of the Jewish people. But it also cannot be studied solely within that experience—as if there were no such thing as Judaism, but merely the evanescent culture of the Jewish group. There *is* such a thing as (a) Judaism, which may stand definition and analysis in the same way that any other religion may be defined and analyzed. A Judaism is no less difficult to define and describe than any other religious system. It holds no mysteries accessible only to people who originate in a Jewish family, and nothing about Judaism is inaccessible to the accepted methods and procedures of the academic study of religions.

What is it, then, that makes Judaism especially interesting? In my judgment, it is that curious interplay between the social and historical environment of the Jews, on the one side, and the religious character of Judaism, on the other. The one defines the questions; the other answers them. In the interplay between question and answer is the work of ecology of religions—if, as I hope, I have not erred in converting to the present purpose a metaphor that may convey nothing but confusion. Time will tell.

This fourth edition, completely revised, suggests that my approach to the academic study of religion, exemplified by the case of Judaism, will enjoy a hearing into the twenty-first century. This book began, in its first edition, in 1969. The third edition coincided with the celebration of the bar mitzvah of my firstborn in 1978. The fourth edition goes to press as he enters his senior year of college and goes on to his serve as an ensign in the United States Navy, and as his two brothers wend their way through college and his sister proceeds through high school. As my children, Samuel, Eli, Noam, and Margalit, have grown and changed in the nearly twenty years since this textbook began its life, so have my wife, Suzanne, and I, she in her art, I in my labor of learning. The fact that this book takes up a fresh perspective on a subject on which I have worked for so long testifies to my goal: to remain still a beginner, still a learner, everything new and fresh every morning.

J.N.  
Providence, Rhode Island  
July 28, 1986  
My fifty-fourth birthday

# Acknowledgments

I derived much benefit from the anonymous readers of the third edition of *The Way of Torah*, who provided specific corrections and also offered more general comments on how to make this a still more useful textbook than it had been. I have also incorporated corrections proposed in a personal letter, 16 August 1979, by Professor Charles Liebman, Department of Political Science, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. These were most valuable and were offered in a generous spirit. I have already acknowledged in earlier editions the help of colleagues and students as well. Since I hope there will be a fifth edition, I earnestly solicit the critical comments of colleagues, teachers, and students alike, who may be able to assist me in making this a still more perspicacious and informative textbook than I have succeeded in doing to date.

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**xix**  
*Acknowledgments*

## *Related Reading*

Students will find extensive readings from primary sources complementing the several units of this book in its companion anthology, *The Life of Torah: Readings in the Jewish Religious Experience*. Appropriate selections illustrative of the main points of *The Way of Torah* are in *The Life of Torah* as follows:

### ***The Way of Torah***

History and Definition of Judaism, pp. 1–39

Mythic Structure of Classical Judaism, pp. 41–62

Way of Torah: A Way of Living, pp. 63–111

Continuity and Change in Modern Times, pp. 113–156

### ***The Life of Torah***

The Jewish Heritage, pp. 5–16

The Unity of God, Four Aspects of Torah, pp. 17–60

Rabbis: The Men of Torah, Torah as a Way of Life, pp. 61–154

Torah in America: Movements in American Judaism, Torah in the State of Israel, Zionism and Judaism, pp. 155–234

# Table of Dates

ca. 1200 B.C.E.	Exodus from Egypt under Moses; conquest of Canaan under Joshua
1200–1050	Period of the Judges
ca. 1050	Samuel
ca. 1013–973	David, king of Judah and then of Israel as well
973–933	Solomon
ca. 930	Kingdom divided
ca. 750	Amos
ca. 735	Hosea
ca. 725	Isaiah
722	Assyrians take Samaria, exile ten northern tribes
639–609	Josiah
620	Deuteronomic reforms
ca. 600	Jeremiah
ca. 590	Ezekiel
586	Jerusalem Temple destroyed; Judeans exiled to Babylonia
ca. 550	Second Isaiah
538	First return to Zion under Sheshbazzar
520	Zerubbabel, Haggai lay foundation for Temple
515	Temple completed
ca. 444	Ezra reads Torah
331	Alexander takes Palestine
168	Judaism prohibited by Antiochus IV; Maccabees revolt
165	Temple regained, purified by Maccabees
ca. 100	Community founded at Dead Sea, produces scrolls
63	Romans conquer Jerusalem, which becomes part of the Roman system
37–4	Herod rules as Roman ally
	Hillel
ca. C.E. 40	Gamaliel I heads Pharisees
70	Destruction of Jerusalem by Romans
	Yohanan ben Zakkai founds center for legal study and judicial and administrative rule at Yavneh
ca. 80–110	Gamaliel heads academy at Yavneh
	Final canonization of Hebrew Scriptures
	Promulgation of Order of Prayer by rabbis
115–117	Diaspora Jewries revolt against Trajan
120	Akiba leads rabbinical movement
132–135	Bar Kokhba leads messianic war against Rome
	Southern Palestine devastated
140	Rabbis reassemble in Galilee, restore Jewish government



ca. 200	Judah the Prince, head of Palestinian Jewish community, promulgates Mishnah
ca. 220	Babylonian academy founded at Sura by Rab
ca. 250	Pact between Jews and Persian king, Shapur I: Jews to keep state law; Persians to permit Jews to govern selves, live by own religion
ca. 250	Presentation of Tractate Abot, the sayings of the founders, as the Mishnah's first apologetic
297	Founding of school at Pumbedita, in Babylonia, by Judah b. Ezekiel
ca. 300	Closure of the Tosefta, corpus of supplementary material in exegesis and amplification of the Mishnah
ca. 330	Pumbedita school headed by Abbaye, then Raba, lays foundation of <i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
ca. 400	Talmud of the Land of Israel completed as a systematic commentary on four of the Mishnah's six divisions, in particular Agriculture, Seasons, Women, and Damages (omitted: Holy Things and Purities)
ca. 400	Rab Ashi begins to shape <i>Babylonian Talmud</i> , which is completed by 600
ca. 450	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i> , commentary out of Genesis on the meaning of Israel's history, and <i>Leviticus Rabbah</i> , historical laws of Israel's society developed out of the book of Leviticus, are completed
ca. 475–500	<i>Pesiqta deRab Kahana</i> , set of essays on the salvation of Israel in the messianic time, which is expected fairly soon, worked out
630–640	Moslem conquest of Middle East
ca. 700	Saboraim complete the final editing of <i>Babylonian Talmud</i> as a systematic commentary on four of the Mishnah's six divisions (excluded: Agriculture and Purities)
ca. 750	<i>Problems</i> of Ahai Gaon, compilation of legal discourses
ca. 780	Death of Anan b. David, leader of Karaite revolt against rabbinic Judaism
882	Birth of Saadya, leading theologian, author of <i>Doctrines and Beliefs</i>
ca. 950	<i>Book of Creation</i> , mystical work, brief statement on how phenomena of world evolved from God
1040	Birth of Rashi, greatest medieval Bible and Talmud commentator
1096	First Crusade; Jews massacred in Rhineland by crusader armies
1138	Birth of Moses Maimonides
1141	Death of Judah Halevi
1179	Third Lateran Council issues anti-Semitic decrees
1180	Maimonides completes code of Jewish law
1187	Saladin recaptures Jerusalem from crusaders
1190	Riots at Lynn; massacre of Jews at York, England
1233	Inquisition at Aragon
1244	Ritual burning of Talmuds at Paris by church authorities