

Torah Judaism's most sacred text, consisting of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible

Israelite an early name for the Jewish people

Judaism the first religion based on worshipping one God, developed among the ancient Israelites

tradition an inherited or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior

Israel the Israelites' kingdom; divided about 930 B.C.E. into two kingdoms called Judah and Israel

Torah scrolls are written in Hebrew, the language of both modern Israelis and ancient Israelites. The image includes a *kippah*, a religious head covering, and a Torah pointer called a *yad* (hand), used to follow along in the Torah reading.



1. What We Know About the Ancient Israelites

Historians rely on sources of information such as artifacts and writings, including the **Torah** and the other parts of the Hebrew Bible. From such sources, scholars have learned much about the ancient **Israelites** and the development of **Judaism**.

The Torah The Torah contains written records and teachings of the Jews, as well as hundreds of commandments that direct moral and religious conduct. As often happened in ancient times, accounts of the history of the Jewish people were handed down orally from **generation** to generation. Later on, these stories and **traditions** were written down.

Besides the Torah and the other parts of the Hebrew Bible, historians look at additional sources of information about events and ideas in early Jewish history. Historians often examine archaeological artifacts as well as written records to gain a better understanding of life in this time period.

The Early History of the Israelites According to the Torah, the ancestor of the Israelites was a man named Abraham who lived in Ur (present-day Iraq) in Mesopotamia. Around 1950 B.C.E., Abraham and his family migrated to Canaan, a region of land along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Settling in Canaan, the Israelites herded animals and became farmers.

About 1800 B.C.E., according to the first book of the Torah, a famine forced many Israelites to flee from Canaan to Egypt. For a while, the Israelites prospered in Egypt, but **eventually** they were enslaved. In time, one of their leaders, Moses, led the Israelites in their escape from Egypt.

For 40 years, says the Torah, the Israelites traveled in the wilderness, until they settled once again in Canaan. By 1000 B.C.E., the Israelites had set up the kingdom of **Israel** in Canaan. Israel was ruled by King Saul, then by King David, and finally by David's son, King Solomon. David united the Israelites into one kingdom. Solomon built a magnificent temple in the capital city, Jerusalem. When Solomon died, in about 930 B.C.E., the kingdom of Israel separated into two kingdoms—Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

2. Important Jewish Leaders

The Hebrew Bible tells of the lives of early Jewish leaders. Four key leaders were Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon.

Abraham Abraham is called the “father of the Jews.” One central idea of Judaism is the belief in a single God. According to the Torah, Abraham introduced this belief to the Israelites, ancestors of the Jews. This was a new idea in the ancient world. At that time, most people worshiped many gods and goddesses.

According to the Torah, God spoke to Abraham, telling him to move his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan, later called the Land of Israel. God also promised to make Abraham the father of a great nation and to bless this nation. Abraham did as he was told, and some of his descendants became known as the Jewish people.



Moses The greatest leader of the Israelites was Moses. The Torah describes how he led his people out of **slavery** in Egypt. Moses told the Israelites that God would lead them to Canaan, the “Promised Land,” in exchange for their faithful obedience.

Moses also gave Judaism its **foundational** teachings. The Torah states that God gave Moses ten important commandments, or laws, engraved on two stone tablets. These teachings became the basis of Judaism. The books of the Torah are also called the Five Books of Moses.

David and Solomon After escaping from Egypt and traveling in the wilderness, the Israelites returned to Canaan. It was here that they created a united kingdom, called Israel, during the reigns of King Saul, King David, and King Solomon.

King David established **Jerusalem** as a holy city and the capital of Israel. King Solomon built Jerusalem’s great First Temple. To the Israelites, and later the Jews, the city of Jerusalem and its Temple became powerful **symbols** of their faith in God.

You will now learn more about each of these four important leaders. Let’s find out what the Hebrew Bible tells about them.

The ancient Jewish leaders Abraham and Moses (at left), and David (at far right), were portrayed in these 13th-century statues at the Chartres Cathedral in France. In this way, Christianity honored its Jewish origins.

slavery the treatment of people as property. People who are denied freedom in this way are said to be enslaved.

Jerusalem the holiest city of the Jews; capital of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and then Judah