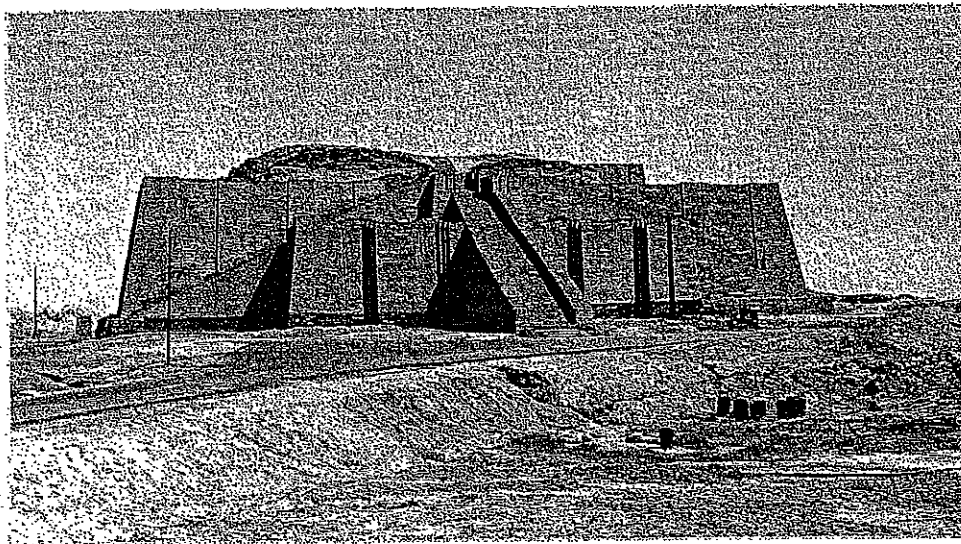


2

How Judaism Began

Do you know how many relations you have? Perhaps you belong to a small family. Or you may have many brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles. The list could go on and on. But none of your relations would have been born if it had not been for your great-grandparents. And many more – going back hundreds of years.

The Jewish people believe that they can trace their beginnings back to one person – a man called Abram. They call him the Father of the Jews. He lived nearly four thousand years ago, in the country now called Iraq.



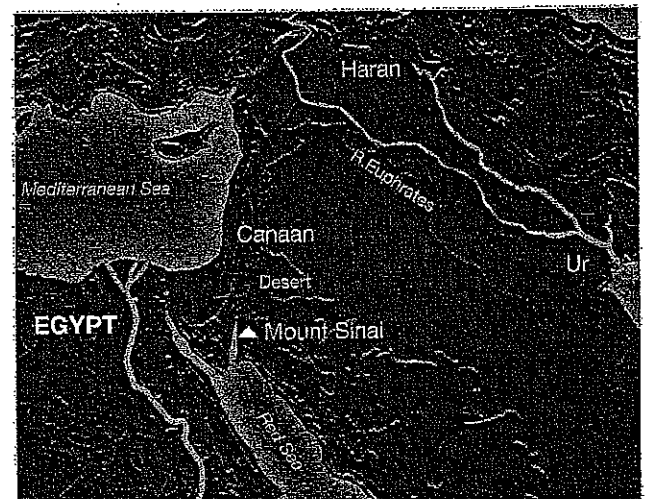
◀ A ziggurat at Ur

Archaeologists have found the remains of the ancient city of Ur. The photograph shows one of their huge temples, a ziggurat, where the sun and the moon were worshipped as gods.

Most people at that time worshipped many gods, but Abram came to believe there was just one true God. He taught his family that this God cared for them. So they should worship only Him.

When Abram was old, God told him to leave his home and travel to a new country. God promised that He would give Abram this land and that his descendants would become a great nation. In return, Abram and all his family were to obey and worship Him.

▼ A map of the Middle East in Abraham's time. He was born in Ur and moved to Haran when he was young



Abram was puzzled. He had no children. How could he have any descendants now? However, he trusted God. So he and his wife, Sarai, set off towards Canaan. His nephew's family went too.

The whole family settled in Canaan and were known as Hebrews. This comes from a word meaning 'from the other side', because they came from the other side of the River Euphrates. They did not forget their promise to worship God.

And then Sarai had a son in her old age. They were amazed. They called the boy Isaac, which means 'laughter'. Abram was given a new name, Abraham, 'father of the people'.

Sarai laughed because she did not believe she would actually have a child, and when she did, she was overjoyed. She was then called Sarah.

Abraham thought it was his religious duty to sacrifice Isaac, his firstborn son. Sadly, this was a common custom at the time of offering something precious back to the gods. The Bible says that God sent an angel to stop him. Abraham then sacrificed a ram, instead.



◀ *God tested Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice Isaac. When Abraham was ready to do this, God sent an angel to stop him. Abraham sacrificed a ram instead*

- 1 Make up a travel diary that Abraham might have written about his journeys.
- 2 a) Write down the meanings of the names Abraham and Isaac.
b) Why was Isaac given this name?
c) Find out the meaning of your own name.
- 3 Abraham was called a Hebrew. Why?
- 4 Which of the following words do you think describe Abraham? Give a reason for each choice.
brave; foolish; old; obedient; cruel; friendly; trusting; bloodthirsty.
- 5 Read Genesis 22: 1–14. Abraham was willing to offer his son in sacrifice.
a) How did God show Abraham that he did not want such cruel offerings?
b) Write about something very important to you that you would only give up if you had to.

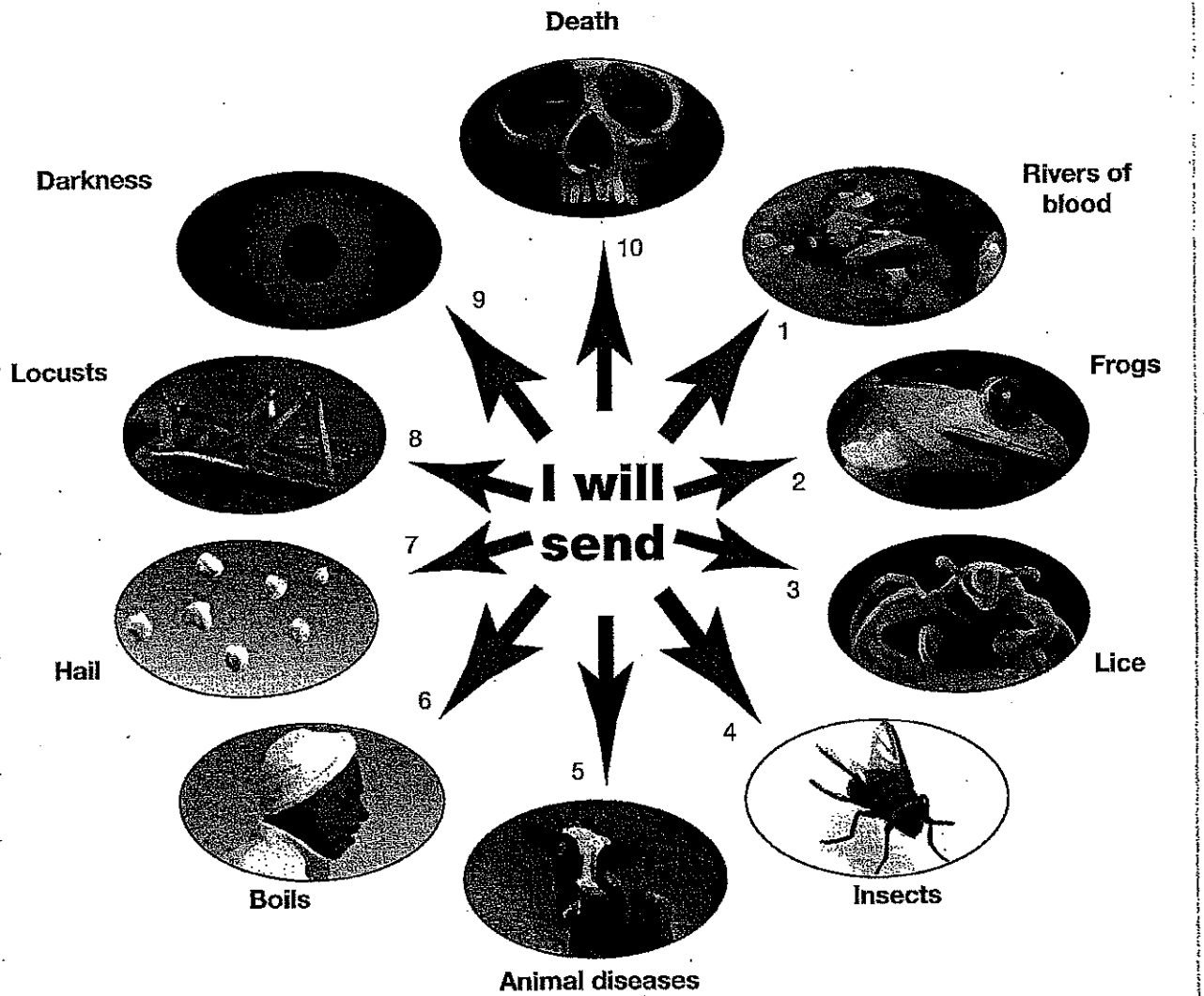
Many years after Abraham's death, there was famine in Canaan. The Hebrews moved to Egypt, where there was plenty of food. At first, everything went well. But later the Egyptians used them as slaves to build two great new cities.

Later, the Hebrews became known as the Israelites after one of their ancestors called Israel (Prince of God). Their great leader was Moses. He asked the Pharaoh of Egypt to set the slaves free. The Pharaoh refused; slaves were useful. At last, however, God sent ten horrible plagues and the Pharaoh finally let the Israelites go.

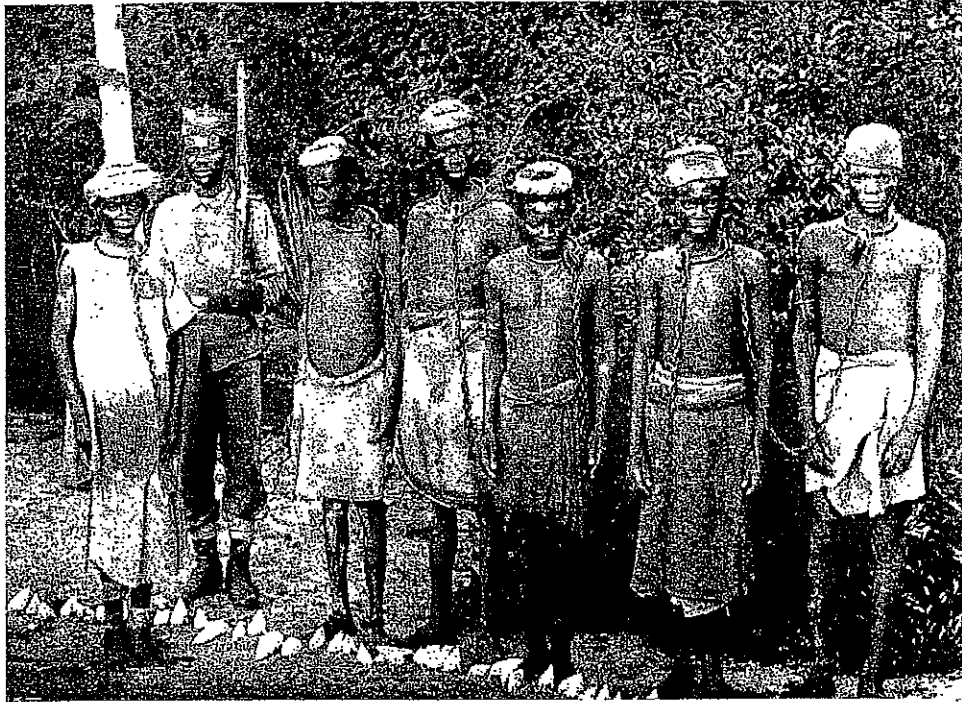
They escaped into the desert, an event known as the Exodus. There, they lived for forty years, while trying to return to Canaan. Moses died during this time. So a man called Joshua led them back into the land God had promised to them.

The people were divided into twelve tribes and the land was shared between them. Each tribe was named after one of Abraham's great-grandsons. The name 'Jew' comes from the tribe of Judah.

The Book of Exodus describes the ten plagues that followed each other, causing destruction in Egypt until the Pharaoh let the Hebrews go. These fit very closely with the conditions of severe drought and freak weather conditions – low water in the Nile turns red, cloudy and polluted (like blood); frogs come onto dry land; infection and insects abound with the lack of water; storms and darkness occur as the weather starts to change; locusts seek out food where they can; disease spreads and kills off many ('the firstborn'). The point is that Moses felt called by God to set his people free just when these disasters were striking. Was the miracle in the timing?



▲ The ten plagues which struck the Egyptians. See how each is more horrible than the one before



◀ African slaves waiting to be sold

The ancient Israelites were unique among all the nations of the ancient world. Only they told a story that their ancestors had been slaves. Other people would have tried to forget this and would have invented a more glorious beginning. Many nations claimed that they had descended from a great hero, a warrior, a king, or a god. The Romans said they came from the two children of the war god, Mars. The Jews said they came from the slaves in Egypt. This honesty suggests that the story is based upon truth. The events of the Exodus were told and retold, down the generations, as *the* event that started the Jewish faith.

Centuries later, other slaves were to hear the story of the Exodus, of Moses and the plagues, and they took comfort from them. When African slaves were taken across the sea to the USA, and the Caribbean, they heard about the Bible. Right at the start of this holy book was a story about escaped slaves, slaves helped by God! They told their own stories about Moses and sang their own songs about him. These are known as Negro Spirituals, and music such as the Blues and Jazz came from this style. A famous singer of Spirituals was Paul Robeson.

- 1 What was the Exodus?
- 2
 - a) How do modern scholars explain the Ten Plagues?
 - b) Do you think this helps people to believe the Bible story, or does it take something away?
 - c) 'The miracle might have been in the timing.' What does this mean?
- 3
 - a) How did many ancient people describe where their tribe or nation had come from?
 - b) What was different about the ideas of the Jews?
 - c) Why did African slaves sing songs about Moses, years later?
- 4 Make up an imaginary tribe that you would like to belong to. Then
 - a) Write an origin story, claiming to have come from something great.
 - b) Write a different story, claiming to have been helped by someone great when your people were in serious trouble.
- 5 Hebrew, Israelite, Jew – different names for the same race, at different times. Where did each name come from?