

# From Sumeria to Brooklyn

## *The Long, Strange Trip of the Jewish People*

### *Chapter 1: A Search for Identity*

#### **A Question of Jewishness**

What does it mean to be a Jew? Is Jewishness a matter of birthright, of nationality, of religion, of culture or is it a matter of self-identification? I would offer that the answer has varied through historical epochs. Perhaps each generation needs to define the answer for itself. But even then questions arise: Must all Jews share the same definition? What happens when these definitions conflict? And what happens when our “internal” definition of Jewishness conflicts with that of the outer world?

I believe that we can gain perspective on these questions through an examination of our common history. Further, I think that from our history we can take a sense of identity

#### **Whose Identity Is It?**

Some dictionary definitions of the word identity include: *condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another; the state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions.*

The first definition implies that there are certain qualities that make us who we are. The second definition adds that these qualities differentiate us from all others. The third definition adds that circumstances may change, but we remain in essence who we are.

The Bible offers a famous definition of identity ) אהיה אשר אהיה *ehyeh asher ehveh*) often translated as “I am that I am” but which I understand should perhaps be translated as “I shall be that I shall be.” In either case the definition seems to imply that identity is intrinsic, something that we have in us from the start and that identity shapes what we will become. The triumph of nature over nurture, so to speak.

#### **Four Definitions of Identity**

During various periods our identity has been based on differing criteria:

- Race/People/Tribe(s)
- Religion
- Nation
- Culture

For each of these criteria, we can also look at they are accepted within the Jewish community or internally and outside the Jewish community or externally.

Since the Diaspora, Jews have been scattered around the world, inter-marrying with the people in every country where they have lived. There are American Jews and Israeli Jews, Argentinean Jews and Iranian Jews. In 1984 and 1985 and again in 1991, rescue operations resettled almost 36,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel<sup>1</sup>. Despite the apparent and obvious ethnic diversity among people who self-identify as Jews, there is a tendency to still refer to the existence of “a Jewish people.”



Figure 1 Ethiopian Jews carrying the Torah, image from <http://www.palestinefacts.org/>

The concept underlying this definition is that today’s Jews are descended from the ancient Hebrews, who settled in the land of Israel, becoming Israelites and Judeans. It is from this concept that all definitions of Judaism related to birth spring.

Until the gathering of archaeological date in modern times, what we know of ancient history came from a limited number of sources. The major source for ancient Jewish history was the Bible or the Tanakh. Secondary sources included the writings of authors such as Josephus. But each year we are learning more about ancient times.

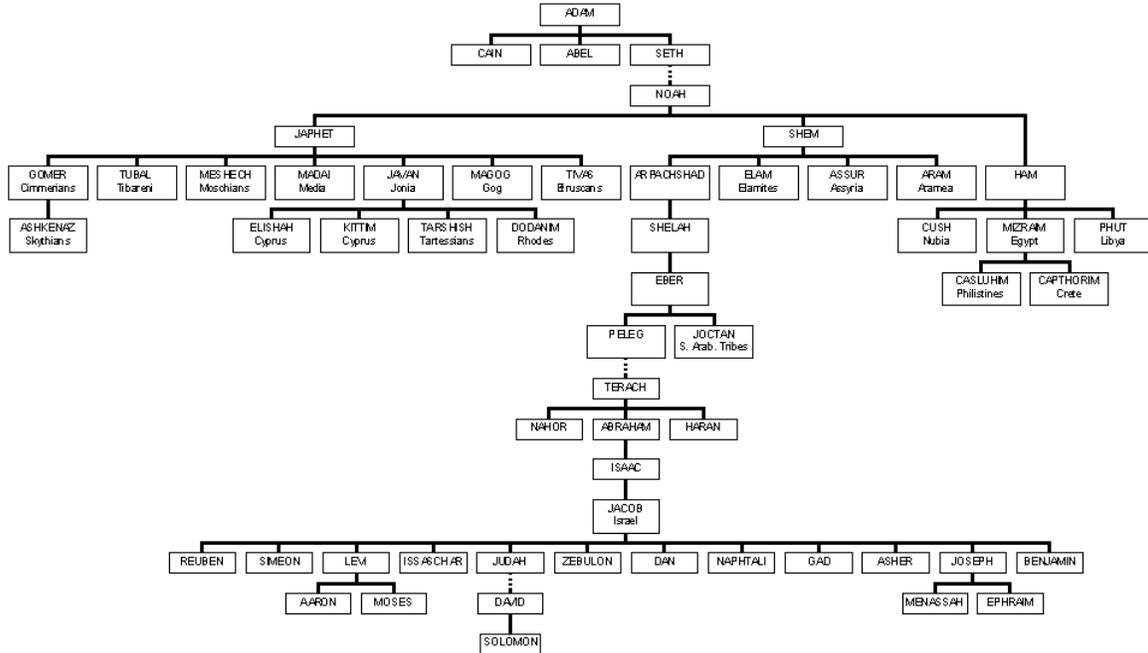
The Bible tells the story of a family. From Adam to Seth, Seth to Enosh, Enosh to Kenan, it is a story of generations. Noah comes in at generation 10 and Abraham at generation 20. Isaac is 21 generations removed from Adam, Jacob 22 generations and the founders

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ejhist.html>

of the twelve tribes of Israel are at generation 23. But what do we “know” about Adam, the founder of this family?

Old Testament genealogy and the peoples of the world  
 American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 75, No. 5, (Oct., 1973), p. 1657-1669  
 Note: CANANIAN (descendant of HAM not displayed because of size)



## The Things That You Are Liable to Read In the Bible, Ain't Necessarily So

A few years ago I would have said that no one really believes in the story of creation as told in the Bible. But I have lived long enough to hear the President of the United States say that the “jury is still out” on evolution and the three out ten Republican candidates for President say that they don’t believe in evolution. It is obvious that some, perhaps even many people still take the Bible as literal and accept the ancient genealogy including the story of the family.

Biblical literalists date the world as being around 6000 years old based on this genealogy. That contradicts strongly with what science tells us about the world. Why would the ancient Hebrews have made these stories up and put them in the Bible?



**Figure 2** Dinosaur's roam the Garden of Eden at Museum of Creation in Petersberg, Ohio.

Recent archaeological research, including the work of Dr. Juris Zarins, of Southwest Missouri State University, shows that the Adam and Eve story has linguistic roots in the ancient culture of Sumeria. Sumer is the name given to the ancient civilization that arose around the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE, the beginning of the Bronze Age and agricultural civilization<sup>2</sup>. Sumeria was a group of city states that learned how to raise crops in the fertile area between rivers ("Mesopotamia" meaning the land between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates.) "Edin" is the Sumerian word for an uncultivated plain and has been found written down in cuneiform records. The Bible describes the Garden of Eden as being bounded by the Tigris and the Euphrates and two other, now lost, rivers.

The word "Adam" has also been found in cuneiform, meaning something like "settlement on the plain."<sup>3</sup> The story of the Garden of Eden is one that predates the Bible. Further analysis of the words show that they come from an even older culture and, like the story of Cain and Able, recount the ancient conflict between hunters and harvesters.

The ancient Sumerians also had a myth of a First Man, called by the Sumerians "Adamu." In the Sumerian mythology, Adamu's fall is due to his NOT eating the food of immortality, which he is tricked into believing to be poisonous.

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th\\_millennium\\_BC](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_millennium_BC)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mega.nu/ampp/eden/roots.html>

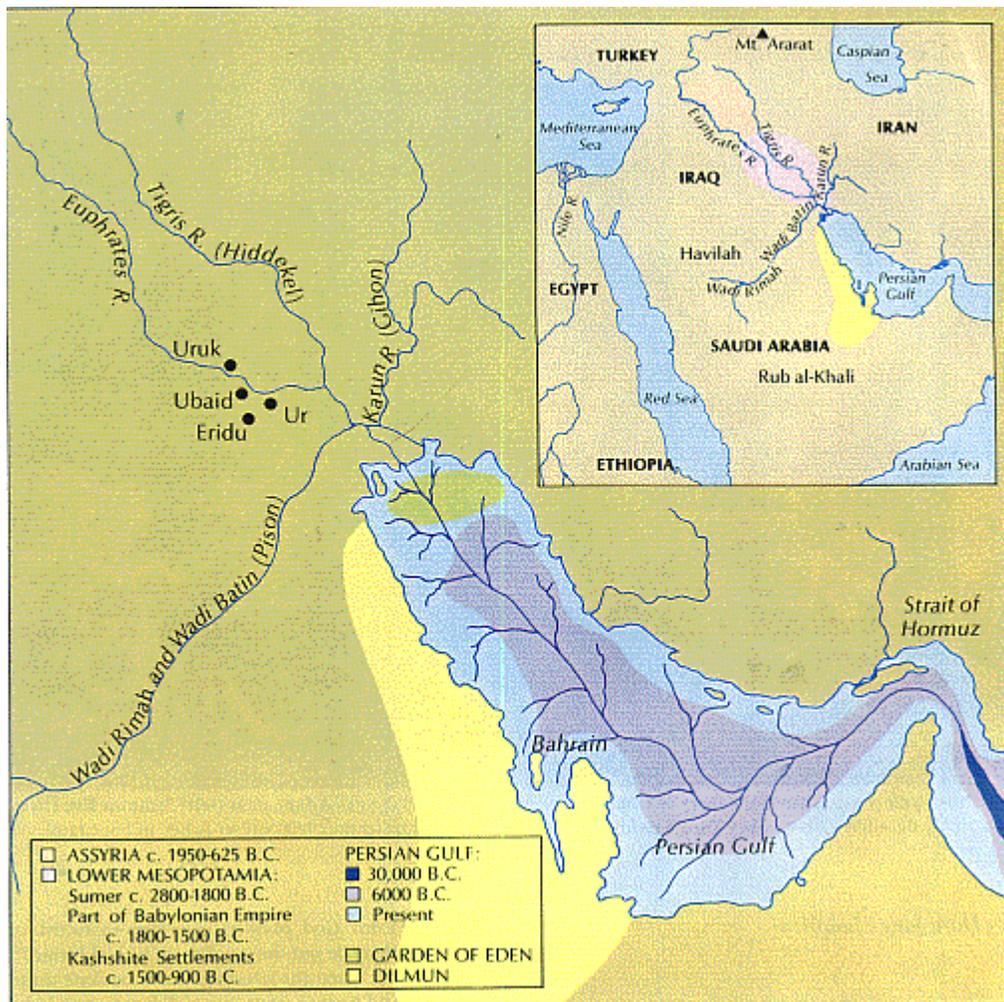


Figure 3 The area where the Garden of Eden was thought to have been in what is today modern Iraq.

There is even a correspondence to Eve. The Sumerian word for “rib” is “ti,” but the same word also means “to make live.” There is a healing goddess in Sumerian myths.

The stories that become part of Sumerian mythology seem to have a basis in fact or at least plausibility. Three ancient civilizations sprang up out of the Bronze Age, one in the Indus valley, one along the shores of the Nile and one in the land between the rivers. Because of the availability of water, crops could be grown. Being able to stay in one area permitted and indeed required the evolution of skills, what might be considered the “fruits of the tree of Knowledge.” You had to develop a calendar to know when to plant and when to harvest, you had to be able to write things down and to be able to count. Staying in one place require the construction of permanent settlements, which grew into cities. And you had to learn to defend yourself from those people still wandering.

The first people to do these things were remembered as being extraordinary beings and their stories became mythological. There may even have been a real “Adamu” but he wasn’t our exclusive ancestor and he wasn’t the First Man in the world.

It is not that 6000 years ago the first man was created; it is that 6000 years ago a civilization existed that had this creation myth.

So how did Sumerian mythology become part of the Bible? The easternmost city on the map is Ur, the birth city of Abraham. Ur was a Sumerian city-state ruled by the Chaldeans. Abraham, rejects the gods of the Sumerians and flees to the land of Canaan, south and west. Having fled from possibly the world's oldest civilization, the Abraham himself and then later the descendants of Abraham will make contact with Egyptians.

Abraham is credited with being the ancestor of the Israelite, Arab and the Edomite peoples. His ancestry of the Israelites through his wife Sarah and of the Arab peoples through Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden Hagar is well-known; the Edomites are descended from Abraham from his grand-son Esau.

Through his willingness to sacrifice, to submit to the Will of G-d, a Covent is made. The Covenant is between G-d and the descendants of Abraham, bestowing lands on them. *"On that day, God made a covenant with Abraham, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river the Euphrates." Genesis 15:18.*

That would include the modern State of Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and parts of modern-day Syria and Lebanon. The biblically described region also encompasses the Sinai Peninsula, which is widely believed to encompass the route of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt. Later on parts of Jordon are added.

Was there a real Abraham? There is no archaeological evidence. However there is evidence of a Hebrew people being in Egypt around 1400 BCE and leaving Egypt around 1250 BCE. The chronology and the details of the events are much disputed. That a people or group of peoples did leave Egypt and go to settle in Canaan is supported.

It is also known that Canaan was invaded and the coastal region conquered by a group of Sea People, presumably from Minoan Crete. These people would be called the Philistines, later the Palestinians. So the conflict was set. A group of people fleeing Egypt and going to settle in or return to Canaan would find a new people already there.

They would conquer and rename the land into the countries of Israel and Judea and be known as both Israelites and Jews or Hebrews as a linguistic designation.



**Figure 4** The sacrifice as painted by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn.

## A People Apart

Our ancient history has but set the stage. By 72 CE, the second Diaspora begins. The people that were dwelling in the land began 2000 years of exile and would separate into many groups living among many nations<sup>4</sup>.

 Israel	5,309,000
 United States	5,275,000
 France	492,000
 Canada	373,000
 United Kingdom	297,000
 Russia	228,000
 Argentina	184,000
 Germany	118,000
 Australia	103,000
 Brazil	96,000
 Ukraine	80,000
 South Africa	72,000
 Hungary	50,000
 Mexico	40,000
 Belarus	45,000
 Belgium	32,000
 Turkey	18,000–30,000
 Netherlands	18,000–30,000
 Poland	12,000–100,000
 Italy	30,000
 Chile	21,000
 Iran	11,000–35,000
 Ethiopia	12,000–22,000
 Azerbaijan	20,000
 Uruguay	20,000
 Spain	12,000-20,000
 Sweden	18,000

Are the Jews of Brazil and the Jews of Iran both the children of Moses? Are they of the same race and what does that mean?

Race refers to dividing people into groups based on characteristics or traits. Most racial categories are based on visible traits. Many scientists dispute the validity of race as applied to humans, stating that definitions of race are imprecise, arbitrary, derived from custom, have many exceptions, have many gradations, and that the numbers of races delineated vary according to the culture making the racial distinctions.”

The US Federal Government offers the following racial groups on the Census: “In October 1997, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced the revised standards for federal data on race and ethnicity. The minimum categories for race are

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jew>

now: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and White. Instead of allowing a multiracial category as was originally suggested in public and congressional hearings, the OMB adopted the Interagency Committee's recommendation to allow respondents to select one or more races when they self-identify. With the OMB's approval, the Census 2000 questionnaires also include a sixth racial category: Some Other Race. There are also two minimum categories for ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino and Not Hispanic or Latino. Hispanics and Latinos may be of any race.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the absence of a generally accepted Jewish race from most classifications, there have certainly been many times during history when Jews have been defined by non-Jews as a race having specific racial traits and qualities. Immediately coming to mind in the modern era are the Nazis and the Soviet Union. The Nazi's genetic mythology was not based in fact, but had horrendous results.

“As defined by the Nazi Nuremberg laws in 1935, a Jew was somebody who had at least three Jewish grandparents, regardless of religious affiliation or self-identification; or somebody with two Jewish grandparents who either belonged to the Jewish religion or was married to a Jew. People who did not belong to the Jewish religion but had two Jewish grandparents were Mischlinge (“crossbreed” of “mixed person”) of the first degree; those with only one Jewish grandparent were Mischlinge of the second degree.”<sup>6</sup>

Various Jewish groups have also accepted a definition that presupposes that Jewishness has a biological component. Orthodox and Conservative Jewish groups believe that Jewishness is passed on through the mother, matrilineal descent. Reform groups believe that either parent can pass the Jewishness on.

Is there any basis for this? Are there a particular set of qualities associated with Jewish parents? The answer is both yes and no.

Ashkenazi Jews score higher on IQ tests than other ethnic groups, including Sephardic and Oriental Jews. This phenomenon is reproducible and varies from 7% to 17%. Theories to account for include natural selection, culture, motivation and the consequence of Ashkenazi genetic diseases. Some of the more well-known genetic diseases that are more likely to afflict someone of Ashkenazi ancestry are Tay-Sachs and Bloom Disease. Less well-known diseases such as sphingolipid cluster and DNA repair cluster may actually increase IQ. I doubt that this is the case or that these comparatively rare diseases would have such a discernable effect of IQ, but I offer the theory anyway.

Regardless, Jews of Eastern European descent account for a very high percentage of the world's intellectual elite. “Ashkenazim have earned 27% of the Nobel Prizes awarded to Americans, 25% of ACM Turing Awards, and 26% of the Fields Medals. They account for more than half the world chess champions.”<sup>7</sup> This phenomena holds even when Jews

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/race/racefactcb.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mischling>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.lagriffedulion.f2s.com/ashkenaz.htm>

are transplanted from Europe to America; however Israeli Ashkenazi' scores are much closer to the norm.

## **Conclusions**

Not much is known about the pre-history of the “proto-Hebrews” before they are observed in Egypt. Based on (slim) cultural and linguistic information, it can be guessed that they originated in either northern or southern Iraq. The ancient Israelites may have resembled the modern Kurds in appearance. We are offered the datum that they dwelled for a time in Ur, the city of the Chaldeans. It is logical to assume that if they went from Iraq to Egypt they may well have passed through the land known then as Canaan and now as Israel.

The story of Abraham suggests that there may have been several interrelated groups of tribes entering the area at one time. One group entered the land of the Egyptians and dwelled there for centuries, emerging far more numerous. They would find not only other tribes living in Canaan, but also Greeks from across the sea. These groups lived together for a period of over a thousand years. This area was of critical geographical importance and was contested by numerous empires. Slavery and rape were not uncommon.

With the Diaspora, several ethnic sub-groups emerged, the largest being the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic groups. Ashkenazi have characteristics different from others, but there seem to be both genetic and cultural components to these differences.

## **Not A Race But A Nation?**

The word Jew refers back the tribe of Judah, that tribe that split off from the other tribes to form its own country. It is in some ways ironic that we refer to our selves as both Jews and Israelites when once these meant two different things.

## **The Land That David Conquered**

In 1993, a stele (upright carving, generally of stone or wood) was found in the ruins of an ancient city, once called Tell el-Qadi and today called Tel Dan. The Tel Dan stele<sup>8</sup>, dated to the 9th or 8th centuries BCE, is the oldest object that refers to the rulers of Israel as The House of David. The stele was erected by the Aramaean kings to celebrate a victory over Israel.

An even older stele, found in Egypt and dated to around 1200 BCE also commemorates a victory over the peoples of Canaan by the Pharaoh Merneptah.<sup>9</sup> These peoples are listed as Ashkelon, Gezer, Yanoam and Israel.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tel\\_Dan\\_Stele](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tel_Dan_Stele)

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah\\_Stele](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele)

From these two stele we know three things: There were people known by the name Israel as far back as 1200 BCE; these people were ruled by descendants of the House of David by 800 BCE and there was constant fighting over this land.

In fact our history while in this region is one of strife and warfare. We will fight the Egyptians, the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Philistines, the Babylonians, the Syrians and the Romans to name the most notable, There are also sundry related tribes such and the Midianites and the Moabites.

According to the Bible, the tribe of Midian is one of the tribes descended from Abraham by the concubine Keturah, who may or may not have been Hagar. The Midianites lived east of the Jordan River and east of the Dead Sea. Besides being related to the Israelites by a common ancestor, Abraham, they are also the people of Zipporah, wife of Moses. Jethro, father of Zipporah, is a priest of Midian. It is in the land of Midian that Moses sees the Burning Bush. There is some (scant) evidence that the name YHWH is the name of the god of the Midianites. Others describe the Midianites as polytheists.

So here we have a people of the same root stock as the Israelis, living outside of Israel, intermarrying with Moses, but also warring with the Israelis. Later on some of the Midianites would join the Israelites.

Israel, in turn would be a single nation from 1050 BCE to 920 BCE, under the kings Saul, David and Solomon, and then split apart based on tribal lines.<sup>10</sup> Judah and Benjamin have the southern land of Judea, while Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, Dan, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben and Gad, and some members of Levi who had no land allocation have the northern area of Israel. Why? The split was caused by taxes levied by Solomon and used to build the Temple and a lack of military support.

The tribe of Simeon is not mentioned and may already have been assimilated.

Judah, the southern kingdom, has Jerusalem and is ruled King Rehoboam. Israel, the northern kingdom is ruled by the rebel king Jeroboam, and has Bethel (or Beit El or Bet El) as a religious center.

There is considerable debate as to how divergent to the two states were in terms of religion. Certainly both were monotheists, but some scholars offer the view that the southerners, the Judeans, had more of an Egyptian influence while the northerners were closer to the older Canaanite worship of Elohim. This theory holds that the Judean priesthood was Mosaic, while the Israelite priesthood has the legacy of the Aaronite priesthood.

If one accepts the documentary analysis of the Bible, that the Bible had several authors and was written over a period of time spanning centuries, then we have a picture of two nations, with two royal houses, two different sets of religious beliefs, living side by side. One source is "Who Wrote the Bible."

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<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient\\_Israel#Divided\\_monarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Israel#Divided_monarchy)

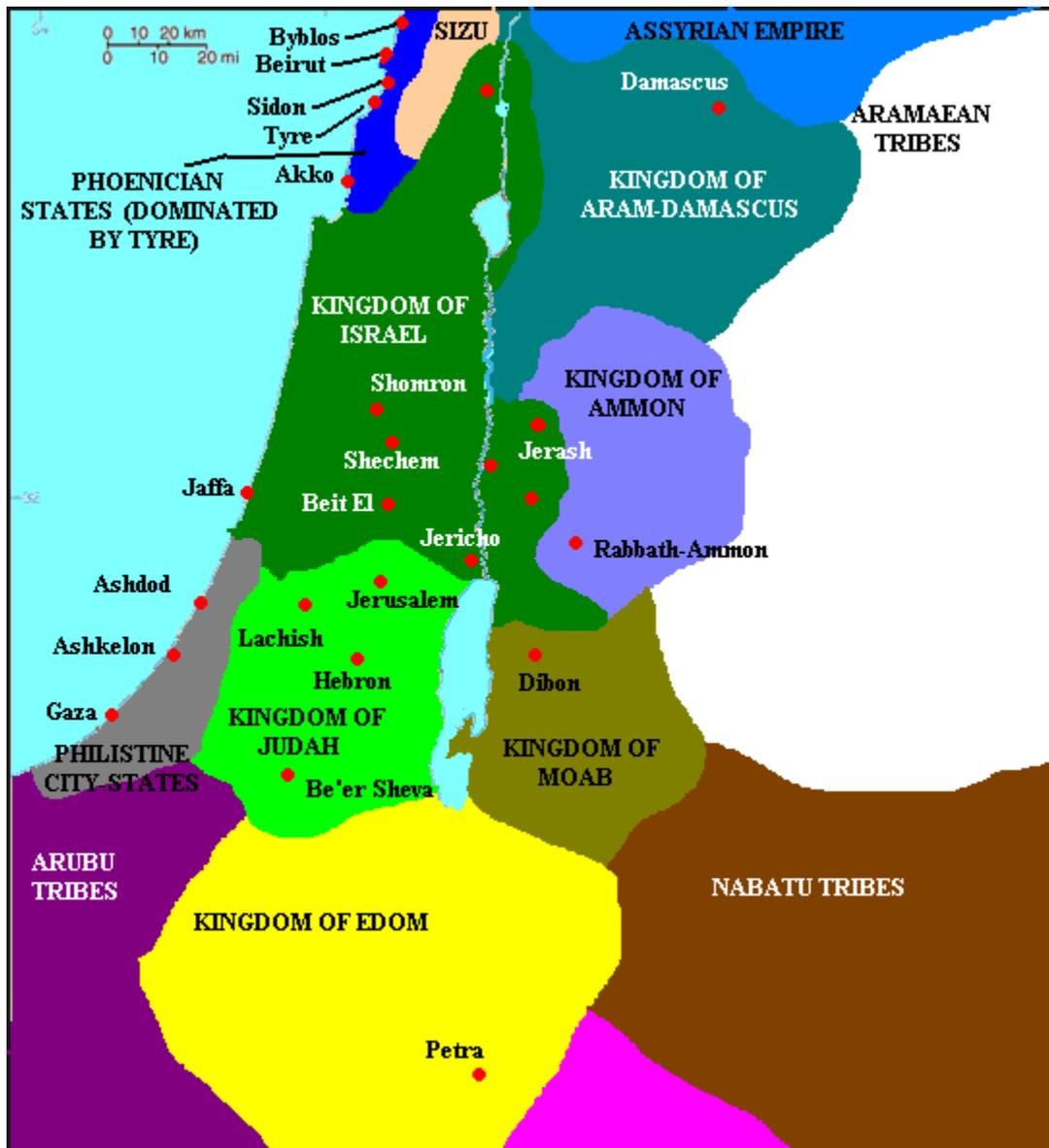


Figure 5 Ancient tribal areas.

Israel and Judah share a common heritage, but they have this heritage in common with other tribes in the region.

Looking at a timeline from ancient days to the modern era we see:

Earliest Date	Latest Date	Description	National Status
2000 BCE	1800 BCE	Prehistory, age of Abraham	Not a nation
1700 BCE	1500 BCE	Hyksos invasion, Canaanites enter Egypt	Not a nation
1600 BCE	1300 BCE	The Exodus, reenter Canaan	Not a nation

1050 BCE	920 BCE	Age of Kings	Nation
920 BCE	597 BCE	Divided land, Assyria conquers Israel	Nation
597 BCE	537 BCE	Babylonian Captivity	Not a nation
518 BCE	72 CE	Second temple era	Nation
72 CE	1947 CE	Diaspora	Not a nation
1948 CE	Current	Modern nation of Israel	Nation

If our history as a people goes from Abraham to the modern era, there has been a Jewish nation in one form or another for only about 25% of that time. I would further argue that if Israel ceased to exist, there would still be a Jewish people.

### **One Judaism?**

I was taught that Judaism was the first monotheistic religion and that the other Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam) derive from Judaism. Based on modern findings, I am less certain of that answer.

Monotheism is the belief in the existence of one deity, one God. For people in the desert, the Sun is a daily force. It is only logical that people in the desert would both fear and adore the most obvious force in their lives.

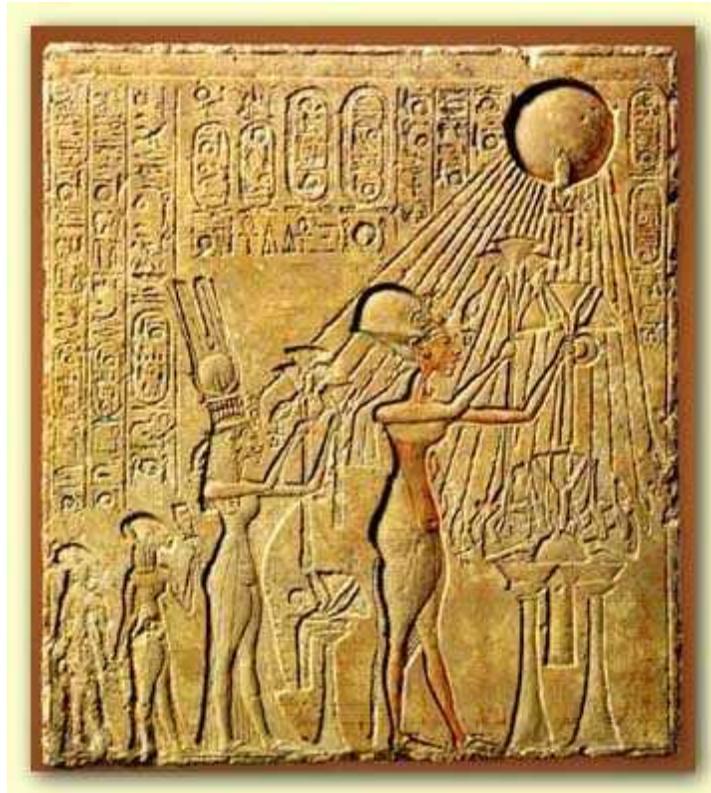
In Egypt a cult flourished briefly that worshipped one god, the sun, personified as Aten or Aton<sup>11</sup>. Aton became the deity of a monotheistic religion of that flourished during the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who took the name Akhenaton. The worship of Aton seems to have ceased shortly after the end of Akhenaton's reign.

Saying that Aton was a sun god may be an oversimplification. The solar disc may have been symbolic of the life-giving force. Regardless, Aton was a single deity and the followers of Aton were monotheists.

Akhenaton<sup>12</sup> (also Ikhnaton) ruled Egypt from 1353 (or 1351) to 1336 (or 1334). He attempted to impose a monotheistic religion on Egypt through military power. He was ultimately overthrown and disgraced. Did his reign overlap the period that the Hebrews were in captivity in Egypt? Perhaps. One theory is that the Pharaoh was forced to leave, but would return as none other than Moses. He would look for a people more inclined to accept his monotheistic theories and attach himself to the Hebrew slaves working on the pyramids at the delta of the Nile. Eventually he would these Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and back to their ancestral home of Canaan.

<sup>11</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aten>

<sup>12</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akhenaten>



**Figure 6 The worship of Aton.**

Even during the flight from Egypt, there would be conflicts between Moses, the former Pharaoh, and Aaron, the natural religious leader. Moses would be supported by the Levites, who were the only ones with swords. When Aaron's followers would worship their god, as represented by the Golden Calf, the followers of Moses would take up their arms and slay hundreds. Eventually a peace was negotiated where Aaron was recognized as a priest second in authority only to Moses. Aaron would lose both his sons, Nadab and Abihu on the very day of his consecration. After Aaron accepts the mantle of the priesthood, Joshua becomes Moses' political second.

The rift between Moses and Aaron would reemerge years later in the division between Judea and Israel. There have always been religious divisions within Judaism. Moses and Aaron, the competing priesthoods of Jerusalem and Bethel, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, the Essenes, the list goes on.

Until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Jews offered the sacrifice of burnt offerings. Leviticus details the exact manner in which such sacrifices are to be made. Even after the destruction of the Temple, the Samaritans continued to make korban or sacrifice.

Judaism was redefined during the priestly era, again during the rabbinic era and again during the modern era.

During the Haskalah, Reform Jews asserted that Jewishness was a religion, not a people. Zionists asserted that Judaism was also a form of nationalism, attached to the idea of a new Israel. Secularists asserted the Judaism was a cultural definition, attached to self identification.

### **The Cultural Definition**

I tried to find a definition of Culture that would be useful in this context. We can talk about language, religion, arts, science, philosophy and more as comprising culture. But what is there about Jewish culture that distinguishes it from the cultures around it?

Our languages include Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino. During the Haskalah, there was a movement away from Hebrew and the translation of the Bible into other languages. We have the rise of Yiddish and acceptance of Yiddish culture. At the same time, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (born Eliezer Yitzhak Perlman in Russia) championing the revitalization of Hebrew as a part of Zionism.

Jews contribute to the arts disproportionately to our numbers in society. This is almost universally true. But what is Jewish art? Is our definition so broad as to include both Jascha Heifetz and the Beastie Boys? If so, what makes a piece of music or art Jewish? Is it the ancestry of the artist, something about the topic or theme, both or something else? How about Lenny Kravitz? Or Bob Dylan? Can the same artist produce works that are part of Jewish and other works that are not Jewish?

The same questions can be raised about Jews in science and even in business. I would offer to you that Robert Oppenheimer, for example, was not just a scientist that happened to be Jewish, but by his philosophy and self-definition, he was a Jewish scientist.

Self-identification may be the only definition of Judaism that makes any sense. Our gene pool is so widely spread, our religious beliefs so varied, our culture so diverse, no other definition may be practical.