



Jews are an ancient people with a long history. The Bible tells of their origins more than 4,000 years ago. The Old Testament, which includes the five books of Moses and sets forth the Ten Commandments, came to the world through the Jewish people.

Judaism itself is a religion. There are Jews who may not observe the religion but still identify as Jews ethnically or culturally. While most Jews are born into Jewishness because their mothers (and for some movements within Judaism, their fathers) are Jews, some people decide to convert to Judaism and go through a process in order to do so. Being a Jew is not a “race.” It revolves around feelings of peoplehood, ethnicity, and religion—there is a dynamic between them where one element may be more strongly felt at some times, and another at other times.

The Jewish people derive from one family. They are the offspring of the Biblical figures Abraham and Sarah and their children and grandchildren. This gives most Jews a common origin. According to the Bible and archeological evidence, the Jews settled in and around what is now Israel. However, due to antisemitism, they were exiled (expelled from their homeland) in ancient history and were dispersed throughout the world. Thus Jews established communities in many different places. This explains why there are Jews of many nationalities and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Often these communities have unique characteristics like language, food, and dress, and variations in religious observance. Nonetheless, Jews are bound by a collective history and common traditions.

Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people, introduced the world to monotheism, the belief in one God. Abraham’s importance is shared by the three major monotheistic religions of the world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—which see him as a patriarch or a prophet.

The basic laws and tenets of Judaism are derived from the Torah. The most important teaching of Judaism is that there is one God, who desires people to do what is just and merciful. All people are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Other basic laws govern morality and how individuals should treat each other (honoring one’s parents, giving a part of one’s income to charity). Still other laws concern the relationship between human beings and God, like observance of the Sabbath or the laws of keeping kosher.

In the modern period, different ideas of observance and what it means to be a Jew have evolved, and Jews often understand their identity in different ways. Orthodox Jews are those who observe all the traditional rules and laws of Judaism. A push to modernize Jewish observance led to Reform and Conservative Judaism, where Reform Judaism is the more progressive of the two. There are additional denominations and diversity within all tenets of Judaism. Further, there are secular Jews who engage in little or no religious observance but continue to identify as Jews from a cultural or ethnic standpoint. For some Jews, a strong aspect of their identity, independent of their religiosity, is tied to the State of Israel and to Jewish peoplehood.

Christianity grew out of Judaism, as did Islam. Jesus himself was an observant Jew. One of the main differences between these two religions is that Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah (messenger of God), while Jews believe that the messiah has not yet come.

Like in other religions, Jews worship in a congregation. The place where they worship is called a synagogue or a temple, and worship is led by a rabbi. Observances can be very different depending on the type of congregation and its location geographically, but in all cases, worship revolves around a set of prayers (group and individual prayers) which include singing and readings from the Torah on the Sabbath and holidays.