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CHAPTER ONE

Background

Before Jesus

Although Christianity began with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, its roots go back much farther. Like another major religion, Islam, it sprang from the teachings and beliefs of Judaism. The major difference between Judaism and Christianity concerns the coming of a Messiah, or Savior. Most Jews believe the Messiah is yet to come. Christians believe the Messiah came in the person of Jesus. They not only believe that Jesus is the Messiah; they also believe he is the son of God. Other differences between Judaism and Christianity are discussed in a later chapter.

From Abraham to Moses

To better understand how Christianity began, it is necessary to take a brief look at early Jewish history. Some religious historians point to the eleventh chapter of the book of Genesis in the Bible for the background to the story of each religion. Genesis 11:27 says, in effect, that “this is the history of Terah’s family.” One of Terah’s sons, Abram (later called Abraham), would come to be recognized as the “Father of Judaism.” And from Judaism, Christianity would begin some 2000 years later.

The story of Abraham is a familiar one. He was born and raised in the Mesopotamian city of Ur. Mesopotamia was a region that lay between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now Iraq. The name itself means “land between the rivers.” Ur was located on the Euphrates River, and is thought to have been founded sometime between 3000 and 2500 B.C.

Both Jews and Christians believe that



Abraham had come to recognize only one god long before he led his followers to the “promised land” of Canaan. This belief led him to one day take a hammer and smash all the idols in his father’s idol shop in Ur. History does not tell us if or how he was punished for his deed.

At some point in his life Abraham left Ur and moved to the city of Haran. Haran was some 600 miles to the northwest in what is now Turkey. Some sources say that Abraham moved there with his father. Others state that he moved his tribe there in search of water and grass for their goats and sheep. Regardless, according to the Bible, it was at Haran that God revealed himself to Abraham and commanded him to take his people and move to another land. Both Jews and Christians refer to Genesis 12:1 of the Old Testament for the story:

Now the Lord had said unto Abram, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew (show) thee.

At Haran (in what is now Turkey), it is said that God revealed himself to Abraham and commanded him to take his people and move to Canaan.



So it was that Abraham left Haran about 1750 B.C. with his family and followers for Canaan. Canaan was a land that roughly corresponds to



Attempting to protect a Hebrew slave from his abusive Egyptian master, Moses inadvertently killed the Egyptian and was forced to flee for his life.

Words to remember:

Messiah
Abraham
Mesopotamia
Ur
Haran
Canaan
Jacob

what later was called Palestine and which today makes up part of the modern nation of Israel. The Hebrews' (as the early Jews were known) leaving Haran stemmed from the covenant Jews believe God made with Abraham. According to Jewish belief, God, or Yahweh, would make the Hebrews his "chosen people" and give them the land of Canaan if they would obey him and follow his will.

The Hebrews lived in Canaan until a famine forced some of them to move to Egypt. This was many years after Abraham's death. Those who left Canaan and settled in Egypt came to be called Israelites. This was because Jacob, the son of Abraham's son, Isaac, was later known as "Israel."

Section Review

1. What was significant about Abraham smashing the idols in his father's shop?
2. What do Jews believe God commanded Abraham to do?
3. What promise do Jews believe God made to Abraham?

Moses and the Exodus

If Abraham was the "father" of the Hebrews, then Moses was their "liberator." For it was Moses who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt after they had been enslaved by the Egyptian pharaoh, or king.

Moses was born in Egypt sometime in the 13th century B.C. It was not a good time for an Israelite baby to be born. The pharaoh, fearful that the Israelites were becoming too numerous and therefore posing a threat to his regime, had ordered that all male Israelite babies be killed. This was after the Israelites had lived in Egypt in peace for some 400 years.

To save her son, Yocheved, Moses' mother, hid him at home for several months. Then she put him afloat in a basket in the Nile River, hoping for the best. Fortunately, one of the pharaoh's daughters found Moses and took him home to her father's palace. There she raised him as her own, and he grew up to become an important official in the pharaoh's court.

Things went well for Moses until an incident caused him to flee Egypt. One day he saw an Egyptian official beating a Jew. He stepped in to defend the victim, and in the process killed the official. Moses then had to flee for his life. He left Egypt and went to the land of Midian, which was located east of the northern tip of the Red Sea. There he married and lived the life of a shepherd for 40 years.

Moses would probably have been content to continue his life as a shepherd had God (as Jews believe) not appeared to him in the form of a burning bush as he was tending his father-in-law's sheep. Although naturally frightened, Moses heeded God's call to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery.

Moses and his brother Aaron went to see the Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses II. They pleaded with him to let the Israelites go. Rameses refused. Then,

according to the book of Exodus in the Bible, God caused a number of plagues to befall Egypt. Still the pharaoh refused to free the Israelites. Finally, a tenth plague in which the Angel of Death went about slaying the first-born child of every family (except Israelites who smeared blood on the doorjamb of their homes to indicate their heritage), caused Rameses to relent. When Rameses' own child was slain, he consented to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt.

But Rameses went back on his word. No sooner had the Israelites left than he sent his army to overtake them. When the Israelites reached the Red Sea, they feared they were doomed. But with the Egyptian army closing in on them, a miracle is said to

have happened. Exodus 14: 21 states:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

Thus, according to the Bible, the Red Sea parted and the Israelites crossed to safety. When the Egyptians tried to follow, the sea closed, drowning them.

The flight of the Israelites from Egypt is referred to as the Exodus. (The word *exodus* means "departure" or "a going out.") It began a period of Jewish history that was to last for 40 years. It was a period when Moses and his followers



According to the Bible, when the Israelites reached the Red Sea—with the Egyptians closing in on them—Moses stretched out his hand and the Red Sea parted.



were destined to wander in the wilderness, none of them being allowed to reach the Promised Land.

In the beginning, everything went well for the Israelites. Although there were a few complaints along the way, God (Jews

who had left Egypt lived to see Canaan—not even Moses. Only their children were allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Moses was more than just a liberator of the Jewish people. He was also a great lawgiver. The Ten Commandments and other laws make up what is called Mosaic Law, or the Law of Moses. These laws form the foundation on which the laws of many religions are based.

Both Jews and Christians believe Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Three of these—Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers—are believed to have been written during his 40 years in the wilderness. These books provide Jews and Christians with a history of the early Jewish people.

Section Review

1. Why is Moses referred to as the liberator of the Jewish people?
2. What finally caused Pharaoh Rameses II to free the Israelites?
3. According to the Bible, what miracle occurred at the Red Sea?
4. What great gift did Moses receive from God on Mount Sinai?
5. Why were the Israelites condemned to wander in the wilderness for 40 years?

From the Exodus to the Roman Conquest

Dates vary as to when the Israelites finally reached the Land of Canaan, but it was probably sometime around 1200 B.C. For the first 200 years, the Israelites were ruled by officials called Judges. Each of the twelve tribes into which the Israelites were divided had its own Judge. But since they were surrounded by hostile neighbors on all sides, the Israelites eventually saw the need to unite under one ruler.

About 1020 B.C., Saul became their first king. Two other important kings would follow. They were David and Solomon. Solomon is remembered for



At Mount Sinai, God is said to have given Moses the Ten Commandments.

and Christians believe) provided Moses and his followers with food and water during their journey across the desert. But after three months, when the group reached the bottom of Mount Sinai and pitched their tents, things started to go wrong.

After reaching Mount Sinai, God is said to have called Moses to the top of the mountain. He stayed there for 40 days, talking with God. It was at this time that he is believed to have received the Ten Commandments. During his long absence, the Israelites at the foot of the mountain grew restless. In their restlessness they went back to their old Egyptian ways of idol worship. They melted down jewelry and made a golden calf. Then they built an altar and started offering sacrifices to their new “god.”

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what was happening, he was furious. So was God. As punishment for their sins, the Bible states that God condemned the Israelites to a life of wandering in the wilderness. None

building the Temple in Jerusalem.

After Solomon died, the Israelites split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel, while the southern kingdom became Judah. This division weakened the Israelites once again and led directly to their downfall.

In 722 B.C., the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians—a warlike people known for their extreme cruelty. Most of the Jews in Israel were carried away into captivity and became known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

In 586 B.C., the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans destroyed the temple and took the Jews captive.

When the Chaldeans themselves were overthrown about 539 B.C. by the Persians, the Jews were permitted to return to Judah. There they set about rebuilding the temple, completing it in 516 B.C.

In 70 B.C., however, the temple was once again destroyed, this time by the Romans. The Romans had built an empire that included all the lands around the Mediterranean. This included Judah and its capital of Jerusalem. Some 65 years

after the destruction of the temple, the Romans drove the Jews from their homeland. They have been scattered throughout the world ever since.

Jews living in places other than present-day Israel are said to be living in the Diaspora. *Diaspora* is a Greek word that means “dispersal,” or “a scattering.”

Ancient Jewish history ended with the Roman conquest. But Judaism lived on, and many of its ideas and beliefs were incorporated into Christianity. In addition to the Ten Commandments and the Old Testament, Christianity’s Jewish heritage includes the belief in an all-powerful God who is not—like other ancient gods—detached and uncaring, but who loves and looks out for his people.

Section Review

1. What caused the Israelites to finally unite under one ruler?
2. What happened to the kingdom of Israel? Judah?
3. What is meant by the Diaspora?
4. How was Christianity influenced by Judaism?

For Further Thought:

1. Both Christianity and Islam trace their roots to Judaism. Think of ways in which the three religions are alike. Think of ways in which they are different.
2. Make a sketch of Solomon’s Temple. Refer to either a book on Jewish history or the Internet for a sample.
3. A number of Hebrew prophets spoke of the coming of a Messiah. If this is so, why did the early Jews not believe Jesus was that person?
4. Make a shoebox diorama depicting a scene from early Jewish history. Possible scenes might include God speaking to Moses from a burning bush, Moses parting the Red Sea for the Israelites to pass through, or Moses receiving the Ten Commandments at the top of Mount Sinai.
5. Imagine you are a reporter for the *Mount Sinai Messenger*. Write an article based on an interview you had with Moses after he came down from the mountain and saw the Israelites worshipping a golden calf.
6. Tell why you do or do not believe in an all-powerful god who intervenes in the affairs of humankind. Cite examples to support your view.
7. Research and write a two-page report on one of the following topics: the ancient city of Ur; Rameses II; the Ten Commandments; Solomon; the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.



Words to remember:

**Judges
Solomon
Assyrians**

**Ten Lost
Tribes of Israel**

**Chaldeans
Diaspora**