

Book review on religious studies

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Judaism

Founded by Moses, Judaism was formed in the Middle East and was one of the three original Abrahamic religions (the other two being Christianity and Islam). Although formally founded by Moses, most Jews follow their heritage back to the days of Abraham and because of this, they believe in their covenant with God, who often communicated through Abraham. A covenant is where God speaks to someone on Earth and asks them to perform tasks in his name; this is why the Jews are dubbed ‘the chosen people.’ The Jewish people refer to ‘the first covenant’ as being the first time that God spoke to Abraham. The circumcision of their sons is a symbol of their link to God. Orthodox Judaism is a strand of the Jewish faith which refers to Jews who strictly follow the Talmudic texts, which are referred to as the ‘oral Torah.’ Their history is a rich one and is filled with persecution by the Egyptians and much later on, the Nazis during World War Two: 6 million Jews were murdered during the holocaust as an attempt by Hitler to eradicate Judaism.

Although there are a number of religious texts central to Judaism, the Torah is widely considered to be the more important. The Torah consists of the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. After the Jewish release from Egyptian slavery, the Jews believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses atop of Mount Sinai and it is believed by Jewish people that it describes how God wishes his people to behave: it contains 613 commandments, although the Jews live most loyally by the ten best-known ones which are referred to as ‘The Ten Statements.’ Whilst the Torah refers to the beginning of the Jewish Bible, the term for all scripture is the

Tanach. 'Torah' translates as several possibilities in English, most notably teaching, instruction and law, thus highlighting the importance of its writings. The scriptures are in the form of scrolls and are read while in the Synagogue, (the Jewish place of worship): small sections are read on Monday and Thursday while a longer section is read on the Shabbat, or the Sabbath (Sunday). Starting from Sukkot, an autumn festival, the entire scripture is read over the course of a year. The scrolls are entirely written in Hebrew, the language of the Jews and are kept in an Ark, named after the wooden chest which held the stone tablets given to Moses from God during the covenant on Mount Sinai.

Jews worship God in a place called a synagogue; these buildings are occasionally used for study and to enhance the community too. Orthodox Jews often call the synagogue 'shul' which means 'school.' Orthodox synagogues require that men and women sit apart from one another and everyone has their head covered, except young girls. Whereas, in a reform synagogue, friends and families can sit together, regardless of their gender. Services can be conducted by the Rabbi or a member of the congregation but each traditional service requires ten Jewish men; this is called a 'minyan.' Depending on whether the service is an orthodox or a reform one, it may be carried out completely in Hebrew or it will be partly in English too. Clothing is an important part of a Jewish service as the wearing of hats shows reverence to God, and all members of the congregation must do so unless you are an unmarried woman. Men must always wear a hat when saying a prayer that features God. The iconic Jewish hat is a small, round cap that fits

over the crown of the head and is called a ‘ Kippah’ in Hebrew or a ‘ Yarmulke’ in Yiddish.

References

Bowker, J. (2006). *World Religions*. New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing.