

◀ Moses presents the Ten Commandments, setting forth the laws of Judaism.

The Ancient Hebrews and the Origins of Judaism

11.1 Introduction

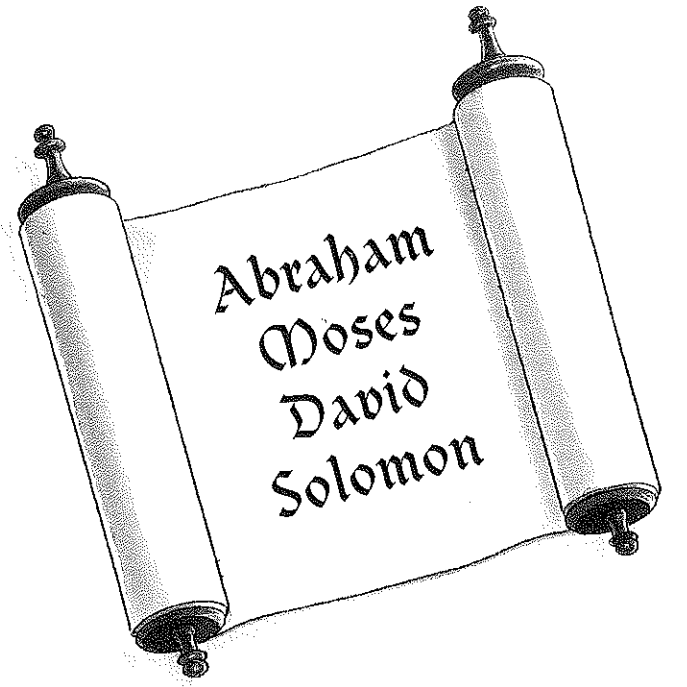
In Chapter 10, you learned about Egypt's southern neighbor, the African kingdom of Kush. In this chapter, you will learn about a group of people who lived northeast of Egypt: the **Hebrews**.

The Hebrew civilization developed gradually after 1800 B.C.E. and flourished until 70 C.E. The people who became the Hebrews originally lived in Mesopotamia. Around 1950 B.C.E., they moved to the land of Canaan (modern-day Israel).

The Hebrews were the founders of **Judaism**, one of the world's major religions. As you will learn in the next chapter, the Hebrews eventually became known as the Jews. Judaism is the Jewish religion.

The origins of Judaism and its basic laws are recorded in its most sacred text, the **Torah**. The word Torah means "God's teaching." The Torah consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. (Christians refer to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament.)

In this chapter, you will read about some of the early history of the Jewish people told in the Bible. You will meet four Hebrew leaders—**Abraham**, **Moses**, and kings **David** and **Solomon**—and learn about their contributions to the development of Judaism.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help you remember important figures in the history of the ancient Hebrews and the development of Judaism.

11.2 What We Know About the Ancient Hebrews

Historians rely on many artifacts to learn about the ancient Hebrews and their time, including the Torah.

The Torah

Historians use the Torah to understand the history of the Jewish people and the development of Judaism. As often happened in ancient times, this history was handed down orally from generation to generation. Later it was written down.

In addition to the Torah, historians look for a variety of other sources of information about early Jewish history. To help them understand the events and ideas of the time period, they examine archaeological artifacts, as well as other written records.

The Early History of the Hebrews

According to the Torah, the ancestor of the Hebrews, a man named Abraham, lived near Ur in Mesopotamia. Around 1950 B.C.E., Abraham and his clan migrated to the land of Canaan. Settling in Canaan, the Hebrews herded flocks of sheep and goats.

About 1800 B.C.E., many Hebrews moved to Egypt. According to the first book of the Torah, they fled Canaan because of a famine. For a time they prospered in Egypt, but eventually they

were made slaves. In time, one of their leaders, Moses, led the Hebrews in their escape from Egypt.

For 40 years, says the Torah, the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness, until they settled once again in Canaan. By 1000 B.C.E., the Hebrews had set up the kingdom of Israel in Canaan under King David and his son, King Solomon. David forged the Hebrews into one united nation. Solomon built a magnificent temple in the capital city of Jerusalem.

One wall of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem remains standing. Today, Jewish people travel from around the world to pray at the Western Wall. This rabbi is reading the Torah at the wall.



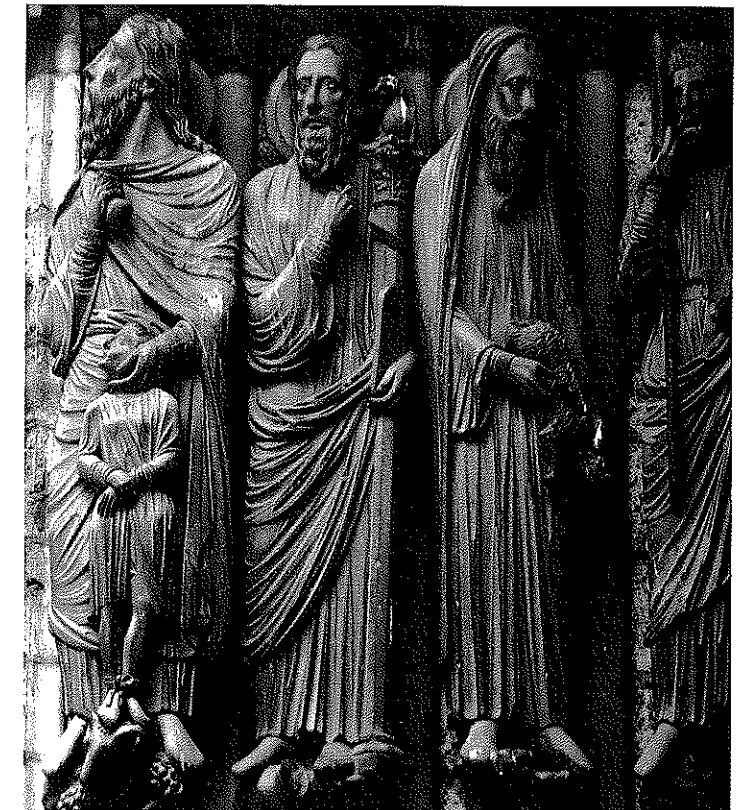
11.3 Important Hebrew Leaders

The Hebrew Bible tells about events in the lives of early Jewish leaders. Four key leaders were Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon.

Abraham

Abraham is called the "father of the Hebrews." One central idea of Judaism is the belief in a single God. According to the Torah, it was Abraham who introduced this belief to the Hebrews. This was a new idea in the ancient world. At the time, most people worshiped many gods and goddesses.

According to the Torah, God told Abraham to move his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan. God also promised Abraham that He would make him the father of a great nation and that He would bless this nation. Abraham did as he was told, and his descendants became known to us as the Jewish people.



Moses

The greatest leader of the Hebrews was Moses. The Torah tells how he led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses told the Hebrews that God would lead them to Canaan, the "promised land," in exchange for their faithful obedience.

Moses also gave Judaism its fundamental laws. The Torah tells how God gave Moses 10 important laws engraved on two stone tablets. These laws became the foundation of Judaism.

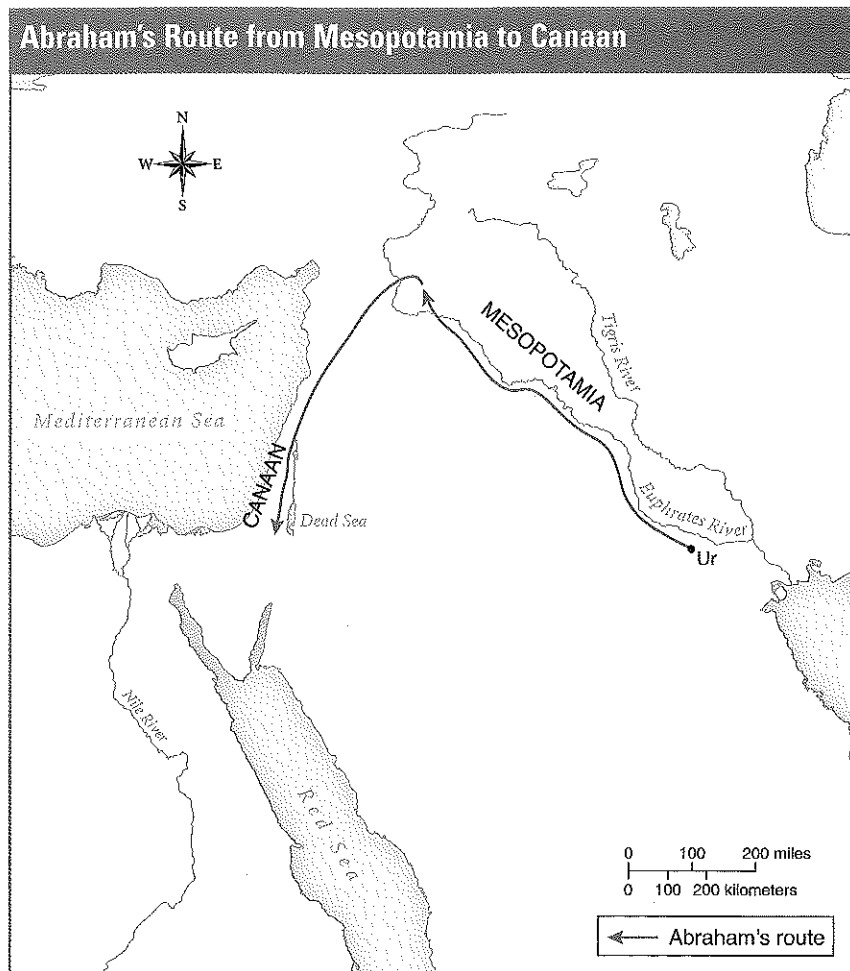
Kings David and Solomon

After escaping from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, the Hebrews came once more to Canaan. It was here that they created a united kingdom under King David and his son, Solomon.

King David established Jerusalem as a holy city. King Solomon built Jerusalem's first great temple. The city of Jerusalem and its temple became powerful symbols to the Hebrews of their faith in God.

Let's learn more about each of these four important leaders by looking at some history from the Hebrew Bible.

The ancient Hebrew leaders Abraham, Moses, and David were honored more than 2,000 years later in these statues, carved in the 13th century for Chartres Cathedral in France.



11.4 The Life of Abraham: Father of the Hebrews

The father of the Hebrews was a man named Abraham. Originally called Abram, he was born about 2,000 B.C.E. in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia. The people of Ur worshiped many gods. But Abram came to believe there was only one true God. This belief in one God would set Judaism apart from other ancient religions. And Abram's special relationship to God would become the foundation of the Hebrew faith.

Abraham's Covenant with God

According to the Torah, the faith that would become Judaism began with a sacred

agreement, or **covenant**, between God and Abram. The Torah says that God visited Abram when he was an old man. God told him, "Leave your own country and your father's house, and go to a country that I will show you." God promised to make Abram the father of a great nation of people.

Abram obeyed. Around 1950 B.C.E. he gathered his many relatives and went west into the land of Canaan.

When Abram was 99 years old, the Torah says, God spoke to him again: "I will make a covenant between myself and you." God promised to favor and protect Abram's **descendants**, meaning his children and the generations that would follow. In return, Abram agreed that he and his people would always devote themselves to God.

As a mark of their covenant, God gave Abram a new name, Abraham, which means "father of many." God also promised the land of Canaan to Abraham's people. For Jews, Canaan became the "promised land." According to the Torah, the covenant meant that Jews would set an example for how God wanted people to live.

covenant an agreement or promise

descendant a daughter or son, granddaughter or grandson, and so on

Abraham's Sacrifice

According to the Torah, God tested Abraham's faith and obedience many times. The final test was the hardest.

It was common at that time to offer animals as a **sacrifice** to the gods. An animal such as a sheep would be killed and then burned on an altar. In his old age, Abraham had finally fathered a son, Isaac. The Torah says that one day God tested Abraham by telling him to make a sacrifice of his son.

Abraham dearly loved his son. Yet his devotion to God was so complete that he brought Isaac to a mountain to be sacrificed. At the last minute, God sent an angel to stop Abraham from killing his son. Abraham had proved his faith and obedience, and God renewed the promise to him. God said, "I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven."

According to the Torah, God kept the promise. The Hebrews flourished. The nation was made up of 12 tribes that were descended from Abraham's grandson, Jacob, whom an angel from God had named Israel.

Abraham made many contributions to the development of Judaism. He was the ancestor of the Jewish people. He introduced the belief in a single God. Because of his covenant with God, Jews believed they should set an example of how to live. Their reward was the promised land. These beliefs became a central part of Judaism.

sacrifice a gift of an animal for slaughter as a way to honor gods

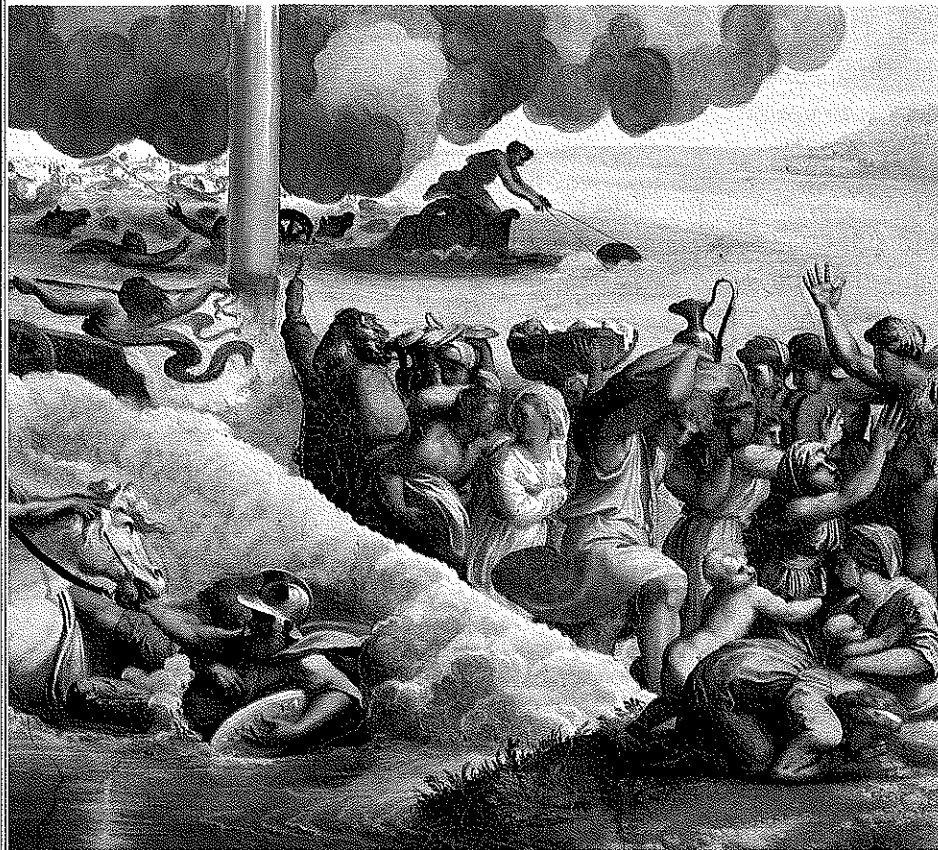
This fresco painting was created in 1726 by the artist Giovanni Battista. It is titled *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.



11.5 The Life of Moses: Leader and Prophet

The Torah tells the story of Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea. For Hebrews, this miracle proved that God was watching over them.

The greatest leader of the Hebrews was the **prophet** Moses. The Torah tells the story of how Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and gave them God's laws to live by.



The Exodus from Egypt

By the time of Moses, around 1250 B.C.E., a large group of Abraham's descendants were living in Egypt. There, the Torah says, the Hebrews "increased in number and became very powerful." Fearful of their growing strength, the pharaoh turned them into slaves. But God heard the cries of the enslaved Hebrews. According to the Torah, God told Moses, "I will send you to the pharaoh, and you shall free my people."

Moses went before the pharaoh and told him to let the Hebrews go free. When the pharaoh refused, God punished

Egypt with 10 terrible **plagues**. In one plague, insects called *locusts* devoured the crops. In another, the waters of the Nile turned to blood. Finally, God sent an angel to kill the firstborn son in every Egyptian family.

Weeping over his own dead son, the pharaoh gave in. Moses began to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.

But the pharaoh soon changed his mind. The Egyptian army chased after the Hebrews and nearly caught up with them at the edge of the Red Sea. Calmly, Moses raised his staff (walking stick), and the waters of the sea parted. The Hebrews crossed safely to the other side. When the Egyptians tried to follow, the waters flooded over the army, drowning the soldiers. The Hebrews escaped.

The Torah calls the flight from Egypt the **Exodus**, which means "departure." It became a central event in the history of the Hebrew people.

prophet a person who speaks or interprets for God to other people

plague a terrible disaster affecting many people and thought to be sent by God as a punishment

Exodus the escape of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery

The Ten Commandments

After leaving Egypt, the Torah says, the Hebrews wandered through a wilderness for 40 years. During this time, God gave Moses the laws that became the foundation of Judaism. These laws are called the **Ten Commandments**.

Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the "Mountain of God." Moses had gone up the mountain alone to pray. When he returned, he was carrying two tablets of stone. Engraved on the tablets were the Ten Commandments.

Some of the commandments spelled out the Hebrews' duties to God. For example, the first commandment was, "You shall have no other God before me." During their wanderings, some of the Hebrews had begun to worship other gods. This commandment reminded them of their promise to worship only one God. Another commandment told them to set aside one day a week, the **Sabbath**, for rest and worship.

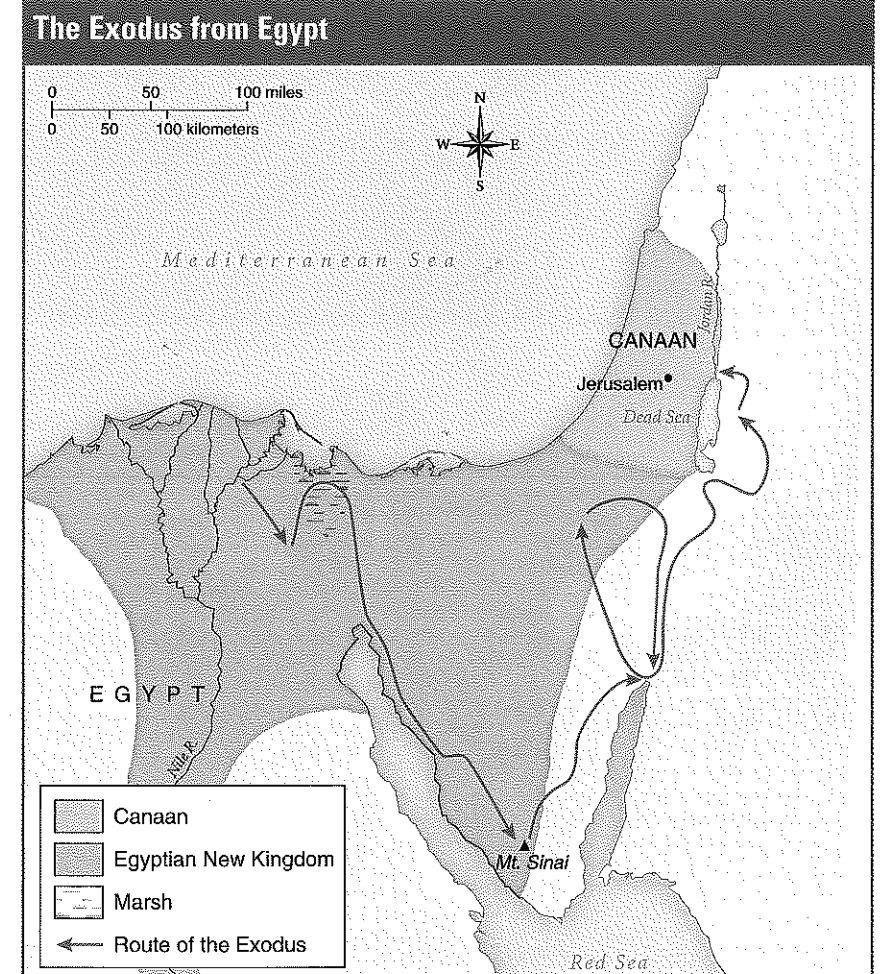
Other commandments laid down basic moral laws (laws about the right way to live). For example, one said, "You shall honor your father and mother." Other commandments forbid stealing, lying, and murdering.

The Ten Commandments state Judaism's basic laws. By obeying the commandments, Hebrews would fulfill their part of the covenant with God. That responsibility was to make God's moral laws known to the world. In turn, God would protect them.

Moses made several key contributions to the development of Judaism. First, he led the Exodus out of Egypt. Jews have celebrated this event ever since as proof that God would watch over them. Second, Moses gave Judaism its fundamental laws, the Ten Commandments. Third, he forged the Hebrews into a united people devoted to a single God.

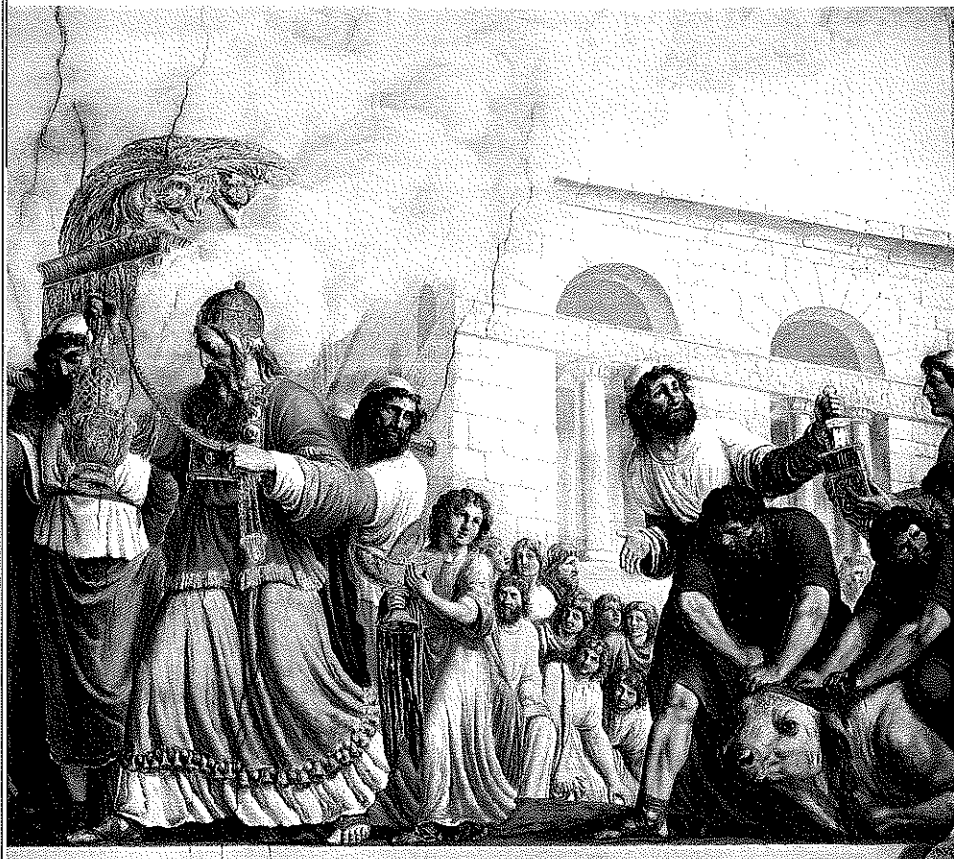
Ten Commandments the ten laws said to be given to Moses by God

Sabbath the seventh day of the week to be used for rest and worship, according to one of the Ten Commandments



Ark of the Covenant
the chest containing the Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, that the Hebrews carried with them during their wanderings after their flight from Egypt

In this painting, King David leads a procession to bring the sacred Ark into Jerusalem.



11.6 The Lives of David and Solomon: Kings of Israel

After their wanderings in the wilderness, the Hebrews settled once more in Canaan. The Hebrew Bible tells how they built a kingdom and a great temple under two kings, David and Solomon.

David Founds the Kingdom of Israel

In David's time, about 1000 B.C.E., the Hebrews were at war with a rival tribe, the Philistines. According to the Hebrew Bible, the Philistines promised to be the Hebrews' slaves if someone could beat their fiercest warrior, the giant Goliath.

David was not yet a grown man, but he was outraged at Goliath's mockery of the Hebrew God. Bravely he stepped forward. His only weapon was a slingshot. With one mighty throw, he felled Goliath with a stone.

David's courage and faith were rewarded later, when God made him king. According to the Hebrew Bible, God said, "The Hebrew kingdom will remain with him and with his children and his children's children forever."

As king, David completed the defeat of the Philistines as well as other enemies. He united the two parts of the Hebrews' land,

Israel and Judah, into a single kingdom known as Israel. He created a strong central government. He gave the new kingdom its own army, courts, and government officials. David himself served as the nation's chief priest.

David chose the city of Jerusalem for his capital. Under David, Jerusalem became the center of Israel's political and religious life. David brought the Hebrews' most sacred object, the **Ark of the Covenant**, to Jerusalem. The Ark was a wood and gold chest that held the Ten Commandments. As the home of the Ark, Jerusalem became a holy city.

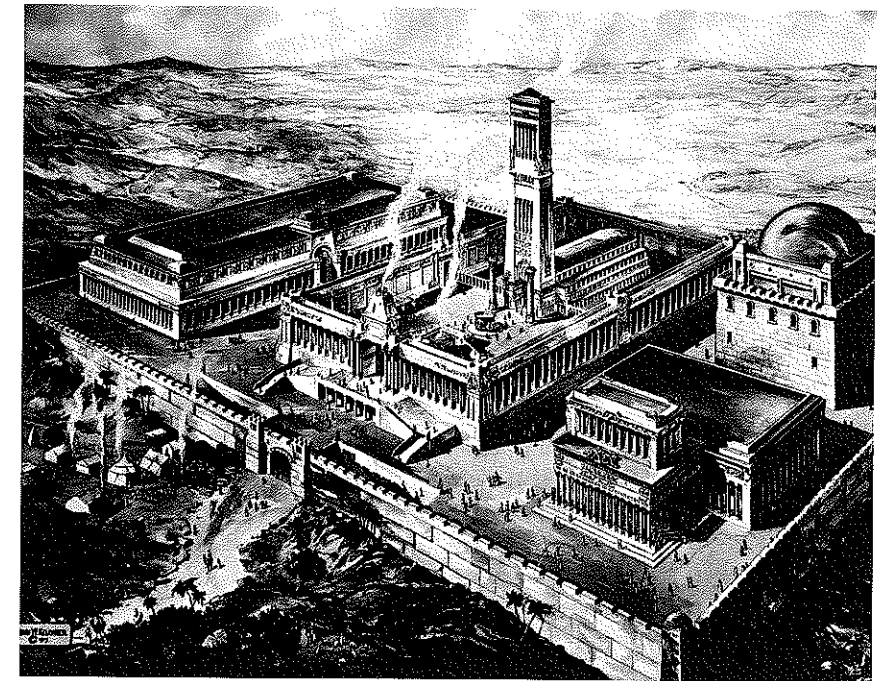
Solomon Builds the Great Temple of Jerusalem

After David's death, his son, Solomon, became king. Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant and to be the center of Jewish worship. According to the Hebrew Bible, he told God, "Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name."

Building the temple was a huge undertaking and cost the Hebrews greatly. Solomon forced his people to work on the construction of the temple. More than 3,000 officials were needed to oversee the project. And Solomon taxed his people heavily to buy gold, cedar wood, copper, and other materials.

Solomon's methods angered many Hebrews. Near his death, their resentment exploded. In 931 B.C.E., the northern tribes broke away and became a separate kingdom of Israel. David and Solomon's descendants ruled the southern kingdom of Judah.

David and Solomon had made important contributions to Judaism. They laid the foundation for the Jewish people to be governed by kings for more than 400 years. David established Jerusalem as a holy city. And Solomon built the first great Temple of Jerusalem. After David and Solomon, Jerusalem would always be a holy city to the Jews and a powerful symbol of their faith.



Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. Today the site of the Temple is the holiest place in the world to Jews.

11.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the ancient Hebrews and the origins of Judaism. Through the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon, you learned how Judaism developed. In the next chapter, you will learn how the Hebrews became known as Jews and how they kept their ancient religion alive outside of Judah and Israel.