

◀ Roman soldiers destroy the Temple of Jerusalem and carry off sacred treasures.

## The Struggle to Preserve Judaism

### 12.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you read about the origins of Judaism. In this chapter, you will discover how Judaism was preserved even after the Hebrews lost their homeland.

As you have learned, the Hebrew kingdom split in two after the death of King Solomon. Weakened by this division, the Hebrews were less able to fight off invaders.

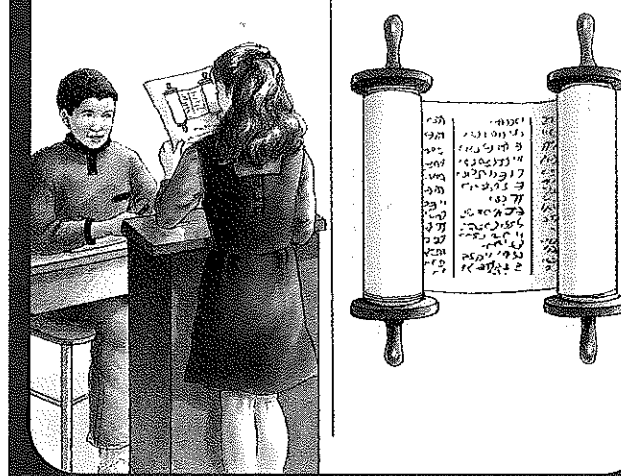
The northern kingdom of Israel was the first to fall. In 722 B.C.E., the Assyrians conquered Israel. The kingdom's leaders were carried off to Mesopotamia.

In 597 B.C.E., the kingdom of Judah was invaded by another Mesopotamian power, Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. The Hebrews fought off the siege until their food ran out. With the people starving, the Babylonians broke through the walls and captured the city. In 586 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar burned down Solomon's great Temple of Jerusalem and all the houses in the city. Most of the people of Judah were taken as captives to Babylon.

The captivity in Babylon was the beginning of the **Jewish Diaspora**. The word *diaspora* means "a scattering." Never again would most of the followers of Judaism be together in a single homeland.

Yet the Jews, as they came to be known, were able to keep Judaism alive. In this chapter, you will first learn about four important **Jewish beliefs**. Then you will read about the Jews' **struggle to preserve Judaism** after they had been forced to settle in many lands.

#### The Classroom Activity The History of Judaism



Use this T-chart as a graphic organizer to explore the struggle to preserve Judaism.



**monotheism** the belief that there is only one God

## 12.2 The Central Beliefs and Teachings of Judaism

The religious and moral ideas of Judaism have left a lasting mark on Western civilization. Let's look at four central beliefs and teachings of Judaism that remain very influential today.

### Monotheism

Most people in ancient times believed in many gods. The Hebrews were different. They believed that there is only one God, a belief called **monotheism**. Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion.

Judaism teaches that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. God is also the source of morality (standards of right and wrong). Jews believe in a solemn duty to honor and obey God. Many Jews feel they have a personal relationship with God. They speak to God through prayer and feel that God is close to them in their daily lives.

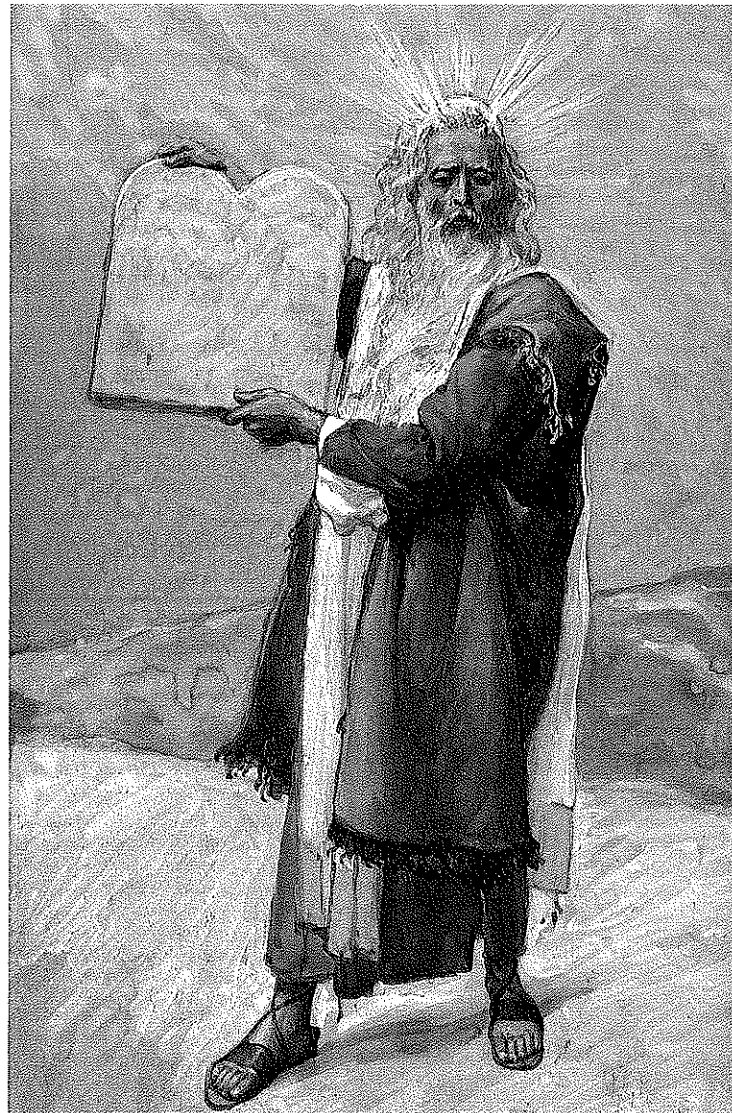
### Following God's Law

Following God's law is central to Jewish life. The Torah instructs Jews how to lead a life that pleases God.

As you have learned, Judaism's oldest laws are the Ten Commandments. The commandments tell how to honor God. For example, one commandment tells Jews to set aside a holy day, the Sabbath, every week. The Sabbath is a day of rest and prayer. The commandments also lay down laws of right and wrong, such as "You shall not steal" and "You shall not murder."

Over time, Jewish religious leaders developed a much larger set of laws. For example, there were rules about how to prepare food and what foods should be avoided. Many religious practices developed, such as the celebration of Passover. These holy days honor God's rescue of the Hebrews from Egypt. Jews strive to be faithful to these rules and practices.

In this painting, Moses holds the stone tablets on which are written the Ten Commandments. Following the law of God is a central part of Judaism.



### Equality and Social Justice

Beginning with the Ten Commandments, Judaism has always been concerned with moral values of right and wrong. Two important values are equality and social justice.

Unlike some other ancient peoples, the Hebrews did not view their leaders as gods. They believed that there is only one God, and even kings had to obey God's laws. Judaism teaches that all people who keep the laws are equal in God's sight.

Belief in equality goes hand in hand with a concern for social justice. Many stories and sayings in the Torah teach about treating everyone fairly. For example, in one passage Jews are told, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor." Caring for the less fortunate people in society is a basic value in Judaism.

### The Importance of Study

Study of the Torah is very important in Judaism. Jews also study interpretations of the Torah made by scholars and **rabbis**.

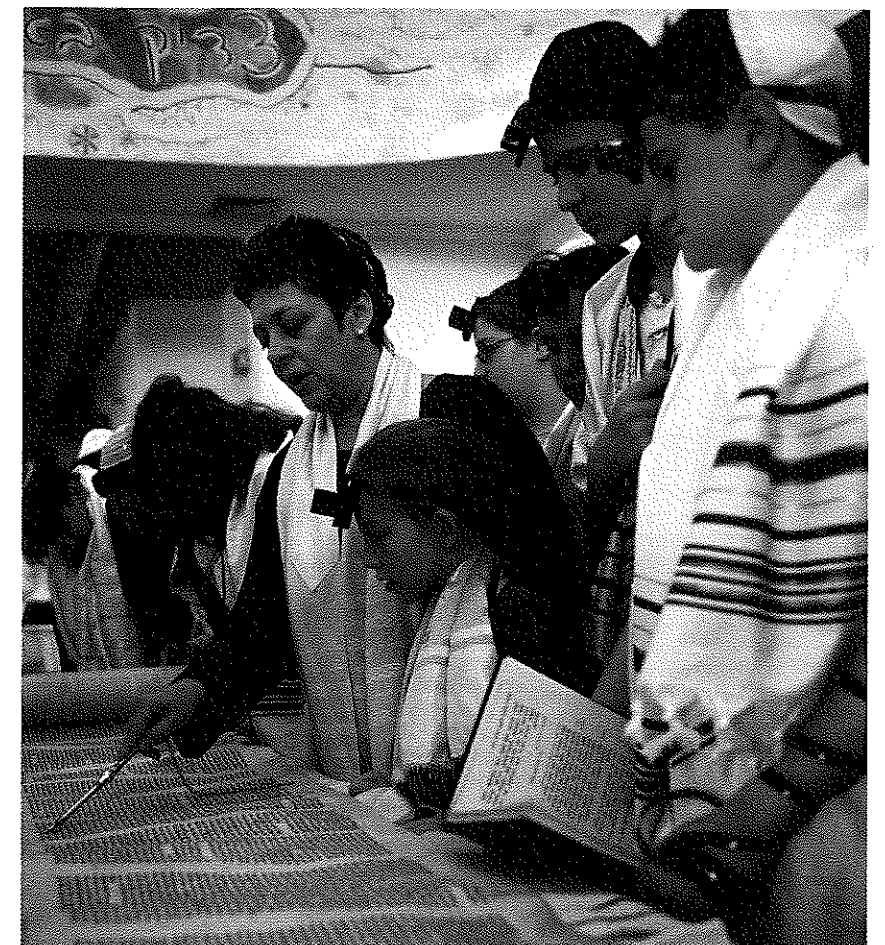
At first, decisions interpreting the Torah were passed down orally. In the 200s C.E., Jewish scholars began writing the **Talmud**, which contains this oral tradition along with learned commentaries. The Talmud became a basic source of Jewish law. Later rabbis wrote their own commentaries on both the Torah and the Talmud.

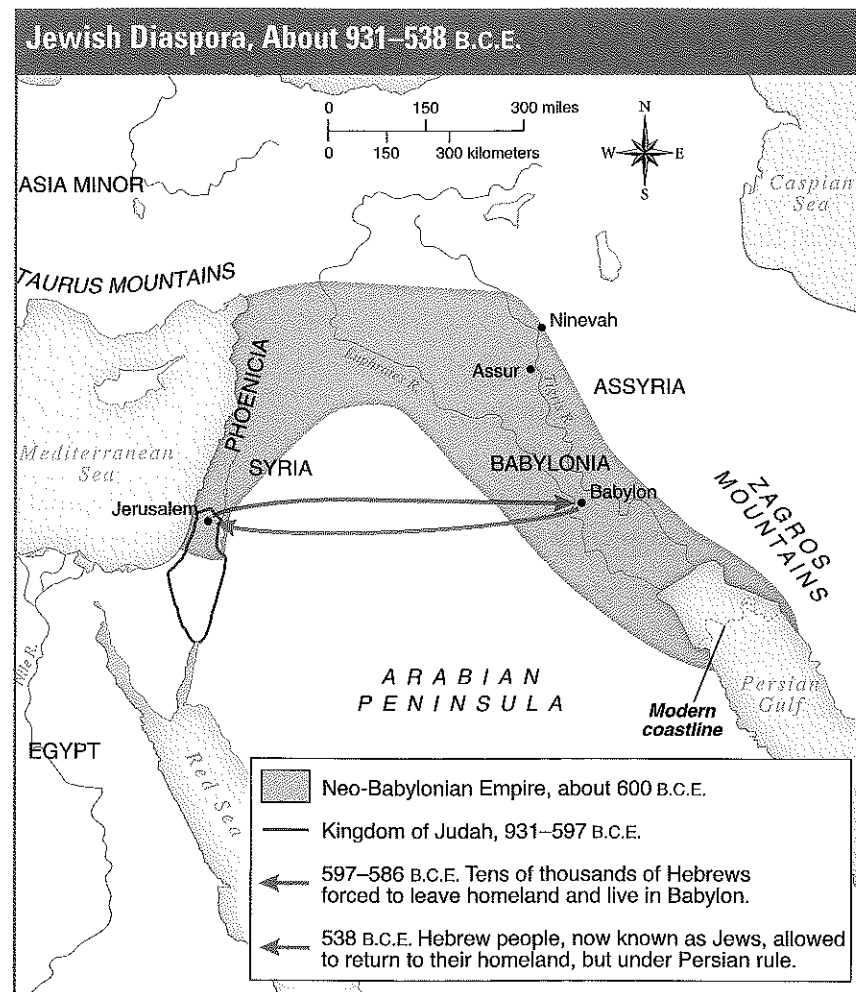
Throughout history, Jews have kept their reverence for study and learning. Many Jews stay in touch with Jewish history, law, and traditions through reading and discussion. They also pass on their knowledge to other members of the faith.

Jewish scholars today study and discuss the Torah as one way of understanding and practicing their religious beliefs.

**rabbi** a religious teacher who studies and teaches others about Jewish law

**Talmud** the collection of ancient Jewish writings that interpret the law of the Torah





## 12.3 Foreign Domination and the Jewish Diaspora

The fall of Judah in 597 B.C.E. and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 B.C.E. threatened the survival of Jewish beliefs. Thousands of Hebrews entered captivity in Babylon. The Jewish Diaspora had begun. From this time on, the followers of Judaism would be scattered in many lands. Those who did return home found their land dominated by foreign rulers. It would not be easy to keep Judaism alive.

### Rule by the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks

The Hebrew captives in Babylon lived there for half a

century. In this time of sorrow, great prophets rose up to encourage the people to remain faithful to Judaism.

It was after this time that the Hebrews came to be known as Jews. The Babylonians called their captives “Judaecans,” after their homeland of Judah. The name was later shortened to “Jews.”

In 539 B.C.E., the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. The Persian king, Cyrus, released the Jews from captivity. Many Jews returned to Judah, where they immediately set to work building a new temple. Others stayed behind in Babylon. Since then, Jews outside their homeland never stopped praying to return.

For nearly 400 years, Judah was ruled by foreigners, first the Persians and later the Greeks. Sometimes the foreign rulers were kind. More often they were harsh.

The Greek rulers tried to force the Jews to worship idols of Greek gods in the temple. In 168 B.C.E., the Jews rebelled and started a war that lasted 27 years. In 164 B.C.E., they drove the Greeks from Jerusalem and reclaimed and repurified the temple. Jews today celebrate Hanukkah to honor this victory.

### Rule by the Romans

For 88 years after the war with the Greeks, the Jews living in Judah had an independent kingdom. Then, in 63 B.C.E., they were conquered by the Romans.

The Romans were building a great empire, and they were quick to stamp out any sign of rebellion. More than 50,000 Jews were brutally **executed** under their rule. But the Romans did allow the Jews to practice their religion and to govern some of their own affairs. In 22 B.C.E., King Herod, who was allowed to rule in Judah, announced a huge project to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem so that it would be even more magnificent than Solomon’s temple. The work took 46 years to complete.

In 66 C.E., the Jews rose up against the Romans. For three years, they managed to keep the Romans out of Jerusalem. Then, in 70 C.E., a Roman military leader named Titus led an army of 60,000 soldiers against the Jews. The Jews fought back fiercely, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. They watched in horror as the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its great temple. All that remained of the temple was its western wall. To this day, Jews consider this wall sacred.

The Roman victory began the final scattering of the Jewish people from their homeland. The Romans seized Jewish land and forbade the Jews from entering Jerusalem. Although some Jews always remained in the land of Israel, thousands were sent to other parts of the Roman Empire.

The Jews had lost their homeland and their holy city. Yet Judaism not only survived, it flourished. Next you will learn how the Jews preserved their faith and way of life.

**execute** to kill

The Western Wall in modern-day Jerusalem was part of a network of supporting walls that surrounded the temple destroyed by the Romans.





## 12.4 Preserving and Passing On the Teachings of Judaism

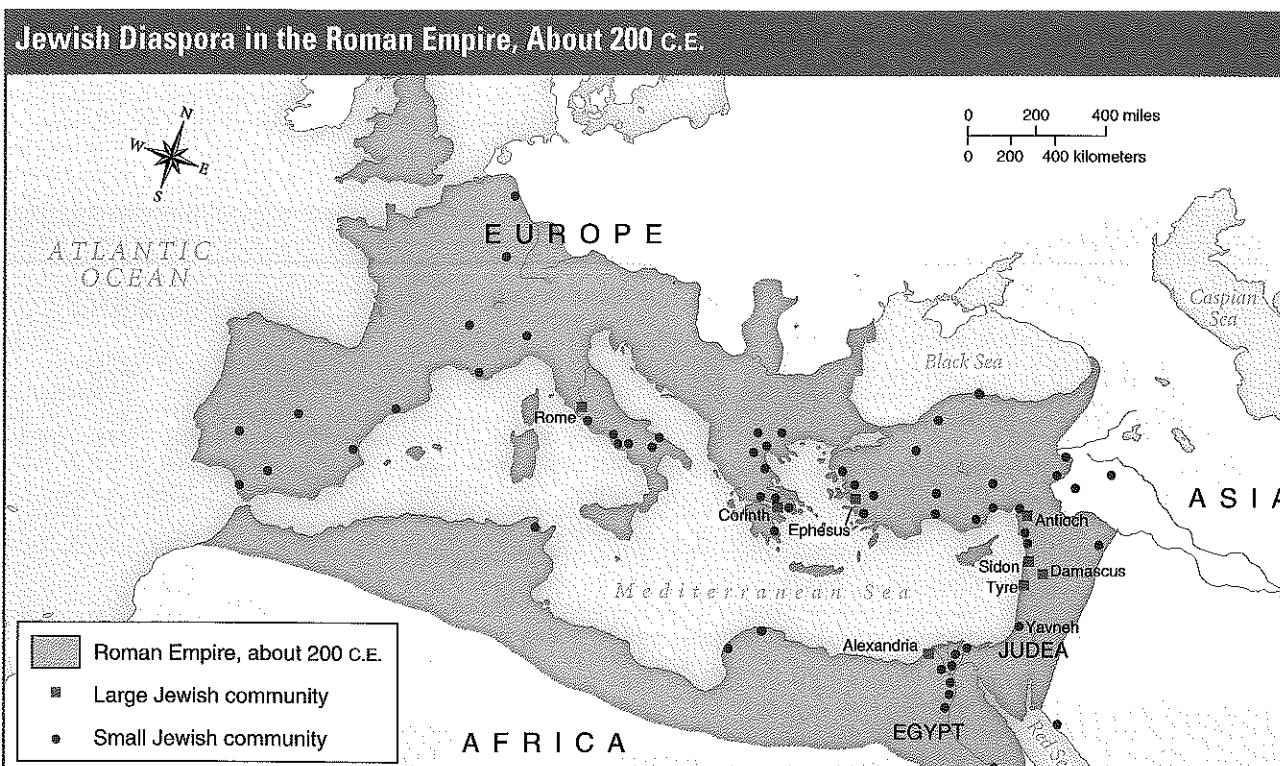
After losing their homeland, their holy city, and the great temple that was the heart of their faith, the Jews faced a great struggle to preserve their religion. Jews were scattered among many **gentile**, or non-Jewish, lands. With creativity and dedication, they found a variety of ways to keep Judaism alive.

### Rabbi Yohanan ben Zaccai

One individual who helped to preserve Judaism was a rabbi, or religious teacher, named Yohanan ben Zaccai. When the revolt against Rome broke out in 66 C.E., ben Zaccai was afraid Judaism would not survive. He worried that the Jewish rabbis would die in the fighting. If they were lost and the temple was destroyed, Judaism would be left with nothing.

Ben Zaccai begged the Jews to surrender in order to save Judaism. When they refused, he decided to approach the Romans for help.

Ben Zaccai faked his death and was smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. He met with Vespasian, a Roman general, and pleaded for the chance to start a Jewish school in the small town of Yavneh. Together with other rabbis, ben Zaccai was allowed to start his school.



When Jerusalem fell, Yavneh became the center of Jewish life. Ben Zaccai and 71 other rabbis created a new religious lawmaking body. They also made Yavneh a training ground for other rabbis. Teachers from around the world came to Yavneh to study. Then they returned to their communities to share what they had learned. In this way, the rabbis at Yavneh made sure that Jews still had leaders to guide them.

### New Teachers and Practices

In addition to training other rabbis, the rabbis at Yavneh introduced new practices to ensure that the teachings of Judaism would be passed on.

Traditionally, only religious leaders were allowed to read from the Torah. The Yavneh rabbis decided that any adult male could read from the sacred text. As a result, Jews no longer needed a trained leader to learn about Jewish history and law.

The rabbis also made the **synagogue** more important in Jewish life. A synagogue is a house of worship. But it is also a place to study and to hold meetings and social gatherings. The rabbis told Jews to build a synagogue wherever there were at least 10 adult male Jews. By building synagogues, Jews could strengthen their communities and their faith.

These new practices helped Jews preserve their religion in communities around the world. Over the centuries, rabbis studied and commented on Judaism's sacred texts, and developed other new practices. Jews often faced prejudice and persecution but kept their faith.

In 1948, a new Jewish state, Israel, was created in part of the lands once ruled by David and Solomon. Jews from many countries settled in Israel. For others, the traditions established over many centuries allowed their religion to thrive in many non-Jewish lands.

## 12.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about Jewish beliefs and the Diaspora. After losing their homeland, Jews struggled to preserve and pass on their religion. With creativity and dedication, they found ways to keep Judaism alive. In the next unit, you will learn about ancient India, a fascinating civilization that gave birth to two major religions of its own.



In the tradition of Rabbi ben Zaccai's first school, Jews today continue to learn and to share their understandings in Torah study groups.

**synagogue** a place of Jewish worship