The Blackwell Companion to Judaism

Edited by

Jacob Neusner
Bard College

Alan J. Avery-Peck
College of the Holy Cross
The Blackwell Companion to Judaism
Blackwell Companions to Religion

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Preface

The *Companion to Judaism* affords perspective on Judaism, its history, doctrines, divisions, and contemporary condition. The work systematically organizes and places into context the history of Judaism from ancient through modern times, identifies and expounds some of Judaism’s principal doctrines, introduces the more important forms of modern and contemporary Judaism, and takes up topics of special interest in contemporary Judaic life. In this way, it identifies the focal points of an ancient and contemporary religion, defining a context in which diverse texts and facts of Judaism fit and make sense. Readers thus gain a view of the whole even as they encounter each of Judaism’s important parts.

The essays provide perspective on dates and facts, the details of a complex religion. Readers thus will learn the facts of Judaism and its history even as they place these facts in the larger setting of Judaic theology, religious practice, and evolving social order. Not only so, but issues of acute contemporary concern – involving constructive theology and ethics, politics, and feminism – are addressed. Since Judaism is identified with a particular ethnic group (a “people”), chapters take up secular forms of being Jewish (“Jewishness”) and Zionism alongside the contemporary trend of the reversion of Jews to the practice of Judaism as a religion. Through this wide range of significant topics, we guide those curious about the past and present of a vital religious tradition, one that, over time, has exercised influence far beyond its own rather modest community.

The essays in this *Companion* expound the topics, and the selections in the associated *Blackwell Reader in Judaism* illustrate important points with primary sources, complementing the exposition. In this way, we both talk about Judaism and let Judaism speak for itself in its own mode of formulating and expressing its convictions. Most important, in both the essays and the readings, all of the authors, experts in their fields, address a broad audience, assuming an interest in the subject but no prior knowledge. We present not academic essays for specialists but introductions and expositions for any literate person interested in
our subject. Moreover, the authors do not take partisan or sectarian positions upon Judaism or its history, theology, and social expressions. They only build upon the consensus of contemporary learning.

The organization and selection of the topics deserves note. It goes without saying that we are able to cover only the more important topics, doctrines, movements, and problems. We should be the first to concede that other equally significant subjects could find a place in these pages. But, while the four principal parts of this book could have included other topics, we should affirm that those to which we have assigned priority would belong in any account of Judaism. These are the main topics that any portrayal of Judaism, its history, doctrines, and movements, must include, ranging from an account of Judaism’s authoritative writings, to which all the faithful refer, to the main theological ideas and, for the contemporary period, the most important movements.

The first three parts of the *Companion* describe Judaism from two angles, the historical and the theological. These chapters deal with the definition of Judaism—exactly what are we talking about when we speak of that religion?—and its formative history, from Scripture up to and including modern times. Part I narrates the history of Judaism from its formative age, in dialogue with the Hebrew Scriptures, through the complex and diverse world of Second Temple times, to the ultimate emergence of the Rabbinic Judaism of the Talmudic period as the normative system. We deal with the history and literature of that Judaism and then turn to the relationships of Judaism with Christianity in both religions’ formative age, and of Judaism with Christianity and Judaism with Islam in medieval times. In that same historical unit, we examine the relationship between Judaism and philosophy as conceived in the ancient world and depict Judaism’s approach to concrete religious life with God, as that life of piety was shaped in the Talmudic period and has continued to be followed by the faithful to our own day.

God, Torah, and Israel define the principal parts of Judaic theology in the Rabbinic writings of classical and medieval times, and, in Part II, these topics are set forth as they take shape in the principal documents of the ancient rabbis: the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmuds. Recognizing today’s broad interest in the messiah-theme of Judaism, we include an exposition of that matter, and, finally, we call attention to the way in which a religion makes its statement through the media of culture, not only through theological categories. Hence, how the Hebrew language embodies the theological doctrine of normative Judaism, representing a set of religious choices of formidable cultural consequence, is spelled out.

Among many Judaic religious systems of modern and contemporary times, three dominate and so form the foundation of Part III: Reform Judaism, the first and most important Judaism of modernity, Orthodox Judaism in its western, integrationist mode, and Conservative Judaism. Modernity presented a new set of political and cultural questions to which these Judaisms responded, each in its own coherent and systematic manner. These are to be compared both to one another and to the classical Rabbinic Judaism to which all make constant
reference. At the same time, while, like God, Torah, and Israel, these Judaisms are principal, they do not encompass all of the interesting constructions that have responded to issues of the social order of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Among other twentieth-century Judaisms, we chose the most acutely contemporary of them all, generally called “New Age Judaism,” different in its media of expression from Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism, quite separate from the Rabbinic tradition that sustains the Judaic systems of modernity, and intensely interesting in its own right.

For our survey of contemporary issues of Judaism, Part IV, we chose the four issues we deem of most acute relevance to religious life today: ethics, feminism, politics, and constructive theology. In Judaism, these are the topics on which systematic thought, mediating between the received tradition and contemporary sensibility, distinguishes itself. So far as religious thinking does not merely recapitulate the received tradition but proposes to contribute to it, it is in these four areas that, as the twenty-first century commences, the world of living Judaism focuses its attention.

Three other special topics find their place, not only because of their importance to the Jews as a group but also by reason of their pertinence to the religion, Judaism. The first is secular Jewishness, the definition of ways of “being Jewish” or of identifying as a Jew on other than religious foundations. In some ways, secular Jewishness takes over the theological heritage of Judaism and translates it into the building blocks of culture. In other ways, secular Jewishness proposes to form a social culture out of the traits of Jews as an ethnic community. The importance of secular Jewishness for the study of Judaism lies in the influence that the secular reading of the religious tradition exercises within the framework of the faith, especially in Reform, Conservative, and New Age Judaisms.

The second of the special topics is Zionism, which is the movement of national liberation of the Jewish people, regarded as “a people, one people,” which brought about the creation of the State of Israel. Zionism both draws heavily upon the Judaic religious tradition and profoundly influences the life of the faith as it is practiced both in the State of Israel and in the diaspora. Hence it demands an important position in any account of Judaism today.

We conclude with the one chapter that combines an interest in religion and theology with a concern for the social group, “the Jews.” In the recent past throughout the world of Jewry, a “return” to Judaism has marked a renewal of the faith for Jews formerly divorced therefrom. The interplay of the ethnic group and the religious tradition is worked out in the phenomenon of reversion. A religion that, at the advent of modern times, seemed to face a gloomy future turns out to exercise remarkable power, through the medium of the Torah, to lead to God people who presented unlikely candidates for religious practice or belief. The return of Jews to Judaism marks the conclusion of modernity. But what now is going to happen, we do not pretend to know.

Here, then, is our approach to making sense of the diverse and exotic data of an ancient and enduring faith. While, in these essays, readers will find guidance to pursue further a variety of critical issues, we are the first to point to areas
treated only tangentially if at all. For the history of Judaism, we should like to have said a great deal more about the theology of Rabbinic Judaism as well as its liturgical and mystical life. Among the principal doctrines of Judaism we should have gladly accommodated besides God, Torah, Israel, and messiah, the matters of theological anthropology and theodicy, sin and atonement, and above all, the theology of history that for holy Israel made sense of all that happened. And we should have been glad to include a chapter on the mystical doctrines of the Kabbalah as well as on the social movements produced thereby. We should have been pleased to describe the actual practice of Judaism in the various countries in which the religion flourishes, first of all, in the State of Israel, the USA and Canada, and western Europe. In this way the theory of systematic thought would have taken on practicality in the realization of that theory by the various national communities of Jews, whether in France or in South Africa or in Russia. And it goes without saying that the special topics, taken up in constructive essays, could have multiplied many times over.

Happily, these and numerous other topics that we could not treat here are set forth in large, systematic essays, comparable to those in the present Companion, in the three volumes and 1,800 pages of the Encyclopaedia of Judaism (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999) edited by the editors of these books together with William Scott Green. The twenty-seven topics treated here are augmented by more than a hundred others. So we have done our best to present Judaism in a comprehensive and responsible manner.

The editors express their gratification at working with the fine staff of Blackwell Publishers, which proposed the project and cooperated at every stage in the work of organizing, editing, and bringing to realization this rather complex project. The editors and production managers of the firm reached a high standard of professionalism and made the work a real pleasure.

Professor Avery-Peck expresses his thanks to the College of the Holy Cross, and Professor Neusner his to Bard College, for sustaining their academic careers and making possible all that they do.

The two editors also point with thanks and pride to the contributors of the essays in the Companion. They gave us their best work. They accepted our requests for revision (often: concision!) and reorganization. They met deadlines responsibly. And they are the ones who in the end realized the project; we could not have done it without each of them. They never disappointed us, and they always kept their promises. Anyone who has ever contemplated undertaking a project comparable to this one will appreciate the weight of those well-earned compliments.

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CHAPTER 1
Defining Judaism

Jacob Neusner

Religion as an Account of the Social Order

Judaism is a religion, so we begin by asking what we mean when we define religion in general and one religion in particular. In general, people treat religion as a set of beliefs about God, and such a philosophical definition sets forth what a religion believes. A definition of Judaism, therefore, would begin with the statement that Judaism believes God is one, unique, and concerned for us and our actions, thus, “ethical monotheism.” But the philosophical definition leaves out much that religion accomplishes within the social order. Religion transcends matters of belief, because it shapes behavior. Religion accounts for the life of the social group that professes that religion. So a definition of propositions and practices without close attention to their social context in the everyday world proves necessary but insufficient. Religion matters for several reasons. First, religion is public, it is social, something people do together, but what people believe tells us only about what individuals think or are supposed to think. Second, religion governs what we do, telling us who we are and how we should live, while what people believe tells us only about attitudes. Religion therefore encompasses not only beliefs or attitudes – matters of mind and intellect – but also actions and conduct. Above all, religion is something that a well-defined group of people does together.

Religion combines belief or attitude, world-view, which we may call “ethos,” and also behavior or way of life or right action, which we may call in a broad and loose sense, “ethics.” But because religion forms the basis of life of people otherwise unrelated to one another and not only or mainly families, it must be seen as an account of a social entity or a social group, for instance, a church or a holy people or a nation. In that sense, religion explains the social world made up by people who believe certain things in common and act in certain aspects of
their lives in common, and so religion accounts for the social entity, which we may call, for the sake of symmetry, ethnos. These three things together – ethos, ethics, and ethnos – define religion, which forms the foundation of the life of many social entities in humanity. Indeed, only when we understand that religion does its work in the social world, then we can begin to grasp why religion is the single most powerful social force in the life and politics of the world today, as in nearly the whole of recorded history. That definition of religion as public and communal serves especially well when we come to Judaism, which, as we shall see, frames its entire message in the setting of the life of a group that calls itself “Israel,” meaning, as we shall see, the heirs of the holy people of whom the Hebrew Scriptures or “Old Testament” speak.

A religious system – way of life, world-view, theory of the social entity that lives by the one and believes in the other – identifies an urgent and ongoing question facing a given social group and provides an answer that for the faithful is self-evidently valid. That is why to study any vital religion is to address a striking example of how people explain to themselves, by appeal to God’s will or word or works, who they are as a social entity. Religion as a powerful force in human society and culture is realized in society, not only or mainly in theology; religion works through the social entity that embodies that religion. Religions form social entities – “churches” or “peoples” or “holy nations” or monasteries or communities – that, in the concrete, constitute the “us,” as against “the nations” or merely “them.” And religions carefully explain, in deeds and in words, who that “us” is – and they do it every day. To see religion in this way is to take religion seriously as a way of realizing, in classic documents, a large conception of the social order.

Ethnic and Religious, Jewish and Judaic

Judaism is identified as the religion of the Jews, that is, a religion of an ethnic group. But that identification brings confusion, for not all Jews practice Judaism or any other religion. Hence the beliefs and practices, if any, of Jews do not by themselves form data for the description of Judaism. Not only so, but while Judaism is practiced in communities, called synagogues or congregations, Jewish ethnic identification is formulated by individuals, large numbers of whom by reason of intermarriage may accept multiple components to their ethnic identity. Hence public consensus of congregations of Jews who practice Judaism defines the faith, but private opinion of isolated individuals, part of no community of Judaism, does not. For we cannot describe the religion, Judaism, if we are constantly confronted with the confusion created by the routine claim, “But I’m Jewish and I don’t believe that” – or “I’m Jewish and I’m not religious at all.” Now the importance of recognizing the social character of a religion, its power to explain a particular group’s life, comes to the fore: when it comes to describing a religion in its own integrity, there is no “I” but only a “we.”
We therefore distinguish Jews' opinions as individuals from the system of Judaism as a coherent statement – way of life, world-view, theory of the social entity, “Israel.” The ethnic group does not define the religious system. We cannot study Judaism if we identify the history of the Jews with the history of Judaism, just as we cannot study Judaism if we regard the faith as a set of ideas quite divorced from the life of the people who hold those ideas. All Judaists – those who practice the religion, Judaism – are Jews, but not all Jews are Judaists. That is to say, all those who practice the religion, Judaism, by definition fall into the ethnic group, the Jews, but not all members of the ethnic group practice Judaism.

Public Religion versus Personal Religiosity: What is at stake in distinguishing Judaic religion from Jewish ethnicity?

When ethnic attitudes are confused with religious doctrines, the opinion of a given Jew, based on secular opinion or merely personal considerations and not in dialogue with the holy books of Judaism, is taken to speak for the religion, Judaism. But, in fact, the holy books of Judaism and the great body of believers may not hold such a view at all. Some simple examples make the point. Some Jews may declare themselves atheists. But Judaism teaches that one, unique God created the world and gave the Torah. Other Jews may not believe in the resurrection of the dead. But Judaic worship, whether Orthodox or Reform (matters we shall consider much later), affirms that God raises the dead and “keeps faith with those that sleep in the dust.”

A public opinion poll might produce broad Jewish consensus in favor of abortion. Judaism, the religion, in its classical formulation condemns abortion from the fortieth day after conception. So many Jews regard “Judaism” as the foundation for liberal opinion, even quoting verses of Scripture to prove their point. But among the faithful considerable debate takes place on whether Judaism is conservative or liberal, or even whether these contemporary political categories apply at all. Because of these simple facts, the confusion of the ethnic and the religious must be addressed head on. Otherwise, a representation of Judaism based on its classical sources and on the contemporary practice of Judaism in synagogues by the faithful will conflict with the impressions we gain from everyday life.

Judaism, the religion, in North America, Europe, Latin America, the South Pacific and South Africa, finds itself wrapped around by Jewishness, the ethnic identity of persons who derive from Jewish parents and deem “being Jewish” to bear meaning in their familial and social life and cultural world. In considering the facts of Judaism that the world about us presents, therefore, we have always to remember that the Jews form a community, only part of which practices Judaism. Some may even join synagogues and attend public worship mainly to be with other Jews, not to engage in public worship. They may wish to utilize the
synagogue to raise their children “as Jews,” while in their homes they practice no form of Judaism. A key institution of Judaism, the Sabbath, is praised by a secular thinker in these words: “More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel.” That is, the Sabbath is treated as instrumental, Israel the secular group as principal. But in Judaism, the Sabbath is a holy day, sanctified by Israel, the holy people, and not a means for some ethnic goal of self-preservation.

To explain the mixture of ethnic and religious, a simple case serves for illustration. The word “Israel” today generally refers to the overseas political nation, the State of Israel. When people say, “I am going to Israel,” they mean a trip to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, and when they speak of Israeli policy or issues, they assume they refer to a nation-state. But the word “Israel” in Scripture and in the canonical writings of the religion, Judaism, speaks of the holy community that God has called forth through Abraham and Sarah, to which God has given the Torah (“teaching”) at Mount Sinai, of which the Psalmist speaks when he says, “The One who keeps Israel does not slumber or sleep.” The Psalmists and the Prophets, the sages of Judaism in all ages, the prayers that Judaism teaches, all use the word “Israel” to mean “the holy community.” “Israel” in Judaism forms the counterpart to “the Church, the mystical body of Christ” in Christianity. Today “Israel” in synagogue worship speaks of that holy community, but “Israel” in Jewish community affairs means “the State of Israel.”

That example of the confusion of this-worldly nation with holy community by no means ends matters. In the Jewish world outside of the State of Israel, Jews form a community, and some Jews (also) practice Judaism. To enter the Jewish community, which is secular and ethnic, a gentile adopts the religion, Judaism; his or her children are then accepted as native-born Jews, without distinction, and are able to marry other Jews without conversion. So the ethnic community opens its doors not by reason of outsiders’ adopting the markers of ethnicity, the food or the association or the music, but by reason of adopting what is not ethnic but religious. And to leave the Jewish community, which is ethnic, one takes the door of faith. Here comes a further, but not unimportant, complication. While not all Jews practice Judaism, in the iron-consensus among contemporary Jews, Jews who practice Christianity cease to be part of the ethnic Jewish community, while those who practice Buddhism remain within. The upshot is that the ethnic and the religious in the world of the Jews present confusion.

**Judaisms and Judaism**

When we deal with Judaism, we pay close attention to the various groups of Jews who do practice the religion they call Judaism – while respecting the differences that separate these groups from one another. This requires that we learn how to respect the plurality of Judaic religious systems and speak of Judaisms,
not Judaism, or “a Judaism” when we mean a specific Judaic religious system. But it also necessitates a clear statement of what holds all Judaisms together as Judaism and also differentiates all Judaisms from any and all other religions.

The change in our normal way of speaking – Judaism to Judaisms – will prove less jarring when we remember that, while we speak of Christianity, we ordinarily mean, a particular Christian religious system. Christianity encompasses a remarkably diverse set of religious systems, which share some qualities in common – belief in Jesus Christ – but which differ deeply especially about matters on which they at first glance concur: who, exactly, was, and is, Jesus Christ? No one imagines that by describing a single common denominator we define one unitary religion; Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox, Methodist, Mormon, and Lutheran – each is comprised by clearly-delineated groups of Christians, all of them with their respective systems of belief and behavior. Just as from the very beginning, when Peter and Paul contended about absolutely fundamental issues of faith, the world has known Christianities, but no single Christianity, so the world has known, and today recognizes, diverse Judaisms, but no single Judaism.

If we were studying Christianity, we would differentiate Catholic from Protestant, noting that Italian, Hispanic, German, and Irish Catholics practice a common religion but differ on ethnic grounds; so when studying Judaism we differentiate one Judaism from another, noting that the ethnic group, the Jews, also thrives partly concentric with, but partly beyond, the circles of the faithful. But now we have to ask, what holds all Judaisms together and permits us to speak of not only Judaisms but Judaism? To answer that question, we have to consider another way of viewing religion, and that is, as a set of responses to a single ecological circumstance. Here is where the ethnic and the religious, the Jewish and the Judaic, come together, and it also is where Judaisms meet and become Judaism.

**The Ecology of Religion**

Ecology is concerned with the interrelationships of organisms and their environments. By “ecology of . . .” I mean the study of the interrelationship between the religious world a group constructs for itself and the social and political world in which that same group lives. I refer to the interplay between a particular religious system’s way of viewing the world and living life, and the historical, social, and especially political situation of the people who view the world and live life in accord with the teachings of their religion. The Jewish people form a very small group, spread over many countries. One fact of Jews’ natural environment is that they form a distinct group in diverse societies. A second is that they constitute solely a community of fate and, for many, of faith, but that alone, in that they have few shared social or cultural traits. A third is that they do not form a single political entity. A fourth is that they look back upon a very
long and in some ways exceptionally painful history. The Holocaust – the murder of millions of Jews in Europe in German death-factories – has intensified Jews’ sense of themselves as a persecuted group and obscured the long history of stable and secure life that they have enjoyed in various times and places, a thousand years in Poland, for example, and long centuries in much of the Muslim world. But Scripture itself presents its account of the people of Israel as the story of disaster and destruction.

A world-view suited to the Jews’ social ecology must make sense of all of these facts, taking account of their unimportance and explaining their importance. It must explain the continuing life of the group, which in significant ways marks the group as different from others and persuades people that their forming a distinct and distinctive community is valuable and worth carrying on. The interplay between the political, social, and historical life of the Jews and their conceptions of themselves in this world and the next – that is, their worldview, contained in their canon, their way of life, explained by the teleology of the system, and the symbolic structure that encompasses the two and stands for the whole all at once and all together – these define the focus for an inquiry into the ecology of the religion at hand, that is, the ecology of a Judaism.

Indeed, what holds all Judaic religious systems together can be identified. It is a single ecology, made up of two components: first, the permanent and ubiquitous appeal to the Torah, that is, the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), and, second, the inquiry into the Torah to make sense of the diverse circumstances of various groups, all of them identifying with the “Israel” of whom the Torah speaks – and all of them small, weak, scattered, and concerned with their status as a small minority, wherever they are (including, in our own time, the Jewish state – The State of Israel in the Land of Israel – which in its time and place is small, weak, and uncertain). These two then – an ongoing reference to a single holy writing, and a permanent social situation – define the eco-system in which any Judaism must take shape.

The Ecology of Judaism: What holds the whole together

We cannot reduce all Judaisms to a single common denominator. But we can point to traits that will characterize a Judaism and no other religious system. These are more than a few. One idea predominates in nearly all Judaic religious systems, the conception that the Jews are in exile but have the hope of coming home to their own land, which is the Land of Israel (a.k.a. Palestine). The original reading of the Jews’ existence as exile and return derives from the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses, which were composed as we now have them (out of earlier materials, to be sure) in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. In response to the exile to Babylonia, the experience selected and addressed by the authorship of the document is that of exile and
restoration. But that framing of events into the pattern at hand represents an act of powerful imagination and interpretation. That experience taught lessons people claimed to learn out of the events they had chosen and, in the Pentateuch, which took shape in 450 BCE when some Jews returned from Babylonia to Jerusalem, for their history: the life of the group is uncertain, subject to conditions and stipulations. Nothing is set and given, all things a gift: land and life itself. But what actually did happen in that uncertain world – exile but then restoration – marked the group as special, different, select.

There were other ways of seeing things, and the Pentateuchal picture was no more compelling than any other. Those Jews who did not go into exile and those who did not “come home” had no reason to take the view of matters that characterized the authorship of Scripture. The life of the group need not have appeared more uncertain, more subject to contingency and stipulation, than the life of any other group. The land did not require the vision that imparted to it the enchantment, the personality, that, in Scripture, it received: “The land will vomit you out as it did those who were here before you.” And the adventitious circumstance of Iranian imperial policy – a political happenstance – did not have to be recast into return. So nothing in the system of Scripture – exile for a reason, return as redemption – followed necessarily and logically. Everything was invented: interpreted.

That experience of the uncertainty of the life of the group in the century or so from the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 to the building of the Second Temple of Jerusalem by the Jews who, with Persian permission and sponsorship, returned from exile, formed the paradigm. With the promulgation of the “Torah of Moses” under the sponsorship of Ezra, the Persians’ viceroy, at ca. 450 BCE, all future Israels would then refer to that formative experience as it had been set down and preserved as the norm for Israel in the mythic terms of that “original” Israel, the Israel not of Genesis and Sinai and ending at the moment of entry into the promised land, but the “Israel” of the families that recorded as the rule and the norm the story of both the exile and the return. In that minority genealogy, that story of exile and return, alienation and remission, imposed on the received stories of pre-exilic Israel and adumbrated time and again in the Five Books of Moses and addressed by the framers of that document in their work overall, we find that paradigmatic statement in which every Judaism, from then to now, found its structure and deep syntax of social existence, the grammar of its intelligible message.

No Judaism recapitulates any other, and none stands in a linear and incremental relationship with any prior one. But all Judaisms recapitulate that single paradigmatic experience of the Torah of “Moses,” the authorship that reflected on the meaning of the events of 586–450 selected for the composition of history and therefore interpretation. That experience (in theological terms) rehearsed the conditional moral existence of sin and punishment, suffering and atonement and reconciliation, and (in social terms) the uncertain and always conditional national destiny of disintegration and renewal of the group. That
moment captured within the Five Books of Moses, that is to say, the judgment of the generation of the return to Zion, led by Ezra, about its extraordinary experience of exile and return, would inform the attitude and viewpoint of all the Israels beyond.

Let me now spell out this theory accounting for the character and definition of all of the diverse Judaisms that have taken shape since the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem in 586 and the return to Zion, the building of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, and writing down of the Torah, a process complete in 450 BCE. Since the formative pattern imposed that perpetual, self-conscious uncertainty, treating the life of the group as conditional and discontinuous, Jews have asked themselves who they are and invented Judaisms to answer that question.

Accordingly, on account of the definitive paradigm affecting their group-life in various contexts, no circumstances have permitted Jews to take for granted their existence as a group. Looking back on Scripture and its message, Jews have ordinarily treated as special, subject to conditions and therefore uncertain, what (in their view) other groups enjoyed as unconditional and simply given. Why the paradigm renewed itself is clear: this particular view of matters generated expectations that could not be met, hence created resentment – and then provided comfort and hope that made possible coping with that resentment. To state my thesis with appropriate emphasis: Promising what could not be delivered, then providing solace for the consequent disappointment, the system at hand precipitated in age succeeding age the very conditions necessary for its own replication.

There have been many Judaisms, each with its indicative symbol and generative paradigm, each pronouncing its world-view and prescribing its way of life and identifying the particular Israel that, in its view, is Israel, bearer of the original promise of God. But each Judaism retells in its own way and with its distinctive emphases the tale of the Five Books of Moses, the story of a no-people that becomes a people, that has what it gets only on condition, and that can lose it all by virtue of its own sin. That is an unsettling story for a social group to tell of itself, because it imposes acute self-consciousness, chronic insecurity, upon what should be the level plane and firm foundation of society. That is to say, the collection of diverse materials joined into a single tale on the occasion of the original exile and restoration because of the repetition in age succeeding age, also precipitates the recapitulation of the interior experience of exile and restoration – always because of sin and atonement.

So it is the Pentateuch that shaped the imagination of Jews wherever they lived, and it is their social condition as a small and scattered group that made the question raised by the Pentateuchal narrative urgent, and it is the power of the Pentateuch both to ask but also to answer the question, that made the answer compelling whenever and wherever Jews (that is to say, “Israel”) lived. Now that we have formulated a theory of the history of Judaism, from the beginning to the present day, let us turn from the historical and contemporary context of the Judaic religious system to its contents. Judaism sets forth the way of Torah – God’s teaching.
The History of Judaism: Brief definitions

The approach we work out here requires us to describe not Judaism as a whole – all the Judaisms of all times and all places set forth through the common denominator that holds them together – but a Judaism, that is to say, a single religious system. Such a system will be composed of three elements: a world-view, a way of life, and a social group that, in the here and now, embodies the whole. The world-view explains the life of the group, ordinarily referring to God’s creation, the revelation of the Torah, the goal and end of the group’s life in the end of time. The way of life defines what is special about the life of the group. The social group, in a single place and time, then forms the living witness and testimony to the system as a whole and finds in the system ample explanation for its very being. That is a Judaism.

Social Entity, Way of Life, World-view: Ethnos, ethics, ethos

How shall we know when we have a Judaism? The answer to that question draws us to the data – the facts – we must locate and describe, analyze, and interpret. The first requirement is to find a group of Jews who see themselves as “Israel,” that is, the Jewish People who form the family and children of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, the founding fathers and mothers. That same group must tell us that it uniquely constitutes “Israel,” not an Israel, the descriptive term we use.

The second requirement is to identify the forms through which that distinct group expresses its world-view. Ordinarily, we find that expression in writing, so we turn to the authoritative holy books that the group studies and deems God-given, that is, the group’s Torah or statement of God’s revelation to Israel. Since we use the word Torah to mean biblical books, starting with the Five Books of Moses, we must remind ourselves that the contents of the Torah have varied from one Judaism to the next. Some groups regard as holy what other groups reject or ignore. A more suitable word than Torah, therefore, is canon, meaning the collection of authoritative writings. The canon contains much of the group’s world-view and describes its way of life. We of course err if we treat as our sole source of facts only what is in writing.

A group expresses its world-view in many ways, through dance, drama, rite and ritual; through art and symbol; through politics and ongoing institutions of society; through where it lives, what it eats, what it wears, what language it speaks, and the opposites of all these: what it will not eat, where it will not live. Synagogue architecture and art bear profound messages, powerful visible messages. The life-cycle, from birth through death, the definition of time and the rhythm of the day, the week, the month and the year – all of these testify to
the world-view and the way of life of the social group that, all together, all at once, constitutes a Judaism.

In the long history of the Jews, groups of people who regarded themselves as “Israel,” that is, groups of Jews, have framed many Judaisms. What permits us to make sense of the history of these Judaisms is the fact that, over time, we are able to identify periods in which a number of Judaisms competed, and other times in which a single Judaism predominated. The historical perspective therefore permits us to sort out the Judaisms that have flourished, keeping each by itself for the purpose of description, analysis, and interpretation, and also to hold the Judaisms together in a single continuum, over time and space, of the whole of which, all together and all at once, we can make sense. By recognizing that a given Judaism came into existence at a time in which Judaisms competed, and by understanding that, at another point, a single Judaism defined the Jews’ way of life, world-view, and social existence as a distinct entity, we may understand how the diverse facts—writings, theologies, definitions of what matters in the everyday life, doctrines of the end of time and the purpose of life—fit together, when they cohere, or do not fit together, when, in fact, they prove discrete.

Diverse Histories of Jews – the history of Judaism

In studying about the history of Judaism, we concentrate not on the Jews as an ethnic group, but on the Judaic religious systems that various groups in diverse times and places have set forth as an account of the social world that diverse ethnic groups, all of them regarding themselves as “Jewish,” or as “Israel,” have adopted. The Jews as a people have not had a single, unitary, and continuous history. They have lived in many places, centuries here, centuries there, and what happened in one place rarely coincided with what happened in some other place. When Jews in the Iberian peninsula flourished, those in other parts of western Europe, for example, England, France, and Germany, perished; when, in 1492, the Spanish and Portuguese governments expelled Muslims and Jews, Jews in Poland and in the Turkish empire flourished. Only rarely did the histories of many distinct and different communities of Jews coincide, for example, in the horror of the mass extermination of European Jews between 1933 and 1945 in Germany and German-occupied Europe.

But if the ethnic group proves too diverse and distinct to treat as whole and harmonious (except as a matter of theology in the conception of Israel, God’s first love, or as a matter of ideology in the conception that the Jews form a people, one people), we can treat as a coherent whole, harmonious and unitary, the history of the Judaic religious system, or Judaism. Let me specify the periods of the history of Judaism. I see four: first, an age of diversity, then an era of definition, third, a time of essential cogency, and, finally, a new age of diversity.