

THE OLD TESTAMENT CULTURE

LOCATION

The Old Testament, or the Jewish Bible, is a collection of many books that are the product of ancient Hebrew faith and culture. It is the root of Hebrew (or Israelite) society, and now also of Christian society. Hebrews (the ancestors of the Jews) are a group of people that originally came from a region called Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and eastern Syria). From Mesopotamia they then moved to Egypt and to Canaan (ancient Palestine), an area between the Jordan, the Dead Sea, and the Mediterranean. Today we find Jews and Christians throughout the entire world, though there are many more Christians. Though the Jewish religion is the main religion of Israel, the Christian religion has become the main religion of many countries, but especially in North and South America, and in Europe.

RELIGION AND HISTORY

The five books of the Old Testament are common to both Judaism and Christianity. It is unclear when the first texts of the Old Testament were written but the best guess is that they were written around 500 BC. The rest of the texts were written over a long period of time in different places after that (more than 600 years). All the histories in the Old Testament have a religious purpose. They all show how God is active in human events. The Old Testament begins with the history of the creation of humans, the first acts of disobedience by Adam and Eve and the two of them being thrown out of God's garden. In Judaism and Christianity there is only one God (a male god). This god is uniquely different from all his creatures and helps (and at times punishes) his creations. Humans are expected to love and fear him.

Human beings are believed to have been created in the image of this god, but are clearly less important (and less powerful) in the universe than this god. Animals and plants are even lower beings than the humans and were created to serve and to please humans. Objects like mountains, rocks, the seas etc. are not seen as sacred or magical.

Traditional ritual foods (kashrut), the saying of blessings, the daily, weekly, monthly and annual cycles of prayer, and respect for the Sabbath (a day dedicated to god) are important parts of traditional Jewish religion. Jewish people have suffered a great deal in history. They have not been easily accepted by other people and have survived defeat, captivity, and the loss of their national independence. Most recently, 6 million Jews were killed in Western and Eastern Europe during the 1940's in what was called the Holocaust or Shoah. Until today the Jews have had to struggle to be free from harm.

Jewish religion has traveled with the Jews to many lands and the Bible has been important in their religious ceremonies and in their synagogues (places where the community of believers come together to worship their god and for education), where it was read and taught and where believers prayed. The Bible has helped the Jewish people keep their identity as a people and has helped people in their daily lives.

Christian religion has its roots in Judaism. Jesus and his followers were Jews living in Palestine 2000 years ago. Jesus was a Jewish prophet (he was born just before the death of King Herod the Great (37 B.C.E.– 4 B.C.E.)). Unlike the followers of Judaism, Jesus' followers believed that he was the Messiah (sent from God to earth) who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. Christians are named after Jesus Christ.

Starting as a small group of people who believed that Jesus Christ was the son of God almost 2000 years ago, Christianity has become one of the world's largest religions. Unlike Jewish people of the past the Christians have had much power, especially because of the Christian Churches. Throughout the 20th century it has been those countries that have had Christianity as their major religion that have dominated the world economically and militarily.

Islam, another religion with one god, also uses the history of creation from the Old Testament and talks about some of the Prophets. At the core of Islamic religion is the Qur'an, believed to be the final revelation by Allah (which means "god" in Arabic) to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Muslims (the people who are Islamic) view Muhammad as the last of a series of Prophets that include people from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (especially Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus). Islam is also one of the major religions of the world today and is very common in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia.

CULTURE

Jewish and Christian religions have had a large influence on the rest of the world. Christian missionaries have traveled to all corners of the world to convert people to their religion. These activities have been quite successful. Most people in the Western World, also those who do not think of themselves as religious, have been influenced by the moral ideals expressed in the Bible.

Biblical literature has also deeply influenced the culture and the art of Western peoples; from music to poetry, drama, and literature. Biblical material - stories, themes, and characters - have been used by writers, playwrights, and poets whether or not they themselves are believers.

Part of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion is to attend official buildings that are places of worship that honor their god. In Jewish religion these are called "Synagogues", in Christian religion "Churches", and in Islam "Mosques".

All three religions are now so widespread that it is difficult to speak of a shared culture. Also, in many places, such as in Africa, South America and the Caribbean, Christianity has been mixed with other more traditional religions.

