

Christianity

Christianity

History of a Civilisation

Peter Franken

Original Sin and Hell: The Ultimate Conspiracy Theory

Religious Conflict: My Imaginary Friend Is Better Than Yours

One Person's Faith Is Another Person's Superstition

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Preface

Christianity began its career as a new religion that prided itself on being the continuation of Judaism. Any discussion of the history of Christianity must therefore begin with this purported predecessor. Consequently, extensive attention is dedicated to the Jews, their religious community, and their enduring friction with Christianity.

Following this prologue, the study addresses the origins and development of the new faith, with the Jewish rabbi Jesus as its figurehead. Just as this movement secured its triumph and became the dominant religion across the Roman Empire and its successor states, a new monotheistic competitor emerged: Islam. This faith is discussed briefly and, above all, compared with its predecessors.

The focus then shifts to the other dimension of Christianity—that of a civilisation. Today, approximately two billion people are counted among its adherents. In this secular age, however, it is evident that this number does not reflect the prevalence of devout belief. Over time, the religious component has receded into the background, and the moral foundations of Christianity have become the bedrock of life in the Western world. We can therefore speak of Western civilisation on a Christian foundation.

For a long time, Christianity as a civilisation left its mark on the development of every continent. Outside its European core, this was primarily the result of large-scale colonialism beginning in the early sixteenth century. When viewed with historical detachment, this 'cultural expansion' constitutes the most profound impact of Christianity.

The Western colonisation of the globe has resulted in a uniformity unprecedented in human history. This civilisational layer is by no means deeply rooted everywhere, but it cannot be denied that almost nowhere a modern-day traveller will experience a genuine culture shock. Whatever one chooses to think of it, this remains a remarkable achievement—and reason enough to closely re-examine the entire history of this civilisation.

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1. Prologue: Judaism

In the following section, the emphasis is placed not so much on Jewish religion, sects, customs, and traditions, but rather on the functioning of the Jewish community within its wider environment. Judaism is situated within a general historical context. This approach makes it inevitable that certain topics are discussed only summarily, particularly if they are not of major importance to the narrative as a whole.

This broader perspective seeks to answer a few fundamental questions, such as the origins of 'Jew-hatred' and the root causes of the diaspora.

The answer to the first question lies in the phenomenon of 'monotheism'. A religion that prides itself on representing the one true God—thereby dismissing all other deities as mere illusions or physical idols—is, in its inherent arrogance, an insult to all who do not adhere to it. A few thousand years ago, Jewish monotheism was an entirely novel phenomenon, and Jews residing within host countries stirred up a great deal of bad blood because of it.

Furthermore, this section clarifies the nature of the diaspora and addresses the second question. It argues that the destruction of the Temple by Titus was by no means the starting point of a mass demographic exodus of Jews from Palestine. Those tied to real estate—the landowners—never left at all.

For anyone who derives their comprehension of the Jewish people almost exclusively from the Bible, the epoch spanning the Babylonian Exile to the appearance of Jesus constitutes a complete blind spot. Such a discontinuity does not fit the design of this book; this study therefore closely tracks the Jews through what turns out to be the actual formative period of their religion. Special attention is also directed toward the religious, cultural, and political ramifications of Hellenisation, and the subsequent Romanisation, of the Jewish homeland of Palestine. This provides the necessary context to understand the emergence of the Jesus movement.

The origins of what has come to be called 'the Jewish people' are shrouded in mystery. Historically, virtually nothing is known about them until five centuries before the beginning of our era. Writing about the first millennia inevitably requires roughly twelve centuries of speculation. This speculative period can be filled in several different ways, using diverging narrative scenarios.

The Biblical Scenario: Abraham and Isaac

In the Bible, Abraham is introduced as the patriarch of a new tribe. He is a Bedouin living in Ur, somewhere in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). When his father Terah dies, Yahweh calls Abraham and tells him to go on a journey:

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great people, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing." (Genesis 12:1–2).

Alternatively, the biblical text depicts Abraham departing from Harran (southeastern Turkey) with his immediate family, including his nephew Lot and his wife Sarah. Whichever the case, the family arrives in Canaan and stays for some time in Shechem. Abraham descends from Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, and Eber (Genesis 11:10–17). The Hebrews might be named after this distant ancestor Eber, which explains why Abraham is called 'the Hebrew' in Genesis 14:13.

Because the land offered little, Abraham leaves for Egypt with Sarah. He has Sarah pass herself off as his sister, and the Pharaoh takes her as one of his wives. Because of this, Abraham finds favour with the Pharaoh and becomes a wealthy man. Later, he is sent away with Sarah when the Pharaoh discovers that she is actually Abraham's wife. The company heads back to Canaan.

Arriving there for the second time, Abraham receives a promise:

"In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates." (Genesis 15:18).¹

Lot subsequently settles in the Jordan Valley and later perishes during the destruction of Sodom.

Genesis 17 recounts Yahweh's announcement that Abraham will father a son with Sarah, who will become the ancestor of a great people. Furthermore, Yahweh enters into a solemn covenant with Abraham, marked by the requirement that all males must henceforth be circumcised. This obligation is applied retroactively: Abraham himself must undergo it, as must Ishmael, his son with Hagar.

Later, when Yahweh visits Abraham alongside two angels on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham tells his wife Sarah to prepare a meal for the guests. The meal consists of baked goods, dairy products, and meat. Clearly, the strict dietary laws that later became so characteristic of Judaism were not yet in force.²

Sarah laughs to herself when she hears Yahweh say that she—ninety years old and barren—will bear a son. When Yahweh questions her

about this, she denies it. Here we see a deity who is not detached and almighty, but rather someone who is a bit offended because his power is doubted. Later, he negotiates with Abraham over the conditions required to spare the condemned city of Sodom. Abraham has a direct interest in this because of his nephew. Furthermore, he argues that destroying the entire city—the 'righteous with the wicked'—is beneath God's dignity. Ultimately, they settle on the number ten:

"And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake." (Genesis 18:32).

That Sodom is ultimately wiped out completely says much about the alleged godlessness of the place. Apparently, there were fewer than ten God-fearing people in the city.³

Sarah later gives birth to a son, Isaac, a half-brother to Ishmael. Besides Hagar, the Bible also mentions another concubine of Abraham, a woman named Keturah, with whom he had six sons (Genesis 25:1–2). In total, eight sons are mentioned. Isaac inherits Abraham's estate, while the other sons receive gifts. Daughters are never mentioned. The Bible refers to Isaac as Abraham's only-begotten son, because Sarah is his primary wife and Hagar is merely a concubine—effectively Sarah's maidservant. Opinions are divided on the status of Keturah. Some argue that she and Hagar are the same person. Others view her as a concubine or a new primary wife after Sarah's death.

To confirm his covenant with Yahweh, Abraham proves willing to go so far as to sacrifice Isaac to him. Although this is called off at the very last second, this episode clearly indicates that at this stage, Yahweh differs little from his pagan counterparts (Genesis 22).⁴

In Genesis 24, we read how Abraham sends a servant out to find a bride for Isaac from his family in Mesopotamia. A marriage candidate from among the inhabitants of Canaan is out of the question. The servant returns with Rebekah, a daughter of Abraham's nephew Bethuel, who subsequently bears Isaac twin sons: Esau and Jacob, in that order. Because Jacob manages to trick his older brother out of his birthright, all attention shifts to him. He becomes the third patriarch of the new tribe that began with Abraham.

The Biblical Scenario: Jacob

Jacob is sent to Mesopotamia to find a wife. He enters the service of his uncle Laban and marries his daughters, Leah and Rachel. He also takes two concubines, Zilpah and Bilhah, the maidservants of his official wives. In total, these women bear him twelve sons, the most famous of

whom are Judah (son of Leah), and Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Rachel. The twelve sons of Jacob are thus, for the most part, half-brothers. Genesis 31 recounts how Jacob leaves his father-in-law Laban with his family and flocks to return to Canaan. A fascinating detail in this story is Rachel's theft of the *teraphim*—figurines of the family gods, often interpreted as fertility goddesses—from her father's house. The mother of Joseph and Benjamin clearly still stands within the polytheistic tradition.⁵

What follows is a reconciliation between Jacob and Esau, alongside a nightly wrestling match with Yahweh in the guise of an angel. Yahweh then gives him a new name: Israel. Consequently, Jacob's descendants are called Israelites, while those of Esau are known as Edomites. Jacob settles in Shechem and buys a piece of land there from the local tribal chief, Hamor.

Shortly after, events spiral completely out of control. Dinah, one of Leah's daughters, goes out to visit the local women and is violated by one of Hamor's sons, fittingly named Shechem. However, he refuses to leave it at a forced encounter; he asks his father to arrange a marriage with Jacob. Two of Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, insist on honour-revenge, but Jacob views marriage as an opportunity to live in peace with Hamor's tribe, which holds a clear numerical advantage. An agreement is reached that the marriage can take place if all the men of Shechem are circumcised, so that Jacob and his family can at least maintain their covenant with Yahweh. Once all the men are circumcised and temporarily incapacitated, Simeon and Levi ambush the village and slaughter everyone.

Jacob is deeply upset by this, as Genesis 34:30–31 states:

"And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites: and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house. And they said, Should he deal with our sister as with an harlot?"

Later, it turns out that Simeon and Levi get the short end of the stick when Jacob allocates living areas. Simeon is only allowed to dwell within the territory of Judah, while Levi remains landless and becomes responsible for temple service (the later Levites). Three of Levi's great-grandchildren will reappear later in the biblical narrative: Moses, his sister Miriam, and his brother Aaron. Joseph, his father's favourite, is subsequently sold by his brothers to a passing group of Ishmaelites (descendants of Jacob's uncle Ishmael). They, in turn, sell him to the Egyptian Potiphar, an officer of the Pharaoh (Genesis 37).

Judah separates himself from his brothers (Genesis 38) to look for a local wife. He marries the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua, who bears him three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.⁶ Er later marries Tamar, also a 'daughter of Canaan'. Er then dies—reportedly punished by Yahweh because he failed in his duty to provide offspring—and the second brother, Onan—whose name ironically means 'the virile'—refuses to fulfil his levirate marriage duty and is therefore also killed. Instead of giving Tamar his third son, Shelah, Judah sends her back to her father, terrified that he will lose another son.

Tamar resorts to a trick. She disguises herself as a prostitute by standing—veiled but suggestively—by the roadside where she knows Judah will pass. She seduces her father-in-law and takes several of his personal items as a pledge until her payment, a young goat, is delivered. Judah is later confronted with the fact that he has impregnated his daughter-in-law, who gives birth to twins, the brothers Perez and Zerah. The future King David is a descendant of this Perez. Notably, Perez is half-Canaanite. Had he been born as the son of Er or Onan, he would have been three-quarters Canaanite. In the development of these legends, this detour via Judah conceivably served to grant the lineage from Jacob to David a greater degree of tribal purity.⁷

When Canaan is struck by a famine, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Only Benjamin stays behind, as Jacob refuses to risk losing another son of his favourite wife, Rachel, after Joseph. In Egypt, the brothers meet Joseph but do not recognise him. He has risen to the rank of vizier, a confidant of the Pharaoh and the most important administrator in the country. He questions his brothers—whom he did recognise—and asks them to return, but only if they bring their youngest brother along. Simeon is left behind as a hostage when they head back. During their second visit, Joseph reveals his identity and forgives his brothers for their betrayal. He asks them to bring the entire tribe—effectively still just Jacob's family—to Egypt to settle in the region of Goshen, the area between the Nile and the later Suez Canal. Jacob agrees, and the entire tribe trades Canaan for Egypt. This might seem to contradict Yahweh's promise, but it does not; Goshen was indeed part of the land that Yahweh had envisioned for Abraham (Genesis 42–48). The tribe of Jacob multiplies and grows into the people of the Israelites. Within this people, multiple tribes are distinguished, each with a descendant of Jacob as its patriarch.⁸ After a period of prosperity, the people fall into slavery, which lasts until the Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

The Biblical Scenario: Moses

The Book of Exodus recounts the life of the Israelites in Egypt and their departure from the land. Central to the narrative is the claim that the Israelites multiplied much faster than their hosts, thereby becoming a threat to the state. The Pharaoh attempted to control this demographic growth by ordering the execution of all newborn Hebrew boys. To escape this fate, the infant Moses was placed in a wicker basket floating on the Nile, only to be found by an Egyptian princess. Consequently, he grew up at the royal court, completely unaware of his Israelite identity. Later, upon discovering his true heritage and feeling outraged by the systemic oppression of his people, he emerged as their leader and guided them northward toward Canaan.⁹

This transition was not without conflict; Egypt first had to be plagued by ten disasters before the Pharaoh agreed to their departure. The Book of Exodus states that the Red Sea was temporarily parted to allow the people passage. Given that the Israelites resided in Goshen, an area in northeastern Egypt, this is an implausible detail within the myth. Between the northernmost tip of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean coast lies over 100 kilometres of dry land, over which one could walk without ever getting wet feet. The Bible justifies this route by explaining that the shorter northern path was populated by the Philistines, whom the Israelites were advised to avoid.

When the Pharaoh noticed that Moses had headed south, he assumed the Israelites had become lost in the desert and pursued them, realising he had allowed himself to be intimidated by a largely unarmed population. During the pursuit, the Pharaoh and his army were swallowed by the Red Sea (Exodus 14:23–31).

Once inside the desert region between Egypt and Canaan, Moses developed into the spiritual leader of his people. He received a foundational set of moral directives from Yahweh (the Ten Commandments), alongside an extensive framework of laws regulating the religious and social life of the community.¹⁰ In addition to parts of Exodus, the entire Book of Leviticus and large portions of Numbers and Deuteronomy are dedicated to this legal system. Within this biblical framework, Yahweh delivered a complete blueprint of legislation to his chosen people through Moses. A crucial component of these laws was the absolute exclusivity demanded by Yahweh in return for the privileges granted to his chosen people:

"I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any

likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me..." (Exodus 20:2–5). Apostasy was thus punished across subsequent generations; even great-grandchildren would suffer the consequences.

That Yahweh was utterly serious about this demand for exclusive worship becomes clear from his reaction when the people, during a temporary absence of Moses, constructed an idol—the 'Golden Calf'—and celebrated around it with dancing. Yahweh intended to wipe out the entire people, but Moses managed to dissuade him. Instead, the men of Moses' own tribe (Levi) slaughtered 3,000 men as an expiatory offering. Here it becomes evident that the character of Yahweh had undergone a significant evolution. Rebekah could still cherish her *ter-aphim* without facing consequences; now, such actions were viewed as high treason, carrying the death penalty.

The stone tablets inscribed with these newly delivered laws and ordinances were stored in a ceremonial chest known as the 'Ark of the Covenant'. This was placed inside a provisional, mobile sanctuary—a tent referred to as the Tabernacle. The Ark would later reside in the Temple of Jerusalem and vanished from history after the destruction of the city by Titus.¹¹

Yahweh promised to eliminate all adversaries of the people of Israel so they could seize their territories. The Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites were specifically earmarked for destruction. The promised territory was delineated as follows:

"And I will set thy bounds from the Red Sea even unto the sea of the Philistines, and from the desert unto the river; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and thou shalt drive them out before thee." (Exodus 23:31).

The 'Red Sea' denotes the Sea of Suf, the 'sea of the Philistines' denotes the Mediterranean, and 'the river' can refer to none other than the Jordan. All in all, this territory was significantly smaller than the land mass originally envisioned for Abraham. The formation of strategic alliances was explicitly forbidden:

"Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in thy land, lest they make thee sin against me: for if thou serve their gods, it will surely be a snare unto thee." (Exodus 23:32–33).

The sheer volume of the Israelite population roaming the desert after the Golden Calf incident can be inferred from Numbers 1:46, which

records 603,555 men aged twenty and older, excluding the tribe of Levi. Within this biblical framework, we are dealing with a massive population of approximately two to three million people. Following forty years of wandering through the Sinai Desert, the territory of Canaan was finally entered and conquered from the indigenous tribes.

The Biblical Scenario: Judges and Kings

The conquest under the leadership of Joshua, who succeeded Moses, was a brutal affair. In alignment with Yahweh's directives, the resident tribes were systematically eradicated and their lands seized. The tribes of Israel distributed themselves across the conquered territories according to the historical blessings attributed to Jacob: Judah and Benjamin in the south, Simeon embedded within the territory of Judah, and the remaining tribes to the north. The centralised leadership that existed during the desert migration and the initial military campaigns quickly dissolved. Prominent individuals arose as local leaders, known as 'Judges'. Concurrently, prophets emerged to warn the populace on behalf of Yahweh to adhere strictly to the law and to abandon idolatry. Eventually, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king.

Saul quickly fell out of favour with Yahweh when he failed to execute his orders strictly regarding the Amalekites. Within the biblical narrative, this group serves as the archetype for absolute malice. The Israelites had a historical score to settle with them, as the Amalekites had ambushed the weakest members trailing at the rear of the Israelite column during the exodus. Once that initial battle had been won by Israel, Moses declared:

"Because the Lord hath sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:16).

In the First Book of Samuel, King Saul received an explicit command from Yahweh via the prophet Samuel to entirely exterminate the Amalekites and all their livestock.¹² The narrative notes that Saul slaughtered all Amalekites except for their king, and spared the finest cattle. This act of leniency was heavily condemned by Yahweh, and as punishment, Saul was stripped of his kingship. The captured King Agag was subsequently executed by Samuel.

Saul's successor was the legendary King David, from the tribe of Judah. Through continuous warfare against neighbouring pagan peoples, he successfully expanded his realm. His son Solomon continued this expansion, and under his administration, the territory controlled by Israel reached its greatest geographical extent. Solomon constructed the

First Temple in Jerusalem, replacing the mobile Tabernacle and permanently establishing Jerusalem as the religious epicentre of the land. Yet, during Solomon's reign, internal decay set in, and the kingdom fractured into two distinct entities: Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, and Israel, with its capital in Samaria.

The First Book of Kings notes that Solomon maintained an enormous harem containing hundreds of foreign wives. This inevitably led to the creeping infiltration of foreign deities at court. To punish Solomon, Yahweh announced that the kingdom would be divided, leaving Solomon's descendants to rule over only his own tribe (Judah). Out of regard for David, the deity postponed this fracture until after Solomon's death. A more secular cause for the division of the empire lies in the high taxation and forced labour imposed by Solomon to fund his military campaigns, the construction of the Temple, and his luxurious lifestyle. The northern tribes grew resentful of being exploited for the benefit of a single ruling tribe in the south—a classic political conflict. Jeroboam, from the tribe of Ephraim (the same tribe to which the conqueror Joshua belonged), became the first king of the northern ten-tribe Kingdom of Israel. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, inherited the kingship over the southern tribe of Judah, which was joined by Benjamin and the scattered tribe of Simeon. This southern kingdom gave its name to a new distinct population: the Jews. Subsequently, the exclusive worship of Yahweh fell into disuse in both the north and the south. Most notably, the Canaanite mother goddess Asherah made a major comeback, alongside various other idols. A few centuries later, the northern kingdom fell victim to an Assyrian invasion. Its population was deported into exile, and the ten northern tribes vanished from the 'biblical historical' record.

The Biblical Scenario: The Babylonian Exile

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had both become tributary states to Assyria. A failure to pay the required tribute served as the catalyst for the Assyrian invasion. Following the defeat of the Kingdom of Israel, the Assyrian forces placed Jerusalem under siege. This siege was lifted after a few years, presumably because the tribute was ultimately paid after all. The Bible, however, attributes this resolution to divine intervention. During these conflicts, Hezekiah ruled over Judah. The Bible portrays him as a God-fearing monarch—one of the very few.

Under his reign, the Temple service was fully restored, an absolute ban was declared—and where possible, enforced—on conducting religious services in rival temples, and idolatry was vigorously com-

bated. As a vassal of Assyria, Hezekiah played a double game by secretly aligning himself with Egypt. He secured Jerusalem's water supply by constructing an underground tunnel, an engineering masterpiece for its time.

Under Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, Judah relapsed into idolatry. The extent of this spiritual regression is evident from the detailed chronicle provided in 2 Kings 23, which outlines everything Manasseh's successor, Josiah, had to do to regain Yahweh's favour. Not that this ultimately availed; the deity had already resolved to inflict the same fate upon Jerusalem as he had upon Samaria, the capital of Israel. The behaviour of Josiah's successors, who undid virtually all of his reforms, only strengthened this divine resolve.

Then Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian Empire, made his entry. Having long been a vassal state of Assyria, Babylon managed to turn the tables. Judah subsequently became a minor vassal state of Babylon. King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylonian rule, counting on Egyptian support that failed to materialise. The people of Judah were defeated and carried away into exile. 2 Kings 25:11–12 describes this event:

"Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carry away. But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vinedressers and husbandmen."

In other words: the officials and the elite were deported, while the farmers stayed behind. The Temple was destroyed, and everything of value was carried off to Babylon. The famous Babylonian Exile had begun.

From this point forward, Babylon was the dominant regional power, with a territory stretching from the Nile to the Tigris. This hegemony would not last long, however, as the Persian Empire soon overran the Babylonians. During the Babylonian Exile, the Jews enjoyed a great deal of freedom. They were permitted to practise their own faith and formed a distinct cultural community. Just as in previous narratives set in Egypt (Joseph, Moses), we encounter a mythical figure here who rises through the ranks of the royal court: Daniel.

When the Persians assumed control, the Jews were permitted to return to Judah; this occurred after a period of roughly half a century. By no means did everyone take advantage of this opportunity, as evidenced by the story of Esther—the subject of the most romantic book in the Bible, and the only one in which the name of the deity never appears. This text describes a large Jewish community remaining in

the former place of exile. Returning to Judah was apparently not all that appealing; moreover, life in Babylon was still well within the territory that Yahweh had promised to Abraham's seed.

Within the biblical framework, we have now arrived at approximately five centuries before the beginning of the common era (BCE). The initial mists have cleared, and the Jewish people have made their entry into regular recorded history.

A Realistic, Pseudo-Historical Scenario

By extrapolating what is known about neighbouring peoples and reasoning backward from the period for which substantial records have survived, we can sketch a plausible picture of 'Jewish prehistory'. To flesh out this period, we must make selective use of biblical myths and legends.

The Israelite people in all probability emerged from a tribal confederation of desert nomads. Perhaps one tribe claimed a mythical patriarch named Abraham, another knew a certain Jacob, and a third spoke of Isaac as their ancestor. When these various tribes merged into a single people, these patriarchs could have been integrated into a shared past, aided by the fabrication of a family lineage. In this way, the newly formed people acquired a collective memory. This mechanism applies not only to stories of lineage but can also be adapted to events that once made a profound impression on a specific tribe—such as the Exodus and other narratives, experienced by a few but later attributed to all. This is how a collective history is forged.

A wandering desert people entering an area where trees grow and agriculture is possible would perceive it as a realm of boundless abundance: 'a land of milk and honey'. This metaphor is a hyperbole rather than a cloaked description of reality. Geographically, the land of Canaan is identical to the later Palestine—an area that, in the absence of modern technology, was far from fertile.

Whether the Israelite people left Egypt *en masse* remains unclear; at the very least, there is absolutely no historical evidence for it. It is equally plausible that a tribal confederation gradually assimilated with the local Canaanite populations. Alternatively, there may have been a partial conquest of the existing population, during which the central and southern regions of what would become Palestine were seized alongside the Jordan Valley. The Bible does not make matters any simpler by introducing other tribal confederations that trace their lineages directly back to the purported patriarchs. For instance, there are the descendants of Abraham, the Ishmaelites, and those of Esau,

the Edomites. How are we to interpret this? If only the descendants of Jacob entered Canaan from Egypt, then according to the biblical text, they would have encountered their own extended family already living there.

Be that as it may, at a certain point, Canaan was inhabited by various peoples who, during a specific era, were tributary to the Assyrians—the dominant regional superpower. Nothing is known historically of a united kingdom under David and Solomon. It is plausible, however, that small vassal kingdoms existed, ruled by kings bearing those names. After all, myths and legends must originate from somewhere.

A nomadic people entering and settling a new land is by no means unique in history. The era of the great migrations offers many historical examples: Huns, Vandals, Mongols, and so forth. Over time, they appear to vanish, but they simply assimilated into the pre-existing population. A similar process is highly likely regarding the Israelites. The prohibition that Jacob supposedly issued against marrying women from other tribes actually dates from the period in which the Bible was written—estimated to be a millennium after Jacob's alleged settlement in Shechem. Furthermore, incorporating foreign women into the tribe was clearly not an issue even in Jacob's time, judging by the choice of partners made by the actual Jewish patriarch Judah: the Canaanite women Shua and Tamar.

A portion of the population living in this Assyrian vassal state was deported around 722 BCE to Assur or Nineveh in modern-day Iraq. This is known indirectly because an Assyrian inscription describes King Tiglath-Pileser III crowning Hoshea as king of Samaria and its surroundings. A few years later, his son Sargon II captured Samaria because the required tribute had not been paid.

Strictly speaking, this is where the people of Israel make their very first appearance in documented history, only to vanish from it almost immediately. Presumably, the social upper class was deported, while those who worked the land were left behind. How could a land that was no longer cultivated yield any revenue? The Assyrian treasury would gain nothing from a total deportation, but everything from complete subjugation. It is possible that colonists from Assyria settled in Samaria and the surrounding area. The later Samaritans, for whom the Bible has not a single good word to say, are therefore in all probability at least partially the descendants of the lost ten tribes.¹³

The Kingdom of Judah

King Hezekiah successfully resisted an Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. His construction of an inflow tunnel, which secured the city's water supply, contributed significantly to this success. In 1880, an inscription discovered inside this tunnel appeared to date from the eighth century BCE. It describes how two teams of labourers, working from opposite directions, met and thus completed the channel.¹⁴ Under Hezekiah's successor, the kingdom relapsed into idolatry, and it fell to his son Josiah to restore order. Josiah was likely a fundamentalist who attempted to impose strict monotheism upon the population, aiming to gain tighter control over a fractured society with the support of Yahweh's priests. Much like his illustrious Egyptian predecessor, Akhenaten, his reforms did not survive their initiator; under his successors, idolatry flourished once more.

Following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, a life in exile began for a portion of the population. Among them was one of the last vassal kings, Josiah's grandson Jehoiachin. His name appears on a clay tablet found in Babylon in the late 1930s, part of a collection recording the monthly distribution of oil to specific individuals. One entry names Ya'u-kinu, king of Yahudu. Given the striking similarity in names, this must refer to the biblical king; he received five litres of oil per month.

After Babylon was forced to cede power to Persia, the Jews were permitted to return from exile. This occurred during the reign of Cyrus II around 538 BCE, roughly half a century after the exile began, meaning the captivity was relatively short-lived.

This return shares notable similarities with events that would unfold in the twentieth century CE. The farmers and rural folk left behind in the land viewed themselves as the rightful inhabitants who had preserved the prevailing customs and traditions. The Babylonian Jews arrived in several waves, the first of which immediately set itself the task of rebuilding the Temple. The local Jews wished to participate in this project but were excluded. The construction of the new Temple was intended as living proof of a Jewish revival—a return to Josiah. This was ironic, because this king was anything but representative of how people in Judah and Israel had actually lived up to that point.

The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah meticulously detail how the land was subsequently cleansed. Jews who had married non-Jewish women—during the preceding half-century—were required to dissolve their marriages, and those who refused to comply were cast out. In this way, the descendants of the de facto deported elite attempted to impose their religious culture onto the remaining population, who

were far greater in number. This sowed the seeds for the division of Jewish society into the common people on one side and the religious aristocracy on the other.

Ezra provides the names of the two leaders of the first wave of repatriation in 538 BCE: Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. These distinctly pagan names indicate the extent to which the Jewish exiles had been Babylonianised. A large portion of the exiles chose to remain in Babylon even after 520 BCE, the period of the final repatriation wave, living contentedly under Persian rule. This constitutes an early example of the diaspora—the permanent dispersion of the Jews across territories outside their homeland. The presence of a major Jewish community in Mesopotamia would only end with its expulsion following the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

The Persian advance continued southward, bringing Egypt under Persian administration as well. Papyrus records found in Elephantine (Aswan) indicate that a sizeable Jewish colony existed there in 475 BCE. The Jews there served as professional warriors, a mercenary garrison tasked by the Persians with maintaining peace and order. It is sometimes argued that Jews outside the homeland lived primarily in foreign military service—giving rise to the epithet of 'the fighting Jew'. Another striking feature of this community was their unconcerned sacrificing of rams in the local temple. Not only did this offend the local population—the ram being a sacred animal in Egypt—but it also ignored the commandment stating that sacrifices to Yahweh could exclusively be performed at the Temple in Jerusalem. Ever since Josiah, great emphasis had been placed on this rule: no place for Jewish worship could exist outside the Temple in Jerusalem. Jewish communities also appear to have settled in other parts of Egypt around the beginning of the fifth century BCE.

For a people who regard the Exodus from Egypt as their glorious moment of origin, this is remarkable. If we assume that the Exodus narrative is merely a myth and Moses a mythical patriarch, everything becomes far more comprehensible. For centuries, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were caught between the superpowers of Assyria and Egypt, and later between Babylon and Egypt. Rather than waiting for defeat and deportation, many Jews sought refuge in Egypt ahead of time—a country that was culturally closer to them than the Mesopotamian empires. This migration offers an explanation for the origin of the diaspora, which was later expanded by the voluntary settlement in Mesopotamia.

It is also possible that the people of Israel were a nomadic population for a long time, commuting between Canaan and Egypt depending on

the availability of food. The movements to and from Egypt by Abraham and Jacob described in the Bible could very well be a metaphor for this type of seasonal commuting.

Yahweh, the Bible, and Being Jewish

The people of Israel experience their 'moment of glory' during the period when David and Solomon rule over a vast empire stretching from the Nile to the Tigris—not coincidentally, the exact territory once envisioned for Abraham. David conquers the fortified city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites, establishing it as his capital, and Solomon builds the First Temple there. The Bible would have us believe that these events unfolded around ten centuries BCE. However, while neighbouring peoples during this era literally recorded their history in stone and carved even minor matters into clay, no archaeological evidence has ever been found for the kingdoms of David and Solomon. For researchers unburdened by an exaggerated respect for the biblical text, the conclusion is clear: we are dealing with myths and legends.

A straightforward extrapolation leads to the realisation that the Bible as a whole cannot boast any genuine historicity. This raises fundamental questions: when was the Bible written, who wrote it, and why? It is evident that multiple individuals were involved in producing these biblical texts. The sheer diversity in how Yahweh is portrayed points to a combination of several distinct underlying sources. We encounter Yahweh as an approachable person who drops by for a meal with Abraham while on his way to a difficult task in Sodom and Gomorrah. Then there is Yahweh the deity of thunder and lightning, who is so terrifying and overwhelming that Moses must stand with his back to him to avoid being consumed. Finally, we see Yahweh as an omniscient elder enthroned amidst heavenly hosts. The painstaking development from being merely the best god among many to the one and only God also points to a plurality of authors.

Furthermore, the directives that Yahweh passes down to his people through Moses are directly mirrored in the pronouncements and orders of Moses himself. On one hand, we find:

"But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt..." (Leviticus 19:34).

On the other hand, we encounter the command to exterminate the Midianites. When the Israelite warriors slaughter only the men and bring the women, children, livestock, and valuables back to camp, they face the wrath of a deeply offended Moses:

"Have ye saved all the women alive?" (Numbers 31:15).

They are promptly sent back to finish the job: only young virgins may be spared to be taken as slaves, while the remaining women and children must be put to death. These are the two faces of Moses—and implicitly of Yahweh: empathetic and merciless, humanist and war criminal.

A recurring mantra throughout the biblical narrative describes the behaviour of various monarchs: *"And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord."* Here we hear the voices of the biblical scribes, viewing everything through the religiously correct lens of their own era. After all, those very myths and legends describe a populace that differed very little from the surrounding peoples. It was polytheistic, deeply attached to physical idols, and revered female deities (particularly fertility goddesses), operating on the principle that gods come in pairs just like humans. Yahweh, too, had a wife: the popular goddess Asherah.¹⁵

In the struggle for survival against neighbouring peoples, having a powerful god on your side is vital—preferably several, as Greek mythology demonstrates. However, rather than relying on multiple second-tier deities, it is far more effective to have the supreme god fight your battles. Moving from a supreme god to the only god, to the exclusion of all others, is a smaller step than it appears. As a people, you then have the exclusive creator on your side, while your adversaries have no deity to fight for them, simply because no other gods exist. This must have provided an immense boost to community morale, eventually fostering deeper solidarity and a sense of invincibility.¹⁶ The initial framework for this shift was likely established under Hezekiah, but the great leap forward was executed by Josiah. Yet, because his successors flouted his monotheism, they paid the price with the Babylonian Exile—a classic case of divine retribution.

It was during this exile that the process of collecting and editing these long-circulating myths and legends must have begun. Every scribe added their own interpretation, but always with the same underlying objective: to hammer home to the population that the only correct path was the worship of the one true deity, while denying the very existence of alternative gods. Because so many different writers were at work, most likely over several centuries, the Bible became an anthology. This resulted in major differences in the interpretation of events and the evaluation of historical figures; the legendary David, for instance, fares much better in Chronicles than he does in Samuel. The fact that Babylonian legends served as a blueprint and source of inspiration for the Jewish scribes is particularly recognisable in the

creation narratives. The Babylonian variants still lean heavily on a complex universe populated by numerous gods and all manner of monstrosities—composite creatures creatively combining the limbs of different animals. The creation stories in Genesis represent a more evolved, streamlined, and realistic version of these tales. Not only is the horrific menagerie absent, but polytheism has been entirely abandoned. Curiously, however, biblical texts featuring visions and prophecies frequently lapse back into this Babylonian 'horror zoo'. Even John cannot escape it in his New Testament Apocalypse.

It is clear that the biblical writers aimed to forge a set of all-defining values, norms, rules, and commandments. This allowed for the establishment of a culturally and religiously unified state—a theocracy that can be described as totalitarian in every sense of the word.

Indeed, the Bible offers no practical justification for its detailed dietary and lifestyle laws. Applying Occam's razor forces us to conclude that their sole purpose was to engineer social isolation. A totalitarian state can only survive as long as disruptive outside influences are kept at bay, and maintaining a completely distinct way of life works wonders in that regard.

The stark dichotomy between those inside and those outside the chosen people is also visible in Exodus 20. The Ten Commandments dictate "*thou shalt not kill*," yet entire tribes were eradicated by divine command. Evidently, the prohibition was intended strictly for internal use, carrying a particularistic application.

Furthermore, it is hard to miss that a fair number of misogynistic types must have been present among those biblical scribes. Take the myth of the Fall, where the blame is squarely shifted to 'the woman'. Because of her actions, humanity now knows the difference between good and evil. To prevent humans from consuming the fruit of the 'tree of life' after eating from the 'tree of knowledge'—which would grant immortality—Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise. An angel is stationed as a guard to ensure they cannot sneak back into the Garden of Eden.

But the scribes did not stop there. They seized this open goal to firmly 'put woman in her place' by having Eve face a divine punishment:

"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." (Genesis 3:16).

The fact that women experience pain during childbirth was thus retroactively blamed on Eve. In the process, she was placed in a position of permanent submission, providing a theological justification for the existing patriarchal status quo.

Strictly speaking, the existence of the Jewish people as a distinct cultural community with a monotheistic religion as its trademark only truly begins upon the return from the Babylonian Exile. Its architect was almost certainly King Josiah—a figure who otherwise remains relatively obscure in the grand narrative. This obscurity is understandable when one realises that the biblical authors wished to create the impression that monotheism had been intertwined with the people of Israel from the very beginning. They traced it back to a legendary covenant that Yahweh supposedly struck with Abraham, establishing them from that moment forward as 'God's Chosen People'.

In this revisionist approach, there was simply no room for a late-stage initiator of monotheism; Josiah could hardly be credited with starting something that had allegedly existed since time immemorial!¹⁷ It is transparent, then, that the heavily emphasised characteristics of Judaism—such as the insistence that Jerusalem is the sole centre of the faith (the only place with a temple where sacrifices may be offered), the denial of any gods other than Yahweh, and the exhaustive lifestyle regulations—only took shape around five centuries BCE. Conversely, if we adopt this as our starting premise, everything falls into place, and the inconsistencies within the Bible are adequately explained.

The moment the Jewish people make their entry into recorded history occurs so late not because they neglected to leave behind physical traces like other major surrounding peoples, but because in that specific form, they simply did not yet exist. Judaism, the concept of being Jewish, the religion, the customs, the exhaustive laws, the stubbornness with which Jews distinguish themselves from other peoples, and the strict taboo against marrying outside the community—all of it has existed for a much shorter duration than the Bible would have us believe. In this sense, the defining moment of the Jewish people was not the mythical Exodus from Egypt, but the historical return from the Babylonian Exile.

At this juncture, it is crucial to emphasise that the Jewish people differ from other populations in the region now known as the Middle East solely on a cultural and religious level. There is absolutely no indication of any biological distinction, such as that between Black and Chinese populations. However, because an intense emphasis was placed on marrying strictly within the group from around 500 BCE onward, it is possible that certain specific genetic traits were passed down with notable frequency.

The Kingdom of God and the Messiah

For most Christians, there is only one Messiah: Jesus. Yet the historical Jesus stands firmly within an ancient Jewish tradition. The messianic phenomenon is entirely Jewish in origin; it is a mere historical coincidence that it became a central concept within Christianity. Before exploring this in depth, it is worth noting how religious awareness emerged—the birth of *homo sapiens* as a religious being.

Early humans reflecting upon their existence perceived a stark contrast between prosperity and misfortune, between good and evil. They distinguished between the unpredictable forces of nature and the actions of fellow human beings. Natural disasters were credited to the gods; thunder meant Thor or Donar was striking in anger. Humans devised countless explanations for the undesirable events threatening their survival, and unexpected personal tragedies were similarly blamed on the divine. Until well into the first millennium CE, many lived within a worldview populated by anthropomorphic deities—gods modelled after humans, complete with flaws, whims, and virtues. Favour with one god could easily incite the wrath of another, with disastrous consequences, as Greek and Roman mythologies abundantly demonstrate. It becomes far more difficult to understand why one human being is 'evil' and another 'good'. Was this the result of a flaw in creation?

Various flood myths from antiquity reflect this line of thinking. In the biblical version, God grows dissatisfied with how his creation turned out. He decides to attempt a restart by wiping out almost everything and beginning anew with a limited number of creatures. He did not view his own handiwork as the root cause of the failure, but rather the way his pawns on Earth had developed. This divine intervention did nothing to rid the world of wicked people; they flourished after the flood just as they had before.

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye reproaches God following a pogrom during his eldest daughter's wedding. He interrupts his monologue, muttering to himself and the audience: "Complaining to God about God—that won't get you very far, will it?"

This captures the core dilemma for anyone living in a community governed by a single, all-powerful deity. Rivalry between gods can no longer be blamed for personal suffering, nor can one fall back on a flaw in creation. The modern God is omnipotent and omniscient; if 'evil' exists alongside 'good', it must be intentional—part of a grand design that we as humans are simply incapable of grasping. Our intellectual capacity is too limited. Yet, this realisation does little to soothe

the existential dissatisfaction many feel with life in its current form. Judaism historically distinguished itself by offering a straightforward solution to these pressing dilemmas: the current state of affairs is merely temporary. A moment is coming when the world will be turned upside down, and everything will be set right. This expectation is referred to as the arrival of the 'Kingdom of God' on Earth. In this future scenario, God utilises an earthly intermediary to lead the people in battle against their enemies: a messiah. Crucially, this figure is not a demigod, but a kind of superman. Once the battle is won for the Jewish people, a divine judgment will follow, wherein the 'wicked' are condemned and damned, while the 'righteous' are elevated to a life within 'God's Kingdom'. By 'the wicked', the text refers primarily to those who refuse to believe in the one almighty God and who flout his laws. This does not resolve the philosophical problem of an imperfect creation, given that the 'wicked' were originally an integral part of that creation. Yet, at the Last Judgment, they suddenly are not. Nevertheless, the anticipation of a messiah runs like a common thread through the history of Judaism, flaring up with intensity during periods of foreign oppression. It is hardly surprising that messianic fever reached a boiling point during the Roman occupation of Palestine—a seemingly hopeless situation that only divine intervention could bring to an end. The figure of Jesus fit into this framework beautifully, as did numerous other messianic competitors during that era.

It is vital to emphasise that the messianic concept is uniquely Jewish. The messiah exists solely for the salvation of the Jews, and for no one else. Yahweh had struck a mythical covenant with the people of Israel, promising them a homeland and the ultimate dominion of their religion over the entire world. In the intervening centuries, ten tribes had vanished, and the remaining members of the community found themselves oppressed within their own land. For many, the 'Kingdom of God' meant casting off this foreign yoke and restoring their own sovereignty. Consequently, the Romans viewed any charismatic figure who claimed to be the messiah not just as a religious eccentric, but as a potent political threat. We will explore the 'Kingdom of God' and the messiah further when we place them within their Christian context.

Hellenism

The return of the Jewish people from the Babylonian Exile did not signal the restoration of an independent polity. Such an independent political entity had barely ever existed; there was almost always a neighbouring superpower to which the local ruler was tributary.

Heavily romanticised potentates like David and Solomon remain legendary figures for whom no historical proof can be provided.

During the period from 538 to 332 BCE, Judah stood under the authority of the Persian emperors. Once Darius III was defeated by Alexander the Great, the Persian overlord made way for a Greek one. Alexander's early death had virtually no impact on this dynamic, as his empire was promptly carved up among his generals. Ptolemy gained control over Egypt, while Seleucus took over the former Persian Empire. His successors also ruled over Syria and Judah. Socially and culturally, this marked the beginning of the Hellenistic period in Palestine, which lasted until the region was annexed by the Roman Empire.

During his military campaigns, Alexander founded a number of cities bearing his name. The most famous was Alexandria in Egypt, situated on the Mediterranean Sea. During the Ptolemaic period—as the era ruled by the successors of Ptolemy I is known—Alexandria grew into the largest metropolis of the ancient world. The city attracted people from far and wide, including a vast number of Jews. By the mid-third century BCE, the Jewish colony had grown so large that it constituted the largest Jewish city outside of Judah.¹⁸

The Alexandrian Jews were primarily engaged in craftsmanship and small-scale trade. While there were affluent individuals among them, such as moneylenders and wholesale merchants, the vast majority belonged to the middle class. Legally, the Jews formed an autonomous community and were not integrated into the Greek-dominated citizenry—nor, for that matter, were the subjugated native Egyptians. Throughout the Ptolemaic period, relations with the authorities were generally favourable. Documented unrest occurred twice, in 145 and 88 BCE, driven by political motives.

Around 250 BCE, during the reign of Ptolemy II, work began on translating the Jewish sacred scriptures from Hebrew into Greek. Legend has it that the king summoned seventy-two Jewish translators from Jerusalem to Alexandria to execute this task. The resulting text is known as the Septuagint.¹⁹ This project arose from the growing unfamiliarity of Egyptian-dwelling Jews with the Hebrew language, which meant they could no longer properly understand the original texts. The translation met a rapidly expanding need.

The subjugation of Egypt and the wider Middle East by the Greeks triggered profound cultural shifts, comparable to the global cultural dominance of Western trends over two millennia later. Thanks to Alexander's conquests, a hybrid blend of Greek and Persian cultures emerged under the name 'Hellenism'. This synthesis dictated the norms for the more educated social strata of the population for rough-

ly a thousand years. Alongside syncretism²⁰, the defining characteristics of Hellenism included internationalisation (particularly in trade and travel), systematisation (visible in urban planning), realism (in the visual arts generally), heightened expression, dynamic movement along diagonal lines, and individualism (such as portraiture). The Hellenistic worldview was characterised by an anthropocentric focus rather than a theocentric one—placing human beings at the centre of existence.

The Jews living in Alexandria assimilated much of this culture. Within Judah, however, this adoption of non-Jewish influences remained largely confined to urban centres.

Jews in the Diaspora

From the sixth century BCE onward, distinct groups of Jews were living outside their original homeland, marking the true beginning of the diaspora. The persistent threat of a Babylonian invasion prompted many inhabitants of Judah to seek safety in Egypt ahead of time. During the Babylonian Exile, the Jews were permitted to remain together as a unified group. A large portion of them chose not to return to Judah, remaining in Babylon even after the region fell under Persian administration. It was during this era that the Jews began to increasingly distinguish themselves as a group with a *status aparte*. This development was driven by several key factors:

The definitive evolution toward a strict monotheism, which made it impossible to participate in the polytheistic aspects of everyday host societies:

Stringent dietary laws that made it impossible to share even a simple meal with non-Jewish neighbours;

The unusual interruption of the week for the celebration of the Sabbath—in an era governed by the principle of *festina lente* (make haste slowly), it must have seemed absurd to the surrounding community to effectively exclude an entire day from public life. While a modern weekend to catch one's breath is a contemporary concept, it held no meaning in antiquity, as there was little scheduled work and heavy labour was performed by slaves anyway;

The intense emphasis placed on keeping their ranks closed by strictly forbidding marriage outside the immediate community;

The mandatory alteration of all male members through circumcision, functioning as a bloody physical sign of the covenant with their one almighty God.

These factors inevitably generated social friction, suspicion, and aversion. The logical implication of strict monotheism is that the gods of all other groups do not exist and are mere fiction—an assertion that the rest of the population found offensive. Furthermore, a deity who imposes contrived and unnatural demands upon his followers breeds suspicion, and in the case of circumcision, outright revulsion. Added to this was an old grievance: the Jews in Egypt had placed themselves in the military service of the Persian rulers—effectively acting as henchmen for an occupying force—while simultaneously maintaining a triumphant Exodus narrative that explicitly humiliated Egypt.

The subsequent arrival of the Greeks did the Jewish cause no favours. Having previously linked their fortunes to the Persians, the Jews now found themselves politically isolated in a foreign land. It was within this specific environment that the seeds were sown for a phenomenon that has proven impossible to eradicate: Judeophobia, or Jew-hatred.²¹ Alexandria quickly expanded into the centre of the Hellenistic world outside Greece, soon harbouring a Jewish colony estimated at roughly 100,000 individuals. The native Egyptian population viewed these relatively prosperous Jews with intense envy. From the Greeks, the reaction was primarily one of suspicion and disdain, as they considered the Jewish religion to be culturally inferior. Several Egyptian historians writing in Greek chose to put a different spin on the traditional Exodus story. They asserted that the Jews had actually been expelled from Egypt as lepers, and that their invisible, nameless God was a misanthrope who burdened them with the most bizarre laws. They were forbidden from eating pork and barred from working a seventh portion of the week (the Sabbath), which earned them a reputation for being inherently lazy.

Far less is recorded about the living conditions of the Jews in former Babylon. However, that friction existed there as well can be inferred from the words attributed to the character Haman a few centuries later in the Book of Esther:

"There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them." (Esther 3:8).

This is followed by the decree issued by Haman on behalf of King Ahasuerus:

"And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of

the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey." (Esther 13/Additions to Esther).

It would certainly not be the last time in history that the Jewish people faced the threat of total annihilation.

Judeophobia

Although Judeophobia—or Jew-hatred—is the only historically accurate term for this phenomenon, it is almost impossible nowadays to avoid using the word 'antisemitism', so deeply embedded has the designation become. Consequently, these two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this text. The phenomenon is entirely unique, from which one can deduce that it is directly tied to the only truly unique aspect of the Jewish people: monotheism. Until recently, it was frequently claimed that Pharaoh Akhenaten was the true initiator of a monotheistic religion centred around the god Aten. Modern scholarship, however, is more inclined to view Akhenaten's reign as a political attempt to break the power of the existing priesthood. Furthermore, the existence of other deities was never denied; Aten was simply elevated as the new supreme god. Thus, we are looking at a politically motivated movement toward a henotheistic religion. What remains remarkable, however, is the choice to abandon physical images of this new deity; the sun disc Aten was his own likeness and could not be looked at directly under penalty of blindness. For the first time, an abstract god entered history, departing from the traditional anthropomorphic model.

In any case, the Jews were the first to accept an abstract god as the only god. They effectively invented absolute monotheism while simultaneously abandoning the practice of depicting the deity in any physical form. In fact, even pronouncing or writing the name of the Jewish God became forbidden. Instead of Yahweh, preference was given to descriptions like 'the Lord', and in extreme cases, the name was written strictly without vowels: YHWH.

When a people is master of their own land, denying the validity of other gods causes little disruption. Similarly, peculiar customs demanded by a local deity do not provoke widespread alarm, suspicion, or aversion; they simply belong to the local culture and that is the end of it. This dynamic alters completely when one lives as a displaced minority among other peoples. A clan can choose to stick together and live as separately as possible from the other inhabitants of the country, but total isolation remains practically impossible.