A Sacred Canopy

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On Religion, Ideologies, and Mass Movements

Peter Franken

About the cover image:
The cover features a widefield infrared view of the Milky Way's core. Throughout human history, the vast, mysterious night sky has served as the ultimate cosmic canopy—an awe-inspiring firmament under which civilisations constructed their sacred doctrines, moral orders, and secular ideologies.
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Preface

This volume brings together the historical foundations and ideological developments that shaped both religious and secular systems of absolute power. Originally conceived in Dutch as *Het Heilig Baldakijn*, this reconstructed English edition combines the early historical trajectory of Western religious authority with the study of twentieth-century ideocratic regimes.
The narrative traces a continuous thematic arc: from the monotheistic origins of Judaism and the rise of Early Christianity through the Middle Ages, to the modern manifestations of totalizing belief systems in Communist Russia, National Socialist Germany, and Fascist Italy. By examining how sacred structures of authority evolved into secular ideologies, *A Sacred Canopy* provides an integrated perspective on the historical impulse to impose overarching worldviews upon society.

Why devote such attention to totalitarianism and fascism today? Above all, because fascism remains a deeply misunderstood ideology, easily conflated with National Socialism and the atrocities of the Second World War without a rigorous analysis of the original doctrines. To comprehend how these movements gained such widespread support, this study focuses on the socio-communal, economic, and cultural dynamics of Italian Fascism and German National Socialism up to around 1940, stepping back from the war period itself.
Today, terms like 'fascist' and 'nazi' are frequently reduced to generic pejoratives. Yet in an era of shifting political landscapes, sound knowledge of these original doctrines is essential to distinguish historical reality from modern rhetoric—separating populism from fascism and provocative radicalism from structured neo-Nazism.
To avoid being swept along by prevailing narratives, one must critically examine one's own assumptions. A century after these mass movements first emerged on the world stage, maintaining such vigilance is more vital than ever. This book attempts to contribute to that essential understanding.

Peter Franken

Rotterdam, November 2026

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 *teraphim* 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 preexisting 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 inscrip-

tion 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 pa-

gan 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 ex-

ploring 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 em-

pire 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 roughly a thousand years. Alongside syncretism[20], 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 des-

ignation 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.

To sum up: for roughly a thousand years, the Jews were the only people on Earth with a strictly monotheistic religion.[22] This status quo remained unchallenged until the arrival of Islam. The Jews dispersed across a large portion of the globe, always making an effort to separate themselves within their host countries. While such self-isolation was practised by other displaced groups within polytheistic hosts, it never occurred elsewhere in combination with a principled rejection of all gods except their own.

Interestingly, the social position of early Christians during the first few centuries closely mirrored that of the Jews. Roman society viewed members of this early Christian sect with virtually the same suspicion

as they did the Jews. This dynamic only shifted fundamentally once the Christians became the dominant ruling party.

Islamophobia, by contrast, is a much more recent phenomenon. Because the historical spread of Islam occurred hand-in-hand with direct military conquests, Muslims were consistently the dominant, ruling class wherever they resided. It was only when Muslims began to migrate across the globe individually that they encountered the phenomenon of being different within a host country—or at least being perceived as such.

Roughly coinciding with the era in which Jewish monotheism emerged, a fundamental economic shift occurred in human society. The historic unity of location between producers and consumers began to break down, giving rise to merchant trade. While the exchange of goods had always existed, it had previously been restricted to bartering one's own products directly for those of another. A profound shift occurred when individuals began offering goods that had been acquired elsewhere. This marked the birth of middleman merchant trade.

Nomadic tribes in all probability took the lead in this development, as intermediary trade required only a slight expansion of their regular activities. They no longer migrated solely to find pastures for their livestock, but also carried items to exchange for goods beyond basic survival needs. The concept of luxury goods emerged, proving lucrative. A skilled trader willing to take risks could accumulate substantial wealth.

As established, the Jews likely emerged from a nomadic people who eventually settled in a land that was scarcely capable of producing enough food for its population. While a portion of the population engaged in farming, viticulture, and animal husbandry, another segment continued along the paths of their nomadic ancestors. In short, many Jews entered commerce. For trade, they lived in an absolute prime location—situated directly between the two great power centres of the ancient world: Mesopotamia and Egypt. It was an incredibly disadvantageous position for maintaining independence, but for commerce, it was ideal.

The contemporary cliché that 'the world is getting smaller' was equally true twenty-five centuries ago. Seafaring peoples like the Phoenicians and the Greeks systematically colonised the Mediterranean basin. These colonies maintained active commercial links with their motherlands, generating intensive maritime traffic. Consequently, it became increasingly easy for independent individuals to travel across the region as passengers. This combination of factors enabled enterprising

Jewish merchants to establish themselves throughout the ancient world and become wealthy.

This initiated a new phase in the diaspora, but simultaneously marked the widespread dissemination of antisemitism. Unlike the primary diaspora—which was triggered by political cataclysms and resulted in the wholesale settlement of large Jewish communities in Egypt and Babylon—this secondary diaspora was driven by commercial opportunities. It consisted of streams of individuals who were not consciously emigrating for survival, but were simply following the trail of money.

In addition to the social adjustments previously noted, a new psychological element now entered the equation: humanity universally dislikes the middleman. He buys cheaply—profiting off labour performed by others—and sells at a steep premium. What the public routinely overlooked were the immense risks these ancient merchants faced: shipwreck, piracy, extortion, cutthroat competition, and protection fees. In this perilous environment, the clannish behaviour of the Jewish community acted as an immense commercial asset. Wherever a trader arrived, there was always a local network of people to provide shelter and support. A modern parallel can be found in the global network of the Overseas Chinese. In developing nations, this successful group is often viewed with identical envy—they are comparable to the Jews of the ancient world, but operating without the same religious baggage.

In summary: numerous distinct factors can cause a specific group or people to fall into disrepute with its surrounding neighbours. Yet no other group in human history possesses the exact same combination of interlocking variables that characterises the Jews. This reality makes antisemitism a completely unique historical phenomenon. Wherever Jews travel, they carry this reputation with them. Only in a territory where they constitute the dominant, ruling majority will antisemitism cease to be an active threat. This conclusion aligns precisely with the core thesis advanced at the close of the nineteenth century CE by Theodor Herzl.

The Seleucids

In the second century BCE, Judah was situated between the Ptolemaic Kingdom, with Alexandria as its capital, and the expansive Seleucid Empire. Initially, Judah fell under Ptolemaic control, but from around 200 BCE onward, it was administered by the Seleucids. Over the centuries, this immense empire steadily contracted until it ultimately

encompassed nothing more than modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.[23] Like the other regions governed by the successors of Alexander the Great, Judah had to contend with the distinct culture of its new rulers: the area was gradually Hellenised.

A highly influential lineage during this era was the Tobiad family. Their power base was located east of the Jordan River in territory that had historically belonged to the Ammonites. The Tobiads were the driving force behind the movement to abolish Jewish customs and traditions in favour of Hellenistic practices. This Hellenisation occurred primarily within the upper social strata of the population and was visible in the adoption of typically Greek traditions, such as constructing a gymnasium in Jerusalem, participating in Greek athletic contests, and abandoning the sacred covenant with Yahweh—effectively cancelling the treaty with this deity. Because Greek sports were practised naked, Jewish men stood out conspicuously due to the absence of their foreskins. Consequently, an increasing number of families chose to abandon the circumcision of newborn boys, ensuring they could later become full participants in the new society without being ridiculed for their altered bodies.

Since the return from Babylon, the Tobiads had lived in bitter enmity with another prominent family, the Oniads. This lineage supplied the Temple priests and had effectively fashioned themselves as the incarnation of the legendary Levites. Managing the Temple involved vast sums of money; in fact, the sacrificial services were the main source of revenue for the temple city of Jerusalem. In this regard, the Oniads held a highly privileged position. Furthermore, the High Priest possessed the right to collect taxes within the minor temple state of Judah. This right was lost when Ptolemy III revoked it, because the High Priest had sided with the Seleucids during a conflict with the Ptolemies over the control of Judah. From that point forward, tax collection was transferred to the Tobiads, which significantly strengthened their political leverage.

The vendetta between the two families erupted into open conflict when the Hellenised Tobiads attempted to seize the office of High Priest via the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV. This was a complete cultural clash, heavily fueled by political and economic motives.

When Antiochus IV (c. 215–164 BCE) assumed control of the Seleucid Empire in 175 BCE, Onias III was serving as High Priest in Jerusalem. In the perception of Antiochus, the High Priest was merely a local governor who could be appointed or dismissed at royal whim. For orthodox (meaning non-Hellenised) Jews, however, the High Priest was the head of the theocracy, appointed by the deity himself and therefore

untouchable. The troubles began when Jason, the brother of Onias, induced Antiochus to appoint him as High Priest instead—a transaction that involved substantial sums of money. Jason—notably adopting a Greek name—abolished the theocracy and subsequently reorganised Jerusalem along the lines of a Greek *polis*.

A few years later, Menelaus—who came from a different priestly family that traditionally held no claim to the high priesthood, but was likely backed by the Tobiads—managed to bribe Antiochus into appointing him as High Priest in place of Jason. He promptly had Onias murdered, just to be certain. When Menelaus's brother, Lysimachus, was accused of stealing sacred vessels from the Temple, riots broke out. Menelaus was called to account before Antiochus but managed to clear himself of Onias's murder and was confirmed in his office by the king.

When Jason subsequently succeeded in expelling Menelaus to become High Priest once more, Antiochus decided that enough was enough. He alone determined who held the high priesthood—in principle, whoever offered the highest bid—and that system brooked no interference from the local population. Feeling his dignity as an absolute ruler insulted, Antiochus overreacted drastically. He plundered the Temple and ordered the capture and deportation of women and children, as recorded in the later biblical Book of Maccabees. This meant carrying them off into slavery, while leaving the slaughtered men behind.

Following this, the Hellenisation of the population was made mandatory, as all expressions of Jewish culture and religion were banned. This was unique in history; up until that point, it was taken for granted that a new ruler in a region would allow the local population to retain their customs and traditions.

One can only guess, but it cannot be ruled out that the factors described earlier, which had given rise to the phenomenon of Judeophobia a few centuries prior, also influenced Antiochus's course of action. The Book of 1 Maccabees states that the Jews were no longer permitted to offer sacrifices, possessing copies of the Jewish sacred scripture became a capital offense, and the Sabbath and all Jewish festivals were outlawed. Circumcision was similarly banned, and mothers who defied the decree to circumcise their children risked being murdered along with their entire households. Altars to Zeus were erected where animals forbidden to Jews were sacrificed. An idol of Zeus was placed directly onto the altar inside the Temple. In short, Antiochus made a desperate attempt to completely eradicate Judaism as a cultural and religious phenomenon.

The Maccabees

According to the Book of 1 Maccabees, the spark that ignited the powder keg came from a rural priest named Mattathias the Hasmonean. He refused to worship the Greek gods and killed a Hellenised Jew who attempted to do so in his stead. Mattathias subsequently fled into the wilderness with his five sons. Following his death in 166 BCE, his sons launched a guerrilla war against the Greek rulers and their Hellenised Jewish collaborators. Predictably, forced circumcisions and the destruction of pagan altars formed part of the violence. The commander was Judah Maccabee, whose name in Hebrew means 'hammer'. To many Jews, he was the long-awaited messiah. Following the Maccabees' victory over their adversaries, they entered Jerusalem in triumph, performed a ritual cleansing of the Temple, and restored all the customs and practices of Judaism.

A massive army was dispatched from Syria to crush the rebellion, but it returned empty-handed following the sudden death of Antiochus in 164 BCE. The Seleucids reached a political compromise, granting de facto autonomy to the minor temple state of Judah and restoring freedom of religion. This triumph of the Maccabees is celebrated by Jews to this day during Hanukkah. After the victory over the Seleucids, a segment of the fighters wished to continue the campaign. Neighbouring territories containing large Jewish populations could be conquered, and the remaining inhabitants there could be converted to Judaism.

During these campaigns, Judah Maccabee fell on the battlefield in 160 BCE and was succeeded by his brother Jonathan, who had been installed a few years earlier as the new High Priest following the rededication of the Temple. After Jonathan's death, Simon, the youngest surviving son of Mattathias, became the new leader. In 140 BCE, an assembly of priests and secular leaders recognised him as High Priest, military commander, and ruler over Judah and its surrounding territories. With this decree, the Hasmonean dynasty was formally established.

Although the region was henceforth an autonomous kingdom, it formally remained a province within the Seleucid Empire until 129 BCE. Subsequently, it became an independent kingdom under the Hasmoneans, surviving until 63 BCE when the Roman general Pompey intervened in an ongoing local civil war. Thereafter, it became a Roman protectorate with a native puppet king as a figurehead. The Hasmonean dynasty ended in 37 BCE when Herod, an Idumean, was designated 'King of the Jews' by the Roman Senate.

This marked a striking break with the tradition of the legendary kings of Israel and Judah, who had possessed strictly secular power. Under the Hasmoneans, and later Herod the Great and his successors, there was no longer a separation between the priesthood and the kingship. The new rulers were priest-kings—a reality that led orthodox Jews from the traditional priestly class to question their legitimacy.
This era is covered extensively in the biblical books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. The author of the first book emphasises the struggle for religious freedom, whereas the author of the second frames it primarily as a cultural war between Judaism and Hellenism. In later times, it has increasingly been viewed as a conflict between orthodox traditionalists and reformers within Judaism itself. On the other hand, there was clearly a distinct Hellenistic camp and a Jewish camp. The names of the principal figures in the struggle for the high priesthood speak for themselves: traditionalists with Hebrew-Aramaic names like Onias versus Hellenistic innovators like Jason and Menelaus. The conflict may well have begun as a rebellion against religious oppression that gradually took on the character of a war of independence.

Roman Rule

From the year 63 BCE onward, Judah existed as a Roman protectorate. However, actual administrative power resided in the hands of a Roman governor. From the historical narratives surrounding Jesus, one such governor is preserved by name: Pontius Pilate. Like every governor, those stationed in Syria and Palestine answered exclusively to the authorities in Rome—initially the Senate, and later the Emperor. The governor was responsible for maintaining peace and order within his province and for securing tax revenues to the desired extent. Everyday domestic governance was left to a native client monarch, which in the case of Palestine was Herod the Great. He ruled over a territory bounded by the southern tip of the Dead Sea, the Mediterranean, and the south of modern-day Syria. Regions within his kingdom that are widely recognised from the Christian Bible included Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Herod was popular with the Romans, particularly with Augustus, who viewed him as a dependable vassal. Indeed, until his death in 4 BCE—spanning more than three decades—Herod successfully maintained peace, order, and security throughout his assigned domain. Furthermore, he was immensely active in executing grand architectural projects, including the fortress atop the rock of Masada, several grand palaces, the coastal city of Caesarea, and the expansion of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Following his death, the kingdom was divided among his sons. Herod Antipas was allocated control over Galilee, where he founded the city of Tiberias, named in honour of Augustus's successor. Although the Romans generally permitted the Jewish population freedom in the practice of their religion, persistent unrest nevertheless plagued the region, ultimately culminating in a massive rebellion. Within Roman historiography, this episode is recorded as the First Jewish War.

Political and Religious Factionalism

The epoch spanning from the Maccabean Revolt to the outbreak of the Jewish War was characterised by profound instability across all areas of society. The countryside was plagued by rampant banditry, making travel from one town to another a hazardous undertaking. The biblical parable of the Good Samaritan serves as an illustrative reflection of this underlying reality. Furthermore, it was a golden age for eschatological preachers proclaiming the end of days, heralded by the arrival of a messiah. These movements leaned heavily on the pronouncements of the prophet Isaiah. A particularly resonant passage during times of foreign occupation concerned the return of all Jews to their homeland and the full restoration of the rights of the Jewish people. The figure in question was expected to descend from the lineage of King David and restore the leadership of his royal house. The messiah was framed as an important prophet and king, though as a prophet considered less significant than Moses, and as a king less significant than David.[24] Within such a societal landscape, an eschatological preacher from Galilee named Jesus would scarcely have stood out among his contemporaries.

On the politico-religious front, two distinct factions confronted one another as opposing parties within the Sanhedrin—the supreme representative and judicial assembly: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The former group has remained relatively obscure to history. In all probability, it emerged from the priestly temple aristocracy that had historically centred around the Oniad lineage. The Sadducees were religiously conservative and advocates for political cooperation with the ruling superpower—which, after 63 BCE, meant de facto collaboration with the Romans. The Pharisees, by contrast, were a religious movement that attempted to soften the strictness of Mosaic legislation through innovative interpretations. In principle, they were a lay movement, though members of the priesthood certainly participated in their ranks. Within the New Testament narratives, they are almost universally mentioned in the same breath as the 'Scribes'. These

scribes likely constituted a broader circle of sympathisers who lacked direct representation within the Sanhedrin itself.
The Essenes viewed the comprehensive crisis facing their land and people as a mandate to withdraw entirely from public life, establishing a communal settlement in the desert. It is entirely conceivable that a figure like John the Baptist was a member of this ascetic community before he entered the countryside to launch his preaching ministry. The Essenes practised an absolute community of goods and dedicated as little time as possible to worldly affairs, consuming only what was strictly necessary to sustain life. In this regard, the character of their community mirrored that of the later Carmelite monastic order.
As popular dissatisfaction with Roman rule neared its boiling point, a new faction emerged within the historical record: the Zealots.[25] They viewed themselves as 'zealous defenders' of the holiness of the name of God. They recognised no sovereign lord over them other than God alone. The logical consequence of this theological premise was that they experienced imperial authority—and Roman occupation in general—as an outright blasphemy. Accordingly, they refused to pay imperial taxes. The most extreme radical wing of this Zealot movement was the Sicarii, who utilised a concealed dagger (*sica* in Latin) to carry out targeted assassinations against high-ranking Jewish officials who maintained close cooperative ties with the Roman occupiers.

The First Jewish Revolt (or the Jewish War) 66–70 CE

During his rise to absolute power, Julius Caesar had received crucial assistance from Jewish communities across the diaspora on several occasions. A prime example was the vital logistical support rendered by the Alexandrian Jews during his military campaign in Egypt. Furthermore, Caesar made extensive use of Jewish financiers. A substantial body of imperial decrees issued during the 40s BCE demonstrates how highly Caesar valued the Jews as strategic allies. Out of gratitude and respect, the Jewish faith was granted the formal status of a *religio licita* (a permitted religion). This status effectively exempted the Jews from participating in Roman religious civic activities, allowing them to legally opt out of their polytheistic environment.
For the Jews residing throughout the wider Roman Empire, this arrangement represented an absolute high-water mark; conditions could only deteriorate from this point. This degradation manifested clearly when Emperor Caligula demanded in 39 CE that his physical image be installed in every temple across the empire, including the one in Jerusalem. While the Jews steadfastly refused to comply, the

incident demonstrated a deliberate attempt to chip away at their *status aparte*. In response to subsequent rioting within the Jewish community of Rome—sparked by friction between traditional Jews and early Jewish-Christians—the entire population was summarily banished from the capital by Emperor Claudius in 49 CE.

Importantly, one must not conclude from this expulsion that these early Christians were recognised as a separate, independent group. The Roman authorities assumed it was merely an internal dispute between rival factions within Judaism, involving a new eccentric sect. Collectively, these events pointed to a worsening social climate and a rise in Judeophobia across the empire.

Within Judea and its surrounding territories, resentment intensified due to the excessively high taxes levied by Roman command. The direct catalyst for open rebellion occurred in 66 CE, when the Roman procurator Gessius Florus plundered valuables directly from the Temple treasury, prompting a full-scale uprising led by the Zealots. It took several years of brutal warfare before the rebellion was crushed. In 70 CE, the Roman general Titus captured Jerusalem and ordered the systematic destruction of the Temple. With this cataclysm, Judaism did not merely lose its absolute religious center; it also triggered the permanent economic collapse of the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding region. Strictly analysed, the local economy of Jerusalem had been comparable to that of a major tourist hub. Immense sums of money circulated through the temple complex; large-scale animal sacrifices occurred throughout the day, active money changers operated continuously, alongside a vast network of shopkeepers, innkeepers, and vendors.[26] During major pilgrimage festivals, the city was densely packed, marking the absolute high season for local commerce. Once this entire economic engine was obliterated, systemic decay set in rapidly, forcing inhabitants to migrate for purely financial reasons. Initially, these displaced populations likely sought refuge in other domestic towns, before eventually absorbing into pre-existing Jewish communities abroad.

A radical faction of the rebels refused to surrender, holding out for several years at the mountain fortress of Masada. Following a protracted siege during which the Roman army constructed a massive earthen ramp to push their siege engines to the summit, the garrison and their families committed collective suicide once the fall of the fortress became inevitable. Since that event, Masada has occupied a prominent place in Jewish historical memory as an absolute symbol of unyielding defiance.

Flavius Josephus

A highly remarkable figure to emerge from the Jewish War was the commander of a Jewish garrison besieged by Vespasian: Joseph ben Mattathias. Realising his military situation was entirely hopeless, he orchestrated the surrender of his garrison and allowed himself to be captured. Upon entry into the Roman camp, he famously prophesied to Vespasian that the general would shortly be crowned emperor. Because this prediction subsequently came true, Joseph found himself in high favour with the Romans. He was permitted to adopt a Roman imperial name, becoming Titus Flavius Josephus. The Romans later utilised him as a mediator to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem, though his appeals had no effect on the defenders. Following the campaign, Josephus accompanied Titus to Rome, where he witnessed Titus's triumphal procession. On the surviving Arch of Titus in Rome, the relief clearly depicts the grand menorah from the Temple being carried through the streets as spoils of war.

Flavius Josephus recorded these events in his extensive chronicle, *The Jewish War* (*De Bello Judaico*). In this work, he advanced the thesis that the Romans, in their conquest of Jerusalem and subjugation of the Jews, were merely executing the divine will—framing the Romans effectively as an instrument of Yahweh. Consequently, he argued that resistance against Rome was not only futile but explicitly blasphemous. Unsurprisingly, Josephus was viewed by many of his contemporaries as a traitor and collaborator.

For subsequent historiography, however, his writings remain of monumental importance. In a secondary comprehensive work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus charted the history of his people from the creation down to his own era. While he possessed a tendency to dive into immense, granular detail on all manner of topics, his original text lacked any reference to the rabbi Jesus. Because this omission naturally struck later Christian scribes as a bizarre anomaly, a specific passage—the *Testimonium Flavianum*—was subsequently inserted into his text to mention Jesus. As early as the eighteenth century, historians and philologists exposed this passage as a pious forgery, though contemporary historical criticism approaches the text with a slightly more nuanced perspective, viewing it as a forgery with a potentially authentic core. We will explore this further in due course.

New Rebellions

In 116 CE, the Jewish populations of Cyrenaica—a coastal province in the east of modern-day Libya—launched a major uprising. The provincial capital, Cyrene, formed an integral part of the Hellenistic cultural sphere within the Roman Empire, historically rivaling the cities of the Greek mainland. The city's immense temple dedicated to Zeus was physically larger than the Parthenon in Athens, which underscores its grandeur. In 115 CE, the Jewish population within the city and its surrounding territory revolted, an uprising that could not be fully suppressed until 117 CE. Regions existing under the *Pax Romana* were typically only lightly policed by small garrisons of legionaries, as active troops were continuously deployed to pacify volatile frontier zones in the north and northeast. Consequently, the rebelling Jews operated with virtual impunity, resulting in the slaughter of a massive portion of the Greek-Roman civilian population and the widespread destruction of religious sites and pagan temples. The popular modern image of the Jews as an historically passive, peaceful people is flatly contradicted by the extreme violence deployed in these conflicts against Hellenistic and Roman rulers. This reality speaks volumes about the intense fanaticism that a fundamentalist, monotheistic religion can generate—a novelty in the ancient polytheistic world.

The revolt rapidly spilled over into Egypt, where it was suppressed with immense difficulty. Shortly thereafter, the Romans faced a parallel crisis within the large, established Jewish colonies of recently occupied Mesopotamia. Ultimately, Judea and its surrounding territories were drawn into the chaos. These uprisings erupted during the final year of Trajan's reign and bled into the opening years of Hadrian's administration. In the town of Lydda, Roman troops executed a massive slaughter of the population.

In 130 CE, Emperor Hadrian conducted a personal visit to Jerusalem. He resolved to completely rebuild the decayed and partially ruined city, but not as a Jewish center; rather, it was to be refashioned as a Roman colony. In 131 CE, the Romans performed the sacred foundational rituals to dedicate the new city, which was renamed *Aelia Capitolina*. Atop the historical site of the Temple, a sanctuary dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus was scheduled for construction. Furthermore, Hadrian issued a strict decree outlawing circumcision, viewing it as a barbaric ritual resulting in the needless, permanent mutilation of the human body.

Following the earlier destruction of the Temple, a new alternative religious center had gradually formed at Yavne (Jamnia). This was no

longer governed by a temple aristocracy, but functioned rather as a religious center of study from which rabbis issued religious directives to Jews both domestically and across the diaspora. Consequently, by the time of Hadrian's visit, Jerusalem was no longer the active epicenter of functional Judaism.

When a fresh rebellion erupted against the Romans in 132 CE, a prominent rabbi named Akiva declared the primary military commander, Simon Bar Kokhba, to be the long-awaited messiah. This endorsement provided an immense psychological boost to the movement: with a messiah leading the charge, failure seemed impossible, as it appeared to fulfil explicit biblical prophecy. Initially, the Jewish forces under Bar Kokhba successfully drove the Romans from a vast portion of the territory. For a period of two and a half years, an independent Jewish state existed—complete with its own sovereign coinage—wherein Jerusalem temporarily regained its original status. Bar Kokhba was styled 'Prince of Israel'.

The rebellion was ultimately suppressed by the Romans with immense difficulty and catastrophic losses. Reportedly, the casualties on both sides were so severe that Hadrian, in his official dispatch to the Senate, deliberately omitted the standard imperial greeting: "If you and your children are in good health, it is well; I and my army are in good health." It is estimated that roughly half a million Jews lost their lives in the conflict. Countless others were reduced to slavery or deported, while Jewish political and religious leaders were systematically executed.

Following the final defeat of the uprising in 135 CE, Hadrian banned all core public expressions of the Jewish faith: the Sabbath, circumcision, and the study of the Torah were outlawed. The practice of offering sacrifices had already ceased permanently when the Temple was destroyed. The city was definitively named *Aelia Capitolina*, and Jews were barred under penalty of death from entering its borders. Vast numbers of Jews abandoned the region, ensuring that from this point forward, the majority of the Jewish people resided permanently in the diaspora.

The cumulative events between 70 and 135 CE delivered a fatal blow to Jewish life within the ancestral homeland. Together, they catalysed the tertiary diaspora—a migration driven strictly by economic collapse and intense cultural-religious oppression.

Abandoning one's native land is never a choice made lightly. In historical contexts where populations flee due to active warfare, they typically attempt to return as quickly as possible to resume normal life once stability returns. While it remains a matter of historical specula-

tion, it is highly implausible that large numbers of Jews abandoned their homeland solely due to the loss of religious liberty. In the vast majority of cases, this departure must have had a profound economic undercurrent. If we accept this premise, it becomes highly probable that it was primarily Judea proper that became depopulated, rather than the regions more heavily anchored in agriculture and viticulture—such as Galilee, Gaulantis (the Golan), Samaria, and the Jordan Valley. A segment of that remaining domestic population likely adhered to the Jewish faith for centuries, while another segment—potentially transitioning through an early Christian phase—eventually embraced Islam and became culturally and linguistically Arabised.

Proselytising

At this juncture, we must briefly step back to the reigns of the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great. Herod successfully consolidated the conquests of the Maccabees, ruling over a territory far greater than Judah and expanding beyond the original biblical kingdoms of Israel and Judah combined. Although the New Testament is not the most reliable source for historical facts, certain details can confidently be taken as accurate. The New Testament operates under the assumption that the population of Galilee was inherently Jewish, whereas that of Samaria was not. This implies that the population of the newly conquered Galilee must have converted to Judaism *en masse*. A similar process likely occurred within the population of Herod's own homeland, Idumea. According to biblical myth, this population descended from Esau and was therefore not originally Jewish. The conversion of their monarch prompted many of his subjects to follow his example.
Almost imperceptibly, we encounter a new development here. What once began strictly as a bloodline—where one was born a Jew to Jewish parents—became a community that could expand because individuals chose to belong to it. The next step was exercising a degree of pressure on non-Jews to make that choice. Judaism thus developed from an exclusive, closed tribal community into a proselytising faith with specific rituals and ordinances. Where territories were conquered, as during the time of Herod and his immediate predecessors, enforcing conversion played a significant role: *cuius regio, eius religio*. In the diaspora, however, the expansion of the Jewish community had already been underway for some time, driven strictly by voluntary conversion. A significant portion of this growth came from merchants who recognised the immense advantage of belonging to a vast network. In those instances, individuals did not join a religious communi-

ty so much as an unofficial, loose cooperative. As soon as the attractiveness of such a transition became apparent, this conversion mechanism was set in motion.

During the era of Julius Caesar, when the Jewish faith was granted the status of *religio licita*, conversion offered nothing but advantages. From the second century CE onward, this benefit became less clear-cut, given the poor reputation the Jews had acquired among the Romans following the Jewish War. As emperor, Titus viewed the Jews very differently than his illustrious predecessor Julius had.

To understand the background of a truly voluntary conversion completely free of profit motives, we must look back to the period of Ptolemaic rule over Egypt, particularly the situation in Alexandria. The Greek-speaking Jews living there encountered the works of the ancient Greek poets and philosophers, developing a deep appreciation for their thought and literature. Nevertheless, they refused to abandon their own faith in favour of Hellenistic polytheism, however attractive that culture was in other respects.

Out of Alexandrian Judaism, a distinct hybrid version of Hellenistic culture eventually emerged—a middle path between Judaism and Hellenism. Alexandrian Jewish philosophers asserted that Greek philosophy actually originated from Jewish sources, meaning the two intellectual worlds could not contradict one another. This usurpation of the Greek past was quite a bold claim.

In turn, these Jews argued that the Jewish God should be viewed as an abstraction, and that his relationship with the world could only rest upon metaphysical speculation. This was a far cry from a deity who walked among humans, dictated laws in person, or struck a solemn covenant with one specific people. It represented a major leap forward toward a universal God—an abstraction, an idea rather than an anthropomorphic image. The main obstacle remained the overwhelming abundance of laws and dietary regulations for which Judaism was renowned. Scribes attempted to decouple these as much as possible from the Jewish ethnic identity to emphasise their universal application. Efforts were also made to formulate rational arguments for many of these rules and regulations. By doing so, they managed to defend themselves against the pervasive influence of polytheistic culture while simultaneously generating respect and appreciation for the moral and ethical values of Judaism.

In an era of increasing mobility, these ideas spread rapidly across the wider world, becoming known throughout the Mediterranean basin and, later, the Roman Empire. Like any compelling philosophy, Judaism acquired fashionable traits. In the first century CE, a substantial

number of prominent individuals converted to the Jewish faith. It possessed an exotic, chic quality, much like Buddhism does today. Women in particular were drawn to it (including Poppaea, the wife of Emperor Nero, though not officially). For men, the barrier of circumcision was usually too high.[27] On a less intellectual level: a deity who prided himself on being the one and only God was a deity with nerve; such an absolute claim captured the imagination. Yahweh had chutzpah.

The Jewish Bible

Non-Jews have a tendency to refer to the 'Old Testament' or the 'Torah' when emphasising the Jewish sacred scripture. The only historically accurate designation, however, is the Tanakh—a Hebrew acronym formed from the initial letters of its three constituent parts: T for Torah (Law, also referred to as the Pentateuch, the first five books); N for Nevi'im (Prophets); and Kh for Ketuvim (Writings). The pronunciation of the hard 'k' sound at the beginning of the word Ketuvim shifts to a 'kh' sound at the end of the word Tanakh. This yields TNKh; just as with YHWH, the vowels are omitted.

The compilation of the Tanakh in the era surrounding the Babylonian Exile can be understood as a transition from a fluid system of myths and legends into a fixed, immutable text—the Holy Scripture functioning as solidified mythology.

As is well known, the Greek translation of the Tanakh, the Septuagint, emerged in Alexandria around 200 BCE. Because the process of canonisation was not yet complete at that time, its composition diverges from the Hebrew Tanakh. Textual differences also arose as a result of varying interpretations of how certain passages should be translated.

Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the role of the temple aristocracy was spent. Nothing more was heard of a High Priest, a priestly class, or the Sadducees. The Pharisees and Scribes gathered in Yavne, establishing a new religious centre explicitly devoid of political influence. These theologians came to be designated by the title 'rabbi', which effectively translates to a teacher in religious matters. Alongside 'rabbin', the pre-existing term 'rabbi' persisted—a designation also deployed within the New Testament when referring to Jesus.

The rabbis of Yavne continued the process of canonisation using the original Hebrew texts, discarding the Septuagint entirely. Alexandrian Judaism, however, continued to utilise this Greek translation for a long time, and it later became the foundational basis for the Christian Old Testament. Concurrently, the Talmud emerged, becoming the most important text within Judaism alongside the Tanakh. The Talmud is