8.1 Culture and Beliefs of the Ancient Hebrews
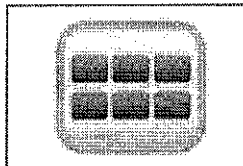
In what ways did the ancient Hebrews influence religions and societies in ancient and modern times?

Explore

P.2

The Roots of Judaism

What role did Abraham play in the culture of the ancient Hebrews?

Culture and Beliefs of the Ancient Hebrews:
Summary Frames
Complete this Summary Frames graphic organizer as you explore
pages 2 through 7.

The Torah is one of the oldest religious texts in existence today. Although it is for the most part a religious text, the Torah was also the book of law for the ancient Hebrew people. It contains stories and legends of their origins, travels, and conquests. Like the information in many ancient texts, only some of the information in the Torah has been supported by archaeological evidence.

One of the most important figures in Hebrew tradition is **Abraham**. The Torah states that Abraham was living in the Mesopotamian city of **Ur** in Sumeria. At the time, the Mesopotamian people practiced **polytheism**, or the belief in many gods. The Hebrew people believe that God spoke to Abraham and told him to establish a new nation. Abraham obeyed God, left Ur, and traveled to **Canaan**, which would become the kingdom of **Israel**. Abraham became the first person to practice **monotheism**, or the belief in a single god, in the religion that would become **Judaism**.

According to the Torah, Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to Canaan, and his wife, Sarah, could no longer have children. However, the Torah states that in Canaan, God made a covenant, or agreement, with Abraham, promising him that his descendants would inherit the nation of Israel. In turn Abraham agreed to worship and follow God and only God. Abraham's promise to follow only one God would establish a religion that was different from the other ancient religions and would go on to influence the formation of other major monotheistic religions.

Followers of Judaism believe that after Abraham agreed to the covenant, Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac, when she was 90 years old. Isaac would go on to found the nation of Israel. According to the Torah, Abraham also had another son, Ishmael (whose mother was Sarah's handmaiden) who was the founder of the nation of **Egypt**. Egypt and the Hebrew people would have a long and complicated history.

8.1 Culture and Beliefs of the Ancient Hebrews

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Explore

The Legend of the Exodus

p. 3

What role did Moses play in the Hebrew tradition?

According to the Torah, a time of great **famine**, or a shortage of food, came to the Middle East many centuries after **Abraham** went to **Israel**. The Torah states that people in most nations suffering from the famine were starving. However, Abraham's great grandson, the Hebrew patriarch Joseph, had a reputation as a man who could interpret God's messages in dreams. The **Pharaoh** of **Egypt** asked Joseph to interpret a puzzling dream. Joseph warned the pharaoh to store food during seven years of good harvests so that the people of Egypt would have food during the famine. Because of this, many Hebrews traveled to Egypt and settled there so that they would not starve.

After several generations, the pharaoh grew concerned over the number of Hebrews living in Egypt and enslaved them. The Hebrew people remained in **slavery** for just over 200 years, until, according to the teachings of **Judaism**, they were led to freedom by the famous prophet **Moses**. Moses was a Hebrew who had been raised as a son of the pharaoh's daughter. According to the Torah, God spoke to Moses in the form of a burning bush, and commanded him to lead his people back to Israel, also called **Canaan**.

Followers of Judaism believe that Moses tried to convince the pharaoh to release the enslaved Hebrews, but the pharaoh would not listen. God then sent 10 plagues on Egypt. After the plagues, the pharaoh released the enslaved people, and Moses led them out of Egypt across the **Red Sea**, or the Sea of Reeds.

Hebrew tradition states that Moses and his people wandered in the desert for 40 years, in search of Canaan. Moses is said to have been forbidden by God to enter Canaan. However, before Moses died, God gave him the **Ten Commandments** at the summit of Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments formed the foundation of Jewish law and inspired numerous legal codes and traditions in later societies. Jews believe that Moses also received the Torah on Mount Sinai, making it a very important religious landmark.

Discovery Education Social Studies

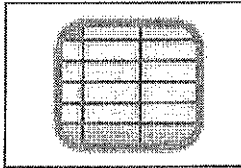## 8.1 Culture and Beliefs of the Ancient Hebrews

In what ways did the ancient Hebrews influence religions and societies in ancient and modern times?

Explore

Three Faiths

p. 4

How did Judaism impact other civilizations and religions?

Culture and Beliefs of the Ancient Hebrews: Comparison Chart

Complete this Comparison Chart as you explore page 8.

Judaism would become the basis for two other great world religions: **Christianity** and **Islam**. Both adopted **Abraham**'s belief in a single god, although each religion called that God by a different name. These three monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—would become powerful driving forces in human history. The tension and conflict between them would lead to wars, persecution, and destruction. However, the three faiths would also inspire powerful empires and timeless works of art.

Christianity grew directly out of Judaism. In fact, according to Christian teaching, **Jesus**, the founder of Christianity, was Jewish, but he sought to reform the faith. Christianity adopted much of the Torah and other Jewish holy books into its own Bible, calling it the Old Testament. The teachings of Jesus were added as the New Testament.

Islam developed less directly from Judaism. **Muslims**, members of the Islamic faith, adapted many of the Torah's stories from a different perspective. According to tradition, most likely derived from the Bible, Arabs are descended from Abraham's son Ishmael.

While many of the specific Jewish rules governing diet and behavior were not kept by Christianity or Islam, the **Ten Commandments** play a strong, central role in both faiths. Christianity kept the Ten Commandments, without change, as part of the Old Testament. Islam kept all but the fourth Commandment, and has verses in its holy book, the Quran, that correspond to each Commandment.

The Torah and Old Testament are filled with intriguing stories, larger-than-life characters, and poetry that expresses universal ideas and values in beautifully crafted language. Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo used figures from the Old Testament as inspiration. The philosopher **Moses** Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote about the problems of faith and free will.

Israel itself never became a large empire. However, Christianity, which grew out of Judaism and included many of its ideals, would become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 CE. This action would reshape the ancient world and make **monotheism** the dominant belief in the Western world. While few archaeological and historical records remain from the ancient Hebrews who founded Judaism, the impact of their beliefs on the world has been well documented.
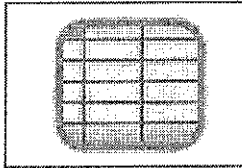
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