

Introduction

In this chapter

Certain assumptions are built into the conventional vocabulary and concepts used to describe Judaism, and some of these terms can produce misunderstandings unless they are explained precisely. This chapter discusses some of these misunderstood terms and explains in what ways Judaism is a religion. Because of the close connection between the Jewish religion and the Jewish people, it is easy to confuse the religion with the historical, cultural or ethnic dimensions. Nevertheless, this book will try to confine itself to topics related to religion, and will avoid discussions of Jewish political and national history. The various terms used for designating the Jews are explained.

Main topics covered

- The word Judaism and its significance
- Jewish religion and nationality
- Different names for Jews and Judaism

The word Judaism and its significance

The English word "Judaism," although it appears to designate a clearly recognizable religion, is in fact a problematic term for a number of reasons. There is no real equivalent to it in the traditional vocabulary of the Jewish religion itself.

To begin with, the normal use of the English "-ism" suffix is to designate an ideological system. Though it applies well to religions that define themselves principally by their dogmas and doctrines, as is true of many forms of Christianity, it cannot be applied without qualifications to other kinds of traditions.

As we shall be noting frequently in this book, whether a person is a member of the Jewish religious community has rarely been determined by their adherence to specific doctrines. There have been attempts to formulate official lists of Jewish beliefs, such

as Moses Maimonides's "Thirteen Articles of Creed" in the twelfth century—but none of these have ever achieved universal acceptance. Even Maimonides's list has been used primarily in order to define heretical deviations from acceptable norms; and yet, a person who subscribes, however passionately or sincerely, to all the articles of the creed could hardly be considered Jewish on that basis.

For rather different reasons, the "Juda-" part of "Judaism" is also problematic. As we shall be learning shortly, the term reflects a proper name, Judah (Yehudah in Hebrew), that was originally one of twelve tribes constituting the nation of "Israel." Although historical circumstances created a situation in which the province of Judea was the only one to survive the conquests and exiles that destroyed the other original tribes, the traditional religious literature of the Jewish people almost invariably refers to their community as "Israel." The terms "Judean" and its English variants "Jew" or "Jewish" were imposed on them by outsiders. This vocabulary choice can have theological implications, and it is probable that the common English usage reflects an old Christian desire to differentiate between the ideal theological category of "Israel" (which they claimed to have inherited) and the inferior status of the fragmented and rejected "Jews."

In spite of the problems outlined here, the word "Judaism" has become so entrenched in English discourse that it would be jarring and futile to avoid it in an introductory textbook written for an English-speaking audience. Nevertheless, the airing of the issues can serve a helpful purpose in raising our sensitivities to a variety of potential stumbling blocks that might otherwise prevent us from achieving an accurate understanding of the Jewish religion as it has been experienced by its own community. The achievement of such an understanding is the main objective of the present book.

In some respects, it would be much easier to present an accurate description of Judaism if it could be presumed that the readers were entirely unfamiliar with the subject. What complicates the matter considerably is precisely the fact that the Jews and their heritage, and especially the Bible, are a fundamental pillar of "western civilization." Because that civilization has been a predominantly Christian one, the portrayals of Judaism have generally been filtered through Christian perspectives, even for people who are not actual Christians. It will require a concerted mental effort to avoid this tendency.

Jewish religion and nationality

A further source of potential confusion in presentations of Judaism is the interplay between religious, national and ethnic elements. Because Judaism developed as the religion of a particular nation, terms like "Jewish" or "Israel" can be used to designate a system of rituals or beliefs, a cultural or linguistic heritage, a political unit, and more. Clearly, not all these topics are relevant to a book about the *religion* of Judaism;

though it is more difficult than it appears initially to declare that any of them are completely irrelevant to the book's main subject. In studying the religious expression of a national group, it is necessary to know something about that group's historical and national aspects. Judaism is a decidedly "historical" religion, both in the sense that it considers history to have spiritual significance, and in the fact that it has been affected decisively by historical developments. Therefore, considerable attention will be devoted to providing historical background for the religious phenomena being described and discussed. Nevertheless, there are many topics that belong properly to the national history of the Jewish people, but which will be omitted from the present book because their relevance to the Jewish religion is marginal or non-existent.

A peculiarity of many books about Judaism is their overwhelmingly passive perspective. That is to say, a disproportionate amount of space is devoted to what non-Jews have thought about or done to Jews and Judaism, particularly to instances of anti-Jewish prejudice (anti-Semitism) and persecution. A variety of theological and ideological suppositions contribute to this situation. Though extensive treatment of Jewish victimization might be justified in a conventional national or political history, phenomena like philo-Semitism and anti-Judaism are not really aspects of Judaism so much as they are features of the religions or ideologies where they appear. For this reason, they will be mentioned here only to the extent that they contribute to our understanding of Judaism itself.

A few specific examples should help clarify these theoretical programmatic and methodological statements. Based on the criteria that I have set out, this book will not include accounts of the wars and intrigues of the Hasmonean kings of Judea, nor of the diplomacy and military events involved in the Zionist movement and the creation of the State of Israel. Nor will it chronicle the Crusader massacres in the medieval Rhineland or the Nazi Holocaust in modern Europe. It will, however, note the Jewish religious responses to these historical events and movements, and the impact that the events exerted on the development of Judaism as a religion.

Most of the preceding discussion has been of a relatively negative character, focusing on what Judaism is *not* or on what should be excluded from a book about Jewish religion. I have not said anything substantial about what does legitimately fall within the legitimate purview of "religion" in general or "Judaism" in particular.

As regards a working definition of "religion," the immense diversity of human confrontations with the absolute or the divine have made it very difficult to arrive at a definition that adequately reflects that variety without imposing a partisan religious or ideological outlook on the data. No doubt there are borderline phenomena, such as "non-theistic religions" or the identification of God with the impersonal totality of nature or science, regarding which it is legitimate to ask whether they can be properly classified as religious.

As regards Judaism, however, the phenomena that we will be describing here, with some rare exceptions, are so obviously "religious" by the most minimal definition

of the term that it seems superfluous to argue about theoretical nuances. For the most part, the Jewish tradition includes such features as the worship of a personal supernatural deity, a revealed scripture, a divinely ordained code of laws, and an assortment of institutions and communal structures in which the religion is observed. To be sure, the religious credentials of some varieties of Judaism, especially in recent years, might be open to question (for instance, certain types of Humanistic Judaism), but such borderline cases are too rare to concern us at this stage.

For the most part, then, I shall include within the domain of "Judaism" all religious phenomena that have found expression within the Jewish community in its diverse historical and geographical manifestations. Clearly, this definition will have to be applied with a measure of selectivity. Not every belief or ritual that has been associated with a person who is ethnically Jewish deserves to be classified as "Jewish," and there are complex questions raised by phenomena like multi-religious identity, or unaffiliated Jews (concepts that would once have been considered an absurdity, but are now quite widespread).

Different names for Jews and Judaism

The people, or religious community, whom we will be describing in this book have been known by a number of different names. Each of them originated in a particular historical context, and is most appropriate for certain purposes. The following glossary summarizes the origins, meanings and most common uses of the English terms. The biblical or other historical references that are mentioned here will be explained in greater detail later in this book.

Hebrew

Original meanings:

- The name of the language in which the Bible and other works of Jewish literature were composed.
- The name "Hebrew" appears in the Bible as a description of Abraham (Genesis 14:13), without any explanation. Some possible meanings that have been proposed include:
 - Foreigner ("from the other side of the river")
 - A descendant of Eber, a figure mentioned in Genesis 10:21–25.

Normal usage:

- To designate the people from the era of the "Patriarchs" (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) until the conquest of the Promised Land.

Israel

Original meaning:

- This name was bestowed upon Abraham's grandson Jacob, father of the twelve tribes, after Jacob's struggle with a supernatural being, as described in Genesis 32:29. It is explained enigmatically as meaning "thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed."
- The designation "Children of Israel" (or: "Israelites") is therefore applied to Jacob's descendants.
- During the era of the "Divided Monarchy," when the nation was divided into two separate states, the northern kingdom was known as Israel. It was composed of ten tribes, as distinct from the southern kingdom that was dominated by the tribe of Judah.
- Jews always refer to their homeland as "the land of Israel" (Erez Yisra'el).

Normal usage:

- This term is the one that has been used most often by the Jews to refer to themselves in their own texts written in the Hebrew language.

Jews (←Judeans)

Original meanings:

- After the fall of the Israelite kingdom, when the ten northern tribes were exiled by the Assyrians, only the Judeans survived captivity in Babylonia to carry on their history and religion. Under the Persian, Greek and Roman empires, their country was known as the province of "Judea." This term was used primarily by non-Jews.

Normal usage:

- This is the most commonly used English term for designating the religious and ethnic community.

(Semites)

Original meaning:

- In the Bible, the Middle-Eastern peoples, including Jews, Arabs and others are traced to Shem, son of Noah. Hence they are all "S(h)emites."
- "Semitic" is also used to denote a language family to which Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and other Near Eastern languages belong.

- The term "anti-Semitism" was coined by Wilhelm Marr in 1879 as a more "polite" term for Jew-hatred.

Normal usage:

- The word "anti-Semitism" is the only context in which the term "Semite" refers specifically to Jews as a nation, race or religious community.

Based on this survey, it is clear that certain names are more appropriate for certain historical contexts. For example, it would be factually incorrect to refer (as do many Jewish writers) to the enslavement of the "Jews" in Egypt, because at that time Judah was only one of the twelve tribes who were subjected to slavery. On the other hand, some writers who insist that the term "Judaism" cannot be applied correctly to the biblical era are really trying to make a theological point, questioning whether the Jews of later generations are true heirs to the religious tradition of biblical Israel.

The fine distinctions between the names have lost much of their original relevance, and they have become almost interchangeable. In modern times, especially, one or another term has acquired negative associations in the non-Jewish culture, causing Jews to prefer a different one. This pattern has varied in different localities. "Israelite" has enjoyed popularity in France, whereas "Hebrew" has been preferred in Italy and among liberal Jews in nineteenth-century America.

Key points you need to know

- The presentation of the Jewish religion in the English language can lead to potential misunderstandings because of differing cultural and theological assumptions.
- Religion and national identity have usually overlapped in the history of Judaism. This book will try as much as possible to restrict itself to religious topics, however broadly that is defined. It is not a history of the Jewish nation.
- The religious community that is studied in this volume is known by several different names. These names and their implications are briefly explained.

Discussion questions

1. Based on the considerations mentioned in this chapter, in what ways (if any) do you think that it is relevant to include a discussion of the Nazi genocide of the Jews (Holocaust, Sho'ah)?
2. Traditional Jews often refer to biblical heroes as "Jews" even though they lived before the rise of the Judean state, or were not members of the tribe of Judah. What might this reveal about how they relate religiously to their ancient history?

Further reading

- Baron, Salo Wittmayer, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 19 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952–83.
- Ben-Sasson, Haim Hillel, and Samuel Ettinger, *Jewish Society through the Ages*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
- Eisen, Arnold M., *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Seltzer, Robert M., *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*. New York: Macmillan, 1980.
- Sharot, Stephen, "Judaism and the Secularization Debate." *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 255–75.