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THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Jewish people settled near the eastern Mediterranean around 1200 B.C.E.—the first fully reliable record of their existence comes from the 1100s, although the Jewish religion claimed an earlier history, including enslavement in Egypt. Hebrews formed a regional state in the period when the larger river-valley empires in Egypt and Mesopotamia were weakening; Jewish political independence did not last long (the prime period of the Israelite state was 1000 to 922 B.C.E.), but the religion the Jewish leaders had formulated was another story.

The principal legacy of the ancient Hebrews to the world's cultural bank was their monotheistic religion, which today thrives as a major religion and in the past served as an essential ingredient for the successor religions of Christianity and Islam. Stressing submission to the laws and commands of their omnipotent and omnipresent God, a deity whom Hebrews perceived as outside of nature and comprehensible in intellectual and abstract terms, the religion focused on God's covenant with the Hebrews and the history of their special relationship. As lawgiver and universal upholder of moral order, God is depicted in the Holy Writ of Israel as beneficent and loving but also as a stern and vengeful overseer who unhesitatingly punishes those who refuse to comply. Priests and prophets began spelling out the tenets of the Hebrew religion in oral form, emphasizing not only God's power but also a series of laws and ethical obligations that endowed the religion with distinctive qualities. Elements of the Hebrew Bible began to be written down from the eighth century B.C.E. onward and were gradually collected into a larger, coherent holy text.

The first selection presents the basic Jewish version of creation, with strong suggestions about the nature of God and the position of human beings among other aspects of nature; the passage has major implications not only for relationships with God but also for ideas about the use and manipulation of nature, which should be compared with characteristic formulations in polytheism.

The second selection emphasizes two aspects of the religion: the definition of a single God and God's relationship to the Hebrew people. The third selection deals

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Selections II and III: From *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, edited by M. Jack Sings, K. Catherine Dobb Skerfield, and James R. Meiller. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Revised English Bible © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989. Selection I: Isaiah pp. 747–48, 401–31; 41:1–24. Selection I: Psalms p. 615, 92:1–5, 94:1–20. Selection II: Exodus: pp. 81–86, 19:1–6; 20:1–17; 33–36; 22:1–5, 16, 21–27; 23:1–8, 13–32.

more with laws and ethical codes; here, Hebrew writings emphasize that God gave a series of laws to Moses after the flight from enslavement in Egypt. These laws included the Ten Commandments but also a subsequent series of rules and ethical prescriptions.

GENESIS

I. THE CREATION

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (1) Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. (2) And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. . . .

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, (4) according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (5) God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." (6) And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE

II. THE NATURE OF GOD: ISAIAH AND PSALMS

Isaiah

What likeness, then, will you find for God
 or what form to resemble his?
 An image which a craftsman makes,
 and a goldsmith overlays with gold
 and fits with studs of silver?
 Do you not know, have you not heard,
 were you not told long ago,
 have you not perceived ever since the world was founded,
 that God sits enthroned on the vaulted roof of the world,
 and its inhabitants appear as grasshoppers?

He stretches out the skies like a curtain,
 spreads them out like a tent to live in;
 he reduces the great to naught
 and makes earthly rulers as nothing.
 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
 scarcely have they taken root in the ground,
 before he blows on them and they wither,
 and a whirlwind carries them off like chaff.
 To whom, then, will you liken me,
 whom set up as my equal?
 asks the HOLY ONE.
 Lift up your eyes to the heavens;
 consider who created these,
 led out their host one by one,
 and summoned each by name.
 Through his great might, his strength and power,
 not one is missing.

Jacob, why do you complain,
 and you, Israel, why do you say,
 My lot is hidden from the LORD,
 my cause goes unheeded by my God?
 Do you not know, have you not heard?
 The LORD, the eternal God,
 creator of earth's farthest bounds,
 does not weary or grow faint;
 his understanding cannot be fathomed.
 He gives vigour to the weary,
 new strength to the exhausted.
 Young men may grow weary and faint,
 even the fittest may stumble and fall.

but those who look to the LORD will win new strength,
 they will soar as on eagles' wings;
 they will run and not feel faint,
 march on and not grow weary.

But you, Israel my servant,
 Jacob whom I have chosen,
 descendants of my friend Abraham,
 I have taken you from the ends of the earth,
 and summoned you from its farthest corners;
 I have called you my servant,
 have chosen you and not rejected you;
 have no fear, for I am with you;

The poor and the needy look for water and find none;
 their tongues are parched with thirst.
 But I the LORD shall provide for their wants;
 I, the God of Israel, shall not forsake them.
 I shall open rivers on the arid heights,
 and wells in the valleys;
 I shall turn the desert into pools
 and dry land into springs of water;
 I shall plant cedars in the wilderness,
 acacias, myrtles, and wild olives;
 I shall grow pines on the barren heath
 side by side with fir and box tree,
 that everyone may see and know,
 may once and for all observe and understand
 that the LORD himself has done this:
 it is the creation of the Holy One of Israel.

III. HEBREW LAW

Exodus

Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said,
 "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel:
 If only you will now listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples
 you will become my special possession; for the whole earth is mine. You will be to
 me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation. Those are the words you are to speak to
 the Israelites. . . ."

God spoke all these words:
 I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery;
 You must have no other god besides me.
 You must not make a carved image for yourself, nor the likeness of anything in
 the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.
 You must not bow down to them in worship; for I, the LORD your God, am a
 jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and

fourth generation of those who reject me. But I keep faith with thousands, those who love me and keep my commandments.

You must not make wrong use of the name of the LORD your God: the LORD will not leave unpunished anyone who misuses his name.

Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. You have six days to labour and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; that day you must not do any work, neither you, nor your son or your daughter, your slave or your slave-girl, your cattle, or the alien residing among you; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and on the seventh day he rested. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and declared it holy.

Honour your father and your mother, so that you may enjoy long life in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

Do not commit murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not give false evidence against your neighbour.

Do not covet your neighbour's household: you must not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to him. . . .

These are the laws you are to set before them.

When you purchase a Hebrew as a slave, he will be your slave for six years; in the seventh year he is to go free without paying anything.

If he comes to you alone, he is to go away alone; but if he is already a married man, his wife is to go away with him.

If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman with her children belongs to her master, and the man must go away alone.

But if the slave should say, 'I am devoted to my master and my wife and children; I do not wish to go free,' then his master must bring him to God: he is to be brought to the door or the doopost, and his master will pierce his ear with an awl; the man will then be his slave for life.

When a man sells his daughter into slavery, she is not to go free as male slaves may.

If she proves displeasing to her master who had designed her for himself, he must let her be redeemed; he has treated her unfairly, and therefore he has no right to sell her to foreigners. If he assigns her to his son, he must allow her the rights of a daughter. If he takes another woman, he must not deprive the first of meat, clothes, and conjugal rights; if he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free without payment. . . .

When a man removes the cover of a cistern or digs a cistern and leaves it uncovered, then if an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the cistern must make good the loss; he must pay the owner the price of the animal, and the dead beast will be his.

When one man's ox butts another's and kills it, they must sell the live ox, share the price, and also share the dead beast. But if it is known that the ox has for some time past been vicious and the owner has not kept it under control, he must make good the loss, ox for ox, but the dead beast is his.

When a man seduces a virgin who is not yet betrothed, he must pay the bride-price for her to be his wife. If her father refuses to give her to him, the seducer must pay in silver a sum equal to the bride-price for virgins. . . .

You must not wrong or oppress an alien, you were yourselves aliens in Egypt. You must not wrong a widow or a fatherless child. If you do, and they appeal to me, be sure that I shall listen; my anger will be roused and I shall kill you with the sword; your own wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

If you advance money to any poor man amongst my people, you are not to act like a moneylender; you must not exact interest from him.

If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, return it to him by sunset, because it is his only covering. It is the cloak in which he wraps his body; in what else can he sleep? If he appeals to me, I shall listen, for I am full of compassion. . . .

And now I am sending an angel before you to guard you on your way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Heed him and listen to his voice. Do not defy him; he will not pardon your rebelliousness, for my authority rests in him. If you will only listen to his voice and do all I tell you, then I shall be an enemy to your enemies, and I shall harass those who harass you. My angel will go before you and bring you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I will make an end of them. You are not to bow down to their gods; you are not to worship them or observe their rites. Rather, you must tear down all their images and smash their sacred pillars. You are to worship the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water. I shall take away all sickness out of your midst. No woman will miscarry or be barren in your land. I shall grant you a full span of life.

I shall send terror of me ahead of you and throw into panic every people you find in your path. I shall make all your enemies turn their backs towards you. I shall spread panic before you to drive out the Hittites, the Canaanites, and the Hivites in front of you.

I shall not drive them out all in one year, or the land would become waste and the wild beasts too many for you, but I shall drive them out little by little until you have grown numerous enough to take possession of the country. I shall establish your frontiers from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the river Ephrates. I shall give the inhabitants of the land into your power, and you will drive them out before you. You are not to make any alliance with them and their gods. They must not stay in your land, for fear they make you sin against me by causing you into the worship of their gods.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What relationship does Genesis suggest between humankind and nature?
2. What were the qualities of the Hebrew God? What were the obligations to this God?
3. What kind of relationship did the Bible suggest between Hebrews and other peoples?
4. Why is the Hebrew insistence on monotheism an important turning point in the history of Mediterranean religions?
5. How did Hebrew law compare with the Hammurabic Code? Does it suggest the same kind of social and gender systems?