



THE JEWS IN HISTORY (Part 1)

Reading: Deuteronomy 28

The beginning of the Jewish nation

The Jews are God's people, and their story begins with Abraham. Because of Abraham's remarkable faith, God chose him to be the father of His people. God made special promises to Abraham (see Lesson 12). These were repeated to his son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, from whom the nation obtained its name. Jacob had twelve sons, who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel (see Abraham's family tree – Lesson 10).

Jacob and his family lived in the land of Canaan, now known as Israel. The youngest but one of his sons was called Joseph. The story of Joseph's life, found at the end of Genesis, is important in the history of God's people.

Joseph's jealous brothers sold him to traders and he became a slave in Egypt. Later, after many trials, he became the head of the king of Egypt's government. In time of famine Jacob and the family moved from Canaan to join Joseph in Egypt, because God provided food for them there through Joseph.

Many years after Joseph's death, when the family had grown into a huge number of people, the Egyptians saw them as a threat and made them slaves. God brought them out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses and led them through the wilderness (a barren and deserted land) to the borders of the land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

A law given by God

As they journeyed through the wilderness the people of Israel came to Mount Sinai. It was here that God spoke to them and they became His special nation. God said to them,

"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples" (Exodus 19:5).

The people replied, *"All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8).*

Then God gave His laws to the people through Moses. We often refer to them as the Law of Moses, although they came from God. They were excellent laws – which included the Ten Commandments – and covered every part of life, and would have brought the Jews great blessings if they had tried to follow them. Then other nations would have wanted to live like them and serve the true God.

God wants people from all nations to come to Him. He chose the Jews to be His people so that they could be His witnesses in the world. Keeping the Law of Moses would make them separate from the other nations. This would prevent them from being influenced by those nations, who served false gods and were very wicked. This is a lesson for us in our lives.

As a sign that the people of Israel were His special people, God told them to keep the last day of every week (Saturday) as a holy day ('holy' means 'separate' or 'set apart'). This day was called the Sabbath. On this day they were to rest from their every day work and think about their blessings from God. But throughout Old Testament times the Jews





failed to keep the Sabbath and repeatedly broke God's laws. Instead of showing the surrounding nations how God wanted them to live, they copied those wicked nations.

The Law of Moses was given to Israel to guide them until the teachings of Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:19-24). So Christians do not have to keep the Law of Moses or the Sabbath. However, it is helpful to set aside one day of the week for worship. Christians try to keep Sunday as a special day because this is what New Testament believers did.

The journey from Egypt through the wilderness to Canaan should have only taken a few weeks. However, the people of Israel were afraid of the inhabitants of Canaan and did not trust in God to help them conquer the land. As a punishment God would not let them enter the land and made them wander for 40 years in the wilderness, until all those who lacked faith had died. Despite this, God still fed them and cared for them during these 40 years:

"You (God) gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell" (Nehemiah 9:20,21).

At last the nation entered Canaan (now known as Israel), the land God gave them as a home. God was their King and He provided priests to teach them His ways and judges to rule over them.

The Jews demand a king

Nearly 400 years passed. The Jews asked for a human king. They wanted to be like the nations around them. In doing this they were rejecting God as their King. Samuel, their judge and prophet, realised that this was wrong and prayed about it. God told him, *"they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them"* (1 Samuel 8:7).

God gave them a human king – 1 Samuel 9 and 10 record the anointing of Saul. He was unfaithful to God. After his death God gave the kingdom to David, who was from the southern tribe of Judah. David reigned for 40 years and pleased God. Solomon, David's son, was the next king. God blessed Solomon and he became very rich and lived in a wonderful palace, but he taxed the people heavily and they became very unhappy. At the start of his reign he was faithful to God but he later worshipped idols. As a punishment God said that the kingdom would be torn into two parts, with the larger part given to Solomon's servant. God said that this would happen during Solomon's son's reign.

A divided kingdom

On Solomon's death his son, Rehoboam, became king. The people asked him to reduce their taxes. Instead of listening to the wise old men who had been his father's advisers, he listened to his young friends and told the people that he would raise their taxes. This was not what the people wanted to hear. Rebellion followed and the Kingdom of Israel was torn into two parts. Ten of the tribes became the northern kingdom under Solomon's servant, Jeroboam. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained faithful to Rehoboam and became the southern kingdom. The division happened just as God had foretold.

The books of 1 and 2 Kings contain the history of these two kingdoms side by side. The southern kingdom became known as Judah, because all of its kings came from the tribe of Judah. The northern kingdom kept the name Israel.

The term 'Israel' is used of:

- Jacob (whose name was changed by God to Israel)
- Jacob's descendants, the Jewish people
- the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants
- the united kingdom (before it was divided in the time of Rehoboam)
- the northern kingdom (after the division).





The continued disobedience of the Jews

In 1 and 2 Kings we read that on many occasions the people of Israel and Judah disobeyed God. Their worship of God was meaningless – it did not come from their hearts. They also worshipped idols. The situation became so bad that God finally punished the people, as He had repeatedly warned through His prophets. Israel (the northern kingdom) was the first to be punished. God brought the King of Assyria against them. The people were taken captive to Assyria and then scattered. They never returned to their own land as a nation.

Later, God pleaded with Judah (the southern kingdom) to listen to Him and repent of their ways. 2 Chronicles 36:15,16 shows how God did this through the prophets:

“The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.”

So the Kingdom of Judah was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. God promised that after 70 years they would be allowed to return to their own land, and many did, although from that time other nations ruled over them. Encouraged by God’s prophets, they rebuilt the temple of God in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. But many times after this they still disobeyed God. The last three books of the Old Testament, the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, were written during the time of the return from captivity.

THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM	THE NORTHERN KINGDOM
Known as Judah.	Known as Israel (also Samaria or Ephraim).
Capital city: Jerusalem.	Capital city: Samaria.
Two tribes (Judah and Benjamin).	Ten tribes.
The first king was Rehoboam, Solomon’s son.	The first king was Jeroboam, Solomon’s servant.
After, ruled by kings descended from David and Solomon (from the tribe of Judah).	After, ruled by various kings, not always descended from each other.
Many kings were wicked, but some served God faithfully and encouraged the nation to worship Him.	All of its kings were wicked and worshipped idols, and so did the people.
After about 400 years it was overthrown by the Babylonians.	After about 220 years it was overthrown by the Assyrians.
Many people were taken captive to Babylon. Some returned 70 years later.	Many people were taken captive to Assyria and then scattered. They never returned to their own land as a nation.

Between the Old and New Testaments

After the last three Old Testament prophets there was a period of about 400 years with no direct message from God, as foretold in Amos 8:11. This period of time comes between the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament. So there was great interest when John the Baptist appeared. After 400 years of silence, God was again speaking to His people.

The greatest Jew

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for someone even greater. God was about to send His own Son to save His people. So in the land of Israel, about 2,000 years ago, Jesus was born. Jesus was a Jew, descended from Abraham and David.

Adam → → → Noah → → → Abraham → Isaac → Jacob → → → David → → → Jesus

Despite hearing his words and seeing the wonderful miracles that Jesus did, the Jews rejected their promised Messiah. They persuaded Pilate, the Roman governor, to crucify





him. When Pilate said, *“I am innocent of this man’s blood”*, the Jews answered, *“His blood be on us and on our children!”* (Matthew 27:24,25). The Jews could not have committed a worse crime. They put to death the totally sinless Son of God. God graciously gave them the opportunity to repent through the preaching of the apostles. However, most of the Jews refused God’s offer of salvation and punishment had to come.

A people without a home

God used the Romans to punish the Jews. In AD 70, about 40 years after the death of Jesus, the Roman army came against them. It was a time of dreadful suffering. Many thousands of Jews were killed. The horrors of that war are some of the worst in history. The city of Jerusalem was taken by the Romans and the temple destroyed. Later, in AD 135, the Jews that survived were taken from the land of Israel and scattered among the nations of the world. In the time of Moses, God had warned the Jews that they would be scattered if they ignored His ways:

“And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other ...” (Deuteronomy 28:64).

For nearly 2,000 years the Jews had no land of their own. They also suffered terrible persecutions and other dreadful punishments prophesied in Deuteronomy 28. Some of these persecutions happened in the concentration camps of Hitler during the Second World War. Over six million Jews were killed with a cruelty that shocked the world. Deuteronomy 28:64-67, written about 3,500 years ago, has come true in recent times.

Despite their wickedness in putting many of God’s prophets and His own sinless Son to death, God still has a plan for His people. God has not rejected them, as the apostle Paul explained some time after the crucifixion:

*“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. **God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew**”* (Romans 11:1,2).

Today, God is bringing the Jews back to the land of Israel. The next lesson continues the history of God’s people.

Summary

The dates given in this table are approximate.

3,500 years ago	God brought the Jews out of Egypt and gave them the land of Israel as a home. God taught them His ways, but often throughout Old Testament times they disobeyed Him.
2,500 years ago	God finally punished the Jews by sending them into captivity. Many people from the southern kingdom of Judah returned to the land after 70 years, but they still disobeyed God.
2,000 years ago	Eventually, the Jews were driven out of the land of Israel and scattered among the nations of the world. For nearly 2,000 years they were homeless and persecuted.
Today	God is bringing the Jews back to the land of Israel.

Verses to learn: Isaiah 43:11,12

‘I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I am God.’

Verses to read:

Leviticus 20:26; 1 Samuel 12:22; 1 Chronicles 17:21,22; 2 Chronicles 36:11-23; Jeremiah 31:35,36; Acts 13:16-39

