

ONE GOD

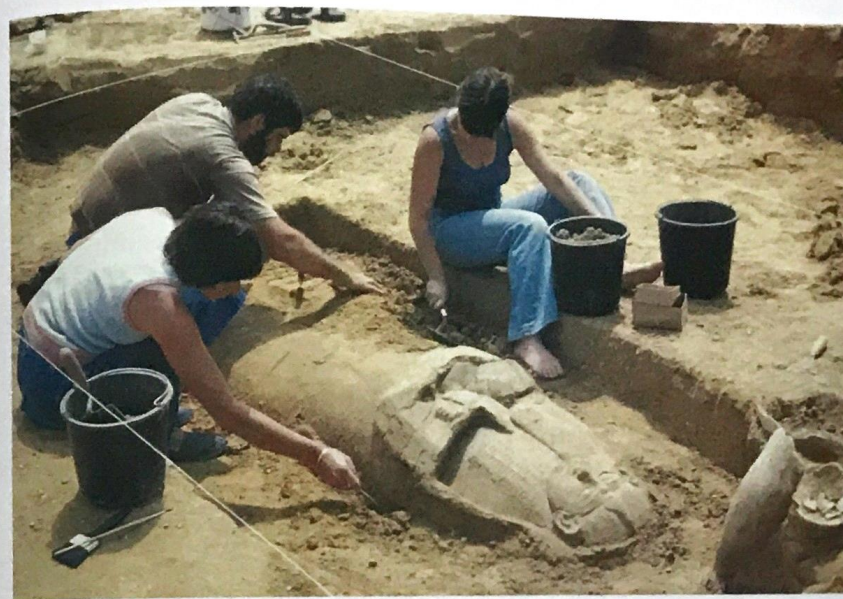
THE RELIGION OF THE ISRAELITES

Children often ask, “Where did I come from?” Groups of people, too—ancient tribes and modern families—have asked similar questions: “Where did we come from?” and “How did life begin?” The answers have given birth to thousands of legends, folk songs, and histories. The creation stories of the ancient Israelites were passed down for hundreds of years, then finally written down. The first book of the Hebrew Bible, *Genesis*, opens with a poem about the creation of the world.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form . . . and darkness was upon the face of the deep. . . . And 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.

The Israelites believed that God cared about the earth and its people. According to the second chapter of *Genesis*, God created the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, and gave them everything in the world for their own use. All he asked was that they obey him. In this story, God put Adam and Eve in the beautiful Garden of Eden, a paradise of trees and rivers, and told them that they could eat the fruit of any tree except for one. Adam and Eve obeyed until a snake tempted Eve to taste the forbidden fruit. She fell for his slithery words and convinced Adam to take a bite, too. Because they disobeyed God, Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden of Eden and were no longer given everything they wanted. Now they had to work.

The Hebrew Bible later describes a time when God said, “I have decided to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is



Archaeologists uncover a clay coffin at an excavation site in Israel. The coffin is shaped like a human, an idea that came from Egypt.

filled with violence.” In his anger at mankind, God decided to destroy all creation in a terrible flood, saving only a good man named Noah and his family. According to *Genesis*, God told Noah to build “an ark of . . . wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with tar.” Noah loaded the ark with a male and female of every creature on Earth. Once he, his family, and all the animals were inside, the rain began. “The flood continued for 40 days upon the earth . . . and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.”

The floodwater destroyed everything and dry land did not reappear for 150 days. When it was finally safe to leave the ark, life on Earth began again. The Israelites believed that the rainbow was the symbol of God’s promise that he would never again destroy the whole Earth by flood.

The Mesopotamians had a similar flood story that was written down long before the Hebrew flood story was recorded. In this story, too, the household of one man, Ut-napishtim, was saved. Like Noah, Ut-napishtim was warned about the flood, and was told to build a boat and fill it with animals. Once the boat was ready, “the weather changed, and [the storm god] Adad began to roar in the clouds . . . the winds were furious as he set forth.”

“Myth of Atrahasis,” Iraq, 17th century BCE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS AND A MESOPOTAMIAN POEM

Genesis, Hebrew Bible

Genesis and *genealogy* come from related Latin and Greek words. *Genesis* means beginning or birth and comes from *genus*, the Latin word for origin or race. *Genealogy*, from the Greek *genealogia*, traces a family’s ancestors.

Genesis, Hebrew Bible

WRITING THE ALPHABET

The Phoenician scribes, who lived to the north of Israel, found a way to write their language using fewer signs than the hundreds that were needed in Mesopotamian cuneiform. Instead of having a sign for each syllable, they chose a sign for each consonant. But this early alphabet was not the first. Scholars have found inscriptions in the Sinai Peninsula, near Egypt, from around 1600 BCE that were written in what they believe was an even earlier alphabet, invented by other Canaanites—the great-great-grandparent of the alphabet we use today.

The Israelites used an alphabet that was adopted from the Phoenician one. It wasn't until much later that the Greeks, who also borrowed the Phoenician alphabet, added letters to represent vowels.

64 Genesis, Hebrew Bible

One big difference between the two stories comes in the reason for the flood. In the Hebrew version, God punished the people because they did things that were wrong. In the Mesopotamian story, the god Enlil became angry because, “The clamor of mankind has become burdensome to me, I am losing sleep to their uproar.” Humans made so much noise, they kept him awake! The storm began at his command.

The two peoples' ideas about their gods, the Israelites' God and the Mesopotamians' Enlil, were very different from one another. And the religions that developed around these gods were different, too. The Israelites who wrote the Bible believed in one God who expected them to worship him by living good lives. The Mesopotamians believed in lots of gods who expected people to serve and care for them. Their chief god Enlil often grew impatient with human beings, but Ea, the kind god of fresh water, sometimes went behind Enlil's back to protect people from Enlil's fury. (It was Ea who warned Ut-napishtim about the flood.) The God of the Israelites combined the traits of Enlil and Ea. Like Enlil, he sent the great flood, but, like Ea, he found a way to protect and preserve life on Earth.

These two flood stories are too much alike not to be related to one another. A very ancient tradition probably lies behind both of them, but each culture shaped the story to fit its own beliefs. People told and retold both stories before finally writing them down.

According to Genesis, Noah's family began a whole new era on Earth after the floodwaters went down and the family was able to leave the ark. The Israelites believed that, at first, all humans spoke the same language. When they began to build a huge tower of baked bricks, God grew worried that the people might become proud and rebellious. He said “If, as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing... will be impossible for them.” So he caused them to speak in different languages. Now the people babbled at one another and could no longer understand each other or work together. They never finished their tower, which became known as the Tower of Babel, and soon scattered to different lands.

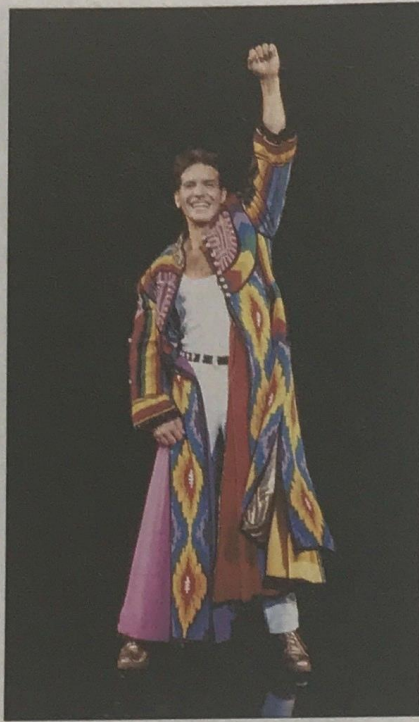


In the pages of Genesis, after reading about creation, Adam and Eve, the flood, and the Tower of Babel, we meet a man named Abraham, whom the Israelites honored as their original ancestor. The Israelites believed that long, long ago God gave Abraham instructions and a promise: “Go from your country... to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.” According to tradition, Abraham's two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, became the “fathers” of two peoples: the Israelites and the Arabs.

The Hebrew Bible explains how different families and different tribes living near one another sometimes got along but sometimes fought, just as siblings in some families do.

A 16th-century CE artist created this imaginary impression of the Tower of Babel, with its top in the clouds. A minaret built centuries earlier in Iraq might have inspired him.

64 Genesis, Hebrew Bible



The story of Joseph and his brothers was set to music in a modern musical, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. The Hebrew Bible says that Jacob gave his son Joseph a “coat of many colors” because he was Jacob’s favorite—and this made the brothers jealous.

The adventures of Isaac’s grandson Joseph (Abraham’s great-grandson) are described in the Book of Genesis, which countless people have enjoyed. When Joseph was a teenager, his brothers sold him to a band of traveling merchants. The

brothers hated Joseph because their father Jacob loved him best. The merchants sold Joseph to a rich Egyptian. But “the Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man . . . in the house of his master, the Egyptian. . . . and [his master] put him in charge over all that he had.” So Joseph was in Egypt—and in power—when his brothers, desperate from famine, came to beg for grain.

Joseph’s brothers didn’t recognize him, but he knew who they were. At first, he hid his identity, but then “Joseph could no longer control himself . . . and he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, . . . Joseph said to his brothers ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still living?’” He forgave his brothers for their cruelty to him, and they all moved to Egypt to join him. According to the Hebrew Bible, the Israelite community grew and flourished. And when Joseph died at the grand old age of 110, he was buried in Egypt, never guessing that his people would soon be unwelcome there.

“ Genesis, Hebrew Bible