Judaism is a monotheistic religion, meaning its followers believe in only one God. Judaism traces its origins back to Abraham, a man born in Mesopotamia in approximately 2000 BC. He was one of the first people to profess the belief in a single God, even though the society in which he lived worshipped many different gods. The Torah, the first five books in the Hebrew Scriptures, says that God made a covenant (agreement) with Abraham, promising to set him as the head of a new nation if he would dedicate himself and the Hebrew people to the worship of one God. Abraham left Mesopotamia and eventually came to the land of Canaan (part of the present day state of Israel) on the Mediterranean coast, which he believed God had promised to him and his descendants. Here the Hebrews lived, worshipping Yahweh; the God they believed would protect them for their faithfulness. At a very old age, he and his wife Sarah had a son, Isaac. Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob, are seen as the patriarchs, or founders, of the Hebrew nation. Jacob’s twelve sons, in turn, are viewed as the ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

The Hebrew people lived in an area surrounded by more powerful kingdoms, and the Bible says that around 1300-1200 BC the Hebrews were forced into slavery in Egypt. After years of suffering Moses, who took them into the Sinai desert to escape capture, led them out of slavery. This escape is known as the “Exodus” and is remembered each year by the celebration of Passover in the Jewish religious calendar. While wandering in the Sinai desert, the Jewish faith teaches that God renewed his covenant with the Hebrew people, revealing to them the Ten Commandments. After many years, they were able to return to Canaan where they lived in twelve generally self-governing tribes. They gradually extended their territory to the south along the Jordan River. The largest of these tribes was that of Judah, from which the names Judaism and Jews developed.

Around 1000 BC, the Hebrew people united under a series of kings, Saul, David, and Solomon, in the kingdom of Israel. David established his capital in the city of Jerusalem, and Saul later built a great temple there and dedicated it to the one true God of the Jewish people. Struggles with more powerful neighbors continued however, and eventually the kingdom was divided with Judah in the south and Israel in the north. A period of Babylonian rule followed, ended by a revolt of the Maccabees in 167 BC, which restored Hebrew control of the area. Independent rule in the area was ended finally by a Roman takeover and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. Only a portion of the Western Wall of the Temple was left standing. The Jewish people were forced out of the lands around Jerusalem and for many generations lived in what was called “The Diaspora,” or the scattering of the Jews to other parts of the world. The importance of Jerusalem and of the remaining western wall of the Temple continued to be central to Jews during the long centuries of the Diaspora. They believed that the lands of ancient Israel and Judea remained part of the covenant they had made with God.
Reading Response

1. What does Monotheism mean?

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2. What is the Torah?

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3. What happened to the Israelites at around 1300-1200 B.C.?

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4. What does Passover celebrate?

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5. Who is Moses?

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6. Where did the name Judaism or Jewish come from?

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7. What does Diaspora mean?

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8. Who destroyed the Temple?

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9. What is the present day location of the land of Cannan?

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10. According to the Jews what land is apart of a covenant that they made with God?

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