The Effect of Diaspora on Modern Jewish Belief

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

The religion of Judaism is one of the oldest religions in the world, dating back to as early as the second millennium B.C.E. It is the oldest surviving monotheistic religion and shares some common history with both Christianity and Islam, which are also considered “Abrahamic religions.” Although many original crucial philosophies remain, some beliefs vary between different modern movements.
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Introduction

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1. The Origins of Judaism

According to the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of the word “develop” is “to grow or become bigger or more advanced”. This is an appropriate word to describe the foundation of Judaism. The religion originated with the prophet Abraham, who is considered the founder of Judaism. According to common religious belief, Abraham was called by the God (who is already known) into a covenant, in which God promises the land of Canaan (modern day Israel) and many descendants. Ancient Hebrew writings define the "Children of Israel" as descendants of common ancestors, including Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son
Jacob. The Children of Israel was comprised of twelve tribes, each descended from one of Jacob's twelve sons.

The Jewish religion was not widespread in its early stages. It appeared during a time when the common belief was that there were many gods. The Jews were not a powerful people and were overshadowed by more powerful tribes and groups of people. The Bible notes that in 1000 BCE, an Israelite monarchy was established under Saul, and continued under King David and his son, Solomon. The Monarchy eventually fell apart due to fighting among the twelve tribes and to outside influences.

The religion developed in its early stages, becoming larger and more organized. In these ancient times, the main belief of the religion was that God was a solitary being. God’s major relationship was not with other gods (as other peoples of the time believed), but with the world, and more specifically, the people He created. According to a Wikipedia article on Judaism, “Judaism thus begins with ethical monotheism: the belief that God is one and is concerned with the actions of humankind” (N.A. n.p.). These ideas are the basis of the entire religion of Judaism and continue to be present in the several versions of Judaism today.

2. Diaspora and the Progress of Jewish Practice

The definition of the word “adapt” according to Google is “to become adjusted to new conditions.” This is exactly what the Jews had to do when faced with many issues throughout their history. The biggest example of how Judaism was forced to adapt can be seen relatively early on in its history. Diaspora is the term used to describe Jews living outside their original homeland of Israel. According to an online article titled Jews around the World – The Jewish Diaspora, “The story of the
Jewish Diaspora begins in the year 587 B.C.E., when the kingdom of Judea was conquered by the Babylonians, who destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and exiled a large part of the Jewish population to Babylonia” (N.A. n.p.). In addition, an article titled Babylonian Exile from the Encyclopedia Britannica says, “Historians agree that several deportations took place, that not all Jews were forced to leave their homeland… and that some Jews chose to remain in Babylonia—thus constituting the first of numerous Jewish communities living permanently in the Diaspora” (N.A. n.p.). This began a long history of Jews living outside of Israel. Although they were separated from their homeland, the religion did not fade. The Jews continued to practice the beliefs that originated in what is today Israel. Diaspora is still apparent today with large numbers of Jews living in North America and Europe. This proves to be a strong example of how the religion successfully adapted to challenges that it faced.

Another example of adaption of the religion is the fundamental changes that occurred after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem following early Diaspora. An online article from Princeton.edu explains the background of the end of the exile saying, “The forced exile ended in 538 BCE after the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who gave the Jews permission to return to Yehud province and to rebuild the Temple” (N.A. n.p.). The Temple in Jerusalem was a cultural and religious center for the religion for centuries until 70 C.E when it was destroyed by the Romans. In Huston Smith’s book, The World’s Religions, he says that following this event, “the focus of Judaism shifted from the sacrificial rite of the Temple to the study of the Torah and its accompanying Oral Tradition in academics and synagogues. Thenceforth it was not the priests, who were no longer functional, but the rabbis (literally teachers) who held Judaism together” (Smith, 310). He continues to say that their synagogues became centers for both study and worship and for congregational life in general. The practice that resulted from this shift is referred to as Rabbinic Judaism, where rabbis are the teachers and leaders of the religion. This focused on the study of the Torah as being a lifelong process. This major shift from worship
at the Temple to study of the Torah shows how the religion adjusted to its new conditions successfully and created the foundation of the common Jewish beliefs today.

3. Modern Jewish Movements

The Google definition of the word “Transform” is “To make a thorough or dramatic change in the form, appearance, or character of.” The religion of Judaism has gone through definite transformations in more recent times. Although many of the same basic principles and traditions remain, the modern version of Judaism is much different from when it started. In more recent centuries, the religion has transformed to apply to the modern times. This can be attributed to Diaspora and groups of Jews being separated for millennia, leading to differences in practice.

This variation is relevant when discussing the four different branches of modern Judaism present in the United States today. Each movement reflects varying responses to changing times and cultures. Not every Jew identifies with a movement, but of those who do, the largest group is those who consider themselves Reform Jews. According to the online article Movements in Judaism, about 45% of American Jews identify with this movement. The article also explains “Reform Jews do not accept the binding nature of Jewish law, focusing instead on the moral autonomy of individuals to decide which laws are religiously meaningful for them. In general, Reform Judaism is a liberal religious movement whose adherents often support liberal social causes” (N.A. n.p.).

The next most popular movement is Conservative Judaism, which consists of about 40% of American Jews. The same article, titled Movements in Judaism also says, “Conservative Judaism accepts the notion that Jewish law is binding upon Jews. That is, that Conservative Jews have an obligation to obey all the teachings of Judaism.” For example, they emphasize the laws of
keeping kosher and keeping The Sabbath. Conservative Jews believe that Jewish law is capable of evolution as humans learn more about interpreting the Torah. Thus, Conservative Jews have changed some of the earlier interpretations of the Torah. For example, men and women worship together in Conservative synagogues, and women can be ordained as rabbis.

Orthodox Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism are relatively small movements, making up about 15% of those Jews who affiliate combined. Orthodox Jews accept Jewish law in the Torah, but unlike Conservative Jews, Orthodox Jews do not believe that the law itself can actually evolve. Orthodox Judaism accepts the idea that the 613 commandments in the Torah are binding on all Jews and must not be altered. On the other hand, the same online article explains that Reconstructionists believe in a more naturalistic approach to religion and consider Judaism not just as a religion but also as an evolving religious civilization. They do not accept the binding nature of Jewish law and reject the idea of Jews as a chosen people.

Conclusion

Through its extensive history, Judaism has developed, adapted and transformed in many ways. More specifically, Diaspora has affected the way the beliefs of Judaism developed through history by allowing different groups of people to develop different variations of the same general ideas.
Bibliography


