

Judaism

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A Never-Ending Story?

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ISBN 9789465541877

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Preface

About ten years ago, I decided to immerse myself in the origins and development of Christianity. Naturally, this led to a study of Judaism—which is hardly surprising, given that Christianity began its journey as a Jewish sect. My findings were later published in my 2019 book, *Het Heilig Baldakijn* [The Sacred Canopy]. In that work, I drew a link between religion as a tool for steering society and modern ideologies like communism and fascism. This present book includes the text from *Het Heilig Baldakijn* that relates directly to Judaism, naturally adapted and expanded in several places. In addition, I have dedicated a chapter to the environment in which Judaism had to hold its ground following the success of Christianity and, later, Islam.

In *Het Heilig Baldakijn* the history of the Jewish people, who lived mostly in the diaspora, was followed until around 1950. At the time, that seemed like a natural endpoint, as the State of Israel had just been founded. That event now lies 75 years in the past, and a great deal has happened in and around the newly created Jewish homeland since then. Now, in the autumn of 2023, with a sudden explosion of violence in the region, the time felt right to provide a sequel to my earlier observations. To understand a situation that has spiraled out of control, it is often necessary to rewind time and bring buried perspectives back to the surface. In the case of Judaism and the history of the Jews in the diaspora, that rewinding goes back very far—about 25 centuries. That is exactly where I believed my previous study would come in handy.

Inevitably, the developments between 1948 and 2023 then had to be analysed, and that is where I ran into a dilemma. I can easily understand and empathise with people who adhere to a religion and try to give meaning to their lives through it. But drawing from some sacred text to establish a historical "fact" or to claim the moral high ground in a dispute goes too far for me. Human beings have been taking each other's lives

ever since exclusive religions came into existence, and monotheism certainly takes the lead in this regard. In my attempt to fathom the situation in the Middle East, and specifically regarding Israel, I have therefore distanced myself from non-verifiable claims. "It is written" can hardly be used as a valid argument in a contemporary political crisis. And that, of course, applies to all parties involved.

Not everyone will agree with this approach, but the reader who keeps an open mind will, I hope, observe that I have arrived at an objective analysis based purely on what is known from secular history. All the while, I keep in mind what Napoleon noted on the matter: *'L'histoire est une suite de mensonges sur lesquels on est d'accord.'*

About the book

In the first part of this book, the focus is placed not so much on Jewish religion, sects, customs, and habits, but rather on how the Jewish community functioned within its wider environment. Judaism is placed within a general historical context. This approach makes it inevitable that certain topics are discussed only briefly, especially if they are not of major importance to the story as a whole.

Within this broader picture, an attempt will be made to answer a few fundamental questions, such as: what are the origins of 'Jew-hatred', and what were the actual causes of the diaspora?

The answer to the first question points toward the phenomenon of 'monotheism'. A religion that prides itself on representing the one and only true God—dismissing all other gods as mere illusions or idols—is, in its inherent arrogance, an insult to all who do not follow it. Jewish monotheism was a completely new phenomenon a few thousand years ago, and Jews living in host countries stirred up a lot of bad blood because of it.

The text will also clarify the nature of the diaspora and answer the second question. It is argued that the destruction of the Temple by Titus was by no means the start of a massive

exodus of Jews from Palestine. Those who were tied to real estate, such as landowners, never actually left.

For anyone who derives their knowledge of Jews almost exclusively from the Bible, the period between the Babylonian Exile and the appearance of Jesus is a total blind spot. Such a gap does not fit the purpose of this book. Therefore, the Jewish people are closely followed during what turns out to be the actual formative period of the Jewish religion.

Extensive attention is also paid to the religious, cultural, and political consequences of Hellenisation, and the subsequent Romanisation, of the Jewish homeland of Palestine. This naturally clarifies the context from which the emergence of the Jesus movement can be understood.

The demonisation of the Jews by Christianity, which branded them with the stigma of 'deicide' (God-killers), proved decisive for their lives as 'eternal guests' among Christians in the Western world. The introduction of a racial component into the mix of variables that caused Jew-hatred lifted this phenomenon to an even more destructive level. From this point on, we speak of antisemitism. After a brief interlude during the time of Napoleon, it proved to be deeply entrenched throughout Christendom. This led to the rise of a Zionist movement led by Theodor Herzl and, ultimately, to the founding of a Jewish homeland. Had it been established earlier, the Holocaust could not have taken place.

The realisation that the extermination of the vast majority of the Jewish population in Europe could have been prevented if there had been a safe haven for these people, out of reach of those with malicious intent, has a massive impact to this day and partly shapes the developments we see unfolding now.

Mark Twain

The Jews run like a common thread through history and have always stood prominently in the spotlight, for better or for worse. Mark Twain noticed this a long time ago. In 1897, he wrote:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff

of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Rotterdam, December 2023, October 2025, August 2026

Peter Franken

1. Origins and Development

In the following section, the emphasis is placed not so much on Jewish religion, sects, customs, and traditions, but rather on the functioning of the Jewish community within its wider environment. Judaism is situated within a general historical context. This approach makes it inevitable that certain topics are discussed only summarily, particularly if they are not of major importance to the narrative as a whole.

This broader perspective seeks to answer a few fundamental questions, such as the origins of 'Jew-hatred' and the root causes of the diaspora.

The answer to the first question lies in the phenomenon of 'monotheism'. A religion that prides itself on representing the one true God—thereby dismissing all other deities as mere illusions or physical idols—is, in its inherent arrogance, an insult to all who do not adhere to it. A few thousand years ago, Jewish monotheism was an entirely novel phenomenon, and Jews residing within host countries stirred up a great deal of bad blood because of it.

Furthermore, this section clarifies the nature of the diaspora and addresses the second question. It argues that the destruction of the Temple by Titus was by no means the starting point of a mass demographic exodus of Jews from Palestine. Those tied to real estate—the landowners—never left at all.

For anyone who derives their comprehension of the Jewish people almost exclusively from the Bible, the epoch spanning the Babylonian Exile to the appearance of Jesus constitutes a complete blind spot. Such a discontinuity does not fit the design of this book; this study therefore closely tracks the Jews through what turns out to be the actual formative period of their religion. Special attention is also directed toward the religious, cultural, and political ramifications of Hellenisation, and the subsequent Romanisation, of the Jewish homeland of Palestine. This provides the necessary context to understand the emergence of the Jesus movement.

The origins of what has come to be called 'the Jewish people' are shrouded in mystery. Historically, virtually nothing is known about them until five centuries before the beginning of our era. Writing about the first millennia inevitably requires roughly twelve centuries of speculation. This speculative period can be filled in several different ways, using diverging narrative scenarios.

The Biblical Scenario: Abraham and Isaac

In the Bible, Abraham is introduced as the patriarch of a new tribe. He is a Bedouin living in Ur, somewhere in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). When his father Terah dies, Yahweh calls Abraham and tells him to go on a journey:

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great people, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing." (Genesis 12:1–2).

Alternatively, the biblical text depicts Abraham departing from Harran (southeastern Turkey) with his immediate family, including his nephew Lot and his wife Sarah. Whichever the case, the family arrives in Canaan and stays for some time in Shechem. Abraham descends from Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, and Eber (Genesis 11:10–17). The Hebrews might be named after this distant ancestor Eber, which explains why Abraham is called 'the Hebrew' in Genesis 14:13.

Because the land offered little, Abraham leaves for Egypt with Sarah. He has Sarah pass herself off as his sister, and the Pharaoh takes her as one of his wives. Because of this, Abraham finds favour with the Pharaoh and becomes a wealthy man. Later, he is sent away with Sarah when the Pharaoh discovers that she is actually Abraham's wife. The company heads back to Canaan.

Arriving there for the second time, Abraham receives a promise:

"In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates." (Genesis 15:18).¹

Lot subsequently settles in the Jordan Valley and later perishes during the destruction of Sodom.

Genesis 17 recounts Yahweh's announcement that Abraham will father a son with Sarah, who will become the ancestor of a great people. Furthermore, Yahweh enters into a solemn covenant with Abraham, marked by the requirement that all males must henceforth be circumcised. This obligation is applied retroactively: Abraham himself must undergo it, as must Ishmael, his son with Hagar.

Later, when Yahweh visits Abraham alongside two angels on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham tells his wife Sarah to prepare a meal for the guests. The meal consists of baked goods, dairy products, and meat. Clearly, the strict dietary laws that later became so characteristic of Judaism were not yet in force.²

Sarah laughs to herself when she hears Yahweh say that she—ninety years old and barren—will bear a son. When Yahweh questions her about this, she denies it. Here we see a deity who is not detached and almighty, but rather someone who is a bit offended because his power is doubted. Later, he negotiates with Abraham over the conditions required to spare the condemned city of Sodom. Abraham has a direct interest in this because of his nephew. Furthermore, he argues that destroying the entire city—the 'righteous with the wicked'—is beneath God's dignity. Ultimately, they settle on the number ten: "And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake." (Genesis 18:32).

That Sodom is ultimately wiped out completely says much about the alleged godlessness of the place. Apparently, there were fewer than ten God-fearing people in the city.³

Sarah later gives birth to a son, Isaac, a half-brother to Ishmael. Besides Hagar, the Bible also mentions another concubine of Abraham, a woman named Keturah, with whom he had six sons (Genesis 25:1–2). In total, eight sons are mentioned. Isaac inherits Abraham's estate, while the other sons receive gifts. Daughters are never mentioned. The Bible refers to Isaac as Abraham's only-begotten son, because Sarah is his primary wife and Hagar is merely a concubine—effectively Sarah's

maidservant. Opinions are divided on the status of Keturah. Some argue that she and Hagar are the same person. Others view her as a concubine or a new primary wife after Sarah's death.

To confirm his covenant with Yahweh, Abraham proves willing to go so far as to sacrifice Isaac to him. Although this is called off at the very last second, this episode clearly indicates that at this stage, Yahweh differs little from his pagan counterparts (Genesis 22).⁴

In Genesis 24, we read how Abraham sends a servant out to find a bride for Isaac from his family in Mesopotamia. A marriage candidate from among the inhabitants of Canaan is out of the question. The servant returns with Rebekah, a daughter of Abraham's nephew Bethuel, who subsequently bears Isaac twin sons: Esau and Jacob, in that order. Because Jacob manages to trick his older brother out of his birthright, all attention shifts to him. He becomes the third patriarch of the new tribe that began with Abraham.

The Biblical Scenario: Jacob

Jacob is sent to Mesopotamia to find a wife. He enters the service of his uncle Laban and marries his daughters, Leah and Rachel. He also takes two concubines, Zilpah and Bilhah, the maidservants of his official wives. In total, these women bear him twelve sons, the most famous of whom are Judah (son of Leah), and Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Rachel. The twelve sons of Jacob are thus, for the most part, half-brothers. Genesis 31 recounts how Jacob leaves his father-in-law Laban with his family and flocks to return to Canaan. A fascinating detail in this story is Rachel's theft of the *teraphim*—figurines of the family gods, often interpreted as fertility goddesses—from her father's house. The mother of Joseph and Benjamin clearly still stands within the polytheistic tradition.⁵

What follows is a reconciliation between Jacob and Esau, alongside a nightly wrestling match with Yahweh in the guise of an angel. Yahweh then gives him a new name: Israel. Consequently, Jacob's descendants are called Israelites, while those

of Esau are known as Edomites. Jacob settles in Shechem and buys a piece of land there from the local tribal chief, Hamor.

Shortly after, events spiral completely out of control. Dinah, one of Leah's daughters, goes out to visit the local women and is violated by one of Hamor's sons, fittingly named Shechem. However, he refuses to leave it at a forced encounter; he asks his father to arrange a marriage with Jacob. Two of Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, insist on honour-revenge, but Jacob views marriage as an opportunity to live in peace with Hamor's tribe, which holds a clear numerical advantage. An agreement is reached that the marriage can take place if all the men of Shechem are circumcised, so that Jacob and his family can at least maintain their covenant with Yahweh. Once all the men are circumcised and temporarily incapacitated, Simeon and Levi ambush the village and slaughter everyone.

Jacob is deeply upset by this, as Genesis 34:30–31 states:

"And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites: and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house. And they said, Should he deal with our sister as with an harlot?"

Later, it turns out that Simeon and Levi get the short end of the stick when Jacob allocates living areas. Simeon is only allowed to dwell within the territory of Judah, while Levi remains landless and becomes responsible for temple service (the later Levites). Three of Levi's great-grandchildren will reappear later in the biblical narrative: Moses, his sister Miriam, and his brother Aaron. Joseph, his father's favourite, is subsequently sold by his brothers to a passing group of Ishmaelites (descendants of Jacob's uncle Ishmael). They, in turn, sell him to the Egyptian Potiphar, an officer of the Pharaoh (Genesis 37). Judah separates himself from his brothers (Genesis 38) to look for a local wife. He marries the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua, who bears him three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.⁶ Er later marries Tamar, also a 'daughter of Canaan'. Er then dies—reportedly punished by Yahweh because he failed in his duty to provide offspring—and the second brother, Onan—whose name ironically means 'the virile'—refuses to fulfil his levirate

marriage duty and is therefore also killed. Instead of giving Tamar his third son, Shelah, Judah sends her back to her father, terrified that he will lose another son. Tamar resorts to a trick. She disguises herself as a prostitute by standing—veiled but suggestively—by the roadside where she knows Judah will pass. She seduces her father-in-law and takes several of his personal items as a pledge until her payment, a young goat, is delivered. Judah is later confronted with the fact that he has impregnated his daughter-in-law, who gives birth to twins, the brothers Perez and Zerah. The future King David is a descendant of this Perez. Notably, Perez is half-Canaanite. Had he been born as the son of Er or Onan, he would have been three-quarters Canaanite. In the development of these legends, this detour via Judah conceivably served to grant the lineage from Jacob to David a greater degree of tribal purity.⁷

When Canaan is struck by a famine, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Only Benjamin stays behind, as Jacob refuses to risk losing another son of his favourite wife, Rachel, after Joseph. In Egypt, the brothers meet Joseph but do not recognise him. He has risen to the rank of vizier, a confidant of the Pharaoh and the most important administrator in the country. He questions his brothers—whom he did recognise—and asks them to return, but only if they bring their youngest brother along. Simeon is left behind as a hostage when they head back. During their second visit, Joseph reveals his identity and forgives his brothers for their betrayal. He asks them to bring the entire tribe—effectively still just Jacob's family—to Egypt to settle in the region of Goshen, the area between the Nile and the later Suez Canal. Jacob agrees, and the entire tribe trades Canaan for Egypt. This might seem to contradict Yahweh's promise, but it does not; Goshen was indeed part of the land that Yahweh had envisioned for Abraham (Genesis 42–48). The tribe of Jacob multiplies and grows into the people of the Israelites. Within this people, multiple tribes are distinguished, each with a descendant of Jacob as its patriarch.⁸ After a period of prosperity, the people fall into slavery, which lasts until the Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

The Biblical Scenario: Moses

The Book of Exodus recounts the life of the Israelites in Egypt and their departure from the land. Central to the narrative is the claim that the Israelites multiplied much faster than their hosts, thereby becoming a threat to the state. The Pharaoh attempted to control this demographic growth by ordering the execution of all newborn Hebrew boys. To escape this fate, the infant Moses was placed in a wicker basket floating on the Nile, only to be found by an Egyptian princess. Consequently, he grew up at the royal court, completely unaware of his Israelite identity. Later, upon discovering his true heritage and feeling outraged by the systemic oppression of his people, he emerged as their leader and guided them northward toward Canaan.⁹

This transition was not without conflict; Egypt first had to be plagued by ten disasters before the Pharaoh agreed to their departure. The Book of Exodus states that the Red Sea was temporarily parted to allow the people passage. Given that the Israelites resided in Goshen, an area in northeastern Egypt, this is an implausible detail within the myth. Between the northernmost tip of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean coast lies over 100 kilometres of dry land, over which one could walk without ever getting wet feet. The Bible justifies this route by explaining that the shorter northern path was populated by the Philistines, whom the Israelites were advised to avoid.

When the Pharaoh noticed that Moses had headed south, he assumed the Israelites had become lost in the desert and pursued them, realising he had allowed himself to be intimidated by a largely unarmed population. During the pursuit, the Pharaoh and his army were swallowed by the Red Sea (Exodus 14:23–31).

Once inside the desert region between Egypt and Canaan, Moses developed into the spiritual leader of his people. He received a foundational set of moral directives from Yahweh (the Ten Commandments), alongside an extensive framework of laws regulating the religious and social life of the community.¹⁰ In addition to parts of Exodus, the entire Book of

Leviticus and large portions of Numbers and Deuteronomy are dedicated to this legal system. Within this biblical framework, Yahweh delivered a complete blueprint of legislation to his chosen people through Moses. A crucial component of these laws was the absolute exclusivity demanded by Yahweh in return for the privileges granted to his chosen people:

"I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me..." (Exodus 20:2–5). Apostasy was thus punished across subsequent generations; even great-grandchildren would suffer the consequences.

That Yahweh was utterly serious about this demand for exclusive worship becomes clear from his reaction when the people, during a temporary absence of Moses, constructed an idol—the 'Golden Calf'—and celebrated around it with dancing. Yahweh intended to wipe out the entire people, but Moses managed to dissuade him. Instead, the men of Moses' own tribe (Levi) slaughtered 3,000 men as an expiatory offering. Here it becomes evident that the character of Yahweh had undergone a significant evolution. Rebekah could still cherish her *teraphim* without facing consequences; now, such actions were viewed as high treason, carrying the death penalty.

The stone tablets inscribed with these newly delivered laws and ordinances were stored in a ceremonial chest known as the 'Ark of the Covenant'. This was placed inside a provisional, mobile sanctuary—a tent referred to as the Tabernacle. The Ark would later reside in the Temple of Jerusalem and vanished from history after the destruction of the city by Titus.¹¹

Yahweh promised to eliminate all adversaries of the people of Israel so they could seize their territories. The Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites were specifically earmarked for destruction. The promised territory was delineated as follows:

"And I will set thy bounds from the Red Sea even unto the sea of the Philistines, and from the desert unto the river; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and thou shalt drive them out before thee." (Exodus 23:31).

The 'Red Sea' denotes the Sea of Suf, the 'sea of the Philistines' denotes the Mediterranean, and 'the river' can refer to none other than the Jordan. All in all, this territory was significantly smaller than the land mass originally envisioned for Abraham. The formation of strategic alliances was explicitly forbidden: "Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in thy land, lest they make thee sin against me: for if thou serve their gods, it will surely be a snare unto thee." (Exodus 23:32–33).

The sheer volume of the Israelite population roaming the desert after the Golden Calf incident can be inferred from Numbers 1:46, which records 603,555 men aged twenty and older, excluding the tribe of Levi. Within this biblical framework, we are dealing with a massive population of approximately two to three million people. Following forty years of wandering through the Sinai Desert, the territory of Canaan was finally entered and conquered from the indigenous tribes.

The Biblical Scenario: Judges and Kings

The conquest under the leadership of Joshua, who succeeded Moses, was a brutal affair. In alignment with Yahweh's directives, the resident tribes were systematically eradicated and their lands seized. The tribes of Israel distributed themselves across the conquered territories according to the historical blessings attributed to Jacob: Judah and Benjamin in the south, Simeon embedded within the territory of Judah, and the remaining tribes to the north. The centralised leadership that existed during the desert migration and the initial military campaigns quickly dissolved. Prominent individuals arose as local leaders, known as 'Judges'. Concurrently, prophets emerged to warn the populace on behalf of Yahweh to adhere strictly to the law and to abandon idolatry. Eventually, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king.

Saul quickly fell out of favour with Yahweh when he failed to execute his orders strictly regarding the Amalekites. Within the biblical narrative, this group serves as the archetype for absolute malice. The Israelites had a historical score to settle with them, as the Amalekites had ambushed the weakest members trailing at the rear of the Israelite column during the exodus. Once that initial battle had been won by Israel, Moses declared:

"Because the Lord hath sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:16).

In the First Book of Samuel, King Saul received an explicit command from Yahweh via the prophet Samuel to entirely exterminate the Amalekites and all their livestock.¹² The narrative notes that Saul slaughtered all Amalekites except for their king, and spared the finest cattle. This act of leniency was heavily condemned by Yahweh, and as punishment, Saul was stripped of his kingship. The captured King Agag was subsequently executed by Samuel.

Saul's successor was the legendary King David, from the tribe of Judah. Through continuous warfare against neighbouring pagan peoples, he successfully expanded his realm. His son Solomon continued this expansion, and under his administration, the territory controlled by Israel reached its greatest geographical extent. Solomon constructed the First Temple in Jerusalem, replacing the mobile Tabernacle and permanently establishing Jerusalem as the religious epicentre of the land. Yet, during Solomon's reign, internal decay set in, and the kingdom fractured into two distinct entities: Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, and Israel, with its capital in Samaria.

The First Book of Kings notes that Solomon maintained an enormous harem containing hundreds of foreign wives. This inevitably led to the creeping infiltration of foreign deities at court. To punish Solomon, Yahweh announced that the kingdom would be divided, leaving Solomon's descendants to rule over only his own tribe (Judah). Out of regard for David, the deity postponed this fracture until after Solomon's death. A more secular cause for the division of the empire lies in the high taxation and forced labour imposed by Solomon to fund his military campaigns, the construction of the Temple, and his

luxurious lifestyle. The northern tribes grew resentful of being exploited for the benefit of a single ruling tribe in the south—a classic political conflict.

Jeroboam, from the tribe of Ephraim (the same tribe to which the conqueror Joshua belonged), became the first king of the northern ten-tribe Kingdom of Israel. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, inherited the kingship over the southern tribe of Judah, which was joined by Benjamin and the scattered tribe of Simeon. This southern kingdom gave its name to a new distinct population: the Jews. Subsequently, the exclusive worship of Yahweh fell into disuse in both the north and the south. Most notably, the Canaanite mother goddess Asherah made a major comeback, alongside various other idols. A few centuries later, the northern kingdom fell victim to an Assyrian invasion. Its population was deported into exile, and the ten northern tribes vanished from the 'biblical historical' record.

The Biblical Scenario: The Babylonian Exile

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had both become tributary states to Assyria. A failure to pay the required tribute served as the catalyst for the Assyrian invasion. Following the defeat of the Kingdom of Israel, the Assyrian forces placed Jerusalem under siege. This siege was lifted after a few years, presumably because the tribute was ultimately paid after all. The Bible, however, attributes this resolution to divine intervention. During these conflicts, Hezekiah ruled over Judah. The Bible portrays him as a God-fearing monarch—one of the very few. Under his reign, the Temple service was fully restored, an absolute ban was declared—and where possible, enforced—on conducting religious services in rival temples, and idolatry was vigorously combated. As a vassal of Assyria, Hezekiah played a double game by secretly aligning himself with Egypt. He secured Jerusalem's water supply by constructing an underground tunnel, an engineering masterpiece for its time. Under Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, Judah relapsed into idolatry. The extent of this spiritual regression is evident from the detailed chronicle provided in 2 Kings 23, which outlines everything Manasseh's successor, Josiah, had to do to regain

Yahweh's favour. Not that this ultimately availed; the deity had already resolved to inflict the same fate upon Jerusalem as he had upon Samaria, the capital of Israel. The behaviour of Josiah's successors, who undid virtually all of his reforms, only strengthened this divine resolve.

Then Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian Empire, made his entry. Having long been a vassal state of Assyria, Babylon managed to turn the tables. Judah subsequently became a minor vassal state of Babylon. King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylonian rule, counting on Egyptian support that failed to materialise. The people of Judah were defeated and carried away into exile. 2 Kings 25:11–12 describes this event:

"Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carry away. But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vinedressers and husbandmen."

In other words: the officials and the elite were deported, while the farmers stayed behind. The Temple was destroyed, and everything of value was carried off to Babylon. The famous Babylonian Exile had begun.

From this point forward, Babylon was the dominant regional power, with a territory stretching from the Nile to the Tigris. This hegemony would not last long, however, as the Persian Empire soon overran the Babylonians. During the Babylonian Exile, the Jews enjoyed a great deal of freedom. They were permitted to practise their own faith and formed a distinct cultural community. Just as in previous narratives set in Egypt (Joseph, Moses), we encounter a mythical figure here who rises through the ranks of the royal court: Daniel.

When the Persians assumed control, the Jews were permitted to return to Judah; this occurred after a period of roughly half a century. By no means did everyone take advantage of this opportunity, as evidenced by the story of Esther—the subject of the most romantic book in the Bible, and the only one in which the name of the deity never appears. This text describes a large Jewish community remaining in the former place of exile. Returning to Judah was apparently not all that appealing;