

QUESTION

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE WAYS IN WHICH THE JEWS HAVE MAINTAINED THEIR FAITH THROUGH CENTURIES OF PERSECUTION?

INTRODUCTION

Judaism is a vast subject that cannot be captured in whole by a single essay of just 2000 words. In this paper therefore, I would try to limit myself to the major points but first, efforts would be made to bring out in brief the early history of the Jews or what is known as the Biblical accounts on the Jews history in relation to their faith. There are some important features (*stated in the immediate paragraph below*) that needs to be borne in mind, and in the light of which I would pin-point one after the other, what seems to me to be the major ways by which the Jews have maintained their Faith through centuries of persecution. I would try to arrange the paragraphs in two major parts i.e. beliefs and practice, then the final conclusion.

Until comparatively recent times there was no dichotomy between the religious and secular aspects of Jewish culture and civilisation. Jewish cultural self-awareness, Jewish historical consciousness, Jewish identity and Jewish existence in its totality were united within an essentially religious framework (*Judaism*). Further more, the Jewish tradition not only teaches certain fundamental ideas about God, revelation, and man, it also expresses these beliefs through ceremonies, rituals and behaviour-guiding laws which in turn give rise to religious institutions, and distinctive style of Jewish life and culture. *On this note, the existence of the Jewish people implies the same for their culture and tradition, and since their faith is inherent to their tradition, in this way, it can be said that the Jewish faith has since being in existence alongside with their tradition.*

THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

The origin of the Jewish people and of Judaism cannot be traced historically with any certainty. The major sources of information are contained in those books which came to be believed as having come from the initiative and inspiration of God, and which became scripture, i.e. Torah, Nebi'im (*Prophets*), and Kethubim (*Writings*), hence the abbreviated name. Tanach; this threefold division goes back to at least the second century BCE. From these books, it seems clear that a kinship group, the bene Jacob (*descendants of Jacob*) gradually ceased to be nomadic and settled in areas of Canaan.

The biblical version of the origins of Judaism gives a more coherent picture of covenants which God made with this people (*or their ancestors*) culminated (*but not ended*) with the covenant with Moses: here the demand is made that Israel should be holy as God is holy, and that the people should obey the command. When the people obey the commands of the covenant, all (*especially according to Deuteronomy*) will be well with them; if not, not. This fact made the Jews to hold on to their faith by '*keeping the covenant in mind and be conscious of observing its terms*'. By doing this, they hope to avert the possibility of being punished by God and even in the midst of persecution, they continued to obey the command.

THE JEWISH BELIEFS

Some have tried to detect the essence of Judaism in the Ten Commandments, but only the first two of these - '*I am the Lord thy God*' and '*Thou shalt have no other gods*' - have to do with belief; the

others comprise rules of conduct. Further passages in the sources (*e.g. Micah 6:8; Psalm 15*) which have been understood as conveying the essence of Judaism are open to the same objection. It was not until the Middle Ages that a more or less authoritative list of fundamental beliefs was drawn up by the Egyptian Jewish sage Maimonides.

The following are the thirteen principles of faith as drawn up by Maimonides: Belief in the existence of God; in the unity of God; in the incorporeality of God; in prophecy; in the coming of Messiah; in the resurrection of the dead and belief that God is eternal; that God alone is to be worshipped; that the Torah is from God; that the Torah is unchanging; that God knows the thoughts and deeds of man; that Moses was the greatest of the prophets; that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished. Almost all of these basic beliefs have directly or indirectly helped in sustaining the Jews faith through centuries of persecution.

For example, on the issue of suffering and faith, the Tanakh depicts the universe as being governed by an all-powerful, personal God who intervenes in history to reward the righteous and punish the unjust. The Tanakh itself brings up the issue with the challenging parable of Job, a blameless, God-fearing, and wealthy man. One rabbinical interpretation is that Satan was co-operating with God in helping Job growing from fear of God to love of God. Another is that faith in God will finally be rewarded in this life, no matter how severe the temporary trials. Another is that those who truly desire to grow toward God will be asked to suffer more, that their sins will be expiated in this life so they can enjoy the divine bliss in the life to come. Such interpretations assume a personal, all-powerful, loving God doing what is best for his people, even when they cannot understand his ways.

Another example is that, in the late seventeenth century a number of Messianic movements arose. There was no doubt that these were partly a product of the insecurity of Jewish life. The most important of these movements was centred on Shabbetai Zevi and his prophet, Nathan of Gaza, and they were able to find acceptance and a following throughout the world. Their argument was that, according to Judaism, the messianic age of a new heaven and a new earth is yet to come. It was an affirmation that, no matter how bleak the surroundings and the future appear, progress is possible. There was '*an unquenchable hope*' that this world can be changed, and the prophetic dream of peace can be realised. Thus the Jews were able to maintain their faith through centuries of persecution by living in anticipation of the arrival of their saviour.

Further more, David, Jerusalem was captured, and there the Temple was built where worship and sacrifices were offered to God. Yet ritual action and kingly control were never self-sufficient; they were monitored by prophets who spoke directly from God, *koh amar Adonai, 'Thus says the Lord....'* In this way the triple cord of Israel's religion (*prophet, priest, and king*) was woven together. Although the Jews lived under foreign rule - Persian, Greek, Parthian, and then Romans - the institutions of '*the priestly rites and of course the constant warning*' coming from the prophets (*since the Jewish belief in prophets and prophecy was so strong*), tended to minimise cross-cultural and religious influences. By this, the Jews faith was being maintained and un-polluted throughout the entire biblical period.

THE JEWISH PRACTICES

Everyone was taught the basics of Torah as a matter of course, but many men also occupied themselves with deep study of the scriptures, from the age of five or six, and *'the practice of repeated study and recitation on its verses'* keep reminding the Jews of the basic statements of their faith. Also in this way, the Torah and its associated life-style and thought patterns, is inextricably bound up with the experience of the Jewish people and their notions of self-identity. This enhances their ability to sustain and maintain their faith.

The Jewish religious year includes a number of festivals and days of fasting. Hardly a month goes by without some festival or fast being observed. The first of these is New Year's Day (*Rosh Hashanah*). Others are the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) which is considered the holiest day in the Jewish religious year. The feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*), the feast of Light (*Hanukkah*) and *Purim* which means *'Lots'*. The *'constant practice'* of these festivals helped the Jews in maintaining their faith through centuries of persecution, especially because of the historical links of the festivals and the Jewish relationship with God. For example, the feast of Passover (*Pesach*) is the best known of all Jewish festivals. This weeklong celebration marks the birthday of the Jewish people, that is, the deliverance of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. And inasmuch as this festival is being celebrated, the memory of their faith would remain with them.

A child is considered a Jew if it is born of a Jewish mother; whether or not the father is Jewish is of no consequence for the religion status of the child, according to tradition. A male child is circumcised of the eighth day after its birth, if it is healthy, and is then given a Hebrew name. Circumcision, representing the entrance of the child into the covenant, which God made with

Abraham and his descendants. Therefore, '*the birth of a child and the accompanied rituals*' returns the Jews to the memory lane of their faith.

Marriage is considered a desirable condition for every Jew, since there is a biblical commandment, or *mitzvah*, to have children. Jews are generally discouraged from remaining single by choice, and religious literature from the biblical story of the first human couple, Adam and Eve, onwards depicts the unmarried individual as an incomplete person. Marriage is a high point in the life of a Jew, for it signifies the setting up of a new family - the family being the basic unit of Jewish ritual. Judaism does not allow marriage with a non-Jewish spouse, and intermarriage between a Jew and a Gentile cannot be performed in a synagogue. On this note, '*marriage ceremonies conducted according to the Jewish religion*' therefore, helped to preserve and maintain their faith.

Apart from that, up to the age of twelve for a girl, and thirteen for a boy, a child is regarded as a minor. He or she will be gradually instructed in the keeping of Jewish rituals, will be taught Hebrew and will learn to translate passages from the Bible and the prayer book. At the age of twelve or thirteen the child is regarded as an adult who must keep the *halakhic* rules in their entirety. Its passage to maturity is marked by a *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony for a boy and a *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony for a girl. The *Bar Mitzvah* consists of being called up in synagogue to read from the *Torah scroll* or the weekly portion from the *Prophets*. It is note worthy that, '*the restriction placed on those children and the ceremony involved (rites of passage)*', retains their consciousness of the Jewish faith and so sustained the faith.

The proto-synagogue began in the sixth century *BCE (Before Christian Era)*, after the First Temple was destroyed, when many Jews were deported in captivity to Babylonia. Its role then was as a house of assembly. It developed markedly after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE (*Christian Era*). There were many synagogues in the temple area in Jerusalem and, after the destruction of the temple, the synagogue assumed a role of vital importance in the preservation and development of Judaism. Synagogue '*provided the forum*' and so became the centre for community prayers, for the reading of a section from the Pentateuch and discussing problems. By this, the Jewish in Diaspora were better able to maintain their faith in the face of persecution.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the conclusion drawn on each of the points above, I would like to mention that one of the '*most remarkable phenomena*' by which the Jews have maintained their faith even during the Holocaust years was that the study of Torah continued into the lanes of the crematoria. Although the scope of their choices was fearfully constricted, Jews still saw in every act performed in accordance with the prescriptions of the Halakhah a lifeline to God. Indeed at a time when '*the earth was delivered into the hand of the wicked*', the very exercise of any Halakhic choice whatsoever was an act that redeemed not only the doer but the Divine Presence Itself in exile. Thus Rabbi ruled that 'especially at this time...[when] we are in their power to do with us as their evil desires dictate' it is incumbent to recite daily the benediction of thanks to God that '*He has not made me a slave*'. This demonstrates the fact that, Jews cannot be described in isolation of their faith. By this, Jews were able to maintain their faith through centuries of persecution.