



Torah in Hebrew means “teaching” or “guidance” and the Torah scroll, stored in a special decorated container called an ark, consists of the first five books of the Tanakh, the complete Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrews and the Origins of Judaism

The ancient land of Israel was located at the far western end of the Fertile Crescent, the site of the modern State of Israel, on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The first ancient Israelites inhabited small villages in the hill country of central Israel, called at that time Canaan, sharing land and many cultural attributes with other Canaanites. Although archaeology teaches us that they shared a common physical culture, the ancient Israelites' worship of a single God was unique. More than 3,000 years ago, the ancient Israelites developed the religion of Judaism, which became a defining feature of their culture. Today, Judaism is one of the world's major faiths.

The Ancient Israelites' Unique Belief System

The beliefs of the ancient Israelites, also called the Hebrews for the first three generations, differed in basic ways from those of nearby peoples. The Israelites were monotheistic, believing that there was only one god. At the time, all other peoples worshiped many gods.

A few religious leaders, such as the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton, spoke of a single powerful god. However, such ideas did not have the lasting impact that Israelite beliefs did.

The Israelites believed in an all-knowing, all-powerful God who was present everywhere. In their views, history and faith were interconnected. Each event reflected God's plan for the people of Israel, and the Israelites' choices and actions made the plan unfold. The Torah (TOH ruh), their most sacred text, is the story of the ancient Israelites and their continuing relationship with God. The Torah includes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—that is, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Hebrew Bible includes a total of 24 books. Additional laws, customs, legends, and ethics written down much later make up

another important lengthy text, the Talmud, containing over 12,000 pages.

Summarize How did the beliefs of ancient Israelites differ from those of other nearby peoples?