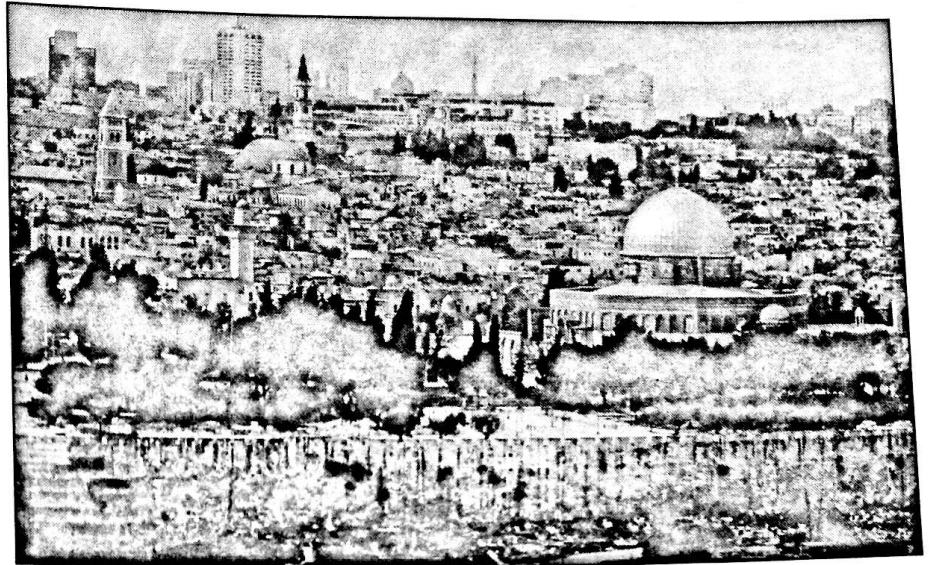


The Development of Jewish Law

The Torah is the source for Jewish law. But what the Torah means has been a subject of discussion and debate for more than 2,000 years. Beginning about 500 B.C., after the Babylonian captivity, Jews commenced a serious study of the Torah. Scholars met, discussed, debated, and compiled interpretations of the Jewish laws. Some of the scholars met in Jerusalem while others conferred in Babylon. For centuries, scholars in these two centers of Jewish thought debated and interpreted the Torah. The vast literature that resulted from this effort is called the Talmud (meaning "learning" or "instruction"). The Talmud mainly focused on how the laws of the Torah should be applied to everyday life.

Starting as early as the second century A.D., Jewish scholars attempted to compile a code of laws from the Torah and other sources that would assemble all Jewish law in one place. One famous Jewish legal scholar, Moses Maimonides, claimed that the Torah and his own code, completed in 1187, were all that were necessary to know everything about Jewish law. Several centuries later in 1563, Joseph Caro incorporated the work of Maimonides and other great Jewish scholars into his own code. This has become the main authority on Jewish law up to this day.

Over time, Jewish scholars have disagreed about nearly every point of the law. Today, three main divisions exist within Judaism. Orthodox Jews believe that the laws of the Torah and Talmud written centuries ago must still be strictly observed. Conservative Jews follow the old laws, but also see them as open to interpretation. Reform Jews view the traditional Jewish religious



Jerusalem was the capital of ancient Judah and is the capital of the state of Israel today.

and moral laws as guides to life, but not binding in every detail.

In 1948, the Jewish people regained a homeland when they established the modern state of Israel. Today, this democratic nation is not strictly governed by the laws of the Torah. It has a parliament that makes laws. Religious courts exercise limited authority. Israel has adopted modern procedures and individual rights from English and other Western legal systems. Many of these procedures and rights, however, had been developed from ancient principles of Jewish law.

In fact, Jewish law has had a great impact on many legal systems. Islamic law borrowed much from it. When Rome adopted Christianity as its official religion, it incorporated much of Jewish law. The English common law relied on the writings of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible).

For Discussion

1. Why do you think Jewish law has provoked so much debate and discussion? What divisions exist today in Judaism over Jewish law?
2. What has been the influence of Jewish law?