

Theme 1C: Religious figures and sacred texts – The Torah as a source of wisdom and authority

Key words

Mitzvot

Torah

Revelation

Sefer Torah

Aron Kodesh

Mantle

Yad

Yeshiva

Seminary

Talmud

Key concepts

The five books of Moses are of the greatest importance to Jews as they contain the mitzvot – the 613 commandments. They also set out the ethical ideals of the Jewish people. Furthermore, the significance of the written law is such that the practices of Jews today can be seen as a development of these laws into a distinct lifestyle.

Different groups within Judaism interpret the nature and purpose of the Torah in different ways. Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah is the word of God and accept its authority without question as the direct revelation of divine law. As a result of this they continue to live according to the 613 mitzvot as far as is practicable. Orthodox Jews also believe that Moses received the Oral Torah that was to be passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next.

Reform Jews believe in God's revelation and that the Torah contains many divine truths, but they attribute the authorship of the Torah to divinely inspired humans. Therefore, Reform Jews interpret the mitzvot according to current needs and do not always adhere to all of the original 613 commandments.

According to rabbinic tradition, the Torah was created before the world existed and was present in Heaven before God revealed it to Moses, thus representing the plan which God had established before the world even began. Jews also believe that the Torah is eternal, will continue to exist and is relevant for all future generations.

Great care and attention is paid to the Sefer Torah as it contains the Word of God, and the way in which it is stored (Aron Kodesh), used (yad) and decorated (mantle) further highlights its significance.

Torah study is especially important in order to learn how to keep the mitzvot as well as in order to gain an insight into the spiritual significance of the mitzvot. There are opportunities for Jewish boys to attend a yeshiva, and girls a seminary, in order to study the Torah in greater depth.

Key quotes

'The momentous encounter with God at Sinai is ... the defining moment in Jewish history, the moment when God came down on earth and spoke to all Jews, present and future, giving them His rules for life ... These Laws ... became the basis of all Judaism'. (Tigay)

'The biblical writers were men inspired by God, but they were not superhuman and there can be no guarantee that they were equally inspired in everything they wrote.' (Close)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

To what extent does the Torah remain the main authority within Judaism today?

The Torah is always the starting point when a question or issue is raised within Judaism. It continues to provide guidance for everyday life within Judaism and even remains to be the foundation of Reform Jew's religious faith. Are there other important sources of authority? What about rabbinic tradition? Mishnah? Talmud? Midrash?

Has the Torah become a religious icon?

How is the term 'icon' to be interpreted? Treating a religious object with great respect does not necessarily make it an icon. Veneration of images and objects is not allowed within Judaism. Perhaps the emphasis should be placed upon the content of the Torah rather than the actual physical scroll.