

Some Important Terms for Understanding Judaism and Jewish History. Pay particular attention to terms in **bold** letters. (source: '06 Walter Hesford)

1. Names of the people, place, and language:

**Hebrew** is the oldest name for both the people and the language they spoke who eventually gave birth to Judaism. They and their language are classified as **Semitic** (the Arabs and Arabic are also Semitic). The Hebrew people seem to have moved in to the area of Canaan around 20000 BCE. While there are several possible etymologies for “Hebrew,” a popular one is “wanderer” or “alien worker”—thus the Hebrews were often enjoined to be kind to the strangers in their midst, as they once too were aliens.

**Israel** becomes known as the name of the country occupied and controlled (sometimes!) by the Children of Israel (or Israelites), those who belong to one of twelve tribes who trace their ancestry to the children of Jacob, whose name, according to Genesis 32: 22-32, was changed to Israel after he wrestled with a mysterious stranger who proved to be an emissary of God; thus, according to tradition, Israel means “wrestling with God”; as Huston Smith points out, to wrestle with God and with meaning is a Jewish tradition.

**Judah/Judaism/Jews**—the son of Jacob who settled with his tribe in the southern portion of Israel was Judah, so the area itself became known as Judah; after the northern portion of Israel was conquered, those in Judah sustained the tribal religion; hence this religion became known as Judaism and its followers as Jews.

2. Two names for the Supreme Being worshiped by Jews:

**Elohim**—when you see “God” in translations of Hebrew scripture, this is the Hebrew name in the original text. “El” is the general Semitic name for “God”; one can find it in several forms; e.g., “El Shaddai” is “God Almighty”; “Bethel” is “house of God”; this is name for God in Genesis 1.

**Yahweh** (or simply **YHWH**—the Hebrew language has no vowels; in some English translations, “Yahweh” becomes “Jehovah”)—this seems to have been the personal name of the war god or storm god of the Hebrew people; worship of him probably predates worship of “El...” His name becomes considered too sacred to utter safely; thus “Adonoi” is substituted for it in the Hebrew Bible; “Adonoi” is translated as LORD. We first encounter this name for God in Genesis 2:4.

3. Names of Hebrew sacred scripture (the Tanakh):

The Tanakh, centuries in development, was by the first century C.E. divided into three sections: **Torah**—the Law, also known as The Five Books of Moses (traditionally ascribed authorship) or the Pentateuch; it presents the history and the 613 mitzvot (laws) that bind together observant Jews; over the course of the year, it is read in conjunction with portions of the Nevi'im—the Prophets, whose call for justice and promise of hope constitutes the heart of the faith; the third portion is the Kethuvim—the Writings, which contains both conventional wisdom such as one finds in Proverbs and challenges to this wisdom such as one finds in the Book of Job.

The central creedal proclamation of monotheism: the **Shema**: