The Evolution of The Jewish Faith:

Although the ancient Israelites may not have established a vast empire or left a great deal of monumental architecture, their spiritual ideas have profoundly influenced much of Western culture, and they continue to exert tremendous force on the modern world.

Central to understanding the development of the Jewish faith is the concept of the Covenant. The Covenant was a formal agreement between the Hebrews and their god, Yahweh, which was first made at the time of Abraham and was later renewed under Moses. According to this contract, the Hebrews were to worship Yahweh as their only god, and they, in turn, were to be Yahweh’s chosen people and promised the land of Canaan.

Initially, Yahweh was likely just one god among many that were worshipped in the Near East. As the main god of the Hebrews, Yahweh would have faced completion from other gods such as Baal, Enlil, Marduk, and Amon-Re. Over time, the Hebrews came to regard Yahweh as the only true God, thus laying the foundations for a monotheist religion.

Yahweh, as he appears in the Old Testament, is an all-powerful and all-knowing god who created the world and then stood outside of it. He is, at times, portrayed as a jealous god, but despite his sometimes harsh nature, Yahweh was a god for everyone; a god who cared for all classes, and was not too aloof to care for the individual.

The Hebrews believed that their god intervened in human affairs and forgave those who truly regretted their wrongs.

What made the Jewish faith stand apart from other faiths at the time of Moses was that is was a religion of the people. It was deeply and passionately felt from within, not imposed from above. It must be remembered that leaders such as Moses were not kings and, therefore, could not force the people to obey laws. These men of ordinary status were able to exert tremendous influence on the ethical behaviours of a society – an influence that has lasted over 3000 years.

Critical to the success and development of Judaism was the passion of the prophets who emerged through Israel’s history. A theme common to all the prophets was the corruption of a society and God’s forgiveness if people repented their sins. The prophets declared that God would prove his love for his people by providing a Messiah to lead the nation of Israel. From about 200 BCE forward, Jewish thought maintained that a king would someday appear to lead the people of Israel and restore their power and glory.

History Continues to Unfold:

Despite the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout Europe and around the world that began with the Diaspora in 70 CE, Jewish culture and religious beliefs have influenced all the ancient cultures of the Near East. Many of the traditions of the Israelites live on today – not only among the Jews, but also among several other major religions.

Comprehension and Extension Questions:

1. In what way is ancient Israeli culture less visible than ancient Egyptian culture?
2. What is the Covenant?
3. Describe the nature of Yahweh.
4. How does the legacy of ancient Israel continue to exist in the modern world?