

# HEBREW EMPIRE: ANCIENT ISRAEL (UNITED AND DIVIDED KINGDOM)

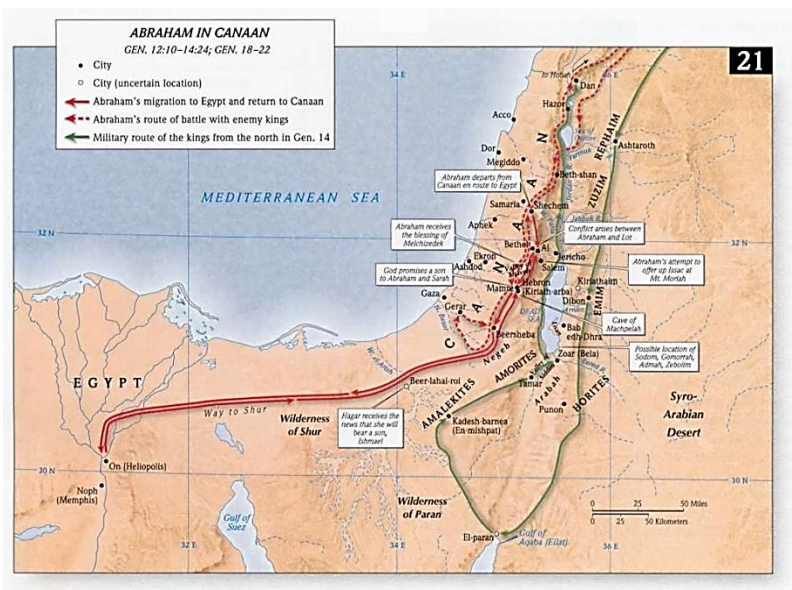
Our knowledge of the ancient history of Israel is largely based on one source, *the Old Testament*. Set to written text during the reign of King Solomon (961-922 BC), this massive work contains large clusters of historical data, a body of law received by Hebrew prophets from their god Yahweh, as well as poetry and prayers of various Hebrew Prophets. The challenge arises from the need to distinguish genuine historical information from matters of faith, particularly when there is very little available external information to corroborate details preserved in the *Old Testament*. As we have already seen with respect to the Stele of Merneptah, when external source material does survive it tends to confirm the general historical outline of the *Old Testament*; it certainly offers nothing to contradict it. It is necessary to analyze this record effectively to illuminate the history of the ancient Israelites in economic and socio-political terms. Over all, their history reflects the challenges posed to many cultures in this region that transited from rural origins to settled urban existence. Unlike previous cultures, however, the Israelites reflected greatly on this transition as it occurred and questioned both its benefits and its disadvantages. By recording the path of their experience and by subjecting it to the scrutiny of recalled tradition, they were able to articulate their historical experience as a process of gradual enlightenment on several levels.

## HISTORICAL OUTLINE

### ERA OF THE PATRIARCHS, C. 1850-1000 BCE

Our record of the era of the Patriarchs is legendary but it presents the likely scenario that the Hebrews began as rural tribes migrating through Mesopotamia and existing along the margins of the emerging urban societies of Sumeria, Akkadia, and Babylonia. Around 1850 BCE, Abraham migrated from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Haran in northern Euphrates valley, and then to Hebron in Canaan. Sometime between 1700 and 1580 BCE, Joseph

led a migration into Egypt. According to the Hebrew tradition not all the related tribal elements relocated to Egypt, the Benjaminites, for example, claimed to have remained in Canaan throughout the Egyptian experience and were viewed throughout the historical era as the keepers of ancestral law. In the period 1290-1224 BCE, Moses led the Exodus from Egypt. Based on the testimony furnished by the Stele of Merneptah in 1220 BCE, and allowing forty years for “wandering” in the Wilderness, this can be dated to the reign of the



Pharaoh Ramses II and would seem to coincide with the Treaty of Kadesh, mentioned above (1258 BC). The Stele of Merneptah confirms the *Old Testament* tradition that the Hebrews invaded Canaan. During the next two centuries their twelve tribal elements gradually adapted to settled agricultural existence. They lived side by side with the surviving Canaanite population and in close proximity to competing militaristic peoples, such as the Philistines, the Armenians, and the Phoenicians.

## 1200-1000 BCE, PERIOD OF JUDGES; SETTLEMENT IN CANAAN

According to tradition Hebrew society at this point was organized according to twelve Tribes, 10 in the north, 2 (Judah, Benjamin) in south. Each tribe was ruled by councils of judges or Suffetes. Their population remained highly segmented and their “judges” emerged among clan-based warlords. The Hebrew tribes were weakened by internal strife as well as by the military threat posed by their neighbors. Repeated losses to the Philistines forced Hebrew tribal leaders reluctantly to appoint a king named Saul (1020-1000 BCE). According to the *Old Testament*, there was no precedent for kingship among the Hebrews, thus, the organization of a “central hierarchy” was viewed as the option of last resort. Saul ultimately made himself unpopular by turning against the hierarchy, purging the standing priesthood (the one unifying institution prior to the creation of the monarchy), and thus provoking internal dissension and rebellion. Eventually the Israelites turned to a young charismatic renegade, who assumed the throne as **King David** (1000-960 BCE).



## UNITED KINGDOM (1000-922 BCE)

David defeated the Philistines and established the **United Kingdom** (1000-922 BCE). He conquered the entire coastal region from Gaza to Phoenicia. He extended his authority to the Euphrates River in the north and perhaps as far as the Red Sea to the south. His reign represented the greatest extent of the Israelite Empire and was recalled as a "golden age." David established his capital at the former Canaanite citadel of Jerusalem.

David was succeeded by **King Solomon** (961-922). Solomon was not as active militarily as David had been, but he was gifted in trade and diplomacy. He forged alliances with Phoenician kings, Egyptian Pharaohs, and the Queen of Sheba (located possibly in Yemen or Somalia). He

constructed the palace and the temple on the rock butte platform of Jerusalem. He used conscript labor, the prytany system (a monthly rotation structure), to construct these edifices. Each tribe had to send drafted free laborers one month per year to work for the king (David's tribe of Judah was alone exempt from this). Solomon enjoyed a large Harem aristocracy (reportedly, 700 wives and 200 concubines), including numerous foreign princesses who settled in the palace with entourages of foreign priests, attendants, and

traders. The forced labor and cosmopolitan character of Jerusalem caused dissension among Israelite citizens. At the death of Solomon, civil wars erupted and ultimately Israel fell apart.

## DIVIDED KINGDOM 922-721 BCE

The **Divided Kingdom** was represented by Israel in the north, with a new capital at Samaria, and Judah (with its capital remaining at Jerusalem) in the south. Israel remained the more populous, more urban of the two kingdoms and was more closely connected to the ruling houses of Phoenicia. Judah/Jerusalem was more rural and isolated. Both kingdoms became subject to Assyrian domination by 850 BCE, and forced to pay tribute. The kingdom of Israel joined in the repeated rebellions of the Phoenicians, and was punished with increasing harshness. In 721 BCE, the Assyrian Kings Sargon II and Esarhaddon conquered Israel and conducted a mass deportation of the ruling aristocracy to Urartu (ancient Armenia). There the ruling elite of Israel became submerged beneath the native population (the "lost tribes"). In 586 BCE King Nebuchadnezzar



sacked Jerusalem and enslaved its aristocracy. Their deportation to Babylon marked the Babylonian Captivity, 586-539 BCE, the period when the Hebrew literature was presumably completed. Cyrus of Persia ultimately released these captives and allowed them to return to Jerusalem to organize a religious society. Along with Palestine Israel remained subjected to regional powers in the Hellenistic Era (particularly the Seleucids of Syria). The revolt of the Maccabees c. 120 BCE, brought them some measure of independence; however, Israel was ultimately crushed by Pompey the Great of Rome in 62 BCE. From then on the history of Israel's dealings with the Romans proved decidedly uneven (friendly relations with Julius Caesar; yet they were hated and terrorized by the Emperor Caligula). Ultimately the Jewish population in Palestine rebelled against Roman authority and was crushed violently by the Roman Emperors Vespasian (69-70 CE), and Hadrian (120s CE). Their experience with Roman imperium proved disastrous and highly unfortunate.