

Hebrew and Phoenician Civilizations

History of the Hebrews

Much of Hebrew experience is recorded in the Holy Writ of Israel, the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, whose present content was approved about A.D. 90 by a council of rabbis. As a work of literature it is outstanding; but it is more than that. "It is Israel's life story - a story that cannot be told adequately apart from the conviction that God had called this people in his

grace, separated them from the nations for a special responsibility, and commissioned them with the task of being his servant in the accomplishment of his purpose."

The Biblical account of the history of the Hebrews (later called Israelites and then Jews) begins with the patriarchal clan leader Abraham, called in Genesis 14:15 "the Hebrew" (Habiru). About 1800 B.C. Abraham led his people out of Ur in Sumer, where they had settled for a time in their wanderings.

The Kingdom of [Israel](#) occupied the land on the [Mediterranean](#) Sea corresponding roughly to the State of Israel of modern times. The region was known, historically, as [Canaan](#), as Phoenicia and, later, as [Palestine](#). Named after the Hebrew patriarch Jacob (also known as Yisra'el, 'persevere with God') and, by extension, his nation, Israel was, at first, the region allegedly conquered by the Hebrew General Joshua around 1250 BCE. The biblical book of Exodus tells the story of the Egyptianized Hebrew leader Moses and how he led his people out of slavery in [Egypt](#) to the "promised land" of Canaan.

According to the story, Moses was unable to enter the land himself owing to a misunderstanding with God and passed his leadership to his second-in-command, Joshua, who then led the Israelites to victory over the indigenous people. This version of history, it should be noted, is only found

in the Hebrew [Bible](#) and, while archaeological evidence in the region once known as Canaan does support the wide-spread upheaval of a [conquest](#), said evidence does not fit neatly with the biblical narrative. Whether there was such a general named Joshua and whether the Hebrews did, in fact, [conquer](#) the Canaanites is a matter of belief in the biblical narrative. It has been established, however, that something of moment did occur circa 1250-1200 BCE which resulted in a displacement of indigenous people, not only in Canaan, but elsewhere throughout the region.

The Israelites had to contend for Palestine against the Canaanites, whose Semitic ancestors had migrated from Arabia early in the third millennium B.C. Joined by other Hebrew tribes already in Palestine, the Israelites formed a confederacy of twelve tribes and, led by war leaders called judges, in time succeeded in subjugating the Canaanites.

Israel developed into a united kingdom under the leadership of King David (c.1000-960 BCE) who consolidated the various tribes under his single rule (having taken over from Israel's first king, Saul, who ruled circa 1020 BCE). David chose the Canaanite [city](#) of [Jerusalem](#) as his capital and is said to have had the Ark of the Covenant moved there. As the Ark was thought to contain the living presence of God, bringing it to Jerusalem would have made the city both a political and religious center of considerable importance. David intended to build a great [temple](#) to house the Ark but that task fell to his son, Solomon (circa 960-920 BCE) whose rule corresponds to the height of Israelite grandeur. Solomon consolidated treaties with neighboring kingdoms such as [Tyre](#) to the north, Egypt, Sheba and sponsored building projects which made Jerusalem a great and opulent city (including, of course, the First Temple). The reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon (but especially the latter two) have been traditionally characterized as a 'golden age' of unity and prosperity.

The Kingdom of Israel, culturally, seems to have been characterized by a strong belief in a fierce desert god (the same who was claimed to have inspired Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt) named [Yahweh](#) who was considered the only 'true god' and the creator Lord of the Universe. David and Solomon, especially, seem to have used this belief to their benefit in

unifying the people but, upon Solomon's death (around 920 BCE) the kingdom split in half, Israel occupying the northern region with a capital at Samaria and the Kingdom of Judah in the south with Jerusalem as capital. The two kingdoms would sometimes ally and sometimes [war](#) but would never again achieve the strength and wealth of the kingdom under the rules of David and Solomon. The Kingdom of Judah prospered under the reigns of the kings Omri (c.876-869 or 884-872 BCE) and Ahab (c.876-853 BCE) and, later, Jehu's dynasty (842-746 BCE) according to archaeological evidence and the biblical narrative, but seems often characterized by instability.

Unable to achieve a lasting, meaningful alliance with each other, Israel fell to the [Neo-Assyrian Empire](#) in 721 BCE and the population was deported (replaced by Assyrian settlements) and, in 587 BCE, the Babylonian King [Nebuchadnezzar II](#) defeated Judah, sacked Jerusalem (destroying the temple) and deported the aristocracy, scribes and skilled craftsmen back to [Babylon](#) (known as the Babylonian Captivity). Following the sack of Samaria, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Diaspora, Israel ceased to exist until the creation of the modern State of Israel in 1947-1948 CE by the United Nations. This link between the ancient Kingdom of Israel and the modern state of the same name has been hotly contested through the years and continues to remain a contentious subject of debate.

1) Who were the Hebrews?

Ans: The Hebrews were a small group among the peoples of the ancient Middle East. Because of their religion, however, they have had a great influence on the world's civilizations. Their religion still exists today. It is called Judaism.

The early Hebrews were nomadic; some were traveling merchants. Leading long trains of donkeys loaded with goods, these merchants walked from one trading post to the next. The Hebrews followed a route that started from the city of Ur on the Euphrates River. There, Hebrew artisans and craftspeople made goods from gold, copper, and ivory. Hebrew merchants then stuffed the goods into bags, loaded them on donkeys, and started up the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates. At Harran, a city near the Turkish mountains, they exchanged their goods for silver. Sometimes, merchants continued west and then south along the Mediterranean coast to trade with Egyptian, Phoenician, and Cretan merchants.

The Hebrews believed that they were descendants of Abraham. The story of the Hebrews and their god is written in the Bible. It states that Yahweh or God, made an agreement with Abraham. Abraham and his followers were to leave Ur and go to Canaan. There, they were to worship and obey Yahweh as the one true god. In exchange, Yahweh promised that they and their descendants, or offspring such as children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on, could always live in Canaan. During ancient times, most people believed in many gods. These gods behaved like humans but were more powerful. The Hebrews, however, believed that Yahweh was different from humans. He did not get hungry or thirsty, marry, or have children. According to the Hebrews, Yahweh was powerful and could do whatever he wanted, He did only what was just and right.

Abraham and members of his household settled in Canaan around 1800 B.C. In Canaan, they raised flocks of sheep and grew wheat, figs, and olives. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, had 12 sons. Each son led a separate family group. These Hebrew groups later formed 12 Hebrew tribes. The Hebrews stayed in Canaan for about 100 years. Then, a drought came, and they went to Egypt where they could get food.

2) Why did the Hebrews travel all the way to Egypt?

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3) What is the "Exodus"?

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After the Hebrews settled in Egypt, they were enslaved. About 600 years later, Moses, the Hebrew leader at the time, appeared before the pharaoh and told him to end Hebrew enslavement and let the Hebrews leave Egypt. The pharaoh at first refused but later agreed. Moses then led the Hebrews out of Egypt. The pharaoh again changed his mind and led his army in pursuit. According to the Bible, Yahweh parted the Red Sea to allow the Hebrews to cross and they escaped into the Sinai Desert. They called their escape the Exodus.

4) What does the “Babylonian Captivity” mean?

Ans: The Babylonian captivity or exile refers to the time period in Israel's history when Jews were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. It is an important period of biblical history because both the captivity/exile and the return and restoration of the Jewish nation were fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies.

God used Babylon as His agent of judgment against Israel for their sins of idolatry and rebellion against Him. There were actually several different times during this period (607-586 B.C.) when the Jews were taken captive by Babylon. With each successive rebellion against Babylonian rule, Nebuchadnezzar would lead his armies against Judah until they laid siege to Jerusalem for over a year, killing many people and destroying the Jewish temple, taking captive many thousands of Jews, and leaving Jerusalem in ruins.

As prophesied in Scripture, the Jewish people would be allowed to return to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile. That prophecy was fulfilled in 537 B.C., and the Jews were allowed by King Cyrus of Persia to return to Israel and begin rebuilding the city and temple. The return under the direction of Ezra led to a revival among the Jewish people and the rebuilding of the temple.

The Babylonian captivity had one very significant impact on the nation of Israel when it returned to the land—it would never again be corrupted by the idolatry and false gods of the surrounding nations. A revival among Jews took place after the return of the Jews to Israel and the rebuilding of the temple.

5) How did the Hebrew religion emerge?

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6) Who were the Phoenicians?

Ans: The Phoenicians lived in the northern part of Canaan. Most of what is known about them comes from the Bible, the writings of other ancient peoples, and the ruins of their cities and ships. The Phoenician people were part of a larger group known as the Canaanites. The Canaanites came from the desert south and east of Canaan. They were herders who wandered from pasture to pasture. Another group—the Philistines lived in southern Canaan along the Mediterranean coast. They came from the eastern Mediterranean near Greece. The Philistines were traders and shipbuilders.

By 1200 B.C., the Phoenicians had built cities and towns along a narrow strip of land between the mountains and the sea. Although the land was rich, there was not enough to grow food for all of the people. For this reason, many Phoenicians turned to the sea to make a living. The mountains near Phoenicia were covered with cedar forests. These forests provided wood that the Phoenicians used to build strong, fast ships. The Phoenicians started out as coastal traders. In time, they became widely traveled merchant shippers who controlled the trade of the Mediterranean. They exchanged cedar logs, cloth, glass trinkets, and perfume for gold and other metals. Many Phoenician ships were traveling workshops. Sailors who were also artisans carried their tools with them and worked onboard the ships. Phoenician sailors and explorers plotted their courses by the sun and stars. They traveled to places where no one else dared to go. They brought Middle Eastern culture to unexplored areas of the western Mediterranean. Some experts believe the Phoenicians actually sailed around the west coast of Africa to India. They may even have sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas 2,000 years before Christopher Columbus. From their business dealings, the Phoenicians learned the value of making agreements. They used the same idea to keep peace with their larger, more powerful neighbors. They signed peace treaties, or agreements between states or countries, in which they promised to supply free shipments of goods. In exchange for these shipments, the other countries agreed to guarantee Phoenician independence.

7)What was the main contribution of the Phoenicians to world civilization?

Ans: Through trade, the Phoenicians spread ideas as well as goods. Their most important gift was the idea of an alphabet. Innovation of alphabet based writing system (from Cuneiform) necessity of keeping business transaction records 22 letters (without vowels) made writing and reading much easier facilitated communication as well as trade and commerce different nations.

They established colonies in various parts of the Mediterranean world. A colony is a region controlled by a distant country. Carthage was a famous Phoenician trading colony in North Africa. They introduced not only the Asian goods but also the cultural influences on Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Palestine and India.

8)What motivated the Phoenicians to innovate a simplified writing system with alphabets?

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Under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian Empire spread throughout the Middle East, and around 607 B.C., King Jehoiakim of Judah was forced into submission, becoming a vassal to Nebuchadnezzar ([2 Kings 24:1](#)). It was during this time that Nebuchadnezzar took many of the finest and brightest young men from each city in Judah captive, including Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishaël (Meshach) and Azariah (Abednego). After three years of serving Nebuchadnezzar, Jehoiakim of Judah rebelled against Babylonian rule and once again turned to Egypt for support. After sending his army to deal with Judah's revolt, Nebuchadnezzar himself left Babylon in 598 B.C. to deal with the problem. Arriving in Jerusalem around March of 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, taking control of the area, looting it, and taking captive with him Jehoikim's son, Jehoiachin, his family, and almost all of the population of Judah, leaving only the poorest people of the land ([2 Kings 24:8-16](#)).

At that time Nebuchadnezzar appointed King Zedekiah to rule as his representative over Judah, but after nine years and still not having learned their lesson, Zedekiah led Judah in rebellion against Babylon one final time ([2 Kings 24– 25](#)). Influenced by false prophets and ignoring Jeremiah's warnings, Zedekiah decided to join a coalition that was being formed by Edom, Moab, Ammon and Phoenicia in rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar ([Jeremiah 27:1-3](#)). This resulted in

Nebuchadnezzar again laying siege to Jerusalem. Jerusalem fell in July 587 or 586 BC, and Zedekiah was taken captive to Babylon after seeing his sons killed before him and then having his eyes plucked out ([2 Kings 25](#)). At this time Jerusalem was laid to waste, the temple destroyed and all the houses burned. The majority of the Jewish people were taken captive, but, again,

Nebuchadnezzar left a remnant of poor people to serve as farmers and vinedressers ([2 Kings 25:12](#)).