

Who were the Arameans?

Aram was the Hebrew designation for the nation of Syria, so the Arameans mentioned in the Bible are Syrians. In fact, some translations such as the ESV and KJV, when translating the Hebrew word for “Aramean,” substitute the word Syrian instead (see 2 Kings 7:6). The Arameans lived on an elevated tableland, and the topography is reflected in the fact that the word Aram comes from a root meaning “heights.” Aram Naharaim in Genesis 24:10 means “highland of the two rivers.”

The borders of Aram encompassed a broad region immediately to the northeast of Israel, extending to the Euphrates River and including Mesopotamia. Among the major cities inhabited by ancient Arameans were Damascus (Genesis 14:15) and Hamath (Numbers 13:21). Much later, Syrian Antioch was built and is mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 11:19; 13:1). The various kingdoms comprising ancient Aram gradually unified under Damascus, which grew to be the most dominant of the Aramean kingdoms.

When Abraham sought a wife for his son Isaac, he sent a servant to the land of Aram to find Rebekah (Genesis 24:10; 25:20). Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, is called an Aramean in Genesis 31:10. Jacob himself is called “a wandering Aramean” in Deuteronomy 26:5, since both his mother and his grandfather were from Mesopotamia and therefore considered Arameans by the Hebrews.

During the reign of King David, the Arameans of Damascus came to the help of another group of Syrians. David defeated them, and the Arameans were forced to pay tribute (2 Samuel 8:5-6). Later, the Arameans joined forces with the Ammonites in war against Israel (2 Samuel 10). The Israelites defeated Aram again and kept them in subjugation. This arrangement lasted through the reign of King Solomon (1 Kings 4:21).

After the time of Solomon, the Arameans were a perennial thorn in Israel's side. They fought Israel during King Ahab's time, and Israel won (1 Kings 20). In another battle, however, they killed Ahab (2 Chronicles 18:34). They raided Israel (2 Kings 6:8) and later laid siege to the capital, Samaria (verse 24). Elisha predicted the atrocities that the Arameans would commit (2 Kings 8:12). The Arameans fought King Joram of Israel and wounded him (2 Kings 8:28). And they fought King Joash of Judah and wounded him (2 Chronicles 24:23-25). The eventual fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon was aided by the Arameans (2 Kings 24:2).

In a wonderful demonstration of God's grace and power, Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian of leprosy (2 Kings 5). Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, was an enemy of Israel, but he humbled himself enough to seek the Lord's help. Naaman discovered that God is merciful to all those who call upon Him—even Arameans—and that discovery drastically changed Naaman's worldview: "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).