

The Old Testament World

As far as we know, the writing of historical texts began around 3100 B.C. in Egypt and Sumeria. Both the Bible and scientific research indicate people existed, used tools, hunted, raised animals, and farmed before 3100 B.C. But we have no written evidence before that time. Biblical history includes accounts of the events, actions, and speech of the Bible's people. Moses wrote the first books of the Bible as early as about 1446 B.C. He included materials relating human origins as well as the origins and early history of Israel. Subsequent writers continued the biblical account for another thousand years. These writings are some of the oldest and most organized treatments of human events that we possess.

The Bible is not technically a history book. However, when it speaks of events, actions, and words of the past, it relates facts accurately. I affirm the inerrancy and infallibility of God's Word. Therefore, I also believe the Bible's historical writing is based on solid historical principles. I believe there are good reasons to affirm what the Bible says on historical matters, and there are good reasons for using sound historical research when studying the Bible.

Many people groups populated the lands of the Old Testament. Each of these groups had a culture, religion, and language with its own morals and customs. Because of a common language ancestry and the proximity of neighbors and trading partners, similarities among these groups abound. Whether in language, religion, or cultural and legal customs, these similarities help us reconstruct to some extent the historical setting of the biblical text. Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Nehemiah lived alongside these peoples and interacted with them.

However, the differences between the Hebrews and the surrounding people groups are revealing. Israelite religion, culture, and legal codes dramatically set them apart from their neighbors. The Old Testament's authors used these similarities and divergences between the Hebrew people and their contemporaries when describing the struggle of God's relationship with the Hebrews.

The ties between the Hebrews and their neighbors can help Bible students in two ways.

1. Correspondences shed light on the language, culture, and customs of the Bible.
2. Divergences highlight the Hebrews as a distinctive people called out and set apart for God.

Both of these perspectives help bring the people and message of the Old Testament into focus—not as two-dimensional literary features but as real, three-dimensional, flesh-and-blood people with a vital message for today.

Six major people groups most influenced the biblical history of the Hebrew people: Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, the Canaanites, Persia, and Aram (Syria). These groups were spread

geographically across the Fertile Crescent, the crescent-shaped swath of agriculturally abundant land that stretches from Egypt north to Syria and south through Mesopotamia.

Assyria and Babylonia

Assyria and Babylonia were located in the area between and surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (modern Iraq). The region, home to Babylonia in the south and Assyria in the north, sustained an agricultural economy. The governing model was the city-state. A large regional city dominated the trade and political affairs of the local population. Each city had its king and patron cultic deity. Frequently, one ruler and city rose to prominence by subjugating a league of cities.

Over time waves of people migrated down to the river plains from the mountains of present-day Iran to the east and Turkey to the north. These people groups eventually took over the cities and blended their forms of government, laws, language, and religion with those native to the region. The Babylonians displaced the Sumerians as rulers in this manner. The Assyrians repeated this process and subjugated the Babylonians for several centuries.

Abraham, a Semite (a descendant of Noah's son Shem), probably spoke a dialect of Akkadian and/or early Aramaic. Akkadian was part of the Semitic language family and was therefore related to Hebrew. It was written in cuneiform wedges impressed on clay tablets. Cuneiform was a pictographic language (similar to modern Chinese) in which picture symbols acted as words, phonetic syllables, or grammatical markers. The Semitic Akkadian language borrowed the Sumerian cuneiform signs as its written form.

The Mesopotamian dialect of Akkadian in the south differed slightly from the northern dialect (in Assyria), but the common Semitic language roots and the similar cuneiform sign base enabled verbal and written communication across the whole Fertile Crescent. As shown by the Amarna letters, written by the city rulers of Palestine to the Egyptian pharaoh (c. 1390–1350 B.C.), Akkadian was the international language of diplomacy and trade.

The Babylonians and Assyrians based their cultic practices on a large family of idol gods who represented forces of nature:

- Marduk—the supreme god of Babylon
- Asshur—the supreme God of Assyria
- Sin—the moon god
- Shamash—the sun god
- Ishtar—the goddess of the planet Venus

The names sometimes differed among different people groups, but the cult and attributes of deities remained similar, as in the Greek and Roman myths. The heavenly rank of these idols changed through time with the ascendancy of different city-states, so that each had its own patron deity. The gods of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, and Syrians may have reflected the administrative structure of the ruling class in both hierarchy and attributes.

Ruling gods were divided into levels. The supreme deity, on the first level, represented the king. The other powerful deities, on the second level, represented the nobility. They were autonomous, impetuous, fickle, and fallible. The third level of the pantheon was made up of craftsmen gods who were proficient and always did their task well; this would have represented the scribal class and skilled workers. The messenger gods made up the fourth level; they were sent to perform tasks and to carry messages.

Religious ceremonies often resorted to omen reading through the study of animal organs, fertility sacrifices, and cultic prostitution. Worship and sacrifices were offered both in temples and on elevated sites the Bible calls high places. A family would have had its idols set up in a shrine in the home, burning incense before them. The events on earth were seen as mirroring what happened in the heavens.

The people often lived in mud-brick houses on their land or in a city. When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and subsequently from Haran, he did not leave wilderness areas. He left urban population centers with civilized cultures. Assyria and later Babylon reigned supreme in their time. Each empire subjugated the land of Palestine and defeated Egypt. Assyria conquered and carried away the northern kingdom of Israel (722 B.C.), while Babylon exiled the people of Judah one hundred years later (605, 597, 587 B.C.).

Egypt

Ancient Egypt was located along the banks of the Nile River. The Egyptians divided their land in two ways. They called the fertile land next to the Nile the Black Land, and they called the desert waste farther from the Nile the Red Land. They also called northern Egypt Lower Egypt (since it was downriver and therefore lower), and southern Egypt was called Upper Egypt (since the Nile flowed from the south). Egypt became a united nation at the same time the Sumerian culture rose in Mesopotamia (about 3100 B.C.).

Key factors driving the development of Egyptian culture included the following.

1. An isolated river valley with regular seasons of flooding, which provided rich farmland
 2. A multitude of competing gods, representing all of creation from the Nile River skyward, who must be appeased for mortals to have a happy afterlife
 3. The idea that anything written down or inscribed on stone became reality
 4. The concept of Maat, or divine order, which led the Egyptians to maintain the status quo.
- Due to geography Egypt was seldom under any fear of foreign domination early in its history. The Red Land, or desert regions, insulated the fertile Nile valley to both the east and the west.

The Egyptians believed if they were not buried in the proper way in their homeland, they had no hope of an afterlife. This belief could have influenced the effectiveness of their army on foreign soil. Egypt's was a prosperous agricultural economy in which labor was cheap. The pharaohs occasionally went on campaigns into adjacent regions, such as Canaan and Syria, to subjugate, take tribute, and enforce their rule. The building projects of the pharaohs employed thousands, who were paid daily in bread and beer.

The Egyptian language is known only from written sources and then only in part. Written in hieroglyphs (pictures that stand for either an object, a word, a phonetic syllable, or a symbol), Egyptian was a pictographic language like Akkadian. Words written on tomb walls or on execration texts (burial spells and incantations to help the dead in the afterlife) were considered to be reality. An execration text would list all of the bad things the deceased had not done so that he could be found guiltless when weighed on the scales of judgment after death.

The Egyptian pantheon of gods changed over time, depending on the city, dynasty, and region from which the ruling pharaoh came. These gods numbered in the thousands. Some of the chief gods were Amun, Ra, Isis, Osiris, Hathor, Set, Khonsu, and Ma'at. Each ruling dynasty had its deity triad (father, mother, and son) that it served. The people worshiped the pharaoh as the representation of the sun god Ra on earth. One myth states that pharaoh was identified with the god Horus, and when he died, he became Horus's father, Osiris.

Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers down to the generations of Moses (whose Egyptian name means *born of or drawn from*) had contact with or lived in the land of Egypt. Solomon married an Egyptian princess, perhaps the daughter of Pharaoh Siamun. Egypt overran Israel more than once, but eventually, Judah looked to Egypt for help against the Assyrians and Babylonians. However, Egypt was never a good ally for Judah or Israel.

The Canaanites

The Canaanites were the peoples living in the land promised to Abraham. They had migrated to this region in the millennia before Israel entered the land. For the purpose of this discussion, we will group several ethnic people groups together. The Amorites, Phoenicians, Amalekites, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and Philistines may be discussed in this manner because of their similarities in religious culture and their adversarial relationship with the Hebrews (with the exception of the Phoenicians). The Philistines do not truly fit in this group, but for the most part they took on the culture and religion of the native Canaanites. The Philistines also regularly opposed Israel.

The Canaanites living in the land developed their agricultural and trade economies around the local city-state. A larger city, such as Hazor, at times headed a league of kings and cities that would go out to battle together. Egypt dominated the Canaanites in Palestine in the middle to late Bronze Periods (1800–1200 B.C.).

The language of the Canaanites was a branch of Semitic close to biblical Hebrew. The people of Ugarit, north of Phoenicia, wrote in an alphabetic cuneiform script (one sign = one letter), which included the 22 letters of biblical Hebrew. Though there are differences, the Phoenicians were likely responsible for the spread of the northwest Semitic alphabet across the Mediterranean (seen in the comparison Hebrew: Aleph, Bet, Gimel, Dalet ... ; Greek: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta ...).

The religion of the Canaanites did not differ greatly from that of Assyria and Babylonia. The Canaanites chiefly worshiped Baal as the god of rain and fertility. Baal's consort was Asherah, a fertility goddess. An Asherah was a wooden pole set up near altars to Baal. The common cultic fertility rites included prostitution and, in some places, child sacrifice. God warned the Israelites to stay away from the Canaanites and their idols, but they did not do so. As the Israelites interacted and intermarried with the Canaanites in the land, they fell into idolatry. The Hebrew prophets denounced the cultic idolatry of the Canaanites. This same idolatry eventually caused Israel and Judah's exile from the land.

Aram (Syria)

The Arameans more than likely began as a tribe in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains in northeastern Iran. The tribe spread from upper Mesopotamia into Babylonia. Abraham was from Aramean ancestry and was living in Ur in southern Mesopotamia when God called him to leave (see Deut. 26:5). The Arameans grew in number and split into many tribes speaking roughly the same dialect. They formed small states in northern Mesopotamia that caused problems for the Assyrians. Eventually, these tribes became powerful enough that they aligned under one ruler and became a nation. The Arameans were herdsmen dwelling in tents, and their society was ruled by tribal chiefs. Hadad, the storm god, was their patron deity and was joined by a large family of idol gods. Each city and tribe had its own significant deities as well, who were worshiped at high places with sacrifices and offerings.

The Aramean state of Syria (literally, *Aram* in Hebrew) came to power in Damascus during a weak period in the Assyrian dynasty (ninth century B.C.). Syria was a rival to and a trading partner with the northern kingdom of Israel. The balance of power between the two kingdoms shifted back and forth. In 853 B.C. Ahab of Israel joined a coalition of 12 armies with Aram to fight the Assyrian army at the battle of Qarqar. The coalition was victorious, but Hadad-idr, the king of Aram, eventually turned on Ahab of Israel. Several wars were fought between Ahab and Hadad. War continued when Hazael usurped the throne of Aram in 842 B.C. Hazael oppressed Israel and Judah and managed to hold the rising Assyrian power to a stalemate. Hazael also invaded south and besieged and conquered the Philistine city of Gath. At that time he was bribed by Jehoash, the king of Judah, to spare Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 12:17-18). Around 737-735 B.C. King Rezin of Aram formed a coalition with the king of Tyre and Pekah, the king of Israel. This coalition tried to intimidate Ahaz, the king of Judah, into joining them. Ahaz appealed to Assyria for aid, and Aram was eventually defeated.

Aramaic was the language of the people of Aram. They adopted the Phoenician alphabet around 1100 B.C. When the Assyrians conquered Damascus, they came to see the superiority of communicating in the Aramaic alphabetic language. Aramaic was eventually approved as an official language of diplomacy and communication. The Aramaic language became the common international language until the time of Alexander. Parts of the Book of Daniel were written in Aramaic (see 2:4b-7:28).

Persia

Persia followed Babylon as the world's great power (539 B.C.). Cyrus II, the son of a Persian and a Mede, united the Persians and Medes by defeating his Median grandfather Astyages in battle in 550 B.C. The Persian Empire thus began in what is now western Iran and spread to all of western Asia and eventually Egypt. The Persians were polytheistic but worshiped their patron god, Ahuramazda, as their supreme deity. Later the prophet Zoroaster popularized his version of this religion (Zoroastrianism).

The Persians' governing strategy differed from that of their predecessors. Cyrus II allowed exiled Israelites to return to their homelands in 538 B.C. A copy of Cyrus's proclamation is found in Ezra 1:1-4. Old Persian became the official language, although Elamite, Akkadian, and Aramaic were still used. Many Hebrews had become used to life in Mesopotamia and did not return from exile. Later Persian kings gave favorable treatment to the returning Israelites: Darius I (522–486 B.C.), Xerxes (Esther, 487–465 B.C.), and Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah, 465–424 B.C.).

Paul R. House and Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 6–13.