

## Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia

### ***7-1 The Assyrian Empire (900 – 612 B.C.E.)***

The **Assyrians** were a Semitic (Hebrew and Arabic languages) tribal group who emerged from nomadism in what is now northern Iraq in the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E, following the decline of the Hittite monarchy based in Turkey

➔ Enter history around 900 B.C.E.

Nineveh – The main city and later capital of the Assyrian Empire is located in the upper valley of the Tigris River and their chief god was the fierce Assur from whom the people derived their name

Assur – The chief god of the Assyrian people

By 800 B.C.E., through their own ferocity and cunning in war, the Assyrian kings had conquered much of the Tigris-Euphrates region and were fighting the Babylonians for the southern portion. The Assyrians displayed great talent in military affairs. Their army was large and seemingly invincible, using new tactics to negate the traditional advantage of charioteers over foot soldiers

#### **Assyrians fought the Babylonians**

Later Persian Empire was much more extensive and had much more land than the Assyrian Empire by c. 494 and c. 650 (height of Assyrian Empire)

1. Dominant Semitic people in what is now Northern Iraq
2. Conquered Tigris-Euphrates region by 800 B.C.E.
3. Success due to strong military
  - a. Tightly knit, well-armed infantry formations able to withstand chariots
  - b. Terroristic tactics (enslavement, execution, pillage, rape)
    - i. Threat of gory executions as a fear tactic to discourage rebellions

Often chariots would split the ranks of foot soldiers and the speed of the horses gave chariots a strong advantage over traditional foot soldiers.

However, Assyrians were so tightly knit that their ranks would not break and were experts in siege warfare with their catapults and rams

Ways Assyrians were successful

1. Divide and conquer policy
2. Governed by network of military commanders

3. Merciless towards enemies
4. Deported many
5. Held hostages to insure good behavior of subject people

The conquered people united under Chaldees and overthrew Assyrians and by 612 B.C.E. Nineveh was destroyed

Assurbanipal built largest library of ancient times

- 20,000 volumes (clay tablets) have been recovered since early 1800s CE

## ***7-2 Phoenicians (3000 - 1000 B.C.E.)***

The **Phoenicians** were a small but significant Semitic people

Phoenicians – People of ancient Phoenicia, a region that approximately includes modern Lebanon, they were noted sailors, merchants, and colonizers of the ancient Mediterranean Sea, who originally inhabited a strip along the coast of what is now Lebanon

Had ports in Tyre and Sidon, they became the greatest maritime traders and colonizers of the ancient near East

Traded luxury wares such as copper and dyes

1. Trade around Mediterranean and the Atlantic (coast of Britain)
2. Spread art of iron making from the Hittite settlements to the Greeks and westward into Africa
3. Established whole series of colonies
  - a. Carthage, one of the colonies founded in 800 B.C.E., became the great rival to Rome until its final defeat around 200 B.C.E.

The Phoenicians themselves were absorbed into the Assyrian and succeeding empires but remained the paramount Mediterranean traders and seafarers until the rise of Greece in the 600s B.C.E.

Phoenicians most notable contribution came in the linguistic field

They were the first to use a phonetic alphabet in about 1000 B.C.E.

1. System of 22 marks(letters)
2. Made literacy accessible to more people
3. Adopted by Greeks who added vowels and improved Phoenician alphabet

### ***7-3 The Persians (3000 - 1000 B.C.E.)***

Iranians – Indo-Europeans pastoral nomads who settled the Iranian Plateau and unified c. 850 B.C.E., forming a powerful kingdom that played a crucial part in the history of the ancient Near East. Closely related to the Aryans of India, another name for Persians.

Pastoralists – Nomadic people who moved with their herds of animals

500 B.C.E. – 500 C.E.

Three dynasties ruled in this period of 1000 years

1. Achaemenids
  2. Parthians
  3. Sassanians (Zoroastrian becomes state religion)
- Some of the most powerful of the many peoples in western Asia

Until 20<sup>th</sup> century, present day Iran was called Persia

- Situated on a high arid plateau
- Central point on the Silk Road
  
- Iranian nomadic groups emigrated south, 1500 – 1000 B.C.E.
  - Indo-Europeans, related to Aryans of India
  - Achieved dominance due to cavalry tactics
  - Adopted agricultural, sedentary, civilized life

### ***7-3a The Achaemenid Persian Empire***

In the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The Persians united under a brilliant warrior king, Cyrus the Great

Cyrus the Great – (ruled from 559 – 530 B.C.E.) Founder of the Achaemenid dynasty in Persia; permitted the Jews to return to Judea from the Babylonian Captivity, and quickly overcame their Iranian cousins, the Medes

Cyrus extended his domains from the borders of India to the Mediterranean coast

- By 525 his son and immediate successor, Cambyses, had broadened the empire to include part of Arabia and the lower Nile Valley

Main Cities That Marked Decline of Mesopotamia's Importance

1. Persepolis
2. Susa
3. Ecbatana

### **Cyrus Ruled very differently than the Assyrians**

- Government showed tolerance toward non-Persian Subjects
- “King of Kings” at Persepolis ruled empire
- Allowed subjects to keep their customs, laws, religion
- Emperor delegated authority to Persian supervisors (satraps) ruling provinces (**satrapies**)
- Local authorities stayed in power if they remained loyal, paid taxes, and provided conscript soldiers

Satrapies – A province under a governor, or satrap, In the ancient Persian Empire

Zarathustra – The mythical founder and chief prophet of the ancient Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism, which influenced Jewish and later Christian belief

#### Zoroastrianism

- Based on teachings of Zoroaster (Zarathustra) found in the Avesta
- Ethical monotheistic religion
- Conflict between good and evil
  - Ahuramazda (God) vs Ahriman (Devil)
  - Ultimate triumph of good
- Human free will to choose good or evil side
- Judgement day, heaven and hell
- Importance of priesthood
  - Priests would interpret what was right and wrong conduct

Usually religion is tied to morality

- Moral actions are manifestations of a belief in good and evil
- These moral actions are ultimately determined by a supernatural code of conscience
- Attitude changed from appeasing gods with coming of Zoroaster

Avesta – Teachings of Zarathustra and scripture

Taught that two principles were in eternal conflict

1. Truth and goodness
- VS.
2. Lying and evil

Muslim conquest in 634 C.E. extinguished the religion and survivors fled to India and become known as the Parsees.

Their scripture, the *Avesta*, remains one of the first attempts to unite *religion* (worship of the immortal gods) with *ethics* (a code of proper conduct for mortal men).

Darius I – was the third great Persian ruler, following Cyrus and Cambyses

- Empire Reached its Maximal Extent during this time
- Noteworthy Failure was Darius I and Xerxes I (Darius's son) attempts to conquer Greece which both failed
  - 492-490 B.C.E. (Darius I)
  - 480 B.C.E. (Xerxes I)
- Despite this Darius introduced a stable coinage in gold and silver and a calendar that was commonly used throughout the near East

For the next century (100 years) the people flourished under Persian leadership until Alexander the Great conquered Xerxes II in 334 – 323 B.C.E.

## **7-4 The Hebrews**

Tanakh – The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament as it is known to Christians

- Twelve Tribes of the Hebrews is described in the Tanakh
- Many stories regarded as mythological have some basis in fact

### **2000 B.C.E. – 1000 B.C.E.**

Recordings of Abraham leading his people out of the wilderness and into the land of Canaan refers to what is generally accepted as historical fact

- Nomadic, primitive Semitic tribes began migrations out of Northern Mesopotamia early in the second millennium B.C.E.
- By 1500's B.C.E. some were established in Canaan, the southern part of Palestine
  - Came under Egyptian rule and many left to live in the Nile Delta as slaves or voluntarily
  - Exodus – Hebrews flight from the wrath of the Egyptian pharaoh c. 1250 B.C.E.
    - Moses led Hebrews out of Egypt
    - Returned to the “land of milk and honey”, the promised Land of Canaan

### **Ancient Palestine and the Jewish Kingdoms**

Kingdoms of Judea and Samaria (Judah and Israel) divided region once occupied by the Philistines and Canaanites before the Jews return to the Promised Land

By 1000 B.C.E. the Hebrews had overcome the Canaanites and set up their own small kingdom, with Saul as their first king

- Saul carried war to the Philistines and his successor David was successful in conquering Jerusalem which became Hebrews capital
- David's son Solomon was most renowned king of the Hebrews, bringing a brief important factor in near Eastern affairs
- Temple of Jerusalem was built by Solomon
  - Many hated him because of heavy taxes and luxurious living

1. King Saul (1000 B.C.E.)
  - a. Fought Canaanites
2. King David (until 973)
  - a. Fought the Philistines and established Jerusalem as capital city of Hebrew
3. King Solomon (973 – 935 B.C.E.)
  - a. Most renowned for the building of the Temple of Jerusalem

A revolt ensued over Solomon's successor (son) leading to break of the Hebrew Kingdom (Israel in the north and Judea in the south)

First Diaspora – referring to the scattering of the Jews from ancient Palestine and the Ten Lost Tribes of Jewish tradition

Judea survived under Assyrian rule until defeat of Assyrians by Babylonians in 613 B.C.E.

King Nebuchadnezzar – Babylonian King who crushed the Judeans around 585 B.C.E.

Babylonian Captivity – Transportation of many Jews to exile in Babylon as hostages to ensure good behavior, occurred in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. (586-539 B.C.E.)

Temple of Solomon was destroyed

Jewish scribes started writing scattered stories into the Tanakh as a way to preserve the religion and beliefs

Judeans returned when Persia Empire conquered Assyrians in 539 B.C.E.  
Temple was rebuilt

**Babylonians, Assyrians, and Greeks were not tolerant**  
**Persians were tolerant**

Alexander the Great (Greek) toppled Persian King of Kings in the 330's

### ***7-4a Jewish Religious Belief and Its Evolution***

From the time of the Kingdom of Saul a great god known as Yahweh (Jehovah) was established as the Hebrews chief deity

God, Yahweh, and Jehovah are all different names for our lord and savior

Samaria relegated Yahweh as inferior

Judea gradually relegated Yahweh to a superior and became the only deity of the Jews of Jerusalem

600's the Judean Jews under influences of a series of great prophets including Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Isaiah – came to believe themselves bound to Yahweh by a sacred contract, the Covenant (promise)

The contract was understood to mean that if the Jews remained constant in their worship of Yahweh and kept the faith he instilled in them, they would eventually triumph over all their enemies and be a respected and lordly people on Earth.

The faith was supported by rigid rules known as the Ten Commandments

- Judaism and Zoroastrianism are earliest attempts to link ethics and worship
  - Yahweh as enforcer of correct ethical actions
  - Evil would be punished
  - Following one's conscience, they were doing the Lord's work and possibly gaining eternal salvation

### ***7-4b- Economic Change and Social Customs***

Although Jews religion would have major influence on western civilization, they were minor players on the near Eastern stage in economic affairs and politics

Split between Israelites and Judeans weakened both groups

With constant wars both groups and their cities remained stagnant

Hebrews under Saul were still rural herders and peasants living as Abraham had lived.

- Over next 500 years many Hebrews made the transition from rural to town life
  - Many people shifted from subsistence farming to wage life
    - Social tensions between rich and poor began to appear
      - This caused weak solidarity which was strong before
      -

Social justice reminded people that exploitation was not limited to the Gentiles (non-Jews)

Jews divided all humanity into “they” and “we”. Jews looked upon non-Jews as distinctly lesser breeds whose main function in the divine plan was to act as tempters and obstacles that the pious must overcome

Hebrews deliberately segregated themselves and intermarriage was highly frowned upon and was punished with expulsion.

Ancient Judaism was almost never open to converts

- Yahweh, a male deity
- Women
  - Marriage, divorce reflected patriarchy
  - Male polygamy allowed
  - Wife married into husband’s family, moved into his house
  - Retained separate property rights
  - Divorce easy for husband, unusual for wife
  - Adultery defined by marital status of the woman
- Children the key reason for marriage
  - Boys shared inheritance, girls did not
  - Education carried out within family

### ***7-4c- A Changing Theology***

In the centuries after the fall of the monarchies of Samaria and Judea the Jews conception of Yahweh changed in significant ways

Babylonian Captivity put Jews at a very low point and many never returned and were seduced by the “Great Whore” Babylon into worshipping Mesopotamian deities

Those who returned were the “tried and true” who were tested again and again by their faith

- New interpretations of the Covenant (the Talmud), the Jews reappraised and made precise the nature of God and their relationship to him
- God was the universal god of all
- He was just, merciful, omnipotent, and omniscient (all powerful and all knowing)

- Yahweh became a PERSONAL deity
  - Could be prayed to directly
  - Actions were not impulsive or unpredictable
  - Relationship between God and Man is meant to be one of mutual love
  - God was observant of all that affected one’s life
  - Mutual love
- Some expected a **messiah**, a redeemer
  - Belief in a king from the line of David who would redeem the Jews from captivity and restore the Kingdom of Israel
  - Disbelief in Jesus because he spoke of a kingdom “not of this earth”

But, inevitably, some of them, including many of the learned men (*rabbis*), came to think of this promise as one aimed not at simple preservation but at a counter conquest by the Jews of their enemies. Instead of being a contemptible minority in the empires of the mighty ones, these Hebrews believed that they would become the mighty and would bend others to their will.

➤ Origins of Christianity and the belief in Jesus or the Messiah

Messiah – a savior king who would someday lead the Jews to glory

When Jesus said a Kingdom “not of this Earth”, many were disappointed because some wanted to establish an empire once again

Zealots – Jewish religious extremists at the time of Jesus who opposed Roman occupation and used guerilla methods and assassination to drive them (the Romans) out of Israel and Judea

Second Diaspora – referring to the scattering of Jews by the Romans and defeat of Zealots

- Relationship between the deity and his creations:
  - Mutually dependent, ethical, and just
  - Merciful on the Lord’s side; submissive but not slavish on Man’s side
  - Basis for the evolution of Christianity