

Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-4 The Hebrews

Book Title: World Civilizations

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7-4 The Hebrews

What we know of the ancient Twelve Tribes of the Hebrews is derived in large part from the [Tanakh \(The Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, as it is known to Christians.\)](#) (or Hebrew Bible). In recent years the *Tanakh's* stories have been partially borne out by modern archaeological evidence. It is clear that many events and stories previously regarded as mythological have some basis in fact.

The ancient Hebraic oral tradition (later recorded in the Bible) of a certain Abraham leading his people out of the wilderness and into the land of Canaan refers to what is now generally accepted as historical fact: nomadic, primitive Semitic tribes began migrations out of northern Mesopotamia early in the second millennium B.C.E. and wandered for a lengthy time through what is now Saudi Arabia. By the 1500s B.C.E. some were established in Canaan, the southern part of Palestine (see [Map 7.2](#)). Here they came under imperial Egyptian rule, and a good portion of them departed Canaan—perhaps voluntarily, perhaps as coerced slaves—to live in the Nile Delta. We know that many semicivilized peoples were moving about the eastern Mediterranean region in the thirteenth century B.C.E. The Hebrews' [Exodus \(The Hebrews' flight from the wrath of the Egyptian pharaoh, c. 1250 B.C.E.\)](#) from Egypt under their legendary leader Moses would have occurred during that century. The exact reasons for the Exodus are not clear, but it is possible that the biblical account of brutal treatment by the pharaoh is true. In any case, under Moses, the Hebrews resolved to return to “the land of milk and honey,” the Promised Land of Canaan, whose memory had been kept alive by their leaders in Egypt.

Map 7.2

Ancient Palestine and the Jewish Kingdoms

The kingdoms of Judea and Samaria (Judah and Israel) divided the region once occupied by the Philistines and Canaanites before the Jews' return to the Promised Land. After the split, the Samaritans swiftly fell to the temptations of false gods such as the Golden Calf.

Thinking About This Map

Locate Canaan, the Jewish “land of milk and honey.”



According to the biblical account the Hebrews wandered until they encountered the Canaanites and the Philistines, who were already settled in Palestine. By about 1000 B.C.E., the Hebrews had overcome the Canaanites and set up their own small kingdom, with Saul as the first king, according to the Bible. Saul carried war to the Philistines, and his lieutenant and successor, David, was successful in conquering Jerusalem, which then became the Hebrews' capital.

David's son Solomon (ruled c. 970–935 B.C.E.) was the most renowned king of the Hebrews. During his reign the Hebrews briefly became an important factor in Near Eastern affairs, serving as trading intermediaries between Egypt and Mesopotamia. The famous Temple of Jerusalem—which Solomon constructed of stone and cedarwood and decorated inside and out with gold—became a wonder of the ancient world. But many of Solomon's subjects hated him because of his heavy taxes and luxurious living. When he died, a revolt against his successor split the Hebrew Kingdom in two: Israel in the north and Judea (or Judah) in the south. A failed rebellion in 722 B.C.E. against an Assyrian army of occupation resulted in the scattering of the Israelites far and wide (the first [diaspora \(The scattering of the Jews from ancient Palestine.\)](#), or "scattering") and the eventual loss of them (the ten Lost Tribes of Jewish tradition) to history. Judea, however, survived under continued Assyrian rule until the defeat of the latter in 612 B.C.E. It then fell under Babylonian

overlordship. Another ill-fated attempt in 586 to throw off this foreign yoke led to the crushing defeat of the Judeans (or Jews) at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar (neh-buh-keh-d-NEH-zer) and the ensuing exile of the Jews to [Babylonian captivity \(The transportation of many Jews to exile in Babylon as hostages to ensure the good behavior of the remainder; occurred in the sixth century B.C.E.\)](#) (586–539 B.C.E.), when thousands of Jews were taken to Babylon as hostages to ensure the good behavior of the rest. The great temple of Solomon was demolished. Biblical scholars believe that, as a way to preserve their identity and beliefs in God, it was during these decades of exile that Jewish scribes began recording the ancient Hebrew oral traditions and scattered stories into the *Tanakh*.

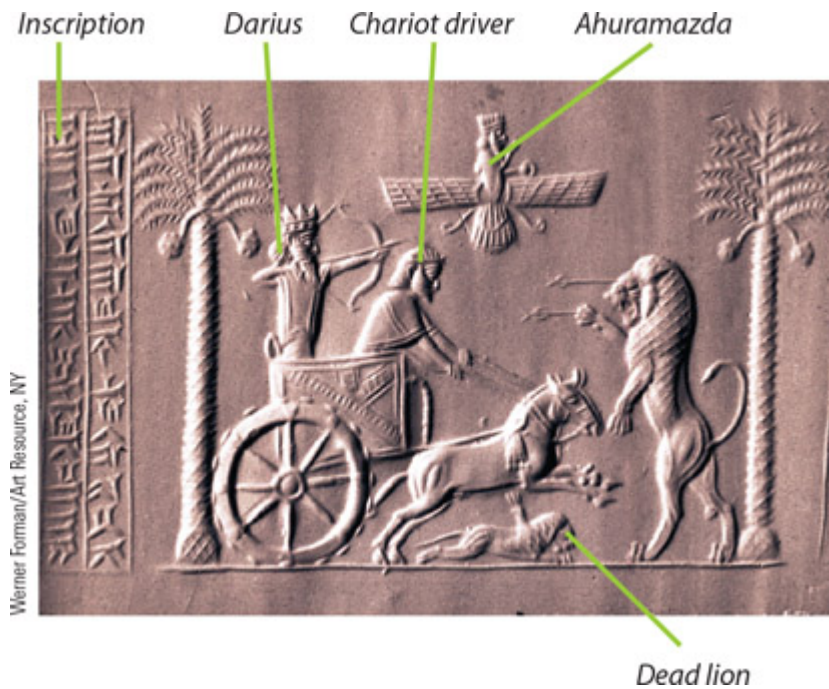
With Judea becoming one of the provinces of the Persian Empire after 539 B.C.E., the Judeans were allowed to return there, where they continued under Persian rule until Alexander the Great toppled the Persian King of Kings in the 330s (see [Chapter 8](#)). They then lived under the successors of Alexander until the gradual extension of Roman power reached Palestine.

Images of History

Lion Hunt

Royal Seal of Persian King, Darius I.

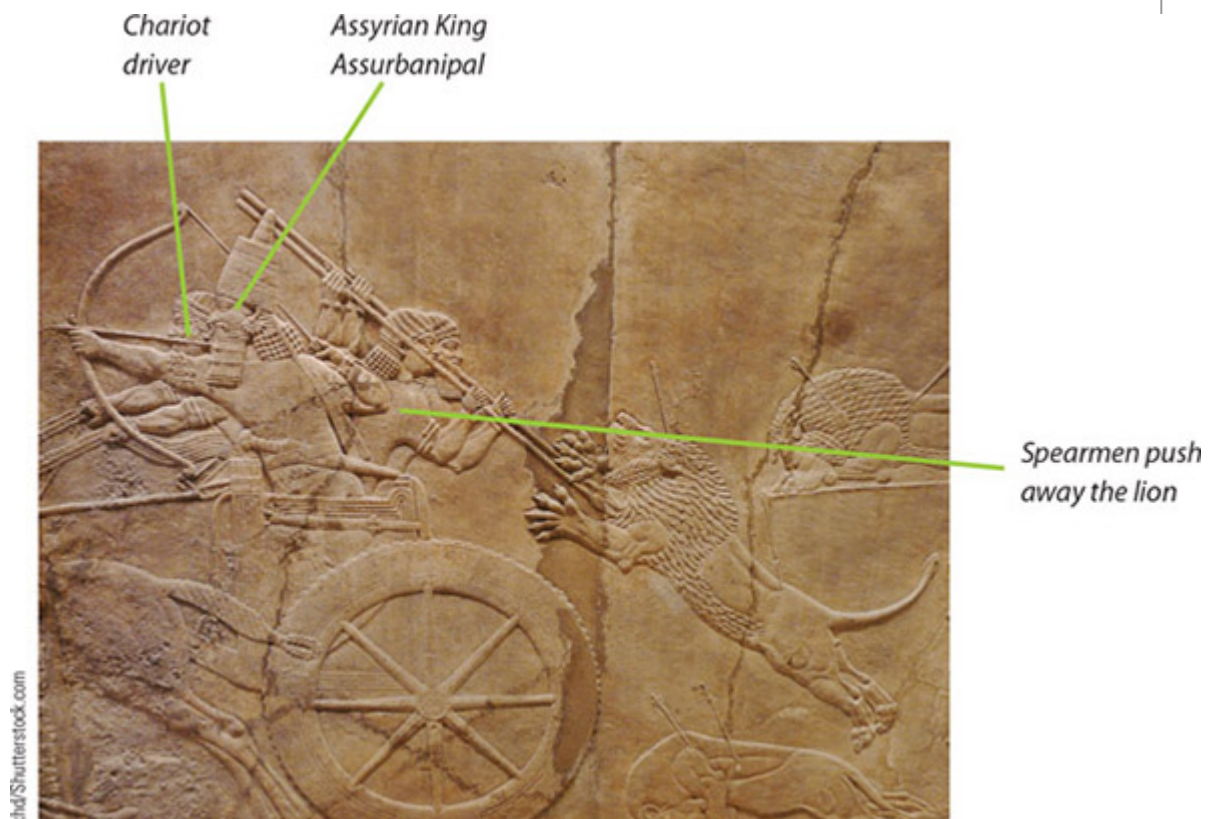
Darius I was a Persian king whose reign lasted from 522 to 486 B.C.E. His royal seal, shown here, is a cylinder made of agate and is engraved with a number of images that were formulaic symbols of Mesopotamian royalty. As were Assyrian and Babylonian kings before him (compare with the image of Assurbanipal at a Lion Hunt), the king is shown in a royal lion hunt, suggesting that he was strong enough to overwhelm even the powerful and unpredictable forces of nature (the slain beast beneath the wheels of his chariot). Above, as if blessing the king, is Ahuramazda. To the left is an inscription in Elamite, Babylonian, and Persian, which proclaims, “I [am] Darius the King.”



Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY

Assurbanipal at a Lion Hunt.

This Assyrian bas-relief shows King Assurbanipal charging the lion in his war chariot, accompanied by hand-picked spearmen who thrust away the fierce prey as the monarch loads his bow. The Assyrian genius for portrayal of violent action comes through strongly in this and similar reliefs, which date from the 600s B.C.E.



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