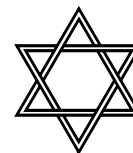


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CHAPTER ONE

Early Jewish History



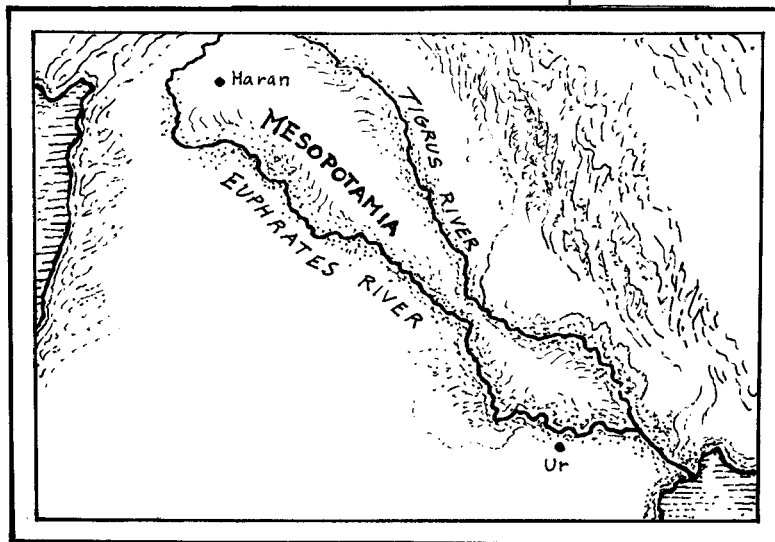
The early history of the Jewish people took place in what is now the state of Israel. In those days, however, this land, located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, was called Canaan. Much later it became known as Palestine. When a Jewish homeland was established there in 1948, it was thereafter called Israel.

But we are far ahead of our story. The Jewish people, or Hebrews as they were called long ago, did not migrate into Canaan until sometime between 2100 and 1500 B.C. Until then, their ancestors lived in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia was a large region located in what is now the Middle East. (Today, much of the region makes up the modern nation of Iraq.) It was situated between two mighty rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates—and its name means “land between the rivers.” It is here that our story of Jewish history begins about 4,000 years ago.

Abraham

As stated in the overview, Jewish history begins with Abraham. Abraham was the patriarch, or head, of his tribe. A tribe is a group of people descended from a common ancestor. In short, a tribe is like one big family. But what a family! In Abraham’s time, households were very large, with sons and their wives and children living at home, along with those sons’ sons and their wives and offspring and so on.

Abraham had many responsibilities. As head of his tribe, he had a hand in everything. He settled disputes and punished lawbreakers. He officiated at religious ceremonies, saying prayers and offering sacrifices at the altar. He led his tribe into wars with other tribes.



Perhaps Abraham’s greatest responsibility was to look after the well-being of his tribe. Because they were goatherds and shepherds, Abraham decided where they would live. If there was not sufficient water and grass in one area, the tribe moved to another. Thus it was that Abraham left the region around Ur in Mesopotamia and moved his tribe to Haran. Haran was an ancient city to the northwest, approximately 600 miles from Ur. Today it is part of southeast Turkey.

It was at Haran that God is said to have revealed himself to Abraham. It was also at Haran that Jews (and Christians) believe God gave Abraham the following instructions, as recorded in Genesis 12:1 of the Old Testament:

Now the Lord had said unto Abram (as Abraham was known in those days), “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee.”

Even though Abraham was 75 years old at the time, he was not about to disobey God. According to Judaism, God had made a covenant with Abraham that

Jewish history begins with Abraham who left the city of Ur in Mesopotamia and moved his tribe to the northern city of Haran. It was at Haran that God is said to have revealed himself to Abraham saying, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee.”

Words to remember:

Canaan
Mesopotamia
Abraham
Haran
Ur



he would give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan as their home if they carried out God's will. The covenant became a contract between Abraham's followers and God. As long as they served God and obeyed him, they



Although Abraham's father was an idol merchant, Abraham believed in one god who created the earth and everything on it.

Words to remember:

Terah
Yahweh
Isaac
Mount Moriah

would be God's Chosen People. Knowing this, Abraham gathered his family and followers together and departed for the land of Canaan.

Canaan was a narrow strip of land about 600 miles to the south. It was only 130 kilometers (81 miles) wide at its broadest point. Length-wise, it measured about 241 kilometers, or 150 miles. It was bordered on the west by the Mediterranean Sea, on the east by the Arabian Desert, on the south by Egypt, and on the north by Mesopotamia. To this land Abraham led his tribe.

Section Review:

1. What is a tribe?
2. To where did Abraham move when he left the city of Ur? Why did he and his family feel the necessity to relocate?
3. What covenant do Jews believe God made with Abraham?
4. Where was the land of Canaan?

Two Intriguing Stories

No one in Jewish history is more loved and respected than Abraham. Jewish lore is filled with countless stories about the great patriarch. One of the most interesting stories concerns an incident that took place when Abraham was a boy living in his father's house in Ur. His father, Terah, was an idol merchant, and because everyone in those days worshiped idols, business was good. But Abraham wasn't all that interested in idols. He had, in fact, slowly come to regard idol worship as a waste of time. In his mind he had formulated the image of one god, a god who was the creator of the earth and everything on it.

One day when Terah was out of the shop, Abraham took a hammer and smashed all the idols except the largest one. In the hands of this large statue he placed the hammer. When his father returned and stood aghast at the damage, Abraham is believed to have said, "Father, while you were gone, the idols got into a fight. The big one who is now holding the hammer won."

"That's ridiculous," his father retorted. "Idols can't think. Idols have no will of their own. Idols have no power. They are incapable of doing anything."

"Then why do you worship them?" Abraham asked, no doubt with a certain smugness in his voice.

Another story is more familiar. It deals with God ordering Abraham to sacrifice his young son, Isaac, on an altar. In those days, it was common practice to sacrifice a human being to the gods. According to Hebrew tradition, God, or Yahweh as the early Jews referred to him, decided to test Abraham's faith by commanding him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham, although disheartened at the thought of his son dying, was determined to carry out God's will.

The sacrifice was to take place atop a mountain called Mount Moriah. The mountain was three days journey from Abraham's home. Abraham made the



“Land of Goshen.” After about 400 years, however, they were made slaves by the Egyptians, and remained in bondage for several centuries.

Enter Moses, the second great leader of the ancient Hebrews. His story is told in the Bible in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books, along with Genesis, are referred to as the Pentateuch, or the Books of Moses. *Pentateuch*, in Greek, means “five books.”

Moses was born in Egypt sometime in the 13th century B.C. It was not a good time to be born, for the Pharaoh, or king, of Egypt had decreed that every son born of a Hebrew woman should be cast into the Nile River. The Pharaoh believed that the Hebrews had grown in such numbers that they posed a threat to his regime. His order to kill all male babies was an attempt to reduce the Hebrew population.

Yocheved, Moses’ mother, hid him for

several months in her home. Then she put him in a basket along the banks of the Nile River, hoping for the best. Luckily, he was found by a daughter of the Pharaoh, who took him home to her father’s palace and raised him as her son.

Moses grew up to be a prince. He learned to read and write, and he became quite important at court. However, something happened that caused him to have to leave Egypt. One day he saw an Egyptian official severely beating a Hebrew. He came to the Hebrew’s defense, and in the process of defending him, killed the Egyptian. To save his life, Moses was forced to flee. He went to the land of Midian, which was located east of the northern tip of the Red Sea. There he lived among the Midianites. He married, had two children, and lived the life of a shepherd for 40 years.

One day while Moses was tending his father-in-law’s flock, God is said to have appeared to him in the form of a burning bush. The ancient Hebrews believed that as Moses stood dumbfounded, God gave him instructions to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrews (who, for the sake of simplicity, we shall henceforth refer to as the Israelites) out of captivity. Although Moses was a little reluctant, he knew he had to obey God’s command.

Moses left Midian and returned to Egypt. Because he had a problem with his speech (he stammered), he asked his brother Aaron to speak for him when they went to see the Pharaoh. They asked the Pharaoh to free the Israelites and to allow them to return to Canaan. The Pharaoh refused. The book of Exodus then states that God sent ten plagues to punish Egypt. These plagues ranged from turning the waters into blood to flooding the land with flies and locusts. But the Pharaoh held firm until the tenth plague, which was by far the worst.

As revealed in Exodus 11: 4–7 and 12: 29–30, the tenth plague had the Angel of Death visit each Egyptian home and take the life of the first-born child. Even the Pharaoh’s first-born child was not spared.

Words to remember:

Moses
Land of Goshen
Pentateuch

According to Jewish tradition, God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush and instructed him to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrews out of captivity.



The angel, however, passed over the houses of the Israelites and did not harm their first-born children. (Jews today celebrate this event as the Passover, which they refer to as Pesach. The name also refers to the Exodus, or the passing over of the Israelites from slavery to freedom. You will learn more about Pesach in Chapter Seven.)

When his own son was taken from him, Pharaoh Rameses II relented and agreed to let the Israelites go.

Section Review:

1. What is the Pentateuch?
2. What did the Israelites believe God instructed Moses to do?
3. Explain the origin of the term "Passover."
4. What finally convinced the Pharaoh to set the Israelites free?

The Exodus

Once the Israelites were free and on their way to the Land of Canaan, Rameses II went back on his word. He sent his army to overtake his former slaves and bring them back to captivity. His chariots and soldiers caught up with the Israelites and their cattle and sheep near the Red Sea. When this happened, Moses' followers looked back at the approaching Egyptians and cried that they were doomed. But then a miracle happened. According to Hebrew tradition, Moses lifted his staff and the sea parted, leaving a dry path in the middle that beckoned the Israelites to cross. They did, and when the Egyptians tried to follow, the sea closed again, drowning all of them.

This flight of the Israelites from Egypt is called the Exodus, meaning "a going out." It was to continue for forty years, although Moses and his followers had no idea at the time that such would be the case. At the moment, they were ecstatic that they had escaped the pursuing Egyptian army and were on

their way to the Promised Land.

Soon the journey through the wilderness became one of hardship. The Israelites constantly complained to



Moses about the shortage of food and water, and many openly confessed that they wished they had stayed in Egypt. Despite their complaints, Hebrew tradition states that God provided for their care. He sent food from Heaven in the form of manna, which was said to taste something like a wafer made with honey. And once, when the Israelites complained that the water at a certain place was undrinkable, God is said to have made it potable by instructing Moses to throw a log into it. When he

According to Hebrew tradition, when Rameses II caught up with the fleeing Israelites at the Red Sea, Moses lifted his staff and the sea parted, allowing his people safe passage. When the Egyptians tried to follow, the sea closed again, drowning all of them.

Three Kings, Followed by Two Kingdoms

After forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites finally reached Canaan. Dates vary from source to source, but they seemed to have arrived sometime around 1200 B.C. For almost 200 years, from 1200 B.C. to 1020 B.C., the Israelites were ruled by officials called judges. A judge governed each of the loosely organized twelve tribes. However, because they were surrounded on all sides by stronger enemies, the Israelites realized they would have to unite if they wanted to survive. In 1020 B.C., they ended what is called the Period of Judges and formed the Kingdom of Israel, with Saul as its first king.

Saul ruled for 20 years. Although he fought successfully against such enemies as the Ammonites, Moabites, and Philistines, he lacked the wisdom the Israelites expected of their king. In 1000 B.C., he was defeated in a battle with the Philistines, as a result of which he killed himself by falling on his sword.

The Israelites chose David to be their next king. David had already made a name for himself when, armed with only a slingshot, he slew the Philistine giant Goliath. David was a much-loved king who established Jerusalem as the capital of his kingdom. He ruled from 1000 B.C. to 961 B.C.

David's son Solomon succeeded him to the throne. Solomon built the great Temple of Jerusalem, as well as roads, fortresses, and other structures that made Israel strong. More than anything, Solomon was known for his great wisdom. He was also noted for his extravagant use of the taxpayers' money. He had a harem of some 1000 wives and concubines, as well as a large number of expensive stables to house his multitude of horses. When he died in 922 B.C., after a reign of 39 years, Israel was ripe for revolt.

In the year Solomon died, the Israelites did in fact rebel. They split into two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel in

the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. Their splitting into two nations led to their downfall, for neither kingdom was strong enough to beat back attacks by powerful empires that had formed in the region.

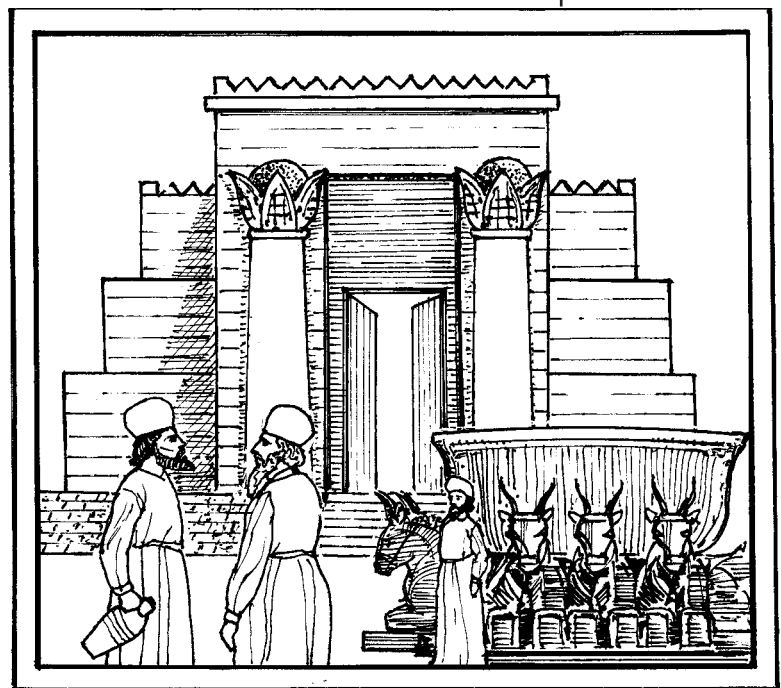


Words to remember:

**Judges
Saul
David
Solomon**

Section Review:

1. How were the Israelites ruled before they united and chose a king?
2. Which king made Jerusalem the capital of Israel?
3. How did Solomon's extravagance hasten the downfall of his kingdom?



Conquest and Captivity

As has already been mentioned, the Israelites were surrounded by other peoples from the start. All sought control of a fertile region that extended in an arc from the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. Much of Mesopotamia lay within this area, which is known as the Fertile Crescent.

As long as the peoples and kingdoms that surrounded Israel were small, the Israelites managed to hold their own

David's son Solomon built the Temple of Jerusalem, as well as roads, fortresses, and other structures that made Israel strong.



against their neighbors. But soon powerful empires appeared that threatened their existence. Three of these were the empires of the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, and the Persians.

In 722 B.C., Israel, the northern Jewish kingdom, was overrun by the Assyrians. The Assyrians were a warlike people known for their extreme cruelty. They tortured captured prisoners by flaying, or skinning, them alive. They destroyed the northern kingdom's capital (Samaria) and carried away many of the Israelites into captivity and slavery. These exiles in time came to be known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. What really happened to them? There are many theories. Some historians maintain that they were gradually absorbed into the cultures of other Mesopotamian peoples. Other theories are not as believable. One states that the Lost Tribes found their way to the British Isles and that the people who live there today are their descendants. Another holds that the American Indians are direct descendants of these wayward Israelites.

The southern Israelite kingdom of Judah lasted much longer. But in time it too fell. In 586 B.C., the Chaldeans, whose

capital was at Babylon on the Euphrates River, captured Judah. They destroyed the Temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem and carried the people away into slavery. Later, when the Chaldeans themselves were conquered by the Persians, the Persians permitted the people of Judah to return. The Israelites rebuilt their Temple, but they again found themselves dispersed when the Romans took over Palestine in the first century B.C.

After the fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the Jews remained scattered throughout the world until the formation of the modern state of Israel in 1948. That they were able to maintain their separate identity and religion during all those years attests to their courage and determination.

Words to remember:

Fertile Crescent
Israel
Judah
Assyrians
Chaldeans
Persians

Section Review:

1. Where is the Fertile Crescent?
2. How did the people of the northern Jewish kingdom come to be called the "Ten Lost Tribes"?
3. Which people conquered the Kingdom of Judah?
4. When was the modern nation of Israel established?

For Further Thought:

1. Why is the study of Jewish history important?
2. How are families different today than they were in Abraham's time?
3. What do you think it meant when Abraham and his followers, through their covenant with God, became the "Chosen People"? If you had been told that you were "chosen," how might that make you feel? How might it shape your life?
4. Imagine yourself a Hebrew boy or girl living in captivity in ancient Egypt. Write a letter to Pharaoh Rameses II giving reasons why he should set your people free.
5. Create a dialogue between two of Moses' followers as they complain of their lot while wandering through the wilderness.
6. Compare the government in Israel during the Period of Judges with that of the United States under the Articles of Confederation. What problems are inherent in such a system?
7. What do you think happened to the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel? Give reasons for the conclusion you have drawn.
8. How might history have been different if the Israelite tribes had not separated into two kingdoms?