

1.5 Ancient Hebrews

From Abraham to the Kingdom of Israel

The Hebrews played a crucial role in the development of what scholars call “western civilization” – a cultural tradition that defines the United States, much of Europe, and a few other nations such as Australia and New Zealand. How did such a small nation of herdsman influence such powerful countries thousands of years later? The answer lies in the cultural beliefs –the faith– of the Hebrews.

I. From Ur to Egypt

Hebrew texts offer a wealth of information on the origins and history of the Hebrew people, with many of its accounts being backed up by outside sources including those of the Egyptians and Assyrians. Archeological evidence also supports many of the claims made by Hebrew sources. In spite of this, scholars maintain a healthy amount of skepticism as a fair number of Hebrew accounts were written centuries after the described events took place. Additionally, a few discrepancies seem to exist between the Hebrew accounts and their various collaborating sources. Of course, this all pertains to the historical aspects of the Hebrew texts – we will be avoiding most of the more divine aspects of their historical tradition.

The First Migrations

The bulk of Hebrew history can be found in the Torah –the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah contains everything from the Hebrew’s creation story all the way through to the establishment of Hebrew law. The first Hebrew leader, Abraham (which means, “father of many”), was a man from the Sumerian city of Ur. The Torah explains that Abraham was approached by the Hebrew God, Yahweh, and was told to abandon his people of idol worshipers. Yahweh is the holy name of the Hebrew God which can be taken to mean “I am and I cause”.

Abraham obeys and takes his family with him to Canaan, the lands that make up much of the Levant, where God commanded him to go. Scholars estimate that, assuming the story of Abraham to be true, the migration began sometime around 1800 BC. Eventually Abraham, his family, and his herds arrived at the land of Canaan which, according to the biblical account, was promised to Abraham as part of God’s covenant with him. This covenant, or agreement, stated that Abraham would become the father of a prosperous nation and that Abraham and his descendants would worship only him.



One of Abraham’s sons, Isaac (which means “he will laugh”) was a miracle according to the Hebrew texts – born to a mother of advanced age. He inherited the covenant from his father and had to pass it on to one of his two sons – twins – Esau and Jacob (which means “he grabs ankles”). The firstborn, Esau, was tricked by his brother who managed to steal the covenant away. In a moment of weakness, Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of beans, and in his old age, Isaac mistook Jacob for Esau and gave him the blessing. Enraged by his brother’s deception, Esau chased Jacob away from the tribe. In his exile, Jacob pleaded with God to grant him the covenant – and God answered. An angel came down and a wrestling match between Jacob and the spiritual being began. Supposedly, Jacob won this match and God gave him the covenant. Jacob’s willingness to fight even an angel for this blessing earned him a new name: Israel which means “struggles with God”.

To Egypt

The Hebrew texts go on to say that Jacob went on to have thirteen sons. The twelfth son of Jacob, Joseph, quickly became his father's favorite and earned the jealousy of his older brothers. They sold him to some travelling Egyptian slavers. After a series of dream interpretations and false accusations, Joseph became vizier under an unknown New Kingdom pharaoh after interpreting the pharaoh's dream. During a period of intense famine, Joseph reconnected with his treacherous brothers and forgave them. He then arranged to provide for his family in Egypt for the duration of the famine.

Jacob –renamed Israel– and his twelve sons thrived in Egypt. Joseph passed away but the descendants of the other twelve brothers grew to become the Twelve Tribes of Judah. The Hebrews eventually adopted the name of their patriarch and called themselves the Israelites. Despite living closely, the twelve tribes operated independently of each other. Each tribe grew in number to the point that the Egyptians –long removed from the leadership of Joseph– began to fear these foreigners. They enslaved the Israelites sometime after 1650 BC.

The enslavement of the Israelites coincides with the construction period of the New Kingdom, though no Egyptian records exist that refer to the Israelites (or Hebrews) by name. To be fair, the Egyptians rarely cared to take note of the ethnicity of those they enslaved. The Hebrew texts also fail to mention the names of any of the pharaohs involved with the story.

II. The Promised Land

After almost 300 years of enslavement in Egypt, the Israelites are led to freedom by a Hebrew who – through strange circumstances – wound up within the sphere of influence of the Egyptian royal family. Using either divine signs or simply shrewd political maneuvering, he was able to win the Israelites their freedom and was chosen to be their leader as they travelled back to the land promised to them by God to Abraham.

The Exodus

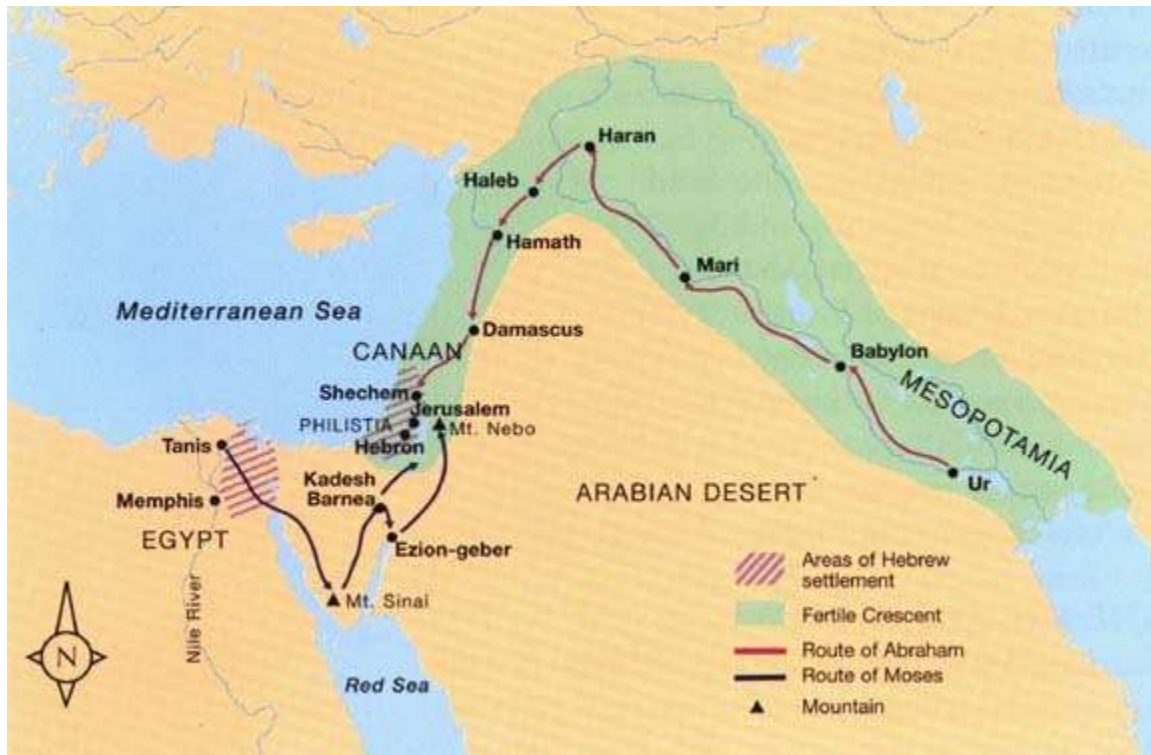
Moses (which means “taken from”) led the Israelites out of Egypt on relatively peaceful terms. The Israelites first stop was Mount Sinai – a mountain on the Sinai Peninsula. There, Moses traveled to the top of the mountain to communicate with God in private. After a few months, he returned to the foot of the mountain with the Ten Commandments, stone tablets bearing the foundational laws of the Hebrew's extensive legal and religious code. The Ten Commandments covered everything from lying and jealousy, to the honoring of parents and requirement to work only six days out of seven.



The Ten Commandments were believed to have been written by God himself, and so the stone tablets they were written on became powerful relics that the Hebrews were required to transport in a distinctive chest known as the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was carried by priests and it always travelled at the front of the caravan. A Tabernacle was built in the Israelites' campsites which was essentially a nomadic temple. It was a large tent meant to host the various religious ceremonies and hold the Ark of the Covenant when the Israelites were not travelling.

Moses passed away before the Israelites could reach the Promised Land of Canaan and so a successor was chosen to lead. This leader would be the first in a line of Hebrew **Judges**, heroic military leaders chosen to lead a united Israeli military. It is important to note that at this point the Israelites were not a unified entity, but rather a tribal confederacy. A confederacy is a league or alliance system. Judges were chosen whenever an outside force threatened the safety of the tribes or when internal tensions ran high. Judges were also chosen whenever the tribes came across an area that they wanted for themselves.

The first Judge was **Joshua** (which means “God brings salvation”) and he made a name for himself as the leader who saw the Israelites return to the Promised Land. Once there, Joshua initiated a series of campaigns against the existing kingdoms of the Levant. By 1000 BC, the Israelites controlled a significant portion of Canaan.



The kingdoms that existed in Canaan prior to the return of the Israelites were powerful military powers. These were cities that were flanked by both the Hittites and the Egyptians, and who engaged in maritime trade with the Mycenaeans. They were still defeated by the relatively small and weak Israelites. Hebrew tradition would say that the improbable victories of the Israelites came from divine intervention. Historians would sooner cite the Bronze Age Collapse. At around the same time the Israelites entered Canaan c. 1100 BC, the waves of migrants entering the Eastern Mediterranean were already disrupting the region. Mycenaean trade was already on the decline, and the introduction of still more warring tribes in the Israelites possibly served to accelerate the collapse of the regions powers.

Establishment of the Monarchy

Though the Israelites carved out an enviable territory in the Levant, there was still constant competition for territory. One of Israel's greatest rivals, the Philistines, were on the rise once again when the Israelites began to clamor for a more stable government. Apparently, the system of Judges was insufficient for the Israelites, who likely grew tired of the constant squabbling of their confederacy's leaders. Eventually, a monarchy was established. With the blessing of both the people and God, the first king of Israel, **Saul**, got to work.



It would be no small feat organizing the tribal confederacy into a unified entity, and the constant wars were sure to slow things down. Saul found victory after victory on the battlefield but was unable to live up to expectations. His disobedience to the commands of God led to Saul losing the support of his people, and God, to one of his generals. Saul quickly grew paranoid and tried to have this rival –David– killed on more than one occasion. David fled for his life garnering more military and political support in his self-imposed exile. As soon as Saul died, David returned and took the throne.

King David (David means “beloved”) won even more military victories than Saul before him and was able to establish the formal Kingdom of Israel. In doing so he unified the Israelite tribes under a single ruler, and he repurposed the city of **Jerusalem** (which means “city of peace”) into the capital of the kingdom. David also relocated the tabernacle to Jerusalem, bringing the Ark of the Covenant with it. This meant that Jerusalem was not only the political center of Israel, it was also its religious center.

Side Note: On Judaism

Judaism is the monotheistic religion of the Hebrews, who at one time were called Israelites, at another time known as the Judeans, and in the current age called the Jews (from the old Judean). Judaism laid the foundation for the two other major monotheistic religions: Christianity and Islam. The bridge between Christianity and Judaism is particularly strong, with the Christian Bible including a great majority of Hebrew texts in its own doctrine.

As a monotheistic religion, Judaism holds that there is only one god –in this case, Yahweh– who requires his people to follow his strict laws. Judaism holds that the descendants of Abraham are God’s “chosen people”, a unique group who hold special standing with their all-powerful creator. According to the Jews, Yahweh has unlimited power and is believed to know all things and be in all places at all times.