

3. Israel

The region between the Sinai Peninsula and Lebanon, known by many names, as Israel, Canaan, the Holy Land, Palestine, has no clear natural frontiers. The River Jordan, rising in what is now called Lebanon and flowing directly South, runs through the middle, parallel to the Mediterranean coast, southward through the lake called the Sea of Galilee (or Lake of Gennesareth) and on down into the Dead Sea where its waters evaporate, leaving the Dead Sea so charged with salts that nothing can grow near it, whence its name. The Dead Sea is far below sea-level.

Almost all the events of the Bible stories happen in towns lying to the West, between the Jordan and the sea. Jerusalem lies west of the point where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea. The Bible stories have two main centres, especially in New Testament times, one the area around Jerusalem, called Judea or Judah, from which comes the word “Jew”, the other the area to the west of the Sea of Galilee, called Galilee. Between these lies the area called Samaria.

Most of the Holy Land is now rocky and not very fertile, but in Bible times it seemed less arid (“a land flowing with milk and honey”). The Jordan is a small river, of no importance for transportation though useful for irrigation. Before the small groups of families (tribes) calling themselves “the Children of Israel” took control of the land, it was called Canaan and in recent times, before the creation of the modern state of Israel, the land was called Palestine. To the South stretches the great desert of Sinai, between Israel and Egypt, caught between the two branches of the Red Sea.

Early History: The Patriarchs

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis (meaning beginning, origin), we see nomadic figures moving across the empty spaces of the Middle East between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean regions. Especially we see a particular family, with proper names: Abraham, his son Isaac, his son Jacob (who is also called Israel, whence the name of the people “the children of Israel”). In the Bronze Age period between 2000 and 1500, semi-nomadic Amorites were coming down from the Syrian deserts into the fertile lands of Canaan, as well as across into Assyria. Among them archaeologists have found names such as Abram, Jacob, Levi, Benjamin. Their flocks of sheep were their main wealth, but they also had some interest in farming; this is the life-style of the “patriarchs” (fathers). These first fathers of the future tribes of Israel were Arameans, people speaking various Semitic languages.

Movements of population brought members of these “foreign” tribes down into Egypt, where they took power as the Hyksos (foreign rulers), and controlled Egypt from 1720-1580, when the Egyptians threw them out and asserted their own power as far as the Euphrates. This control by Egypt was reaffirmed by Rameses II around 1300, and after a campaign in Canaan in about 1230, his successor could write “Israel is laid waste”, the first historical use of the name in the sense of a place inhabited by a specific group of people known as Israel.

Moses and the Exodus

After these victories, the Egyptians used more and more Semitic slaves and prisoners-of-war in their extensive new building projects, a kind of sub-proletariate they called “apiru”, a word also found in Mesopotamia as “Habiru”, meaning low-class mercenaries or slaves from the poor nomads; it is probably the origin of the word “Hebrew”.

The well-known story of Moses (the name is Egyptian) who leads a group of escaping Semitic slaves out of Egypt (Exodus) and through the Sinai wilderness is rooted here. This group is shown as united, although the people are of various family-origins, by the action of a tribal god with the four-consonant name YHWH (Yahweh-el), but the name was rarely spoken, he was called Elohim, the Lord; the familiar form “Jehovah” comes from a confusion, because the Hebrew Old Testament writes the vowels for Elohim over the Tetragrammaton.

For the next two centuries this original group of families, joined by others living in the hills of Canaan who accepted the same faith in the Lord, fought to take control of the Canaanite villages in the

fertile areas near the Jordan. They were an amphictyony, a league united by a conviction that the Lord had established a special covenant with them. Here they found themselves confronted with the Philistine problem. These were "People of the Sea" whom Rameses III had driven out of Egypt and who had settled on the coast of Canaan around 1150. They may have come originally from Greece, their culture was partly Mycenaean, and Homer mentions people with a similar name. They were stronger than Israel, partly because they had learned to make iron weapons, and in 1050 they defeated Israel and even captured the Ark of the Covenant (a wooden box or throne symbolizing the Lord's presence with Israel). The present name "Palestine" is derived from "Philistine".

The Jerusalem Kingdom

About 1000 B.C., it became clear to the religious leader (prophet) Samuel that the future of the amphictyony was in danger and that a strong king was needed to unite and lead the different families (tribes) living in Canaan that considered themselves to have been called by the Lord YHWH (Yahweh-el) to take control of the land. The modern state of Israel still bases its existence on this notion of a Promised Land given them by God. Until now there had been no social organization beyond that of individual extended families, each with their elder patriarch. Some felt that the Lord was Israel's king and that no other leader was needed.

After a first attempt with Saul that failed, in about 1012 David became the new king, first in the South, and crushed the Philistines. He was accepted by the remaining Canaanite populations, and imposed his rule so strongly that the surrounding peoples recognized his control over the whole land. Finally, he made the Canaanite city of Jerusalem his new capital, the centre of the Covenant, and so unifying the various groups and tribes. David's forty years of kingship (1012 - 972) were partly inspired by the forms of divine kingship found in Mesopotamia, adapted to Israel's unique vision of a God who saves in history through his anointed servants.

David's son, Solomon, (ruled 972 - 931) made Israel part of the Mediterranean world by joining forces with the Phoenicians in commerce, by adopting much of their culture and by building a Temple at Jerusalem in Canaanite style, using Phoenician building techniques. Solomon's court was extremely sophisticated artistically and culturally. In this time orders were given to record in writing all the stories of Israel's origins that until then had only been transmitted orally, the writing of the Bible had begun. Some of the earliest texts in Genesis were written at this time, including the familiar story of Paradise, the Temptation of Eve by the serpent, and the Fall, by an individual writer often known as the Yahwist. All animal sacrifices were forbidden outside the new Jerusalem Temple, as well, so centralizing the religious life.

After Solomon died, however, the nation divided, there was much conflict and the tribes of the North established the Kingdom of Israel centered on the city of Samaria, while those of the South continued in Jerusalem, the centre of the Kingdom of Judah. In 722, the Assyrians destroyed Samaria (and Damascus in Syria), and deported the people; the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist.

Exile and Return

For one thousand years, after Hammurabi had consolidated the unity of the Assyrian Empire, the main concern had been survival in a way of life close to that found in the Bible stories about Abraham and the patriarchs. Then, after the year 900, new energy brings the Assyrians into the Bible stories of the history of Judah, with wars and treaties involving kings such as Sennacherib (705-681).

Babylon was burned in 648, in response to a regionalistic uprising against the Assyrian kings, so the local citizens called in the Medes (who were Indo-Europeans) and in 612 Nineveh fell to the new dynasty. Under Nebuchadnezzar II (605-561) there was war with Egypt and invasion of Palestine. In 598 the people around Jerusalem (Judah) rebelled, the king and 3000 citizens were taken back to Mesopotamia. When the survivors rebelled again in 589, Nebuchadnezzar (also known as Nebuchadnezzar, reigned 605 - 561) destroyed Jerusalem after a siege which lasted until 587.

This marks the beginning of the Exile, a vital time in Israel's history, for the Jewish exiles were

not dispersed among the population of Mesopotamia; they continued to live close together. Their special religion served as a uniting force, and while studying the written “scriptures” (writings) they had brought with them, rewriting other records, and so composing the core of the Jewish Bible (called the Old Testament by Christians) they waited for the Lord of their past history to save them as he had saved their fore-fathers from Egypt. Since the Lord had always acted in history through human agents, and not by some kind of divine intervention, it was no great surprise when the long-awaited liberation from Exile and return to Jerusalem came from the Persian king Cyrus in 536, after his conquest of Babylon.

There they rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple, which was rededicated in 516. Only later, around 445, did they rebuild the city walls. Almost two generations had lived and died away from the “Holy Land”, yet they had forgotten nothing of their faith. This miraculous return from Exile and apparent disaster did not mean that Judah was able to become an independent state. Like Egypt, it remained part of the Persian zone of influence until the campaigns of Alexander the Great changed the face of the region. After that, the Jews were ruled by either the Ptolemies of Egypt or the Seleucids in Syrian Antioch.