

Overview of Israel's History

"Palestine was one big truck stop!"

Israel was exposed to its environment, as well as to the armies which crisscrossed its territory. We now have examples of what that environment was like, in areas of law, wisdom traditions, literature, art, architecture, religious influence, etc. They can easily be found online, or you can check out several of the Great Courses (*DVDs with study guides*) from the synod resource center that cover this period of world history.

This explains why the Bible begins with the creation of the whole world, rather than with the story of the people of Israel. The OT is reflecting its geographic reality. It has placed its story in the context of the whole world.

God's choice of Abraham does not occur in a vacuum. Refer to Genesis 12:3: God promised Abraham that he and his descendants would be a blessing to all the clans of the earth. What clans? The ones Genesis 1-11 talked about!

As one works through the OT, one needs to keep this idea front and center. God has a universal purpose as God works with the people of Israel.

"Abraham was an Iraqi!"

The story of Israel proper begins with Genesis 12-50. This is equivalent to the family tree of Israel. The details generally fit what we know from other ancient peoples from about 2000-1700 BCE.

Abraham is from Ur of Mesopotamia, which is in modern day Iraq, just a little south of Baghdad. Ergo, Abraham was an Iraqi in modern terms.

Abraham journeyed up the Fertile Crescent to Haran, which is now part of southeast Turkey. While Abraham journeyed on to Palestine, many of his extended family chose to stay in Haran. That's why his sons go there to get wives.

However, once we get to Jacob's 12 sons, the ties with the "Old Country" are broken. From now on, Palestine will be home. The Promised Land will be home.

"Israel attends Vocational School."

The Exodus is the decisive event for shaping Israel's history. All things point to it or back at it. The covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai is crucial! It is a vocational event. It is not an event that made them God's people, or even one that showed them how to become God's people.

They already are God's people!

Rather, as God's people, this vocational event showed them how to live and think as God's people. It showed them how to answer the following question: "What are the responsibilities we, as God's children, have for the sake of all the families of the earth?"

"The Wild, Wild, West!"

Between 1250-1200 BCE Israel “conquered” Palestine. Actually Israel occupied the hill country only, and stayed out of the Jordan Valley.

Between 1200-1000 BCE under a series of judges, mostly men, but some women, the various tribes began to consolidate their power. At best there was a loose tribal confederation; however seldom did the 12 tribes unite to deal with any problem. Most scholars now doubt if there ever really was a tribal confederation that functioned for all 12.

To get a better picture of this think of the early American West. Early Israel in Palestine was very similar. There are any number of:

“Rugged stories”

“Beyond the law stories”

“Living for the moment”

“Unlikely heroes-both men and women”

When the Philistines arrived on the scene, the tribal organization, whatever it might have looked like, was unable to cope with them. They had iron!

The history of the people of God, during this period, as well as all periods, is incredible in that it doesn’t whitewash the history!

“The Samuel Compromise”

To have, or not to have, that is the question!

Until the Philistine controversy, God was king. In the book of 1 Samuel, we are treated to a running debate over the idea of having an earthly king. Whose idea was it? Did God approve? Either way, the people knew that they needed/wanted a king to save them from the Philistines.

Into this controversy stepped Samuel, with his “Samuel Compromise.”

Israel would have a king, anointed by God. However this king would have to listen to a prophetic counselor, through whom God would speak and lead.

“Israel’s George Washington”

King David is Israel’s George Washington. Why?

His shrewdest move was capturing Jerusalem, located between the northern 10 tribes and the southern 2 tribes. It was neutral turf. By making it his political and religious center, he was able to weld the 12 tribes into a central government headquartered in his personal city, Jerusalem.

During his reign, David is portrayed as militarily successful. It would be remembered as a reign of peace, never to be equaled again after his son Solomon. However, as time passed, and the Davidic stories were told and retold, his memory gets more and more whitewashed. Compare Chronicles with Samuel! As one approaches the New Testament era, the people, long vassals of foreign superpowers, long for a king like David. The prophets pick up this longing and say that a Messiah will come from the line of David and rule. The NT says that this Davidic Messiah came and his name was Jesus!

"Israel had no Abraham Lincoln!"

In 922 BCE, Israel split into north and south. David's "empire" evaporated. The northern 10 tribes kept the name Israel, while the southern 2 tribes were called Judah. Lacking a true Abraham Lincoln, the tribes were never really unified again as an independent country.

Since the documents we have which chronicle the separate histories of the two countries were written from the point of view of Judah, it is almost impossible to do an adequate job of unraveling this complex history. From other sources we do know that Israel was by far the more affluent and powerful of the two. However, with that went exposure to other ways of perceiving the world and other deities to thank and appease. Syncretism!

Israel lasted 200 years, and had 19 kings. It was a period of almost constant political instability and religious decline, with the reign of Ahab and Jezebel as its nadir. They violated the fundamental covenant convictions about the care of the poor and needy. From 760-722 BCE Amos and Hosea tried to point out the spiritual sickness infesting the country, but their warnings fell on deaf ears. All that was left for the two prophets was to announce God's impending judgement on the choice Israel had made.

The Assyrian war machine rolled over Israel and the people were hauled away. They are known today as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Assyria replaced them with people from elsewhere in its realm. They intermarried with the Israelites considered too unimportant to exile = Samaritans!

"An Unexpected Homecoming!"

Judah lasted 125 years longer. During the above 200 year period, Judah had 12 kings, all from the Davidic dynasty. Due in part to its more skilled leadership, including Hezekiah and first Isaiah, Judah survived the Assyrian onslaught. However, after Hezekiah, a similar downward spiral of religion, evidenced in the oppression of the poor and needy, began. Josiah was the only bright spot in this 125 year crash and burn story.

By the time Jeremiah arrived on the scene, after an initial period of hope during the reign of Josiah, he too, could only announce God's judgement on the choice they too had made.

In 597 BCE, Babylon conquered Judah. The king and his officials were deported. After another rebellion in 587 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed, along with Solomon's temple. Thousands were sent into exile this time.

The irony of this exile to Babylon is that they have come full circle back to the land Abraham was called to leave behind! After the exile, many Israelites would choose to stay there, forming the powerful Jewish community that would eventually produce the Babylonian Talmud in 500 BCE!

"The Messiah has come!"

While in exile, the Israelites engaged in an agonizing reappraisal of their history. The Priestly writer, along with the Deuteronomic Historian, Ezekiel, and others, wrote/edited their sacred texts to help explain how this could have happened.

Then Second Isaiah began his ministry, shortly before 538 BCE. He proclaimed that Cyrus, the Persian King, was the promised Messiah, the Anointed One! The Edict of Cyrus, which allowed all exiled people to return to their homelands, is seen as the work and plan of God by Second Isaiah. Some, not many, returned.

In the following years, 3 or 4 migrations of Israelites returned to Palestine, which remained under Persian control. Haggai and Zechariah, along with 3rd Isaiah were prophets during this period. Nehemiah helped rebuild Jerusalem, and Ezra made the Torah the central authoritative Scripture for the emerging community of the faithful, now known as Jews. Judaism was born.

"Israel enters the Dark Ages!"

With Alexander the Great, the Persian world became a Greek one. Israel remained a subject country, first under his Egyptian Ptolemaic successors (301-198 BCE), and then under the Syrian Seleucid successors (198-163 BCE). We know very little about this period of history. We do know that as usual, Israel was caught between two superpowers, who tried to use Israel as a buffer between themselves.

During this period, Israel rapidly began to become Hellenized, much to the consternation of some of her religious leaders. A group, known as the Maccabees, actually succeeded in throwing off the Seleucids, and managed to remain independent from 163-63 BCE.

Daniel and the Maccabean literature shed some light on how deep the anti-Hellenization feelings ran.

Then Rome arrived!