

# HISTORY OF OLD TESTAMENT ISRAEL



*"'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."*

Exodus 19:5-6

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nearly every day when we open our newspapers or turn on the evening news, Israel is in the headlines. There is constantly turmoil between Israel and her neighbors. There is constant fighting, killing, bombing etc...either in or around the nation of Israel. Just as Israel is an important player in world events today, it was also a key player in world events during Old Testament times.

For us to have an accurate understanding of world events today and for us to have a proper interpretation of the Scriptures, it is necessary for us to have a clear understanding of the history of the nation of Israel. How did it come into being? Why is it so important? What has happened through the years? These are all questions that have some bearing on the current world scene and upon understanding the Scriptures. In order to accurately understand the teaching of Scripture, proper interpretation must include an understanding of history. No element of history is as important to understanding the Bible as the history of God's chosen nation, Israel.

### **The Purpose for an Old Testament History of Israel**

*Why should we take the time to study an Old Testament history of Israel?* It is important to study the history of Israel in order to:

1. Provide the believer with an understanding of the historical narrative of Old Testament Israel.
2. Equip the believer to consider that Old Testament narrative of Israel's history against the background of the broader sweep of contemporary ancient Near Eastern history.
3. Challenge the believer with the reality that a valid theology of the Old Testament must be consistent with and, to a significant measure, derived from a proper understanding of the biblical narrative of the history of Israel.
4. Expose the believer to the critical reconstructions of the Old Testament historical narrative, both as to its sources and as to its substances, and to reinforce his confidence in the historical veracity and unique character of that narrative.
5. Confront the believer with the reality that the New Testament can be properly comprehended only as it is understood in light of the Old Testament, and as is appropriate, to focus on specific areas of biblical history and/or doctrine in which that relationship is illustrated.
6. Excite in the believer an ever-growing commitment to properly regard and to properly comprehend the older testament of the sacred Scriptures.

## **The Sources for an Old Testament History of Israel**

*What sources must we use in a study of the History of Old Testament Israel?*

**1. *Obviously the primary source for a history of Old Testament Israel is the Old Testament.***

The Old Testament is more than just a source for Israel's history, but it is a rich treasure of information. In fact Israel's history is written in greater detail than many of the neighboring countries. No other great country of the day has a document that is comparable to the Old Testament. "This invaluable book tells of Israel's development in Egypt, her beginnings as separate tribes in the Promised Land, the uniting of these tribes in a monarchy (with names, reign durations, and main activities of all her kings), the deportation to eastern countries as God's punishment for her sin, the return from that captivity by many of her people, and their subsequent experiences back in Palestine." [Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 3]

In addition to standard historical material the Old Testament includes law, philosophy, dissertation and sermon. The reader learns a great deal more about the people than just historical information. One learns not just what the people did, but how they thought, spoke and behaved. The reader of the Old Testament becomes thoroughly acquainted with the historical events and the people who made them happen.

It is important to remember that although the Old Testament is an incredibly thorough document, it was not written as a history book, but with a theological purpose. The Old Testament was focused on redemption. "The Old Testament is God's record of how He prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ, who provided redemption through His death. Because Scripture's purpose is to point humanity to redemption, the historical material pertinent to this preparation was included; what was not pertinent was normally omitted." [Wood, p. 4] In other words, there are many places in which the Old Testament scriptures omitted unnecessary facts for its own purpose. Therefore an additional source for Israel's history must be considered.

**2. *Another source of information for Israel's history comes from Archaeological research.***

Archaeological research helps fill in the omissions and supply general background for the Old Testament. Diligent archaeological work has gone on in the Bible lands for years and continues to be a productive source of information for Israel's past history. Archaeological sources both confirm the events of Old Testament Israel as well as fill in the omissions of that history from the Bible.

**3. *A third source of information for Israel's history comes from other Ancient literary sources.***

These literary sources are often considered part of the archaeological record and include documents discovered in other parts of the Ancient Near Eastern World that corroborate the Biblical and archaeological material regarding Israel.

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Our purpose in this class is to understand the history of Israel as an integration of political, social, economic, and religious factors, and to do so, on the basis of the Old Testament as Scripture, but also with careful attention to the literary and archaeological sources of the ancient Near Eastern world of which Israel was a part.

### **Some Modern Fallacies Concerning an Old Testament History of Israel**

When considering an Old Testament History of Israel, there are many modern day historians and even some so-called biblical historians who have embraced several modern day fallacies regarding the study of history. The following are some of these fallacies that must be avoided when approaching a history of Israel.

***Fallacy #1—History cannot include the unique, miraculous, and the intervention of the divine.***

This is one of the most prized principles of modernity and is often referred to as the principle of analogy. It assumes that all historical phenomena must be subjected to an analogous explanation. In other words, it is an explanation of history that explains events in terms of other known happenings. Therefore there are no unique events, miraculous events or an intervention of the divine. It is the interpreting history in light of other known history and excludes the idea that God can intervene in history. It clearly denies the supernatural.

***Fallacy #2—History cannot include anything that does not have external documentation.***

This view rejects everything in Scripture for which there is no external documentation or corroboration. In other words, if there is no archaeological evidence to support biblical statements regarding history then those statements cannot be considered as accurate, or important elements for history. Because of this some modern day historians refuse to begin their history of Israel prior to the period of the judges. There are even a few who do not begin Israel's history prior to the reigns of David and Solomon. The most radical historians reject the entire Old Testament except for some elements of the Persian and Hellenistic eras of Israel's history.

This view is unacceptable because over the centuries we have not uncovered archaeological evidence to support many statements of Scripture until very recently. For example, there was no archaeological evidence for Pontius Pilate uncovered until 1961; the procurator Felix until 1966, or the house of David until 1993. The absence of evidence does not corroborate that an event did not happen, it simply means that we have not uncovered any archaeological evidence yet. In other words, we just need to dig deeper.

***Fallacy #3—History cannot include narratives about individuals, but must focus on nations instead.***

This view says that history must not focus on individuals as shapers of the times, but on sociological factors that attempt to discover general laws and large-scale societal forces that influence historical change. This view diminishes the roles of individuals and seeks to see

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history as a series of impersonal forces driving the events of history. This is simply an arbitrary restriction. Why would histories of individuals, families, and tribes be excluded from consideration? This is another reason why some historians do not include the patriarchal period of Israel's history, because they were not necessarily viewed as a nation, but as a family. We can learn much about history through the writings of individuals, journals, family histories etc...

All in all these modern day fallacies are driven from the presupposition that there is nothing special about the Bible. They view the Old Testament as conservative propaganda and that it has no real bearing on secular history. But as believers, we should recognize that the Bible is a unique, supernatural and accurate document and has been clearly attested to through the archaeological record.

### **Approaches to the Study of an Old Testament History of Israel**

There are currently about five major approaches to the evaluation of historical material and evidences for a history of Israel and how one goes about reconstructing that history. [This material is taken from: Walter Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, p. 8-14]

#### ***Approach #1—The Traditional School:***

The traditional approach argues that the text of Genesis to Kings embodies the only ancient, continuous written source that deals directly with Israel's origins. They do not reject Ezra through Chronicles, but see it as repeating the same material in the other books beginning with King David. This approach takes the biblical text at face value and considers the text innocent until proven guilty by external facts.

The adherents of this view see the history of Israel as beginning with the patriarch Jacob and his family (Israel) and multiplying into a nation of 600,000 fighting men, plus women and children, who wandered in the wilderness for forty years after escaping from Egypt, and finally conquered Canaan under Joshua.

#### ***Approach #2—The Albright/Wright/Bright Baltimore School:***

This school has argued over the general trustworthiness of the account of Genesis to Kings, but it never meant by this that the details of Scripture were accurate and true. Whenever the Bible did not correlate with the archaeological interpretations, this school felt free to depart from the Bible in favor of the external evidence without searching for harmonization of the two sets of data. This approach is the result of compromise between the Bible's version of events and a reconstruction of the extrabiblical evidence.

#### ***Approach #3—The Alt/Noth School:***

This school expresses extreme doubt that the overall outline of events found in Genesis to Kings contributes very much to the historicity of Israel. In fact according to this view, the biblical outline is considered to be a revisionist form of history. In other words, they view it as an

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interpretation of the actual events rather than an accurate recording of the facts. They suggest that it is merely one tradition of the real history and is riddled with presuppositions. This particular school usually skips over the patriarchal history and the Exodus because they view these writings to be without any historical reality.

### ***Approach #4—The Norman Gottwald School:***

This view results entirely from social theory. This view utterly rejects the biblical record. They do not believe that Israel entered Canaan to conquer it, but entered as nomads. They believe that Israel emerged from an indigenous Canaanite population and that Israel's so-called conquest and occupation of Canaan must have ethnographic and sociological research behind it.

### ***Approach #5—Non-Pan Israelite Tribal Confederation Schools:***

This view holds that Israel and Judah were separate peoples only temporarily joined under David and Solomon and perhaps some later kings. They view David and Solomon as legendary figures, brought about by the re-imagining of the Genesis to Kings account, which was done in order to idealize Israel's past, by the editors of Chronicles-Nehemiah for theological reasons.

They believe that since the Persians had benevolent policies that honored national gods and traditions that the Jews living in Persia decided that they had better get both quickly. So, according to this view, the editors of Genesis to Kings created a tradition, using the name Israel.

### ***Our Approach:***

As we approach a study of the Old Testament History of Israel, we will use a literal, grammatical, historical interpretation of Scripture. In other words, the Bible (the entire Old Testament in our case) is completely true, even in matters of history and geography. The Old Testament will be valued as God's Word and the primary source for our study. However, knowing that true archaeology never disagrees with the sacred text, we can utilize properly interpreted archaeological elements to supplement the history of Israel. In addition any other early literature might shed light on the history of ancient Israel. This is what I call the Biblical Approach or we might call it the Biblical-Archaeological Approach to the history of Israel.

### **Geographical Context for an Old Testament History of Israel**

*Why is it necessary to have an accurate understanding of the Geography of the Bible?*

The geographical context of the Biblical message in many Scripture texts is intrinsically related to the meaning of that message. To ignore the context of the geographical background will weaken the interpretation of Scripture.

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How can you understand the imagery of the psalmist with an inadequate visual picture of the images they employed? The loneliness of the Judean wilderness is not like that of an Arizona desert. The fruitfulness of Mt. Carmel is very different from that of the Appalachians. The importance of water resources in the Negev is only remotely similar to the situation in the Antelope Valley.

How can you comprehend the metaphors of the prophets without an accurate mental portrait of the figures involved? The procedures in a Palestinian vineyard are very far removed from what's done today in the Napa Valley of California. The early and latter rains have little in common with storms in the Florida Everglades. A walled city in the Ancient Near East can hardly be compared to Fort Apache.

There are major portions of the Bible, which simply cannot be properly understood without a good grasp of geography (e.g. the conquest of Canaan in Joshua's time; the exile and return of the Jews, just to name two).

### ***An Overview of the Geographical Context of the Old Testament World:***

The nation of Israel and many of the events of the Old Testament occur in the area of the world referred to as The Fertile Crescent (See map on next page). The three major regions of The Fertile Crescent include: 1) *Mesopotamia*, which is the location of Assyria and Babylon along the Euphrates River; 2) *Egypt*, which is the southern most section along the Nile River Valley; and 3) *The Land of Canaan*, which becomes the nation of Israel and will be the focus of our introductory geographical study.

### **[Map of the Ancient Near East]**



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### **The Fertile Crescent:**

The Fertile Crescent is called, "the cradle of civilization." This is due to its rather distinct boundaries:

*The Northern Boundary:* The boundary to the North is nearly a continuous belt of mountains (Pyrenees, Alps, Balkans, Caucasus, Elburz, Hindu Kush, and Himalayas). These mountains held back the cold winter winds allowing the southern lands to have a favorable climate for civilization. They also deterred invasions from the north. There were very limited influences from the north, primarily from Asia Minor.

*The Southern Boundary:* The boundary in the south was primarily desert regions (Sahara, Syrian, and Arabian). The deserts in the south formed an effective blockade, however, there were influences from Egypt, Lybia and Ethiopia.

*The Western Boundary:* The boundary to the west was the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean gave life-sustaining moisture to the region, while also offering opportunities of trade and commerce. There were influences from the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans.

*The Eastern Boundary:* The boundary to the east was made up of the foothills of the Iranian Plateau. There were influences from Mesopotamia, Persia and Arabia.

### **The Land of Israel:**

The region of primary interest for Biblical study is the Land of Canaan, otherwise known to us as the land of Israel. This region was located between the two greatest early civilizations in the Mediterranean area, Mesopotamia and Egypt. The trade routes that linked these two civilizations ran north and south through Israel. Additionally, Israel offered the only east-west land route between the Mediterranean Sea and the deserts of Arabia. Therefore, it was an important piece of real estate that was desired and fought over by many world powers.

*Israel's Names:* Different names have been used to describe the land in which most of the events described in the Bible occur. The oldest name, **Canaan** (Genesis 10:19; 12:6), came from the people who originally occupied the land, the Canaanites. This name seems to have originated from the crimson dye used in the Ancient Near East and came to designate the people of Canaan. However the designation, Canaanite later came to mean a "merchant" or "tradesperson."

Later, God gave this land to His chosen people, **Israel**, and it came to be called by that name. After Solomon's death, the nation split into the northern ten tribes, which retained the name **Israel** (sometimes called Ephraim), and the southern kingdom, which was called **Judah**.

By New Testament times the Romans had divided the land into the provinces of **Judea**, **Samaria**, and **Galilee**. Finally, about the fifth century A. D., the land of the Bible came to be called **Palestine**.



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It has been suggested that this term originally meant "land of the Philistines" and referred to the people who once lived along its southeast coast. Other names include: "Beyond the River," "The Promised Land," and "The Holy Land."

***Israel's Geography:*** Although its borders have varied somewhat, Israel is small, approximately 150 miles long and between 25 and 85 miles wide, about the size of Vermont. It consists of five major longitudinal zones: 1) The Coastal Plain; 2) The Shephelah (or foothills); 3) The Central Mountain Range; 4) The Jordan River Valley; 5) The Trans-Jordan Plateau.

During biblical times, the edge of the coastal plain was lined with high sand dunes that prevented streams from flowing into the ocean. This caused swamps and marshes to form during the rainy season. The straight coast had no natural harbors. The coastal plain gradually gives way to the foothills and the mountains of the central region, which includes three mountain ranges. The northern range begins with Mt. Hermon (the tallest at 9,932 feet) and the hills of Galilee. The central, or Samaritan range includes Mt. Ebal (3,077 feet) and Mt. Gerizim (2,849 feet). The southern or Judean range includes Jerusalem (2,592 feet) and Hebron (3,370 feet). Two important valleys cut across these ranges. These include the Valley of Jezreel in the north and the Valley of Sorek in the south. During biblical times many of Israel's cities and people were located in the mountainous regions and valleys. The eastern slopes of the mountains drop sharply down into the Jordan River Valley, which itself is part of a deep fault known as the Great Rift. The Jordan River valley includes the lowest areas in Israel and the world. From the Sea of Galilee (650 feet below sea level) in the north, the Jordan River flows 200 miles south into the Dead Sea, which is 1,286 feet below sea level, the lowest point on the surface of the earth. East of the Jordan River Valley, the land rises to the plateau of the Trans-Jordan area.

### **[Map of the Longitudinal Zones of Israel**

**1-The Coastal Plain**

**2-The Shephelah (or foothills)**

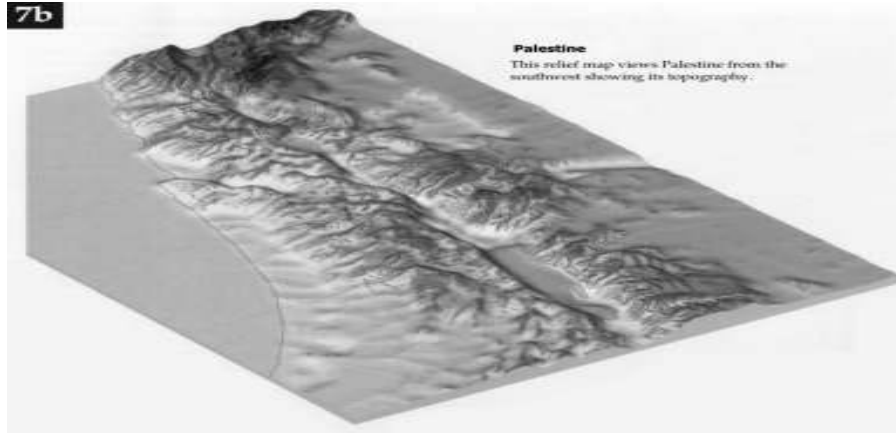
**3-The Central Mountain Range**

**4-The Jordan River Valley**

**5-The Trans-Jordan Plateau**



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**Israel's Climate:** The single most important factor in the climate of Israel is rainfall. Israel like California has both rainy and dry seasons. The autumn or early rains begin in mid-October, with the heaviest rains occurring in December and January. The spring or latter rains occur in April and are necessary for the development of crops. During the summer, dew and morning mist provide needed moisture along the coastal plains and in the central mountain region. The amount of annual rainfall depends on winds from the west and varies from year to year. The coast, the western slopes of the central mountains, the north (Galilee), and the Trans-Jordan receive most of the rainfall. The eastern slopes and the south are drier and include the desert areas.

For such a small region, Israel has a surprisingly wide range of temperatures. Not only does the temperature vary from noon to midnight by as much as 36 degrees, but also from region to region. The Jordan River Valley is the hottest region, and its tropical temperatures can reach 122 degrees in the summer. The coastal regions tend to have a more moderate climate, and the mountainous areas, such as Jerusalem are cooler and can even receive some winter snow.

**Israel's Plants:** Plant life in Israel has changed a great deal since the time of Genesis. At one time, thick forests covered Galilee and the Trans-Jordan. The coastal plains consisted of sand dunes, salt marshes and some forests. The fertile plains of the northwest and central areas provided the best land for agriculture.

Israel's three basic types of plant life (desert, tropical, and subtropical) correspond to the three different types of climate. Subtropical trees include oaks, terebinths, carob, box, and some pine trees. Tropical plants, such as the palm tree, grow in the hotter temperatures of the Jordan River Valley. The acacia, broom tree, nettle, and thorns are found in the desert regions. When the spring rains come, the land blossoms with flowers, such as the crocus and anemone, but these quickly fade and die. In biblical times there were three main fruit bearing trees (the olive, the fig, and the vine). These were so characteristic of the land that they were used to symbolize Israel. Wheat, barley, and millet were Israel's primary grain crops and a chief source of food. Vegetables such as beans, lentils, and cucumbers were cultivated as well.

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**Israel's Animals:** Farming and raising animals were so important in Old Testament times that a man's wealth was calculated by counting the number of cows, horses, sheep, oxen, and camels that he owned. These tame animals provided milk, meat, transportation, tent coverings, and clothing. Israel was also the home of a large number of wild animals such as the lion, leopard, wolf, jackal, fox, rabbit and deer. The dog was as wild as the rest and is described as a snarling dirty creature. Over fifty kinds of birds could be found in Israel, of which the eagle, vulture, owl, hawk, partridge, dove pigeon, stork and sparrow were common. Numerous kinds of fish were plentiful, especially in Galilee, and were an important source of food. The insect population included bees, grasshoppers, ants and locusts.

Most of the Old Testament is action and action involves places, thus the geographical background is a key ingredient of the Old Testament and is clearly important for an accurate understanding of the Old Testament Scripture and Israel's history.

### **An Overview to an Old Testament History of Israel**

This is just a short overview of the history of Old Testament times. There is at least eight distinct periods of Old Testament history. The last seven deal specifically with the nation of Israel and are considered part of an Old Testament History of Israel. These periods are:

- Period 1-Beginnings (Creation to Babel).
- Period 2-Patriarchal History (Abraham to Joseph).
- Period 3-Exodus & the Wilderness Wanderings (Time of Moses).
- Period 4-Conquest & Division of the Land (Time of Joshua).
- Period 5-The Period of the Judges (including Samuel).
- Period 6-The United Monarchy (Saul, David & Solomon).
- Period 7-The Divided Monarchy (Northern & Southern Kingdoms).
- Period 8-The Exile & Return (The Fall, Exile & Return).

Israel's history can be illustrated in the following chart:

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