



Topic  
Philosophy, Religion  
& Intellectual History

Subtopic  
Biblical Studies

# The History and Archaeology of the Bible

Course Guidebook

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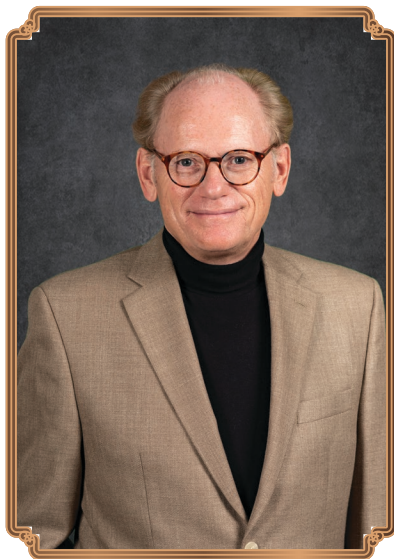
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## Jean-Pierre Isbouts, DLitt

### National Geographic Historian

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In 2014, Professor Isbouts evaluated a recently discovered canvas in Geneva, Switzerland, which he believes is Leonardo da Vinci's first version of the *Mona Lisa*, prompting several publications on the subject. In 2017, he discovered that da Vinci and his workshop produced a second version of da Vinci's famous *Last Supper* fresco, and he traced the work to a remote abbey in Belgium. As a musicologist, he has produced recordings by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, and other ensembles and soloists.

Professor Isbouts is an award-winning filmmaker and best-selling author who gained worldwide renown with his book *The Biblical World*. His books on biblical history include *In the Footsteps of Jesus*, *Who's Who in the Bible*, *The Story of Christianity*, and *Archaeology of the Bible*. He has also coauthored several books on art with Christopher Heath Brown, including *Young Leonardo*, *The da Vinci Legacy*, and *The Dali Legacy*. His films include *Van Gogh Revisited* with Leonard Nimoy; *Walt: The Man behind the Myth* with Dick Van Dyke; *Inside the Cold War* with David Frost; and *The "Mona Lisa" Myth* with Morgan Freeman. His website is [www.jpisbouts.org](http://www.jpisbouts.org). ■

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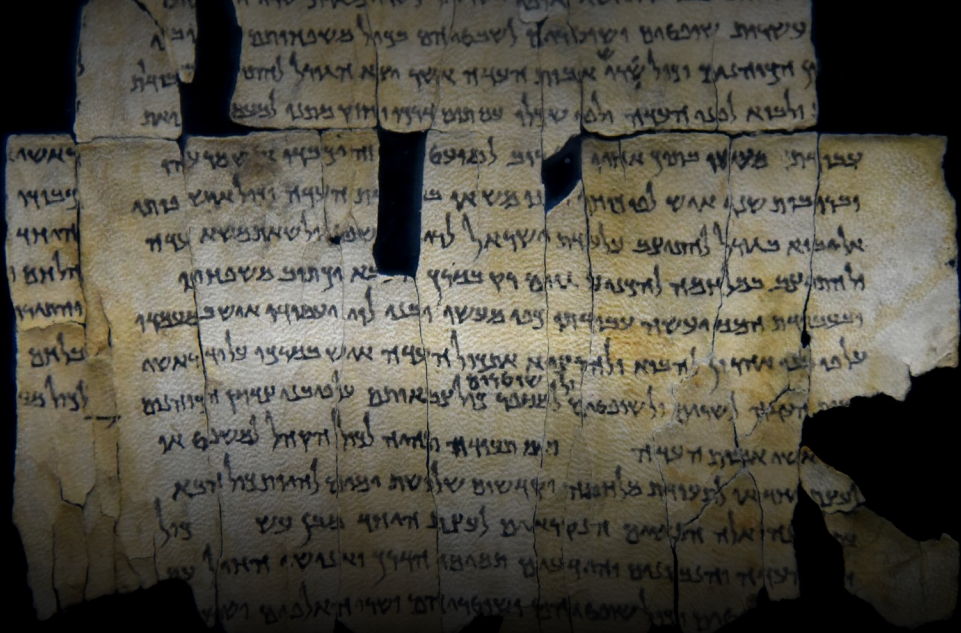
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THE  
HISTORY AND  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
OF THE  
BIBLE

**T**his course offers an in-depth overview of the most important archaeological discoveries related to stories in the Bible, from Genesis to the Gospels. These biblical stories did not originate in a vacuum; each volume emerged in a specific time and place, within a distinct social, cultural, and literary milieu. In the process, these stories were shaped by the most powerful civilizations of their time: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and the world of imperial Rome. By traveling through the world of the Bible, we truly follow the full arc of ancient civilization.

Each lesson is devoted to a particular division or book in the Judeo-Christian Bible. The first 17 lessons focus on key stories in Hebrew scripture—from Genesis and Exodus to the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—with visits to archaeological sites in Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Jordan. The lessons then focus on the Babylonian Exile and the postexilic era as well as subsequent books known as the apocrypha or deuterocanonical works, accepted by some Christian traditions as an integral part of the Bible. The last seven lessons address a number of groundbreaking discoveries related to the New Testament era. They follow the birth and adolescence of Jesus, the growth of his ministry, and a detailed reconstruction of the Passion, based on new archaeological findings in Jerusalem. The last lesson charts the rise of early Christianity.

This course is deliberately presented from a nondenominational perspective and is accessible to everyone. It does not conform to any particular theological orientation but treats the biblical texts as historical documents. This is also true for the question of whether the figures of the Bible were historical characters, or whether some stories are rooted in myth or biblical legend. No scholar will ever question the Bible's moral and religious significance, but many have challenged the Bible as a reliable source of historical information. This course takes no position in the debate. It treats every biblical story as a valued conveyor of meaning, regardless of its putative historicity. Each lesson looks for parallels between the biblical stories and historical sources, including evidence of ancient cities and monuments as well as tablets, letters, and works of art. ■



# THE WORLD OF GENESIS

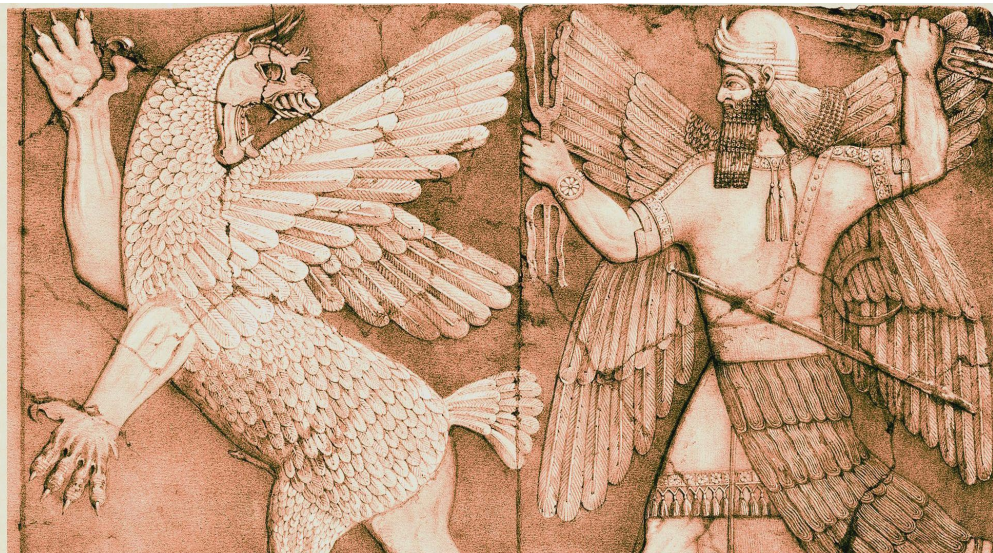
## LESSON 1

**I**n November of 1946, as the sun slowly rose over the Judean desert, a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammed edh-Dhib went looking for a lost goat in the hills close to the Dead Sea. He was so intent on finding the animal that he fell into one of the caves that are found throughout this barren landscape. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he was amazed to find several clay jars filled with some very ancient texts.

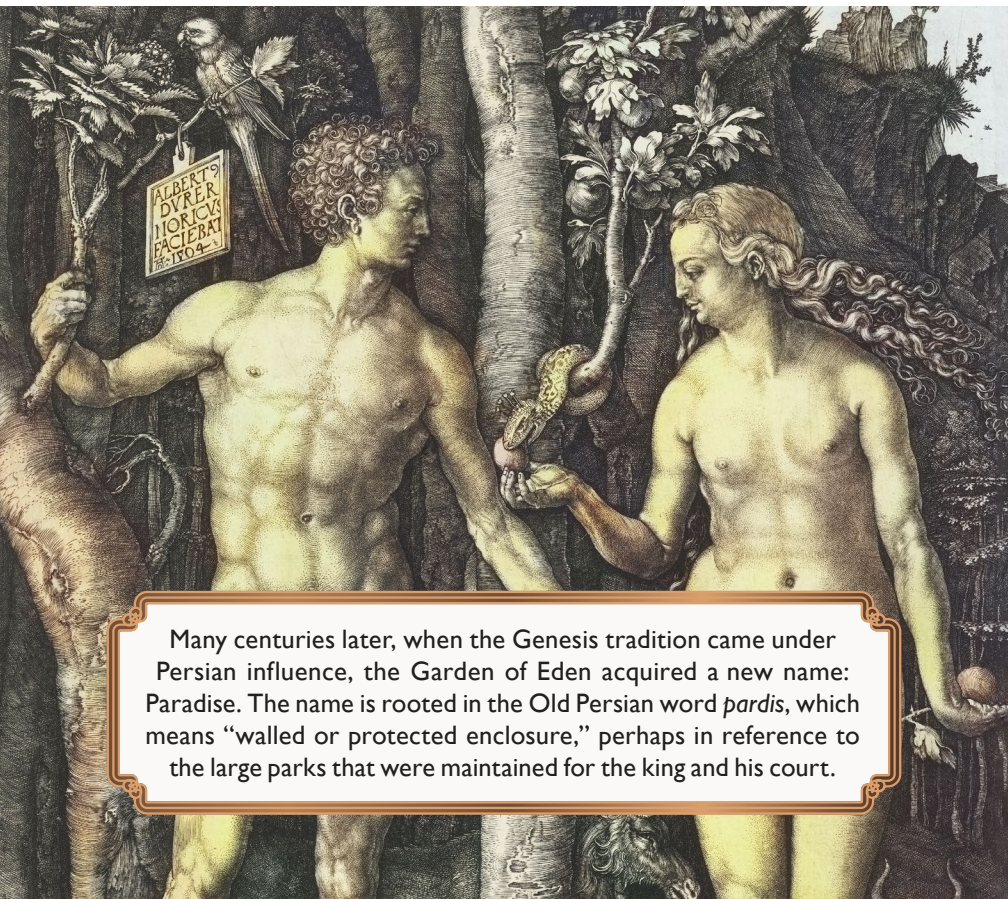
In the months and years to come, researchers found many more such texts in the area, adding up to more than 900 documents from 11 caves. They turned out to be the oldest known versions of Hebrew scripture, roughly dated to between 20 BCE and 60 CE, straddling the time of Jesus. In many ways, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is the beginning of modern biblical archaeology. They give a privileged glimpse of the Hebrew Bible at a key moment in its development and set the stage for the life and time of Jesus.

## The Oral Tradition of Genesis

- ▶ It's important to understand that Genesis wasn't written in modern times; it's not a scientific or historical argument. Instead, Genesis is the result of several oral traditions that taught that the world was not created by a multitude of gods but by one God, known as Elohim in one strand and Yahweh in another. This was a pretty radical argument, because at the time when the Genesis traditions emerged, the world was saturated with polytheism. In Mesopotamia, they worshipped a multitude of gods and goddesses, and the same was true for ancient Egypt. So to make the statement that these two great civilizations were wrong and that this small group of people, the Hebrews, was right was a very bold thing to do.
- ▶ Genesis co-opts Mesopotamian mythology to make its case. The idea that God created the heaven and the earth in seven days is also found in the Babylonian creation epic, which probably originated some four or five thousand years ago. According to this epic, the earth was formed by the god Marduk after he vanquished the ocean goddess Tiamat. On the seventh day, he created "a savage ... charged with the service of the gods." Genesis uses the same motifs that almost everyone in Mesopotamia was familiar with but makes the point that this was not the work of Marduk, or any other deity, but of Elohim.



- ▶ But Genesis is the product of not one but several oral traditions. Genesis says that Adam and Eve dwelled in a beautiful garden called Eden. They were encouraged to eat from every plant and tree except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The idea of the tree as a symbol of life has a long pedigree, not only in the cultures of Sumer and Babylonia but also Assyria. The motif of the serpent also appears in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, in which a serpent steals a plant that confers immortality. Something similar happens in the Genesis story. By eating from the tree of life, Adam and Eve lose their innocence and their connection to the primordial state of divine perfection.



Many centuries later, when the Genesis tradition came under Persian influence, the Garden of Eden acquired a new name: Paradise. The name is rooted in the Old Persian word *pardis*, which means “walled or protected enclosure,” perhaps in reference to the large parks that were maintained for the king and his court.

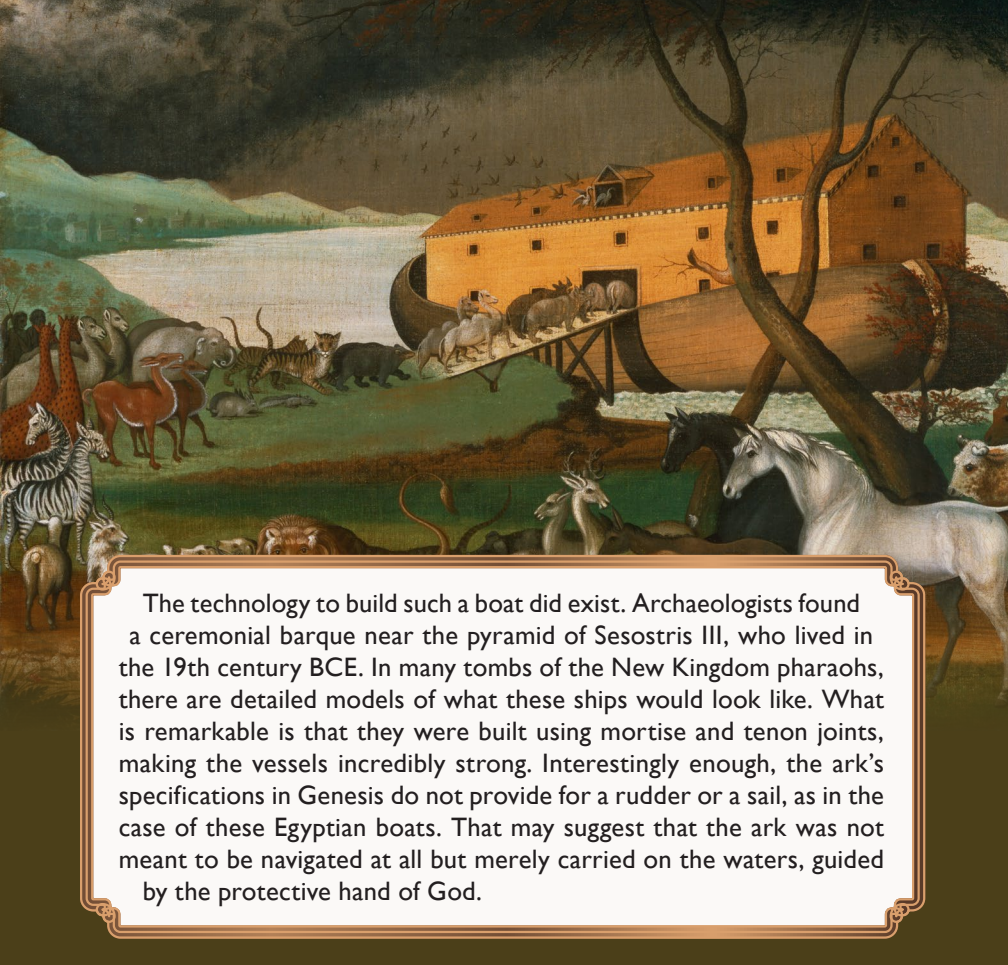
## Climate Change in Genesis

- ▶ The story of Genesis then turns to climate change. Climate change has always played a major role in the story of humankind. After the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, several glacial periods sharply reduced the earth's temperature and lowered the level of the oceans. This forced the early humans to use fire as a source of warmth and possibly as a means to cook their food, leading to major changes in their diet.
- ▶ After the last glacial period, which ended some 12,000 years ago, the gradual warming of the earth led to several animal species becoming extinct, not only because of the warmer temperature but because of changes in vegetation. In Mesopotamia, the greatest climate threat was flooding. Unlike the predictable Nile in Egypt, the Euphrates and the Tigris could rise at any moment to destroy farming fields and the carefully built network of irrigation that sustained them.
- ▶ Modern research has found traces of a catastrophic flood that must have occurred some 5,000 years ago, during the dawn of the great civilization of Sumer. An ancient tablet known as the Sumerian King List, which is roughly dated to around 2100 BCE, offers a list of all the kings of Sumer, and remarkably, it's organized into two groups: kings before the flood and kings after the flood. Samples taken from river sediments near Shuruppak, modern-day Tall Fa'rah in Iraq, show that there was a severe disruption of the local settlement and pottery production around 2900 BCE, more or less supporting what the Sumerian King List says.
- ▶ In the 1920s, British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley went digging near the ancient site of the city of Ur, today called Tall al-Muqayyar. He was astonished to find a deep layer of "perfectly clean clay, uniform throughout, the texture of which showed that it had been laid there by water." The layer was no less than eight feet deep. This great flood may have been the inspiration for many local stories of the flood—including, perhaps, the story of Noah's ark.



## Noah's Ark

- ▶ According to Genesis, when the earth's population becomes corrupt, God comes to regret that he had placed human beings in charge of his creation. He decides to destroy them with a great flood, and only one man and his family will be saved. Noah and his family are to escape from this great cataclysm by building an ark of cypress wood. God even gives Noah detailed specifications of how this ark should be built: "the length of the ark 300 cubits, its width 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits." A Sumerian cubit was roughly a foot and a half, so this was going to be a very large boat.
- ▶ Once Noah, his family, and all the animals are safely stowed aboard, the windows of the heavens open and it rains for 40 days and nights, killing every other man, woman, and child on earth. The waters eventually subside, and the ark comes to rest "on the mountains of Ararat." Many people think this refers to Mount Ararat, which is the name of a tall mountain on the border of Turkey and Armenia. Some people believe that a large impression in the earth in Turkey was left by the ark, but most geologists believe this is just a natural formation.
- ▶ What is so striking about the Noah story, however, is that Genesis once again uses literary motifs that were well-known in both the Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations. In the epic of Atrahasis, for example, the gods decide to destroy humankind with an immense inundation. But the water god Enki takes pity on a man named Atrahasis and urges him to build a boat. This vessel, the god tells him, should be filled with all of his possessions, including animals and birds.
- ▶ An even greater parallel is found in the famous Epic of Gilgamesh. "In those days," the epic says, "the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull." The gods find this to be most annoying, so they decide to do away with the noisy humans. But one god, Ea, remembers his promise to protect Utnapishtim, so he tells him to build a boat. Just as in Genesis, the god then provides detailed specifications: "let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss; then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures." And thus, Utnapishtim is saved.



The technology to build such a boat did exist. Archaeologists found a ceremonial barque near the pyramid of Sesostris III, who lived in the 19th century BCE. In many tombs of the New Kingdom pharaohs, there are detailed models of what these ships would look like. What is remarkable is that they were built using mortise and tenon joints, making the vessels incredibly strong. Interestingly enough, the ark's specifications in Genesis do not provide for a rudder or a sail, as in the case of these Egyptian boats. That may suggest that the ark was not meant to be navigated at all but merely carried on the waters, guided by the protective hand of God.

## Worship and Architecture

- ▶ These examples show that the stories of Genesis originated in a particular place and time and that Genesis uses the legends and images that people were familiar with to make its case for one God. As it happened, that place and time was the first great civilization on earth: the territory of Sumer, today's Iraq. It's here that the first major cities would rise. One of the earliest and most powerful of these city-states was Uruk, which the Bible calls Erech. It may also be the root of the word *Iraq*.

- ▶ Because of the development of irrigation canals, these cities produced a large agricultural surplus that could be traded for other goods from surrounding territories. Sumer became wealthy and was able to support the rise of artisans who could produce clothing, create tools, build monuments, or carve sculptures of the local gods. But at the core of this prosperity was agriculture, so it's not surprising that the earliest gods were closely intertwined with agricultural needs.
- ▶ The idea of a temple was still very new, but over time, each city-state developed its own principal god, in the same way that many cities in the Middle Ages dedicated themselves to a patron saint. In Uruk, for example, the dominant deity was Inanna, goddess of fertility, love, and war. She was venerated in the Pillar Temple, which stood in the heart of the city.



- ▶ An, the god of heaven and ruler of the constellations, was venerated in a structure known as the White Temple. This temple stood on a raised mound that was about 40 feet high. It's possibly the first example of what would become Sumer's most distinctive architectural form, the ziggurat. A ziggurat is a rectangular tower that rises vertically by successively receding stories that are connected by stairways. In Uruk, the ziggurat formed a raised platform on which the shrine to the god An was built.
- ▶ The worship of these gods stimulated a new form of artistic endeavor: architecture. More than any other art form, it is architecture that connects us to these prehistoric times and the Bible stories that would originate from this period. And the greatest example of such architecture would rise in the home of Abraham, the city of Ur.

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## Readings

Bertman, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*.

Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*.



# THE TOWER OF BABEL

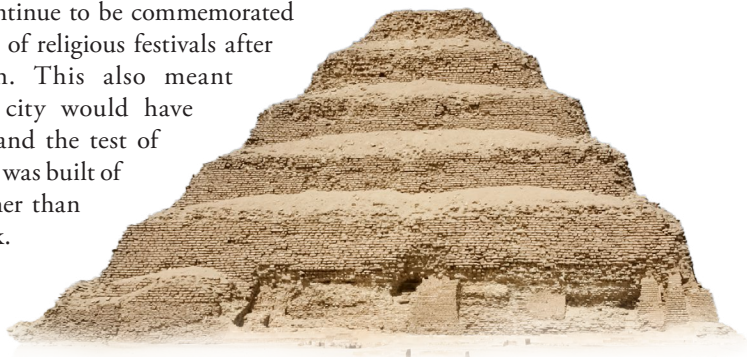
## LESSON 2

**F**rom the earliest of times, human beings have aspired to the heavens. Some scientists suggest that the urge to rise up to heaven and touch the face of God may well be embedded in our DNA. The idea of a celestial stairway to the gods is an old motif in Mesopotamia that often returns in Sumerian mythology. It also appears in the Bible, in Jacob's vision of a ladder that reaches into heaven.

Eventually, people developed the technology to build a monument to the heavens. Their main purpose was to create a mediating space between the gods and humankind, between earth and the firmament. And because the earth's laws of gravity are universal, this naturally led to one form: a pyramid.

## The Saqqara Pyramid

- ▶ As in Mesopotamia, Egypt's civilization first rose along the banks of a great river, the Nile. Communities slowly coalesced into villages, towns, and city-states. In Egypt, these regions were called nomes, and each was run by a tribal chieftain. By 3300 BCE, these nomes had merged into two distinct kingdoms. The first, known as Lower Egypt, covered a territory from the Mediterranean to an area roughly near today's Cairo. This was the Nile delta, a fertile land permeated with tributaries of the Nile. The other kingdom was referred to as Upper Egypt. In this far more forbidding landscape, the pharaohs would build some of their greatest monuments, including Abydos, Karnak, and Abu Simbel.
- ▶ In the 3rd century BCE, an Egyptian historian named Manetho created a chronology of ancient Egypt that modern historians still use today. He says that around 3100 BCE, just as Uruk emerged as the leading city-state of Sumer, a mythical king named Narmer unified the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt. Narmer went on to establish the Old Kingdom of Egypt, beginning the first of 31 dynasties that would ultimately span some 3,000 years. Each king or pharaoh was revered as a god—the living descendant of the sun god Ra.
- ▶ Narmer's son then anchored the unified kingdom by building a capital city at Memphis, not far from modern Cairo. It was in Saqqara, which served Memphis as the necropolis for noblemen, that the Third Dynasty built the oldest example of a monumental architecture that is still standing today. The amazing complex was built by King Djoser. His idea was to create a mortuary facility where he would continue to be commemorated in a series of religious festivals after his death. This also meant that the city would have to withstand the test of time, so it was built of stone rather than mud brick.



- ▶ To achieve this daunting task, Djoser turned to a highly gifted architect named Imhotep. The tour de force of Imhotep's design is a massive stepped pyramid, which in its heyday rose to around 200 feet. Imhotep achieved this stupendous height by stacking a series of blocks of diminishing size. Deep inside this massive structure is the burial chamber for the pharaoh, hacked out of sheer bedrock. Many of these buildings were built of limestone rather than baked brick, which is why they remain in astonishingly good condition to this day.
- ▶ Most historians agree that the Egyptian pyramid emerged from the desire to mark the grave of a nobleman with a mastaba, or stepped mound. It's possible that these mounds symbolized the primeval mound from which the earth was originally created and to which the deceased were destined to return. Others have argued that Imhotep's pyramid represents the social arrangement of a unified Egyptian society under the benevolent rule of King Djoser. Still others have suggested the theory that pyramids were used for astronomical observations. Whatever the case may be, the Saqqara pyramid set the trend for pharaohs to come.

The greatest pyramids were built in the 26th century BCE. These include the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure, each of which took just 20 to 25 years to complete. Unlike the stepped design in Saqqara, these monuments were clad with a veneer of limestone to create a smooth surface. Even though the pyramids were eventually stripped of their precious limestone, the structures still stand after more than 4,500 years.

## Mesopotamian Ziggurats

- ▶ In Mesopotamia, the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE also saw the rise of monumental architecture, but it served a different purpose: to honor the gods rather than to commemorate kings who had died. The Sumerians did not recognize the need for a professional architect, and most of the designing was left to skilled scribes. Still, the ability to build great monuments was just as important in the Sumerian city-states. It was considered one of the greatest gifts the gods had bestowed on humankind.
- ▶ The famous Epic of Gilgamesh says that Uruk, known as Erech in the Bible, was one of the first planned cities in human history. It had spacious streets, market squares, temples, and gardens, all surrounded by a protective wall and canal. There were even zoned districts that distinguished between residential and commercial areas. The temple was at the core of the religious precincts, not unlike the way medieval cities would grow around their cathedral.
- ▶ Throughout the late 4th and early 3rd millennia, these religious shrines grew from simple, single-hall structures to sophisticated designs that, as in the case of ancient Egypt, aspired to the heavens. But whereas Egyptian architects tried to create a perfect pyramid with smooth shapes on all four sides, Mesopotamian pyramids—or ziggurats—were shaped as a series of receding platforms with tapered walls. And unlike the Egyptian pyramids, the summit was shaped as a flat platform, accessible through a series of external ramps and stairways.
- ▶ One of the best-preserved ziggurats is the one at Ur, which was excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s. This ziggurat was built by Ur-Nammu, the king of Ur around 2100 BCE, and later expanded by the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus, around 550 BCE. It was built on three levels, each accessible via stairways, and topped by the shrine dedicated to the moon god Nanna. Excavations show that the ziggurat was surrounded by an elaborate sanctuary that included temple facilities, a treasury, and residences for the priesthood.



The earliest figurines from Mesopotamia are rather primitive depictions, but as time wore on, the sculptors of Sumer became more confident in shaping larger and more realistic depictions of the gods and their worshippers. One example is the Mask of Warka, excavated in Uruk and tentatively dated to 3100 BCE. What makes these sculptures from Sumer so significant is that these are the earliest sculpted representations of human beings, from the world's first great civilization.



- ▶ Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of 32 such ziggurats in both Iraq and Iran. The facades of these ziggurats were usually covered with glazed or colored brick that illustrated the deity to whom the temple was dedicated or the king who was responsible for its construction. Some even have astrological references, which suggests that ziggurats may have been used for celestial observation.

## The Tower of Babel

- ▶ Could the Mesopotamian ziggurat have been the setting, if not the inspiration, for the story of the Tower of Babel? According to Genesis, the story is set in a time when “the whole earth had one language and the same words.” This likely refers to some primordial time when the people of the earth had yet to develop diverse cultures and languages. Genesis also claims the people of the city of Babel had invented a new technology: the creation of bricks from baked clay. This is also an interesting point, because unlike in Egypt, the ziggurats of Mesopotamia were usually built from mud brick.

- ▶ Of course, in Genesis, the Babel project does not remain hidden from God for long. “The Lord came down to see the city,” says the Bible, “and the tower which the children of men had built.” Rather than destroying this monumental project, God decides to “confuse their language there, so that they will not understand each other’s speech.” Unable to communicate with one another, the builders leave the city and are scattered abroad.
- ▶ This is an interesting coda to the story, because the name *Babel* is a typical example of the fondness in Genesis for double meanings. On the one hand, the Akkadian word *bab-ili* means “the gate of the gods,” and that’s likely the root of the word *Babylon*. But *balal* in Hebrew also means something like “sowing confusion” and may be related to the English verb *babble*.
- ▶ The message from Genesis—the idea that building a tower would lead to ruin—did not come to pass in Sumer, but in Egypt. The task of building a huge pyramid complex consumed a pharaoh’s attention from the moment he took office, and it also drained his treasury. By the end of the Old Kingdom, around 2184 BCE, Egypt lay exhausted from the burden of building pyramids. Its troubles were compounded by a downturn in international trade and the failure of harvests. As a result, the power of the central administration crumbled. Only by the beginning of the Eleventh Dynasty, around 2055 BCE, was pharaonic power strong enough to reunify the country once more and enter the Middle Kingdom period.



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## Readings

Cargill, *The Cities That Built the Bible*.

Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings*.



# THE JOURNEYS OF ABRAHAM

## LESSON 3

**I**n many ways, Genesis articulates all of the great themes that will run throughout the Hebrew Bible, including the role of God as creator of the universe and as the principal force of moral justice in the world. It also introduces the promise of a covenant between God and his people, who will dwell in peace and prosper as long as they abide by the terms of that covenant. But along the way, the focus changes.

At first, the scope of the book is universal, encompassing the primeval history of the earth and all its living creatures. From this point forward, the Genesis narrative shifts from a wide-angle lens to more of a close-up. It narrows down to the stories of the patriarchs, beginning with Noah and culminating in the journeys of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, which take the story into Egypt.

## The World's First Script

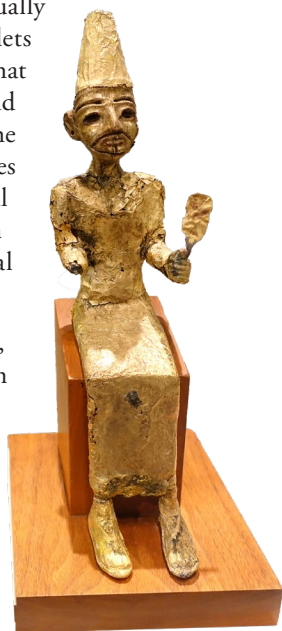
- ▶ The Bible places the origin of Abraham's family in the Sumerian city-state of Ur. In many ways, Sumer is truly the cradle of human civilization. But the most important invention of all was Sumer's development of the world's first script. As the market for agricultural surplus grew, these merchants naturally wanted to keep track of how much they sold to whom and how much that was worth. So the world's first written records are not love poems or some great historical epic but rather prosaic records describing the exchange of wheat for barrels of beer.
- ▶ These early tablets still use some rather crude pictograms, essentially little drawings that identify the goods. But through daily use, these pictograms became more stylized into what today we would call an alphabet. On one such tablet, the pictograms have evolved into wedge-shaped markings that are pressed into soft clay with a stylus. Historians refer to this script as cuneiform, based on the Latin word for "wedge." This form of writing would rule the ancient world for almost 3,000 years, until the advent of the Phoenician script and a new medium, parchment and paper.
- ▶ Clay tablets are important because clay is impervious to fire. You can set a house on fire and the clay won't mind; it will only get harder. This is why we have more records from the Bronze Age than from antiquity, when people shifted to scrolls of papyrus and, later, paper, which are both much more fragile than clay.

### WAS ABRAHAM A HISTORICAL FIGURE?

For these Hebrews, the story of Abraham was a living reality because it validated their faith in a single divine power, as compared to the mixed bag of deities that ruled nations far more powerful than their own. It took guts to do that, and the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob gave them that courage. Scholars may debate the fact that Abraham and the patriarchs were probably literary constructs, but that doesn't take away the great moral truth of their stories.

## Abraham's Journey to Canaan

- ▶ Terah, Abraham's father, decides to leave Ur and move to the city of Harran. Bereft of their lands, they have no choice but to adopt a nomadic lifestyle herding livestock. And when Terah dies, the mantle of leadership falls on his oldest son, Abraham, or Abram, as he is called at this stage. His wife Sarai, later known as Sarah, is barren, but Abraham had adopted his nephew Lot, the son of his deceased brother.
- ▶ The family slowly begins to prosper in Harran, building houses instead of tents and acquiring more livestock. But one day, says the Bible, Abraham feels a stirring in his soul: a whisper of the voice of God telling him that Harran is not his destiny. He must go farther south, to the land of Canaan.
- ▶ It's interesting that Abraham takes God at his word. Sumer was a society with many gods, and a man like Abraham would have been raised in a household that worshipped these gods. But this segment of Genesis uses the word *El* or *Elohim*, which is usually translated as "the Lord," to denote God. Tablets recovered from the ancient city of Ugarit reveal that a god named El was revered throughout Syria and Canaan as the head of the pantheon of gods and the father of creation. It's also interesting that God does not order Abraham to burn the idols of his ancestral gods that were always present in a Mesopotamian household. He will ask Jacob to do that several generations later, but not yet.
- ▶ What makes the El of Genesis different, however, is that this God reveals himself to a single human being. With this simple act, Abraham's El signals that he is unlike any of the deities that Abraham may have worshipped before. What's more, God makes Abraham a very tantalizing offer: Once he's in Canaan, God will make of him a great nation and bless all of his descendants. So Abraham and Sarah, as well as his nephew Lot and all their servants, leave for Canaan, to the land that God will show him.



Canaanite god El

## Sodom and Gomorrah

- ▶ One theme in the story of Abraham is that of tensions within the clan that threaten to tear the tribal bonds apart. One such split takes place when it becomes clear that Abraham's wells and pastures can no longer support his own herds as well those of his nephew Lot. So he gives Lot a choice of his lands, and Lot picks the best ones, the irrigated plains of Jordan near the Dead Sea. There, he settles in a place called Sodom. Abraham eventually settles in Hebron, in the highlands of what today is called the West Bank.
- ▶ But then, says Genesis, it comes to God's attention that evil things are happening in the plain of Jordan, particularly in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God decides to wipe out this evil, just as he had destroyed the wickedness of humankind with the Flood. Abraham immediately fears for Lot and his family. He intervenes with God to save them, and God agrees. Angels bundle Lot and his family out of the city before God rains down sulfur and fire from heaven. But on the way, Lot's wife cannot contain her curiosity, and she looks back. In that instant, says Genesis, "she became a pillar of salt."
- ▶ As in the case of the Great Flood, archaeologists have searched for evidence of this cataclysm. One theory holds that the cities were destroyed by a great earthquake somewhere between 2100 and 1900 BCE. In 2013, Steven Collins of Trinity Southwest University argued that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was inspired by the impact of a massive meteor. Whatever the case may be, the shores of the Dead Sea are still covered with salt to this day.

## Abraham's Sons

- ▶ After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham drifts farther south to the city of Beersheba in the Negev desert. At this point, Abraham faces another problem. He's getting old, and because Sarah is barren, this raises the question of who will succeed Abraham as head of the clan and heir to God's covenant.
- ▶ The couple decides to engage a surrogate mother. The prevailing laws at the time were explicit: If a woman could not bear her husband a child, it was her responsibility to find a woman who could. Sarah picks Hagar,

one of the slave girls they'd brought back from Egypt. Hagar is young and headstrong, and as soon as she knows she's pregnant, her attitude changes. She knows that she's become very valuable—she carries the future of the tribe in her womb. So she refuses to do the household chores that Sarah tells her to do.

- ▶ The law did extend some protection to surrogate mothers, which is rather unusual. The Code of Hammurabi states that “if a female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her.” While Sarah can't just dismiss her, she makes Hagar's life so miserable that the pregnant girl runs away into the desert and collapses near an oasis. There, an angel appears and tells the girl, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring, that they cannot be counted for multitude.” In other words, here is another covenant, another promise of a great nation. Hagar is to call her son Yishmael—or Ishmael—Hebrew for “God hears me,” because God has given heed to Sarah's prayers for a son.



One of the prevailing laws at the time was the Code of Hammurabi, originally compiled by the Babylonian king Hammurabi in the 18th century BCE. It was one of the most detailed legislative documents and was widely distributed through stelae, or upright monuments. Among its 282 rules was one that specified that infertility was a legitimate reason to divorce one's wife.

- ▶ Something incredible then happens: Abraham is visited by angels who tell him that at 90 years, Sarah will finally bear him a son. Genesis says that when Abraham heard the prophesy, he “fell on his face and laughed.” Sarah does give birth to a son, and they call him Yishaq, or Isaac, which means “he will laugh,” just as Abraham did.
- ▶ Now, Abraham faces a new problem: Which of these two sons will inherit the covenant? The Code of Hammurabi said that the children of the principal wife could be favored, and that’s exactly what Abraham decides to do. Poor Hagar and Ishmael are sent into the desert, and Isaac is affirmed as the heir of God’s covenant.
- ▶ But there is a unique twist to the story: God now assures Abraham, “As far as Ishmael is concerned, I have heard you; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.” Later on, Genesis even lists the tribes that will be founded by Ishmael’s sons—and they are Arab tribes. So it is actually Genesis that lays the foundation for Ishmael as the ancestor of Islam. Indeed, from this point, the story of Ishmael is continued in the Qur’an. Abraham has truly become the father of three monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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## Readings

Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*.

Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*.



# JOSEPH IN EGYPT

## LESSON 4

**A**fter the story of Abraham, Genesis navigates the line of his descendants, including Isaac and Rebekah, their sons Esau and Jacob, and Jacob's sons, who would become the founding members of the 12 tribes of Israel. All of these stories are set in the culture of Syria-Canaan, and some of those cultural influences seep into the narrative. In Canaan, El was also revered, but as the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon of gods.

Genesis makes an explicit reference to these pagan gods when Jacob returns from Haran with his wives, concubines, and servants. He tells his entourage, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes." But the next story, that of Dinah, shows that it's difficult to live in a land without acculturating to the customs of that land in some way. The tension between the Hebrews and the population of the lands they inhabit runs throughout the Hebrew Bible and will become prominent in the story of the Israelite settlement after the Exodus.

## Dinah and Shechem

- ▶ Dinah is Jacob's daughter by his first wife, Leah. At this point in the story, Jacob and his family have settled once more in Shechem, the place where Abraham built his first altar to God many years ago. While Dinah is there, she meets the son of Hamor, the local chieftain. The son is called Shechem, just like the town. As soon as he sees the lovely Dinah, Shechem cannot contain himself. He's a powerful person as the son of the local ruler, and he thinks he can force himself on the girl. He rapes her, breaking the fragile sense of coexistence between the Hebrews and Canaanites.
- ▶ Shechem runs to his father and begs him to intervene, as he's actually fallen in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. Hamor asks for a parlay with Jacob in an effort to work this out peacefully. He offers for their clans to integrate with one another: "Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves."
- ▶ Jacob is angry and hurt over the rape of his daughter, but he realizes that it serves no purpose to perpetuate these tensions, because they want to live here, in Shechem. They want to graze their herds on the pastures and drink of the wells that are all in Hamor's jurisdiction. Hamor appears to sense that, saying, "You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it."
- ▶ Jacob likes this proposition, but his sons are still upset about what happened to their sister. So they impose a condition on this deal, which is that every male in the village will be circumcised, just as they are. Otherwise, there is no way that the Canaanites can marry Dinah or any of the other women. Hamor and his son Shechem may not quite understand what's involved with this, but Shechem is so much in love that they agree to the terms.

## Revenge on Shechem

- ▶ The idea of circumcision originated with God when Sarah gave birth to Isaac. From that point on, all of Abraham's descendants would be circumcised at birth as a physical token of their covenant with God. Circumcising a newborn infant is a simple procedure that continues to this day, but circumcising an adult is an entirely different matter. Even in the best of circumstances, it is a painful affair, and surgery in the Bronze Age was still very primitive.

- ▶ So all of the males in Shechem are circumcised, leaving most of them down for the count while they recover. It now emerges that this was all part of the plan: While most of the men in Shechem are at home and in pain, two of Dinah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, take their swords, enter the village, and kill all the men. They even kill Shechem and his father. As soon as that’s done, the other brothers pour in and plunder the city. They take the women, the children, and all of the livestock as their loot, and with that, Shechem ceases to exist.
- ▶ Jacob is shocked. He didn’t condone this, and now he knows that his family will always be fugitives in the land. Any hope of peaceful coexistence with the local Canaanites is now lost. But what’s done is done, so they pull the pegs of their tents and move to Bethel, or Beth-El, which means the “House of God.” Bethel will become prominent in later stories of the Hebrew Bible. This is where Jacob dreams of a ladder between heaven and earth and where a shrine to Yahweh will be built. Today, Bethel has been identified with the Arab village of Beitin, in the West Bank.
- ▶ Along their journey, Rachel, the favorite of Jacob’s two wives and the mother of Joseph, dies while giving birth to a boy named Benjamin. The story then shifts to Joseph. Just as the narrative up to now has been shaped by the culture of Syria-Canaan, the story of Joseph is developed in the context of an entirely different culture: the great civilization of ancient Egypt.

## Joseph’s Journey to Egypt

- ▶ After Rachel’s death, Jacob begins to lavish attention on Joseph, his son by his beloved wife. Joseph’s brothers, including the sons of the “unloved” wife, Leah, don’t like that at all. In the end, the brothers decide to get rid of Joseph. They set the stage by taking their flocks far up north, away from the home fields in Shechem. Eventually, Jacob becomes worried and asks Joseph to go and see where they are. Joseph finds them near the town of Dothan, located some 65 miles north of Hebron.
- ▶ As it happens, Dothan is located right on one of the main trade routes from Syria to Egypt. A caravan of Ishmaelites—the term that Genesis uses to indicate Arab traders, as descendants of Ishmael—is just passing by, and so the brothers decide to sell Joseph as a slave. The deal is done “for twenty pieces of silver,” which was the going rate for a healthy male slave in the Bronze Age.

- ▶ Genesis says that Joseph is taken from Dothan to Egypt, a distance of more than 300 miles. He's put to work in the household of Potiphar, a captain of the pharaoh's guard. Joseph soon impresses everyone with his diligence and loyalty. There is only one problem: Potiphar's wife is bored. It isn't long before she begins to take an interest in this handsome young lad from Canaan.



- ▶ Genesis does not give the wife's name, but the Qur'an names her as Zuleikha. One day, she tries to get Joseph into bed, but Joseph, the righteous young man that he is, refuses. This makes her mad, but it also makes her worried that Joseph might tell her husband about the failed attempt at seduction. So she decides on a preemptive strike: When Potiphar comes home, she tells him that Joseph had tried to rape her. It's her word against Joseph's, and the wife prevails. Joseph is arrested and thrown in prison.

## The Pharaoh's Dream

- ▶ While in prison, Joseph makes a name for himself by interpreting dreams. That might seem strange, but once again, Genesis is using a core motif of Egyptian culture. There were hundreds of dream books that claimed to know the meaning of sleep-induced visions, whether these foretold good fortune or disaster. Some people even went to sleep in the temple of their favorite god in the hope that this deity would reveal an answer to their questions.

Trying to place the stories of the Bible in a particular historical framework is always a difficult task, but it's feasible to place Joseph's story in a unique moment of Egypt's history: the Second Intermediate Period. By the beginning of this period, around 1640 BCE, migrants from Anatolia, Syria, and Canaan had taken control of Lower Egypt, and from there, they controlled the Nile delta.

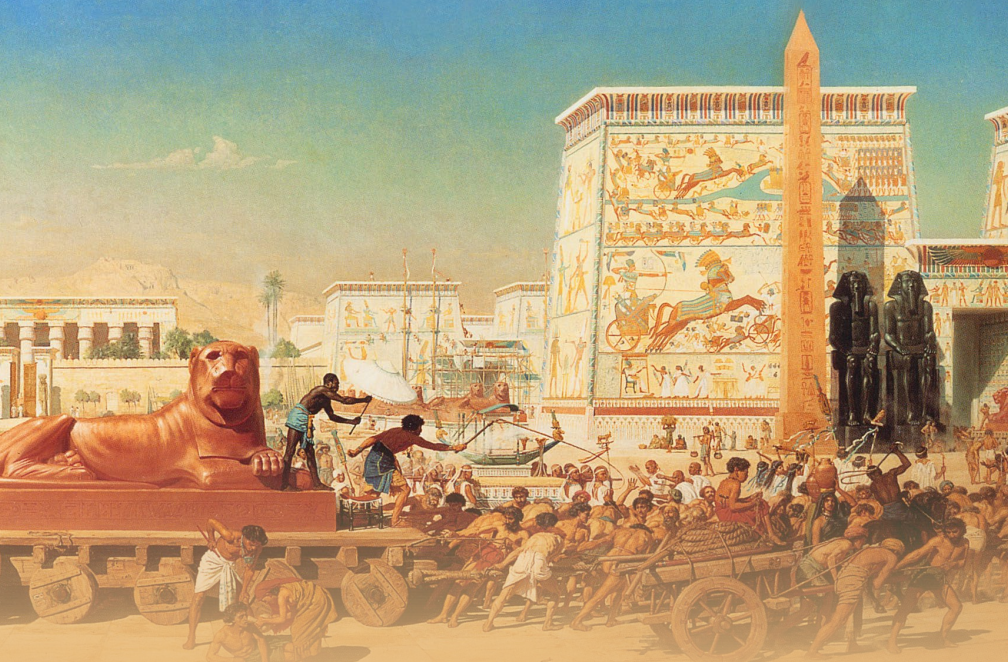
- ▶ Then the pharaoh himself has a strange dream, and no one can tell him what it means. Fortunately, someone remembers that Joseph is a skillful dream whisperer, and so the young man is summoned from prison and brought to the court of the pharaoh. Joseph interprets the dream to mean there will be seven years of fortune and then seven years of famine. No dynasty could ever survive that: As Egypt's history shows, whenever the harvest failed for one or more years in a row, great political upheaval followed.
- ▶ Joseph has a solution to this problem: "Let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise," he says, "and set him over the land of Egypt." Then, "let them gather all the food of the good years that are coming" and store it for when times are bad. The pharaoh is deeply impressed and selects Joseph for the role. The slave from Canaan becomes the grand vizier, the prime minister of Egypt. Historians have scoffed at this idea; it's a wonderful legend, but there's no evidence that any such grand vizier ever existed.
- ▶ After seven years, the famine does come. Once again, people from across Canaan stream to Egypt in hopes of buying grain. The Bible says that Jacob's sons are among them. After several tests, Joseph reveals himself, the brothers embrace him, and the clan of Jacob moves to the land of Goshen, where they will live for generations to come.

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## Readings

Bietak, *Avaris, the Capital of the Hyksos*.

Wilkinson, *The Ancient Egyptians*.



# THE STORY OF MOSES

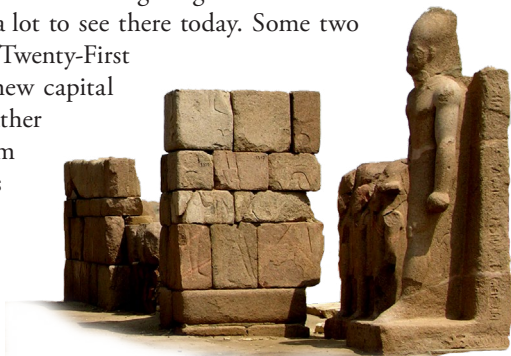
## LESSON 5

**F**or nearly a century, immigrants known as the Hyksos held sway over Lower Egypt and the fertile region of the Nile delta. They created their own line of kings, the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Dynasties, while the original line of Egyptian kings ruled from their refuge in Thebes. But inevitably, the old nobility plotted their return in a grand invasion of the north. What followed was a civil war between Lower and Upper Egypt that was vicious and bloody.

Having ousted the Hyksos, the Eighteenth Dynasty was the beginning of a glorious new era in ancient Egypt, a period that historians refer to as the New Kingdom. Its kings vowed never again to suffer the humiliation of foreign control of their territory. They conquered much of Canaan, the land later known as Israel, as well as parts of Syria and Anatolia to create buffer zones around the Egyptian homeland.

## Pithom and Rameses

- ▶ Exodus opens with the statement that “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” What that means is that the rulers of the New Kingdom no longer recognized the rights and title by which the descendants of Joseph had been free to live and work in the Nile delta. Put simply, the Hebrews in Egypt had now become stateless persons. But the warrior kings of the New Kingdom had another problem: With so many able-bodied men serving in the army, who was going to tend to the fields? Who was going to build the strongholds along the border? The answer was obvious: the immigrants from Canaan.
- ▶ They were still considered foreigners, which is why, says Exodus, Pharaoh was afraid that in the event of war, these Hebrews would “join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” He decides to “set taskmasters over them, to oppress them with forced labor.” Exodus gives the names of the garrison cities that these Israelites were supposed to build: Pithom and Rameses.
- ▶ Here, for the first time, Egyptian records dovetail with the story in the Bible. In the mid-1280s BCE, King Seti I did indeed begin the construction of a garrison city that the Bible calls Rameses. Years later, King Ramses II decided to build another city along the border, which he called Per-Atum, which means “the House of Atum,” the ancient Egyptian god of creation. In the Bible, *Per-Atum* becomes *Pithom*.
- ▶ The ancient city of Rameses is today located near the village of Qantir. This is where the Israelites slaved on building the great monuments of Ramses II, but there isn't a lot to see there today. Some two centuries later, the kings of the Twenty-First Dynasty decided to build a new capital nearby, in the city of Tanis. Rather than building this capital from scratch, they helped themselves to the stones, decoration, and sculptures of Rameses. Here are the monuments that may have been built by immigrant workers—perhaps even the Israelites.



City of Tanis

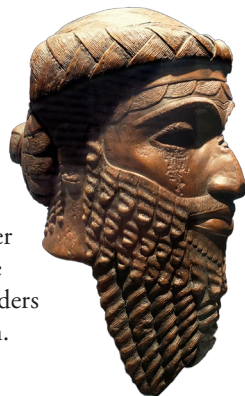
## The Story of Moses

- ▶ The story of Moses is fundamental to Judaism and entirely separate from the question of whether Moses is a historical figure. No other figure so captures the history, the law, and the *raison d'être* of the Jewish people as Moses. While some believe that Moses was a historical person, the majority today agree that the figure of Moses is perhaps a composite of several different traditions. Nevertheless, that composite may still be informed by the very real experience of Israelites working in Egypt.
- ▶ As in the case of Joseph, there are no Egyptian records that refer to Moses, the man who, according to the Bible, was raised by Pharaoh's daughter "as her own son." But there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that the story of Moses's birth is set in the reign of King Seti I, the father of Ramses II. According to Egyptian records, Seti was married to Queen Tui, who indeed presented him with two children: a son and heir, Ramses, and a daughter named Tia. But that princess had no son, let alone a son named Moses.
- ▶ According to the story, Pharaoh had decreed that all newborn boys among the Hebrews be cast into the river. One of these newborns is the baby of Amram and Jochebed. To save their child, Jochebed sets the baby adrift on the river in a basket made of papyrus and sealed with pitch. Eventually, the basket is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, who takes pity on the child and decides to adopt him. She calls him Moses "because," she says, "I drew him out of the water." The Hebrew verb *moshe* means "to draw out."



*Moshe* or *moses* was a common patronymic in Egypt used to invoke the protection of a patron god. *Thutmose*, the name of the king who conquered Canaan, means "son of Tut." *Rameses* means "son of Ra." Perhaps Moses's name once carried the name of a god which later traditions decided to omit.

- ▶ The Hebrew Bible once again borrows motifs from ancient history to underscore the divine intent of Moses's mission. The image of Moses drifting down the river in a basket is perhaps inspired by the saga of Sargon I, founder of the Akkadian empire. Legend says that the infant Sargon was also placed "in a box made of reeds," smeared with tar, and cast on the river so as to escape his enemies. The purpose of these literary parallels is to show how the birth of great leaders is ordained by the divine, and Exodus is no exception.



## Moses and Midian

- ▶ The New Kingdom maintained two capitals: one in Lower Egypt and one in Upper Egypt. Exodus suggests that Moses lived in the palace up north, close to the garrison cities of Pithom and Rameses, where he sees the Israelites hard at labor. At one point, he sees an Egyptian overseer beating one of the Israelite slaves. In a fit of rage, Moses jumps in and kills the taskmaster. He then hides the body in the sand so that no one will discover the deed. Clearly, he is afraid that Pharaoh will find out. But as a prince at the royal court, he would have an authority second only to the king himself. Who would dare to denounce him? And why would the king so rashly condemn his adopted grandson?



- ▶ Remember, much of the Near East was under Egyptian control. Some of these regions were ruled by Egyptian governors, as in the case of Canaan, but some were governed by vassal kings. These were sheikhs who over time had earned the trust of the Egyptian crown and could rule their territory as they saw fit, provided they paid their tribute on time and kept their people in check.
- ▶ One of these vassal regions was Midian. It had been conquered during the Eighteenth Dynasty and had earned the right to a measure of self-government. But even for such loyal vassals, the Egyptian kings wanted to have some leverage. So each was ordered to send their oldest son to the Egyptian court to be educated. This made sure that these foreign princes were thoroughly indoctrinated before they would succeed their fathers as rulers of their domain, but it also meant that if the local vassals did anything to displease the pharaoh, their son would instantly be put to death.
- ▶ The story of Moses may be based on an oral tradition about a Midianite prince in Thebes. It would explain why Moses has reason to fear the wrath of Pharaoh, and it would also explain why Moses feels a certain kinship with the Israelites in the Nile delta. According to Genesis, the ancestor of the tribe of the Midianites is none other than the son of Abraham's second wife, Keturah. Their customs, songs, and prayers would not have been so different from those that Moses observed among the Israelites in Goshen. That also explains the destination of Moses's flight from Egypt: the region of Midian.

## **Egyptian Temples**

- ▶ God speaks to Moses in the form of a burning bush and charges him and his brother Aaron to lead the Israelites out of bondage. They travel to Egypt and petition the Egyptian king, but Pharaoh is outraged that they even dare to make such a request. He orders that his taskmasters should “no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before,” but let them “gather straw for themselves.” Here is another detail gleaned from fact, as straw was indeed the binding agent by which workers made mud bricks, the basic component of many structures in Egypt.

- ▶ Since most Egyptian buildings were made of mud brick, they were all washed away or otherwise destroyed through the centuries. But there is one exception: Egypt's temples. Unlike residential or administrative buildings, the temples of the New Kingdom period were usually built of stone. Temples often served a dual purpose, being the site of worship of an Egyptian god as well as the resting place of an Egyptian king. This is where all Egyptians went to pray, give offerings, and seek guidance from the god who dwelled within.
- ▶ Most of these temples would be decorated with colorful ornamentation, all inspired by themes in Egyptian mythology and cosmology. All of this took time, of course, so pharaohs typically began building a temple to their patron god, including their own mortuary temple, as soon as they began their reign. It is against the backdrop of one of these giant construction sites that Moses and Aaron urge Pharaoh to let most of his enslaved labor force go. When Pharaoh declines, that is the moment when, according to Exodus, God intervenes with an awesome display of his power.

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## Readings

Isbouts, *From Moses to Muhammad*.

James, *The Ancient Gods*.



# THE MYSTERY OF THE EXODUS

## LESSON 6

**I**n Egypt, the king ruled on the basis of a covenant with his people. That covenant specified that the people would work hard and grant the king all the privileges and luxuries of his rank, provided that he did his job in securing the divine order and the continued protection of their gods. Exodus says that when Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites depart from Egypt, God punishes him with 10 plagues. The purpose of these plagues is not only to affect the success of the harvest but, by extension, to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the king.

## The 10 Plagues

- ▶ Exodus says that the first plague begins when God causes the water of the Nile to turn to blood, making its waters undrinkable and killing the fish. Then, thousands of frogs cover the land, followed by an invasion of gnats and flies. Next, hailstorms ravage the fields and destroy the harvest; whatever remains is then devoured by locusts. These are all attacks on the very core of the Egyptian economy: the integrity of the Nile and the crucial role of the harvest.
- ▶ But these plagues may be inspired by what modern scientists have actually observed in Egypt's ecosystem. For example, the Nile does at times turn red, either because of red soil deposits from the Abyssinian lakes or a mix of algae and bacteria in the water. When that happens, the fish die, the Nile becomes toxic, and all the animals that depend on the Nile flee inland in search of fresh water. That may explain why frogs suddenly cover the land. And with piles of dead fish along the shoreline, an outbreak of disease, carried by flies and other insects, is inevitable—that is the pestilence that the fifth plague talks about. During the sixth plague, the disease then spreads to humans and causes boils.
- ▶ The seventh plague changes its focus: Instead of the Nile, it now targets Egypt's climate. Vast hailstorms lash the land and destroy all the plants and trees as well as all the flax and barley in the field. Pharaoh knows his throne is at stake, so he promises Moses that he will let his people go as soon as Moses ends the storm. Moses does so, but of course, Pharaoh changes his mind.
- ▶ The idea of a hailstorm in the hot climate of Egypt might sound farfetched, but it can get very cold in the winter months. The presence of high levels of moisture can also encourage the breeding of a variety of insects, including locusts, which Exodus identifies as the eighth plague. In May of 2020, huge swarms of locusts devastated East Africa, destroying as much as 300 million pounds of crops in a single day—the equivalent of food for 35,000 people per year. These locusts are so voracious that they even attack small infants.

- ▶ Next came the ninth plague: a darkness that settles over all of Egypt. One phenomenon that can have the effect of creating darkness is a type of sandstorm known as a khamsin. As it blows from the southwest across the Sahara, a khamsin can travel from Libya across Egypt and down the Arabian Peninsula with temperatures of more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It typically carries large amounts of sand and dust that can turn day into dusk, or even night. It can also last for a long time: *Khamsin* means “50” in Arabic, meaning that this terrible wind from the Sahara can easily last for 50 days or more.

## The Death of the Firstborn

- ▶ But it is the 10th and final plague that finally breaks Pharaoh’s will. As God says to Moses, he will go throughout Egypt and kill all of the nation’s firstborn sons. It’s a terror attack, pure and simple, not only to shock Pharaoh out of his complacency but also to exact a heavy price for the killing of the Hebrews’ firstborn sons a generation earlier.



- ▶ Of course, God must make sure that the Israelite slaves are not harmed. He tells Moses and Aaron that each Hebrew family must slaughter a lamb and then brush its blood on the two doorposts and the lintel of their houses. This way, the angel of death will know to pass over these homes. Each family must roast the lamb and eat it with their walking staff in hand, ready to leave at a moment's notice. This is the first Passover, a moment that will be remembered every year from that day forward to celebrate the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt.
- ▶ Could the 10th plague have been inspired by an actual event? Something odd took place in 1995 with regards to the household of Ramses II, the pharaoh who may be the king that Exodus has in mind. In May of that year, a team from the American University in Cairo discovered a large tomb in the Valley of the Kings. From the names and cartouches inscribed on the walls, the excavators determined that this tomb belonged to the family of Ramses II. In all, they uncovered 50 mummies. All of them were sons of the pharaoh, who scholars think must have fathered more than 100 children with multiple wives.



- ▶ Among these princes was the pharaoh's oldest son by his wife, Queen Nefertari. He was the crown prince, and yet he died while Ramses was still alive. Could this be the son who perished during the ravages of the 10th plague? Or did the premature death of the crown prince inspire the story of the death of the firstborn? Whatever the case may be, the 10th plague is the final straw. Grief-stricken, Pharaoh summons Moses and says, "Go away from my people, you and the Israelites. Take your flocks and your herds ... and be gone!" The people of Israel are released from bondage, their freedom paid in blood.

In their haste to leave, when baking bread for the journey, the women cannot wait for the dough to rise. So they bake bread from unleavened flour, producing the hard, cracker-like wafers known as matzo, which is still an integral part of Passover celebrations to this day. They also discover that this is actually a good thing, for in the desert, matzo lasts much longer than regular bread.

## Great Bitter Lake

- ▶ The Way of Shur runs across the Sinai Desert to today's Israel. At first, that's the direction that Moses seems to take, before he decides to set up camp at Etham. If he had continued on this road, he would have reached the doorstep of the Promised Land in just a matter of weeks. But something strange happens: God tells Moses to "turn back, go around the Great Bitter Lake and camp between Migdol and the sea."
- ▶ Pharaoh has changed his mind. Six hundred chariots, boosted by cavalry units from all across Egypt, thunder across the desert in hot pursuit of the Hebrew fugitives. This is the famous moment when Moses lifts his staff and the sea divides itself, allowing the Israelites to pass on dry ground. When the last Hebrew is safely on the opposite bank, Moses stretches his hand once more and the waters close, sending the Egyptians to a watery grave.

- ▶ A site that could have inspired this story is the Suez Canal, a marvel of engineering that today is a linchpin of seaborne traffic between the west and the east. According to Exodus, Pharaoh's chariots and the Israelites collided at a place the Bible calls Yam Suph, which has long been translated as the "Red Sea." But this is actually an error; the proper translation of *Yam Suph* is "Sea of Reeds."
- ▶ There are no reeds along the Red Sea, of course, but there are lots of them along the Great Bitter Lake. At times, the water drops so low that sandbanks appear. Quite possibly, it is these sandbanks that allowed the Israelites to cross into Sinai. Pharaoh's heavy chariots would have gotten stuck in the mud, and that could be how the Israelites got away.

## Quails and Manna

- ▶ In the Wilderness of Sin, one of the most desolate places on the planet, the Israelites begin to complain of hunger and wish they had stayed in Egypt. God hears them and tells Moses that he will "rain bread from heaven for you." And indeed, "in the evening quails came up and covered the camp," ready for the taking, while in the morning, there "was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground." The Israelites call it manna, which may mean "What is it?" But soon, they figure out that you can roll these flakes into dough to bake bread.
- ▶ It sounds incredible, but actually, quails and manna are still consumed by the Bedouins in the Sinai today. Manna is actually the secretion of a small insect that feeds off the sap of tamarisk trees. This sweet substance drops to the ground, where it can be collected and used as a sweetener or made into wafers.
- ▶ But even more astonishing is the story of why quail would show up in the heart of the desert. As it happens, the Sinai Peninsula is positioned on the path of migrating birds during their annual spring trek from Africa to cooler regions in the north. To this day, the Bedouins in northern Sinai set up nets to capture them. By the early 2000s, the slaughter of quail birds had become so widespread that the Egyptian government told the Bedouins they had to obtain a quail hunting license. Once again, what appears to be the stuff of legend could actually be rooted in the customs and practice of this region.



## Did the Exodus truly take place as described in the Bible?

Today, most scholars believe that the oral traditions were ultimately compiled and documented between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE. At that time, many traditions about the migration of workers from Egypt to Canaan may have been combined in the saga that is Exodus. But there is one block of stone that offers a tantalizing piece of evidence. It's called the stela of King Merneptah, and it's dated to 1207 BCE. Among its dense hieroglyphs is the first reference to an entity called "Israel." It seems that near the end of the 13th century, a community known as Israel had indeed begun to exist.

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### Readings

Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*.

Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity*.



# THE SETTLEMENT IN THE PROMISED LAND

## LESSON 7

**T**he Torah, or the Five Books of Moses, is not so much interested in writing history as in making the argument for the theological foundation of Israel's prehistory. But things change in the second division of the Hebrew Bible, known as *Nevi'im*, or the Prophets. Unlike the Torah, the principal purpose of this division is indeed to tell a historical saga: the rise of the kingdoms of Israel and their eventual fall to Assyrian and Babylonian aggression.

The stories of Joshua, Samuel, and Kings can increasingly be illustrated by what archaeologists have been able to excavate not only in Israel but in the territory of ancient empires such as Assyria and Neo-Babylonia. These excavations have yielded a rich harvest of data that can help put the biblical stories in a historical context.

## Jewish Law

- ▶ The first collection of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, includes five books: In addition to Genesis and Exodus, there is also Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These three books spell out the Jewish Law in detail. Together, the five books are also called the Laws of Moses, because according to the biblical tradition, these books were dictated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments, the fundamental principles of the Law, were also engraved on stone tablets, and these were placed in a sacred container known as the Ark of the Covenant.
- ▶ From this point on, this Law will define the practice of ancient Judaism, including its rites of sacrifice and its code of justice. It's certainly true, as some scholars have claimed, that there are similarities between the Jewish Law and the Babylonian tradition of social justice that had produced the Code of Hammurabi and other legal works. There are also parallels between the Ten Commandments and Egyptian law, with which the Hebrews in Goshen were certainly familiar.
- ▶ But the Mosaic Laws are unique because they go far beyond the purely judicial code of a centralized state. They spell out a form of conduct by which humanity will prosper, not only as a family and a community but also as nation under the benevolent guidance of God. While it's true that much of the Mosaic Law, and particularly Leviticus, is concerned with sacrificial rites and the rules of ritual purity, it's the concern for social justice makes the Torah stand out among all the other codes of ancient prehistory.

## Jericho

- ▶ At the beginning of the book of Joshua, the Israelite refugees are poised to enter the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River near the city of Jericho. Unfortunately, Moses does not live to see that day. On the eve of the crossing, the great leader journeys up Mount Nebo, where God shows him the hills of the Promised Land. He dies there and is buried in an unmarked grave.

- ▶ By that time, a young warrior named Joshua has been designated as the commander to lead the Hebrews into Canaan. Moses had been impressed with the way Joshua distinguished himself in the battle against the Amalekites at Rephidim. He had also formed part of the secret reconnaissance team that had been sent to explore the Promised Land ahead of the main body. What they discovered is that the rich valleys of Canaan, and particularly the Jezreel Valley, were protected by a ring of fortresses.
- ▶ Jericho is the first major city in their path. At that time, Jericho was one of the oldest cities on earth, and archaeologists today have found the layers of no fewer than 21 successive settlements going back to 9000 BCE. Jericho is obviously a difficult nut to crack, but Joshua has no choice. The city sat on the main path between the Transjordan and his ultimate objective: the spine of the high country, running across the length of Canaan.
- ▶ Joshua and his troops march around the walls of the city seven times. They carry the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments, while seven priests blast away on their trumpets. On the seventh day, when the soldiers finish their seventh turn, the people let out a mighty war cry. Finally, the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

## **Evidence of Joshua's Campaign**

- ▶ The idea of flattening the walls with shock waves of sound rather than military hardware is a magnificent story, but the excavation of Jericho has shown that the city was destroyed many centuries earlier, around 1500 BCE. And while archaeologists did find evidence of massive walls, these appear to have been demolished even earlier, probably as a result of an earthquake. By the time the Israelites appeared at its doorstep in the late 13th century BCE, the city only had walls of packed mud—not much of a defense against an enemy.
- ▶ Harvard archaeologist Lawrence Stager, who made a study of Joshua's campaign, showed that of the 31 cities said to be taken by Joshua and the Israelites, 20 have been positively identified by excavation teams.



Wall of Jericho

Of these, the vast majority show no evidence of violent destruction in the late 13th or early 12th century BCE. What the Bible portrays as a victorious march by a conquering army was probably more of a gradual infiltration in areas that were unlikely to get the locals upset, such as the highlands, where the topsoil is dry and agriculture is difficult.

- ▶ This approach makes sense because any migrating groups from Egypt, after a long trek through the desert, would not have the heavy weapons needed to subdue the Canaanites. At this time, as the Bible admits, many Canaanite cities had equipped themselves with cutting-edge Iron Age technology, such as the composite bow and chariots drawn by fast horses. But there is one exception to this theory, and that is the city of Hazor.

- ▶ At the time, Hazor was one of the most powerful cities of Canaan, with a population of some 15,000 people. In 1955, the Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin set out to discover Hazor's fate during this time and concluded that Hazor had indeed been razed to the ground by the Israelites around 1230 BCE. In the years since, however, Yadin's findings have come under heavy attack, and some historians believe the royal palace was destroyed by the Egyptians or perhaps the Philistines.

## The Philistines

- ▶ The Philistines were a potent and battle-hardened military force that had already left a trail of destruction through much of the Near East before they landed in Canaan. One of the great mysteries today is where these people came from and why they decided to go on a murderous rampage through much of the Mediterranean world, but many historians agree that the source of this violent migration can be found in Greece.
- ▶ In the center of the Peloponnese peninsula was a city-state called Mycenae. For some reason, just as the Israelites were entering Canaan, Mycenae quite rapidly came to ruin. Nobody quite knows why, but it was clear that a shadow of death was stealing across the Mediterranean, either in the form of a pandemic or a prolonged famine. A group that historians refer to as the Sea Peoples, which included the Philistines, propelled large groups of people to move in search of safer havens. The Sea Peoples moved swiftly on land as well as the sea, and they were deadly. By 1175 BCE, they had conquered most of the coastal regions of today's Syria and Lebanon.
- ▶ The threat of the Philistines served to distract the Canaanites as well as the Egyptian military just as the Israelites tried to settle in the land. It is this distraction that gave the Hebrews the necessary breathing room to consolidate their settlements in the highlands. The bad news is that once they were evicted from Egypt, the Philistines pointed their ships back east and sailed to the southern coast of Canaan. One scenario suggests that Ramses III actually gave them this strip of land—which technically was still inside the Egyptian sphere of influence—as part of the negotiations to keep them out of Egypt. Much of this coastal region was rolled up in short order and turned into a Philistine confederacy that became known as Philistia.

- ▶ In other words, by the middle of the 12th century BCE, there were three groups of people competing for the limited water and land resources of Canaan: the Israelites, the Philistines, and the Canaanites themselves. This was bound to lead to conflict. Sure enough, it is this conflict that runs through the next set of books in the Bible.

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### **Readings**

Cline, *1177 BC*.

Collon, *Ancient Near Eastern Art*.



# THE RISE OF THE ISRAELITE MONARCHY

## LESSON 8

**T**he book of Joshua gives detailed information about the settlement in Canaan—which tribe goes where and who gets which part of the country—and the distribution of the various tribes suggests that, at least in the view of the Bible, the Hebrews spread far and wide. The Bible now turns to the gradual transformation of the various Israelite tribes into an alliance and, finally, into the beginning of a nation.

## Deborah's Victory

- ▶ Some tribes are lucky to settle in relatively secure places, while others find themselves in considerable danger. Those who live near the adjoining nations of Moab and Edom, for example, live under the constant threat of invasion from foreign tribes. Many others find themselves living in the shadow of heavily fortified cities such as Bet She'an, Megiddo, or Jerusalem, all of which are held by the Canaanites. In response to these threats, several tribes begin to elect military commanders.
- ▶ One of these commanders is a woman named Deborah, a prophet from the tribe of Issachar. This tribe settles near the wonderfully fertile Jezreel Valley, but the surrounding Canaanites have a far superior military. Deborah wants her people to have full access to the fields and wells of the Jezreel, but all by itself, the tribe lacks the strength to secure it. So she reaches out to all the surrounding tribes, asking them to send militia and arms to finally have it out with the Canaanites. But there isn't yet a sense of cohesion, of shared identity, so while some tribes send their men, most turn a blind eye.
- ▶ The Bible says that Deborah and her commander then ride out to meet the phalanx of chariots that the Canaanites had deployed as part of their order of battle. Fortunately, God unleashes a rainstorm that floods the plain and strands the chariots in the mud. The Israelites prevail, but this doesn't solve the existential threat the Israelites are facing: As long as they go about it piecemeal, they'll never vanquish the enemies arrayed against them.



## A Series of Defeats

- ▶ The problem becomes even more pronounced when the Philistines land on the coast and begin to make life miserable for everyone—the Canaanites as well as the Israelites. At the time, Canaan was just a narrow strip of land with limited resources, but some historians have calculated that during the 11th century, the Hebrew population alone grew from 45,000 to around 150,000. The Philistines know that something has to give, so they are the first to unleash a major offensive to drive the Israelites from the valleys.
- ▶ The series of battles that follows is the subject of the books of Samuel, the first major prophet of ancient Israel. The Philistines are fierce warriors, and their offensive is a big success. They capture the city of Aphek, which has been identified with a site near the Yarkon River. Four thousand Israelites are killed.



Aphek was excavated by Moshe Kochavi in the 1970s and 1980s, and sure enough, he found evidence that the city was flourishing during the Late Bronze Age. It suddenly went into steep decline and was resettled by Philistines in the 11th century, based on pottery fragments found there. In other words, the evidence seems to confirm the biblical account.

- ▶ The Israelites withdraw to lick their wounds, and everyone agrees that they need to change their tactics. Someone has the idea to carry the Ark of the Covenant into battle to bolster morale and hopefully invite an intervention from Yahweh, just as he had done in the battle against the chariots. This is actually a custom seen throughout the ancient world: bringing tokens of your gods on the battlefield in the hope of having the divine on your side. The Assyrians did it, as did the Persians and even the Greeks and Romans. But in this case, the plan backfires.
- ▶ During the next battle, the Philistines not only defeat the Hebrew forces once more, but they also capture the Ark of the Covenant and carry it back in triumph to their city of Ashdod. This is the absolute low point in the story of the Hebrew settlement in Canaan. Not only have they lost large parts of their territory, but now they've also surrendered the symbol of their purpose in this land. This is such a humiliating defeat that most scholars believe it is historically accurate, precisely because it is such an embarrassment to the Israelite cause.
- ▶ Fortunately, says the first book of Samuel, God intervenes. The Philistines are struck by the plague, and whenever they try to move the Ark of the Covenant, the plague follows in its wake. At long last, they decide to get rid of it. They put it on a cart pulled by cows, and the cart winds up in the Hebrew settlement of Beth Shemesh.

## **Saul and David**

- ▶ Unless the Hebrews figure out a way to stop them, the Philistines will not rest until all of Canaan is under their control. Only then do the tribes realize that they need to pull together. They need to fight as one army, under a unified command, or they will all be destroyed. It's a significant moment because up to this point, the tribes were always adamant in keeping their independence. But now, there is a growing feeling that the tribes needed to appoint a leader.
- ▶ Saul, a young man from the tribe of Benjamin, emerges as the first nagid—the leader of the people of Israel. Some or all of the tribes coalesce around the supreme commander, and Saul is able to push back the Ammonites as well as the Philistines, giving the Hebrews some critical breathing space. Saul is received as the hero of the hour.

- ▶ The problem is that Saul does not seize the moment and capitalize on his victory by pushing the Philistines all the way back to Philistia. What happens next is a war of attrition. Battles are fought, territory is lost and won, but nobody is really winning. The Bible then loses patience with Saul. In the eyes of the Deuteronomist redactors, the fact that Saul could not deliver the final blow is simply unforgivable. This pressure shows in Saul's behavior. He loses his self-confidence and, eventually, his mental stability.

Knowing when exactly this seminal transition to a monarchy took place would determine all of the subsequent history of Israel, right up to the modern day. In 2008, archaeologists found a potsherd that includes a critical sentence: "The men and the officers have established a king." Some scholars believe it refers to the coronation of King Saul and that it should be dated to around 1000 BCE. But as always, this theory has been disputed.

- ▶ This is when a figure appears on the scene who will not only become the hero of the story but also define much of Israel's identity as a nation for thousands of years to come. David is a shepherd's boy from Bethlehem, but he's clearly intelligent and wise beyond his years. He secures a place at Saul's court with his skill with the harp and as a composer of songs. Saul is so pleased with the boy that he appoints him as his armor bearer.
- ▶ Another major battle with the Philistines looms on the horizon, and this time, the Philistines field a weapon of mass destruction: a giant named Goliath. When the Israelites lay eyes on him, they are frozen in fear—all except young David. Armed with only a sling, he picks a stone from his bag and fires it right at Goliath's forehead. David's aim is true; the stone strikes the giant and topples him, and David quickly dispatches him with his sword. The Philistines turn and flee, and everyone is overcome with joy. They all clamor for David to become their new commander, and Saul is forced to place young David at the head of his army.

## A New King

- ▶ On the surface of things, all seems to be going well. David marries Saul's daughter Michal, and he becomes a close friend of Saul's son Jonathan. But Saul is terribly jealous and believes that David is out to replace him as king. Even though David is now a close member of his family, Saul begins to devise a way to kill him. David has no choice but to flee, and he finds refuge near the Dead Sea, in the oasis of Ein Gedi. Saul even goes as far as to force his daughter Michal to marry another man.
- ▶ But Saul's days are numbered. When he leads his army to meet the Philistines once more, he's not only defeated, but almost all of his sons are killed in battle. Badly wounded, Saul falls on his own sword. The Philistines take his corpse and hang it from the city walls. Displaying the corpse of the Israelite king is a calculated attempt to demoralize the tribes and have them yield the field.
- ▶ And then, in the midst of this crisis, the Israelites once again fall back on internal squabbles. The northern tribes want to anoint Saul's remaining son, Ishbaal, as their next leader. The southern tribes want David. But soon, all the tribes are willing to accept David. He shows his political savvy by insisting that his wife, Michal, be restored to him first. There is a clear political motive for this: Once their marriage is restored, it will legitimize David's rule, for he'll once again belong to the line of King Saul. Their reunion will not only seal the merger of the house of David and Saul but also the tribal divisions between north and south—at least for the time being.

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### Readings

Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel*.

Dothan and Dothan, *People of the Sea*.



# THE KINGDOM OF DAVID

## LESSON 9

**T**he Bible extolls the kingdom of David as the high point in the history of ancient Israel. But even here, there are different traditions and viewpoints at work. It could be that the scribes who skillfully wove all these traditions together weren't always clear about what happened and why.

There are scholars who tend to see archaeological discoveries as potential evidence of David's kingdom, and there are those who see a more gradual emergence of two rival kingdoms, Judea in the south and Israel in the north, which later authors then conflated into an ideal monarchy, a model for the future restoration of an independent Jewish state. This fierce debate continues to this day.

## Jerusalem

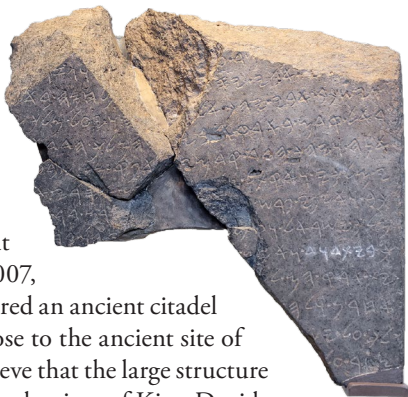
- ▶ According to the Bible, the newly anointed King David does not marshal the tribal militia and ride out to face the Philistine foe. The reason could be that the king's most pressing objective is to solidify the fragile tribal federation and turn it into a nation. David believes that if the new nation is to survive and defeat the Philistines, it has to be able to recruit and train a national army, levy taxes, organize the nation's economy, feed the hungry, and rally the people behind a national ideal that supersedes all other tribal concerns.
- ▶ David decides to create a national capital in neutral territory. He wants a city that can be defended, that's located in the strategic heart of the country, and no city meets those conditions like Jerusalem. It straddles the traditional boundary between Judea and the northern tribes, and it's perched on a high ridge surrounded by three valleys, providing clear fields of fire against any invaders. And best of all, it has its own source of fresh water: the Gihon Spring in the Kidron Valley.
- ▶ In sum, Jerusalem is perfect. The only problem is getting control of the city without too much bloodshed. David sends his soldiers up "the water shaft," which is probably a tunnel that connected the spring with the citadel. Once the soldiers make it inside the city, the opposition is quickly subdued. The city falls without the massacre that David wants to avoid at all costs—after all, the Israelites need to coexist with these people and learn from them how to run the city.
- ▶ Word of David's nifty capture of Jerusalem quickly spreads, and the Philistines are thoroughly alarmed. The Hebrews are now led by a much more agile and resourceful commander. What's more, the Israelites now control one of the most strategic points in the country. So the Philistines rush their forces to the foothills of Jerusalem in an attempt to defeat David before he can consolidate. But this time, the Hebrew army is ready. The Philistines are defeated—not once, but twice—and sent packing to the coastal region of Philistia.

## Archaeological Evidence for Jerusalem

- ▶ In the 1860s, the British archaeologist Charles Warren discovered a passageway under the ancient city that led to a 43-foot shaft. From here, the citizens of Jerusalem may have lowered their buckets into a basin fed by the Gihon Spring. This shaft has survived to this day. New excavations indicate that this particular tunnel was not created until after 800 BCE, but it's safe to say that a tunnel like the one described in the Bible could have existed.
- ▶ In the last two decades or so, much of the excavation activity in Jerusalem has centered around an area called the City of David. Some believe this became the core of David's new residential and administrative center. After the Six-Day War of 1967, Israeli archaeologists excavated a series of terraces that may have served as the original foundation for David's residential complex.



- ▶ The debate reached a fever pitch in 2005, when Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar discovered a large stone structure that she identified as the palace of David. Among other things, she found a collection of bullae, or clay seal impressions, that suggest a date in the 10th century BCE. Since then, other pieces of evidence have been found, including a bone that has been radiocarbon-dated to between 1050 and 780 BCE and a seal that some believe was issued during the Davidic period.
- ▶ As for evidence outside of the city, in 1993, archaeologist Gila Cook found a victory stela at Tel Dan that is dated to around 850 BCE and attributed to the king of Aram-Damascus—today’s Syria. The stela refers to King Jehoram, son of King Ahab, with an Aramaic phrase that could mean “house of David.” And in 2007, Yosef Garfinkel and Saar Ganor discovered an ancient citadel known as Khirbet Qeiyafa, which is close to the ancient site of Beth Shemesh. These archaeologists believe that the large structure inside the citadel could be a palace from the time of King David.
- ▶ The archaeological evidence shows that a kingdom of Judea may indeed have existed in the 10th century BCE under the leadership of a man named King David. However, whether the territory of that kingdom was as large as the Bible suggests is still an open question.



According to the Bible, David is not satisfied with his great victory over the Philistines. He wants to remove any and all threats from surrounding kingdoms, so he conquers Aram-Damascus and the territories of Ammon, Moab, and Edom.

How is it that the Hebrew army, which struggled for so long to subdue the Philistines, is all of a sudden able to conquer all of the kingdoms in this part of the Near East? From a historical view, this may just be a rearview projection by scribes at the 7th-century court of King Josiah, who did indeed try to occupy all of this territory.

## David's Controversy

- ▶ The Bible doesn't hide the fact that David is in many ways a morally flawed character, even though he would become such an important inspiration to the future generations of Israel. For example, while the army is in the field, David's eye falls on the beautiful Bathsheba. Bathsheba, however, is married to Uriah, one of David's top commanders. That doesn't stop David from beginning an affair with the young woman, and she becomes pregnant. David orders the general to place Bathsheba's husband right at the front line, virtually guaranteeing that Uriah will be killed. With his rival out of the way, David then marries Bathsheba and places her in the palace alongside his many other wives.
- ▶ The prophet Nathan, who serves as one of David's advisors, bravely marches to the palace and reads David the riot act. This is not how a king of a nation under God should behave. To his credit, David repents and acknowledges that he has sinned. But that is not enough. Nathan says that because David has shown contempt for the Lord, his newborn son will not live. And indeed, the little boy falls ill and dies.
- ▶ Bathsheba becomes pregnant once more and gives birth to a son named Solomon. The problem is, however, that Solomon is not the only son of David. To placate the tribes, the king had taken a wife from nearly every tribe, who of course gave birth to other sons. This doesn't sit well with the very conservative tribal leaders in the provinces. The strength of family, the backbone of the Hebrew tradition, is being threatened. They feel that David has created a harem like some Babylonian king, and that harem is rife with competing ambitions.
- ▶ As David grows older, different factions emerge around the ambitions of David's sons—and their even more ambitious mothers. Bathsheba is also busy plotting her son Solomon's future against his rivals at court, even though his claim on the throne is rather tenuous. But he does have the support of the prophet Nathan, possibly because Solomon believes in the need for a strong, centralized monarchy. Matters come to a head when David ails and the various factions ready to make their move. This drama unfolds in the opening chapter of the books of Kings.

## The Books of Kings

- ▶ When it becomes increasingly likely that David will soon pass away, his son Adonijah decides to throw a party to celebrate his upcoming coronation. He has good reason to do so: He has the support of the army as well as one of the two high priests. Everyone is invited to join this great feast—except, of course, the faction of Solomon.
- ▶ Nathan tells Bathsheba to exploit the moment, to go to David and tell him that Adonijah is declaring himself king even while his father is still alive. Bathsheba, who is just as ambitious as many of the mothers at court, goes to David's chamber and reminds him that he had sworn to make her son Solomon king.
- ▶ In David's eyes, this looks like he has another coup on his hands. He summons the other high priest and orders that he take Solomon to the springs of Gihon and anoint him king without delay. Even as his rival is still partying with his friends, Solomon is anointed king of Israel. Thus ends the reign of David, and so begins the reign of King Solomon—a period that is even more glorious, and even more controversial, than that of his predecessor.

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### Readings

Finkelstein and Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel*.

Silberman and Small, *The Archeology of Israel*.



# THE TEMPLE OF SOLOMON

## LESSON 10

**T**he world of King Solomon is a hotly debated subject in archaeological circles today. Did Israel become the regional powerhouse during this period, as the Bible would have it, or are there other factors at play? Regardless of their historical grounding, the stories of Solomon are among the most beautiful and fascinating verses in the Bible.

## Solomon's Kingdom

- ▶ According to the Bible, Solomon is a hands-on leader. He reorganizes the kingdom into 12 districts, deliberately cutting across tribal boundaries, and appoints professional administrators, rather than tribal chieftains, to further centralize his control of the kingdom. The key motive for this is to improve the collection of taxes, which doesn't exactly endear him to the tribal elders. Solomon then reaches out to bordering states and begins to develop a dense network of trade. Before long, his kingdom is a leading player in the trade and politics of the Middle East.
- ▶ By the mid-10th century, trade in the Near East was indeed recovering from the devastation of the Sea Peoples. Even the Philistines were now using their nautical skills to become traders across the sea. This trade was further boosted by the development of the galley, a flat-bottomed ship with a curved bow or stern, and the domestication of camels, which were capable of traveling 14 days without nourishment of any kind. With the introduction of these two revolutionary means of transport, Solomon could begin to leverage Israel's unique position at the nexus between Egypt in the south and Mesopotamia in the north.
- ▶ If Solomon's kingdom was so rich and powerful, why don't we see much evidence of that on the ground? That question has spurred a lively debate between scholars. One group claims that Solomon is a mostly legendary figure who combines all of the virtues of a Davidic king as well as the aspirations of Israel as a powerful nation. The other group believes that there is archaeological evidence, but much of it was destroyed in the later wars with Assyria or built over in later periods.
- ▶ Just as in the case of David, there are tantalizing fragments that can conceivably be traced back to a ruler named Solomon. But on the other hand, much of the narrative has suffered from exaggeration by later scribes, who were keen to show that Israel was once a great and powerful nation and that all that King Josiah was trying to do was restore that greatness in the 7th century.



## Megiddo and Hazor

- ▶ The search for archaeological evidence of Solomon's kingdom should begin with Megiddo and Hazor, strategic fortresses that were first excavated by Yigael Yadin in the 1950s. Both have a monumental gateway that is almost identical in design, and both feature a long and narrow passage flanked by three large chambers on either side, which were probably used to house guards and their weapons. The heavy ashlar stones and the way they are fitted together point to new engineering ideas, perhaps even a new style, designed by Solomon's architects. Some historians have argued that the design of the gate is not unique and that it is found elsewhere in the Near East, including Phoenicia. That may be true, but that doesn't rule out the possibility that Solomon's architects simply brought these designs back from their travels abroad.
- ▶ Another debate rages with regard to the area right next to the palace precinct of Megiddo, which Yadin also dated to the time of Solomon. At first glance, this appears to be an exercise yard bordered by stables. Each of these is furnished with a hollow stone block that may be a feeding trough. Sure enough, the first book of Kings says that Solomon had "forty thousand stalls of horses and twelve thousand horsemen," enough to outfit a regiment of 4,000 chariots. So when the excavators saw these troughs, they right away identified them as Solomon's stables. But we have new research that argues that all of this was built much later, possibly in the 9th century. These authors argue that very similar facilities have been found in Hazor, and these are reliably dated to the time of King Ahab.

## The First Temple

- ▶ There is one thing that we can reliably attribute to the time of Solomon, and that is the First Temple, which Solomon built to house the Ark of the Covenant. The design of the First Temple largely follows the outlines of a typical megaron, a design that probably has its roots in the Greek culture of Mycenae. The megaron consisted of an entrance portal, followed by a rectangular chamber and an inner chamber that contains the sanctuary and the cult statue of the god in question. This megaron design would lay the foundation some 300 years later for the development of the Greek temple. Early examples of the megaron have also been found in Israel.

- ▶ The First Temple had a large rectangular nave flanked by lower aisles and preceded by a ceremonial portal. At the very end of the nave was the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, which held the ark. In the front courtyard, the king placed an altar for the animal sacrifice rite and a huge bronze vessel known as the Sea of Bronze. This vessel rested on 12 bronze oxen, each group of three facing the four points of the compass. This magnificent work has not survived, but an excavation project near Susa found a similar bronze basin from around 1500 BCE.



- ▶ Over the next 400 years, the temple was repeatedly plundered until it was destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. There are some shrines in Israel that give an indication of what the temple might have looked like, including the one in 'Arad, an Israelite outpost in the Negev desert. Here, we can see the same key features we would see in the temple in Jerusalem, such as an area for an altar to perform sacrifices, an inner courtyard within the sanctuary, and an inner sanctuary.

### **DID SOLOMON HAVE THE FUNDS TO BUILD SUCH A TEMPLE COMPLEX?**

The income from his gold mines indicates that he did. But, says Kings, Solomon is keen to ensure that his people have a shared investment in the project. He appeals to the patriotism of his wealthier subjects by suggesting that they donate a generous portion of their income to the construction. In all, Solomon raises 5,000 gold talents and 10,000 silver talents, which is roughly \$100 million in today's currency.

- ▶ Unfortunately, nothing of Solomon's complex survives, with one possible exception: The first book of Kings tells of a bronze laver stand Solomon commissions from the Phoenician artist Hiram. He reportedly "made ten stands of bronze, and each stand had four bronze wheels and axles of bronze." Hiram is so proud of his work that scholars think he actually made 11 such stands: 10 to be shipped to Jerusalem and one to keep for himself. Indeed, one such bronze stand has survived, and the British Museum has dated it to the time of Solomon. It is quite possibly the only major work of art from ancient Israel dating to Solomon's kingdom.

## The Fall of the Kingdom

- ▶ Under the veneer of Solomon's wealth and prosperity, all is not well. As Solomon grows old, the northern tribes grow increasingly restless. The source of that unrest has been brewing for some time: Rather than being part of a unified kingdom, the northern tribes had always preferred an alliance that gave each tribe full autonomy.
- ▶ Many elders are also repelled by the pomp at Solomon's court and his Asiatic-style harem. They feel that the southern tribe of Judah has become a ruling elite at the expense of the hard-working, mostly agrarian north. Solomon's ruthless taxes and his policy of sending press gangs throughout the provinces to recruit forced labor must also be a source of discontent. These policies, they feel, run counter to the egalitarian spirit that was Israel before the monarchy, just as the prophet Samuel had feared.
- ▶ The Deuteronomist scribes who edited these passages naturally blamed the collapse of Solomon's kingdom on the fact that when the king grows old, "his wives turned away his heart after other gods." He supposedly even builds shrines to the pagan gods of Ammon and Moab to please his wives. In the eyes of the Deuteronomist authors, this is sacrilege of the highest order. Finally, the kingdom of David and Solomon falls.

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### Readings

Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*.

Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum*.



# THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

## LESSON 11

**T**here are signs of trouble long before Solomon breathes his last. He discovers a conspiracy led by Jeroboam, his minister of forced labor, and orders his arrest. But Jeroboam is able to escape to Egypt, where King Shishak—probably Shoshenq I, who founded the Twenty-Second Dynasty in 945 BCE—grants him political asylum. Meanwhile, Solomon's successor, his son Rehoboam, tries to renew the treaty of unification with the northern tribes, but the elders rebuff him.

So begins the period of the divided monarchy. The turncoat, Jeroboam, is anointed king of the north, which calls itself Israel. Rehoboam's kingdom, now known as Judah, shrinks to little more than the territory of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The northern kingdom will last for only two centuries, and seven of its 19 kings will die a violent death. The southern kingdom will last for 350 years, ruled all the way by descendants of the house of David. Then it, too, will be destroyed.

## The Divided Monarchy

- ▶ Many historians do not agree with this chronology of the split between the two kingdoms. They do not contest the existence of two Hebrew kingdoms, as they are indeed attested by archaeological evidence, but they believe that the kingdoms emerged as separate entities from the beginning and that the unified monarchy is a utopian concept from later times.
- ▶ The kingdoms emerged during a volatile time, when many power shifts occurred in the Middle East. After Shoshenq's death, new empires rose in Mesopotamia and Anatolia to take Egypt's place as the dominant superpower of the region. Poised between the grinding forces of these giants, tiny Israel and Judah embarked on a dangerous game of power politics. Many Hebrew kings attempted to recapture the glory of the Davidic kingdom by making aggressive alliances for the sake of territorial expansion. This is what doomed them in the end.
- ▶ Whatever the case may be, there is no question that the north was the more powerful of the two. Archaeologists believe that the northern kingdom became the dominant monarchy because it had more people and covered a far larger territory than Judah. The northern tribes also had the best farmlands and fertile foothills, including the Jezreel Valley. With its manpower restored, the north could now begin to exploit these rich agricultural lands with the production and trade of olive oil, wine, figs, dates, and cereals. This is how the north became a state by the 9th century.



## The House of Ahab

- ▶ According to the Bible, the architect of the new commonwealth of the north is a king named Omri, who aims to create a new capital to rival Jerusalem in the south. He settles on a spot located on a summit in the hills of Ephraim, just northwest of Shechem, and calls the new city Samaria. Harvard's Clarence Fisher excavated the area in the early 20th century and uncovered the ruins of a palace. He also found fragments of decoration in ivory that were created by artists from Phoenicia.
- ▶ Construction of Samaria continues under Omri's successor, his son Ahab, who had married a Phoenician princess. That may explain why he tolerates, and even encourages, a growing merger of the worship of Yahweh and pagan deities such as Asherah, goddess of love and fertility, and Baal, god of dew and rain. This incurs the wrath of the prophet Elijah, the first of many prominent prophets who will minister during the period of the divided monarchy.
- ▶ According to the first book of Kings, there are no fewer than 450 prophets of Baal who eat at the table of Ahab's wife, Princess Jezebel. Elijah challenges them all. He proposes a test conducted on Mount Carmel to see whose sacrifice will be lit by a lightning strike from heaven. This proposal is a shrewd move because lightning is the favored attribute of Baal in his capacity as god of storms. But Elijah wins the challenge: Only his sacrifice is lit by God.
- ▶ The Bible claims that the priests of Baal are then put to death, but excavations show that the use of fertility figures and amulets bearing the image of Astarte continued. Perhaps the worship of these pagan fertility gods had always continued under the surface, as farmers were naturally anxious to protect their harvests at all costs. This may also explain why Elijah curses the house of Ahab. All of Israel and Judah will be destroyed, he warns, except for those who remain faithful to Yahweh. The prophesy is fulfilled when Ahab is killed during a war against Israel's old enemy, Aram-Damascus, and his son dies after a fall. Ahab's second son, Jehoram, is then ousted by an army commander named Jehu, and Queen Jezebel is thrown out of a window.

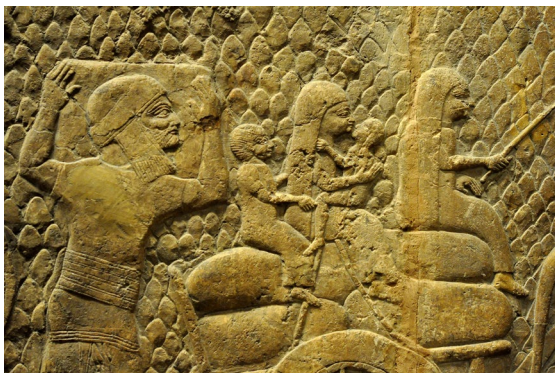
## The Battles at Qarqār

- ▶ The subsequent fate of the northern kingdom is the subject of the second book of Kings. This is a time of great shifts in the power plays of the region, and the principal actor of these movements is Assyria. In the mid-9th century BCE, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III begins to make moves to the south, with his eyes on Aram-Damascus, Phoenicia, the northern kingdom, Judah, and Egypt. These nations had all been rivals at one point, but the common threat of Assyria makes them set old animosities aside and form the first coalition in the region's history. Having gathered their forces, the allies meet the Assyrian army in 853 near Qarqār, some 150 miles north of Damascus.
- ▶ This dramatic clash is described in great detail on a large stela found in the city of Kurkh in southeast Turkey. At the top is the profile of Shalmaneser III surrounded by the symbols of his patron gods: Ashur, Ishtar, Anu, and Sin. The stone confirms that the king faced a large and determined force. The kingdom of Israel is also mentioned, for the stone says that Israel's forces joined the battle with 2,000 chariots and 10,000 horses under the command of Ahabbu, which refers to King Ahab.
- ▶ The stone claims that the Assyrian army won a great victory, but this is doubtful, as the Assyrians try to invade again more than a decade later. This time, they come up against King Jehu of Israel, and the Assyrian forces are successful because the coalition had been disbanded and Israel was on its own. That, at least, is the claim recorded on a great black obelisk discovered in 1846 near the ancient city of Nimrud. It shows King Shalmaneser as he receives tribute from a king who is identified as follows: "The tribute of Jehu son of Omri." In other words, Israel had now become a vassal state. But eventually, Shalmaneser dies, and the Assyrians lose interest in their vassals.



## The Fall of the Northern Kingdom

- ▶ The Assyrian's disinterest in their vassals changes when a new king takes charge of Assyria about half a century later. His name is Tiglath-pileser III, or King Pul in the Bible. The new king isn't interested in having a series of vassal states; he wants to own these lands by conquering them and creating a vast empire that will stretch from the Tigris to the Nile.
- ▶ In 735, Tiglath-pileser is close to realizing this goal. His armies have moved down the Mediterranean coast, captured all the port cities down to Gaza, and are now approaching the borders of Egypt. Of course, the whole Near East is in uproar, including Israel. Once again, everyone agrees that regional quarrels have to be put aside to form a defensive alliance.
- ▶ The northern kingdom joins this coalition, but Judah does not. It had always been deeply suspicious of any movements by the north, so its ruler at the time, King Ahaz, decides that this alliance is really an attempt by the north to isolate and overrun the south. Judah takes the fateful step of not only giving the alliance the cold shoulder but going over to the other side by joining Assyria.
- ▶ Of course, Tiglath-pileser is overjoyed by this overture, as it gives him the perfect staging ground to attack the coalition. As the second book of Kings says, the Assyrian king captures Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, Galilee, and all the land of Naphtali, "and he carried the people captive to Assyria." In the past, an enemy force could conquer you and force you to pay tribute, but never before had a foreign invader also carried out wholesale deportations. But that now becomes Assyria's policy, as entire villages are forcefully removed to Assyria.



Judean people are being deported into exile

- ▶ The Deuteronomist authors of these passages have an explanation for why the northern kingdom comes to fall: “They had worshipped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out.” These sections are colored by the political outlook of Judah, where these authors lived and worked. There is a bit of *schadenfreude* in between these lines, as the tension between north and south had never been resolved. At the same time, however, the terrible fate of the north also serves as a lesson for the people of Judah. It reveals that the south will have a similar fate unless they, too, repent and return to observing the Law. But that is not what the people of Judah do, and they pay the ultimate price.

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## Readings

King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*.

Wagemakers, *Archaeology in the “Land of Tells and Ruins.”*



# THE RISE OF ASSYRIA

## LESSON 12

**F**rom the 9th century BCE onward, Assyria threw the Middle East into turmoil. Northern Israel and Judah were both turned into vassal states and finally colonized and depopulated. This raises a simple question: What made the Assyrians so invincible?

## The Assyrian Conquerors

- ▶ The Assyrian kings recognized that the gradual collapse of Egyptian control in the Near East had produced a power vacuum in which all sorts of upstart kingdoms (including Israel and Judah) were trying to stake a claim, thus disrupting trade across the region. Assyria's population was growing, and to make matters worse, its vassal kingdom of Urartu, located in today's Armenian highlands, was making it difficult for Assyria to get to the strategic mines of Anatolia—today's Turkey—as well as its rich farmlands and livestock.
- ▶ The war aims of Assyria were twofold: to create a series of buffer states and to secure all of the principal trade arteries of the Levant. Of course, they didn't say that out loud; they clad their aggressive wars in a cloak of religious observance. They set out to convert foreign peoples to the enlightened faith of the Assyrian god Ashur—though, of course, this privilege came with a price, in the form of a heavy tribute.
- ▶ The greatest Assyrian conqueror in this period was King Ashurnasirpal II. Much to his surprise, he found little opposition as he launched his invasion of his neighbors. He first pushed the Assyrian border south to the Persian Gulf, conquering all of Babylonia. He then moved southwest through Syria, reaching Mount Lebanon and the Mediterranean in 877 BCE, all the while levying heavy tribute on his conquered vassals. As a result, vast wealth began to pour into the Assyrian treasury. Ashurnasirpal would put it to good use.

## Architecture and Art

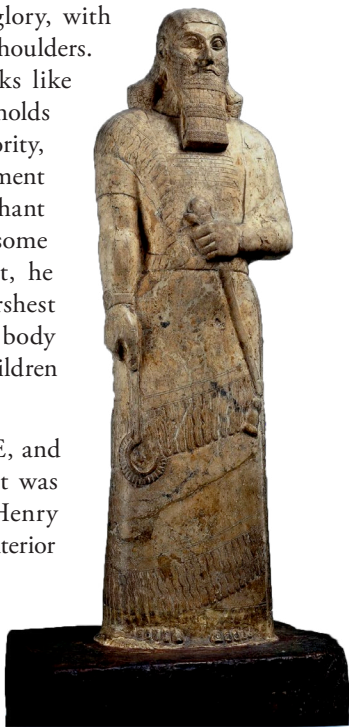
- ▶ Ashurnasirpal decided to restore the great Sumerian ziggurats and the Babylonian temples in his newly expanded empire, which is how much of the ziggurat of Ur was preserved. But he wasn't just interested in preservation; he wanted to build his own monuments for the glorification of his reign and his patron god, Ashur. He built a vast new palace complex in the city of Kalhu, or Nimrūd (known as Calah in the Bible), which he made his capital. Before long, the new city became the center of an Assyrian culture that flourished, with lavish spending on science, architecture, and the arts.

- ▶ One stela shows the king in all his glory, with a long beard and hair that falls on his shoulders.

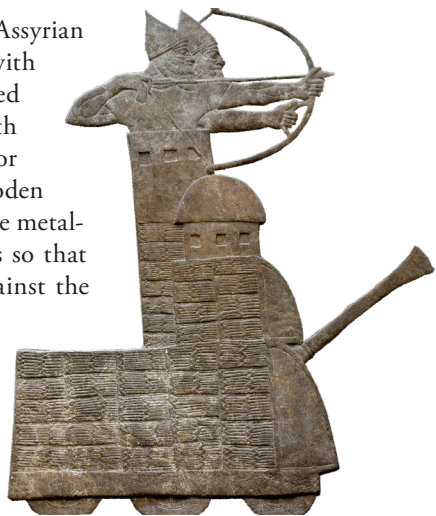
In his right hand, he holds what looks like a ceremonial sickle, while in his left he holds the mace that is the symbol of his authority, granted to him by the gods. The monument describes him as a firm ruler with a penchant for great cruelty. For example, when some of the occupied people rose in revolt, he suppressed the rebellion with the harshest possible measures, cutting off various body parts of his prisoners and burning the children along with the city.

- ▶ Kalhu was abandoned around 612 BCE, and the palace gradually fell into decay. It was rediscovered in 1845 by Sir Austen Henry Layard. He was astonished to find huge interior walls covered from top to bottom with sculpted reliefs depicting the king's victories. Among the many tableaux that he shipped back to London are some beautiful snapshots of the king riding in his war chariot with his special guard, no doubt returning from one of his many victories in the field. Above him, as always, is the god Ashur, the patron god of Assyria, who is said to have urged the Assyrian kings to begin their military campaign against the nations of the Middle East.

- ▶ These reliefs also show that the rapid conquests were due to a number of military inventions. Though at its core the Assyrian army continued to rely on infantry and archers, Ashurnasirpal was possibly the first to use cavalry units to spearhead and screen the movement of infantry. At the same time, his chariot forces—the Bronze Age equivalent of the modern tank—would lead the attack head-on, sowing fear in the enemy and often setting them to flight.



- ▶ One relief shows the secret weapon of Assyrian might: the siege engine, equipped with a large battering ram. It's surmounted by a wooden tower that bristles with archers, all firing away at the poor defenders of the city. This large wooden framework moved on wheels, while the metal-clad ram was suspended from chains so that a platoon of soldiers could swing against the walls or gates of an enemy city. The battering ram was often capped with a metal pointed head for additional effect. If the target city was built on a hill, slaves would be used to build an earthen ramp that would bring the siege machine close to the city walls.



## Assyrian Deportations

- ▶ King Ashurnasirpal was succeeded by his son, Shalmaneser III, who would reign for almost 35 years. Since Assyria had expanded toward the north, east, and west, the obvious next step was to move south, into the territory that was always considered Egypt's sphere of influence. Here were the lands of Aram-Damascus, Phoenicia, the northern kingdom, Judah, and Egypt itself.
- ▶ After a series of battles, the Assyrians succeeded in taking control of all of Israel and initiated wholesale deportations of the local population. It doesn't seem to make any sense to remove the hundreds of farmers who knew the soil intimately and knew how to secure a good harvest—indeed, recent studies suggest that the primary motive was not so much to destroy the social infrastructure of a conquered region but to discourage revolt. By displacing captive peoples to other, less populated areas, the Assyrians also tried to create a more equitable distribution of population centers in proportion to the available natural resources—in effect colonizing areas with relatively low habitation.



- ▶ The deportations also enabled the Assyrian economic planners to exploit highly fertile regions, such as the Valley of Jezreel in Israel, using skilled labor from Mesopotamia. In both the Bible and Assyrian records, there is a sense of a clear master plan. For example, the Israelites were moved to Iran and Babylon, the Arabs and Persians were relocated to Syria-Canaan, and the Chaldeans were deported to Armenia.
- ▶ The Assyrians were careful not to break up families and clans. Once the refugees arrived at their destination, they were free to rebuild their communities, till the land, and practice their faiths as they had done before. In fact, skilled craftsmen, scribes, scholars, and other highly trained Hebrews would eventually attain prominent positions in the polyglot and racially diverse society of Assyria and, later, Neo-Babylonia. This is one reason why when Cyrus II granted the Jews permission to leave, only a part of the community of exiles took him up on his offer, sometimes reluctantly.
- ▶ At the same time, the Assyrians encouraged their own people to go and colonize the lands that were now under their control. For example, when the capital of Samaria fell to the Assyrian king Sargon II, much of the population was forced into exile. In his annals, Sargon even talks of having uprooted no fewer than 27,000 Israelites. But their homes, fields, and cattle were then handed over to Babylonian “settlers,” many of whom hailed from Cuthah in Babylonia.

- ▶ Over time, these Babylonian people assimilated with the remaining inhabitants of Samaria. They married local wives and eventually even adopted Jewish customs and laws, including the worship of Yahweh. The result was a new group of mixed-race Israelites called Samaritans. But no one ever forgot that they still had Babylonian blood in their veins, and the inhabitants of Samaria, the Samaritans, became outcasts, shunned by most Judeans.
- ▶ It would be wrong to think of Assyrians as savages bent on destruction and deportation. They were deeply invested in science, including astronomy, which they inherited from the Babylonians. In fact, their observations of the stars and solar eclipses were so exact that modern astronomers have been able to use them to date the successive dynasties of the Assyrian empire. But as a military power, Assyria had no equal. And with the northern kingdom of Israel now destroyed and colonized, the next victim was the kingdom to the south: the kingdom of Judah.



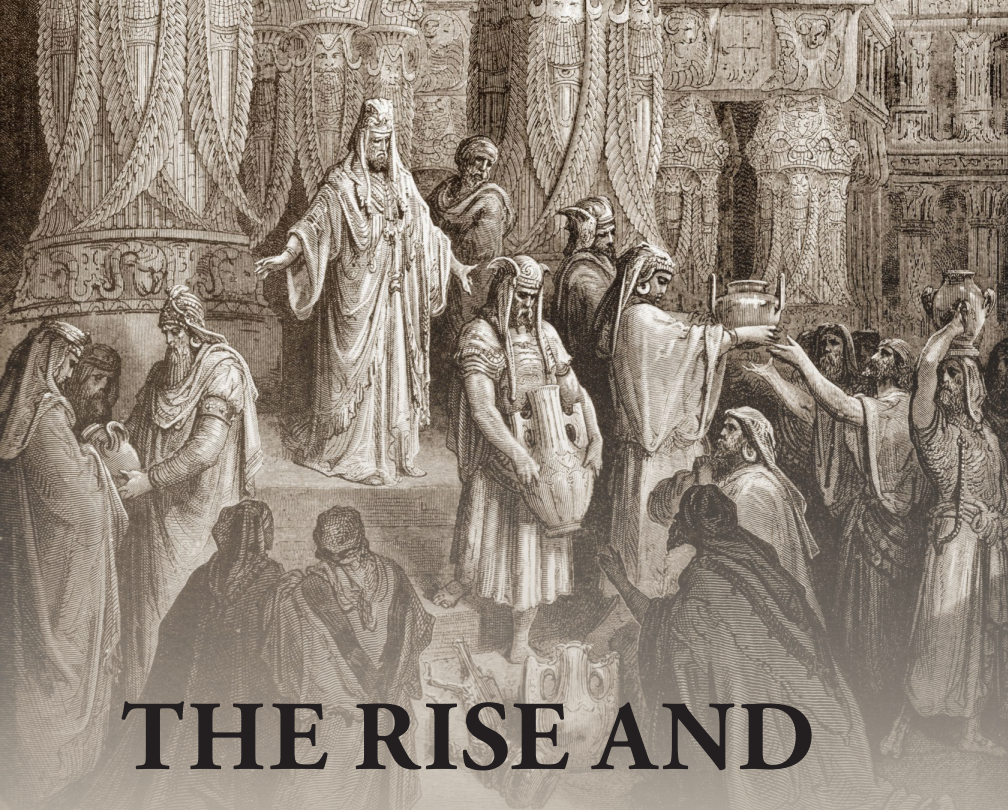
Babylonian Planisphere

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## Readings

Frahm, *A Companion to Assyria*.

Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*.



# THE RISE AND FALL OF JUDAH

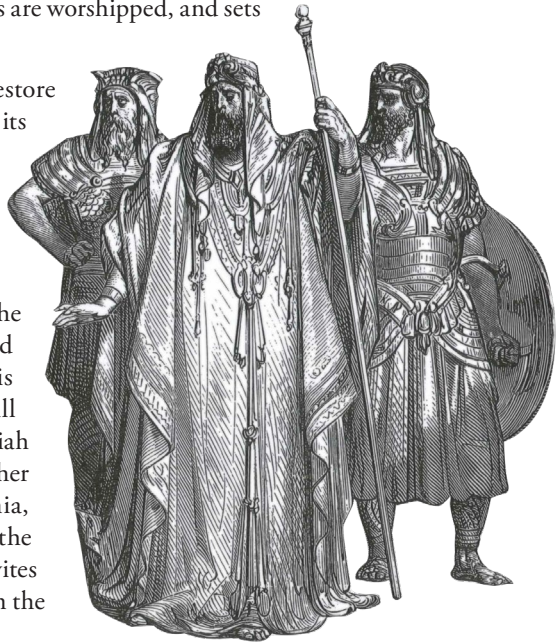
## LESSON 13

**A**s in the north, the southern kingdom of Judah sees the ministry of a number of prophets. One of these is Amos, who argues that by forsaking social justice and true faith, the people of Israel have violated the concern for social justice in the Covenant Law and will soon feel the wrath of God. “I will send fire on Judah,” Amos says ominously, “and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.”

Amos’s critique is taken up by the prophet Micah, who spends most of his time arguing the plight of the poor to officials in Jerusalem. Like Amos, Micah believes that the kingdom’s social ills violate the core tenets of the laws of Moses. This prophet, too, predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, during which “Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.” Of course, the instrument of this destruction is the might of Assyria.

## The Prophet Isaiah

- ▶ Judah at this point is already an Assyrian vassal state, and King Ahaz does everything to please his Assyrian masters. He builds a Babylonian-style observatory for astrological observations and allows the cult of pagan idols to flourish once more. But as the threat of Assyrian aggression grows and Ahaz is succeeded by King Hezekiah, things change. The new king immediately launches sweeping reforms, razes the high places where pagan idols are worshipped, and sets about purifying the temple.
- ▶ Hezekiah's priority is to restore Judah's economy and break its isolation. He embarks on a very dangerous power play, trying to foment rebellion against the Assyrian overlords. The time seems ripe because the Assyrian king Sargon had died in 705 BCE, and his successor, Sennacherib, is still an unknown quantity. Hezekiah decides to reach out to another vassal, the king of Babylonia, who is also chafing under the Assyrian yoke. Hezekiah invites him to Jerusalem to show him the city and its precious assets.
- ▶ This state visit alarms many people, including the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has enjoyed a long career as a prophet, diplomat, and poet, serving no fewer than three kings as Judah's religious conscience. The Davidic strand of the books of Kings is at work here, as Isaiah firmly believes in the validity of the Davidic dynasty and in the fact that Zion, the city of Jerusalem, had been chosen by God to be his seat on earth.
- ▶ Isaiah goes to Hezekiah's palace and warns, "Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord."

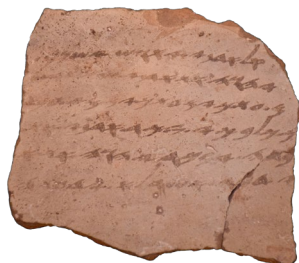


But Hezekiah, with his eye on future glory, doesn't listen. Instead, he hatches a plan with his guests. They will launch a rebellion against Assyria, with Babylonia attacking from the north and Judah striking from the south.

- ▶ Unfortunately, the new Assyrian king Sennacherib learns of Hezekiah's plot long before the Babylonian delegation arrives back home. He mobilizes his forces and quickly subdues Babylonia. Then, filled with righteous wrath, he turns west, determined to punish Judah as well. Now, all of Jerusalem is in uproar. Knowing he's up against impossible odds, Hezekiah prepares for a long siege.

## Lachish

- ▶ There are two sources for this punitive campaign: the second book of Kings and a carved clay document with six sides, known as a prism, written by Assyrian scribes. Amazingly, they largely agree on what happens next.
- ▶ First, Sennacherib moves west against the Phoenicians—who, much to their regret, had sided with the rebellion—and defeats them at Tyre and Sidon. The king then moves south and accepts the submission of the kings of Ammon, Moab, and Edom, who each rush to pledge their tribute. This leaves tiny Judah, and before long, the protective ring of fortresses is methodically destroyed.
- ▶ But one town, located just 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem, resists. At first, it seems that Lachish might be saved, or so it appears from one of the letters written at the time. Back then, most people used simple pottery shards, known as ostraca, as writing paper. One such ostrakon, written during the siege, reads: “May Yahweh cause my lord to hear news of peace.” But it was not to be.



- ▶ King Hezekiah is shocked when he hears about the massacre at Lachish. He summons his scribes and sends a message to the Assyrian king, who is still encamped at Lachish, saying, “I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.” This is an offer Sennacherib can’t refuse. His terms are simple: “Pay me a ransom of 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold.”
- ▶ In the days of Solomon, this might have been a tolerable sum. But for Hezekiah’s impoverished nation, the tribute is a staggering burden. He summons the prophet Isaiah, who says Hezekiah should do nothing: “By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city.” This seems like strange counsel when your whole city is surrounded by an overwhelming force. But then, says the Bible, “the angel of the Lord struck down” the Assyrian camp. Historians interpret this reference as a possible outbreak of disease. Whatever the cause may be, the siege of Jerusalem is indeed lifted.



- ▶ It seems as if Jerusalem has been delivered, but Hezekiah has paid a heavy price for his rebellion. His proudest cities lie in ruins, he's lost much of his territory, and he's had to loot the temple to pay Sennacherib's army to leave. And thus, Hezekiah disappears from history.

## The Fall of Judah

- ▶ In a twist of fate, things in Judah suddenly change for the better—or so it seems. King Josiah sets about cleansing and restoring the temple, and he bans all foreign cults and orders Judah to refocus on the sole worship of Yahweh. All the pagan sanctuaries are destroyed, and all pagan priests are put to death.

As various priests and clerics clean up the archives and storage rooms at the temple, the high priest Hilkiah stumbles on an ancient scroll called “the book of the law”—quite possibly an early version of what would become the book of Deuteronomy. The discovery of the scroll may have inspired the first comprehensive attempt to create a canon of the Torah, a process that would continue for many years and not be completed until after the Babylonian Exile.

- ▶ Meanwhile, the political situation is changing rapidly. Up to this point, Assyria has been ruled by King Ashurbanipal, the last great king of the empire. But the empire is crumbling, and all the vassal kingdoms are plotting rebellion in one way or another. Josiah seizes the growing power vacuum by invading the Assyrian provinces in the north. What he is trying to do is combine the two Hebrew nations, north and south, into one unified kingdom.
- ▶ Some historians believe that this conquest inspired the legend of a great Davidic kingdom, the idea that Josiah was merely trying to restore what David and Solomon had built many centuries earlier. This idea of a great restoration found its way into the fabric of Deuteronomist history, as written by Josiah's scribes. Whatever the case may be, by trying to declare war on nations far greater than itself, Judah is once again messing with power plays that are bound to end badly.

- ▶ In 612 BCE, the Medes and the Babylonians rise in rebellion and sack the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. Much to everyone's surprise, the Egyptian king Necho I switches sides and comes to the aid of the Assyrian forces. Josiah then makes the strategic mistake of setting an ambush as the Egyptian army races to the north. King Josiah is fatally wounded, and Judah becomes a vassal state of Egypt, like the Canaan of old.
- ▶ In the meantime, the Assyrian army has been decisively beaten at the Battle of Carchemish, and a new Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, is in charge. Once again, Judah contemplates the idea of staging a rebellion. This is the time of the prophet Jeremiah, and he is shocked that this tiny country would repeat the mistake of King Josiah once more. "This whole land," Jeremiah says, "shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years." In the end, that's exactly what happens.
- ▶ In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar sieges and captures the city after a bitter struggle. This time, the temple is completely destroyed. All of Jerusalem's elites—the noblemen, the priests, the scribes, and other educated people—are either killed or marched into captivity. The Israelite kingdoms are no more, and the great Babylonian exile has begun.

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## Readings

Davies and Finkelstein, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*.

Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum*.



# THE PERSIAN ERA

## LESSON 14

**M**uch of the population of Jerusalem is now on its way to exile in Babylon. Those that are left behind—mostly farmers, shepherds, and soldiers who had survived the fighting—are placed under the authority of a new administration. According to the Bible, a man called Gedaliah is appointed to rule as governor of the province of Judah. He's despised as a collaborator, and several officers hatch a plot to assassinate him. When that plot succeeds, the Babylonians launch a wave of reprisals and deportations, and many of the Judean officers flee to Egypt.

This is where the narrative of the second book of Kings ends, and it's also the end of the collection of books now known as the Deuteronomist History. Judah meets the same fate as the northern kingdom, from the Deuteronomist point of view, because it had neglected its covenant obligations to Yahweh. It had allowed pagan practices to flourish, and it had tolerated the use of idols. Now, God's terrible vengeance had come to pass.

## The Babylonian Exile

- ▶ Back in Babylon, there are signs of hope. Among the refugees are several prophets who try to articulate a new message to maintain the unique identity of the refugees from Israel and Judah. For example, Ezekiel recognizes that the nation of Yahweh can't exist in a political sense, but that doesn't mean it can't celebrate its identity in other ways. People realize that they can continue as Jews by celebrating their heritage in the form of ritual, song, or liturgy. It's this hankering to preserve the unique Jewish identity that will inspire a renewed effort to collect and organize what today is called the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians call the Old Testament.
- ▶ The Babylonian Exile is brief—not more than three generations. Many of the Hebrews actually begin to like the place. Babylonia, and particularly its capital of Babylon, enjoyed a standard of living that was far higher than that of either Israel or Judah. Part of that was due to King Nebuchadnezzar himself. Once back at home in Babylon, he launched a major program to rebuild the city in a fashion that would put the Assyrian capitals of Nineveh and Ashur to shame.
- ▶ One monument built by Nebuchadnezzar that has survived is the Ishtar Gate. It has been restored and is still visible today in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. This huge gateway was one of eight gates that led to the city's inner precinct. Begun in 575 BCE, it was covered with glazed color tiles that depict mythological animals including dragons and oxen, the symbols of the Babylonian gods Marduk and Adad.
- ▶ Shortly after the Ishtar Gate was completed, however, the Neo-Babylonian Empire began to crumble. What no one could know at the time was that this would begin



a new era that in the course of eight centuries would see the rise and fall of three great empires: Persia, Greece, and Rome. What's unique about these empires is that for the first time, they straddled not just the Middle East but parts of Europe as well. All of these would have a profound influence on the development of Judaism and early Christianity during the Roman era.

## The Cylinder of Nabonidus

- ▶ Most of the occupied people in the Babylonian empire were tired of overlords who didn't care for anything but exploiting their lands for tribute. We know this because there is a wonderful story described in one of the royal documents of the era. The Babylonians used something similar to the Assyrian prisms to keep records, but instead of prisms, they're cylinders. One example is the cylinder of Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.
- ▶ Cyrus the Great is as unstoppable as the Assyrian kings before him. When he marches down with his army to take the city of Babylon, Nabonidus appoints his son, Bel-shar-usur, to lead the army against the Persian troops. Scholars believe that Bel-shar-usur is the same Belshazzar in the book of Daniel, which describes the experience of a Hebrew exile at court in Babylon. It's therefore set in the 6th century BCE, but many scholars believe the book was actually completed in the 2nd century BCE.
- ▶ According to Daniel, Belshazzar decides to throw a party using gold plates and vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had looted from the temple in Jerusalem. At the height of the party, disembodied fingers appear and write on the wall in Aramaic: "*mene, mene, tekel, parsin.*" Daniel interprets this as follows: "*Mene*: God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. *Tekel*: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. *Parsin*: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

*Mene, tekel, and parsin are actually units of measure equivalent to the mina, the shekel, and the parsin, which were used in Babylonian trade and finance. Before the development of coins, metal cast in a particular shape—say, a lion—and at a set weight served as currency.*

- ▶ The Bible says that Belshazzar is killed that very same night, though Babylonian records suggest that he did lead his forces in battle against the Persians. Whatever the case may be, the cylinder clearly states that the people of Babylon are so fed up with these characters that they simply open the gates when they see Cyrus's army on the horizon. It's a great story, even if we will never know if it truly happened.

## Cyrus the Great

- ▶ Cyrus decided to do things differently from other conquerors in an effort to prevent the people from rising in revolt. He would give these people a way to celebrate their identity, even while under occupation, and he would make a comprehensive effort to raise the quality of life for all people under his sway.
- ▶ He built an extensive network of royal roads, and the Persians also introduced the first standard currency in the form of coins. Scholars debate who gets the credit for inventing coins, but most historians agree the first coins were made in Lydia, today's northwestern Turkey, during the 6th century BCE. They were made of an alloy of silver, gold, and copper, and they were stamped with a symbol, such as an animal. When this innovation moved to the Persian interior, coins became standardized.
- ▶ The most brilliant idea that Cyrus came up with was to give all of his subjects full religious freedom and state support for the reconstruction of any of their temples that were destroyed in the course of the Babylonian wars. He also allowed them to return to Jerusalem. According to the text of a document called the Cyrus cylinder, the Persian king also undertook the return of the gods of Sumer and Akkad and willingly paid for the "repair of their dwelling places." Nevertheless, the book of Ezra in the Bible extolls Cyrus as a great savior.



## Yehud

- ▶ The exiles from Judah and the northern kingdom were now free to pack up their families and belongings and return to their homelands, but not all decided to go. Those that did take the 600-mile journey found that much had changed. Judah was now known as the subprovince of Yehud. It was also much smaller than the former kingdom, now bordered to the north by the town of Bethel, to the east by the Jordan River, and to the south by a frontier that ran well short of Hebron, thus depriving the country of Israel's ancient city.
- ▶ Yehud was ruled by a succession of governors who were loyal to their Persian masters. They continued to pump money into the reconstruction of the temple, but that project was not going well. Twenty years after the first return of exiles, the temple barely rose above its foundations. According to the Bible, funds were running so low that donations had to be solicited from Jewish families back in Babylonia. The people of Yehud had other problems to deal with, too, such as a prolonged drought and poor harvests. But in the end, the reconstruction of the temple was finally completed around 516 BCE, 70 years after it had been destroyed.



- ▶ Yehud would now be governed by the religious elite of the priesthood. The ancient ideal of a Davidic monarchy, ruled by a messiah, was replaced by that of a Jewish theocracy whose authority was rooted in the sacrificial system of the newly restored temple. This idea—that the cult system organized around the temple had absorbed and replaced the need for a Jewish political identity—would become the dominant theme of what scholars call the Second Temple period, from 515 BCE to 70 CE. Its language would change as well: Instead of Hebrew, the dominant language now became Aramaic.
- ▶ There is little archaeological evidence of the Persian period in Israel today. In recent years, Andrea Berlin and Sharon Herbert have excavated an area more than half a mile long in the Upper Galilee. They believe it is one of several places that archaeologists have been trying to associate with the biblical “Kedesh of Naphtali” in the book of Judges. One of the structures excavated by Herbert and Berlin may have been the administrative building of the Persian province of Tyre and Upper Galilee. If so, it would be one of few remains from the Persian period in Israel.

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## Readings

Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period*.

Magness, *The Archaeology of the Holy Land*.



# THE EMPIRE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

## LESSON 15

**W**ith the empire of Alexander the Great and the beginning of the Greek period in the history of ancient Israel, we enter the age between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. That doesn't mean, however, that there is no scripture to fall back on.

The deuterocanonical book includes well-known works such as Tobit, Judith, and the Wisdom of Solomon. These are believed to have been written between 200 BCE and 100 CE, and for a variety of reasons, they were not included when the Hebrew Bible reached its final form sometime after the 7th century CE. But they are included in some editions of the Christian Old Testament, and this collection includes the two books of the Maccabees, which cover the Greek period in Judah—or Judea, as it now would be called.

## The Greek Influence

- ▶ For a long time, the city-states of ancient Greece were at war with one another, fueled by traditional tensions between the aristocracy and the growth of a new class of educated professionals and artists who gravitated toward the cities. In 508 BCE, Athens decided to do away with kings and noblemen and instead adopt a form of government where the citizens shared in power. From that point on, Athens embarked on a new golden age. In the span of just half a century, Athenians would revolutionize the fields of art, architecture, science, and philosophy and create a lasting foundation for Western civilization.
- ▶ The greatest triumph of Greek civilization was its development of an architectural system that would continue well into the 20th century. It found its purest expression in the temple, such as the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens. At the same time that Greek architects were defining the principles of classical architecture, Greek sculptors were revolutionizing the way that the human form could be shaped in marble. Sculptors such as Phidias, Praxiteles, and Lysippus launched an experiment to replicate the human form in marble. That effort produced the incredible group of sculptures that were once placed on the east pediment of the Parthenon. Here, for the first time, the human body was reproduced with a marvelous realism.



- ▶ The Greek influence had been percolating into the Persian province of Yehud for quite some time, mostly through Phoenicia, which had developed strong trade contacts with the Greek world. But for the most part, Greek pottery, coins, and figurines remained largely limited to the coastal areas. Devout Jews were offended by the Greek fondness for depicting human beings in the nude. But many others, particularly the political elite and the wealthy, were quite taken by the Greek sense of fashion and style.
- ▶ Another trend taking place at this time was the growing alienation between Galilee and Yehud. Because it was so close to Phoenicia, Galilee was far more susceptible to Greek influences than Yehud was. The evidence for this is in the scores of Greek pottery and cultic figurines that have been excavated in this region. While Yehud was permitted a measure of religious autonomy, the northern territories, including Galilee, would continue to be ruled as Persian colonies. Thus, Galilee became a major transit point for the Hellenization of Persian Palestine long before the arrival of Alexander the Great. This deepening estrangement between Galileans and Judeans will form a key backdrop for the Gospel stories.



## Alexander the Great

- ▶ The long-simmering tensions between Greece and Persia finally erupted once more in 334 BCE, when young Alexander took his army into Asia Minor and went on to defeat the far superior army of the Persian king Darius III. There is a famous mosaic from Pompeii, a copy of a painting that was widely admired in ancient times, of the Battle of Issus. On the left is Alexander, storming toward the Persian forces with his cavalry, and on the right is King Darius, shocked and stunned, about to turn and flee the field.



- ▶ Alexander then pushed into the Persian realm and rapidly conquered almost all of its vassal states. The result was an empire even greater than its Persian precedent, covering some 2 million square miles. But this empire was not destined to last. Just 11 years later, Alexander died in the palace of Darius in Babylon.
- ▶ Alexander's death came so suddenly that no one had prepared for an orderly succession. This led to a power struggle between his leading generals. After a long civil war, they split the empire into four separate territories: the home territories of Greece and Macedon, Asia Minor and part of the Balkans, the core of the old Persian empire, and the regions of Egypt and Yehud, which were to be ruled by General Ptolemy and his dynasty.



## Alexandria

- ▶ Meanwhile, all eyes were on Alexandria, the new capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom. Laid out in a grid pattern, the city had a manmade causeway to the island of Pharos, which held the tallest lighthouse of the ancient world. It had a vast library that became the center of Greek scholarship, and it was also the place where Alexander's body was put to rest, in a gold sarcophagus filled with honey.

Around 258 BCE, an official named Zenon conducted an audit of the agricultural sector in Ptolemaic Palestine on behalf of finance minister Apollonius. His reports, which were preserved as the Zenon papyri, offer a fascinating glimpse of the sheer variety of crops, fruits, and fish produced in Galilee and Judea during this time. But there is little archaeological evidence of the Greek period, when Judea was ruled by the successors of Alexander the Great.



- ▶ The Jews of the time didn't quite know what to make of Alexandria. They enjoyed the high standard of living, but the pagan cult of Greece ran counter to everything that ancient Judaism stood for. They decided to settle in Alexandria to become part of its thriving trade, but they tried hard to remain faithful to the Torah. They developed private prayer halls, which would later be known as synagogues, where they could come together as a community.
- ▶ The Jews also translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, as few of the Jewish expatriates could understand the ancient Hebrew texts. There is a persistent story, probably apocryphal, that says that the initiative came from King Ptolemy II, who had begun to stock the great library with religious texts from around the world. The king offered the high priest in Jerusalem an exchange: If the high priest sent him 70 (or 72) scholars to produce a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the king would release any Jewish prisoners held in Alexandria.
- ▶ The story was probably invented to endow this translation with the authority of Jerusalem scholars, when in fact it was probably done by Greek scribes in Alexandria. But the story stuck and is still reflected in the name of this translation: the Septuagint, from the Latin word *septuaginta*, or "70," referring to the 70 scholars from Jerusalem.

## The Maccabean Revolt

- ▶ Unfortunately, the rather benign attitude of the Ptolemies did not last. The Seleucid empire had its eye on Judea, and around 200 BCE, King Antiochus III captured the province and added it to his empire. The Syrian treasury was entirely depleted as a result of the Syrian king's ill-advised attack on Greece, which was now a Roman dependency. His successor then decided on a desperate course: He ordered that all the temples in his kingdom be looted of their treasure. In subsequent years, the Syrian kings also tried to oppress any and all Jewish worship, forcing people to sacrifice to the Greek gods.
- ▶ This persecution was too much. One priest, called Mattathias, refused to comply. When a Syrian officer arrived in his village to enforce the observance of pagan rites, the priest lashed out and killed the officer. This was the spark that launched the great revolt against Syrian oppression. It was led by Mattathias and his sons, including a man named Judas, whose nom de guerre was Maccabee, or "the hammer." As a result, the rebellion became known as the Maccabean Revolt, the subject of the two books of the Maccabees.
- ▶ The story of ancient Judaism is filled with revolts against foreign oppressors. Almost all of these came to a tragic end. But after many decades of hard campaigning, the Jewish guerilla fighters of the Maccabean Revolt were able to push back the powerful Syrian army. In 164 BCE, Judas captured Jerusalem and restored the worship of Yahweh. It took another 20 years, but all of Judea was once again recognized as an independent kingdom, and it remained a free kingdom until the rise of Rome.

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### Readings

Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*.

Harrington, *The Maccabean Revolt*.



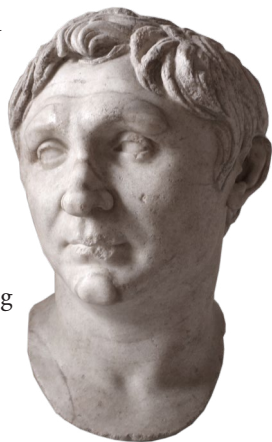
# JUDEA IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

## LESSON 16

**T**he development of Judaism and Christianity would not have been possible without the pivotal role Rome played in the process. During this time, there was a fragmentation of Jewish society that would extend well into the time of Jesus. This was something new: While they suffered under the yoke of foreign oppressors, most Jews felt a strong solidarity with one another. But now that they were free, these divisions rose to the surface.

## Expansion of the Roman Empire

- ▶ The Roman Empire guaranteed a level of security that had been lacking for most of the preceding centuries, going back all the way to the days of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Farmers could seed and harvest their fields in peace, and goods could be transported over a vast network of new roads or using a regular schedule of cargo ships across the Mediterranean. Trade flourished as more people were drawn to the Roman global economy.
- ▶ Rome began its expansion, first conquering the Italian peninsula and then branching out across the Mediterranean, while Persia and Greece, the major powers of the time, were too busy fighting each other to take notice. While Alexander's empire crumbled into rival states, Rome pounced on the opportunity. It defeated Carthage, the main power in North Africa. Asia Minor fell right into Rome's lap. The Seleucid kings of Syria were trying to push their way into this territory, so the local rulers appealed to Rome for help.
- ▶ King Attalus III of Pergamum was so grateful for Rome's help that when he died in 133 BCE, he donated his entire nation to Rome. Much to its own surprise, Rome suddenly became a major world power. The senators liked this idea, and they kept urging their generals to conquer even more territory. There was good reason for this expansion because by now, Rome had grown by leaps and bounds, with a population of 1.5 million. It could no longer feed its people from the yield of its own fields alone; instead, it needed almost daily shipments of grain from places like Egypt.
- ▶ Because the Mediterranean was infested with pirates, the Senate charged Pompey the Great to take the Roman navy and eradicate the problem once and for all. Pompey accomplished the task, but he didn't stop there. He continued campaigning with the goal of creating a ring of buffer states in the Near East that would protect the crucial lifeline of grain from Egypt. This mission is how Pompey came to the doorstep of the Jewish nation, the independent kingdom of Judea.



Pompey

## Sadducees and Pharisees

- ▶ Unfortunately, things were not going well in the Jewish nation, which is referred to as the Hasmonean kingdom. Much of the trouble can be traced back to a fateful decision by Jonathan, the youngest of the sons of Mattathias, to assume the function of both secular ruler and high priest. As a result, Jewish society became polarized. On the one hand were those who liked the Hasmonean kings and supported their fondness for Greek culture. But there were those who continued to observe the Covenant Law, despised anything that had to do with Greek fashion, and yearned for a true high priest. This split is apparent in the two books of the Maccabees.
- ▶ The first book of the Maccabees, for example, praises the achievements of the Hasmonean dynasty to high heaven, whereas II Maccabees, which covers much of the same history, is primarily concerned with the restoration of the liturgy at the Temple of Jerusalem. The same inner tension is in another apocryphal book—meaning a book not included in the official canon of the Hebrew Bible—called the Wisdom of Solomon, or the book of Wisdom, which was probably compiled in the 1st century BCE.



The Second Temple

- ▶ On the one hand, the Wisdom of Solomon rages against Greek culture, but on the other hand, the book seems to accept the Platonic idea that the soul could be immortal—“the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord.” That ran counter to the prevailing idea in ancient Judaism that there was no real afterlife other than, perhaps, the life of shadows in Sheol, the underworld. Of course, that idea of the immortality of the soul would become very important in the ministry of Jesus.
- ▶ The man who described these different movements in great detail was a 1st-century Jewish historian named Josephus. His books, written in Rome, are a valuable source of information about the events of that time. Josephus tells us that there were three principal factions in the Hasmonean period, which then continued well into the era of Jesus.
- ▶ First, there were the Sadducees, or Tzedoqim. The root of that word is possibly derived from the name Zadok, the high priest who anointed Solomon. The Sadducees were a deeply conservative faction that did not accept any scripture beyond the Torah—including the books of the Prophets—and rejected any idea of an afterlife or the immortality of the soul. They also wanted to control the entire apparatus of ritual sacrifice at the Second Temple, including the collection of tithes.

The third group, according to Josephus, was the Essenes. They were outraged by the Hasmonean merger of king and high priest, so they decided to withdraw from social life altogether and venture out into the Judean desert. It's been suggested that a large residential community discovered in Khirbet Qumran could have been a monastic retreat of the Essenes. Here, archaeologists discovered a large room that may have served as a large library and scriptorium, where scribes copied the text from Hebrew scripture. When the Roman army appeared on the horizon during the Jewish rebellion, these texts were stored in clay jars and hidden in the nearby caves—only to be found, some 2,000 years later, by a Bedouin boy.

- ▶ The Pharisees were both priests and pious laymen who were passionately devoted to the observance of the Jewish Law in everyday life. For example, whereas the Sadducees believed that only through sacrifice would a Jew be able to find redemption, the Pharisees felt that Jews should please God in everything they did. Whereas the Sadducees believed that the Torah was a closed book, the Pharisees felt that they should continue to debate and interpret the application of the Hebrew scripture to everyday life.

## The Sanhedrin

- ▶ The Sadducees and Pharisees had considerable political power because they both served on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. Under the Hasmoneans, the kingdom of Herod the Great, and even under the Romans, the Sanhedrin had considerable influence on the way things were done, considering the Torah was a religious law.
- ▶ There was often tension between the Sanhedrin and the ruling king as both tried to push the envelope and see how far their authority would go. But around 100 BCE, the Hasmonean dynasty did something that would cast a long shadow over the century to come: They tried to exploit the tension between Sadducees and Pharisees by striking a deal with the Sadducee faction. They offered exclusive control of the temple if the Sadducees would accept that Hasmonean kings can also serve as high priest.
- ▶ That bargain was music to Sadducee ears. Not only would they now control the whole apparatus of sacrifice; they would also control the temple treasury, giving them full jurisdiction over how the proceeds of the tithes would be spent. And the Hasmoneans would from now on pledge their support to whatever the Sadducees decided to do in the Sanhedrin.
- ▶ The Pharisees, now deprived of much of their power, became the opposition party. As a result, many Pharisees withdrew from governance in Jerusalem and focused on pastoral work in rural areas, whether they were clergy or laymen. This is how they ultimately got in contact with Jesus.

## The Fall of Judea

- ▶ Torn by divisions from within and threatened by danger from without, the Hasmonean kingdom ultimately fell. The immediate cause was that after the death of the last Hasmonean ruler, Queen Salome Alexandra, a power struggle erupted between her two sons: Hyrcanus II, who was already serving as high priest, and Aristobulus II. It became a nasty affair, with the Pharisees supporting Hyrcanus and the Sadducees favoring Aristobulus.
- ▶ Things got out of hand when both factions asked foreign powers to intervene. This was exactly what the Roman Senate wanted to avoid—the whole point of Pompey campaigning in the area was to keep things under control. So as soon as Pompey heard of the mayhem in Judea, he mustered his troops and prepared to march. Once again, Jerusalem was besieged, and once again, the city fell to a foreign invader. Once Judea was pacified, Rome looked around for someone who could rule the territory on their behalf. They found him in the son of an Arab nobleman, Antipater. Thus began the reign of Herod the Great.

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### Readings

Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Udoh, *To Caesar What Is Caesar's*.



# THE KINGDOM OF HEROD THE GREAT

## LESSON 17

**H**erod the Great's reign coincided with a time of great political instability in Rome. Workers and farmers were fed up with the way that the noblemen and landowners of the Senate were hogging the wealth pouring into the Roman republic. One of these noblemen was a man named Julius Caesar. He decided to ally himself with the populist cause, and by 59 BCE, he had become the most powerful man of the republic. He was even declared dictator for life, a move that alarmed many in the Roman Senate. A conspiracy was formed, and on the Ides of March in 44 BCE, Caesar was assassinated on the Senate floor. The result was a civil war that would last more than a decade.

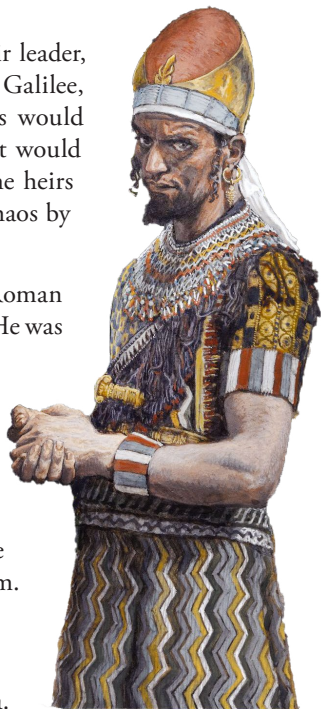
## Antipater and Herod

- ▶ The leading assassins, Cassius and Brutus, fled to the Near East, where they hoped to raise funds for new legions. The Caesar faction decided to pursue them. Both factions tried to convince local leaders to switch to their side and that their victory was simply a matter of time.
- ▶ One of these local leaders was a man named Antipater, who governed the Roman vassal state of Judea on behalf of the inept Hyrcanus II. Antipater was a canny operator, for he already saw that Judea's future lay with Rome. In years past, he had cultivated his ties with Julius Caesar. Caesar had liked him and had even given him the formal title of *epitropos*, a position comparable to that of prime minister. Antipater promptly exploited that new position by appointing his two sons, Phasael and Herod, as provincial governors. Phasael, the elder, received the heartland of Judea and Perea, while Herod was put in charge of the northern province of Galilee.
- ▶ Antipater and Herod decided to back the cause of Caesar's assassins, Cassius and Brutus. They were senators, they were noblemen, and they had a good story: They had saved Rome from tyranny. But Cassius demanded a stiff price. Antipater and his sons were charged with raising a huge sum of 700 silver talents, which is about \$6.3 million today—a hopeless task in a country as poor as Roman Palestine. But Herod eagerly accepted the challenge.

## King of the Jews

- ▶ Herod's domain, the province of Galilee, was an agricultural region with no major assets such as mines or timber. But Galilee did have farmers who tilled the land in one of the most fertile valleys in the Near East. Herod increased the tax burden on these poor farmers to such an outrageous level that, as Josephus says, he was able to realize his allocation of 350 talents before anyone else.
- ▶ Of course, Antipater and Herod had bet on the wrong horse. Cassius was defeated, and Octavian, soon to become known as Augustus, became the first emperor of Rome. But the farmers of Galilee didn't take Herod's exploitation lying down. They rose in revolt—the first time in history that we hear of a revolt taking place in Galilee rather than in Judea.

- ▶ Herod tracked down the rebel militia and their leader, Hezekiah, and had them executed. Now all of Galilee, and indeed all of Judea, was in uproar. This would have been the end of Herod, and perhaps that would have been a good thing, but the Parthians, the heirs to the Persian empire, decided to exploit the chaos by invading Judea.
- ▶ Antipater had always cultivated ties with the Roman Senate, and Herod now took advantage of that. He was invited to address the Roman Senate, which was a great honor, and he convinced the Senate that he was the man who could rally all of Roman Judea and send the Parthians packing—with Roman military support, of course. Herod was voted king of the Jews and even received a Roman legion to drive the Parthians out and secure the throne of Jerusalem.



## Herod's Fortresses

- ▶ Herod decided to change the face of Roman Judea. But first, he needed to secure his kingdom, so he built a string of fortresses surrounding it. Several of these fortifications were built on the top of prominent hills or on old Hasmonean forts, but they all served a dual function as the base for the military and a place of refuge for the king and his family in times of trouble.
- ▶ During the dark days of the Parthian invasion, before he made his way to Rome to try to secure support, Herod had left his family in an old stronghold on top of a mountain called Masada. This massive plateau, located close to the Dead Sea, would now become the crown jewel in this string of fortifications.
- ▶ Masada was excavated by Yigael Yadin in the 1960s, and his team discovered that the original Hasmonean fortress had been turned into a luxurious resort, with large cisterns to catch rainwater for bathing facilities on site. A palace complex on the west side of the plateau featured a throne room and a residential section for the king and his family.

- ▶ Ten years later, Herod created the most impressive building of all: a suspended palace, precariously perched on three levels of stepped cliffs. This engineering marvel offered the king and his guests breathtaking views of the Judean hills and the Dead Sea. Herod built similar fortresses near Bethlehem, on a conelike hill which he called the Herodion, and another fortress called Machaerus.

Soon after the Roman takeover of Judea, the Roman general Pompey told his Syrian legate, Gabinius, to show the Jews what a modern city ought to look like. Gabinius decided to rebuild Bet She'an, known as Scythopolis at the time, as a Greco-Roman polis. The result was a city like nothing anyone in Judea had ever seen before, and even today, it's one of the most impressive archeological sites in Israel. For Herod, Scythopolis was a glimpse of what his new domain could look like—how Judea could become the rival of Alexandria, Tyre, and Sidon as the jewel of the Near East.

Machaerus

## Herod's Cities

- ▶ Once these fortresses were in place, Herod could focus on the development of his cities. The purpose of the new cities was twofold: to stimulate the growth of the region's economy and to fulfill the wishes of Herod's overlord, the Roman emperor Octavian. The emperor wanted to fuse Rome's possessions into a seamless commonwealth. Only by creating a global economy that would raise the living standards of all the people under his sway would the Roman realm avoid the cycle of rebellions that had doomed the empires of old.
- ▶ Herod did his part by building a new city from scratch on one of the most hallowed sites of ancient Israel. Sebaste is perhaps one of the best-preserved projects from the reign of Herod the Great. He had wanted to build here because this was originally the capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria, a place rich with Jewish history.
- ▶ The most ambitious enterprise of Herod's reign was the development of a deep-sea port on the Mediterranean coast. His architects built a vast artificial breakwater by pouring cement made from lime and volcanic ash. While this massive port, called Sebastos, was under construction, Herod also built a city around the port, which became known as Caesarea Maritima. Eventually, it became the largest Greco-Roman city ever built on Israel's soil.



## The Second Temple

- ▶ To suggest that Herod's subjects were none too pleased with this massive influx of pagan culture would be an understatement. In the holy city of Jerusalem itself, Herod began to build a theater, a hippodrome, and an amphitheater that, according to Josephus, was designed for all sorts of entertainment, "including those featuring men fighting wild animals." This, he adds, "greatly offended the Jews."

- ▶ Herod realized that some gesture was needed to calm his Jewish subjects, so he began the expansion of the Second Temple into one of the largest sanctuaries of the ancient world. The project was begun around 20 BCE and, some believe, not completed until around 62 CE. First, Herod the Great dismantled the old temple elevation and replaced it with a stunning new facade. Inside and outside, the temple was overlaid with gold leaf and flanked by massive columns that were entwined by elaborate vines of solid gold and grape clusters said to be as tall as a man.
- ▶ The temple and its forecourt were fronted by a large courtyard known as the Court of the Women. This complex was surrounded by a vast esplanade covering no less than one-sixth the area of the city. It was accessible through two floating staircases on the west, each supported by arches. A small portion of one of these arches, known as Robinson's Arch, is still visible today. This arch connected the temple to the lower market area of ancient Jerusalem.
- ▶ The most exciting discovery is a large flight of steps that led to the Double Gate. It was excavated after the Six-Day War in the late 1960s and has since been restored. These are likely the stairs that Jesus and the apostles would have used to enter the temple complex after their stay in Bethany. The entire complex was supported on a huge platform that dwarfed anything that had ever been built on the site. Only the western part of this massive platform, known as the Western Wall or Wailing Wall, remains today, and it is the holiest place in Judaism.

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## Readings

Horsley, *Galilee*.

Reed, *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament*.



# THE WORLD OF THE GOSPELS

## LESSON 18

**W**e now move out of the orbit of the Hebrew Bible and into the realm of the New Testament, the books of Christian scripture. Of course, the two are closely related. Time and again, the evangelists—and particularly Matthew—will hark back to the Hebrew Bible in search of texts that prophesy the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. But in and of themselves, the Gospels form a separate canon, and it's useful to see how these narratives developed and what unique perspectives they bring to the story of Jesus.

## Tension Between Judeans and Galileans

- ▶ The story unfolds in Galilee in the north as well as Judea in the south. Galilee and the northern kingdom were separate from Judea during the period of the Israelite monarchy, and that split was sustained during the subsequent Assyrian, Persian, and Greek periods. Galilee was an outlier, high in the north and surrounded by foreign territory. When Cyrus the Great granted Judea a measure of autonomy, he specifically omitted Galilee, which remained a Persian province.
- ▶ Galilee was first depopulated and then colonized by settlers from around the Middle East. As a result, it became a place of many foreign peoples, whereas Judea maintained its character as a Jewish nation. Indeed, when the Maccabean Revolt liberated Judea, Galilee remained a mostly foreign territory and a rural backwater. It took another 40 years before the region was finally incorporated into the Hasmonean kingdom, but even then, suspicions ran rife. So much foreign blood had been intermingled with Jewish blood.
- ▶ All of these tensions are reflected in the Gospels. In John's Gospel, someone asks, "how can the Messiah come from Galilee?" He must obviously come from Bethlehem, for the Messiah must be of the Davidic line. So why would anyone suggest that he would be coming from a small village like Nazareth? In that same gospel, it is Nathaniel, when he hears about Jesus's place of origin, who says, "Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?" There were deep social tensions between Judeans, who considered themselves the pure strain of Judaism, and Galileans, who had suffered so much from foreign infiltration.

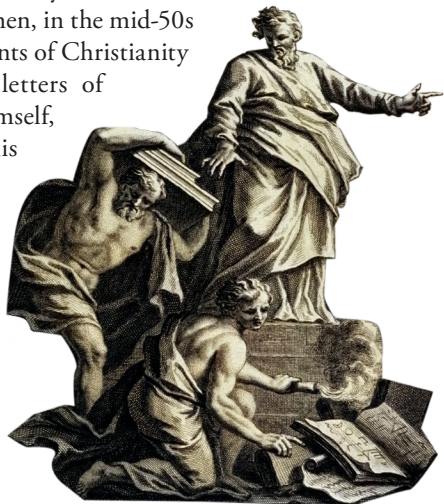
## The Oral Tradition of the Gospels

- ▶ Just as the books of the Hebrew Bible were told by elders sitting around a campfire at night, so, too, did the Gospels originate based on oral traditions about the rabbi from Nazareth. Scholars sometimes have different ideas about these origins than what church tradition tells us. For example, one tradition holds that the author of Matthew's Gospel was "Matthew, the tax-collector," who knew Jesus firsthand. Some believe that Luke and John were also members of Jesus's or Paul's entourage. It's a wonderful idea that the evangelists were eyewitnesses, but historical analysis has shown that this is unlikely.

- ▶ The Gospels explicitly say that the disciples of Jesus were blue-collar workers—Galilean fishermen. It’s extremely unlikely that any of them knew how to read, let alone write, which were two different skill sets in antiquity. And the evangelists wrote in Koine Greek rather than the Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke. The gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John are clearly written by intellectuals, people who had been trained in Greek history-writing and knew how to develop a compelling story based on the available sources.
- ▶ There are also many differences between the Gospel stories that are hard to explain if the evangelists were eyewitnesses. It’s far more likely that the Gospel material is different precisely because they are based on many different oral and written traditions about Jesus that were circulated in the Roman Empire at that time. This does not rule out the possibility that some of these oral strands originated within the circle of the apostles themselves—indeed, that is actually very likely. The Gospel of John, for example, says that his story is based on “testimony” by a “disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them.”

## Sayings Documents

- ▶ For the first two decades after his ministry, which probably ended in either 30 or 33 CE, many different oral traditions circulated about Jesus. Then, in the mid-50s of the 1st century, the first documents of Christianity were committed to paper—the letters of Paul. Some were written by Paul himself, while others were written under his name by his disciples. These letters don’t provide much biographical information about Jesus, because Paul never met Jesus in the flesh, much to his regret. But they do provide information about how Paul shaped the message of Jesus’s ministry for his audience, which was not only Jews but also Gentiles outside of Roman Judea.



- ▶ Around that time, and perhaps as a result of the missionary activity of Paul and many others, the oral traditions about Jesus himself were committed to paper. Such papers are called sayings documents, and they record significant statements made by a prominent sage or philosopher. It was rare for a person who wasn't a king or an emperor, or who wasn't wealthy, to leave a contemporary record. Therefore, it was up to oral traditions to sustain the memory of Jesus's life and deeds. In the 50s, as his fame continued to spread, these first sayings documents were written.

There are other sayings documents, including one that scholars don't actually have in hand but are able to reconstruct. This document is called Q, based on the German word *Quelle*, which means "source." The reason scholars think that this document existed is that both Luke and Matthew seem to cite from it.

- ▶ It's possible that one of these documents, the so-called Gospel of Thomas, emerged in this timeframe. It's a bit of a misnomer, because Thomas isn't a Gospel in the sense that it carries a theological message like the actual Gospels do. But it is a fascinating document because it does exactly what a sayings document is supposed to do: It lists some of Jesus's most striking statements, verbatim, just as a court recorder would have done.

## The Evangelists

- ▶ The location where the evangelists lived is the subject of ongoing debate, but many scholars accept that the oldest Gospel was that of Mark, who probably wrote in Rome around 70 CE for a local Christian congregation. The Christian community in Rome was one of the oldest groups of Christians outside of Judea, and many of them were Jewish. The Christians there already lived under a cloud of suspicion, and the problem became worse when the Jews back in Judea rose up in revolt. These events could have provided the motive for this community to commission Mark to write his Gospel.

- ▶ Assuming Mark wrote around 70 CE, then most scholars will also accept that the works of Matthew and Luke followed some 20 years later. Matthew is believed to have written his book in Damascus, and it's possible Luke wrote for a Christian community in Asia Minor, Greece, or Alexandria, given the elegance of his written Greek.
- ▶ While these three Gospels are different in many respects, they do have many segments in common. Careful analysis has shown that both Matthew and Luke copied some 40% of their narrative from Mark. Scholars refer to these three Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—as the synoptic Gospels, from the Greek word *synoptikos*, meaning “seen together.”
- ▶ The Gospel of John is more concerned with Jesus’s theological ideas than with the details of his life. John clearly wrote for a Gentile Christian audience that was not familiar with either the Hebrew Bible or the Jewish Law. That’s why, time and again, John must explain certain Jewish customs to his readers. And that’s also why his message is not that Jesus was the Messiah—a term most of his readers would not have understood—but that he is the son of God, the redeemer of all mankind.
- ▶ In sum, it seems that all of the evangelists wrote outside of Roman Judea. This also explains why there isn’t much information about everyday life in Galilee in the Gospel texts—simply because the evangelists didn’t live there. Fortunately, that gap is bridged by the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote two books about Judea in the 1st century. But above all, it is modern archaeology, including recent excavations in Galilee, that allow scholars to fill this gap.



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## Readings

Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee*.

Evans, *Jesus and His World*.



# THE BIRTH OF JESUS

## LESSON 19

**I**n ancient times, there was a longstanding literary tradition that the birth of a prominent person, such as a king, was always attended by two things: a prophecy and miraculous signs. For the ancient audience, this validated the importance of the birth. It was a way for the divine to signal to humankind that something important was about to happen.

Prophecies and miraculous signs are both at work in the Nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke: first, a prophecy, in the form of the appearance of the angel; and later, in Matthew, the star of Bethlehem, which summons the three wise men, who are astrologers and prophets themselves.

## The Birthplace Problem

- ▶ Luke and Matthew faced a problem concerning the birth of Jesus. Few people believed that the Messiah would come from a rural backwater like Nazareth. This wasn't just a matter of prejudice against Galileans; everyone knew the prophecy of the 8th-century BCE prophet Micah, which specified Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. Bethlehem was the origin of the line of David, so all kings of the Davidic line, including the Messiah foretold in scripture, had to be born there.
- ▶ So the evangelists faced the problem of getting the parents of Jesus, who lived in Nazareth, into Bethlehem in time for the birth of Jesus. Mark, the earliest Gospel, and John, the last Gospel, simply decide not to go there. Their Gospels start when Jesus is a grown man, so the whole issue of the Nativity, with the need for prophecies and the challenge of getting Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, is put aside.
- ▶ But Matthew and Luke do tackle this challenge, perhaps because there may have been one or several oral traditions about Jesus being conceived out of wedlock, by the power of God. Both Luke and Matthew stage the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but the way they do this is different, which shows that once again, different traditions are at work.

## The Prophecy

- ▶ In Luke's narrative, Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel. She is already engaged, says Luke, to a man named Joseph, so she's probably between 13 and 15 years old. Gabriel gives Mary the news that she is about to conceive a child.
- ▶ Both Luke and Matthew are steeped in the Hebrew Bible, and their mission, as they see it, is to convince their audience that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in Hebrew scripture. So Luke paraphrases the great prophecies in the book of Genesis: the one to Hagar, Abraham's concubine, and the one to Sarah, Abraham's wife. The literary structure of the prophecies is as follows: first, the news of conception; second, the name that the child should be given; and third, the role he is to play in God's plan.



- ▶ The angel says to Hagar: “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.” The same structure is followed when God appears before Abraham and tells him: “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son; and you shall call him Isaac; I will establish my covenant with him.” Luke follows that poetic structure to the letter: “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son; and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.”
- ▶ While Luke’s story of the Annunciation, as this episode is called, is seen entirely from the perspective of Mary, Matthew tells the story from the viewpoint of Joseph: “When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together,” Matthew writes, “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” The phrase “before they lived together” is important, because under the Jewish Law, a couple was considered to be married as soon as their union was consummated. If, however, the bride-to-be became pregnant before the wedding, and with someone other than her husband, then she and her family would have been exposed to tremendous shame.

- ▶ In Matthew’s Gospel, when Joseph hears the news that his fiancée is pregnant, he immediately recognizes the terrible consequences. He knows he hasn’t had any conjugal relations with Mary yet, so he cannot be the father. Therefore, the marriage contract that was probably negotiated between their families over many months is now invalid.
- ▶ But an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew also uses the same literary construct from Hebrew scripture that we saw in Luke, for he says: “She will bear a son; and you are to name him Jesus; for he will save his people from their sins.”

## Luke’s Solution

- ▶ Now, Mary is pregnant, Joseph is still her devoted fiancé, and they need to go to Bethlehem. Luke and Matthew offer two different scenarios. Luke is the historian, so he makes a considerable effort to frame the events he writes with historical markers, as an author in the tradition of Herodotus and other history writers is supposed to do.
- ▶ Luke’s solution is that Joseph and Mary have to go to Bethlehem because of a Roman census, and since Joseph is from the house of David, that’s where he has to go to fulfill the obligation. This makes sense because when Herod the Great died, he split his kingdom among his sons. Each of the four regions continued to operate as autonomous entities, meaning that it was their responsibility to levy taxes based on a census, or assessment, of what each property was worth.

Luke says the newborn infant is put in a manger since there is no cradle around. Incidentally, in the 2nd century CE, a physician named Soranus of Ephesus wrote a book about gynecology and obstetrics that would be used until well into the Middle Ages. He recommends that a newborn be swaddled in cloth and put on a pillow or a mattress with a “channel” to keep the baby from rolling over. In fact, he writes, you can also use a “feeding trough” since these are slightly inclined, and thus prop up the baby’s head. So Luke’s reference to a manger may be based on actual practice.

- ▶ Eventually, Quirinius was put in charge of Roman Syria, including Judea, and he ordered a census of his new territory. But the Quirinius census would not have affected Mary and Joseph because, according to Luke, they lived in Nazareth. That was part of Galilee, which remained an autonomous region ruled by Antipas, with its own system of tax collection. And we now know that the census took place in 6 CE, not 4 BCE, and at that time, Jesus was already at least 10 or 11 years old.
- ▶ What this discrepancy shows is that to Luke's audience, the facts didn't matter. They had a different yardstick for truth, and that was the meaning of the story. If it carried a beautiful message, then that was validation in itself. The purpose of Luke's Nativity narrative is to frame the birth of Jesus with a divine purpose using the vocabulary of Hebrew scripture. So the couple travels to Bethlehem, where they find that there is no room in the inn, and finally, Mary gives birth to Jesus in a grotto or someplace where livestock is kept.

## Matthew's Solution

- ▶ Matthew has a different scenario for placing the birth in Bethlehem. He says that Jesus is born in Bethlehem for the simple reason that this is where Mary and Joseph live. When the three magi from the east follow the star of Bethlehem, they are led to the "place," *oikia* in Greek, where Mary and Joseph live. *Oikia* means "house" or "household," so that clearly implies a permanent residence.



- ▶ Soon thereafter, Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod, for the king has ordered the so-called Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem in an effort to eliminate the future king of Israel. There is no historical attestation of this event, but apparently, no one had any difficulty imagining that the king could do such a terrible thing.
- ▶ Mary and Joseph bide their time in Egypt until the king is dead and it's safe for them to return. But then Joseph hears that another Herodian, Archelaus, is now in charge. This is historically accurate: Archelaus was indeed king of Judea. According to Matthew, this is why Joseph decides not to return to his house in Bethlehem but to move up north, "to the district of Galilee," where Joseph "made his home in a town called Nazareth."
- ▶ The scenarios given by Matthew and Luke are different, but the meaning is the same: Because he is born in Bethlehem, Jesus is fully qualified to become the *Mashiach*, Hebrew for "Anointed One," which in Greek would be translated as *Christos*, or "Christ."

Matthew implies that Jesus is born in the final months or years of Herod's reign, when Herod tries to kill the child that might one day challenge him and his dynasty. If that's true, then the birth must have taken place in either 5 or 4 BCE, the year that the king actually died, and not in the year 1 of the Common Era, as we traditionally assume.

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## Readings

Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*.

Levine, Allison, and Crossan, *The Historical Jesus in Context*.



# YOUNG JESUS

## LESSON 20

**S**cholars typically refer to the interval between the Nativity narratives and the moment that Jesus leaves Galilee to join John the Baptist in the desert as the lost years. The only story we do have from this interval of some 25 to 30 years is from Luke, telling us that when Mary and Joseph lose track of a 12-year-old Jesus in Jerusalem, they find him in the forecourt of the temple, lecturing the scholars and scribes on the Law.

This time period is nothing like the peaceful, pastoral idea of Galilee that one might expect of the childhood of Jesus. Modern research has shown that the decade or so in which Jesus grew up was one of the most violent episodes in Galilee, with not one but two major peasant uprisings that devastated the land. These uprisings created the conditions that would shape Jesus's ministry.

## Jesus's Childhood

- ▶ In Upper Galilee is a 1st-century village, known as Qasrin, which Israeli archaeologists have recently restored. This village reveals the type of environment that Jesus would have grown up in. For example, a simple two-story dwelling was built of rough stone. It had a small courtyard where the animals would be kept, and inside, there were two rooms: a main living room on the bottom and a small living area on top. The floor was packed earth but covered with a rug to provide a modicum of comfort.
- ▶ There was very little furniture because wood was scarce. A ladder provided access to the sleeping area above as well as a shelf, suspended from the roof, where Mary would keep edibles like wheat, yeast, and olive oil. Mary would also have a kitchen of sorts with two appliances, a mill and an oven, which she would use to make her daily bread.
- ▶ Boys typically followed in the footsteps of their father, so whatever trade Joseph practiced was likely the trade that Jesus learned before he became a rabbi. The Gospel of Mark clearly identifies Jesus as a carpenter, or *tektōn*, which the King James Bible indeed translates as “carpenter.” But *tektōn* actually means a “skilled worker,” implying any sort of skill, which means that Joseph could have been an artisan of sorts.
- ▶ When listening to Jesus's parables of the Kingdom of God, there is no sense that he grew up in a world of carpentry. Instead, time and again, Jesus talks about seeds and sowing, the joys of a full orchard, or the frantic urgency of harvest time. These are the words of a man who has observed the seasonal cycle of orchards and fields since childhood. Remember, Josephus said that almost everyone in Galilee was involved in agriculture. So to understand why Mark calls Jesus a *tektōn*, we have to go back to 4 BCE, to the aftermath of the death of Herod the Great.

## Archelaus

- ▶ After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided among his three sons and his sister. The largest part went to Archelaus, and he knew that the people in Judea were sick and tired of the rule of Herod and the heavy taxes that were used for Herod's endless list of building projects. So Archelaus did something that no one had ever tried before: practicing a bit of openness.

- ▶ As soon as the Jews heard of this new policy, they overwhelmed Archelaus with petitions, comments, and grievances. A loud clamor went up for the new ruler to release the hundreds of political prisoners who were still in Herod's jails. Others pleaded for him to ease the heavy taxes that were still in force. Some were even bolder and demanded that members of the Herodian regime should be brought to justice for their crimes against the Jewish people. When Archelaus didn't agree to these demands, things quickly got out of hand.
- ▶ The timing was poor, as it was the season of Passover, when tens of thousands of Jews streamed into the city. Soon, Jerusalem was overtaken by mass demonstrations. Archelaus then did what most autocrats do: Rather than trying to listen and make changes, he called in the army. Three thousand demonstrators were killed. At that point, the protests turned into a nationwide revolt.
- ▶ Rome itself was up in arms, and no fewer than three legions marched down to suppress the revolt. Rome typically called on all the vassal kings in the region to contribute militia, so even before the Roman legions could arrive on the scene, a whole host of undisciplined troops descended on Galilee and Judea with the intent to rape, pillage, and burn.

## Sepphoris

- ▶ When Antipas arrived to take over Galilee and Perea as tetrarch, he came up with an idea: If he could not become his father's successor and rule as king from his palace in Jerusalem, he would at least build himself a palace in Sepphoris. Since Sepphoris had conveniently been destroyed during the revolt, Antipas could design his new city from scratch. This also meant that Antipas could not draw from a pool of experienced construction workers. Instead, he did what his Roman masters would do: employ conscript labor. If this theory is correct, then this explains why we don't hear anything about this period in the Gospels. This is where Joseph was conscripted to work as a *tektōn*, and this is where his son Jesus would have joined him as soon as he was at least 7 or 10 years old.

- ▶ The construction of a city as large as Sepphoris took many years. It must have dominated all commercial activity in Galilee, consuming manpower, supplies, and food from all over the region. Some archaeologists have suggested that as skilled workers, Joseph and Jesus may have worked on the most challenging part of Sepphoris, which was building its beautiful theater, carved into the natural slope of a hill.
- ▶ Antipas made one major concession when building his city: He did not build any of the Hellenistic trappings that his father was so fond of, such as Roman baths, a gymnasium, or temples dedicated to pagan gods. The reason is that during the time of Jesus, the population of Sepphoris was overwhelmingly Jewish. Scholars know this because excavations by Mark Chancey and Eric Meyers have uncovered many *mikva'ot*—pools used for ritual immersion—and vessels made of stone, a material that the Jews believed protected fluids like water against impurity. The excavations suggest that by 20 CE, Sepphoris was once again a thriving city, with a population of between 12,000 and 30,000 people.



## Migdal

- ▶ Sometime along the way, Jesus learned to read scripture. Scholars know this because in later years, his disciples referred to him as rabbi, which means “teacher.” For a long time, scholars debated where he would have received such an education. The Talmud suggests that during the era of Rabbinic Judaism—that is, after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE—rabbis tried to provide every boy, even peasant boys, with some rudimentary training in the Law, but it’s debatable to what extent this program was carried out. And if, by the 3rd or 4th centuries, some rabbis did visit villages to teach scripture, it’s unlikely that this would have been the case in Jesus’s time.
- ▶ Many historians long discounted the reference in Luke that when Jesus returned to Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry, he “went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.” These historians believe that Luke is simply referring to the type of community synagogues that he would have seen in his own city, sometime in the 80s or 90s. While the temple still stood in Jerusalem, they argued, there was no reason to have a purpose-built synagogue anywhere in Galilee. Well, these historians were wrong.
- ▶ Much of this debate was put to rest in 2007, when a group of archaeologists from Israel and Mexico began excavating in Migdal, the biblical home of Mary Magdalene, where they discovered a synagogue in Galilee. In the heart of the synagogue was a stone that depicts the Second Temple, and this is the first three-dimensional representation of the temple ever found. On the floor of the synagogue was a coin, minted in Tiberias in 29 CE—right before the time of Jesus’s ministry.



- ▶ Needless to say, this astonishing discovery has completely uprooted the long-held idea that there were no synagogues in Galilee before the destruction of the temple, and even in the time of Jesus. Even more exciting was the discovery of a large room in front of the prayer hall, lined with benches, with room for scrolls and other study material. This must have been a Beth Midrash—exactly the type of study rooms for young pupils that the Mishnah and Talmudic sources wrote about. Jesus could have learned the Torah in a Beth Midrash such as the one in Migdal.
- ▶ In the meantime, though, Antipas stopped his project in Sepphoris and switched to the construction of another city on the Sea of Galilee. This would lead to the next episode in Jesus’s life: his journey to a prominent dissident called John the Baptist.

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### Readings

Isbouts, *Young Jesus*.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.



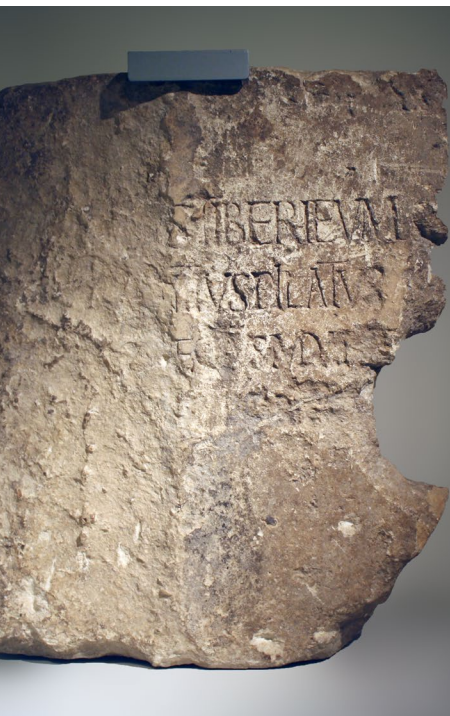
# JESUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

## LESSON 21

**T**he question of why Jesus undertakes his journey to meet John the Baptist is rarely addressed in biblical literature, perhaps because the sequence is so familiar. Jesus joins John because it's the natural overture to his ministry—John is the prophet who prepares the way. This is one of very few events that appears in all four Gospels, which is a powerful attestation of its historicity.

## Pontius Pilate

- ▶ While Antipas was busy building a pagan city on the shores of Galilee, a new antagonist appeared on the scene: Pontius Pilate, the new prefect of Roman Judea. Pilate soon found that he hated the Jews, and he could not understand why Caesar and Augustus had extended so many privileges to them. Why were they exempt from important duties, such as pledging their loyalty by sacrificing to a statue of the emperor? Why were they exempt from military duty? In Pilate's mind, giving the Jews such liberties was bound to lead to even greater calls for freedom.
- ▶ The prefect began a series of deliberate actions to see if he could provoke the Jews into revolt so that he would have an excuse to come down hard and suppress any sign of dissent. The first thing he did was take Roman standards with silver eagles, the face of the emperor, and other offensive images into the Temple of Jerusalem. Sure enough, this caused a number of protests, which were rapidly suppressed.



Since there are no Roman records that attest to Pilate's post in Judea, some people have wondered whether he was a myth invented by the evangelists. But those ideas were put to rest when, in the 1960s, excavators discovered a stone in Caesarea, the capital of the Roman government in Judea. The block is a cornerstone of sorts, used in the construction of a building. It says: "To the Divine Augustus this Tiberium has been dedicated by Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea." *Augustus* is the honorific title of Tiberius, and the building itself is likewise called the Tiberium.

- ▶ When Pilate learned that the temple served as a central bank of sorts, with all the tithes from across the Jewish Diaspora pouring into the treasury every year, he had to get his hands on it. He hatched a plan with Caiaphas, the high priest. Pilate had learned that the chief priests all had mansions in the upper city in Jerusalem, but they had problems filling their *mikva'ot*, their ritual baths, with running water. It's possible that he offered to build that great Roman invention, the aqueduct, to bring running water to the upper city—but it would be paid for by the temple's treasury, perhaps with a management fee for Pilate himself.
- ▶ This is the story that's told by the 1st-century historian Josephus. A plot like this doesn't stay secret for very long, and once again, there were massive protests in the forecourt of the temple. As the demonstrations grew, Pilate's soldiers infiltrated the crowd, wearing cloaks over their uniforms. When Pilate gave the sign, they killed everyone in sight. "They slew not only those that had participated in the demonstration," says Josephus, "but even innocent bystanders, who had nothing to do with it." Thousands lay dead or dying in the twisting alleys of Jerusalem.
- ▶ Few historians have related this episode to the decision by Jesus to leave for the Jordan River, but Jesus even refers to this massacre in the Gospel of Luke, when he talks about the poor Galileans who happened to be in the temple at that moment. When news of the massacre, which took place around 28 CE, spread through all of Judea and Galilee, it must have produced a wave of revulsion. Young men and women must have been desperate to take action, to find someone they could rally around. That man was John the Baptist.

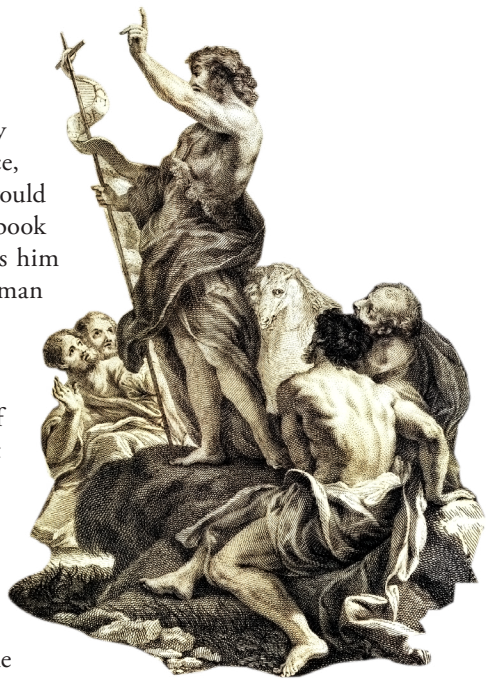
## John the Baptist

- ▶ A compelling source about John the Baptist is a book by Josephus. Both the Gospels and Josephus are in agreement: John believed that a great cataclysm was at hand and that these transformative changes would herald the coming of the Messiah, an agent of moral cleansing. The only problem, of course, was how to recognize the Messiah when he arrived.

▶ Some believed the Messiah was a commander like Joshua who would evict the Romans by military means. Others saw him as a prince, a descendant of King David, who would restore the Davidic kingdom. The book of Daniel, on the other hand, sees him as an angelic messenger, but in human form. The phrase Daniel uses is “one like a son of man,” which is how Jesus referred to himself. John the Baptist preached the coming of the Messiah as part of a violent regime change.

▶ John invited his audience to repent by being fully immersed in the Jordan River. Ritual immersion had always been part of Jewish ritual, particularly among the upper classes, who could afford a private mikvah. But John did not see it as a ritual act but as a cleansing of all the evil of his time, including Greco-Roman culture, the gap between rich and poor, and neglect of the Jewish Law. Interestingly enough, the Gospels say the exact opposite: John’s baptism was a rite of forgiveness, a pardon of sins. Much later, under Paul, the role of Christian baptism would change again, to a rite of initiation into the Christian community.

▶ Jesus, too, came to be baptized, and here, the Gospels faced a quandary. Why would Jesus, the future Messiah, need a baptism for the forgiveness of sins? That wouldn’t make much sense, but there was no way around it; the oral tradition that Jesus was baptized was too strong. So the evangelists depict this baptism in a new light. In their view, Jesus’s baptism is not a cleansing of sins but the formal act by which he becomes anointed as the Messiah—anointed not by oil, but with the waters of the Jordan. This is made explicit by the appearance of the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, and a voice from heaven that says, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

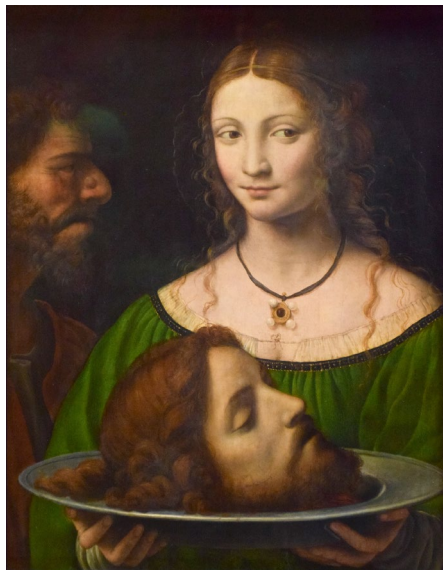


## The End of John's Ministry

- ▶ It was only a matter of time before John the Baptist's militant rhetoric would come to the attention of the authorities. John's renown as a dissident became so widespread that Pilate grew alarmed and may have put pressure on Herod Antipas to act. This is also the view of Josephus, who says that Antipas was afraid that "the great influence John had over the people might empower him to raise a rebellion."
- ▶ The Gospels see it somewhat differently. It appears that during one of his visits to Rome, Antipas had fallen in love with the beautiful wife of his half brother Philip, named Herodias. On top of that, Herodias was also his niece, the daughter of Antipas's half brother, Aristobulus. This was typical of the Herodian family, where there were 17 marriages between blood relatives. Antipas was in love, so he divorced his wife, daughter of King Aretas IV, and married Herodias instead. The king was deeply humiliated and vowed revenge.
- ▶ In the Gospels, John takes exception to the marriage, based on a reference in Leviticus that says that "you shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness." According to Mark, this angers Antipas so much that he arrests John and throws him in prison. But he doesn't put John to death, because, says Mark, John "was a righteous and holy man."

In 1996, Jordanian archaeologists were able to identify the place of baptism based on the remains of an early Byzantine church. Today, this is located in Jordan, but back then, it was in the region of Perea, the territory that had been added to the realm of Antipas, even though the two did not connect. This is why John preached on the east side of the Jordan, according to the Gospel of John. There, he did not fall under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate. He could wave at the Roman soldiers on the other side, but in principle, they couldn't touch him.

- ▶ There is now the dramatic story of Antipas throwing a banquet in one of his father's fortresses, the fort of Machaerus, where John is also imprisoned. Antipas wants to make sure that everyone likes his new wife, Herodias, and her daughter by her former husband. The Gospels don't give us her name, but Josephus does: She is called Salome.
- ▶ Antipas, eager to please his new wife, calls out to Salome, "Tell me what you wish—even if it is half my kingdom." The poor girl doesn't know what to do, so she runs to her mother. Herodias obviously has a bone to pick with this mettlesome preacher, this John the Baptist, who dared to speak up against her new marriage. So she tells Salome to ask for the head of John the Baptist, and Antipas has no choice but to give her what she wants. John is executed, and his disciples bury him in a cave nearby. With this violent act, the ministry of John the Baptist ends, and the ministry of Jesus begins.



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Neusner, *Judaism when Christianity Began*.

Senior, *Jesus*.



# THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

## LESSON 22

**A**ny interpretation of Jesus's ministry must begin with the historical foundation of his life. This lesson focuses on how this ministry unfolded and how the essential message of his teachings, the program that he called the Kingdom of God, can be understood.

## Jesus as Teacher and Healer

- ▶ The first phase of Jesus's ministry begins with his decision to return to Galilee with three of John's disciples, who had decided to become his followers. He then sets up his base camp in Capernaum, and he limits his movements to places within a day's walking distance. This is a break with the established practice of Israel's prophets, including John the Baptist, who usually stayed in one place and waited for people to come to them. Jesus does things differently; he wants to actively seek out towns and villages to spread his good news.
- ▶ During this initial phase, Jesus doesn't just teach; he also reveals himself as a healer. In Capernaum, he performs an exorcism and heals a man who was paralyzed. Before long, there is a line to the house where Jesus is staying of people who all hope to be healed. Healing serves to exemplify the "good news" of the Kingdom of God as Jesus envisions it. Healings make that message tangible and turn its theory into practice.

Good news, the translation of the Greek *euangelion*, is actually called *godspell* in Old English. This would become the root of the word *gospel*.



- ▶ In ancient times, people would not have made a distinction between exorcisms, healings, and miraculous events, such as the calming of the sea. Once an individual was believed to be endowed with wondrous powers, he or she was assumed to be capable of virtually anything. But modern scholarship tries to make a clear distinction between healings and metaphysical miracles. While healing stories abound in all four Gospels, the so-called nature miracles appear only incidentally. Only one miracle, the feeding of the 5,000, is reported in all four Gospels, while Jesus's ability to heal people appears in some of the oldest strata about Jesus—the earliest oral traditions that circulated before the development of the Gospels.
- ▶ Jesus has an unusual diagnostic approach. He first observes the patient and then touches him. He also tells him “your sins are forgiven,” because in Jesus's day, birth defects and chronic diseases were often regarded as God's punishment for sins—either by the patient or by his parents. A modern psychologist would recognize this as an attempt to eliminate the belief that he suffered because he deserved to. This is the meaning of “your sins are forgiven,” which is as much directed to the patient as to the villagers around him.
- ▶ It's also possible that Jesus was an energy healer. Modern studies show how energy healing can improve the condition of certain patients, even cancer patients. It's possible this is why Jesus always touches his patients, which marks a departure from Jewish customs regarding ritual impurity. In this, as in so many other examples, Jesus always places concern for human life above the rules of the Jewish Law.

## The Kingdom of God

- ▶ Because of these healing events, the crowds who want to see Jesus keep growing. Jesus seizes this opportunity to address the multitudes and articulate his essential teachings. At one point, Luke says, “He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” Tradition has identified this place as the Mount of Beatitudes, which still appears today as it may have been on that memorable day 2,000 years ago.

- ▶ The Sermon on the Mount is where Jesus introduces his concept of the Kingdom of God—or the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew’s version, which avoids a direct reference to Adonai, or the Lord, as pious Jews still do. The yearning for a return to the Kingdom of God, a Davidic kingdom based on the Torah, was very much in the air at that time. The book of Daniel thought the kingdom would come about as the result of a major cataclysm. John the Baptist saw it as the result of a radical regime change by a militant Messiah with an ax in his hand.
- ▶ Jesus didn’t see it that way. For him, the kingdom was not a political entity at all. Given the recent history of bloody revolts in Galilee, that’s not surprising. It would be pointless for a group of Galilean farmers to try to overthrow the Antipas regime and, by extension, the Roman Empire. For Jesus, the kingdom meant social change, a radically new way in which Jewish society would operate. It was essentially a new social covenant whereby Jews pledged to return to the two cardinal commandments of the Law: love toward one another and abiding faith in God. It’s this theme, the Kingdom of God as a compassionate society, that would dominate Jesus’s teaching for the rest of his ministry.

## The Health of Galilee

- ▶ If Galilee was the breadbasket of the Near East, why were the multitudes that come to see Jesus so poor, and why were so many of them afflicted by disease? It turns out that King Herod doubled the tax layer on his subjects here, just as he had done when, as governor of Galilee, he had raised more than \$3 million for Cassius. Traditionally, Galilean farmers paid taxes to either a Jewish king or to a foreign power, but under Herod, they found themselves supporting both the mad construction schemes of the king and a hefty tribute to Rome. Herod also levied salt taxes, fishing taxes, and custom duties for the shipment of produce from one region to the other.
- ▶ This new tax burden was entirely unsustainable, and the penalty for nonpayment was foreclosure. So even though the Galilean peasantry lived in one of the most fertile regions in the world, they lost their livelihood. They were reduced to eating bread made from barley, which was usually grown as animal fodder. The Gospel story of the miraculous multiplication of “five barley loaves and two small fishes” is evidence of the substandard food, in miserable portions, to which the people of Galilee were now reduced.



- ▶ Modern research by anthropologist Jane Cahill shows that the resulting lack of vitamins and protein led to chronic conditions of disease. Before the Roman occupation, she found evidence in fecal matter of a healthy diet of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Specimens from the Herodian period reveal not only a less balanced diet but also a dramatic increase in parasites and infectious agents. This explains why the thousands who came to hear Jesus's words were not only hungry but also sick. In sum, Jesus's ministry unfolded in the midst of a humanitarian crisis that was absolutely unprecedented in the history of ancient Israel.

## **Jesus Expands His Ministry**

- ▶ The next phase of Jesus's ministry involves traveling throughout the region, beyond the orbit of Capernaum. Fortunately, his fishermen disciples have a boat that allows Jesus to visit all of the main places around the Sea of Galilee, including Magdala, where he meets one of his most loyal followers, Mary Magdalene. According to Mark, Jesus even crosses over to the eastern side, to the territory of the Gaulanitis, which is almost entirely Gentile. Up to this point, Jesus had always said that his teachings were for "the lost sheep of Israel" only. But now, Gentiles from as far as Tyre and Sidon came to hear him speak, and that may have changed his mind.

▶ Jesus then casts his net even wider, traveling outside of Galilee and crossing into Phoenicia to visit the area around Tyre and Sidon. Here, he has an experience that might have had a major impact on his ministry. He meets a Gentile woman who comes to him and asks him to heal her daughter, who is afflicted by an unclean spirit. Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But the mother takes it in stride. “Sir,” she says, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs”—Even those who are not God’s chosen people might still yearn for his grace. Jesus is deeply impressed with this answer and immediately says, “Go, the demon has left your daughter.”

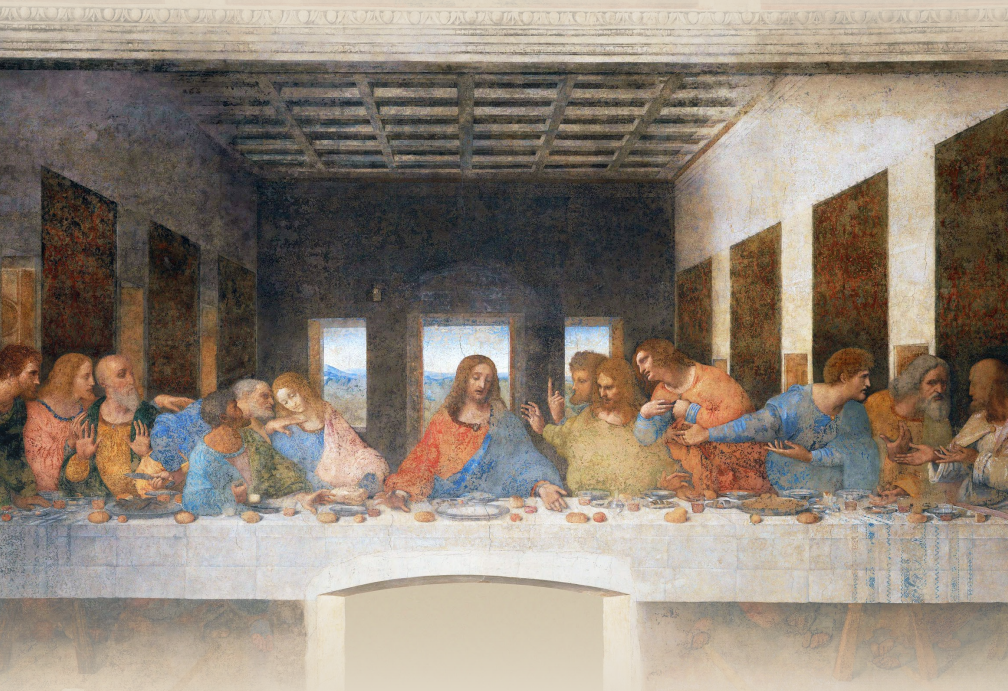
In 1986, a severe drought lowered the water level of the Sea of Galilee and exposed the hull of an ancient boat, 26 feet in length and 7.5 feet in beam. The boat has been carbon-dated to between 120 BCE and 40 CE, perfectly straddling the time of Jesus.

▶ This is when the ministry seems to take another turn. Jesus begins to realize that it’s here, in these Gentile lands, that he sees more faith than he witnessed among his own people, the Jews of Galilee. He moves east, to the town of Paneas. This was a cult center for the Greek god Pan, but in recent years, the tetrarch Philip had developed it into a resort town. It’s a rather unlikely setting for a Gospel story, but it’s here that Jesus reflects on the success of his ministry to date. He realizes that he will not accomplish his great vision by staying in Galilee, so he decides to bring his message to the heart of the nation: the Temple of Jerusalem.

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## Readings

Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*.



# THE PASSEOVER EVENTS IN JERUSALEM

## LESSON 23

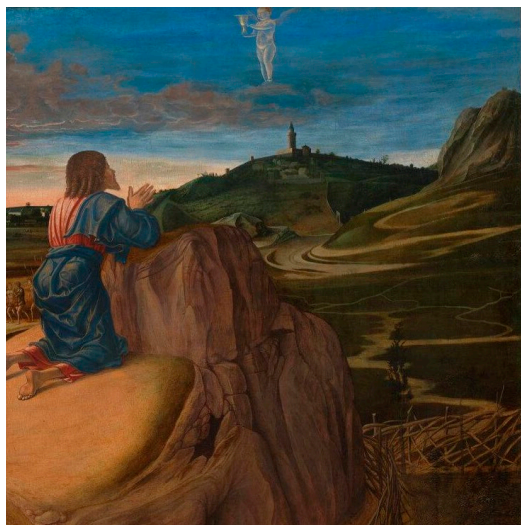
**B**ased on data in the synoptic Gospels, which list only one reference to Passover, Jesus's ministry could not have lasted more than a year, or perhaps 18 months. This is probably why there are no contemporary records of Jesus. This is also true of the Passion, which is only described by one source. It's likely that Mark used a now-lost document referred to as the Cross Gospel to develop his story of the Passion. Mark's version was then used by all other evangelists, though with various additions.

## The Temple of Jerusalem

- ▶ When Jesus returns to Jerusalem, it's the eve of Passover, when the head of every Jewish household is expected to sacrifice a one-year-old male lamb or goat at the temple. Many scholars believe that this was Thursday, April 6th, in the year 30 CE. Coming from Bethany, he must have used the staircase leading from the Valley of Kidron, which was excavated in the 1960s and has recently been restored. But when he enters the sanctuary, he is stunned. He'd expected to see a crowd of pilgrims, ready to listen to his sermon. Instead, the whole forecourt has been turned into a bazaar, filled with moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals.
- ▶ The sacrificial lamb had to be one year old and without any blemish or injury, but it was difficult to get a goat through the alleyways of Jerusalem, with pilgrims all jostling to try to get to the temple. The chances of the goat getting squeezed or hurt were great, and that would disqualify the precious purchase for sacrifice. So what Caiaphas had done, apparently, was to bring the sale of these animals inside the temple itself, in the Court of the Gentiles.
- ▶ The problem with using this new venue was that Roman coins and other currency, which usually bore an image of a king or emperor, were not allowed in the temple. So the priesthood came up with the idea of setting up various stalls in the temple courtyard where moneychangers could exchange your coins for the approved currency.
- ▶ Of course, Jesus had not anticipated this. He hadn't come here to sacrifice; he had come to speak. In fact, at no point in the Gospels does Jesus perform a sacrifice, even though that was the whole point of the temple at that time. For Jesus, the temple is a house of prayer, not the Old Testament rite of sacrifice. In an instant, Jesus's hopes of rallying the nation of Israel with his speech are dashed.
- ▶ Jesus takes out his belt and chases the moneychangers from the temple. That's bad enough, because right over his head, Roman soldiers are watching from the towers of the Antonia Fortress to nip any such disturbances in the bud. Jesus then compounds the trouble by implicitly accusing Caiaphas and the priesthood of being thieves. These words seal his fate, and the call goes out for his arrest. Neither the Romans nor the temple priests can ignore the risk that this Galilean rabbi might try to stage another violent demonstration.

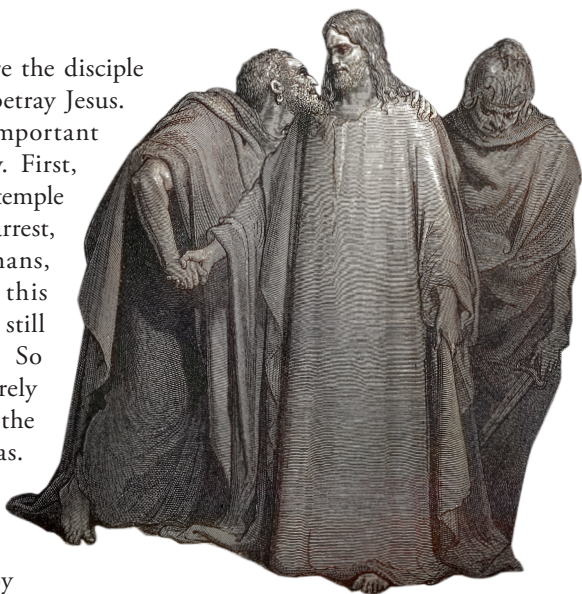
## The Last Supper and Gethsemane

- ▶ Jesus and the apostles are able to leave the temple without being caught, but they cannot return to Bethany, because the city gates are heavily guarded. Jesus sends out two disciples to look for a place where they can celebrate the Seder, the Passover meal. This Seder meal has gone down in history as the Last Supper, and it is one of the most beloved depictions in Christian art.
- ▶ Tradition has placed the location of that Last Supper in a room near the Zion Gate. As it happens, it's located right above what is traditionally held to be the resting place of King David. This room looks a lot like a Gothic chapel, which would seem to place the room some 1400 years later. But actually, the room was destroyed so many times that the Franciscans decided to rebuild it from the ground up in 1342.
- ▶ The Gospel of Mark says that as soon as it's dark, Jesus and the disciples slip out of the city and head to the Mount of Olives. Jesus is in great turmoil, and he realizes that his ministry has passed a point of no return. The Gospels suggest that Jesus has a premonition of the Passion to come, but that Passion was not yet a foregone conclusion. Clearly, Jesus needs a place for prayerful meditation, and he finds it in Gethsemane.
- ▶ In Renaissance art, such as the painting by Bellini, Gethsemane is often shown as a rocky garden. But actually, it was not a garden at all. *Gat shemanim*, the root of Gethsemane, means "oil press." This means the place was a cave, since oil pressing and storage required a fairly constant temperature. The diary of a 4th-century pilgrim, a French noblewoman named Egeria, confirms that at the time, a cave on the Mount of Olives was revered as Gethsemane.



## Jesus's Arrest

- ▶ Gethsemane is where the disciple Judas shows up to betray Jesus. There are two important aspects to the story. First, the fact that it's the temple guards making the arrest, and not the Romans, suggests that at this stage, the warrant is still religious in nature. So the case is still entirely in the jurisdiction of the high priest, Caiaphas. Second, Jesus should be taken to the temple stockade to await a hearing by the full Sanhedrin. Only a full quorum of the Sanhedrin can condemn a man accused of religious crimes. But instead, Jesus is spirited away under the cover of night to the private residence of Caiaphas.



- ▶ The book of Acts says the disciples of Jesus are arraigned but eventually released, largely due to the intervention of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the more progressive wing in ancient Judea, and they would have been very sympathetic to what Jesus had to say. Caiaphas must know this, or at least suspect it. He decides to exploit the tension between Sadducees and Pharisees by indicting Jesus himself with a handpicked group of his Sadducee cronies.
- ▶ Caiaphas's plan has a serious flaw: Without a full quorum, he can't condemn a man to death. The Romans are the only other authority able to do this, but they don't want to get involved unless the crime is political in nature. So Caiaphas has to get Jesus to say something that will qualify him as a rebel, as a political criminal, on the charge of a secular crime.

- ▶ Caiaphas decides to interrogate Jesus himself, but Jesus wisely refuses to take the bait. Finally, the high priest plays his last card: “Are you the Messiah,” he asks, “the Son of the Blessed One?” This is a question Jesus can’t ignore. “Yes,” he says, “I am.” And he goes on to quote the famous passage from Daniel that had inspired his ministry: “You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” This is exactly the sort of language that would get Pilate’s attention.

## The Trial

- ▶ What happens next is the subject of ongoing debate. Jesus is transferred to Roman custody, but where was Pilate? Where did the so-called trial of Jesus take place? Traditionally, it was thought that it took place in the convent of the Sisters of Zion, built atop the remains of the Antonia Fortress. It would make sense for Pilate to stay here, for it overlooked the temple and served as the barracks of his troops.
- ▶ Another school of thought says that Pilate would have stayed in the old palace of King Herod the Great, but the problem was that Herod’s palace had never been found. This changed in 2015, when archaeologist Amit Re’em discovered remnants of this palace during the excavation of an old Ottoman building, the Kishle. The large stones, known as ashlar, are clearly dated to the time of Herod. If this is true, then this is most likely the place where Jesus was tried by Pilate.
- ▶ Was the proceeding indeed a trial, as described by the Gospel of John? Remember, the evangelists wrote outside of Judea, in various parts of the Roman Empire. Perhaps they were Roman citizens themselves. If that was the case, they knew they were protected by Roman law and would get a fair hearing. But Jesus was not a Roman citizen. For colonial subjects, a far more arbitrary law prevailed. It gave the local Roman administrator wide latitude to judge things as he saw fit. Unlike the Gospel of John, Mark doesn’t describe a trial at all but rather a brief hearing.

- ▶ Mark then tells the story of the amnesty, where “at the festival Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.” This is not likely: The last thing Pilate would have done is release a prisoner at the height of Passover, when tensions are high. There is no record of any such amnesty in Judea, though in other, more peaceful places in the Roman Empire, governors could extend such a courtesy if the circumstances allowed it. That’s how Mark may have heard about the custom. But Pilate was an intensely cruel man, and Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion.

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### Readings

McCane, *Roll Back the Stone*.



# THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

## LESSON 24

**F**or Christians, the Crucifixion is the dramatic climax of the Gospel story. Indeed, all of the material in Mark's Gospel propels the story to the Crucifixion and the resurrection. The other Gospels follow this model, even though they add material from other sources so as to further develop Mark's story and its theological message.

But there are also strands of Christianity, particularly in the 1st and 2nd centuries, that do not follow this model. Scholarship refers to these documents as gnostic Gospels, and they are not included in the canon of the New Testament. As research by Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman has shown, these are Christian movements in their own right, although they do not survive in the end. This literature can serve to broaden our horizon as we try to understand the historical Jesus and the impact he would have on humankind.

## Via Dolorosa

- ▶ In Jerusalem, there is a route through the Old City known as the Via Dolorosa, or the Road of Sorrows, that Jesus is believed to have taken to the place of his execution. The problem is that in 135 CE, after the defeat of the Second Jewish Revolt, Emperor Hadrian ordered Jerusalem to be destroyed. In its place rose a new city called Aelia Capitolina. The main street leading from the Damascus Gate today is the Cardo, the main avenue of that Roman city. This is why it's impossible to reconstruct the route of Jesus's Passion, for the Jerusalem that Jesus knew no longer exists.
- ▶ Scholars generally accept that this last journey ended on Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, which today is marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Hadrian built a temple of Venus on the spot so as to erase any traces of that holy site. But in the 4th century, Queen Helena ordered that temple torn down, and the first church was built. Destroyed several times, it was rebuilt in the 12th century during the crusader era. One part of the church marks Golgotha as the place of the Crucifixion, while another, the Rotunda, marks the presumed location of Jesus's tomb.



- ▶ Today, the tomb is covered by a 19th-century structure known as the Edicule. In October 2016, a conservation team from the National Technical University of Athens went in and opened the tomb. Not only was it found to be empty; it was also placed right on top of the limestone bedrock of the hill, exactly as described in the Gospels.

The Gospels say that Jesus rises from the dead on the third day, which carries a special significance in ancient Judaism. During this time, relatives of the deceased were expected to visit the tomb and inspect the corpse to ensure that he or she was truly dead. Mary Magdalene and two other women visit the tomb after the end of the Sabbath, not only to visit the body but also to complete the anointing process. But as they arrive at the tomb, they see that the large round stone that closed the tomb chamber has already been rolled away. According to Mark, a young man dressed in a white robe tells them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.”

This is where the oldest version of Mark’s Gospel ends.

## The Jerusalem Christians

- ▶ There are two sources in the New Testament that can shed light on what happened to the Jesus movement in the months and years that followed: the Letters of Paul, written in the 50s CE, and the Acts of the Apostles, which claims to have been written by Luke, the same evangelist who wrote the Gospel. That claim is generally supported by biblical scholarship today. Acts must have originated in the 80s, another 30 years or so after Paul’s letters, when early Christianity was already spreading through Asia Minor and beyond.
- ▶ Acts tells us that the original apostolic movement continues its activities in Jerusalem rather than Galilee. This is a surprise to Caiaphas and the chief priests, who thought that with the execution of Jesus, they had eliminated his following as well. At first, Caiaphas tries to stop the

movement by bringing some of the apostles to trial in front of the Sanhedrin, but that effort backfires; twice, the accused are released, partly because of intervention by the Pharisees.

- ▶ The Sadducees then change tactics and proceed to outright persecution. A Greek follower called Stephen is successfully prosecuted for “speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God,” and he is stoned to death. The murder has its intended effect. Many followers flee from Jerusalem to find sanctuary elsewhere. Only a small core group remain in Jerusalem, soon to be led by a man named James, the brother of Jesus.
- ▶ The original group in Jerusalem remains active until around 62 CE, when James is indicted by the high priest. He is thrown off the temple walls and stoned to death. Four years later, war breaks out, and the group of Jerusalem Christians then move to Pella, in Jordan. That’s where they are believed to have died out.

## Paul

- ▶ One of the officials who had presided over Stephen’s stoning was a young man named Saul. He had so impressed the chief priests with his zeal that he was authorized to track down the Christians who had fled to Damascus. But on the way to Damascus, says Acts, a divine intervention takes place, and Saul decides to join the Jesus movement himself. He writes that he believes he acted with “the mind of Christ” and was in every sense an apostle himself.
- ▶ The Jesus movement begins to diverge at this point. The original group continues to live and pray as Jews, observing the Torah and preaching to a primarily Jewish audience in Judea. A second group, initiated by Saul as well as others, looks elsewhere, to Asia Minor and to a Gentile rather than Jewish audience. This is why Saul changes his name to the Latinized version of Paulus, or Paul, so as to better appeal to a Roman audience.



Saul

- ▶ Paul undertakes three missionary journeys through the Mediterranean world. While he makes little headway with Jews who refuse to accept Jesus as the Messiah, or Christ, he finds that many Gentiles are receptive to his ideas. This is not entirely unprecedented. While in Joppa, Peter, too, had baptized a Roman centurion named Cornelius and his family. But there is a big difference: Peter and the Jerusalem community accepted Gentiles who were willing to embrace both Judaism and baptism. In other words, these people were expected to become Jewish, to be circumcised, and to eat kosher food if they wanted to join the Jesus movement.
- ▶ Paul has a very different experience. He finds that the Gentiles he speaks to are attracted to Christian spirituality, but they aren't interested in becoming Jews as well. Circumcision and kosher food are strong deterrents for these Gentiles. Paul wholeheartedly believes that the future of the movement lies not in Judea but in the Roman world at large, among the Gentiles. He believes that the Jewish rite of circumcision—and indeed, much of the Torah—had in fact been replaced by baptism and faith in Christ. “Real circumcision,” he writes in his letter to the Romans, “is a matter of the heart; it is spiritual, not literal.” What had begun as a reform movement by a Jewish rabbi in Jewish Galilee was now disengaging itself from that tradition.



## Christianity in the Roman Empire

- ▶ The book of Acts depicts the early Christian Church as a rapidly growing movement throughout the Roman Empire. But modern research has shown that there were actually multiple Christian movements circulating in the Mediterranean, and some of these differed from Paul's interpretation of Jesus and his teachings. In later years, as the Catholic Church slowly emerged as the dominant form of Christianity, the followers of these other traditions would be branded as heretics. But even then, various Christian factions continued to torment the Mother Church.
- ▶ Despite these internal debates, and despite the persecution in some parts of the Roman Empire, the Christian movement survived. As archaeological excavations have shown, Christian chapels sprang up in all sorts of unexpected places in the empire. In the end, the Roman authorities relented and began to tolerate Christian worship. In 259 CE, Emperor Gallienus issued a formal Edict of Tolerance.
- ▶ Unfortunately, that tolerance was once again revoked by another emperor, Diocletian, so it's Constantine the Great who finally made it permanent. In 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which gave complete religious freedom to all citizens in the empire. Just 80 years later, another emperor, Theodosius, made Christianity the sole religion of the realm.
- ▶ In 350 years, the teachings of the rabbi from Nazareth succeeded in conquering the world in the form of a new faith: a religion called Christianity. The same is true for Judaism, which after the fall of the temple abandoned its rites of sacrifice and temple worship and instead embraced the ongoing study of Hebrew scripture. After 2,000 years, the great traditions of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome have all ceased to exist, but Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism still endure to this day.

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Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*.

Pagels, *Beyond Belief*.

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MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. Penguin Books, 2009. For anyone interested in the rise of the Christian movement, MacCulloch's book is a must-read. Immensely absorbing and written as narrative history, it won the Cundill History Prize and was cited as one of the 100 most notable books by *The New York Times*.

Magness, Jodi. *The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. Dr. Magness offers the general reader as well as biblical students and scholars a wonderful introduction to the archaeology of the Holy Land, from the destruction of the temple in 586 BCE to the Byzantine era in 640 CE, with a special focus on Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine finds.

Meier, John P. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vols. 1–5. Doubleday, 1994–2016. John Meier's widely praised five-volume work has set a new benchmark in research on the historical Jesus. While some of his conclusions, particularly related to the historicity of the parables, are controversial, his scholarship is beyond question. After the first volume was published in 1994, Meier published his highly anticipated fifth volume in 2016.

Mitchell, T. C. *The Bible in the British Museum: Interpreting the Evidence*. Paulist Press, 2004. The British Museum houses one of the world's largest collections of biblical artifacts and monuments. Mitchell is an authoritative guide as he introduces the reader to each object, from early Sumer to ancient Israel and New Testament times, showing its correlation to biblical texts.

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Reed, Jonathan L. *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals about the First Christians*. HarperCollins, 2007. This richly illustrated guide offers a deeply immersive encounter with the archaeology of the Holy Land, including excavations in Galilee and Jerusalem as well as a reconstruction of Paul's missions to the Mediterranean world and early Christian chapels in Rome.

Schaberg, Jane. *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*. Continuum, 2004. Schaberg brings a long-ignored feminist perspective to New Testament studies. While exploring the historical context of Mary Magdalene, she makes a compelling case for a fresh look at Christian literature through a feminist lens.

Tishby, Ariel. *Holy Land in Maps*. Israel Museum, 2011. This beautifully illustrated book shows how the unique historical panorama of the Holy Land was communicated to the Western world using stunning, hand-colored maps from the 6th through 20th centuries.

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