

Israel and the Nations

A. Israel and the Great Powers During the Old Testament: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia

Israel's geographic location posed two special tests to its faith. Israel's agriculture was dependent on sufficient rain, especially in the crucial fall and spring seasons. Israel had to make a choice: Who provides the rain? The LORD or Baal? Often they made the wrong choice, especially under Ahab and Jezebel.

Israel was also caught in the middle of the wars between two sets of world powers: the ancient empire of Egypt to the south and whoever was the current empire emerging from Mesopotamia to the north: Hittites, Assyrian, Babylonians, Persians, and Macedonians. These international conflicts had a great influence on the political history of Israel and Judah. Though the prophets warned the kings against trusting in international alliances, Israel and Judah too often looked to other nations rather than to the LORD to rescue them.

Egypt

Egypt was one of the cradles of civilization, beginning in about 3000 BC. Old Kingdom Egypt produced the pyramids in about 2500 BC. During the early periods of Egyptian history, Egypt's interests in Asia were largely commerce, acquiring raw materials like lumber and metals, and establishing a secure buffer for its border.

Egypt was not only an enemy state but also a country where Israelites frequently sought refuge. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:10-20), King Jeroboam of Israel (1 Kings 11:40), refugees fleeing from the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:26 and Jeremiah 43:5-7), and the baby Jesus and his family (Matthew 2:13-15) are among the many refugees from Israel to Egypt. According to biblical chronology, the emerging nation of Israel itself spent 430 years in Egypt from about 1877 BC to 1447 BC.^a

Led by Jacob and Joseph, Israel went down to Egypt during the 12th dynasty of the Middle Kingdom Egypt. During part of the 430 years during which Israel was in Egypt, Egypt was ruled for a time by foreign rulers from Canaan called Hyksos. This disruption of native Egyptian dynasties lasted from about 1730 to 1570 BC. The expulsion of the Hyksos led to the establishment of New Kingdom Egypt and to the oppression of Israel. The New Kingdom pharaohs of the 18th dynasty were more militaristic and more interested in exerting control over Canaan to prevent a re-occurrence of the Hyksos domination.

Some scholars date the exodus to the 13th century BC, during the 19th dynasty of the New Kingdom, but this date cannot be reconciled with the data in 1 Kings 6, in Judges, and in Joshua. The Merneptah Stele, the only mention in ancient Egyptian records of Israel in its homeland, dates to this period, to about 1210 BC.

During much of the first millennium BC, Egypt was no longer ruled by native pharaohs but by Libyan and Nubian pharaohs, whose people had long served in Egypt as mercenaries. During this period, Israel's contacts with Egypt were largely with pharaohs who were trying to establish or maintain a foothold in Israel as a buffer against encroaching Mesopotamian powers. Despite the prophets' warnings, Israel frequently allied themselves with Egypt against either Assyria or Babylon. But Egypt always either oppressed them or failed them.

During the 10th century BC, an unnamed pharaoh of Egypt gave a daughter to Solomon in marriage in order to seal an alliance with him. The same ruler captured the Canaanite city of Gezer and gave it to Solomon as a wedding gift (1 Kings 3:1; 1 Kings 9:16). Pharaoh Siamun of the 21st dynasty (986–967) is the most commonly proposed candidate for this role.

^a All dates are approximate. There are many uncertainties about the chronology.

1 Kings 14:25-26 and 2 Chronicles 12:2-5 report an invasion of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam I by Pharaoh Shishak and a subsequent raid on Jerusalem and the temple. Shishak is generally identified with Shoshenq I of the 22nd dynasty (943–922).

2 Kings 17:4 says that King Hoshea of Israel sent letters to “So, King of Egypt” to help him resist Assyria. No pharaoh with the name So is known from the time of Hoshea (about 730 BC). During this time Egypt had three dynasties ruling contemporaneously. Of these pharaohs King So is commonly identified with Osorkon IV (730–715).

2 Kings 19:9 and Isaiah 37:9 mention the 25th dynasty pharaoh Tirhakah (690–664) as an ally of Judah against Sennacherib of Assyria in 701 BC. Tirhakah is called the King of Cush because he was a member of a Nubian dynasty. His efforts to help Judah, probably undertaken when he was still crown prince, failed.

2 Kings 23:29 and 2 Chronicles 35:20-24 say that the 26th dynasty pharaoh Neco II (610–595) was responsible for the death of Josiah in battle at Megiddo in 609 BC. Josiah was trying to stop Neco from going to help Assyria against the rising power of Babylon.

Jeremiah 44:30 warns that Neco’s successor Apries or Hophra (589–570) will be defeated by Babylon and will not be about to help Judah.

Further information about some of these incidents is reported in the next two sections.

Assyria

Assyria was an important commercial power already in the second millennium BC. Located along the Tigris River, in what today is the northern part of Iraq, it had trading ties westward into present-day Turkey and eastward into present-day Iran. It had several periods of prominence and decline during this period.

Assyria did not, however, have any direct influence on Israel until the 9th century BC. In 853 BC Ahab of Israel joined with an Aramean coalition that was resisting Assyrian expansion into Syria-Palestine. This first Assyrian attempt to push south into Syria-Palestine failed. Assyria records say that King Jehu of Israel paid tribute to Assyria in 841, in effect being a reluctant “ally” of Assyria versus Aram.

As a result, Israel enjoyed comparative peace, freedom, and power during a vacuum of international powers. During this period, the LORD sent his prophet Jonah to preach to Nineveh in Assyria, a world power which was temporarily in eclipse (2 Kings 14:25). The result was a short-lived repentance. Assyria was the very power which had already threatened Israel once and would later return to destroy it. This explains Jonah’s unwillingness to preach to Assyria.

Through the mid-8th Century BC both the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south enjoyed a period of prominence due to the vacuum of superpowers on the international scene. Egypt was a washed-up has-been of an empire, and Assyria was in temporary decline. Under Jeroboam II (781-753) the northern kingdom of Israel reached the zenith of its power. Under Azariah/Uzziah (791-739) Judah also prospered for a time, both militarily and economically. Both kingdoms, situated as they were on the important trade routes between the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, were political and economic centers of importance.

Spiritually, Israel was already in its death throes. Amos warned: “Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, you who feel secure on Mount Samaria.... I am about to raise up a nation against you, O house of

Israel, declares the LORD, the God of Armies” (Amos 6:1-14). The prophet Hosea also issued prophetic warnings against the Assyrian threat to Israel and Judah.

Assyria revived as an imperial power under the great Tiglath Pileser III (745-727). He invaded Aram (Syria), defeated a western coalition that had formed against him, subdued Merodach-Baladan of Babylon, and when Israel’s power rapidly disintegrated after King Jeroboam II, he subjected King Menahem of Israel (752-741 BC) to tribute and began deportations of captives from Israel in the 730s. (He is the “Pul” mentioned as “king of Assyria” in 2 Kings 15:19-20.) According to one interpretation of Assyrian records, Azariah (Uzziah) of Judah participated in a league against Tiglath Pileser but had to submit tribute to Assyria. Ahaz of Judah allied himself (subjected himself) to Assyria to gain help against Aram and Israel. Ahaz became completely subservient to Tiglath Pileser, even to the point of introducing symbols of his submission into the temple at Jerusalem (2 Kings 16:7-18).

Shalmaneser IV (727-722) succeeded Tiglath Pileser as king of Assyria. When Israel’s King Hoshea (731-722) tried to enlist Egypt’s help in a rebellion against Assyria, Shalmaneser imprisoned Hoshea and began a siege against Samaria that lasted three years (2 Kings 17:3-6). Apparently Shalmaneser died during the final stages of this siege of Samaria, and the work of destroying Samaria was completed by Sargon (722-705). The disintegration of the Northern Kingdom of Israel followed, and the people who eventually became the Samaritans were imported into Israel to replace the deported Israelites.

Sargon was followed by Sennacherib (705-681 BC). Early in Sennacherib’s reign Merodach-Baladan of Babylonia plotted against Assyria with Hezekiah of Judah (2 Kings 20:12-19). It was during this alliance that Hezekiah (729/715-686 BC) foolishly showed the Babylonians all his treasures (Isaiah 39). (Incidentally, the events as reported in 2 Kings and Isaiah are not in chronological order. The illness of Hezekiah and the embassy from Merodach Baladin must have preceded Sennacherib’s attack in 701.) Sennacherib first marched against Babylon, which was the nearer threat, and subdued it. Hezekiah knew that he was in danger and prepared for the coming siege of Jerusalem by cutting a water tunnel from the spring of Gihon into the western part of the city (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:30). This project is still a marvel for the tourist to Jerusalem!

Having subdued Babylon for the time being, Sennacherib turned on Judah, captured most of its key cities, including Lachish, made Hezekiah a tributary, thwarted Egyptian efforts to interfere, and sent his commander, the Rab Shakeh (translated “herald” in 2 Kings 18:17, 37) to threaten Jerusalem. The siege of Jerusalem is reported in 2 Kings 18 and 19 and in Isaiah 36 and 37. After the sudden destruction of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers by the angel of the LORD at Jerusalem, Sennacherib was forced to return to Nineveh, where he was killed by two of his sons some years later (2 Kings 19:37).

Sennacherib was succeeded by Esarhaddon (681-668), who carried on successful campaigns against Phoenicia and Egypt. Manasseh, the wicked king of Judah (687-642), was allowed to rule in relative freedom as long as he paid tribute to Assyria, but he was briefly taken to Babylon as a prisoner when he was suspected of disloyalty (2 Chronicles 33:11). Assurbanipal (668-626) succeeded Esarhaddon as king of Assyria. He fought a number of successful campaigns and was noted for his rebuilding of Nineveh, but after his time, the decline of Assyria was rapid. Egypt revolted. The Medes conquered Asshur in 614 BC, and Nineveh fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC.

With the decline of Assyria, the kingdom of Judah enjoyed its last brief period of spiritual revival under good King Josiah (640-608), who tried to renew all of Israel, including the north, during his great reform. When Neco of Egypt passed through Palestine in 609 BC to prop up Assyria versus Babylon, Josiah tried to stop him at the Megiddo pass and was killed in battle. Judah’s fortunes quickly deteriorated under Josiah’s sons Jehoahaz (609), who was deported to Egypt, and Jehoiakim (609-598), who came to power as an Egyptian puppet. Israel was now caught in the middle of the showdown between Egypt and Babylon.

Babylon

Babylon is mentioned as a center of world power and culture already in Genesis 10. During the second millennium BC, Babylon was a cultural center whose influence was felt even in Israel. Babylonian Akkadian was the international language of this period.

Direct Babylonian contact with Israel began during the Neo-Babylonian Empire under the leadership of the Chaldeans. This new Babylonian kingdom rose to power under Nebopolassar near the end of the 7th century BC and pushed westward under his son Nebuchadnezzar (605-562). Nebuchadnezzar was the commander of Babylon's army which defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 25:1). Soon thereafter Nebuchadnezzar marched against Jerusalem for the first time and made the first deportation of Judean captives, including Daniel and his friends (2 Kings 24:1). This occurred during the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598), who was caught between declining Egypt and rising Babylon.

When Jehoiakim, with the aid of Egypt, revolted against Nebuchadnezzar in 598, he died during the subsequent siege (Jeremiah 22:18-19; 36:30; 2 Kings 24:2-6), and he received "the burial of a donkey" for his disloyalty (Jeremiah 22:19).

When Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin became king, Nebuchadnezzar completed the siege of Jerusalem in 597 BC and took Jehoiachin captive to Babylon along with the second deportation of Jewish notables, including Ezekiel (2 Kings 24:14; Ezekiel 1:1-2).

Nebuchadnezzar placed Josiah's son Zedekiah (597-586) on Judah's throne, but when Zedekiah rebelled in 589 BC, the Babylonian king decided to break Judah's power for good. The Edomites took advantage of Nebuchadnezzar's siege and also invaded Judah (Obadiah 1:10-14; Psalm 137:7; Lamentations 4:21-22). Nebuchadnezzar destroyed one Judean city after the other: Ramat Rahel, Beth Shemesh, Lachish, Arad, and En Gedi. Finally the walls of Jerusalem were breached, and the city and the temple were destroyed (in 586 or 587 BC). Zedekiah's sons were killed before his eyes. He was then blinded and led captive to Babylon (2 Kings 25:1-21). Jeremiah the prophet records these final events in Jerusalem, particularly his own dealings with King Zedekiah, in chapters 37 to 39 of his book.

During his exile in Babylon, Daniel had significant interaction with Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, the first and last kings of Babylon (Daniel 1-6). Babylon was captured by the Persians in 539 BC, and Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

Persia

The Persians and their cousins the Medes were Indo-European peoples, who lived in what is today Iran. They were on the sidelines of world power until the sudden rise of the Persian Empire under the leadership of Cyrus the Great. They built the greatest empire the world had seen up to that point, an empire that extended from Greece to India.

Four Persian Kings had a significant influence on Israel. This story is told in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther and in the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah.

Cyrus, the founder of the empire, allowed the Jews who wished to do so to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, shortly after the beginning of the Persian Empire in 539 BC.

Darius, the great organizer of the empire, who came to power in 522 BC after a period of disorder in the Persian Empire, reaffirmed the right of the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem, and they finished the rebuilding of the temple in about 516 BC.

Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was the husband of Esther. He is most famous for his failed attempt to conquer Greece in 480 BC. During his reign Esther and Mordecai played a role in saving the Jews from

extermination by the plot of Haman.

Artaxerxes was the king who was served by Ezra and Nehemiah. He permitted them to return to Jerusalem in the 450s and 440s BC to rebuild the spiritual and physical walls of Jerusalem.

Israel remained under Persian control until the arrival of Alexander the Great in about 330 BC.

B. Israel and her Neighbors During the Old Testament: Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, Phoenicia, and Aram

This list is not intended to provide a detailed history but just to serve as a quick reference with the books in which these enemies appear. More detailed information about a specific time period will be provided at those places.

Edom, Moab, and Ammon were three cousin nations of Israel.

Edom

The Edomites were Israel's bitter enemies whose territory extended from the southern end of the Dead Sea to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. Their heartland was the area east of the Arabah Valley (the Great Rift), but they also claimed land west of the Arabah and encroached on the territory of Judah from the south.

The Edomites were descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, and the hostility of the two brothers set the pattern for the hostility between the two nations. This hostility began when Edom refused to let Israel pass through their territory on their journey to Canaan. During following centuries Edom raided Israel, and after the time of David, Judah and Israel attempted to rule Edom. When Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, Edom celebrated their downfall and infiltrated their land from the south, where they established themselves as the Idumeans, the ancestors of Herod.

Moab

Moab, Israel's neighbor located on a high plateau along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, was related to Israel through their ancestor, Lot the nephew of Abraham.

At times there were friendly relationships due to the Moab heritage of David's ancestor Ruth, but for the most part, the relationship was hostile, with Israel trying to rule over Moab from the time of David, and Moab trying to assert its independence.

Ammon

Ammon was Israel's neighbor east of Samaria, on the east side of the Jordan, located in the bend of the Jabbok River. Like Moab, Ammon was in conflict with the tribes of Reuben and Gad who had land east of the Jordan. Two of Ammon's chief wars with Israel were at the time of the judge Jephthah and when David sent Joab to destroy Rabbah, the capital of Ammon. The Ammonites also were implicated in the assassination of Gedaliah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had installed as governor of Judah, which is recorded in Jeremiah 41.

Philistia

In the book of Genesis the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac had an at times tense relationship with their Philistine neighbors along the south coast of Israel. These Philistines were relatively peaceful herdsmen, whom Genesis 10 classifies as a Canaanite people. They seem to be significantly different people from the later Philistines.

The Philistines seem to have taken on a new character when they were joined by immigrants from various parts of the Mediterranean coast. From the late period of the judges to the early monarchy (Samson, Samuel, Saul, David), the Philistines were a hostile, militaristic people who threatened the very existence of Israel. After the time of David, the Israelites had the upper hand in the relationship, with the Philistines largely limited to short-term raids, and Israel forcing the Philistines to participate in their anti-Assyrian and anti-Babylonian alliances.

Phoenicia

Phoenician is the Greek term for Canaanites. The Israelites were supposed to destroy all the Canaanites, but they allowed some pockets to remain. One such pocket was around the maritime cities of Tyre and Sidon, on what today is the coast of Lebanon. From the time of David and Solomon, under King Hiram the Phoenicians were allied with Israel and supplied the timber for the temple, and they assisted Israel with other building projects and with maritime ventures on the Red Sea.

When their eastern homeland was subdued by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, the Canaanites had a second life through the Punic Empire of Carthage, until it was destroyed by Rome.

Aram (Syria)

Aram is the ancient name for Syria. The Israelites themselves were of Aramean origin since the family of Abraham and the four wives of Jacob were all Arameans.

In regard to their dealings with Israel we can divide the Arameans into two main groups.

Damascus was the chief city of the southern Arameans. It was an important commercial city on the trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt and Mesopotamia and Arabia and bordered directly and Israel.

The northern Arameans of Hamath, Zobah, and Aram Naharaim were more distant and less of an immediate threat.

Hostilities between Israel and Aram became more intense during the reign of David. Aramean armies failed in their attempts to help the Ammonites repel David, and as a result the nearby Arameans were subjected to the direct rule of David. The more distant Arameans were subjected to a tributary status. After the time of David and Solomon, Israel seldom had any direct control of Aram.

As often happens in international intrigues, during the time of David, some Arameans were allied with David against their fellow Arameans. In the later period, either Israel or Judah were allied with Arameans against their brother nation or against Assyria, but they were also allied with Assyria against Aram. When Israel and Aram were enemies during this period, Aram in general had the upper hand, especially during the days of Ahab.

The shifting alliances were a futile game and led to the destruction of both nations by Assyria.