

Dynasties Rise and Fall

The historical record of civilization in Europe goes back some 5,000 years, to the Bronze Age, and that of the Americas, about 3,000 years. The recorded history of the United States begins in 1775 or 1776, a little over two centuries ago. The Middle East is home to the earliest civilizations we know of. The Jordan River city of Jericho was founded in the Neolithic Age, about 9600 B.C.E.—nearly 5,000 years before Europe’s Bronze Age. Today, Jericho is a town of about 20,300 people in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank. People have lived in Jericho for more than 10,000 years, making it the oldest continuously occupied city on the planet.

Without question, much of the Middle East is volatile and violent today. The issues that roil the region often seem confusing, obscure, and sometimes—to Westerners—even trivial. Yet at their root are cultures, ideas, motives, and values older than anything in the Americas or Europe.

Compared to the Middle East, we of the West are the newcomers. *Ancient* does not equate to *permanent*, however. Although the region has been the seat of diverse peoples and empires, they have one thing in common: each came into being at the expense—often the destruction—of a predecessor, and each was, in turn, attacked, diminished, subjugated, or destroyed by a successor.

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Before History

In a high school textbook published in 1914, Professor James H. Breasted of the University of Chicago coined the phrase *Fertile Crescent* to define the region of western Asia and northeastern Africa in which many of the earliest civilizations arose. These days, historians are not in perfect agreement as to the boundaries of the Fertile Crescent, but all generally agree that it encompasses the ancient lands of Mesopotamia—the territory adjacent to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Some authorities extend the region to include ancient Assyria, to the north of Mesopotamia; Phoenicia, west of Assyria and Mesopotamia and fronting, on the east, the Mediterranean Sea; and Egypt, along the lower reaches of the Nile.



DEFINITION

Fertile Crescent is a term coined by University of Chicago archaeology professor James Henry Breasted to describe the region of the arid Middle East with sufficient water to support early civilization. The region encompasses modern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Cyprus, Egypt, and the extreme western portions of Iran and Kuwait, along with the southeastern edge of Turkey. “Fertile Crescent” is often used interchangeably with “cradle of civilization.”

Today, the modern nations of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian territories, together with extreme southeastern Turkey and the western fringes of Kuwait and Iran, occupy this historical region. Although Professor Breasted inadvertently exaggerated when he asserted that civilization began here, the region is still often called the “cradle of civilization,” and it is without question *an* origin—if not always *the* unique origin—of many cultural, intellectual, and technological features that define civilization. Some of the earliest examples of the wheel, irrigation, glass, and writing were produced by peoples of the Fertile Crescent, as were many religions, perhaps even the very idea of religion, and (as far as we can tell) the concept of monotheistic religion.

Between the Rivers

For the past decade and a half, much of the news on American television, in print, and on the Internet has focused on Mesopotamia, a Greek word meaning “the land between the rivers”—the Tigris and the Euphrates. Here, about 4500 B.C.E., Sumer arose on territory that is part of modern Iraq. The archaeologist-historian Samuel Noah Kramer echoes other scholars in his observation that “no people has contributed more to the culture of mankind than the Sumerians.” They created the first agriculture, metalwork, pottery, masonry building, and written language of which there is any record.

Although it is presumptuous to say that civilization began with Sumer, it is accurate to trace the longest *continuous* line of civilization from those ancient people to the people today.

Sargon Conquers

Sumer's location between two major rivers gave it agricultural fertility as well as an advantageous position for trade. Sumer was not a country but a collection of settlements organized around population centers, and its city-states grew prosperous and became targets for conquest. About 2340 B.C.E., Sargon the Great, ruler of Akkad, invaded Sumer, his neighbor to the south, annexing the cities to Akkad and creating the first empire of Mesopotamia, the heart of what we call the Middle East.



DID YOU KNOW?

Evidence of the use of wheeled vehicles is found in Mesopotamia, dating from the Sumerian civilization of the middle of the fourth millennium B.C.E. Depictions of wheeled vehicles from about the same period have been found in the Indus Valley of modern Pakistan; the Caucasus of southern Russia, near the Black Sea; and in central Europe. An actual wooden wheel was discovered in 2002 in the marshes of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Radiocarbon analysis suggests that it is 5,150 years old.

The Sun of Babylon Rises

Like many ancient rulers, Sargon proved far better at conquest than at sustainable government. Within about two centuries, rule in the Akkadian Empire broke down, and the realm created by conquest fell prey to conquest in turn. Finally, about 1760 B.C.E., Hammurabi—the “Sun of Babylon”—saw that Sumer and Akkad were ripe for plucking. Babylon, the city-state Hammurabi ruled, now became the center of Babylonia, a new empire encompassing all of southern Mesopotamia and, along the Euphrates, extending well to the north.

Unlike Sargon and many other strongmen in the region, Hammurabi was not only an impressive military leader, he was also one of the first competent practitioners of government. Under his rule, the first important and enduring set of laws, the so-called Code of Hammurabi, was created: 282 statutes covering many key aspects of human behavior in society, ranging from rules of trade and commerce to criminal and even family matters. Among the most enduring principles in the code are the related concepts of judicial punishment suited to the nature of the offense and what became known in Latin as *lex talionis*, the “law of retaliation,” a principle the authors of the Old Testament book of Leviticus (24:19–20) called “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.”



VOICES

And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbor; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him;
 Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again.
 —Leviticus 24:19–20, Old Testament, King James Version

Lex talionis has been influential throughout civilization, but it remains particularly durable in many cultures of the Middle East and some have seen in it a trigger of the present-day conflict in the region.

We might also discern in the culture and traditions of Hammurabi's Babylonia the roots of patriarchy (male-dominated society) that so powerfully drives the culture of much of the region to this day. The Code of Hammurabi accorded men most rights and apportioned to women most legal punishments. Presumably, this reflected the intensively male-dominated culture and governance that characterized ancient Middle Eastern civilization.

Hammurabi

Hammurabi (d. ca. 1750 B.C.E.), sixth ruler of the First Dynasty of Babylon, is most widely remembered as the world's first giver of law. Born in the city of Babylon, he was a member of the Amorite tribe and the son of Sin-muballit, whom he succeeded to the Babylonian throne in 1792 B.C.E. In the year of his accession, Rim-Sin, ruler of Larsa (southern Babylonia), conquered Isin, a traditional buffer zone between Babylon and Larsa. From this point on, Rim-Sin became Hammurabi's principal rival, against whom he struggled for control of the Euphrates River.

In 1787 B.C.E., Hammurabi conquered the city of Uruk and took it from Rim-Sin, whom he fought a second time in 1786 B.C.E. Some 20 years of peace followed, during which Hammurabi built great temples and other public works and probably promulgated his celebrated code of laws. Unfortunately, the final 14 years of Hammurabi's reign were marked by ultimately ruinous warfare. In 1764 B.C.E., Hammurabi moved against an alliance among Ashur, Eshnunna, and Elam—important powers along the Tigris River—which blocked access to the metal-producing regions of modern-day Iran. A year later, he fought Rim-Sin again, employing the apparently innovative tactic of damming up a principal watercourse (probably a canal flowing out of the Euphrates) either to flood Larsa or to deprive it of water. After a siege of many months, Larsa fell to Hammurabi.

In 1762 B.C.E., Hammurabi fought his eastern neighbors, and the following year turned against a longtime ally, King Zimrilim of Mari. During 1755–1757 B.C.E., Hammurabi turned again to the east, Eshnunna (in modern Iraq), again by damming the waters. This victory, however, proved self-defeating, as it laid Babylon open to attack from the Kassites, a militaristic Babylonian people. During the last two years of his reign, Hammurabi was forced to neglect all public works in order to construct fortifications against the Kassites.

A Land of Many Gods

During the period dominated by Sumer, Akkad, and Babylonia, Mesopotamians worshipped many gods, deities typically associated with geographical features, elements (fire, water, air, earth), heavenly bodies, and the sky itself. Dating to the thirteenth century B.C.E., the *Epic of Gilgamesh* contains the earliest surviving creation myth, many features of which are echoed in Genesis. The continuities between ancient Mesopotamian religious belief and narrative and those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam suggest that the early traditions influenced the latter. Equally important, however, is what the three dominant modern religions rejected—namely, polytheism. For all of their differences,

differences that have contributed to much violent conflict over the centuries, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share belief in a single god—ultimately, the *same* god, that of Abraham—and are strongly, even violently, opposed to polytheism.

Assyrian Terror

To the north of Babylonia lay three cities along the Tigris—Assur, Nineveh, and Nimrud. The first of these gave its name to Assyria, an empire dominated for many years by the more powerful Babylonians. Within Assyria, however, tribal affiliations were strong, and with a frequency distressing to the Babylonians, various Assyrian tribes rebelled. The tradition of revolt created a warlike culture among Assyrians, which Shalmaneser III successfully harnessed in the ninth century B.C.E. to invade Babylon and adjacent Palestine. Ultimately, Assyria would extend its dominion into the western part of present-day Iran, northern Turkey, and as far south as Thebes, in Egypt.

The dominance of Babylon was often brutal, but it was also characterized by concepts of law. In the case of Assyria, conquest conferred few civilizing benefits but was, on the contrary, characterized by the utmost terror. The obedience of subjugated people was commanded through severe punishments ranging from mass impalings, burnings, amputations, mutilations, and flayings; noble prisoners were often skinned alive—publicly. Beyond organized terror, Assyrian conquest was also proceeded by what today might be called ethnic cleansing and strategic deportation. If a population proved resistant to brutality, the invaders might simply break up tribes, clans, and families by dispersing members to far-flung parts of the empire. This is the fate Israel suffered in 722 B.C.E., when tens of thousands of Hebrews were sent into exile as the “ten lost tribes of Israel.”

Babylonian Renaissance

Ultimately, rule by terror proved impossible to sustain, and in 612 B.C.E., Nabopolassar, ruler of the Chaldeans—the ethnic group that had come to dominate Babylonia—made an alliance with the Medes, a people of what is today western Iran. The allies attacked Ninevah, inflicting a major defeat on Assyrian forces there. Nabopolassar’s son, Nebuchadnezzar II, completed the defeat of the Assyrian Empire and, in the course of his reign over the Neo-Babylonian Empire (ca. 605–562 B.C.E.), led the conquest of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine—as well as the Hebrews. As the Old Testament book of Daniel relates, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, together with Solomon’s Temple (the First Temple), in 586 B.C.E. and, like the Assyrians, implemented a strategic ethnic cleansing by sending Hebrew captives into Babylonian exile and slavery.

Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon reached new heights of dominance and prosperity, becoming an agricultural and industrial powerhouse, as well as a fabled realm of wonders, thanks to such works as the spectacularly terraced Hanging Gardens of Babylon, remembered in history as one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. With its military, economic, political, and cultural rise, Babylonia also came to dominate religion, its many gods toppling those of Sumer, Akkadia, and Assyria. Although Babylonian religion was still resolutely polytheist, it did introduce an element common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: a concern for the relationship between human beings and the divine. Babylonian religion traced the direct connection between humanity and its gods even as it emphasized the essential inferiority of human beings to those who had created them.

On the Iranian Plateau

The empires that rose and fell in succession, up to and including the rise of Neo-Babylonia, were Semitic peoples, meaning that the languages they spoke shared certain characteristics. From this group, another distinctive people would arise: the Arabs. They would ultimately lend their name to the vast region known as Arabia, which includes the peninsula bounded by the Mediterranean Sea to the north-west, the Tigris River to the northeast, the Persian Gulf to the southeast, the Arabian Sea to the south, and the Red Sea to the west, and also encompasses Egypt west of the Red Sea, along the Nile.

Perhaps because Iran—until 1935 known as Persia—has long figured prominently in the turmoil of the Middle East, many modern Westerners think of it as another Arab country. It is not. The history, language, and culture of Iran—and Persia before it—are very distinct from those of the Arab nations. Little wonder. Although Iran is adjacent to Arabia, its geography has always served to separate it from the ancient Arab world. Much of Iran is a plateau surrounded by sea and mountains: to the west are the Zagros Mountains; to the north, the Elburz; to the east, the Makran Range; and to the south is the Persian Gulf. Internal isolation bred profound cultural differences between the peoples of Mesopotamia and those of Iran. Whereas Mesopotamia was dominated by the Tigris and Euphrates, which provided natural avenues of communication and trade, the great Persian plateau and rugged mountains promoted isolation, tribal development, and, often, nomadic ways of life. Nevertheless, Persian (or “Persianate”) culture deeply influenced “Arabia” and Islam after the eighth century.

Elamites and Medes

Against this backdrop of small settlements and nomadic tribes, two early civilizations arose. The Elamites are first mentioned about 3000 B.C.E. Although they successfully claimed portions of Babylonia, they were in turn brutally conquered by the Assyrians. In their place, the Medes arose and allied themselves with the Neo-Babylonians. Together, they finally defeated the Assyrians, and beginning about 678 B.C.E., the Median Empire came to dominate what is now Iran.

The Medes brought with them one of the world’s first monotheistic religions, Zoroastrianism, in which the all-powerful deity, Ahura Mazda, engages in eternal conflict with Angra Mainyu, the embodiment of evil. Adherents of today’s dominant religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—should recognize not only familiar themes of monotheism but also of the universe as essentially an arena in which the forces of good and evil are locked in struggle. Zoroaster (628–551 B.C.E.), the founder of the religion named for him, taught that Ahura Mazda would judge each person after death, sending the good to paradise and the evil to a place of eternal torment.



DID YOU KNOW?

Zoroastrianism may be seen either as a religion of two gods—Ahura Mazda (embodying light and good) and Angra Mainyu (darkness and destruction)—or as the earliest known example of monotheism, in which Ahura Mazda is the only god and Angra Mainyu roughly the equivalent of the devil in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a model of monotheism, Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Measured by numbers of adherents, it is today a minor faith, with some estimating 2.6 million active Zoroastrians and others as few as 145,000.

The Persians

After Elam suffered a crippling defeat at the hands of Assyria in 636 B.C.E., Persian warriors spearheaded an invasion of the Elamite lands. This left the Medes and Persians as the two major contending groups in the region. In 559 B.C.E., Cyrus II ascended the throne of Persia's Achaemenid Dynasty. His father was a Persian, his mother a Median princess. About 550 B.C.E., Cyrus led a rebellion against his mother's father, who was king of the Medes.

Cyrus's success against his maternal grandfather drove the momentum of remarkable conquest in which Cyrus took Asia Minor and then Babylonia, transforming Persia into an empire of unprecedented extent and earning the title of Cyrus the Great. He was as ruthless as any other conqueror, but he wasn't gratuitously cruel. He freed the Jews from their Babylonia bondage, allowing them to return to Palestine. For this, he earned commemoration in the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

Cyrus the Great died in 530 B.C.E. and was succeeded by his son Cambyses II, who extended the Persian Empire into Egypt by defeating Pharaoh Psamtik in the Battle of Pelusium (525 B.C.E.). On the death of Cambyses three years later, his brother Bardiya may or may not have briefly assumed the throne before it was allegedly usurped by Gautama, who was in turn overthrown by Darius late in 522 B.C.E. The new ruler would earn the title Darius the Great by conquering Thrace and Macedon as well as invading Scythia.

Persia was now unquestionably the greatest empire on the planet, extending from Afghanistan to the fringes of Greece and encompassing perhaps 50 million people—a huge population in the ancient world. Even more importantly, Darius consolidated imperial power, completely replacing remnants of the old Assyrian bureaucracy with what proved to be a durable system of regional governors known as *satraps*.



DEFINITION

Satrap was the title given to provincial governors in the ancient Persian Empire. The word, derived from Old Persian, means “protector of the province,” and it survives today to describe the loyal lieutenants of any very powerful political or business leader. Historically, the satraps are significant for setting the pattern of organization of many early empires of the Middle East.

Alexander the Great

Neither Darius the Great nor his son and successor, Xerxes I (reigned 486–465 B.C.E.), succeeded in their greatest ambition, which was to add the city-states of Greece to their empire, and their hostile contact with Greece provoked the creation of a Greek confederation against Persia. In 334 B.C.E., Alexander III of Macedon—better known to history as Alexander the Great—led an army of this confederation against Persia, defeating Darius III at the Battle of Issus (in modern Turkey) in 333 B.C.E. and the Battle of Arbela (also called Gaugamela) in 331 B.C.E. in what is today northern Iraq.

Defeated in both battles, the Persian Empire fell, and Alexander managed to add Mesopotamia, Palestine, Pakistan, a portion of India, and most of Egypt to his empire. Even after proclaiming

himself pharaoh of Egypt, Alexander wanted to press his conquests farther but was stopped, not by any external enemy, but by the threatened mutiny of his own armies, exhausted (as he was not) by years of campaigning.



VOICES

What of the two men in command? You have Alexander, they—Darius!

—Alexander the Great's address to his troops prior to the Battle of Issus, 333 B.C.E.

Alexander set about “Hellenizing” the whole of the Middle East by making Greek the official language of the region and by commanding thousands of his troops to marry local women. Alexander died suddenly in 323 B.C.E., at 33, having conquered much of the ancient world, but also having come up short in his effort to transform it. This would be left to the Romans, whose empire was on the rise by the early first century B.C.E.

Alexander III the Great

Alexander III the Great (356–323 B.C.E.) conquered virtually the entire known world, laying the foundation of the Hellenic Empire. He was born at Pella, Macedonia, the son of King Philip II. As tutor to Alexander, his father secured the greatest mind of the age, Aristotle, so that, when he ascended the Macedonian throne in 336 B.C.E., Alexander was as well-educated a monarch to ever assume power.

To Alexander, Persia was Macedonia's principal rival, and he resolved to liberate the Greek cities of Asia from Persian suzerainty. Crossing the Hellespont with an army of about 40,000 men, he defeated the Persian army, subdued other enemies in western Asia Minor, and then, in July 332 B.C.E., stormed the key trading city of Tyre. He conquered and occupied Palestine and Phoenicia, and then turned toward Egypt, which he subdued through a series of lightning campaigns from 332 to 331 B.C.E. Returning to Tyre in 331, Alexander marched his army across Mesopotamia and conquered Babylon. The following year, he entered Media, land of the Medes, and captured its capital. This put him into direct confrontation with the Grand Army of the Persian Emperor Darius III, whom Alexander defeated at the Battle of Arbela in 331 B.C.E., setting the Persian Empire into irreversible decline.

Although Darius III escaped after Arbela, he died the following year, and Alexander assumed the title Basileus (great king), adding rule of Persia to that of Macedonia. In mid-summer 330 B.C.E., Alexander embarked for central Asia, which he spent the next three years subjugating.

The final campaign of Alexander the Great was in India. Crossing the Indus River in 326 B.C.E., he set about acquiring territories that extended as far as the Hyphasis and lower Indus. The only substantial threat to his juggernaut came from King Porus of Paurava. At the Hydaspes River in 326, Alexander defeated Porus by boldly marching across the great river in the very face of the advancing Paurava army. Alexander now overran the Punjab, but

ultimately had to turn back; his army simply refused to follow him farther. During the last year and a half of his life, Alexander turned increasingly to Iranian troops and, with them, prepared to launch a vast Arabian campaign. While making his preparations, however, he fell ill, probably of pernicious malaria, and died in Babylon on June 10, 323 B.C.E. He was just 33.

Egypt

Egypt, like Mesopotamia, was a civilization born on and sustained by a river. The Nile was a means not only of transportation, but also a source of fertility in a desert land. The river not only provided water for irrigation, its seasonal cycle of flooding and recession deposited a fresh layer of tremendously fertile black silt, creating a long strip of farmland along the Egyptian portion of its course.

Agriculture was the most momentous development of Egyptian civilization, leading to population growth and the development of a bureaucracy of priests who could forecast seasonal change with rather sophisticated astronomy. In contrast to Mesopotamia, where settlement developed between the Euphrates and Tigris, and Iran, where settlement spread out across a plateau, the major cities of Egypt all hugged the Nile. It was, in this way, an intensely urban civilization, at once concentrated and yet vastly influential.

Recorded civilization begins in Egypt about 3100 B.C.E. when Menes (a semi-legendary figure) united Lower Egypt (settlement along the Nile delta) and Upper Egypt (settlement upstream) and established a dynasty. But it was not until between 2700 and 2200 B.C.E. that the historical record becomes more complete in the period known as the Old Kingdom. In contrast to the rulers of Mesopotamia and Persia, who, despotic though they might be, were considered mortal, Egypt's pharaohs enjoyed at least semi-divine status. Yet being a quasi-deity carried a certain burden. Whereas absolute despotism might be the norm among the "mortal" rulers elsewhere in the Middle East, in Egypt, the divine pharaohs were expected to rule with the wisdom, justice, and goodness befitting a god. Certainly, the pharaoh did not rule unaided, but created a sophisticated bureaucracy, both on the level of the kingdom as a whole and for each of 42 provinces.

The Middle Kingdom is the period from 2050 to 1800 B.C.E., which was marked by something of a demotion for the pharaohs, who were now generally considered fully human, and a rise in military aggressiveness, with invasions of Palestine and Syria—which, however, failed to produce permanent annexation or occupation—and Nubia, which was joined to the kingdom.

The era of the Middle Kingdom ended in chaos when Egypt was invaded by a West Asian people called the Hyksos. For about a hundred years, they ruled Egypt as unwelcome foreigners—but they introduced into the region new technologies, mostly of a military nature, including the chariot, the compound bow, and—thanks to their methods of smelting bronze—vastly improved edged weapons. It was by mastering these imported technologies that the Egyptians were ultimately able to expel the Hyksos, and establish, in 1550 B.C.E., the New Kingdom, which endured until 332 B.C.E.

During the New Kingdom, Egypt became the dominant empire in the region, absorbing more of Nubia, successfully invading Phoenicia and Palestine, and taking part of Syria. The most serious competition New Kingdom Egypt faced came from the Hittites, an Indo-European people living in

what is today Turkey. Although the New Kingdom endured until it was conquered by Alexander in 332, its decline was long, beginning about 1070 B.C.E., when the kingdom was increasingly dominated by Nubian, Libyan, Assyrian, and Persian rulers.

The Israelites

The ancient Middle East, from Persia in the east to Egypt in the west, was a vast stage on which great empires rose, fought, and fell. Into this drama came a tribal people who, never having created a great empire, would likely have sunk into archaeological and historical obscurity were it not for the religion associated with them and the telling of their story in the founding document of that religion: the Old Testament.

People of Abraham and Moses

About the twentieth century B.C.E., Abraham left Ur, in Mesopotamia, for Canaan, near modern Palestine. This was a journey from polytheism to monotheism, undertaken (according to the Old Testament, the historical accuracy of which is subject to much debate) at the command of Yahweh, the one true God, who promised Abraham that He would protect and guide him and his descendants forever. Those descendants, the chosen of God, were the Hebrews, or Israelites, or Jews.



DID YOU KNOW?

Ur, a Sumerian city-state located at modern Tell el-Muqayyar (in Iraq), dates from the twenty-sixth century B.C.E. and is so ancient that its very name is a prefix in German, English, and often other languages forming words with the sense of primitive, original, or proto. Thus the Chinese abacus may be referred to as the “ur-computer” or the original or earliest manuscript version of a literary work as the “ur-text.”

They lived modestly in Canaan until about 1600 B.C.E. when drought and famine forced them to migrate to Egypt, where they settled east of the delta in Goshen. After a period of well-being, the pharaoh pressed the Jews into slave labor to build the pyramids and other monuments. This enslavement lasted some 400 years until Yahweh, in fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham, intervened, appearing to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God commanded Moses to lead his people into freedom. At first Moses appealed to the pharaoh. When the tyrant was unmoved, God visited upon Egypt plagues and disasters, culminating in a visitation by the Angel of Death, who killed the firstborn son of every Egyptian household. This prompted the pharaoh to allow the Jews to leave Egypt—yet no sooner did the exodus begin than he sent an army to intercept them. God intervened yet again, parting the Red Sea to allow the Jews to cross from Egypt into the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, then releasing the sea so that it engulfed the pursuing army.

For 40 years, according to the Old Testament, the Jews lived in 12 loosely confederated tribes in Sinai, until God summoned Moses to Mount Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments, which became the basis of the Hebrew Torah, the central text of Judaism. From the wilderness, Moses now

led his people back to Canaan, the Promised Land. A cornerstone of Judaism is the doctrine that God set this land aside for the Jews and the Jews alone. Canaan, however, was occupied by Hittites, Amorites, and others. The book of Exodus relates that God commanded the Hebrews to wage war on the interlopers, even to the point of their extermination: “For ... the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.” (Deuteronomy 7:6)

War in Canaan

The Jews waged war against the Canaanites for some 200 years, first under King Saul and then, after he was killed in combat, under his subordinate commander, David. It was David who led a decisive victory against the Philistines, the most formidable among those contesting for possession of Canaan. It was David, too, who forged a kingdom—Israel—out of the 12 disparate tribes that had settled in Canaan, and it was David who wrested Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made the city his capital.

Division and Destruction

David died about 970 B.C.E., having ruled some 40 years, and was succeeded by his son Solomon, who made Israel an important center of copper mining and foreign trade and who institutionalized Judaism by building a great temple in Jerusalem. Yet, although Solomon provided an enduring symbol of Judaism, the kingdom of Israel barely survived his death in 931 B.C.E. Following a period of civil war, it divided in two, Israel to the north, with its capital in Samaria, and Judah to the south, centered on Jerusalem. Israel prospered while Judah more or less languished.

Unfortunately for Israel, prosperity made it a target for Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C.E. Most of the Israelites were exiled in a *diaspora*—a scattering. Many were simply absorbed into the Assyrian Empire as uprooted members of the “10 lost tribes.” Suddenly, humble Judah became the center of Judaism and Hebraic culture. The very name *Jew* is derived from *Yebudi*, “man of Judah.”

Exile, Return, and Loss

As mentioned, under Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian Empire rose to its second great prominence as what modern historians call the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Among the realms Nebuchadnezzar chose to conquer was Judah. Over the course of his reign, four mass deportations were forced upon Judah between 605 and about 582 B.C.E. In 586 B.C.E., Babylonian forces sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon’s Temple.

Both Israel and Judah effectively ceased to exist, as did the physical symbol of the Jewish religion. The Jews themselves underwent a new diaspora (often called, however, the First Diaspora), and were exiled into the Babylonian captivity movingly commemorated in Psalm 137, which begins, “By the rivers of Babylon, / there we sat down, yea, we wept, / when we remembered Zion,” *Zion* being a synonym for Jerusalem.



DEFINITION

Although **Zion** is widely used as a synonym for *Israel* as both the land itself and as a symbol of the Jewish people, its historical root is as an alternative name for Jerusalem, location of the First and Second Temples, whereas *Israel* historically refers to a kingdom and, now, the modern state. *Zionism* is a term associated with Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), founder of the Jewish nationalist movement that, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, sought to establish a homeland for all Jews.

Persia's Cyrus the Great liberated the Jews from their Babylonian captivity after he conquered Babylonia in the sixth century B.C.E., and in 538 B.C.E., Zerubabel, a direct descendent of King David, led the first contingent of Jews back to the Promised Land. A century later, in 450 B.C.E., Ezra the Scribe would lead a second large group back from Mesopotamian exile.

Judah now flourished as a quasi-autonomous nation within the Persian Empire. And yet, restored though they were to their homeland—and with the Temple having been rebuilt and consecrated in 516—the Jews were no longer truly independent. They lived once again in the Promised Land, the land of God's covenant with Abraham, but that land was no longer absolutely theirs. The Jews survived, and many even prospered, yet at the heart of their religion and culture was planted an enduring sense of exile and loss. As the covenant had united the Hebrews for centuries, now the sense that it had been broken and was in need of restoration formed an even stronger cultural, spiritual, and political bond.

The Least You Need to Know

- The area of the Middle East watered by the great river systems is often called the “cradle of civilization.” It is also the cradle of religion—as well as much strife based on religious differences.
- The ancient history of the Middle East may be told in a succession of empires: the rise of Sumer, followed by its conquest by Akkad; the conquest of Akkad by Babylon; the conquest of Babylon by Assyria; the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and its conquest by Persia; the conquest of Persia and Egypt by Alexander the Great of Macedonia.
- The rise of ancient Israel is largely the history of a struggling people who created one of the world's great and influential religions.