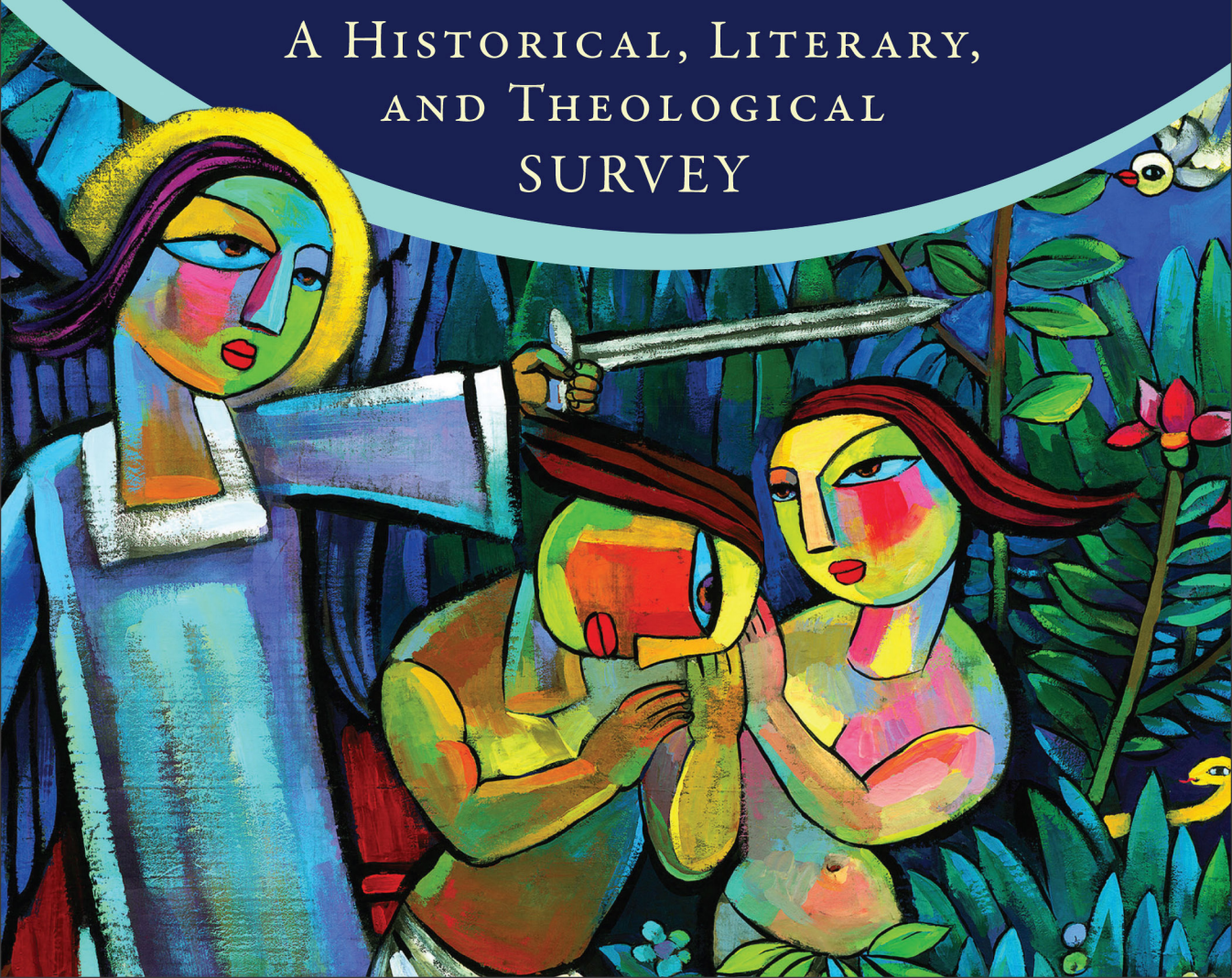


Rolf A. Jacobson / Michael J. Chan

INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

A HISTORICAL, LITERARY,
AND THEOLOGICAL
SURVEY



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Rolf A. Jacobson
and
Michael J. Chan


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Contents

List of Maps xi

Preface xiii

PART 1

The Old Testament: Context and Scope

1. The Old Testament World 3
2. The Old Testament Writings 25

PART 2

From Creation to Inheritance

3. The Pentateuch 49
4. Genesis 69
5. Exodus 91
6. Leviticus 115
7. Numbers 129
8. Deuteronomy 147

PART 3

Stories of Land, Loss, and Homecoming

9. The Historical Books 167
10. Joshua 183
11. Judges 201
12. Ruth 221
13. 1–2 Samuel 233

14. 1–2 Kings 255

15. 1–2 Chronicles 279

16. Ezra-Nehemiah 291

17. Esther 305

PART 4

Poetic Collections

18. Poetry, the Poetic Books,
and Wisdom 317
19. Job 329
20. Psalms 345
21. Proverbs 365
22. Ecclesiastes 377
23. Song of Songs 389

PART 5

Prophetic Literature

24. Prophecy and the Prophetic
Books 403
25. Isaiah 427
26. Jeremiah 445
27. Lamentations 459
28. Ezekiel 467
29. Daniel 479
30. Hosea 495

31. Joel	509	39. Haggai	599
32. Amos	519	40. Zechariah	607
33. Obadiah	535	41. Malachi	617
34. Jonah	543		
35. Micah	555	Glossary	627
36. Nahum	567	Notes	635
37. Habakkuk	579	Art Credits	641
38. Zephaniah	589	Index	645

Maps

- 1.1. Ancient Near East 9
- 1.2. Israel and its neighbors from the tenth through the seventh centuries 11
- 1.3. Geographical map of ancient Israel 14
- 4.1. Possible route of Abraham and Sarah's journeys 87
- 5.1. Proposed routes for the exodus 111
- 7.1. Route of the Israelites from Mount Sinai to the Jordan River 131
- 7.2. The route from the Wilderness of Zin around Edom and other countries 136
- 8.1. Mount Nebo 158
- 10.1. The traditional view, that the book of Joshua portrays a three-forked invasion by Joshua of the land 187
- 10.2. Tribal divisions 188
- 13.1. David's united kingdom 239
- 14.1. Divided kingdom 262
- 14.2. Babylonian Empire 264

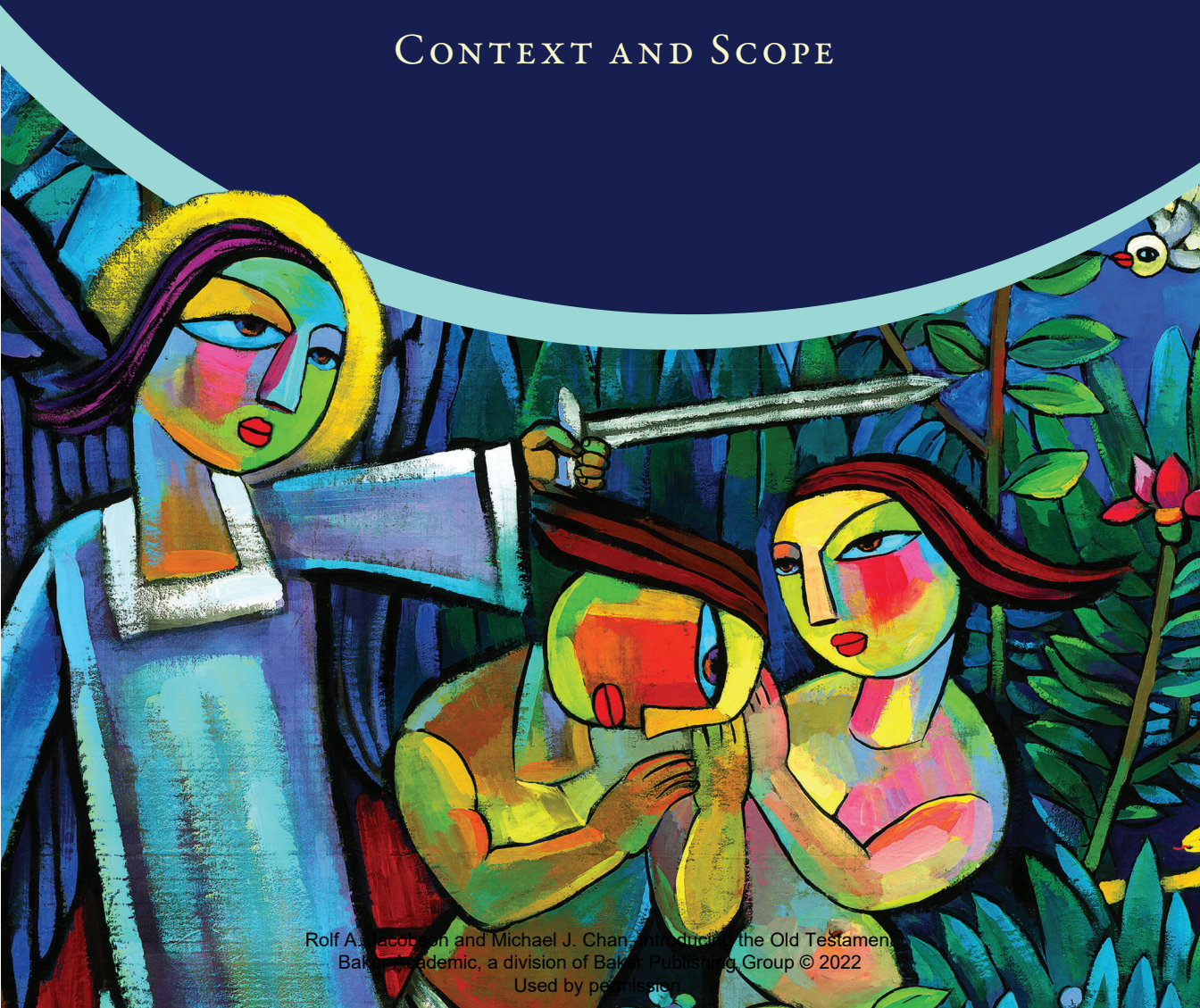


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Part 1

THE OLD TESTAMENT

CONTEXT AND SCOPE



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The Old Testament World

Few books, if any, have had a greater impact on the world than the book Christians call “the Old Testament.” The Old Testament has shaped how people think about what it is to be a human being. It has shaped how people think about the universe. It has impacted how people conceive of the earth and its many creatures and features. It has influenced the basic elements of human society—including things such as marriage, family, childhood, and old age. It has played a role in the evolution of ethics, the development of laws, and the rise of the arts. It has shaped how people think about both the past and the future. And, perhaps most of all, the Old Testament has influenced how people think about God and about spiritual matters.

In light of the Old Testament’s great influence in shaping our world, it is surprising how little most people know about the world that shaped the Old Testament. All the books of the Old Testament were written by people who lived in an actual world—what we are calling in this chapter “the Old Testament world.” This may seem like an obvious statement, but many readers of the Old Testament often fail to appreciate this fact. Perhaps the reason for this is that many readers approach the Old Testament in search of “timeless truths”—and the concept of timeless truths tends to obscure the time-bounded character of the text. In order to understand the Old Testament properly—indeed, to understand why and how the Old Testament’s witness remains valid and applicable in the modern world—knowing and understanding the contours of the Old Testament world is essential.

Why does such knowledge matter? In two words: understanding and misunderstanding. Knowledge of the Old Testament world can help one understand the meaning of various passages. And perhaps even more importantly, knowledge of the Old Testament world can help a reader avoid misunderstanding various passages.

testament A written account of a covenant. It is in this sense that parts of the Bible are called the Old Testament and the New Testament.

ancestors Sometimes referred to as the patriarchs or matriarchs; generally includes Abraham/Sarah, Isaac/Rebekah, Jacob/Rachel/Leah.

BCE An abbreviation for “before the common era”; in academic studies, BCE is typically used for dates in place of BC (“before Christ”).

Israel (1) The entire people descended from Abraham and Sarah; (2) the Northern Kingdom centered in Samaria; (3) a symbolic name given to Jacob, the patriarch.

Egypt An ancient imperial power in northeast Africa, organized around the Nile River.

Exodus The second book of the Pentateuch. It describes the liberation of the Israelites from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh and the subsequent giving of the law at Sinai.

the law The law of Moses or any regulations the Jewish people understood as delineating faithfulness to God in terms of the covenant he had made with Israel; often used synonymously with Torah.

Time Periods

Period of the Ancestors: Prior to 1500 BCE

The oldest traditions in the Old Testament date to a time that is often called the period of the ancestors or the period of the patriarchs and matriarchs. This time period can be considered prehistory because its events and people are very difficult to date historically. Most likely these stories date from a time before 1500 BCE. During this era, Israel’s story began. And the story began as a family story—the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his wives and consorts, and Joseph and his brothers.

Slavery in Egypt and the Exodus: Ca. 1500–1240 BCE

The book of Genesis ends by recounting how Jacob and his family end up in Egypt. The book of Exodus starts by describing how the Israelites had grown numerous and were enslaved by the Egyptians. Exodus then tells the foundational story of Israel’s identity: the exodus from Egypt. This story describes Israel’s rescue by God from Egyptian slavery, Israel’s new covenantal relationship with God, the gift of the law, and Israel’s journey through the wilderness.

Emergence of Israel and Settlement in the Land: Ca. 1200–1000 BCE

Following the exodus and Israel’s journey through the wilderness, the nation of Israel comes of age in the “promised land” of Canaan. There is debate about the nature of Israel’s emergence in the land. Was it a giant military conquest?

Box 1.1

Basic Old Testament Chronology

Prior to 1500	Period of the ancestors
Ca. 1500–1240	Slavery in Egypt, exodus, and journey to Canaan
Ca. 1200–1000	Emergence of Israel and settlement in the land
Ca. 1025–928	United monarchy (Saul, David, and Solomon)
Ca. 922–586	Divided monarchy
Ca. 922–722/721	Israel (the Northern Kingdom) exists until Assyria conquers it
Ca. 922–586	Judah (the Southern Kingdom) exists until Babylon conquers it
586–537	Exile
539–333	Persian period (the return and the diaspora) Return (many exiled Judeans return to Judah) Diaspora (many exiled Judeans choose to live as a dispersed people in locations throughout the ancient Near East)
332–63	Hellenistic period

Note: All dates are BCE.

Was it a political revolution? Was it a peaceful immigration into previously unsettled areas? Was it a combination of all three? Scholars disagree on this, but all agree that at the end of the second millennium BCE, a people called Israel emerged in Canaan. Sometimes this era is called “the tribal league” because during these years Israel was not a centralized nation ruled by a king but rather a loose affiliation of twelve tribes that were led by various leaders called “judges” (charismatic leaders). During these early years, Israel’s existence was constantly threatened by rival people who lived nearby—such as the Arameans, Moabites, Canaanites, Philistines, Midianites, and Ammonites. According to books like Judges and 1 Samuel, Israel did not have a human king because God was considered the nation’s king.

Judges The translation of a Hebrew term more properly translated “deliverers” or “saviors.”

Canaanite A term used to describe the inhabitants of the Holy Land prior to Israel’s emergence there.

United Monarchy: Ca. 1025–922 BCE

The system of charismatic judges leading the people eventually failed. When this failure occurred, the people demanded a human king. For about a century, the twelve tribes of Israel were united under a single king. Three men ruled successively over the unified nation: Saul, David, and Solomon. King David made Jerusalem the capital of the united Israel, and his son Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem to centralize the worship of Israel’s God. According to the biblical text, during David’s rule the nation of Israel briefly achieved the status of a powerful empire. But by the end of the reign of David’s son Solomon, the nation was fragmenting due to both internal and external pressures.

Divided Monarchy: Ca. 922–586 BCE

Following Solomon’s reign, the twelve tribes split into two kingdoms—a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. During this period, the relationship between the two nations was sometimes friendly. At other times, the nations were in rivalry with each other, and sometimes they were even at war with each other. Even though both nations worshiped Yahweh, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” they had rival religious structures and some differing theological teachings.

Judah The Southern Kingdom centered in Jerusalem.

Northern Kingdom: Ca. 922–722/721 BCE

The Northern Kingdom (which the Bible often refers to as Israel, Ephraim, Jacob, or Joseph) was composed of the ten Israelite tribes that lived in the northern part of the land. This nation was formed when ten tribes rebelled against the Davidic kings who ruled from Jerusalem. Israel was more populous and prosperous than Judah, the Southern Kingdom, but it was plagued by internal political instability (its kings were often overthrown from within by

Northern Kingdom The ten tribes that broke away from Judah after Solomon’s reign. It had alternative cultic sites at Dan and Bethel.

sacrifice The offering of something valuable (e.g., crops from a field or an animal from one's flock) as an expression of worship.

Assyria A northern Mesopotamian empire that had a significant impact on the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, especially during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.

Samaritans Semitic people who lived in Samaria at the time of Jesus and claimed to be the true Israel; descendants of the tribes taken into captivity by the Assyrians.

exile Shorthand for the sixth-century-BCE period in which many Jews were forcibly deported from the Holy Land and relocated to Mesopotamia, most notably Babylon.

Babylon A southern Mesopotamian power responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of Jews to Mesopotamia.

exiles In Israelite history, the Jews who were deported to Mesopotamia after Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians.

political rivals) and by external military threats (Israel was more vulnerable militarily than the mountain-bound Southern Kingdom). The capital of Israel was eventually located in the city of Samaria, and its religious centers included Bethel and Dan (where the first king, Jeroboam, erected golden calves in the worship sanctuaries), as well as numerous “high places” and other sites, such as Gilgal and Shechem, where sacrifices were performed and offerings were received. The Northern Kingdom was eventually conquered by the Assyrian Empire. After several failed attempts to rebel against Assyria, Samaria was destroyed in 722/721 BCE; its leading citizens were forcibly exiled; and foreign people were resettled into the land. (The descendants of the Northern Kingdom were later called Samaritans.)

Southern Kingdom: Ca. 922–586 BCE

Two tribes—Judah and Benjamin—composed the Southern Kingdom, which took the name of Judah (the more powerful of its two tribes). Although the nation of Judah was neither as wealthy nor as powerful as its northern neighbor, it enjoyed several other important advantages. These advantages mainly centered on the city of Jerusalem, a well-fortified city and the political and religious center of the country. Judah experienced political stability because it had the Davidic monarchy—all of its kings hailed from the line of King David. The country also had a stable religious life, centering on the temple in Jerusalem, where offerings were received and sacrifices were performed. The Southern Kingdom was able to survive the Assyrian threat that brought about Israel’s demise, lasting for approximately 150 more years, although in its final years it was a vassal nation of the Babylonian Empire. After Judah rebelled several times, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem—razing the temple, tearing down the city’s walls, and forcing the prominent citizens into exile in Babylon (many other leading citizens fled to places such as Egypt and Damascus).

Exile: 586–537 BCE

After Babylon subdued Jerusalem, a period of exile followed. In a series of deportations (in 597, 586, and 582), many prominent citizens of Jerusalem and Judah were taken to live as exiles in the land of Babylon. During this period, other Judeans also fled to Egypt and elsewhere.

Persian Period: 539–333 BCE

In 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon. Soon thereafter, Cyrus gave the Judean exiles in Babylon permission to return home, resettle in Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple.



Fig. 1.1. This nineteenth-century painting is titled *The Captivity of the Tribes of Israel*. Viewers might ask, “Which one?” since the people of Israel were enslaved, conquered, exiled, or otherwise subdued by many of the world’s great empires. Sadly, the “captivity” to which the artist refers is a pogrom of Jews that occurred in France in the fifteenth century, reminding us that the suffering of the Jewish people has continued for millennia after the writing of what Christians call “the Old Testament.”

The return. Following Cyrus’s edict that the Judeans could return to the promised land, many who were living in exile did so and joined in the resettling and restoration of the land. But Judah was not reestablished as an independent nation with a king. Rather, the Persian province of Yehud was created. In 515 BCE, a new temple built on the foundations of Solomon’s temple was dedicated. This temple lasted until the Romans destroyed an expanded version of it in 70 CE. The period of time from 515 BCE to 70 CE is known as the Second Temple

Cyrus the Great

Persian emperor who conquered the ancient Near East and permitted exiled Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple.

Persia A large area east of Mesopotamia and north of the Persian Gulf; the center of the Persian Empire, which ruled large portions of the ancient Near East from 539 to 332 BCE.

CE An abbreviation for “common era”; in academic studies, CE is typically used for dates in place of AD (*anno Domini*, “in the year of the Lord”).

Second Temple period

The era in Jewish history between the dedication of the second Jerusalem temple in 515 BCE and its destruction in 70 CE.

synagogue A congregation of Jews who gather for worship, prayer, and Bible study, or the place where they gather for these purposes.

diaspora Jews living in exile outside the Holy Land; also called the dispersion.

Torah The law of Moses, as contained in the Pentateuch; or, frequently, a synonym for the Pentateuch (referring, then, to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible).

ancient Near East Geographical area that runs east-west from Egypt to Mesopotamia and north-south from Turkey to the Arabian Peninsula.

Hellenistic Affected by Hellenism, that is, the influence of Greek and Roman culture, customs, philosophy, and modes of thought. For example, Jewish people were said to be “hellenized” when they adopted Greco-Roman customs or came to believe propositions derived from Greek philosophy.

Seleucids The Syrian dynastic family that ruled Palestine during the years 198–167 BCE.

period. This was one of the most transformational and productive periods in Jewish history.

The diaspora. Although many exiles returned to live again in or near Jerusalem, many did not. Those who continued to live at a distance from the land formed Jewish communities in the midst of foreign lands and began to gather and worship in local synagogues. Thus began what is known as the diaspora—marking a major change in the identity of the people of Israel. Prior to the exile, the people thought of themselves as a holy nation, living in a holy land, centered on a holy temple and the chosen family of Davidic kings. The exile and diaspora initiated a lengthy and complex process of change that fundamentally transformed Jewish identity. The emphasis on Torah observance among many modern Jewish communities testifies to these seismic shifts.

Hellenistic Period: 332–63 BCE

Persian rule of the ancient Near East lasted until the rise of the Greeks, led by the youthful Alexander the Great. Palestine fell under Alexander’s rule in 332 BCE. The period of time that followed is known broadly as the Hellenistic period—referring to the time when Greek culture and language heavily influenced many contemporary Jews. Greek became the international language. After Alexander’s death in 323, his generals and officials fought for control of his empire. Two of these generals succeeded in gaining control of large territories—Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucus in Asia Minor. Judea, which was located near the border of these two territories, owed allegiance first to the Ptolemaic Empire (320–198 BCE) and then later to the Seleucid Empire (198–167 BCE).

In the middle of the second century BCE, Jewish fighters rebelled against the Seleucid overlord, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), achieving independence for a time. They were responding to his harsh religious and political repression. Their recapture and rededication of the temple initiated a period of native Jewish rule over Judea known as the Hasmonean period (165–37 BCE), named after the ruling dynasty. During this period, the latest books of the Old Testament were most likely written and other books that had evolved over the centuries probably reached their final form.

Ages of Empires

In large part, the Old Testament recounts the story of the people of Israel. It narrates Israel’s understanding of itself as having begun when God called an aged couple—Abraham and Sarah—to be the founders of a chosen people. The story unfolds as this chosen family survives early threats, grows to be a

substantial people, eventually becomes an independent nation, declines under many different pressures, and survives as a holy people of a holy book.

Throughout the long story of the Old Testament, this chosen people, Israel, was beset by powers and principalities greater than itself. Over the centuries, Israel was often besieged by the great empires that rose and fell around it—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and Rome. Familiarity with these great (and near-great) empires and the imperial pressures they imposed on Israel provides useful context for understanding various texts from the Old Testament. Here, only a brief sketch of the major empires is given. In later chapters, additional context will be provided.

Egyptian Empire(s)

The land of Egypt was host to many great rulers and dynasties. Throughout Israel's long history, Egypt exercised profound influence—both benign and malignant—on the chosen people. This can be seen in the mixed array of stories about Egypt in the Pentateuch. On the one hand, Egypt was a safe harbor during famine under the capable administration of Joseph in Genesis. On the other hand, Egypt was Israel's oppressor in the book of Exodus. Later on in Israel's history, kings occasionally looked to Egypt for protection and no doubt benefited economically from trade relations.

Over the centuries, Egyptian power and influence over the Levant—the land along the eastern Mediterranean Sea—waxed and waned. Historians

Antiochus IV Epiphanes A second-century-BCE king of the Seleucid Empire (based in Syria) who was responsible for religiously persecuting Jews living in Judea. These events influenced the latter chapters of the book of Daniel.

Hasmonean The family name of the Jewish rebels who led a successful revolt against the Syrians in 167 BCE.

principalities Powerful spiritual beings that exercise their influence in a dimension not perceptible to human senses.



Map 1.1.1. Ancient Near East

Ptolemies The Egyptian dynastic family that ruled Palestine during the years 320–198 BCE.

Pentateuch The first five books of the Bible, sometimes called the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

Holy Land A term used to describe the land promised to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants.

Aram The ancestor of the Arameans, according to the Bible (Gen. 10:22). In some cases the term also describes a geographical location, referring to the Aramaic city-state of Damascus or locations where Arameans live.

distinguish between various epochs of Egyptian empire, such as the Old Kingdom (2686–2218 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BCE), the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE), and the Late Period (664–332 BCE). Between each of these eras were transitory interregnums during which Egyptian power was low or internal divisions were being sorted out.

In terms of ancient Israel, the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) had a great impact. During this period, Egyptian power reached its zenith—with Egyptian hegemony reaching as far south as Ethiopia and as far north as Syria. The events recounted in the book of Exodus likely occurred during this era. Especially important here is to note that during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE—precisely when Israel was emerging as a people in the Holy Land—Egypt lost control of that area. Toward the end of the New Kingdom, internal disorders and divisions grew rampant. The golden age of Israel’s kingdom (from Saul’s reign in ca. 1020 BCE through the fall of the Southern Kingdom in 586 BCE) coincided with a time in which Egypt’s power was greatly diminished. In the Late Period, a resurgent Egypt reappeared and played a role in the final years of the Southern Kingdom.

Regional Powers in Israel’s Neighborhood

Israel’s history was not only shaped by the great riverine civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Smaller kingdoms in Israel’s geographical neighborhood also had significant influence (Aram, Ammon, Edom, Moab, Philistia, etc.). These regional powers played a variety of roles depending on the circumstances. Sometimes they were allies; sometimes they were adversaries; and sometimes they were trade partners. The full range of state relations existed among Israel and its neighbors.

The Philistines are but one example. In the twelfth century BCE, this seafaring people settled in five cities (Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron) along the coast of the Mediterranean. During the Israelite periods of the judges and early monarchy, the Philistines and Israelites were often at loggerheads. This was so much the case that, in a good portion of the Old Testament, the Philistines appear as iconic adversaries of Israel.

Significant amounts of cultural and religious intermingling happened among these regional powers. From the ninth through sixth centuries BCE (especially during the time of the Northern Kingdom of Israel), powers to Israel’s north and east—Aram, Sidon, and Tyre to the north; Ammon, Moab, and Edom to the east—vexed Israel and Judah. Their religious and cultural practices were imitated by some within Israel and Judah, including royalty, which caused some division within Israel and Judah. The Edomites seem to have played an especially destructive role in the siege and sack of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Testimony to

the Judahites' bitterness regarding these events is found in several biblical books, including the entire book of Obadiah.

Neo-Assyrian Empire (934–609 BCE)

According to Genesis, the story of Israel started when Abraham and Sarah uprooted their household from Mesopotamia—the fertile land between and around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—and transplanted it to Palestine. The story of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah climaxed when two Mesopotamian empires—Assyria and Babylon, respectively—subdued those kingdoms. As was the case with Egypt, both the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires consisted of multiple empires over many epochs. It is specifically the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires that played important roles in the world of the Old Testament.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire rose from the ashes of past empires beginning in 934 BCE under kings such as Assur-dan II and Tukulti-ninurta II. The empire reached its zenith during the expansionist reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE). Over the next three centuries, many countries and kings bent their knees to various Neo-Assyrian kings. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was no exception. The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III brought Israel under heel as a vassal nation in 841 BCE. Following several attempted rebellions, Israel was defeated, its capital city of Samaria destroyed in 722/721, and its citizens deported, while a more docile foreign population was resettled in the land of Israel. The Assyrians also threatened the Southern Kingdom of Judah but did not utterly destroy it. Neo-Assyrian rule over the ancient Near East endured for the next century, until finally giving way in 609 BCE to a new empire.

Neo-Babylonian Empire (627–539 BCE)

As with the Egyptian and Assyrian Empires, the Babylonian Empire had several incarnations over the centuries. The one that most directly affected the



Map 1.2. Israel and its neighbors from the tenth through the seventh centuries

Neo-Assyrian Empire An empire based in northern Mesopotamia that ruled much of the ancient Near East from the middle of the eighth century BCE until approximately 609 BCE.

Neo-Babylonian Empire An empire based in southern Mesopotamia that ruled much of the ancient Near East from 612 to 539 BCE.

people of ancient Israel was the Neo-Babylonian Empire, a relatively short-lived empire that nonetheless played a major role in the fate and fortunes of the kingdom of Judah. Babylon first forced Judah to submit in 597 BCE, but when it continued to rebel, Babylon eventually sacked Jerusalem and forced several waves of Jews into exile.

Persian (or Achaemenid) Empire (550–333 BCE)

The Achaemenid king, Cyrus the Great, was responsible for overthrowing the Babylonian Empire. In a move that was both self-serving and generous, Cyrus granted the exiled captives permission to return to their homelands. The Persian religion was Zoroastrianism, but the empire tolerated and even encouraged local populations to keep their own gods, temples, and religious traditions. When Persia conquered Babylon, many captive peoples, including the exiled Judeans, were allowed to return home and reestablish their religious institutions. With respect to local government, Persia granted considerable local autonomy, but the land was divided into provinces of the Persian Empire with appointed governors. Judah became the province Yehud, no longer an independent nation or vassal kingdom with its own dynastic kings.

Yehud A term for the province of Judah during the Persian period.

priests In Second Temple Judaism, people authorized to oversee the sacrificial system in the Jerusalem temple; closely associated with the Sadducees.

prophet Someone claiming to bear a message from a divine source.

Box 1.2

War in the Ancient Near East

The famous story of King David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 begins, "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle . . ." War was a regular feature of life in the Old Testament. The annual rhythm that included times for planting, tending, and harvesting of crops also tragically included "a time for war," as the poet writes in Ecclesiastes 3. In the Old Testament world, the main purpose of war was to subjugate foreign territories for economic exploitation. A conquered nation was required to send the conquering empire annual tribute in the forms of silver and gold, male and female slaves, and crops and livestock.

Over the centuries that encompass the Old Testament, the technologies and tactics of war developed. Early innovation included the use of horses and chariots in war and the development of body armor and weapons (first made of bronze and then of iron). Later, cities were fortified with walls and gates for purposes of defense. This fortification led invading armies to develop tactics and weapons for siege warfare. These included battering rams to attack city gates, great siege ramps to gain the rams access to the city gates, and engines of war to overcome city walls. Besieging armies would also excavate beneath city walls in order, quite literally, to undermine their foundations. Kings were expected to lead their nations' armies, while priests and prophets were expected to provide ritual and prayer support in times of war. The role that religion played in war and conquest differed from nation to nation.

Greek Empire and Empires of the Ptolemies and Seleucids (334–167 BCE)

With the appearance of Alexander the Great on the battlefields of the ancient Near East, a sea change took place in the region. The international language shifted to Greek, and the influences of Greek culture spread. But a unified Greek Empire under Alexander was short lived. In the wake of his premature death, the empire split into smaller entities (including the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms), each of which waxed and waned over several centuries. The influences of Greek culture and empire on Second Temple Judaism were sometimes experienced as threats. Judah was at times ruled by the empire of the Ptolemies, based in Egypt, and at other times by the empire of the Seleucids, based in Syria. In these alternating periods of domination, taxation and required tributes were heavy, but especially during a particular era of Seleucid domination of Judah, the explicit oppression of Jewish religious life became intense, ultimately resulting in the desecration of the temple.

Second Temple Judaism A general term for the diverse culture, practices, and beliefs of Jewish people during the Second Temple period (515 BCE–70 CE).

Geography of the Old Testament World

Many readers of the Old Testament do not have an appreciation of the role of “place” in the texts of the Old Testament. Nor do many readers have a strong sense of the geography of either the land of Canaan or its broader region—known as the ancient Near East. The emphasis on the Bible as “the word” by some religions may have contributed to this lack of appreciation and lack of knowledge. But because the story of the Old Testament takes place in and around specific places, basic knowledge of Old Testament geography is essential.

Palestine (Canaan, the Promised Land)

The story of the people of Israel began when God said to Abram, “Leave your land . . . for the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1 CEB). From that point

Box 1.3

Empires of the Old Testament World

Empire	Era	Homeland	Language	Key Leaders	Key Gods
Egyptian	1550–1069	Egypt	Egyptian	Akhenaten, Ramesses III	Horus, Re
Neo-Assyrian	934–609	Mesopotamia	Akkadian	Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon	Assur, Ishtar
Neo-Babylonian	627–539	Mesopotamia	Akkadian	Nebuchadnezzar	Marduk, Šin
Persian	550–333	Iran	Aramaic	Cyrus, Artaxerxes	Ahura Mazda
Greek	334–167	Macedonia	Greek	Alexander, Seleucus	Zeus, Mars

Note: All dates are BCE.

onward, the so-called “promised land” looms as a major feature of the story. What was this land—later described as “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:17)—really like?

The “land of Israel” refers to a slender strip of land that runs north to south along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. Israel is relatively small—a little smaller than New Jersey. The Mediterranean Sea marked the western border—although the southern part of the coastal area was occupied by the cities of the Philistines. On the east, the border was the desert that makes up

the northwest section of the Arabian Peninsula. In biblical times, the region of Bashan and the nations of Ammon, Moab, and Edom were arranged along this eastern border. To the south was a wilderness/desert area known as the Negev; to the north were the nations of Phoenicia and Aram (Syria).

Within the land, the Jordan River flows from the Sea of Galilee (also called the Sea of Kinneret) in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. A low, mountainous spine runs north and south just west of the Jordan River. In these mountains, herds of goats and sheep were tended, and crops were grown on human-made terraces. The southern highlands formed the center of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, where Jerusalem was located. To the west of this central range are plains, valleys, and lowlands. The key cities of Bethel, Shechem, and Samaria were located in this region.

The northern end of the land is also mountainous, with Mount Carmel to the northwest protruding into the Mediterranean Sea and the high point of Mount Hermon (7,326 ft.) farther to the north, as if to look down on the rest of the land. The



Map 1.3. Geographical map of ancient Israel

major break in the north-south mountain range is the Valley of Jezreel, which runs east and west from Mount Carmel in the west to the Jordan Valley in the east. This valley was prime agricultural land, serving as the breadbasket of ancient Israel.

The area east of the Jordan River is called the Transjordan. Israelites lived in this area, but as was the case with all border areas, neighboring countries contested with Israel for dominion over the territory (cf. 1 Kings 22).

The climate of Israel is arid and warm—with lengthy, dry summer months and a comparatively short rainy season. In the rainy season, otherwise dry creek beds known as wadis temporarily run with water. Droughts and dry years were common. In the absence of rain, natural springs and human-made wells were highly prized and could provide the point of conflict.

Israel was at a crossroads in the ancient world. Two important international roads were part of the land's terrain. These two highways facilitated international trade (and war) and were sources of taxes for the kingdoms through which they ran. The Way of the Sea ran north and south along the edge of the Mediterranean Sea—especially connecting Egypt to Israel, Lebanon, and Asia Minor. The King's Highway also ran north and south, but along the east side of the Jordan River—especially connecting the Arabian Peninsula to Mesopotamia. Multiple smaller east-west roads connected the two major north-south roads, creating an international crossroads in Palestine.

Within the land, there was a national boundary between Israel and Judah. There were also tribal boundaries—between Ephraim and Dan, for instance. Various places in the land had holy sites—Shechem, Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, and most importantly, Jerusalem.

Most of the population lived in villages, with a minority living in larger towns. The villages were often located near springs for water or on hilltops for defense.

Jordan River A major river system in Israel running north-south and connecting the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

Transjordan The geographic region of Israel east of the Jordan River.

Ancient Near East—Cradle of Civilizations

The larger known world during the time of the Old Testament is referred to as the ancient Near East (ANE). Broadly speaking, this area included the lands surrounding the eastern Mediterranean Sea as well as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iran, and modern-day Turkey.

Considered as a whole and over a long period of history, this region proved a fertile ground for the growth of cultures, languages (including the development of writing), arts, and sciences. Great civilizations and religions emerged in the ANE. In addition to the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek civilizations already mentioned, great civilizations such as the Hittites, Sumerians, and various Mediterranean kingdoms were born in the region. The

Sumerians are often credited with being the first civilization to develop writing. Writing in the ANE began as a kind of pictographic orthography that developed into a syllabic form of writing—a form of writing in which characters represent two- or three-phoneme clusters. The invention of the alphabet—a form of writing in which an individual character represents a single phoneme—most likely occurred along the northeast coast of the Mediterranean.

Israel, located at a key crossroads of the ANE, both reaped the rewards of its location and paid the penalty for it. The greatest downside was probably the constant threat of war and imperial domination. Israel was often either a pawn in the game of empires or caught in the crossfire between empires. But there were other downsides. Being located at the crossroads exposed Israel to epidemics and to adverse social conventions, such as slavery and the promulgation of social classes and economic inequalities.

But Israel's location provided numerous advantages as well, such as access to international trade. Israel had access to foreign markets for its most tradable commodities—especially olive oil and wine, neither of which grew in Egypt or Mesopotamia. Israel was also exposed to many salutary cultural influences, including the development of legal codes; technological developments such as pottery, the cultivation of agriculture, the milling of grain, and the forging of bronze and iron; and cultural evolutions in philosophy, astronomy, math, and architecture.

polytheism The belief that there are multiple gods.

henotheism A belief in multiple gods but with the added belief that one god rules over the others.

monolatry The worship of a single god without denying the existence of others.

monotheism The belief that there is only one God.

Judaism A general term for the religious systems and beliefs of the Jewish people. In Jesus's day, there were varieties of Judaism, though all shared certain fundamental ideas and practices.

Box 1.4

Polytheism, Henotheism, Monolatry, Monotheism

For most peoples of the ancient Near East, the world was full of deities. It was not until much later in Israel's life that belief in a single deity actually won out. Scholars use several technical terms to describe the various ways people conceptualize the divine world. *Polytheism* is a belief in many gods. *Henotheism* is also polytheistic, but it claims that one deity rules all others. *Monolatry*, similarly, affirms the existence of multiple gods, but its adherents choose to worship only one among them. *Monotheism* is belief in a single God. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam lay claim to this belief system.

Belief in multiple deities was the default in the ANE. Whether talking about the official Egyptian pantheon or popular religion in Phoenicia, belief in multiple gods shaped the everyday lives of people in the ANE, including Israel. Israelite religion developed in this environment. In its early stages, ancient Israel's religion is probably best described as henotheistic: they believed in multiple gods but placed the Lord at the top of the divine hierarchy. This belief is reflected in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and Psalm 82:1–4. Judaism eventually became a monotheistic religion, but only after a very long time.

Religious Landscape of the Ancient Near East

The ancient Near East was a religiously diverse part of the world. Religious beliefs were evident in all aspects of life, from birth to the afterlife. Quite unlike people in modern, secular Western nations such as America, ancient Near Easterners viewed the world as “enchanted”—that is, it was filled with gods, goddesses, demons, and semidivine beings who blessed, afflicted, and otherwise impeded everyday life in a variety of ways. This rich belief in an enchanted cosmos left its mark in the archaeological record in the form of ritual texts, mythologies, graves, divine images, sculpture, architecture, and more. Not surprisingly, the people of this region developed a rich array of practices and professions that allowed them to negotiate this complex, largely unseen world.

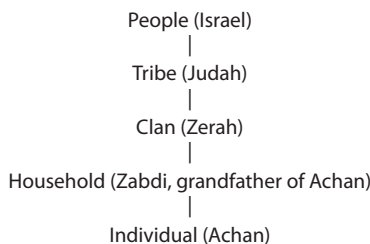
demon An evil (or “unclean”) spirit capable of possessing people and incapacitating them with some form of illness or disability.

Daily Life in Ancient Israel

Kinship-Based Social System

Every society develops norms and customs that help organize the complicated set of daily human interactions. Biblical Israel was a kinship society, meaning that extended family networks formed the warp and woof of the societal tapestry. The structure of Israel’s kinship relations is evident in the following passage, in which the leader Joshua was tasked by God with sorting through the people of Israel: “So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought *Israel* near *tribe* by *tribe*, and the *tribe* of Judah was taken. He brought near the *clans* of Judah, and the *clan* of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the *clan* of the Zerahites, *family* by *family*, and Zabdi was taken. And he brought near his *household* one by one, and Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the *tribe* of Judah, was taken” (Josh. 7:16–18; emphasis added).

Notice that there are four layers of social relationships to which an individual belonged. The highest level of kinship was the “people” (i.e., Israel), and the lowest level was the “household”:



Every person in Israel would have known the people, tribe, clan, and household to which they belonged. The “household” was literally that—a three-generation

family living together in one house. In such a house, the father and mother of the house lived with all of their sons and the sons' wives and children, all of their unmarried daughters, and all of their unmarried grandchildren.

This web of kinship provided the relational networks in which ancient Israelites found their personal identity, their sense of purpose and belonging, and also their economic role. An ancient Israelite's purpose was to work together with all blood relatives to contribute to the well-being of the household, clan, tribe, and ultimately, people. If a person became ill or handicapped, indebted or endangered, a relative was expected to step up and care for them.

The Hebrew language had a special term—*go'el*, often translated as “redeemer” or “kinsman-redeemer”—for the family member who fulfilled obligations to a relative in need. The identity of this “redeemer” would depend on what a person's need was (relief from debt, disability, injury, starvation, homelessness, childlessness, slavery, death, etc.) and who was available to meet their need. Hebrew also had a special term for those people who did not belong to a household or clan or tribe. A “family-less person” was called a *ger*, usually translated as “sojourner” or “resident alien.” In the ancient world, nobody wanted to be a “sojourner,” because sojourners had no family to help them if they were hurt, injured, starving, homeless, disabled, childless, enslaved, and so on.

In a kinship-based society, the social value of hospitality cannot be emphasized enough. Hospitality was not a voluntary action that a person extended to friends and colleagues. It was a society-wide obligation that every household was duty bound to extend to strangers, foreigners, travelers, and sojourners. Because the societal weave was based on familial relationships, the societal welfare demanded that households offer temporary shelter and food to anyone who was brought by life circumstance into a household's territory at the end of a day. The stories of Abraham and Sarah preparing a lavish feast for three travelers (Gen. 18:1–15) and of Jesus sending seventy followers into the land of Samaria (Luke 11:1–11), as well as many other passages, illustrate the importance of the value of hospitality.

Daily Food and Drink

When Jesus's disciples asked him for instruction in how to pray, one of the petitions that he commended to them was, “Give us each day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3 NIV). As this prayer indicates, bread—along with wine, grains, and olive oil—was a staple of the Israelite diet. In fact, bread (Hebrew: *lehem*) was so important to the ancient Israelite that the word for “food” is the same as the word for “bread.” Bread *was* food. The two basic breads in ancient Israel were an unleavened type of pan bread baked on a hot, flat surface (either stone



Fig. 1.2. Along with olives and figs, grapes were an essential part of the Mediterranean diet during the biblical period. Grapes could be eaten or used to make wine. This picture shows Joshua and Caleb bringing grapes to the Israelites who are about to enter the “promised land” as a testimony of the fertility they will encounter there.

or metal) and a risen bread baked in a clay oven built into the ground. It is estimated that 50–75 percent of daily caloric intake for many Israelites came from bread alone. Grapes and olives grew in abundance in Israel, and these two crops could be preserved for future consumption or trade—grapes could be preserved as wine and olives as olive oil. Together, bread, wine, and olive oil—the “Mediterranean triad”—were the staples of the ancient diet.

But this did not mean that bread was the only thing ancient Israelites ate. Fruits, vegetables, beans, and dairy products (from cattle, sheep, and goats) were also important to the ancient diet. But these other foods were available on seasonal bases.

It is sometimes said that ancient Israelites rarely, if ever, consumed meat. It is more accurate to say that for most Israelites, access to meat and fish was not

a daily luxury. Animals were primarily kept and tended not to produce meat but for the other contributions they made to society—sheep and goats for the production of wool and dairy products, oxen and donkeys as the engines of agriculture, and poultry (a later development) for eggs and feathers. Only secondarily were animals tended for their meat. And as can be expected, there was an unequal distribution of meat and fish—the prosperous and the powerful enjoyed meat more often than poor people.

anoint To use oil to symbolize the selection of a royal figure.

In this vein, the Old Testament recalls that before the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king, he warned the people of the greedy, exploitative ways of kings. As part of this warning, he cautioned that the king "will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take . . . the best of your cattle and donkeys. . . . He will take one-tenth of your flocks" (1 Sam. 8:14–17). In light of this warning, the description of King Solomon's lavish ways implies a strong critique of the inequitable distribution of food: "Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl" (1 Kings 4:22–23). Similarly, the prophet Amos castigated the wealthy for their conspicuous consumption:

Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory . . .
and eat lambs from the flock
and calves from the midst of the stall, . . .

Box 1.5

Is There a Biblical Diet?

Some readers of the Old Testament assume that the biblical diet was healthier than other diets and therefore that descriptions of food in the Bible hold a sort of divinely revealed key to a healthy life. It is true that some modern studies have shown that the "Mediterranean diet," centered on grain, wine, and olive oil, is healthier than diets that are high in saturated fats and refined sugars. But this does not mean that the ancient Israelites were healthier than people today. Research suggests that the diet of many or most ancient Israelites was severely lacking in key nutrients. One scholar concludes, "Our current state of knowledge suggests that the population of Iron Age Israel generally suffered from an inadequate diet, poor health, and low life expectancy."^{*}

The Old Testament also includes long lists of "clean" and "unclean foods" (see Lev. 11 and Deut. 14). The meaning and purpose of these food laws will be discussed in later chapters, but it should simply be noted here that the Israelites' daily diet was impacted by these laws.

^{*} Nathan McDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 87.

Iron Age The period of human culture from 1200 BCE to 586 BCE; the period in which Israel developed from a loose confederation of tribes into a kingdom.

who drink wine in bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils. (Amos 6:4–6 ESV)

Work and Professions

A variety of work and professions were available to ancient Israelites. As the above discussion of food implies, for those living in rural areas and villages, most of life was devoted to agricultural work.

For men, this most likely meant directly tending crops and herds—planting, tending, harvesting, and processing grain; pruning, harvesting, and crushing grapes and olives; and herding, grooming, slaughtering, and butchering the flocks. Herding the flocks seems to have been especially assigned to younger men and boys.

For women, this most likely meant the crucial responsibilities of running the household economy. This included preparing the daily meals for the extended household—processing, preserving, and preparing food. It also involved processing agricultural by-products to produce clothing, including spinning and weaving yarn and crafting clothing. Israelite clothing was made from linen (produced from flax), wool (produced from sheep and goat hair), and leather (produced from animal skins). The importance of clothing and the amount of labor needed to produce clothing for the household must not be underestimated. Many people only had one set of garments and one cloak, as the statute in Deuteronomy 24:12–13 indicates: “If [a person leaves a garment in pledge for

Box 1.6

The Gezer Calendar

The rhythm of the entire Israelite year revolved around agriculture, as an ancient Hebrew document called the Gezer Calendar attests. The year began in the fall, with the harvest:

- Two months of ingathering [Sept.–Oct.]
- Two months of sowing [Nov.–Dec.]
- Two months of late planting [Jan.–Feb.]
- One month of cutting flax [March]
- One month of harvesting barley [April]
- One month of harvesting and measuring grain [May]
- Two months of pruning [June–July]
- A month of summer fruit [Aug.]*

* Translation based on F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, J. J. M. Roberts, C. L. Seow, Richard E Whitaker, *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 157.



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Fig. 1.3. Gezer Calendar

a borrowed item], you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you.” The crucial role that women played in leading the household economy is illustrated by the list of the accomplishments of a “valorous wife” in Proverbs 31.

In the larger towns, more trades and professions were available. Israel had potters, weavers, tanners, carpenters, masons, smiths, traders, bakers, courtiers, fishers, and soldiers/guards, among others.

Israel also had religious professionals. There was a unique tribe—the Levites—to whom the profession of priest was given. An Israelite priest filled many roles, including butcher (as in most early religions), healer (in charge of ritual purity and cleanliness), worship specialist (Levites served as singers, musicians, scribes, and chroniclers), religious educator, diviner of the future, tutor of the young, and treasurer. The profession of priest will be discussed more in later chapters, as will the role of another religious professional—the prophet.

scribes Professionals skilled in teaching, copying, and interpreting texts; in Second Temple Judaism, closely associated with the Pharisees.

Conclusion

The world of the Old Testament is a complicated and foreign place for most modern readers. The purpose of this chapter has been to provide new readers of the Old Testament with a basic knowledge of some prominent features of that world. The treatment here does not claim to be exhaustive. As we delve more deeply into the individual books and literary genres of the Old Testament, we will explore more contours of this ancient world.

genre A type or form of literature (e.g., poetry, letter, narrative).

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