

Hebrews and the Land of Milk and Honey

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An illustration of Moses with the Ten Commandments. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Empires rose and empires fell. The Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Persians accumulated immense wealth and power that allowed them to build capital cities of striking beauty. But their cities and palaces eventually fell into decay and were covered by thousands of years of sand and dust.

One of their relatively powerless contemporary groups outlived those great empires. These people were the Hebrews, known also as Israelites or, later, Jews.

Their early contribution to humankind was not military power or groundbreaking technology. Rather, it was the revolutionary idea that there was only one god, a belief known as monotheism. This one god was called Yahweh. To the Hebrews, Yahweh was all powerful and all knowing yet beyond human understanding. These beliefs influenced the founding of the religions of Christianity and Islam.

Abraham and the Torah

The history of the early Hebrews is known primarily from one of their sacred texts, the Torah. This comprises the first five books of the Old Testament of the Bible. According to the Torah, Abraham is the ancestral patriarch, or father, of the Hebrew people.

Abraham was born in the Sumerian city of Ur. Yahweh visited Abraham, it is said, and instructed him to smash the idols of his father's gods, to worship the one and only true god, Yahweh and to move his family to Canaan. Yahweh promised Abraham that if he followed these commands, he would be the founder of a great nation. His people would live in a land flowing with milk and honey. This land, known as Canaan in ancient times, is roughly located in the same place as modern-day Israel.

Abraham's migration took place sometime between 2000 and 1700 B.C., which was 4,100 to 3,800 years ago. It occurred at a time when the Canaanites lived in relatively small, walled cities. The Hebrews, who were nomadic herders, were tolerated by the Canaanites.

However, the land that Abraham and his followers found was no paradise. The dry climate and rocky soil required considerable effort to survive. Drought eventually forced Abraham and his family to move to Egypt.

The Twelve Tribes

The Torah tells how Abraham had a son, Isaac. Isaac's son was Jacob, who in turn had 12 boys. These sons became the leaders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Jacob's most beloved son, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. However, Joseph rose to become the Egyptian pharaoh's chief minister of the land.

When a drought plagued Canaan, his same brothers came to Egypt, begging him for grain. Ignoring their past mistreatment of him, Joseph supplied them with food and convinced them to stay in Egypt.

There, the Hebrews prospered and became a great nation. They became so numerous that a later pharaoh enslaved them.

The Exodus to Canaan

The Torah then recounts the story of Moses, a legendary leader who freed the Hebrews. This event, known as the Exodus, most likely occurred between 1224 and 1211 B.C. After what the Hebrews believed were a series of acts by Yahweh on their behalf, Moses led his people out of Egypt.

The Hebrews then wandered in the desert for 40 years as they sought to return to Canaan. During this time, Moses received what later became known as the Ten Commandments from Yahweh. These laws were meant to govern people's beliefs and behavior. He also struggled to keep his people loyal to Yahweh. Moses, though, died before he could lead his people back to Canaan.

That task fell to Joshua. Under his leadership, the Hebrews settled among the Canaanites and the Philistines. The Old Testament tells of Joshua's victorious battles against these people. Over time, the Hebrews began to adopt the ways of the Canaanites. They settled down to a life of farming and herding.

In 722 B.C., the northern half of Hebrew lands known as Israel was invaded and mostly destroyed by the Assyrians. The southern half, known as Judea, survived until around 597 B.C. Then the Babylonians defeated the Judeans and carried most of them back to Babylon as captives.

During their captivity in Babylon, Hebrew scribes recorded the history of their people and their relationship with their god Yahweh. After 539 B.C., the Persians under Cyrus II conquered Babylon. He allowed the Hebrews to return to their holy city of Jerusalem. However, other empires continued to dominate the Hebrew people. About 2,000 years ago, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. They sent most of the Jews into exile. They would not return to their homeland as a united people until the 20th century A.D.