



Unit 1B

OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

ALTHOUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT CONTAINS MUCH MORE THAN JUST NARRATIVES, MOST OF the materials in the Old Testament are linked in one way or another to a single overarching story, most of which stretches over the course of the first two millennia BCE. Religion 101 is entitled “The History and Religion of *Israel*,” but technically speaking, Israel did not exist during that entire time. A certain degree of flexibility and nuance in the use of that term “Israel” is therefore required in this course, as we will be looking at the history and religion not only of the Israelites, but also of the Hebrews who preceded them, their Judean relatives to the south, and the Jewish descendants of Judean and Israelite refugees.

This preparation guide will help you learn:

- some basic facts about the geographical context of the Old Testament storyline;
- the broad outlines of the Old Testament storyline, synchronized with the biblical books and broader ancient history; and
- some of the biblical writers’ own outlines of “Israelite” history.

☑ THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT STORYLINE

The Old Testament stories are set within a broad geographical region that biblical scholars often call the “Near East.” The scholars’ Near East is roughly the same region generally called the “Middle East” today. For purposes of this course, think of that region as stretching from the **Mediterranean Sea** (called the **Great Sea** in the Bible) in the west to **Persia** and the **Persian Gulf** in the east, and from **Asia Minor** (modern-day Turkey) in the north to **Egypt** and northern **Arabia** in the south.

Canaan, called “Palestine” during Roman times, is the setting for most of the biblical narratives. The kingdoms of **Israel**, with its royal city of **Samaria**, and **Judah**, with its royal city of



Jerusalem—site of Solomon’s temple dedicated to worshipping the God of Israel— occupied this territory throughout their history. Canaan was never a single political entity with sharply defined boundaries, but was a “fuzzy-bordered” region united not by politics but by culture. The same region today includes modern-day Israel, the western parts of Jordan and Syria, and parts of southern Lebanon. The large oblong lake in the southern part of Canaan—shown, but not labeled, on the map above—is called the **Salt Sea** in the Bible, and is commonly known as the **Dead Sea** today. The river that flows into the Salt Sea from the north is the **Jordan River**. The Old Testament usually seems to reserve the term “Canaan” for **Cisjordan**, the land between the Jordan River–Dead Sea valley and the Mediterranean Sea. Culturally, however, “Canaan” extended into **Transjordan**, the region immediately east of the Jordan River. Canaan itself is part of a larger region called the **Levant**, a term that includes all the territory bordering the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea.

Egypt, both a region and a nation, was sometimes a friend, but usually an enemy of Israel. Egypt often exerted control over Canaan. The modern nation of Egypt occupies part of the territory controlled by ancient Egypt.

The **Sinai Peninsula** is the setting for Moses’s receipt of God’s laws. Today the Sinai Peninsula is part of modern Egypt, just as Egypt typically controlled the peninsula in ancient times.

Aram, sometimes called **Syria** and occupying much of the same territory as modern Syria, was home to a kingdom of the same name that heavily influenced Israel and Judah during their monarchical periods. Aram was sometimes a friend, more often an enemy, to Israel and Judah. Aram’s royal city was **Damascus**. Later, Damascus was capital of the satrapy of Abr-nahara, the division of the Persian Empire between the **Euphrates River** and the Mediterranean Sea.

Mesopotamia, defined by the **Euphrates** and **Tigris Rivers**, was home to two major empires that exerted control over the entire Fertile Crescent. First the **Assyrian empire**, with its royal cities **Asshur** (which does not figure prominently in the Bible) and **Nineveh** (which is the focus of two biblical books, *Jonah* and *Nahum*) in the northern part of Mesopotamia, dominated the region. Later, the **Babylonian empire**, based around the city of **Babylon** in southern Mesopotamia, rose to power. The heartlands of both the Assyrian and Babylonian empires are now within the borders of Iraq, and along Iraq’s border with Iran. A sizeable Jewish community spent fifty or sixty years as captives in ethnic enclaves near Babylon, and many of the Jews from that community stayed in the area after the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians.

Persia plays little role in the biblical story until later in the history of the Jews, when the Persian empire overthrew the Babylonian empire. The Persian empire stretched from the Persian heartland northeast of the Persian Gulf—in what is now Iran—all the way to Egypt. **Susa** and **Ecbatana** were major administrative centers of the Persian empire, and are the settings for a few biblical stories.

TEST PREVIEW

On any test or examination in this course, you might be asked to label or recognize any of the regions or cities whose names appear in **boldface** in this section of this preparation guide.

OVERALL TIMELINE OF THE BIBLICAL STORY

TIME	STORYLINE	MAJOR BOOKS	MAJOR ISRAELITE/JUDEAN CHARACTERS	EVENTS & FOREIGN RULERS	
1800	Ancestral period	Genesis	Abraham Isaac Joseph Jacob		
1700	Sojourn in Egypt	Exodus			
1600					
1500					
1400					
1300	Wilderness	Lev Num Deut	Moses Aaron	Exodus from Egypt Rameses II (1279–1213)	
		Joshua	Joshua	Merneptah (1213–1203)	
1200	Premonarchical period	Judges	Deborah Gideon Samson		
1100					
1000	United monarchy	1–2 Samuel	Saul (1025–1005?) David (1005–965?) Solomon (968–928?)		
900					
800	Divided monarchy	1–2 Kings Amos Hosea Isaiah 1–39 Jeremiah	<i>Judah</i> Rehoboam (928–911) Ahaz (743–727) Isaiah son of Amoz Hezekiah (727–698) Manasseh (698–642) Josiah (640–609) Jeremiah Jehoiakim (609–597) Jehoiachin/Jeconiah (597) Zedekiah (597–586)	<i>Israel</i> Jeroboam I (928–911) Ahab (873–852) Elijah Amos (mid-700s) Hosea (mid-700s) Hoshea (732–722)	<i>Assyrian Period</i> Shalmaneser III (858–824) Tiglath-pileser III (745–727) Syro-Ephraimite Crisis (735) Sargon II (722–705) Fall of Samaria (722) Sennacherib (705–681) Siege of Jerusalem (701) <i>Babylonian Period</i> Nebuchadnezzar (605–562) Fall of Jerusalem (586)
700					
600			Exile	Ezek; Isa 40–55	Ezekiel
500	Persian rule	Ezra Nehemiah	Zerubbabel Jeshua son of Jehozadak	Cyrus the Great (558–530) Fall of Babylon (539) Edict of Cyrus (538) Darius I (522–486) Xerxes I (486–465) Artaxerxes I (465–424)	
400			Ezra Nehemiah		
300	Ptolemaic rule			Alexander the Great	
200	Seleucid rule	Daniel	Judah Maccabee	Antiochus IV (175–164)	
	Hasmonean rule		TEST PREVIEW Boldfaced dates on this timeline or elsewhere in any preparation guide might appear on tests. Use this timeline to help you keep the stories in order.		

The biblical story of “Israel” really begins with their ancestor **Abraham**, whom God called to migrate from **Mesopotamia** to **Canaan**. Abraham, his son **Isaac**, and his grandson **Jacob** were “semi-nomadic pastoralists,” that is, sheep- and goat-breeders who traveled around according to the seasonal needs of their livestock. The Bible also calls these men and their families “**Hebrews**,” apparently a quasi-ethnic (because it seems to derive from the name of Abraham’s ancestor Eber), quasi-social (because it seems to denote “wanderers” or “outsiders”) term. God changed **Jacob’s** name to **Israel**, and Jacob’s twelve sons became the **twelve tribes of Israel**. Jacob and his family migrated to **Egypt** due to a famine that struck both Egypt and Canaan, but God had promised Abraham that his descendants would eventually inhabit the land of Canaan. (*Related biblical books: Genesis.*)

CHECK YOURSELF

Before reading on, see how much of this you already know. Write down a list of the top ten events you can think of that you think are in the Old Testament, in chronological order. Try to name at least two biblical characters that relate to each event.

Over time, Jacob’s descendants grew numerous enough to constitute a distinct ethnic group. Now called **Israelites**, they were forced to work as slave laborers in Egypt for a time. God called a man named **Moses** to liberate the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt (an event known as the **exodus** and commemorated by the **Passover** festival) so that they could return to the land of Canaan. Their first major stop on that journey was at **Mount Sinai** where, according to biblical tradition, God gave Moses a number of laws for the Israelites to follow. After spending forty years wandering in the **Sinai Peninsula**, the Israelites finally began to enter Canaan under the leadership of **Joshua**, Moses’ successor. Joshua assigned the land of Canaan to the twelve tribes in proportion to their populations. However, the land was already occupied, so Israelite attempts to settle in and control this land met with some resistance. The book of Joshua describes the Israelites’ initial entry into the land, and claims much success for their efforts to displace the existing Canaanite populations. The book of Judges, however, is more frank about the Israelites’ military failures and their ongoing struggle to find a place for themselves in “the promised land.” (*Related biblical books: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua.*)



Eventually, facing pressure from the **Philistines** on the Mediterranean coast, the Israelites began to desire a king to lead them in battle. The biblical storyline places the reign of Israel’s first king, **Saul**, in the eleventh century BCE. After Saul’s death in battle against the Philistines, Israel and Judah were briefly separate; Israel was ruled by Saul’s son Ishbaal and Judah by a popular military champion, **David** (star of the famous “David vs. Goliath” story). After seven and half years of war, Ishbaal was assassinated and David reunited Israel and Judah. David quickly conquered the Canaanite city of **Jerusalem**, which previously had not been taken by the Israelites. Under David’s



leadership, Israelite borders reached their greatest extent, and several neighboring kingdoms—notably **Aram**, **Ammon**, **Moab**, and **Edom**, became subservient to David. (*Related biblical books: 1–2 Samuel.*)

David died of old age and was succeeded by his son **Solomon**. Solomon has a reputation in the Bible for being very wise, and for building in Jerusalem a temple for the LORD God of Israel. However, Solomon is infamous in the Bible for worshiping other gods as well. Near the end of Solomon's reign, his kingdom began to shrink as neighboring peoples took back the lands David had conquered or annexed. Moreover, Solomon had relied on pressing the Israelites into forced labor to build his palace, the temple, and other projects. Solomon's son, **Rehoboam**, unwisely told the Israelites that he was going to increase their work burden. Therefore, the Israelite tribes rejected Rehoboam's rule and acclaimed **Jeroboam son of Nebat** (also called "Jeroboam I") as their king. Rehoboam continued to rule the tribe of Judah, which remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty. For the remainder of their histories, the two kingdoms of **Israel** and **Judah** remained separate.

The kingdom of Israel lasted for around 200 years. The **Israelites** were never able to maintain any particular dynasty for more than a few generations, so Israel experienced a great deal of internal turmoil. Israel was often at odds with its northeastern neighbor, Aram, although they sometimes cooperated. One of Israel's kings, Omri, built the city of **Samaria** and made it Israel's royal city. The kingdom of Israel persisted until **722 BCE**, when it was destroyed by the **Assyrian empire**. The Assyrians scattered the Israelites throughout Assyrian territory. Meanwhile, the **Judeans** were continuously ruled by David's descendants until **586 BCE**. At that time, the **Babylonian empire** under the leadership of **Nebuchadnezzar** destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. Unlike the Assyrians, who scattered conquered populations within the empire, the Babylonians tended to relocate conquered populations and resettle them in ethnic enclaves near **Babylon** itself. Therefore, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem inaugurated a period of time when many **Jews** lived as prisoners in **Babylonia**, a period known as the "**Babylonian exile.**" (*Related biblical books: 2 Kings.*)

During the Babylonian exile, the region that had formerly been the kingdom of Judah was a fairly disorganized border region of the Babylonian empire. The Bible makes little mention of the land and its inhabitants during this period. Similarly, there are almost no biblical narratives about Jewish life in Babylonia during the exile. However, the Jewish longing for an end to their captivity is reflected in the preaching of the prophet **Ezekiel** and that of an anonymous prophet usually called **Deutero-Isaiah**. (The book of Ezekiel and Isaiah 40–55 illuminate this time period.)

After the Jews had been in "exile" for about fifty or sixty years, **Cyrus the Great**, first king of the **Persian empire**, conquered the city of Babylon. One of Cyrus's major policies for organizing and solidifying his empire was to repatriate (send home) the populations that the Babylonians had deported. Cyrus therefore issued an edict allowing Jews living in Babylonia to migrate to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its temple. Most of the Jews who accepted this offer would have been the children, maybe even grandchildren, of the original deportees. Over the course of the next hundred years or so, a relatively small number of Jews made the journey from Mesopotamia back to the region that had once been the kingdom of Judah. Encouraged by the prophets **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, leaders



such as **Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel** and **Jeshua son of Jehozadak** spearheaded the efforts to rebuild the city and temple. (Related biblical books: Ezra–Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah.)

As Jerusalem was rebuilt, the region was reorganized politically into the province of **Yehud**. Part of the region that had once been the kingdom of Israel was also reorganized during this period; the province that centered on the rebuilt Samaria was also called Samaria. The Persian empire was divided into large regions called **satrapies**; both the provinces of Yehud and Samaria belonged to the satrapy of **Abr-nahara** (“Beyond the River”), which was governed from the city of Damascus. Yehud did not have its own king at this time, of course, but was overseen by governors appointed by the king of Persia. (Related biblical books: Ezra–Nehemiah.)



In 332 BCE, the Greek armies under **Alexander the Great** defeated the Persians at the Battle of Issus, giving Alexander control over Egypt and the Levant, including Jerusalem and its environs. Alexander himself died in 323 BCE, and his empire was divided between four of his top officials. One of these, **Seleucus I**, established himself over Syria and Mesopotamia; another, **Ptolemy I**, ruled Egypt, **Palestine** (a Hellenistic- and Roman-era name for Canaan), and Phoenicia. The Seleucid dynasty and the Ptolemaic dynasty were often at odds. Around 200 BCE, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III wrested control of Palestine from Ptolemy IV. His successor, **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, tried to force the Jews to accept Greek culture, including Greek religion. He had the temple in Jerusalem defiled by pagan sacrifices, and forbade certain Jewish religious practices. Antiochus’s oppression prompted some Jews to rebel against Seleucid rule. Led by **Judah Maccabee**, they waged a guerilla war against the Seleucid army in Judea for about three and a half years, eventually driving the Seleucids from Jerusalem. The re-dedication of the temple after the **Maccabean revolt** is celebrated each year during **Hanukkah**. (Related biblical books: Daniel.)

TEST PREVIEW

The storyline described in this section of this preparation guide is fundamental to the structure and content of Religion 101. Each of the individual unit tests will assess your knowledge of *part* of this storyline, as appropriate to the unit. By the time you take the final examination, you will need to know this storyline very well. (In fact, this preparation guide for Unit 1B is probably your best study guide for the final examination.)

☑ BIBLICAL SUMMARIES OF ISRAELITE HISTORY

The Bible itself contains a few texts that summarize “Israelite” history (remember that the word “Israelite” is anachronistic as applied to some parts of the Old Testament story, and that in parts of that story it’s important to distinguish between “Israelites” and “Judeans.” Please read the summaries presented in the following texts:

- Genesis 15:12–21
- Deuteronomy 26:1–11
- Joshua 24:1–18
- Psalms 78; 105; 106
- Nehemiah 9:6–37

As you read, please try to notice which elements of the Israelite story are highlighted in each of these texts, and which ones you might expect to see but are actually missing.

CLASS SESSION PREVIEW

During the class session, Dr. Heard will:

- help you get “the big picture” of the biblical storyline;
- share with you the archaeologically-reconstructed “story of Israel,” in very broad strokes; and
- help you see the primary historical and theological emphases in the biblical summaries of Israel’s story.

TEST COMPETENCY CHECKLIST

Before taking the Unit 1 test, please make sure that you:

- can locate the **Great (Mediterranean) Sea, Persia, the Persian Gulf, Asia Minor, Egypt, the Nile River, Arabia, Canaan, the Salt (Dead) Sea, the Jordan River, Cisjordan, Transjordan, the Levant, the Sinai peninsula, Aram (Syria), Mesopotamia, the Euphrates River, the Tigris River, Samaria, Damascus, Jerusalem, Asshur, Nineveh, Babylon, Susa, and Ecbatana** on a map of the ancient Near East;
- correlate or synchronize the archaeological ages and storyline time periods show on the overall timeline presented above;
- to summarize the biblical story from creation through the enslavement of the Hebrews (Genesis 1 through Exodus 1);
- know which event(s) feature most prominently in the Old Testament’s own summaries of Israelite history;
- know what the different artifacts shown in the PowerPoint slideshow during the class lecture tell us about ancient Israel; and
- list and describe the archaeological traces of the emergence of the ancient Israelite *people* in the early Iron Age and the emergence of the *kingdoms* of Israel and Judah a bit later.