

©Copyright ChristianCourses.com/RBC Ministries.

2 Samuel-2 Kings: The Difference Leaders Make - Lesson 3.

Supplement Two.

The Old Testament "Story" and its Sources.

I. Introduction to the Historical Books.

The English arrangement of the Old Testament historical books includes Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. In the Hebrew arrangement, Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel and Kings constitute a group referred to as "The Former Prophets." Labeling them as prophetic rather than historical suggests these books were considered to be primarily theological in nature rather than annalistic. These books share a prophetic view of history where cause and effect are tied to the blessings and curses of the covenant. The remainder of the books, Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, form part of the section of the Hebrew canon called "The Writings."

II. Historical Overview of Old Testament Times.

History may be defined as the interpreted record of the socially significant human past, based on organized data collected by the scientific method from archaeological, literary, or living sources. God as an actor in history will preclude the idea of history happening within a closed system. Of course, one must keep in mind that any historical record will include some events and exclude others, usually on the basis of availability of data and the special interests and concerns of the historian.

This selectivity is eminently discernible in the Old Testament account of Israel's history. The primary thrust of the Old Testament record is theological in nature. Those facts relevant to the grand themes of the divine purpose (for example, redemption) were retained while other possibilities were excluded. The Old Testament is not a history in the chronicling, political sense of the term, but a descriptive account of God's work in human affairs.

When reading the Old Testament historical books it is important to get the sweep of things, the big story. This is a remarkable story, an immensely moving passage through time, about 2,000 years of it, ending nearly 2,000 years ago. It is important for students of the Bible to have an understanding of the overarching structure of ancient Israel's history. The major segments of that history include: the patriarchal wanderings; the Egyptian sojourn and Exodus; the settlement of Canaan; the institution and development of the monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon; the division of the kingdom; the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians; the destruction of Solomon's temple and the southern kingdom by the Babylonians; exile in Babylonia and Egypt; return to the land; and the rebuilding of the temple.

A. Patriarchal Age to Exodus (2000-1200 B.C.).

The Middle Bronze Age (2000 - 1600 B.C.) of Canaan that Abraham entered into was dominated by scattered city-states. In Syria there were power centers at Yam-had, Qatna, Alakh, and Mari, and the coastal centers of Ugarit and Byblos seemed to have been already thriving. In Palestine

only Hazor is mentioned in prominence. As the period progressed there was more and more contact with Egypt, and extensive caravan travel arose between Egypt and Palestine.

The Hebrews voluntarily entered Egypt under Joseph, but subsequently were reduced to slavery. Suffering in Egypt, the Israelites cried to Yahweh for deliverance, which came in the person of Moses. After a series of plagues that God sent upon the land of Egypt, Moses led the people across the Red Sea into the Sinai Peninsula. The most important event of the Hebrews' forty years in the wilderness was the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. There, Moses received the Decalogue, and the tabernacle was constructed according to instructions received through divine revelation.

B. Settlement in Canaan (1200 - 1000 B.C.).

Victories in the Transjordan formed a prelude to victories in the Promised Land itself. After crossing the Jordan River, Joshua set up his base camp at Gilgal. His military strategy was designed to divide the Canaanite forces. Victories at Jericho and Ai in central Palestine divided the inhabitants of the land and provided a wedge from which the Israelites gained effective control. Although the land was not wholly occupied by the Israelites during Joshua's lifetime, it was distributed among the twelve tribes on both sides of the Jordan River. The Levites, whose concern was public worship, were not given a tribal inheritance, but were assigned forty-eight cities with the respective pasture lands.

The Israelite tribes formed a loose confederation during the period of the judges. The tribes settled in their respective territories and had to defend themselves against distant marauding bands and the local Canaanites who had not been dispossessed during the time of Joshua. During the twelfth century B.C. a migration of Philistines from Crete and the Aegean region took place. They settled along the coastal regions of southern Palestine and became the greatest threat to Israelite independence. The lack of strong central government was keenly felt during the time of the judges.

C. United Kingdom (1000 - 931 B.C.).

The books of Samuel record the beginnings of Israel's golden age, the one period of history during which Israel became a world power; however, Samuel was disheartened when the people asked for a king. It seemed to be a rejection of the theocracy, and of Samuel himself. Samuel was directed by Yahweh to anoint Saul, a Benjamite, as the first king of Israel. Saul was successful in maintaining the equilibrium with the Philistines throughout most of his reign, but after the battle of Mount Gilboa (in which Saul was killed) the Philistines occupied most of the central portion of Canaan.

When David came to the throne, one of his first tasks was to regain control of the Israelite territory. This was accomplished from his newly conquered, fortified base in Jerusalem. As a result of David's military successes, his son Solomon inherited an empire that stretched from the Euphrates in the north to Egypt in the south. Though Solomon's wisdom was widely recognized and the prosperity of his realm unparalleled, the empire decayed under his guardianship and was on the verge of collapse when his son Rehoboam took the throne.

D. Divided Kingdom (931 - 586 B.C.).

Rehoboam refused to come to grips with the economic chaos of the nation. Jeroboam, a former officer under Solomon, returned from exile in Egypt to lead a revolt that resulted in the establishment of an independent northern kingdom. This included the larger portion of Palestine proper, as over against the rival kingdom of Judah. The boundary between Israel and Judah ran south of Jericho, Bethel, and Joppa.

The three kingdoms that developed from the breakup of Solomon's kingdom in western Palestine, Aram (Syria), Israel, and Judah, strove for supremacy. Nearly concurrent with the rise of the Aramaeans came the resurgence of Assyrian imperialism. During the reign of Hoshea, Israel rebelled against Assyria. Shalmaneser's campaign to the west began a three-year siege of Samaria, the capital. Upon its fall, the survivors were deported, the city destroyed, and the northern kingdom of Israel was annexed entirely into the Assyrian Empire (722 B.C.).

Judah continued for almost a century and a half after the fall of Samaria; however, during much of that period it was a tributary to Assyria. Nabopolassar the Chaldean revolted against his Assyrian lords and established one of the greatest empires of antiquity. The last kings of Judah rebelled against his son Nebuchadnezzar, which precipitated an eighteen-month siege of Jerusalem. This ended with the destruction of the city and its temple and the deportation of the citizens to Babylon (587 B.C.). With the destruction of Jerusalem, Judah ceased to exist as a sovereign state.

E. Exile and Return (550 - 450 B.C.).

The Jews who were deported from Jerusalem were permitted to settle in their own communities in Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel prophesied to such a community located at Tel-abib on the river Chebar near Nippur. During the years of exile, Israel became a religious community unrelated to any political entity or cultic center. This caused changes in its thinking and in its political institutions that have continued to the present. Although some Jews would later return to Jerusalem, the majority continued to live at a distance from the Holy Land. Their ties were cultural and religious, but not political.

The history of Israel between the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of the first group of exiles following the decree of the Persian king, Cyrus the Great (538 B.C.), is largely unknown. The temple utensils were retrieved from Esagila, the temple of Babylon, and entrusted to a Jewish prince who had been appointed governor of Judah, Sheshbazzar. About 50,000 Jews returned to their homeland with the blessing and help of Cyrus. The leadership of the returned exiles passed to Zerubbabel and Jeshua (or Joshua) the priest. They built the altar of burnt offerings and began the offering of daily morning and evening sacrifices on the site of the former temple (Ezr 3:2-3). The rebuilt temple was dedicated in 515 B.C.

III. Major Archives.

Archaeology has substantiated many historical events recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. When modern excavators came across the Assyrian libraries buried in Mesopotamia, they discovered

that the Assyrians were indebted to literary collectors and librarians from the Old Babylonian times. The Babylonian collectors had themselves gathered Sumerian as well as Babylonian tablets in a library. The famous Royal Library discovered at Nineveh we now know had a long history. Since the archives provide written records and literature, they have more to offer students of the Bible than any other kind of archaeological find.

More than a dozen major archives have been discovered in the ancient Near East, as well as a number of smaller archives, especially from the cities of Assyria and Babylonia. Most of these finds have been royal archives, but some have been personal archives such as those found at Nuzi. No Israelite archives have been unearthed as yet, though a few collections of ostraca have been found, notably at Samaria and Lachish.

A large portion of many of the archives was made up of economic texts, comprising mostly the documentation of various business transactions (for example, receipts). While these at times can contribute to biblical studies, much more significance is attached to other classes of literature. Mythological texts, treaties, wisdom literature, epics, historiographical documents, and even occasional references to prophecy have all come to light. Religious texts such as omens, incantations, hymns, and prayers have often been included among the tablets and provide a background against which the faith of Israel can be studied.

A. Ebla (Tell Mardikh).

Tell Mardikh is an exceptionally large mound, covering 140 acres and rising some fifty feet above the surrounding area. It is situated in northern Syria on a plateau halfway between the modern cities of Hama and Aleppo. Ebla was the capital of a great Canaanite empire that flourished during the third and second millennia B.C. Under the great king Ibrum, the kingdom of Ebla controlled all the territory between Egypt and the Persian Gulf, including Palestine and Syria, Sumer and Akkad.

In 1964 scholars at the University of Rome decided to carry out an archaeological excavation in Syria, at Tell Mardikh. After many years of less than spectacular results, 42 tablets of the Ebla archive were discovered in 1974. In 1975, another 15,000 or so tablets were unearthed, and the 1976 season produced an additional 5,000. The tablets were in various sizes and shapes and date back to the third millennium B.C.

The tablets fall into five categories: economic-administrative texts, including rations for palace personnel, offerings for temples and deities, lists of tributes paid to Ebla, etc.; (2) lexical texts, including school exercises, lists of animals, fishes, birds, geographic places, rolls of professions and personal names; (3) historical and juridical texts; (4) literary texts, including mythological stories, hymns to deities, incantations, and collections of proverbs; and (5) syllabaries, texts designed for learning Sumerian, for example, grammatical texts with verb paradigms in Sumerian and Eblaite.

B. Mari (Tell Hariri).

Mari was an important political center in northern Mesopotamia in the third and early second millennia B.C. The ancient city has now been identified with Tell Hariri, which is located some fifteen miles north of the Iraqi border and less than two miles west of the Euphrates River. This position permitted Mari to benefit from the intersection of the caravan routes that led from southern Mesopotamia to the Upper Euphrates and the route that led westward to the Mediterranean coast.

The outstanding architectural discovery of this period was the royal palace of Zimri-Lim, a contemporary of Hammurabi, king of Babylon. The palace covered an area of eight acres. A part of the palace was set aside for administrative offices, and the archives of this complex have yielded some 25,000 cuneiform tablets. These include economic, legal, and diplomatic texts. Several of the Mari texts reveal striking similarities to biblical prophetic texts. A god (especially Dagon) reveals himself spontaneously to a diviner-prophet, and, speaking in the imperative, sends the diviner with a message to the king.

C. Nuzi (Tell Yorghan Tepe).

In 1925, Edward Chiera of the Oriental Institute began excavations at Tell Yorghan Tepe, a few miles southwest of Kirkuk in Iraq and recovered approximately 1,000 cuneiform tablets from the ruins of what proved to be a wealthy businessman's home. The tablets recorded the business affairs of the family during the fifteenth century B.C. Included on the tablets was the name of the town, Nuzi.

The Nuzi documents were written in Akkadian but with a generous sprinkling of Hurrian words, so that the texts have become a valuable resource for reconstructing the language of the Hurrians. They are of particular interest to students of the Old Testament because they record social customs that are very similar to those recorded in the Bible in connection with the patriarchs; significantly, these tablets come from the same general area of Mesopotamia as the family of Abraham.

D. Amarna (Tell el-Amarna).

Illumination of the social and political situation in the land of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age, including the activities of the Habiru, has come from Tel el-Amarna in Egypt. The Amarna era in Egyptian history (ca. 1375-1350) is connected with Amenhotep IV, the "heretic pharaoh," who introduced new religious ideas in Egypt. He changed his name to Akhenaten, which encouraged the sole worship of the Aten and actively discouraged the worship of the other gods of Egypt.

The cuneiform tablets found there constituted a part of the diplomatic correspondence between the Amarna pharaohs and the rulers of the major power centers of Asia, the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Mitannians, the Kassites, the Cypriotes, and the kings who ruled the city-states of Syro-Palestine. Valuable information on the nature of the Canaanite language in the Amarna period has also been gleaned from the tablets.

The numerous references to the activities of the Habiru as a disruptive social element in Canaan has stirred much scholarly debate. The name varies in form from Sa-Gaz in the Sumerian

language to Habiru (more correctly Hapiru or Apiru) in Akkadian. References to the class of people designated by the term have been found in texts ranging back into the Early Bronze Age, from such diverse sites as Mari, Haran, Hattusas, Ugarit, Alalakh, and Amarna. Although some have tried to equate these peoples with the Hebrews, there is ample evidence to question the proposed equation of Hapiru = Hebrew.

E. Ugarit (Tell Ras Shamrah).

Ugarit was an ancient city-state on the Mediterranean Sea north of modern Latakia. Excavations of the site of Ras Shamrah, which have brought to light a city on the Syrian coast from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C., are of great importance for biblical studies. The importance lies in the retrieval of texts in the local script and language, which has revolutionized both the linguistic knowledge of Northwest Semitic in its most ancient stage (and consequently Hebrew), and the knowledge of the terminology, style, and content of Canaanite literature of mythological and religious nature.

The Ugaritic texts testify to a number of social conventions that were also found in ancient Israel, including rituals of death and mourning, slavery for debt, and the practice of blood revenge. Of even greater interest are the legends and myths of Ugarit. There are two legendary epics about the ancient kings, Keret and Danel, and mythological texts about the gods of Ugarit, Baal and Anath; El, the patriarch of the gods; Athtart; Mot, the god of sterility and death; and others. The myths and legends of Ugarit permit us to glimpse the conceptions of the supernatural that infused Canaanite life and thought and to observe their cultic rites and practices.

F. Nineveh (Ashurbanipal's Library).

In the spring of 1850, Austen Henry Layard and his assistant, Hormuzd Rassam, made a significant find at Nineveh, thousands of clay tablets representing the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. The famous library was collected by Ashurbanipal "in order that he might have that which to read." He had been educated in both Akkadian and Sumerian.

The contents of the library may be divided into two main categories: the royal archives, and literary works in general. The royal archives contained letters written by the king and others written to the king by sovereigns, princes, and state functionaries on all sorts of matters. Also found were contracts made with and by the royal house and economic texts dealing with every phase of palace life. The literary texts may be divided as follows: (1) philological, syllabaries, lexicons, and grammars of Assyro-Babylonian and Sumerian; (2) juridical, legal texts dealing with social practices and points of law concerning familial relationships, ownership of property, contractual agreements, etc.; (3) historical, annals of the kings; and (4) religious, including myths of Creation, the Flood, hymns, prayers, lamentations, and wisdom motifs.

IV. Monuments and Inscriptions.

In addition to archival material, ancient monuments and inscriptions have contributed to our knowledge of the history of Israel. Some of the monuments and inscriptions unearthed by archaeologists name kings of Israel or Judah. Others refer to events that are known from the

pages of the Old Testament. The following examples are among the most significant artifacts of this kind.

A. Mesha Inscription (Moabite Stone).

A stele of black basalt found at modern Dhiban (Old Testament Dibon) in the Transjordan, contained an inscription of about thirty-four lines commemorating various military and building activities of Mesha king of Moab in the ninth century B.C. This inscription is the primary evidence for the Moabite language, a Canaanite dialect in the group of Northwest Semitic languages. It is closely related to Hebrew in grammar and vocabulary but has affinities with Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic.

When King Mesha of Moab came to the end of his reign, he had a monument inscribed recounting all his accomplishments. Called the Moabite Stone, the inscription includes a report of how Moab had come under the domination of Israel during the reign of Omri, but had regained its independence and recaptured some territory from Israel during the reign of a later king. It provides the only extrabiblical reference to the concept of placing things under the ban (Hebrew *herem*) as Joshua did at Jericho (Jos 6:17-19). The *herem* was a strongly religious activity, involving a vow or promise to give the spoils of war to the deity who had commanded the attack and insured victory. In addition, it also contains the oldest extant extrabiblical occurrence of Yahweh as the name of the God of Israel.

The inscription is of primary importance as extrabiblical testimony to the relationship between Israel and Moab in the ninth century. It is a valuable supplement to the account of Mesha's revolt against Israel in 2 Kings 3:4-27. He attributes his success to the god Chemosh, who was regarded as the source of victory or defeat. Mesha also described his extensive construction of new towns and rebuilding of others previously destroyed. He apparently used Israelite captives in these endeavors.

B. Stele of Shalmaneser III.

Shalmaneser III (who reigned from 858-824 B.C.), son of Ashurnasirpal II (884-859), grandson of Tukulti-Ninurta II (889-884), was one of the founders of the Assyrian Empire. He was faced with opposition on the north, west, and south fronts, and finally, in his closing years, with civil insurrection. He left detailed records, so that it is possible to reconstruct much of his reign. Inscriptions speak of Shalmaneser's western campaigns against coalitions that included kings Ahab and Jehu of Israel.

The first direct contact between Assyria, the major power of Mesopotamia in the Iron Age II period, and Israel occurred in the time of King Ahab but is not mentioned in the Bible. The inscriptions of Shalmaneser III record the battle of Qarqar on the Orontes River in 853. Among the confederacy that opposed Shalmaneser's army was King Ahab, who was one of the leaders of the opposition. The Black Obelisk discovered at Nimrud, which preserves the accounts of Shalmaneser's campaigns from his eighteenth to thirty-first years pictures Jehu, or more likely, his representative, bowing before him with the tribute signifying submission to Assyrian

suzerainty. This occurred in 841, Jehu's first year on the throne, after the obliteration of the line of Ahab.

C. Sennacherib's Prism (Taylor Prism).

Sennacherib, son of Sargon II and father of Esarhaddon, was king of Assyria and Babylonia from 705-681 B.C., and Layard's excavations in 1849-50 revealed the palace of Sennacherib and the famous Taylor Prism, which records the annals of Sennacherib, including his siege of Hezekiah's Jerusalem. Sennacherib details his success against 46 cities of Judah and his deportation of more than 200,000 Israelites. He also boasts of imprisoning Hezekiah in Jerusalem by subjecting the city to siege, "As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to the yoke . . . Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage."

The prism gives no hint of Sennacherib's suffering a defeat and does not record the outcome of the siege on Jerusalem, but it does note how he received tribute from Hezekiah. Hezekiah "did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, antimony, large cuts of red stone, couches (inlaid) with ivory, etc." Thus the inscription confirms the military details as presented in the Bible (2Ki 18-19; 2Ch 32; Isa 36-37), but fails to provide any substantiation of the role ascribed to the Lord or the victory claimed in Scripture. Likewise, it says nothing to contradict the version of the events recorded in Scripture.

D. The Cyrus Cylinder.

Biblical connections with Persia are limited to the exilic and postexilic periods. The Iranian plateau knew a long history of fragmentation before the establishment of the Persian Empire in the sixth century B.C. By 550 B.C. the Median ruler, Astyages, was defeated by the Persian leader, Cyrus the Great. From this Medo-Persian base, Cyrus went on to establish the Persian Empire. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., and consequently the Jews in exile in Babylon came under Persian control.

Cyrus instituted a new approach to foreign policy. This policy was built on the philosophy that offering increased autonomy to subject peoples would increase loyalty to the empire, not undermine it. The Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylinder containing the royal decree granting various peoples permission to return, does not mention Judah specifically, but Scripture reports that Judah enjoyed such a benevolence (2Ch 36; Ezr 1). Part of the inscription reads, "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me [to him]; to Marduk, my lord, they may say this: 'Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son.'"