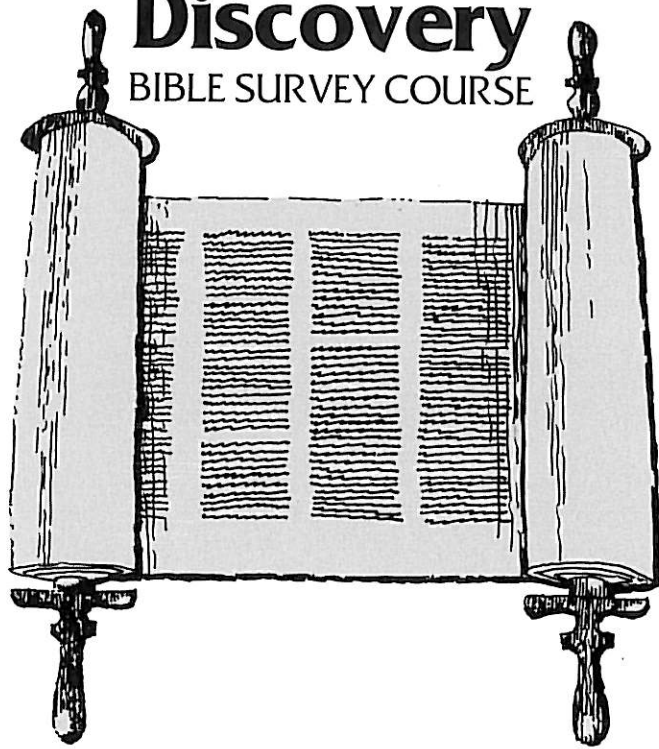


MENNONITE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES
220.07 Sh44d Bk.1 MLAMAIN
Shelly, Maynard/Discover the covenant pe



Discovery

BIBLE SURVEY COURSE



Book 1

Discover the Covenant People

Maynard Shelly

M
220.07
Sh44d
Bk. 1

Book 1

Discover the Covenant People

Discovery
BIBLE SURVEY COURSE

Maynard Shelly



M
220.07
sh44d
Bk.1

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture is taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1946, 1952, © 1971, 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and used by permission.

Library of Congress Number 84-81986
International Standard Book Number 0-87303-096-6
Printed in the United States of America
Copyright © 1984 by Faith and Life Press, Newton, Kansas 67114



This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in whole or in part, in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of Faith and Life Press.

Design by John Hiebert
Printing by Mennonite Press, Inc.

27465

Preface	iv
Introduction	v
How to Use This Series	ix
Part I Yesterday's People Give Us a Treasure for Today	
Chapter 1. Hands on the Bible	2
Chapter 2. Lands Around the Bible	10
Chapter 3. Eyes of Faith to See the World	18
Part II Journey of Faith Across the Fertile Crescent	
Chapter 4. The Founding Families and Joseph	28
Chapter 5. The Shape of the Promised Land	35
Part III The People Meet the God Who Acts	
Chapter 6. The Founding Events	44
Chapter 7. The Covenant for a People Under God	50
Chapter 8. Broken Pots and Clay Tablets	57
Suggested Resources	65
Time Line of the Bible	66

Table of Contents



Preface

iv

Development of *Discovery* has been for me a labor covering most of two years. Finding resources and putting words on paper took far longer than either the sponsoring committee or I ever anticipated. Having written some Sunday school study materials during the last ten years, I assumed that the necessary data for some thirty or more chapters could be gathered and turned into readable form during the summer months of 1982 plus a few more weeks here and there. After only a few weeks, I found that each chapter seemed to require as much research and attention as an entire unit of church school lessons. So, winter and spring gave way to another summer and I had yet to fix my grasp on most of the material for the New Testament section. And after the completion of that feeble first draft came, along with the signs of another winter, the toil of revising and rewriting under the guidance of an untiring editor and a panel of fearless consultants.

I have appreciated the support of the committee who planned this endeavor: Herta Funk; Dorothea Janzen; Elizabeth Yoder, editor for this series; and Perry Yoder, who also served as a consultant on the development of the manuscript. Other consultants included Philip Bender and Gerald Gerbrandt. All these persons aided me immensely in bringing order and integrity to the text. Those weaknesses that remain can only be reckoned as a failure on my part to make better use of their counsel. I must also express appreciation to Javan Shelly, my son, who encouraged me to take on the services of a word processor thereby greatly multiplying the creative time that I could give to making these 150,000 words more readable. Griselda Shelly contributed the largest gift, for her work sustained our household and gave me liberty to pursue this task.

I am most grateful to have been chosen to work on this project. I know that I have been privileged to have been able to indulge my love of the Bible by learning more about its riches and being able to take time to draw new strength from the women and men through whom God bequeathed this revelation to us. I share with the Commission on Education of the General Conference Mennonite Church and its staff the vision to extend and deepen our experience as a church in the study of the Bible. As the product of our labor comes into your hands, I am as keenly aware of its limits as I am happy with its strengths.

Its basic strength is in the resolve that it represents on the part of our community of believers to be open to the message of God's Word and to respond to it. We have been captured by the Christ-event, God becoming flesh and entering into our history. To study the history of revelation and find God at work in our world and in our lives is to be about the work of God.

We give these books to you to carry on and extend the work here begun. Your learning and your response will enrich all of us.

Maynard Shelly

Open the Bible, and you find words. Taking meaning from these words and the sentences that they form, we've come to a notion of what the Bible has to tell us. An understanding of Scripture based on a reading of its words has served us well. Yet we are sometimes puzzled. Some words conceal when we want them to reveal.

We need not read far into the Bible before we sense that behind its words are people—men and women with, we suppose, feelings and fears much like ours. Yet they lived two to three thousand years ago. After such a long time, do we really share their view of the world? Can we brush aside the mists of the centuries that have passed and reach out to the people behind the words?

Can we flesh out the words of the Bible with the women and men who encountered the God of Scripture? To meet those people in their world brings the Bible right into experiences within our own lives.

So much to learn about the Bible people

Discoveries about the people of the Bible have exploded in recent years and decades. The fruits of these explorations have filtered down to us ever so slowly and in piecemeal form. Snatches of these studies have been cloaked in controversy and have been confounded by arguments about meaning and value. Too often, well-meaning leaders of the church have decided that people should be protected from knowledge which might be unsettling. Yet, for the most part, such information enlightens and enriches.

To the four books in this *Discovery* series, we have tried to bring the most important results of the revival of Bible research in our day. We want to share those findings that over the years are commonly agreed to be reliable without entering into all the technical details. Much of this material is still under study and future research may change or improve the insights about the people of the Bible and the ways in which the Bible came to be. Only as we enter into that ongoing journey, can we be part of that continuing search for the people of the Bible and their understanding of the God who met them on their pilgrimage.

What *Discovery* is not

This series of books is not a Bible study nor a study of the books of the Bible. Neither is it a commentary on the Bible to interpret its meaning and teaching. Here, we intend only to give you the people of the Bible and a piece of the world in which they lived. Having met them, you can enter into your own study of the Bible as you begin with the meaning that these writings first had for these Bible people.

We have not handled matters of doctrine or theology, not because we feel these have little value, but because we regard them as so important that all who come to discuss them should first know the witness of the Bible itself. As we broaden the base of our Bible knowledge, we are better able to understand what the Bible teaches and how to apply those doctrines to our day.

Yahweh in the Bible text

We have made one change in the text used for quotations from the Bible (RSV). From earliest times, the Israelite name for God was Yahweh. Yet, when the words of Scripture were fixed on paper, a time had come in the life of Israel when the name of God was no longer spoken,

Introduction

the syllables being regarded as too holy to be sounded on human lips. It was not even written, being recorded only in the form of a code which is translated and written in our traditional versions as LORD.

Knowing now the earlier form of the name of God in the life of Israel, we have chosen to use that title to recall the feeling for the power of the holy name. Yet we also want to remember the link between Yahweh and LORD, for when we come to the people of the New Testament, and we find them speaking of Jesus as Lord, we feel something more of their witness and conviction.

Themes that carry meaning

As you walk with the people of the Book, you will discover words and ideas important to them. Here are several that you will find.

Covenant. Abraham, Moses, David, and their people had a conviction of a special relationship with God, a feeling of being chosen. The covenant was their link to God. Much of their journey included a search for the meaning of this special bond. Whom did it include? What did it mean to be included? Was anyone left out? Through the covenant, they came to learn about God. And as they experienced God in their own lives, they began to see covenant in a new light.

Kingdom. King and kingdom sparked debate: should the people of God have a king or not? The question wasn't answered even after the people took a king and the king took them. Wasn't God their king? Was the kingdom the same as the covenant? And when the kingdom of God's people fell before a pagan empire, could they hope for a kingdom restored? When we meet the people of the New Testament, we find them still working with the meaning of kingdom.

Grace and salvation. The people of the New Testament moved on to talk about grace and salvation, yet they had not left covenant and kingdom behind. They only added new dimension to the former questions of belonging and response. They had found new ways of knowing God and understanding the plan of God.

Jerusalem. The convictions of the Bible people had important links with history, the most outstanding of which were related to Jerusalem. The two disasters that befell the holy city—the first fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the second in A.D. 70—bracket a most important era. Each fall of Jerusalem left its stamp on the soul of the people. The first gets much mention in their writings. The second receives no direct reporting at all, but its shadow hovers over much of the New Testament.

We have entered into their lives when we wrestle with them about these watershed events which shaped so much of what they came to affirm about God and the way in which they responded to their God.

Revelation and history

In the Bible, we find a history, albeit, a special kind of history. In one sense, it is God's history, but it is also our history. That's what makes the Bible so special. It belongs both to God and to us. The Bible is the history of God's revelation—a revelation through history.

God entered into history, making it the arena of revelation: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14); " 'his name shall be called Emmanuel' (which means, God with us)" (Matt. 1:23).

The faith that Jesus Christ is Lord of Scripture has special application not just when we come to study the teachings of the Bible. That faith also has a special meaning for revelation. The Christ-event confirms that history is God's arena and God's way of revealing. Through Jesus, God entered into the life of our world as Jesus "himself likewise partook of the same nature" (Heb. 2:14) and became a part of our life.

In the incarnation of Jesus, God shared our flesh and our history. If within the humanity of Jesus lies a profound understanding of God's revelation, the divine use of history has an equally important application for the way we study the Bible.

Since the Bible is history, we can come to it using the methods that we have learned for understanding our world. This makes this book different from many other surveys of the Bible which have seen history as less important.

The historical method opens up the Bible. It brings meaning to the words of the Bible by introducing us first of all to the people behind the words and the world in which they lived. This approach to the Bible is both simple and profound. It is simple because each living person is a historian and has a sense of his or her own history. Such a study is also profound because through it, revelation overtakes us. Within the sum of words, people, and events, we find God at work. Yesterday's people of faith called this revelation as do all believers today.

Discovery with inspiration and authority

The journey we undertake here promises many rewards. We will make new friends from an ancient time because we will have traveled with them. Our lives will be broadened by sympathy for their witness and their loyalty and by our own sharing in the rigors of their test of faith.

The inspiration and authority of Scripture will have new meaning for us for we will find it more than a proposition about the meaning of words, but something made real by the living witness of people who received a revelation from God and carried it faithfully from generation to generation. The power of this witness will be multiplied many times over as we discover how wonderfully God has worked.

This study will require dedication and discipline from individuals and groups. The emphasis here is on learning. The mastery of facts requires careful reading and study, but the effort invested is small compared to the rewards.

As aids for learning, three features are included with each chapter: Journal, Inventory, and Discovery.

JOURNAL—For individual study at home

The journey begins with the reading of the portion of Scripture assigned in Journal. After that, follow the directions for making entries into a notebook. Putting your observations into words and writing them down is the first step in getting a firm grip on facts. What you write will stay with you many times longer than what you have only read and left unwritten. A notebook will help you keep your work together in one place for quick reference and encourage you to stick to the job.

In your readings, we want you to sample each type of literature and gain experience in making your own observations of the words read. At the same time, you will begin to make connections between the Bible people and the world in which they lived. Before long you will have a diary (or journal) of your journey into the world of the people of the Bible.

After your work with your Journal, you will be ready to read the chapter. You will find places where your observations will be confirmed. You may also come upon material that may differ from what you have written. Note these in your Journal. You may wish to report these items to your Discovery group meeting for testing and perhaps for further research and study.

How to Use This Series

INVENTORY—Measuring your factual knowledge

With each chapter, we have included Inventory, a review of some of the important items given in the chapter. This self-test will help you to hold onto facts both old and new, and to store them in a ready place in your mind.

Make Inventory a part of your Journal. The answers to these questions are within the text of the chapter itself. If you find you have overlooked a particular item, a quick review of the chapter should turn up the needed data.

DISCOVERY—Sharing and learning from others

As writing helps us to learn, telling someone else about what we have found makes that discovery a nearly permanent part of our lives. Those who have studied the chapter and recorded their findings will profit from meeting together with others who have done the same. The purpose of the meeting will not be to hear a lecture on the material covered but to review what each person has learned in his or her individual study of the chapter.

The leader of this session can be a fellow learner and does not need to be one who has mastered all the material. In this class of learners, the members will examine each other on what they have studied and learn from each other. Some groups may want to rotate leadership of the Discovery meetings among some or all of the members of the group.

Start each meeting by collecting each person's leading insight gained from the study of the chapter. Take time to discuss this list, which you may wish to post on a chalkboard or a large sheet of paper.

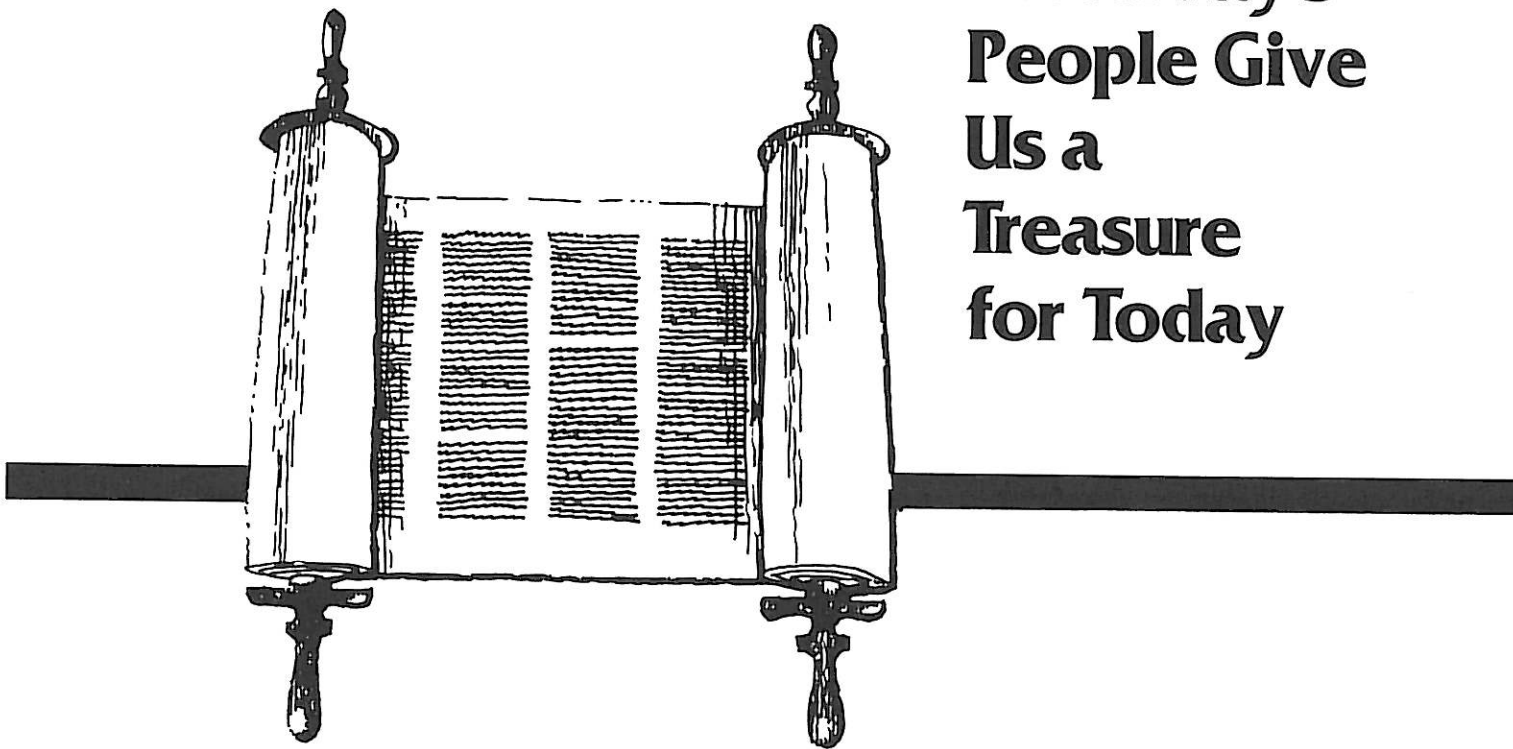
Then, list each person's chief unanswered question arising out of the study of the chapter. Help each other find answers to these questions. If no answers seem available, check the resource readings or other materials in your church or public library.

Then, discuss the questions and issues suggested in Discovery. Do not feel that you need to cover one chapter in each meeting. You may find it more profitable to spend two sessions on a particular chapter rather than to rush through the book.

Remember that the aim of this study is to learn about the Bible people and the world in which they lived. You will be tempted sometimes to discuss matters of interpretation and application of various biblical teachings. These are important and deserve treatment. But we are better able to deal with these issues once we have broader background in the experiences of the people who first received the revelations recorded in Scripture. Thus, there is value in keeping to the purpose of this particular series of studies.

PART I

**Yesterday's
People Give
Us a
Treasure
for Today**



CHAPTER 1

Hands on the Bible

2

Gist

Before the Bible, the spoken word of God held first place in the esteem of the People of Faith. Then, the authority of the speaking prophets passed over to the written prophetic word when a king and his people obeyed the words written in a book. Later, the apostles passed the authority of the spoken words of Jesus on to the written words of Jesus and the believers testified that those words carried inspiration and authority.

Remember your first copy of the Bible—the first you could call your own. Most likely, you received it as a gift. You knew you had been given something special. Between its two covers were sacred words—words different from all others. They came to you with God's authority.

Knowing that, you set out to read the Bible. You probably did not ask how the Bible came to be the Bible. All that history from the past seemed unimportant. What was most urgent, you were sure, was to learn what the Bible had to say to you at that moment in your life.

But the long journey traveled by these chapters and verses from the hands of apostles and poets and prophets holds part of the understanding of these vital words. Thousands of people in hundreds of communities from many centuries have poured their energy into these sentences.

Life-saving and life-giving words

When the People of Faith found a book or a collection of writings that spoke to them with the authority of God, they made it part of a list that came to be called *canon*. The word means measurement, for it comes from an ancient word that first meant reed. (In those early days, a reed was used as a measuring stick.) When a book became a part of the list of God-inspired books, that meant it measured up to the standard of being invested with God's authority.

Within the event of the canonizing of the books of the Bible is the miracle of the Bible itself—the way in which the conviction grew that particular words were indeed life-saving and life-giving words.

We go back to the Hebrew Bible, the parent of our Old Testament, to pick up the story. The Jewish Scriptures were divided into three parts: Law, Prophets, and Writings. The New Testament bears witness to this three-part division, when we hear the resurrected Christ say, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything

written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). (The Psalms, being the largest collection in the third group, represented the Writings.)

These three divisions represent three stages in the seven-century process of the canonization of Hebrew Scriptures.

Once only the spoken word had authority

Before the written words, the spoken word of God held first place in the esteem of the People of Faith. That word of God came through the prophets inspired by the spirit of God:

The lion has roared;/who will not fear?/The Lord GOD has spoken;/who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:8).

Prophecy received special attention and reverence whenever and wherever it appeared in the life of God's people. The Bible began with the conviction that God spoke through chosen prophets. The oral tradition repeated the words of these prophets, kept their words alive, and passed on their authority in their words.

During the time that Israel had prophets, they already had many written words that would later become part of the canon and part of the Bible. Poems and songs celebrated the acts of God in their past. Histories preserved the memory of outstanding leaders and special events. Even the words of the prophets, beginning with Jeremiah, were written down.

At that time, inspiration and authority were not found in the written words. Only the word of God spoken by the prophets carried the authority of God. But then something happened to change that view.

The book found in the temple

It was in 621 B.C., in Jerusalem, when the authority of the oral prophetic word passed over to the written prophetic word. In that year, a book was uncovered in the temple. This book that came to light during the reign of Josiah while the temple was being repaired, was the "book of the law" (2 Kings 22:8, 11; 23:24) and the "book of the covenant" (23:2, 21).

The reading of the book unsettled the king. As a result, he made sweeping changes in the life of the kingdom and called on the people to obey the commands of God. The specific reforms carried out by Josiah in abolishing idolatry and establishing Jerusalem as the sole sanctuary for the worship of God identify this book of law and covenant as the book we know as Deuteronomy. It is the only one of the five books of the Law that calls for an exclusive place of worship for the entire nation (Deut. 12:5-7; 10-12).

Though Deuteronomy is a book of Law, it is its link to prophecy that gained canonizing authority for it. The book consists of three sermons given by Moses. In Deuteronomy, Moses speaks in the manner of the later prophets. And Moses was regarded as the first of the prophets, for God spoke through him (Deut. 34:10-12; Num. 12:5-8; Hos. 12:13).

So, the king and the people responded to the prophetic words of the book as words that had authority. They made a covenant with God. They acted in response to the prophetic word that unless the people turned and pledged their obedience to God, the people would be destroyed (Amos 9:8). The book discovered in the temple carried the same warning (Deut. 28).

In making their covenant (2 Kings 23:1-3), Josiah and his people

Journal

Read 2 Kings 22:1—23:30. What is the nature of the book found in the temple? Note the two different terms used to describe the book. What did the king do after having read the book? What did the people do? Who was the person who certified the book's authority? What was the source of this person's authority?

Read Jeremiah 36. This chapter also involves a book, a prophet, and a king. But the results are different. Suggest some reasons for the differences.

Deuteronomy 4:1,2; 12:32. Compare these instructions with Revelation 22:18, 19. Do these restrictions apply to other books of the Bible? Why?

2 Timothy 3:16, 17. What are the Scriptures that the New Testament church first accepted as inspired Scriptures?

2 Peter 1:19-21. Restate the meaning of this passage in the light of the previous passages studied.

Seed

The Lord God has spoken;/who can but prophesy? . . . Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me. . . . In my heart as it were a burning fire/shut up in my bones . . . My heart became hot within me. . . . For I am full of words,/the spirit within me constrains me./Behold, my heart . . . is ready to burst./I must speak. . . . We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard. . . . And in the last days it shall be, God declares,/that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,/and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. . . . entrusted with the oracles of God (Amos 3:8; Deut. 18:15; Jer. 20:9; Ps. 39:3; Job 32:18-20; Acts 4:20; 2:17; Rom. 3:2).

took the first steps to bring this book into the canon. Their obedience showed that these written words had authority.

Closing the canon on the Law

A canonical claim—a warning not to add or subtract from the book—was written into Deuteronomy (4:2; 12:32). Yet, the book was also open to the words of prophets to come (18:15-18).

Other books of the Law were compiled and edited during the coming two centuries. This period of history saw the destruction by the Babylonians of the temple that had been repaired, the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, and their return from exile. Various writings associated with Moses were identified as inspired and added to the collection of the books of the Law.

But a time came when changes and additions ended. The canon for the Law was closed. It may have happened around 400 B.C. About this time, the Samaritans, the descendants of those Jews who remained in Israel after the fall of the northern kingdom, separated themselves from the main body of Judaism. On Mount Gerizim, they built their own temple and placed in it a copy of the Pentateuch (meaning “five scrolls”), which they have maintained unchanged until today. Since the Samaritan Pentateuch is almost identical to the present books of the Law in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, we know that the canon for the books of the Law was closed before the time of the Samaritan division.

Prophetic authority for prophetic books

The reception given to Deuteronomy made an impact on the books of history of the people of Israel—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books were written from the point of view of the message of Deuteronomy. This Deuteronomistic philosophy of history is given in Judges 2:1—3:6.

These early histories, called the *Former Prophets* in the Hebrew Bible, grew in popularity during the Exile when the people wanted to understand the meaning of the terrible things that had happened to them. Coming back after the Exile, they wanted to remember the Promised Land as it had been in better times.

The picture in Deuteronomy of Moses as a prophet created interest and acceptance of the more recent prophets from the eighth century B.C. on. The prophetic message of gloom and doom had been most unpopular when first proclaimed. But once its predictions had proved true—the nation had been destroyed as the prophets said it would be—the people knew that even these latter prophets had been vested with God’s authority.

The written words of the prophets were collected and remembrances of their deeds recorded. These books, known as the *Latter Prophets*, were revised and annotated to give evidence of future glory just as earlier historical books had been edited to point out the failures of the past.

By the year 200 B.C., the Prophets, both Former and Latter, had become part of the canon of Scripture. After that, no additions were made to these books. As the written word gained in authority, the spoken word of the prophets declined in power. The written word of God took the place of the spoken word of God, and so the need for living prophets

began to fade. Even before the canon closed on the prophetic books, the age of the prophets had come to an end.

Taking the measure of the Writings

Unlike the Law and the Prophets, the Writings give us several different kinds of literature. Various items were added to this third collection as they proved they had enduring interest and had stood the test of time. Psalms, Proverbs, and Job must have been recognized early as being inspired.

The five Festival Scrolls claimed special attention because each one was read at one of the annual festivals: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. (See Chapter 18.) Daniel, a book which had not been canonized with the Prophets, also appeared. And then there were later editions of history from a priestly point of view: Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.

The canon on the Writings was still open during the days of Jesus and even during the era of the early church. The scribes and rabbis resisted a number of books that others regarded as part of the canon such as Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. They objected to Esther because the name of God was not mentioned in its text.

It took the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to put an end to the various debates and close the canon on the Writings. The Jewish councils which were now dominated by the Pharisees were concerned to keep out of the canon those sectarian and Christian writings that were beginning to circulate during the first century A.D. So it was that in A.D. 90, at the Council of Jamnia, a city near the site of present-day Tel Aviv, the Jews closed the canon on the Writings, the third and last section of the Hebrew Bible.

The church and the Apocrypha—a special relationship

The Christians of the first century accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as their own. Thus, they also accepted the judgment of the Jews on the inspiration and authority of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. But they accepted even more.

While the Bible known to Jesus and his disciples and to the Palestinian church was the Hebrew Bible of Palestine with its Law, Prophets, and Writings, Paul and the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who soon became the majority group in the church used a Greek translation of the Scriptures called the *Septuagint*. The Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, made this translation during the second century B.C. at a time when Jews outside of Palestine were reading Hebrew less and using Greek more. The Septuagint reflected a more open attitude toward canonization. It included not only Law, Prophets, and Writings, but another group of books that came to be called the *Apocrypha*.

Not only did the editors of the Septuagint add these other books, but they also broke down the Hebrew Bible's strict classification of Law, Prophets, and Writings. Influenced by Greek patterns of organizing knowledge, they arranged the books by chronology and theme, putting, for example, Ruth before Samuel, and Chronicles after Kings. When the church took over the Septuagint, it kept this order, one that is still followed in most Christian Bibles.

The Hebrew Bible

Law (Torah)

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Prophets

Former: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings

Latter: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

Writings

Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles

Books of the Apocrypha

1 Esdras

2 Esdras

Tobit

Judith

Additions to Esther

Wisdom of Solomon

Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach

Baruch

Letter of Jeremiah

Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men

Susanna

Bel and the Dragon

Prayer of Manasseh

1 Maccabees

2 Maccabees

The Greek translators also scattered the Apocrypha throughout the Bible, and these books were a part of the Christian Scriptures until A.D. 1534. Martin Luther, in his translation of the Bible into German, separated the Apocrypha from the Old Testament, saying that "these are books which are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures, and yet are useful and good for reading." He kept the Apocrypha in the Bible but in a separate section between the Testaments.

The Apocrypha was a casualty of the Reformation controversy of the Protestants with the Roman Catholic church. Luther and the other reformers found the Apocrypha being used by their opponents to support justification by good works and the merits of the saints. They put an end to that argument by rejecting the Apocrypha as scriptural. In 1546 at the Council of Trent, the Catholic church came to the defense of the Apocrypha and kept it as part of their Old Testament.

Even so, the Apocrypha continued to appear in Protestant Bibles, even in the first editions of the King James Version beginning in 1611. In the early nineteenth century, the British and Foreign Bible Society decided to drop the Apocrypha from the Bibles which it distributed and this set the pattern for Protestant Bibles until our day.

However, with renewed interest in Bible study during recent decades stimulated in part by a near flood of new English translations of the Bible, the Apocrypha has once again begun to appear in Bibles published for Protestants.

The special relationship of the church with the Apocrypha saved these books from extinction during a time when the Jewish community gave its primary attention to the Hebrew Bible. When, in later centuries, the Jews looked for these writings, the church was able to share them as the Law, Prophets, and Writings had once been received from Judaism.

Apostles take up from the prophets

As the authority of the prophets once influenced the making of the Old Testament canon, so the apostles came to shape the canon of the New Testament. But for many years during the life of the early church, Christians did not feel the need for additional Scriptures. They had the Hebrew Bible which they regarded as the "oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2), and this filled their needs. Besides this, they had a strong oral tradition in the remembrances of the apostles of the teaching and ministry of Jesus. They regarded the words of Jesus repeated orally by the apostles as inspired.

In the beginning, the other words that later became the sacred words of the New Testament were seen only as ordinary words. The letters of Paul written to meet specific needs during the apostolic age were about the only written materials to survive from the early days of the church. But sometime after A.D. 70, and after the death of Paul, his letters were collected and circulated throughout the various congregations.

The Gospels were not written until toward the end of the first century and only after the ranks of the eyewitnesses to the ministry of Jesus began to thin. As there were fewer apostles, the demand for witnesses who could speak with authority about Jesus increased.

So it happened that not four Gospels, but many gospels were written and read by the churches. Out of the many that were produced,

four were eventually singled out as worthy of use: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Then came the Acts of the Apostles, the non-Pauline letters, Hebrews, and Revelation. By the second century, all these writings, as well as others, were in general use and were valued. A canon for the New Testament was in the making.

From oral authority to written

The period of testing for these various writings took about three centuries, although by the end of the second century A.D., the form of what would later be the New Testament had begun to appear. Yet, the canon was not finally closed for two hundred more years.

The authority of the words of Jesus in the oral tradition passed to the written words of Jesus through the hands of the apostles. The pattern of the Old Testament was being repeated whereby the authority of the spoken word of God in the mouths of the prophets passed on to the written words of the prophets.

Since the apostles became the guardians of the words of Jesus, it was gradually accepted that whatever was apostolic was canonical. Anything not linked to an apostle was not canonical. Thus, for many years, the right of the Book of Hebrews to belong in the list of sacred books was challenged since it was written anonymously and could not be identified with an apostle (though some claimed that it came from Paul).

Pushed by a heretic

Marcion, a second-century church leader, rejected the Hebrew Old Testament because it portrayed, he thought, a "strange" God so unlike Jesus. So, sometime after A.D. 150, he published his own Scriptures which included the letters of Paul and an edited version of Luke-Acts.

In response to Marcion and his unorthodox teaching, the church was pushed to prepare its own list of inspired books. In so doing, the church followed Marcion's pattern of linking together "gospel" and "apostle." But it needed to do so in a way that showed that Luke and Paul were not different from the other gospels and other apostles. Thus, they opened the way for the inclusion of other gospels and for writings with the authority of other apostles.

The testimony of three leading bishops and scholars of this period shows that the process of deciding which books were inspired and authoritative was going on in various communities in the church. Irenaeus, a native of Asia Minor, worked in the church in Rome and later became bishop of Lyons in what is now France. Clement was head of the great school of theological studies in Alexandria in Egypt. And Tertullian was a lawyer and church elder in Carthage in northern Africa. Each of them recorded in his writings the various books that were being used in his region. The books which they listed were much the same with only a few exceptions.

But the canon was still open. Books were being added and subtracted from time to time during the following years. Origen, who followed Clement as head of the Alexandrian school in A.D., 203, took another step. He traveled widely and, wherever he went, he asked which

Irenaeus's List

Four Gospels
Acts
12 Pauline letters (Philemon omitted)
3 Catholic letters (1 Peter, 1 & 2 John)
Revelation
Shepherd of Hermes

Clement's List

Four Gospels
Acts
14 Pauline letters (including Hebrews)
4 Catholic letters (1 Peter, 1 & 2 John, Jude)
Revelation
Apocalypse of Peter
Shepherd of Hermes
Preaching of Peter
Barnabas
1 Clement

Tertullian's List

Four Gospels
13 Pauline letters
Acts
Revelation
3 Catholic letters (1 John, 1 Peter, Jude)

Inventory

[The following assignment is part of your home study. Record your answers and responses in your journal.]

1. List the steps in canonizing of the Old Testament.
2. Do the same for the New Testament.
3. What was the measure (canon) for the authority of the books that became part of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Old Testament of the Christian Bible?
4. What was the measure used to decide whether a book had proper authority to become part of the New Testament?
5. Identify:
Babylon
Deuteronomy
Jamnia
Josiah
Pentateuch
Septuagint

books were being used. His list from the third century is the list of books we have today in our New Testament.

Words with inspiration and authority

Yet the possibility existed that the list might be changed. James and Jude were disputed. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century, mentioned 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John as "disputed writings which are nonetheless known to most." He himself had questions about Revelation.

Shortly after the time that Constantine recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, the emperor asked Eusebius to make fifty copies of the Scriptures on vellum and send them to him at the palace in Constantinople. None of these copies has survived, so we do not know which books Eusebius included in this first large edition of the New Testament. But it hastened the day when the canon would be closed.

In 367, Athanasius of Alexandria sent out an Easter letter to the churches in his charge. In this letter, he listed the "books that are canonized and handed down to us and believed to be divine." His list included the twenty-seven books of our present New Testament.

Toward the end of the fourth century, two important church councils met in North Africa. The first was at Hippo in 393 and the other at Carthage in 397. Augustine, the noted theologian, presided over both. At Carthage, a decree was issued that said that "apart from the canonical scriptures, nothing may be read in the Church under the name of divine scriptures." After listing the books of the Old Testament, they added: "Of the New Testament: of the gospels, four books; of the Acts of the Apostles, one book; epistles of Paul the apostle, thirteen; of the same, to the Hebrews, one; of Peter the apostle, two; of John, three; of James, one; of Jude, one; the Apocalypse of John, one book."

This set the limits of the canon for the New Testament. It was a decision widely supported. The believers in many different congregations had selected these books by their use in worship and study. They had tested these twenty-seven books in their daily lives and they thus testified that the words of the Bible carried inspiration and authority.

Discovery

[The following exercise is for a group activity for those who have studied this chapter and have written out their findings in a journal. The aim of the meeting is to reinforce learning and to support each other in a continuing study by clarifying facts and testing new ideas.]

1. Ask each person to share, one at a time, his or her most meaningful new insight or new understanding. List these on a chalkboard. When the list is complete, discuss those mentioned most often. Ask: Why was this discovery important? How has it changed or added to our understanding of what the Bible is?
2. Where are the unexplored frontiers in our knowledge of canonization? What other things would we like to know about this subject? Explore ways of finding more information.
3. The canonization of the Old Testament and the New Testament took a thousand years from the recognition of the authority of

Deuteronomy in 621 B.C. to the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397. Try to estimate the number of people who in small and larger ways had a share in this thousand year process. (Obviously, this is an impossible task, but in working at it, you will understand something of the miracle of the Bible becoming the Bible.)

4. Consider the gift of canonization as a gift to the world. Imagine what it would be like if each church in your community had different scriptures and some had no scriptures at all. And, then, imagine the new opportunity that all would have if each accepted the same scriptures.

Resources

Schroeder, David. "From Copy to Canon," Chapter 5 in *Learning to Know the Bible*. Newton: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale: Herald Press, 1966. Pages 48-60. A concise summary of the history of the making of the canon.

The following articles from the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* will supply you with additional information on canonization:

Beare, Frank W. "Canon of the New Testament," I, 520-32.

Freedman, David Noel. "Canon of the Old Testament," Supplement, 130-36.

Pfeiffer, Robert H. "Canon of the Old Testament," I, 498-520.

Sundberg, Albert C., Jr. "Canon of the New Testament," Supplement, 136-40.

CHAPTER 2

Lands Around the Bible

10

Gist

When Abraham and Sarah set out for Canaan, the world was already old. Many nations at both ends of their region had come and gone, most of them leaving a heritage rich in technology, science, and religion. Could a family taking root in a small nation add anything at all to this stream of grand achievements?

Travel through the Bible has to be on a three-lane highway. The one lane that leads through the Holy Land of Palestine is really part of a multitrack speedway with many, many crossovers and lots of interchanges.

To the left is the Egyptian superhighway. It's broad and elevated, with pyramids as some of its mighty milestones. Coming toward us from the right is Mesopotamia Avenue. Can you read those wedge-shaped symbols on its clay tablet road signs? Tribal caravans crowd this broad roadway in an almost endless stream to divide and merge and sometimes force each other off the road.

Crises are many on such a busy complex of thoroughfares. Crossovers and detours have plagued the small and bumpy Palestine Lane. Startling are the intersections, planned and accidental, that have bracketed this perilous middle way.

The stories about the lands around the Bible hold an important key for our understanding of the Bible's text. Once we've untangled the lines of traffic we're already deep into our study of the Scriptures.

Life appears near four rivers

To find the beginnings, we go back into the Stone Age, back to about the year 8000 B.C., to Jericho—or the site that was to become that city. Here, not far from the Jordan River appeared an encampment of round reed huts. Around their fires, these Jericho people worked with utensils made of black obsidian stone and vessels fashioned from Sinai turquoise.

Centuries later, villagers on the banks of another river far to the west began to fashion pots from clay. It was also here on the Nile in the settlement called *Fayum*, in prehistoric Egypt in the latter half of the fifth millennium B.C., that farming began in this valley. But they were not the world's first cultivators.

East of the Jordan flowed the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, rising in the Armenian Mountains within fifteen miles of each other and spreading

across the broad plain on their way to the Persian Gulf. This special valley came to be called Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers). Here in about 6000 B.C., people began to settle down in villages. They fashioned pottery on which they painted human and animal figures with great artistic skill. They tilled small plots, working with tools of stone and copper and practicing the art of farming that had developed in the hills north of the valley centuries earlier.

Temple gardens flourish in Sumer

While the first signs of human activity were in the highlands above the Mesopotamian valley, the first city-states appeared down near the mouths of the rivers. For more than a thousand years, they developed slowly. The names of these first builders have gone unrecorded.

We know more about the Sumerians who built the first large city in Mesopotamia, near where the two rivers meet and flow into the gulf. These people of Sumer pictured themselves on their inscriptions as a stocky, broad-headed people, their men clean shaven. But we do not know their race. Their language was unlike that of any other speech so far discovered.

They were the first people ever to put their words into writing. They wrote with a stylus, leaving wedge-shaped symbols in a soft clay tablet that was later baked and hardened. Their style of script is called *cuneiform*.

At the center of their city was the temple with gardens, fields, and storehouses located around it. All activity seemed to center on the temple with the people working for the god of the shrine. The priest ruled as the god's agent. The Sumerian culture was at its height from 2850 to 2360 B.C.

Sargon forges the first world empire

Sumer gradually faded and was overtaken by the people who became known by the name of their capital city built on the upper plain near the later site of Babylon: *Akkad*. These Akkadians were Semites who had lived side by side with the Sumerians for years. As their number grew, they adapted themselves to the Sumerian culture and gradually took control. They put their language into the cuneiform script developed by the Sumerians.

In the twenty-fourth century B.C., Sargon stepped forward to lead the Akkadians. He conquered all of the city-states of upper Mesopotamia and the surrounding region, took control of Syria, and extended Akkadian rule to the Mediterranean Sea and even up into Anatolia (present-day Turkey). His trade contacts reached as far afield as India. He put together the first empire the world had ever seen.

But the empire lasted only about a hundred years. Akkad fell before the invasion of the Gutti people who swept down from the Zagros Mountains to the northeast of Mesopotamia. Less civilized than the Akkadians and Sumerians, the Gutti had no appreciation for art and architecture, for culture and literature. They smashed everything of value they could grasp.

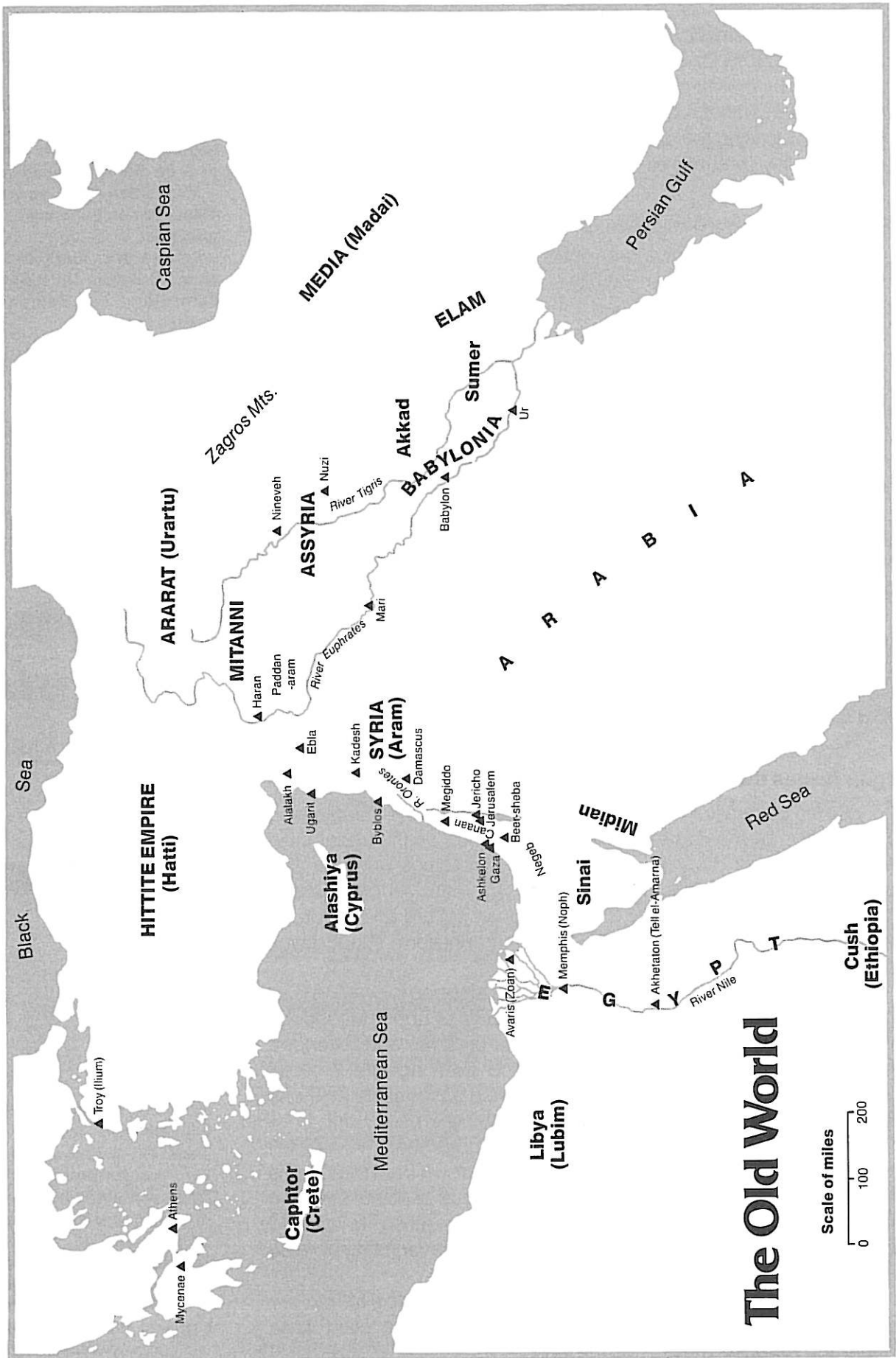
The growth of two thousand years of culture came to a temporary end. A dark age settled over the Upper Mesopotamian plain while Hurrians and Amorites moved into the land.

Journal

Make an outline map of the ancient world in your journal, a map that will include Egypt, Palestine, and the region up to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Trace or draw the map freehand.

Mark these rivers on your map: Jordan, Euphrates, Tigris, Nile.

Locate and mark these cities: Babylon, Ur, Byblos, Jerusalem, Memphis, Thebes, Jericho.



Pyramid portals to the next life

At the other end of the Fertile Crescent, that band of green fertile land that stretched in an arc from Mesopotamia through Palestine to the Nile, the people of Egypt were leaving their villages to form a new kind of society. They put to use some of the things they learned from the people of Sumer and Akkad. Important to them was the art of building with bricks, a skill pioneered by the people of the two rivers.

These early Egyptians borrowed from Sumer the cylinder seal used to impress names and engraved pictures onto clay documents. More importantly, they adapted the art of writing to their own language.

At first, the people of the Nile Valley grouped themselves into two clusters, one on the Upper Nile and the other on the Lower Nile. In the first written records from Egypt that have survived, we read that an Upper Nile family eventually succeeded in bringing both parts of Egypt under its authority. Menes, the leader of the First Dynasty which began about 3000 B.C., set up his capital at Memphis at the point where the two regions meet.

At about this time, the first monuments appear. Copper was being mined, and the first metal tools were fashioned. Tables, beds, and chairs were being used in homes. Civilization in Egypt was on its way.

More isolated than the open plains of Mesopotamia, the Nile Valley was sheltered from sudden invasion and infiltration. So, unlike Mesopotamia with its changing cast of rulers and nations followed often by new languages and cultures, Egypt's history went along in a steady course, moving from one period to another with fewer sharp changes.

The history of Egypt is recorded in a series of thirty dynasties. Each of these ruling families held power for an average of a century or so before losing control and giving way to a competing clan.

The two-part origin of the nation continued in the memory of the people, being enshrined in the symbols of the royal families. King Narmer of the First Dynasty appeared on the monuments of his era wearing the white crown of the South and the red crown of the North, his figure drawn larger than life to show him as the god-king, a being destined for eternal life.

This belief in the divinity of the royal ruler found expression in the Pyramid Age with the building of the pyramids which were fashioned to deliver the king and all his wealth safely to life in another world. The Stepped Pyramid of Djoser, erected in 2700 B.C., was the first large monument constructed entirely of hewn stone. It still stands at Memphis with a funeral temple at its base.

Even more remarkable are the Pyramids of Cheops, Chefren, and Mycerinus built in the twenty-sixth and twenty-fifth centuries B.C. The Great Pyramid of Cheops, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, stands 481 feet high on a base 755 feet square. The structure contains over two million blocks of hewn stone, each weighing over two tons and each cut to a margin of error close to zero.

Crossroads Palestine

Compared with Egypt and Mesopotamia, Palestine lagged behind in creativity and culture. Yet it benefited from the progress made in these lands east and west. Merchants from both sides came to sell their wares and traders appeared to bargain for the raw materials needed by expanding empires.

Seed

Babylon was a golden cup in Yahweh's hand, making all the earth drunken. . . . The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia . . . shall come over to you and be yours. . . . In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom Yahweh of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage" (Jer. 51:7; Isa. 45:14; 19:23-25).

Major Periods In Egypt's History

The Old Kingdom or Pyramid Age, Third to Sixth Dynasties, 2700-2200 B.C.

The Middle Kingdom, chiefly the Twelfth Dynasty, 2000 to 1800 B.C.

The New Kingdom or Empire, Eighteenth to Twentieth Dynasties, 1570 to 1090 B.C.

Egypt's Time Line

B.C.	
3000.	Upper and Lower Egypt united
2700.	Pyramid Age
1700.	Hyksos invasion
1580.	Hyksos driven out
1364.	Amarna period begins
1280.	Israelite Exodus
1188.	Philistines invade Egypt

Those early years in human history were known as the *Bronze Age* when the metal forged from copper and tin was used for tools, weapons, and utensils. The copper mines of Sinai in southern Palestine were actively worked from earliest times to supply Egypt. The early pharaohs sent soldiers to dig in the mines and hold off the nomads. But later rulers made treaties with the Bedouin sheikhs, inscribing their names in Egyptian hieroglyphs on monuments erected at the mines.

The changing styles of pottery found in Canaanite cities in Palestine give evidence of widespread trade. Most active in commerce was Byblos, a port city on the Phoenician coast north of what is now the modern city of Beirut. Its temple showed strong Egyptian influence. Byblos exported oil, spices, wine, and leather to Egypt, but most valued by that nearly treeless country on the Nile were the cedars and spruce of Lebanon, especially needed for shipbuilding.

Though the material culture of Palestine never equaled the wealth of cities on either the Nile or the Tigris-Euphrates, the Early Bronze Age was a time of progress. Population increased and city-states were built. Early records show that the following cities were flourishing in this early period: Jericho (rebuilt after long years of being abandoned), Megiddo, Beth-shan, Ai, Gezer, Lachish, and Jerusalem, all cities mentioned in the Bible.

Yet, these cities were in danger from both sides. About 2325 B.C., Egypt sent five military expeditions to crush the "sand-dwellers," as they called the people of southern Palestine. Later, they struck as far north as the Carmel range. Though Palestine was not a part of the Egyptian empire in those early days, both Palestine and Syria were really under Egypt's thumb.

Somewhere between the twenty-third and twentieth centuries B.C., a barbaric horde poured into Palestine from the north. City after city was destroyed. Once they had conquered the land, these fierce people chose not to rebuild the old cities but set up simple villages in and about the Jordan Valley.

These nomadic warrior tribesmen were the Amorites, a part of a larger group of Semite people pushing down on the Fertile Crescent at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. They eventually filtered into Egypt and moved into Mesopotamia. From the Amorite people came the Hebrews who would appear several centuries later.

According to the Bible, the Amorites were among the ethnic groups already in Palestine and Transjordan following the Exodus (Josh. 10:5; 24:15; 2 Sam. 21:2). In fact, the native population of Palestine was sometimes referred to simply as Amorite (Gen. 15:16; Deut. 1:7). They spoke a Semitic dialect from which both Hebrew and Aramean languages later developed.

Foreign chiefs called Hyksos

Even Egypt was not immune to the assault of Semitic foreigners. Shortly before 1700 B.C., as its ruling family grew weak and unable to defend its northeastern border, streams of Asiatics armed with weapons newer and more deadly than those held by the Egyptians broke through the frontier and set up encampments in the Nile delta. There they built their capital and called it *Avaris*.

The Egyptians called them the *Hyksos*, which scholars at one time translated as "shepherd kings," a name that seemed to be in keeping

Cultural Ages In Palestine

Early Bronze: 3000-2200 B.C.

Middle Bronze: 2200-1500 B.C.

Late Bronze: 1500-1200 B.C.

Iron: 1200-580 B.C.

with their supposed nomadic background. But a more correct rendering calls them "rulers of foreign countries" or "foreign chiefs." The first wave of Hyksos invaders were of Semitic stock and seem to have been Canaanite or Amorite people. They worshiped the Canaanite gods, chief of whom was Baal.

But they were later joined by invaders who were non-Semitic, who came from east of Mesopotamia, a race called *Hurrian*, of Indo-Aryan lineage. The Egyptians made no distinction between the two. To them, they were all foreigners and therefore Hyksos.

While the Hyksos held sway over Egypt, for a period of more than two centuries, they also dominated Palestine. Here, the first Hyksos had Semitic names that later gave way to Hurrian names. The Bible refers to them as Horites (Gen. 14:6), a group that may also have included the Hivites and the Jebusites (Exod. 3:8, 17).

Come the Hurrians with horse and chariot

The original home for the Hurrians seems to have been in the mountains of Armenia. They were first mentioned in the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia in the twenty-fourth century. They swept into the plain of the two rivers when the Guti destroyed the empire of Akkad.

In Upper Mesopotamia, in the sixteenth century B.C., they settled in a kingdom then called *Mitanni* which was ruled by a kindred Indo-Aryan people who came from the Indus Valley of India.

It was through the Hurrians that the chariot, drawn by horses whose original home may have been in southern Russia, was introduced into the warfare of the day. When the Hyksos came to Egypt, they were armed not only with horse and chariot, but also with the composite bow, heavier sword, and with body armor.

The Hyksos chiefs became the pharaohs of the Fifteenth Dynasty, a period of humiliation and disgrace for the native Egyptians. Some scholars have assumed that it was during this time that the ancestors of the Israelites came to Egypt because they had common ties with the Semites among the Hyksos.

But in the course of time, the Egyptians themselves got hold of the new weapons that the Hyksos had used to conquer the land. In 1580 B.C., they mounted a revolt against the Hyksos rulers, pushed them back into the Nile delta, and finally expelled them from Egypt. They pursued them into Palestine and after a three-year siege destroyed the Hyksos fortress at Sharuhen, on the southern border of Palestine.

With independence regained and its power renewed, Egypt took its turn at being a world empire, determined never again to be overrun by a foreign foe. Thus began the New Kingdom or Empire of Egypt, one of whose pharaohs, Thut-mose III (1490-1436 B.C.), devoted seventeen campaigns to Asia and pushed the borders of Egyptian influence as far north as Syria. He called himself the "smiter of the rulers of foreign countries" showing that he was trying to overcome the disgrace inflicted by the Hyksos.

A pharaoh flirts with monotheism

Egypt's power in Palestine continued to grow for several centuries. But it was in the fourteenth century that Egypt almost lost its hold on Palestine because of a religious crisis sparked by a young pharaoh. Amenophis IV (ca. 1364-1347) was a devoted worshiper of Aten (the

Palestine's Time Line

B.C.	
3000.	Early Bronze Age begins
2550.	Byblos trades with Egypt
2325.	Egypt attacks sand dwellers
2250.	Amorites level all cities
1800.	Abraham and Sarah in Palestine
1500.	Late Bronze Age begins
1240.	Israelite conquest

Mesopotamia's Time Line

B.C.

- 2850. Sumer empire founded

- 2360. Sargon extends Akkad

- 2180. Guti invasion

- 2060. Ur III Dynasty begins

- 1728. Hammurabi rules in Babylon

- 1531. Hittites sack Babylon

- 1200. Hittite empire falls

solar disc of the sun), whom he declared to be the only god. He even changed his own name to Akhenaten ("the splendor of Aten") and also built a new capital city named after his god.

The king's support for one god was stiffly resisted in Egypt which for more than a thousand years had given its devotion to a variety of divine beings. This age in Egyptian history is called the *Amarna period* because we read about the turmoil in the empire in letters found in excavations at Tell el-Amarna, the site of Amenophis's short-lived royal city. The Amarna letters contain pleas from the governors of the city-states who were trying to maintain Egyptian control in Palestine in the face of rising revolt from the native people. They were also made uneasy by the growing power of the Hittites to the north.

Egypt's shaky hold on its empire in Asia did not improve until the appearance of Sethos I in 1306 B.C. He mounted a military expedition that pushed Egyptian control to its farthest point by driving north through Palestine to Kadesh on the Orontes River in northernmost Syria. All this happened in Egypt less than one hundred years before Moses appeared proclaiming Yahweh as the only God of the Hebrews.

After Hammurabi, the Hittites

In Syria, Egypt ran into the Hittites. It took five years of hard fighting for Ramses II, Sethos's successor, to come to terms with the Hittites and make peace with them. That treaty lasted as long as the Hittite empire endured.

The center of Hittite power had been in Anatolia, a region now a part of modern Turkey. For a short period, they expanded their empire into Mesopotamia. That happened after the rise of Ur and after the reign of Hammurabi, Ur's most famous king who ruled from Babylon.

It was under the third dynasty of Ur (ca. 2060-1950 B.C.) that there was a revival of Sumerian culture. For more than a hundred years, the kings of Ur styled themselves as "kings of the four parts of the world" and as "kings of Sumer and Akkad," but Ur was not destined to last. The Amorites flooded into the plain and took over city after city. Amorite rulers held sway, though they adopted the culture of Sumer and Akkad.

The center of power in Mesopotamia moved farther to the north through a series of cities, until power over the region was set up in Babylon by Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C.), a descendant of the Amorites. He brought a remarkable revival of culture to Babylon which he built into a great new city. Unfortunately, evidence of his achievements cannot be recovered because the site of Babylon now lies below the water table of the Euphrates Valley.

Hammurabi is perhaps best known for his skill as an administrator and for his social programs. The Code of Hammurabi, published late in his reign, brought together all past legal traditions and made out of them a standard for future laws. The later Assyrian code as well as the Exodus Covenant were drawn from the same traditions with which Hammurabi worked.

The power of Babylon fell away with the advance of the Hittite people from the north. The Hittites came out of central Anatolia and spoke a non-Indo-Aryan language. They flooded into the Mesopotamian plain and overwhelmed powerful Babylon. They sacked the city in 1531 B.C. But after a short time, the Hittites met the Hurrians and retreated to the north where they stabilized their empire in Anatolia and Syria.

The Hittite power was broken around 1200 B.C. by an invasion of a new power from the west whom the Egyptians called *People of the Sea*—the Philistines.

Philistines replace the Egyptians on the coast

The Hittite culture continued north of the Fertile Crescent for another 500 years carried on by another group of people, whom historians call neo-Hittites. It is these people whom Abraham and the later Israelites found in Canaan. The Hittite kingdom never included Palestine, but the later neo-Hittites did filter into the area where they carried the Hittite name (Gen. 23:7, 10; 25:9; 49:29, 30; 50:13; 2 Sam. 11:3).

The Philistines invaded Egypt in the eighth year of Ramses III (about 1188 B.C.). They came from Crete, called *Caphtor* in the Bible (Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7; Deut. 2:23). The Egyptians were able to drive the invaders from their shores, but the Philistines then settled on the coast of Palestine, capturing the cities of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Gaza which were likely under Egyptian control at the time. The Philistines built here the city of Ekron.

By the time Abraham came to Palestine and by the time the Israelites arrived from the Exodus and their wilderness wandering to begin a new nation, the world was already old. The traffic across Palestine had been heavy. The world before them had not been empty nor had its people been idle. The Israelites had to cope with the consequences of the history that had worn deep trails from the Nile River to the twin rivers across the Promised Land.

Discovery

1. In your group session, ask: What impression has this review of the history of the ancient world left with you? List these on a chalkboard or on a sheet of paper. Discuss the items most frequently mentioned. Test for agreements and disagreements. Look for positive values.

2. Clearly, the events and experiences recorded in the Bible were not isolated from the events and experiences in the world outside. Where do you begin to see evidence that the people of the Bible were accepting or rejecting outside influences?

Resources

Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. Third Edition, 1975. See Chapter 1, pp. 23-45, for more names and places in the history of the ancient world.

Kramer, Samuel N. *Cradle of Civilization*. New York: Time Inc, 1967. Good maps. Moderately easy reading.

Inventory

1. In your journal, make three columns: Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. Under each column, write the names of cities, people, and things that you associate with each. Examples: Egypt—pyramids, Memphis; Palestine—Jerusalem, Philistines; Mesopotamia—Babylon, cuneiform writing. Underline the names that appear in two or more of the columns. Example: Philistines appear in Egypt and Palestine.

2. Define the term *Fertile Crescent*.

3. Identify:

Akkad
Baal
Babylon
Canaan
Cuneiform
Egypt
Euphrates
Hammurabi
Hittites
Hyksos
Mesopotamia
Nile
People of the Sea
Philistines
Sargon
Sumer
Tigris
Ur
Yahweh

CHAPTER 3

**Eyes of
Faith to
See the
World**

18

Open the Bible and you start with beginnings. *Genesis*, the Greek title and *Bereshit*, the Hebrew name for this first book, both mean “beginning.” That is the first word of the first verse in these languages. Here many beginnings are described: the first heaven and earth, the first man and woman, the first sin, the first rebellion, and the first covenant.

All this first-ness that fills these first chapters of Genesis should not bar us from the fullness and completeness of this great epic. Here is no beginner’s awkward scrawl, but the sure hand of the saints who have seen God’s greatness and goodness. They have taken the crude stuff of human history and made of it song and celebration.

Though it comes first in the Bible, Genesis 1—11 is a revelation that came to the faithful only after centuries in contest with sin and temptation, doubt and denial. Only at the end of their journey of faith did they receive the revelation they now freely share with us: in the beginning—*God*.

Abraham and Sarah with treasures from Mesopotamia

Genesis 1—11 forms the prologue to the history of the founding families. This pre-history (the story under the history) begins with the creation of the world and those early events that gave shape to the world before Abraham and Sarah stepped on stage.

Abraham and Sarah came out of Mesopotamia, from “the region beyond the River.” Such is the record of Joshua 24:2-4, 14, 15. These early records of the people of Israel admit that their ancestors served other gods. Those gods, we dare assume, were part of the culture they brought with them from Mesopotamia. For such was their origin. Their genealogy carried the names of Nahor, Serug, and Haran (Gen. 11:22, 24, 27, 29), all names out of Upper Mesopotamia. Certainly, they could not have been untouched by the science, religion, and technology of the great civilization of early Babylon which loomed large over the land of the two rivers.

“Eden” in the creation story of Genesis 2 is a name from the Sumerian culture that preceded Babylon by many centuries. And Eden

Gist

Mighty tales from the days before history tell us about humankind and the God of faith who works now in history as God did from the beginning.

is located by the Genesis narrative at the intersection of four rivers, including the Tigris and Euphrates, which watered the great civilizations that rose and fell along their banks. The Pishon and the Gihon (2:12, 13), literally "Gusher" and "Bubbler" according to the Hebrew version of their names, represent tributaries of the first two rivers.

The table of nations in chapter 10 has sources in the cuneiform tablets of Babylon as do the genealogies of 11:10-30 and the table of the patriarchs (5:1-32). The tower of chapter 11 is named Babel so that everyone will know it is in Babylon. And the story of the Flood (6:5—8:22) is the recollection of an ancient people who lived, not in the hill country of prehistoric Israel, but rather in the early settlements on the level plain between those mighty rivers.

Science from Babylon but no religion

All these things represent the great store of knowledge that was the treasure of Babylon, Akkad, and Sumer, and which were among the treasures that Abraham and Sarah brought with them when they were called forth.

The account of creation in Genesis 1 represents the science of Babylon which was modeled not on the atom or on the laws of physics now known to us but on the three-storied universe: heaven, earth, and underworld (Exod. 20:4). According to this pattern, the earth was a flat platform wrinkled and dimpled by mountains and valleys, rivers and seas.

Above the earth was the huge dome of the firmament that held back the oceans of heaven's waters and supported the place of God's court (Gen. 1:8; Ps. 148:4). Below, the earth was held up by pillars which rose from the underground waters (Ps. 24:2; 104:5). Thus, the earth was surrounded by water, above and below. Sheol was also located in this nether region (Num. 16:30).

For the Mesopotamians, as for all ancient peoples, science was intertwined with religion, which in the case of Babylon meant a whole series of gods and goddesses whose exploits in love and war served to explain creation and the course of the world. In fact, the beginning of the three-storied universe, according to Babylonian lore, could be traced back to a fierce struggle between Marduk, the god of order, and Tiamat, the monster goddess of chaos. Marduk won the battle and split the fishlike body of the goddess to form the upper and lower parts of the universe.

How different are the Genesis epics of the people of Israel. The saints and sages of Israel refined from the ore of Babylon the dross of its idolatry and demonology until it became a tribute and bulwark to define their own faith in one true and living God.

We gain a profound expression of their world view in their telling of the creation story. The Mesopotamia account appears in *Enuma elish* (its title comes from its first words, "When on high"), an ancient poem of over one thousand lines written on seven clay tablets. The first *Enuma elish* fragments were found in an excavation of the king's library in Nineveh between 1848 and 1876. Other tablets were found later in Asshur and at Uruk (the biblical Erech of Gen. 10:10).

According to this Babylonian poem, the universe had its beginnings with the gods who represented the elements and forces of nature. But in Genesis, God was separate from the material of the world that God

Journal

1. Compared to the larger blocks of Scripture we will survey later, this chapter's scope is brief. Read all eleven chapters, if possible. Don't miss Genesis 1:1—3:16; 6—8; 11:1-9.

2. Compare the two creation accounts. Make a column for Genesis 1:1—2:4a, and a column for 2:4b-25. List, in order, each event. Then, record your observations. Where do the accounts agree? Where do they differ? What is the special insight and purpose of each?

3. Review the report of the Flood in Genesis 6—8. Compare the instructions for the number of animals in 6:19, 20 and in 7:2, 3. Write down one or more explanations for the variation in instructions.

Seed

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. . . . And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them. . . . But I will establish my covenant with you. . . . And Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai. . . . Now Sarai was barren; she had no child (Gen. 1:31; 6:13, 18; 11:29, 30).

Creation in the *Enuma elish* of Babylon

1. The gods and the material of the universe are one and the same and endure forever.
2. Primeval chaos: the goddess of the sea is wrapped in darkness.
3. Light emanates from the gods.
4. Firmament created.
5. Dry land created.
6. Lights in the sky created.
7. Human beings created.
8. The gods rest and celebrate.

created. And light is not a substance of the gods, but light is created also. While there are similarities, the differences are most striking.

Moral purpose grounded in the justice of God

Also found in the king's library in Nineveh over a hundred years ago was the Gilgamesh Epic, a work divided into twelve tablets, dating back to the second millennium B.C. The longest tablet, which contained 300 lines, had many similarities to the Flood of Genesis and is called the Flood Tablet.

The hero is Utnapishtim, who had been chosen for deliverance from an impending universal catastrophe. Like Noah, he was given detailed instructions on how to build an ark. Thus, he and his people were saved from the deluge while all life outside the ark was destroyed.

Utnapishtim's ark ran aground at the top of a mountain when the waters went down. Like Noah, he released a series of birds (raven, swallow, and dove) to test whether the earth was once more a fit place to live. When Utnapishtim set foot once again on dry land, he expressed his gratitude for his salvation through the offering of a sacrifice.

The record on the Flood Tablet is not the same in every point to the Flood event in Genesis. A comparison of the two accounts does show that Genesis brought a new dimension to the fore. According to the cuneiform tablets of Babylon, the flood which destroyed all but a small piece of creation happened at the whim of the gods. The reason is not clear. Genesis brings to its report of the flood a strong moral purpose grounded in the concern of God for justice.

The story of the tower of Babel also has its echoes in the Babylonian creation epic of *Enuma elish*, but the Genesis account carries direct criticism of Babylon by naming the city, almost as a joke, Babel, the place where tongues were confused (11:7, 9). Again, the Israelite authors took Babylonian materials and used them as a way to express their own view of the world and their own faith in God. They used them to point to the folly of humankind and to the presumption of people who would oppose God. Babel brings on the division of humanity into separate nations, a condition contrary to the will of God.

Writers of the Pentateuch more than one

Who transformed the knowledge of a pagan civilization into a creed to affirm the power and righteousness of the one true God? Is this the work of one author or many?

Genesis, as well as the other books of the Pentateuch, have been ascribed to Moses, a tradition reinforced by the alternate title of Genesis as the "First Book of Moses," with corresponding titles given to the following four books. Several references in these five books do speak of Moses as writing some materials or being commanded to write (Exod. 17:14; Deut. 31:9; also, Exod. 24:4; 34:27; Num. 33:2).

Nowhere is the claim made that Moses wrote everything in the Pentateuch. In fact, Genesis and Leviticus do not speak of Moses as the author of any of those books. While the New Testament does speak of Moses as the giver of the Law, this may only show that a tradition had grown up that linked the name of Moses with these first five books.

Other evidence shows that the Pentateuch took its form after the time of Moses and thus points to writers from a later period in Israelite history. Genesis seems to have been written at a time when the Canaan-

ites were no longer in the land (12:6; 13:7), a point of view from the days that Israel had a king. Another passage (36:31) shows that the writer lived during the time of the kings and long after the days of Moses.

The Philistines are mentioned in the time of Abraham and Sarah (21:34), yet these invaders did not come to the coastal plains of Palestine until about the years that the Israelites began their conquest of the hill country. In 14:14, the text says that Abraham pursued his foes as far as Dan; yet, according to Judges 18:29, Dan did not receive that name until its conquest in the days of the judges.

A long and careful study of the Pentateuch by many Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish scholars has led to a rather general agreement that these first five books are the product of more than one author. A large body of evidence shows that this material comes from different writers in different periods of history representing various groups in Israel.

It was in the use of the names of God that observers picked up the first clue that in the Pentateuch we have more than one source. In 1753, Jean Astruc, a French physician, observed that in some parts of Genesis the personal name for God was *Yahweh* (translated as "Jehovah" in the Revised Version). But in parallel accounts, the name for God in the Hebrew text was *Elohim*, the usual Hebrew name for "divine being." So, Astruc assumed that Genesis was the work of two authors, one using *Yahweh* and the other using *Elohim*.

As it turned out, the scholars who followed him discovered at least three writers who had worked on Genesis or perhaps three schools of scribes who had produced documents from which Genesis as well as Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers were assembled. Once the strands of these documents had been identified, it became clear that they were different not only in style and choice of words, but also in point of view.

Three documents for Genesis

The three documents have been named J, E, and P, according to the first letter of their given titles: J for Jahwist (German spelling of Yahwist), because of its use of *Yahweh* for God's name; E for Elohist, which in the Hebrew text uses *Elohim* for the name of God; and P for Priestly document which, while it also uses *Elohim*, has special interests in rituals and priestly matters that sets it apart from E.

Only J and P appear in the pre-history section of Genesis 1-11. E joins them beginning in Genesis 20.

The creation story beginning in Genesis 2:4b is the work of J who proves to be a matchless storyteller. The tale of Joseph is the most dramatic example of J's ability to tell a stirring tale with a few choice words. J probably wrote in the tenth century B.C. during the early days of the united Israelite monarchy.

J was a strict monotheist and suppressed all references to idolatry and to the history of the gods. Thus, in J's accounts, human beings gain a greater significance as the partners of God.

P's trademark is an interest in genealogy, in family trees, in generations, and in begettings. "Be fruitful and multiply" is a phrase in the primeval history that belongs to P (1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7). P has a concern for statistics such as the total life span of a given individual, the age of a father at the birth of his first son (See Gen. 5.), and the names of other members of the family. The P document probably took form in the time of the Exile and later. It is likely not the work of one individual alone

Creation in Genesis 1

1. God creates the universe but is above and separate from the material of the universe.
 2. Earth is a desolate waste with darkness covering the watery expanse.
 3. Light created.
 4. Firmament created.
 5. Dry land created.
 6. Lights in the sky created.
 7. Human beings created.
 8. God rests and sanctifies the seventh day.
- [Adapted from *The Babylonian Genesis* by Alexander Heidel, p. 129.]

but the product of a group of like-minded persons from many generations from early Israelite times through the Exile and beyond.

Faith in the acts and promises of God

Genesis 1 gives us P's version of the creation which is in sharp contrast to that of J beginning in Genesis 2:4b. J's story is the account of the creation of human beings, while P's epic is more universal in scope, describing the creation of the world. P's work is lofty and thoughtful; J's report is more folksy and down to earth.

In Genesis 2, God works as a craftsman, gathering the dust of the earth, forming from it a body, and breathing into it "the breath of life." The Creator in Genesis 1 is more distant and therefore more majestic, calling forth the lights of the solar system, the great oceans of water, and the animal and vegetable life of earth and sea.

E stands midway between J and P in the approach to God. The God we meet in J is close at hand and speaks directly to people. The God in the P document is far away in heaven. In E, when God has a message, it comes through an angel or through a dream. E was probably composed in the ninth century B.C. in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Of course, all these documents made use of the ancient records and memories of the people of Israel, some written and others oral. Oral traditions were carefully treasured among ancient peoples. They retained the essence of events in a reliable way. Yet oral records differ from written records even when eventually transferred to paper. We can still identify many of these oral traditions for many of them are sayings and stories that explain customs and place names. Songs and bits of poetry are also materials that had been passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation.

All the assembled records express faith in the acts and promises of God. Both J and P agree that creation was good but later marred by sin and disharmony introduced by people who sinned and rebelled. This corrupted the human race and separated the world into warring nations. To this sin and rebellion, God responded first in the Flood and then by calling forth a chosen family.

Creation as history and not as nature

Both Genesis accounts show creation as the result of God's goodness. In the first, God surveyed that which had been made and pronounced it good (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and, in the case of humankind, "very good" (v. 31). The value of man and woman was demonstrated by their creation at the end of the process and therefore as the capstone of God's great endeavor.

In Genesis 2, man is shown as unique by being created first of all. All other contents of the earth are brought into being for his benefit. But all these gifts were insufficient until God completed the human order with the creation of woman.

As further expression of love and regard, God provided a special dwelling for these loved ones, the Garden of Eden, a place of harmony and peace (*shalom*), a spot where people were in tune with each other and with God.

Thus, the creation accounts of J and P refined the ore of Babylonian culture. And for what purpose? With the God who acted in history, they were taking a stand against the nature religions of Canaan.

Each year, the devotees of Baal used their worship to stimulate the cycle of nature. Through rites of sexual union, the Canaanites thought they were helping the gods produce a new birth of the earth and bestow fertility in the form of abundant harvests and general prosperity. But Israel's faith in the God of creation was different. First of all, God was separate from the material of creation, not a member of a sexual order. Yahweh was not a member of a family of gods and goddesses. Unlike the life of the gods of Canaan, Yahweh's court saw no marriage, no birthing, and no offspring of Yahweh. In fact, the Hebrews had no word for "goddess," so far was the notion of sexual activity removed from their idea of the divine life.

For them, creation was rooted in historic time when Yahweh set the cycle of creation in motion. God was outside of nature in the realm of time and history and not trapped within nature. Yahweh was the Lord of nature as well as of history.

While the creation stories have links with the Babylonian epics and the people of Israel lived surrounded by the practices of the fertility cults of Baal and Asherah, the miracle of grace is that they fashioned a new world view, a new understanding of the nature of God.

Coping with bad things in a good God's world

Having put their faith in one God, a good God, and a God of love, the Israelites held a pure faith and escaped the pitfalls of paganism and idolatry. Yet they faced one large problem that their pagan neighbors did not share. If their good God was the source of all things, from whence did evil come? If God was all powerful, why did God not put an end to evil? These questions plagued them then even as they bother us today.

Most of Genesis 3—11 addresses itself to the question of sin: evil in the Fall (chap. 3), the murder of Abel (chap. 4), the Flood (chap. 6—9), and the confusion of Babel (chap. 11). Here we confront the wide range of evils that beset humankind: natural (death and pain); moral (murder and violence); and religious (idolatry). Through the use of symbolic language, these chapters explore evil at a most profound level.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil (2:9, 17) says that evil is rooted in the exercise of freedom which leads to rebellion against God. Rebellion lay within humanity's power from the very beginning, and they were unable to withstand the test. But hope remained. The same freedom that permitted the choice of evil still allowed the trusting person to choose good.

Good was always available to God's people even before the Fall. Adam knew how to till the ground. He could speak, and he recognized the animals and gave them names (2:15, 19, 20). Eve desired the forbidden fruit because it could make her wise. Such a desire for knowledge was good, a value to be cherished.

The dialogue between Genesis 1 and 2 faces frankly the meaning of sexual activity, which should not surprise us given a world that exploited sex. After eating the forbidden fruit, "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (3:7). Sexual desire in this setting appeared as the first sin. It was after the Fall that the man and woman had sexual intercourse and a child was born.

According to the view of Genesis 3, procreation was not a blessing, but a consequence of sin. So, too, we have Psalm 51:5, "in sin did my mother conceive me." Though created by grace, humankind was

Inventory

1. The three documents used in Genesis are J, E, and P. Identify these writers according to the time of their writing, their style of writing, and their belief about God.

2. What is the difference between the Babylonian and Genesis view of creation? Give several examples.

3. What is the case for and the case against the Mosaic authorship of Genesis?

4. Identify:

Abel
Akkad
Baal
Babel
Babylon
Eden
Elohim
Elohist
Euphrates
Mesopotamia
Pentateuch
Shalom
Utnapishtim
Yahweh
Yahwist

born through sin. But contrast this view with that of Genesis 1:28, where procreation was seen as part of the divine order. However defined, the act of rebellion brought separation from God—the man and woman were put out of Eden; they had chosen disharmony instead of harmony.

The next step in the course of events was the strife between Cain and Abel. Though the conflict was pictured in terms of two persons, the struggle was between the pastoral way of life represented in Abel and the agricultural way of life represented by Cain. It was a tension repeated over and over again in the life of the ancient world. But even social conflict produced personal evil. Envy, murder, and the lie came into the world through Cain.

When we come to the generation of the Flood, evil had run its course. Yahweh saw that the “wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). So, God destroyed all creation, saving only Noah and his family.

After the Flood, God made a covenant for a new beginning and a new creation, a pact that took in all people. God extended grace to all (9:8-17).

Yet the course of rebellion was not finished. Noah and his sons fell into sin that was spurred on by drunkenness, and slavery became a part of the human experience (9:20-27). Then, came the final fruit of rebellion in the division of humankind into warring nations. This was the result of idolatry, humankind’s worship of itself and of its own progress.

Stage now set for God’s grand plan

Thus ends the pre-history. This is the world as all of us have come to know it—a sinful, rebellious, separated, and warring world. Yet God was not content to let the world continue in this state. God had a plan for a new creation, a plan that began with a family. We meet the family at the end of chapter 11, and we take up this family’s adventure beginning in chapter 12.

Discovery

1. What are the new insights that have come in the study of Genesis 1—11? List the various observations. Discuss the ones mentioned most often.

2. In the creation accounts, we have two points of view. The documentary analysis of Genesis shows us that we have at least three pairs of eyes reporting to us. Evaluate the benefits of seeing through more than one pair of eyes.

3. Note how early Israelite thought drew on themes from Mesopotamian sources, while Egyptian influence seems absent or insignificant. What does this tell us about the ancestry of the Israelites and their attitude toward their neighboring nations?

4. How does a faith grounded in the acts of God in history differ from a religion of nature? How would the Bible be different if it represented a nature religion rather than a historical faith?

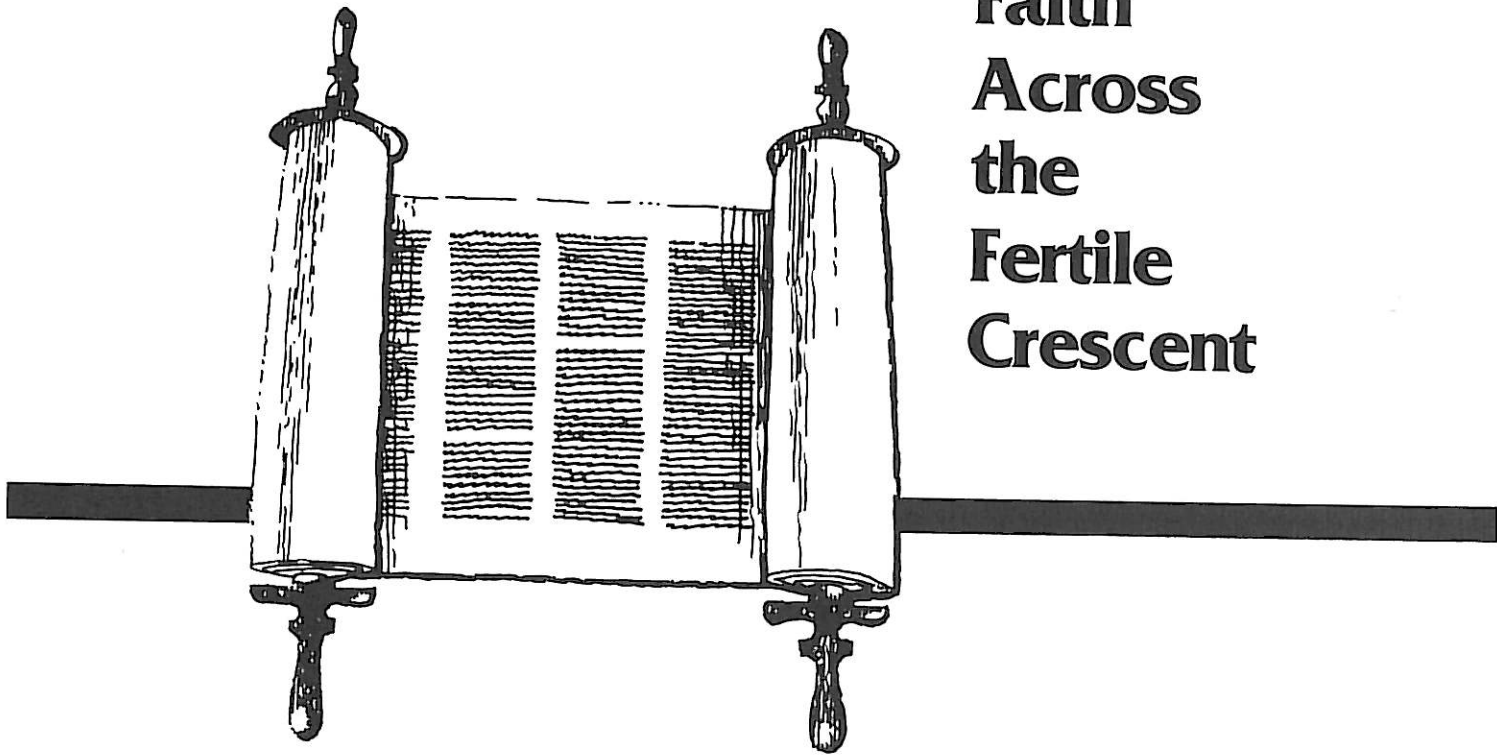
Resources

Heidel, Alexander. *The Babylonian Genesis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Second Edition, 1951. This provides a translation of the Babylonian cuneiform creation story tablets.

Pritchard, J. B. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton University Press, 1958. Contains the texts of Enuma Elish and the Gilgamesh Epic.

PART II

**Journey
of
Faith
Across
the
Fertile
Crescent**



CHAPTER 4

The Founding Families and Joseph

28

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve couldn't hold onto their innocence. Peace couldn't be found in the fields with Cain and Abel. The ark of Noah didn't bring together the right mix of people and resources. Even the tower of Babel couldn't be built high enough.

But in Abraham and Sarah, a new episode began that would win back innocence, peace, a new humanity, and a new relationship with God—all the ideals cherished from the creation of the world. Through thick and thin, through failure and success, that promise would entice generation after generation, lure them into nationhood, salvage them from the loss of nationhood, and finally produce a community of faith that girdles the globe and energizes people with the power of God's new kingdom of peace and justice.

Genesis 1—11 set the stage. In spite of the best efforts of the most advanced civilizations and cultures, no one could fashion the community of harmony. Now, late in the history of the world, came the seed of the youngest and smallest of nations, a man and a woman and their family. How feeble their first gesture seemed: they withdrew from Mesopotamia, from the center of wealth and power, to go to a land where they had no home.

Promise made this family go

The promise, reduced to basics, dealt with a land and children: "Go . . . to the land . . . I will make of you a great nation" (12:1, 2).

But the childlessness of Abraham and Sarah dominates the stories of the cycle about them (Gen. 12—15). How could they found a great nation if they did not have at least one child? Their grasp on the promise was often tested, each time in more extreme fashion.

Even with a child born at last in their old age, the progression of the promise moved slowly. Isaac and Rebekah in the next generation were for a time tested by childlessness also (25:21). Besides that, the possession of the land escaped them. Abraham could buy only a plot of ground on which to bury Sarah. How could the family become a nation if it had no land?

With the stories of Jacob and Esau and those of Jacob and Laban (Gen. 25-36), we explore deeper meanings of the promise. What is the

Gist

The promise had a hold on Abraham and Sarah, on their children, and their grandchildren. They, in turn, held on to the promise in spite of famine, doubts, childlessness, and sin. They never gave up on God and God never gave up on them.

nature of the blessing? Jacob, the younger of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons, schemed for the birthright and for the blessing, outwitting Esau on both occasions.

The tales become more complicated as more people become involved. Rebekah supported her favorite son in his plots, finally sending him back to the family's homeland to choose a wife. There Jacob was pitted against his uncle, Laban, in a contest over the daughters he would marry and for the property he would inherit.

Could Jacob's family live together in peace? In the life of Joseph, the brothers came to blows, but the promise worked itself out in a strange way, and the family ended up in Egypt. How did the shape for a new way of living take root in these events from the shadowy past so many centuries ago?

A widening of their kinship

Keeping the promise alive seems to have been the force that drove Abraham as he waited for the appearing of an heir. Would he need to adopt his steward Eliezer of Damascus as his heir (15:2)? Would he need to take on a substitute wife in Hagar, according to the customs of Haran from which he had come (16:2, 3)? Through long years, Abraham and Sarah brooded about the next generation and the preservation of the promise. They were being tested.

Even after the birth of Isaac (21:1-7), the examination was not over. For then came the great ordeal on the mountain of Moriah (22:1-14) when Abraham took Isaac on that long trip from which it appeared that Isaac might not return. Abraham and Sarah had already proved their dedication by obeying the command to leave their home in Ur and their home in Haran and move toward Canaan where they had no home. But human sacrifice was regarded as the expression of highest devotion to one's God. This ordeal showed that the faith of Abraham and Sarah was nearly boundless. They could maintain faith in the promise when all appeared lost—even without Isaac if need be.

When Isaac and Rebekah took up the promise, they were also tested. Isaac prayed for Rebekah and the prayer was answered with the birth of Esau and Jacob (25:21-26).

Those early families looked forward ever so keenly to the coming generations. Would the young folks keep the promise? Yes, the faith would go on because the parents gave themselves so completely to it. Those intergenerational relations had power.

The stories of the Abraham and Sarah cycle were also working out relationships more distant than those of parents and child. The birth of Ishmael to Abraham and Hagar represented the remembrance by the children of later generations of another relationship—a kinship to the Bedouins and the Arabs (16:7-14; 21:8-21). These Ishmaelites, spirited people of the desert who seemed so defiant: what was their place in history? The children of the founding families could affirm that they were related to these people who were also part, in a different way, of the family. But, for the time being, they seemed to be outside the promise.

The cycle of tales included still other people. The promise worked its way through Abraham's nephew Lot, who went down to Sodom, only to be rescued with his daughters from near destruction when that city, along with Gomorrah, was destroyed because of its corruption. The

Journal

Read Genesis 12:1-9. This begins the cycle of stories about Abraham and Sarah. Paraphrase the promise God made to them. What was special about this promise?

Read Genesis 22. The ordeal of Abraham and Isaac does not yield its message easily to modern readers. Write out your impressions and observations.

Genesis 28:10-22. The promise is repeated to Jacob in a night vision at Bethel.

Genesis 44:1—45:15. This is the climax of the Joseph epic. Find the reference to the promise in this section.

Read several other sections in Genesis and record your observations.

The Promise

The promise to the founding families appears twelve times in Genesis:

12:1-3

12:7

13:14-17

15:1

15:5

15:18-21

17:1-8

22:16-18

26:24

28:13-15

35:10-12

46:3, 4

catastrophe, in fact, seems like a small-scale version of the Flood of Noah's day (13:8-13; 19).

From Lot's family came the tribes of Moab and Ammon, whom later generations also identified as kindred tribes (19:37, 38). But during those days, they seemed also to be outside the promise.

Schemes in place of promise

Esau and Jacob, twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, fought fiercely over the inheritance. For this generation, the promise meant blessing, a blessing to be claimed rather than shared, especially as Jacob saw it.

First, Jacob duped his older twin Esau into selling his birthright for a pottage of lentils (25:29-34). Then, when their father Isaac was about to die, their mother Rebekah conspired with Jacob to cheat Esau out of the rightful blessing and grab it for the younger son (27:1-45).

Esau in his innocence wins our sympathy, but according to the conventions of the day, Jacob had gained title to the homestead along with the right to be the leader of the tribe and bearer of the promise. Jacob obviously had much to learn about the deeper meaning of the promise.

Esau became the founder of the tribe of Edom (32:3). So, the Edomites joined the Ishmaelites, the Ammonites, and the Moabites as kindred families of Israel, yet people for the moment outside the benefit of the promise.

Jacob, either in flight from the vengeance of Esau or for the more noble purpose of finding a wife among his mother's people, set off for Paddan-aram (28:2). It was here that Jacob found not one wife, but two: the sisters Leah and Rachel. He also found his match in the crafty scheming of Laban, his uncle and later father-in-law (chaps. 29—31).

Smitten with love for Rachel, Jacob served seven years for her only to become obligated to accept first her older sister Leah as his wife and then serve another seven years of service as Laban's herdsman for Rachel. Though outwitted by Laban in the first round, Jacob determined not to be tricked again when it came time to divide the wealth of Laban's homestead. Jacob's herds continued to prosper while Laban's dwindled.

Eventually, Jacob left with his wives, his growing family, and his larger flocks. It was then that Rachel stole her father's household gods, the tokens in her society of her husband's right to the family inheritance. So, Rachel proved herself as resolute as her mother-in-law Rebekah in staking out a claim for the future blessings of the family (31:17-35).

These stories of grasping and scheming intertwine with tales of encounters with God that Jacob experienced at various holy places. In the night vision at Bethel of the staircase toward heaven, the promise of God of land and family once given to Abraham and Isaac was offered to Jacob (28:10-22). The stairway recalls the temple tower of Babylon that was the model for Babel in Genesis 11, showing that the Mesopotamian heritage was still fresh in the life of the people of Abraham's clan.

But most memorable is Jacob's nighttime wrestling bout at the crossing of the Jabbok River on his return to Canaan from the land of Laban (32:22-32). Jacob grappled all night with a mysterious person whose identity is not clear. The meaning of the encounter is also not clear. Yet the test brought a change in character to Jacob who may have begun to see the meaning of blessing in a new way.

Jacob's Children

Six sons and one daughter by Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah (Gen. 29:31-35; 30:14-20).

Two sons by Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali (30:3-8).

Two sons by Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher (30:9-13).

Two sons by Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin (30:22-24; 35:16-20).

History turns its key in Egypt

The last epic about the founding families is the story of Joseph, the firstborn son of Jacob and his favorite wife Rachel. Now the promise begins working out a design on the larger canvas of history. Once again, family relationships shape the picture, with brothers plotting against Joseph. But the faithfulness of Joseph turns rebellion into salvation.

Rather than a collection of stories and events as in the earlier cycles, in the Joseph narrative, we have one long story that covers twelve of the fourteen-chapter block of Genesis 37—50, the longest sustained account of one person's life in the Bible. This story is a key element in the history of the promise and the founding of the nation.

Jacob shamelessly doted on Joseph as his special son. This favoritism pitted the ten brothers of the other three wives against Rachel's oldest son. Their resentment led to a plot in which Joseph ended up a slave in Egypt.

But Joseph did not go down to Egypt alone. Yahweh was with Joseph and he became successful (39:2), first in the house of a leading officer of the court of Pharaoh; and, then, after a period in prison, as prime minister to the pharaoh.

As second in command in Egypt, Joseph saved Egypt from a serious famine and in the process saved his family also. Though his brothers had an evil intent in the plot that sent Joseph to Egypt, behind the events, the promise to Abraham and Sarah was working itself out: "for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . to preserve for you a remnant on earth" (45:5, 7).

Joseph brought his father and family and his brothers and their families to Egypt. This larger family, that had its roots in Ur of the Chaldees and in Haran among the Arameans, now found itself at the other end of the Fertile Crescent in the land of the other great center of power in the ancient world: "in Egypt"—the last words in the Book of Genesis.

Real people amid the tribal scene

In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, we dealt with pre-history. The shell of the material and the symbols came from Mesopotamia, but they had been given new meanings by the Israelites.

When we come to the days of the founding families, we are already deep into the historical period. The pyramids of Egypt were by then a thousand years old. Sargon, who built the first world empire in Mesopotamia, had come and gone. Even so, we have no records outside the Bible about these founding families. Their names are nowhere recorded. They erected no monuments and built no cities. The court journals of Egypt contain no mention of a Joseph who was prime minister to a pharaoh or of the famine from which he saved the country.

Some have argued that here we have tribal histories that were later personalized as the actions of individuals. Thus, the stories of the sons of Jacob are not the jealousies of brothers in a large family but the interaction of related tribes sometimes cooperating for a common purpose, sometimes competing for land or position. So the exploits of persons are really the activities of a tribe. Such is likely the case in Genesis 34 which reports on the mischief of Simeon and Levi at Shechem. It is really the record of an assault of Israelite tribes on a Canaanite city before the time of the conquest.

Seed

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. . . . To your descendants I will give this land. . . . I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again. . . . so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 46:3, 4; Isa. 55:11).

Wives in Danger

Three stories of the founding families have the same plot: a husband says his wife is his sister and a king takes her for his wife. Twice, it is Abraham and Sarah—once with Pharaoh, once with Abimelech (12:10-20; 20:1-18).

Twice, the same king is involved: Abimelech—with Sarah (chap. 20) and with Rebekah (26:6-11). Would the same king be taken in twice? Unlikely. Chapters 20 and 26 are from different writers (the first called E, the second J), who wrote at different times and from different traditions: E (Elohlist) and J (Yahwist, who also wrote Chapter 12).

Holy Places and Visions of God

In Genesis, God appeared at the following sacred places:

Bethel (28:10-22; 35:9-15)
Mahanaim (32:1, 2)
Peniel (32:22-32)
El-bethel (35:1-7)

Strong Women

In Sarah, we find the model of assertiveness and strength for the women of her family. The promise of many descendants was not just to Abraham but also to Sarah as the mother of nations (Gen. 17:16), a prospect more trying to her faith in the face of her childlessness than if the promise had been only to Abraham.

Rebekah, her daughter-in-law, took an active role in assuring that the inheritance would be entrusted to

The history of this early period may well be more complicated than is assumed at first reading. Certainly, tribal movements are always in the background of the stories about individuals. Our first meeting with Abraham and Sarah admits that many persons were with them (12:5), including the family of Lot, who may also represent a tribe. In 13:5-13, the two families are so large that they cannot inhabit the same pastureland. Lot and his tribe move down the Jordan Valley toward Sodom. Yet, when we meet Lot in Genesis 19, we find him not as a tribe but as a family living in a house in a walled city with his wife and daughters. In 14:14, Abraham is able to put 318 men into battle, a sign that the number of people in his tribe must have been a thousand or more.

But even if the tribes came first, the founding parents are more than symbols for the tribe. They were real persons who were leaders of a people. The process that brought them out of the tribal background is surely more complex than the personal narratives led us to believe. While we cannot reconstruct the lives of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, or of Jacob and Rachel, the witness is genuine that they were historical people who grew out of the seedbed of the tribal experience.

Trustworthy are the family records

Specific historic information about the founding families is lacking. Yet, we know quite a bit about life in the second millennium B.C., and what we know fits with the biblical record. The founding families came from the northwest region of the Mesopotamian Valley where Semitic people such as the Amorites were living with non-Semitic people like the Hurrians (Horites in the Old Testament). Of the Semitic people in the region, the future Israelites seem to have had a kinship with the Arameans (Syrians).

They refer to the land from which they came as Paddan-aram (Gen. 25:20; 28:2, 5) and their relatives are "Bethuel the Aramean" (28:5) and "Laban the Aramean" (31:20). The ancient confession of Israel began with the words: "A wandering Aramean was my father" (Deut. 26:5). One genealogy claims Aram as a descendant of Abraham's brother Nahor (Gen. 22:21).

Though the families separated themselves from the Arameans when they migrated to Canaan, they continued to remember these people. They also recalled the contacts that they had with the Hurrians, for the stories of their lives reflect the patterns of culture in the records of the city of Nuzi, a Hurrian community in the east Tigris region.

The founding families, in fact, had a unique lifestyle that was sometimes in conflict with later Israelite law and practice. Jacob married two sisters (Gen. 29:15-30), a union not allowed to his descendants (Lev. 18:18). Abraham planted a sacred tree and Jacob set up a pillar (Gen. 21:33; 28:22), acts which the later law declared illegal (Deut. 16:21, 22). That the later editors did not omit these references, which many must have regarded as bad examples for later generations, indicates that they had respect for the texts they received. In turn, this assures us that these records are trustworthy.

The life of the founding families in Canaan also fits with what we know about that country in the first half of the second millennium B.C. They were herders and spent most of their time in the hill country which was then not heavily populated and offered good pastureland. But while

they were a pastoral people and even may have raised crops (26:12), they were not nomads. They avoided the desert, and even though they passed through it, their pattern was not to stay there. At best, they were only seminomads who because they were herders needed to move about to find new places to graze their cattle.

Setting the times of coming and going

As the founding families move across the stage of Canaan, the land seems peaceful and almost empty. They must have come to the land at the end of the period when the cities of Canaan, which had been destroyed during the third millennium (see "Crossroads Palestine," in Chapter 2, p. 13), were once again being resettled by waves of Amorites who were pouring into all parts of the Fertile Crescent. The founding families were part of this wave of migration, sometime during the Middle Bronze Age which ended in 1560 B.C.

Another date having a bearing on the founding families is the time of their descent into Egypt during the days of Joseph. It had long been thought that the clans of Israel came to Egypt during the Hyksos period, 1730-1570 B.C. Some of the Hyksos people who invaded Egypt and ruled the nation for almost 200 years were of Semitic background. (See "Foreign Chiefs Called Hyksos," Chapter 2, p. 14). Since the Israelites were also Semites, it would seem that they would be more openly received by the Hyksos than by the Egyptians themselves. The final expulsion of the Hyksos would then explain the beginning of the oppression of the Hebrews when Egypt returned to native rule under a "new king . . . who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8).

But evidence that Egypt during the time of Joseph was under Hyksos rule is quite slim and is far from certain. It seems more likely that the Israelites came to Egypt after the expulsion of the Hyksos, sometime after 1500 B.C.

Names for the family of God

The important legacy of the founding families was their faith, yet it was not a faith identical to that of Moses. Their God was a God of the clans, known as the God of Abraham (28:13), the Fear of Isaac (31:42, 53), and the Mighty One (or Champion) of Jacob (49:24).

This early faith was probably not a pure monotheism, and they may have used idols. We know that Rebekah's brother Laban did have household gods (31:30-35). When the families came to Canaan, they found shrines at Shechem, Bethel, and Beersheba, and may have worshiped at these sacred sites.

The Canaanites name for God was *El*, a name that the founding families also used. The Canaanite Melchizedek's God was *El 'Elyon* (God Most High), a name that Abraham accepted as the name for his God (14:19, 22).

In later times, particularly during the time of the monarchy, Baal became the name for the Canaanite deity, taking the place of *El*. While *El* was freely applied to the God of Israel, Baal was never so used and does not appear at all in Genesis.

Yahweh is also used in Genesis as the name for God. For example, *Yahweh* called Abraham out of Haran (Gen. 12:1). But according to Exodus, this name was introduced first to Moses (Exod. 3:13-16).

Jacob (27:1-29).

Rachel, Sarah's granddaughter-in-law, also schemed to get a second inheritance for Jacob by snatching the household gods of her father Laban (31:33-35).

Leah, Rachel's co-wife, won back Jacob's affection and gained Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah by making a deal with Rachel (30:14-21).

Tamar overcame a grave injustice done to her through a challenge to Judah, her father-in-law, that provided her with relief from her widowhood (38:6-26).

The men of the founding families were often overshadowed by these powerful women.

Ishmaelites or Midianites as Slave Traders

Two documents carry the story of Joseph and sometimes they overlap. In J, Judah is Joseph's protector, the father is called Israel (37:3), and Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites (37:21-30).

E, the Elohist, has Reuben as Joseph's protector, calls the father Jacob, and sells Joseph to the Midianites.

Names for God

El Shaddai (God Almighty):
(Exod. 6:3; Gen. 17:1;
43:14)

El 'Elyon (God Most High):
(Gen. 14:18-24)

El 'Olam (Everlasting God):
(Gen. 21:33)

El Ro'i (God of Seeing):
(Gen. 16:13; cf. 22:14)

El Bethel (God of Bethel):
(Gen. 31:13; 35:7)

Inventory

1. From where did the journey of Abraham and Sarah begin and what country was their goal?

2. Who were the other five principal members of the founding families?

3. What caused the founding families to leave their original home and what cause explains their actions during the following years?

4. How was the faith of Abraham and Sarah twice tested?

5. What were the names of God used by the founding families?

6. Identify:

Arameans

Baal

Elohist

Hagar

Haran

Hyksos

Ishmael

Yahwist

Though Yahweh acted for the founding families, they did not know God by that name (Exod. 6:2, 3).

In Genesis, the material from the hand of E (the Elohist) as well as the work of P (the Priestly writers) carefully avoided using the name *Yahweh*. However, J (the Yahwist writer) wished to trace the worship of Yahweh back to the earliest times, and therefore used that name for God in his passages (as in Gen. 12:1).

The most outstanding feature of the religion of the families was that their relation to God was defined by the promise. Their faith was already rooted deeply in their history. Peoplehood marked their understanding of being a follower of God.

The founding families stood at the beginning of the pilgrimage of faith. Their acceptance of the promise and their search for its fulfillment was their religion, a faith that continued to support those who followed after them. They took the experiences and encounters that came to them and made them both uniquely their own and a heritage for those of us who would follow them.

Discovery

1. What were the new insights you gained from this chapter? Discuss the items mentioned most often.

2. Of all the stories told about the founding families, which seem most likely to be stories of tribes and which are instead stories about individual adventures? How can one tell the difference?

3. The promise to the founding families began the formation of a separated nation, which means some people belonged and others didn't. Who were the people who belonged? Who were excluded? Were there any signs of concern for the people who were left out of the promise?

Resources

Sarna, Nahum M. *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken Books, 1966. Shows how the faith of Israel parted ways with the other religions of the ancient world.

Speiser, E. A. *Genesis*. Anchor Bible, Volume I. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964.

Ever so briefly the founding families lived in Canaan, a land they could not call their own, yet a place that had been promised to them. What was the shape of this region? Did the form of the land in any way determine their faith? Later poets would call the country a "land of milk and honey" (Deut. 26:9). But the spirit that imbued these people could hardly be termed a milk and honey religion.

No, the land did not form their faith. God working through history did that. But this Promised Land with its richness and its poverty, its climate and its rocks, its barriers and its openness molded the culture, the politics, and the history of the people of faith.

But in one way the land and the faith were fixed on each other. When the people came to the land, they entered into a kinship with the hills and the valleys, the fields and the forests, and into a new relationship with their God. To catch the feeling that these special people had for their country, we must reach out to touch their environment.

Small among the nations

From north to south, Dan to Beersheba often set the limits of the land, a distance of no more than 160 miles. In width, from the Mediterranean coast on the west to the Jordan Valley on the east, the average distance is forty miles, though seldom did the people possess the coastal lands, so the nation was often smaller than even these dimensions suggest.

One of the disadvantages of smallness was that the land really never had a name that people from the outside recognized. In the conversations of the world powers of the ancient world, the land was reckoned as part of the Aramean (Syrian) power which had its center in Damascus to the north.

Over the years, Palestine has become the common name for this region, including the uplands on the east side of the Jordan. *Palestine* comes from Philistia, the nation of Sea People who lived for a time on the coastal plain. The Hebrew name for the country was *Canaan*.

Palestine was the last place on the west end of the narrow part of the Fertile Crescent where farming was possible. Although there was just enough rainfall and just enough arable land, farming was not easy. The fields were small and covered with large lumps of limestone. Happily, the

CHAPTER 5

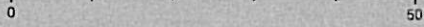
The Shape of the Promised Land

Gist

One focus of the promise to Abraham and Sarah was on the land that God had marked off for them and their descendants. The source of the promise was in God, but the shaping and coloring of the history that the promise would make would come in part from the land. Knowing the land prepares us for a walking tour through the life of the People of Faith.

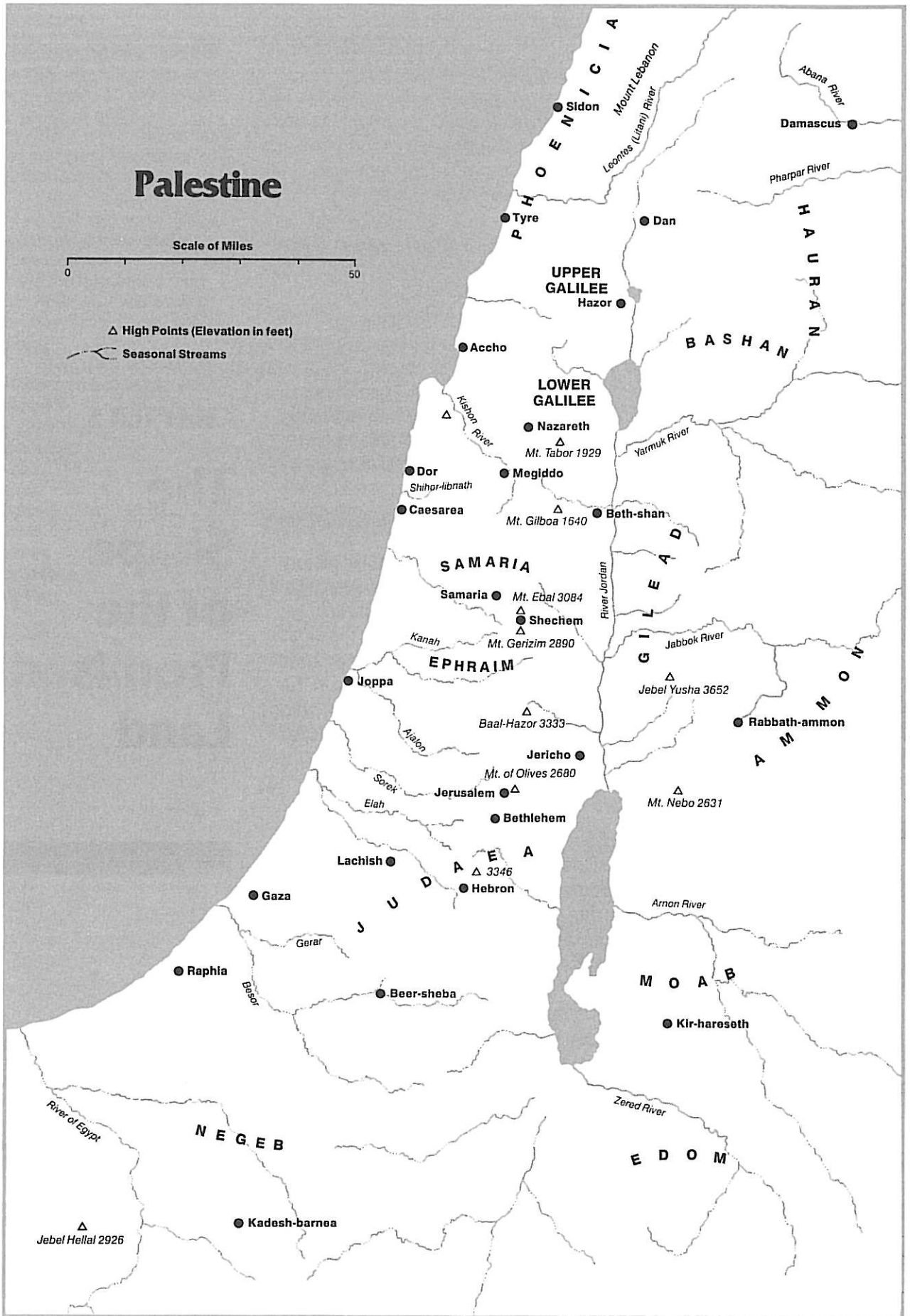
Palestine

Scale of Miles



△ High Points (Elevation in feet)

Seasonal Streams



limestone did provide some ongoing fertility for the land.

Small deposits of copper and iron were found south of the Dead Sea, but the yield has always been low. So, the limestone, a grade excellent for building, remains the soil's only wealth. A large part of the land served as pastureland for sheep, goats, and camels.

Four zones, north and south

The region itself can be divided into four zones, each distinct from the other: the plains, the hills, the valley, and the uplands. These zones run through Palestine lengthwise, north and south, with the plains on the west, and the other three following toward the east.

Plains with flowers and Philistines

The coastal plain stretches from the Bay of Acre (Acco) on the north to the River of Egypt on the south. This narrow strip of land is broken only by Mount Carmel which juts out toward the sea.

The barriers on the coast are not rocks and cliffs, but sand. Silt carried by the sea from the Nile River fills the mouths of the small rivers that might otherwise provide harbors. This limits the approach that ships can make to the shore.

The Plain of Sharon, south of Mount Carmel, was a marshy area poorly drained by its sluggish rivers. Since crops could not prosper here, its flowers have been its chief claim to fame.

South of Sharon, on the most extensive level space in Palestine, was the land of the Philistines, the best agricultural land. Beyond Gaza the rainfall is in short supply, so without rivers or springs, the opportunity for farming here was limited.

Hills at the heart of the Hebrew homeland

The hill country of Palestine is really a continuation of the mountains of Lebanon, lower but still rugged. These hills formed the center of the Hebrew homeland, the place where most of their history was acted out. Let's make an aerial journey over these hills, starting in the north and moving south.

Galilee, the first section of the hill country, was on the northern frontier. In the early days, upper Galilee, that part north of the Sea of Galilee, was covered with forests and settled only slowly. No important cities appeared in the region, though a good annual rainfall made it a prosperous place for orchards and groves.

In lower Galilee, which included Nazareth, the boyhood home of Jesus, the hills had gentler slopes. Covered with olive and fig trees, this was one of the most attractive and fertile parts of the hill country.

The hills of Galilee are separated from those of Samaria to the south by the Plain of Esdraelon and the Valley of Jezreel. This lowland follows a rift in the earth's surface that moves from the northwest near Mount Carmel to the southeast and the Jordan River. The rift is a break in the earth's crust that has lowered the level of the land along the line of the fault.

The Plain of Esdraelon is the fault basin and Jezreel is the fault valley, forming a great corridor through the hill country and providing a fertile farmland as well as a pathway for both traders and invaders. Because of its value as a trade route, the plain was often the scene of fierce battles involving Egyptians, Syrians, and others.

Journal

Make an outline map of Palestine for your journal. A freehand version should serve. If your Bible has no set of maps in it which you can use, borrow a Bible atlas from your church or public library.

Draw in the bodies of water: Sea of Galilee, Jordan River, Dead Sea, Great Sea (Mediterranean).

With a dotted line, mark off the four geographical zones: plains, hills, valley, the uplands. (If your set of maps does not define these regions, wait until you have read this chapter to finish this part.)

Locate on your map, if possible, the following regions: Plain of Sharon, Shephelah, Negeb.

Plot these cities: Beersheba, Dan, Samaria, Jerusalem.

Seed

For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless Yahweh your God for the good land he has given you (Deut. 8:7-10).

When we come to the hills of Samaria, we're in the heartland of Israelite history. Here most of the people of the northern kingdom lived in relative prosperity. On one of these hills, two kings, Omri and Ahab, built Samaria as the capital of Israel, a realm of about 2,000 square miles. But the region could really not be defended. Settlements were open to attack and plunder from all sides.

South of Samaria come the Judean hills with steeper slopes. Thus, while the region was easier to defend, the soil was less fertile. The kingdom of Judah that was centered here was only half the size of Israel in the Samaritan hills. Judah was largely cut off from the outside world. Caravans did not come here. Their routes took them along less rugged trails.

On the west, the Judean hills are separated from the coastal plain by a valley and a low range of hills called the *Shephelah*, running north and south and paralleling the ridge of the Judean range. The rich red soil of these foothills made it a good place for growing grain. But because it was a place that had value for crops and also for defense, it was the cause of many disputes between the Philistines from the plains and the people in the hills.

On the other side of the Judean hills is the wilderness of Judea, which begins a short distance from the Mount of Olives and passes along the west side of the Dead Sea. Its width is between ten and fifteen miles and it extends south for fifty to sixty miles. The rains have percolated through the limestone rocks and carved out unusual caverns in this region. Some of the caves near the Dead Sea served as hiding places for the scrolls from the first-century Qumran community that were not found until 1947.

South of the Judean hills, beginning a little north of Beersheba is the Negeb, which means "south country." As rainfall gradually decreases from the north of Galilee to the south, the Negeb is a region of lesser rainfall, though it has occasional springs, wells, and pools of water, at least in its northern part. Yet not far from Beersheba, there are sand dunes. Still, it is not a desert. Though uncultivated, the sparse grass of the Negeb can serve as pastureland and wheat and barley can sometimes be grown in this plateau region.

Rift and river in the valley

The west part of Palestine has, in a sense, broken off from the uplands of Transjordan in the east. The plains and the hills are now much lower than the uplands beyond the Jordan River, for the Jordan Valley is part of the greatest of all rifts on the face of the globe. The break in the earth's crust stretches from the foot of Mount Hermon in Lebanon through the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan Valley, and the Dead Sea into eastern Africa through Lake Victoria and on to Lake Nyasa in southern Africa. Pressures deep in the earth caused layers of rock to fracture and allowed the region to the east to sink all along the line of the break. The floor of the Jordan Valley is now much lower than the level of the Mediterranean Sea.

While the great rift of the Jordan Valley runs north and south, other smaller rifts, such as that in the Valley of Jezreel and the Plain of Esdraelon run east and west through the hills of western Palestine.

The Jordan River finds its source in springs near the foot of Mount Hermon, the 9,230 foot mountain at the frontier of Palestine, covered

Beasts of Burden

The beast of burden for the founding families when they came to Palestine was the ass. The camel was not domesticated until the days of Gideon (Judg. 6:5). The mention of camels in the days of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 12:16; 24:10-66) is a romantic touch from a later age.

with snow in the winter with patches remaining even through the summer. Several streams in rushing torrents combine near Dan to form the Jordan which once spread out into a marsh called Lake Huleh which was 230 feet above sea level. Over the years, Lake Huleh filled with silt and now has been drained so that it no longer exists.

Leaving the site of Huleh, the Jordan channel drops 925 feet. When it reaches the Sea of Galilee (called *Chinnereth* in the Old Testament), it is 695 feet below sea level. Such is the depth of the rift valley at this point. But it is to go lower yet.

The Sea of Galilee marks a broadening of the rift valley. This heart-shaped body of water is twelve miles long and seven miles across at its widest point. The hills and shores surrounding the Galilee are of basalt, volcanic rock from ancient volcanoes that once were active in the mountain region. A small level plain on the sea's northwest side is known as the Plain of Gennesaret.

South of Galilee, the valley narrows to four to eight miles wide and then to two miles at its midpoint between Galilee and the Dead Sea. It spreads out to about twelve miles wide near Jericho. The valley itself offers stretches of fertile farmland broken by the many streams flowing into the Jordan and washing much debris onto the plain.

The Jordan ends in the Dead Sea at 1,274 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is the saltiest body of water (25 percent) in the world because it has no outlet. Its northern basin is almost 1,300 feet deep. The Dead Sea is the lowest spot on earth and is at the center of the Palestinian rift which continues another 100 miles south to Elath on the Gulf of Aqaba.

Sometime outposts in the uplands

Less well known to the readers of the Bible are the uplands east of the Jordan for they were away from the center of Israel's life. Yet, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh had settlements in this region, contesting for space with those invaders who pressed in on Israel from the northeast.

We again begin our survey near Mount Hermon and move southward. The Transjordan uplands, being on the high side of the great fault, are higher than the Judean and Samaritan hills to the west which have dropped with the fault line. Looking toward the east, we see that the upland plateau slopes away toward the Arabian desert.

North of the Yarmuk River and east of the Sea of Galilee is Bashan, the name of both a mountain and a plateau. The whole area up to the Yarmuk is covered with basalt, the black rock formed from lava.

Moving toward the south, we come next to Gilead, a pleasant land with its rounded hills covered with trees. Grapes and olives grew in this region and the "balm of Gilead" (Jer. 8:22; 46:11) promoted the fame of the region. Ramoth-gilead, one of the outposts of Israel, was sometimes in Syrian hands.

The trees begin to disappear when we come to Ammon, and the rainfall for agriculture is also limited. Ammon's borders are indefinite, its basin separating Gilead from Moab. The River Jabbok encircles the area, rising in Rabbah and flowing toward the Jordan.

Moab is the part of the Transjordan upland on the east side of the Dead Sea. Moab is almost a level tableland where wheat and barley can be grown and the pasturelands support sheep, goats, and camels. The

Wilderness Names

The wilderness areas around the edges of Palestine are known by seventeen different names, most of them beginning with "wilderness of" followed by the name of a nearby site or village:

Engedi, 1 Sam. 24:1

Tekoa, 2 Chron. 20:20

Maon, 1 Sam. 23:24, 25

Ziph, 1 Sam. 23:14, 15

Judah, Judges 1:16

Jeshimon or "Desolation," 1 Sam. 23:24

How Many People Lived in Palestine?

No more than a million ever lived in Palestine at one time and that was during a time of peace and prosperity in the age of the monarchy, according to C. C. McCown in the *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 3, p. 638). Minimum population may have been 500,000 to 600,000. In the sixth century B.C., Judah had 20,000 people; a century later, 50,000.

Erosion

Palestine, a poor land, has been getting poorer. In the cultivated regions north of Beersheba and Jericho, it has been estimated that as much as seventy-eight inches of soil have been eroded away since the time of Christ, most of it disappearing as a result of poor methods of farming.

From Wood to Stone

The forests which once covered the land have been victims of steady deforestation that started already in the time that the Israelites first came into the land (Josh. 17:15-18). The increasing use of stone pillars in later years indicates that trees were already in scarce supply during the days of Solomon.

heartland of Moab is between the Arnon and the Zered rivers.

South of Moab are Edom and Midian. Edom is the "red region" taking its name from the red rocks and soil that abound in this region south of the Zered. Some farming is possible, but the Edomites gained their chief wealth from the iron and copper that they mined from their hills.

The Land of Midian, south of Edom and on the east shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, is also in the northwest part of the Arabian peninsula which has long been peopled by tribes of nomads.

Over the land—all kinds of weather

Since Palestine is at the edge of the Great Sea, it has a Mediterranean climate, which means winter rains and summer drought. The Saharan belt which encircles the world is not far away, and its heat and dryness move in over the land each summer.

But the climate is more varied than this simple summary suggests, for each of the land forms has a slightly different weather pattern which ranges from the subarctic on the slopes of Mount Hermon to subtropical at the surface of the Dead Sea. Extremes of all kinds can be expected. Both Jerusalem and Jericho have experienced snow, rare as that may be.

Being in between climates has disadvantages. The pests of both tropical and temperate climates infest the land along with locusts and mildew.

The politics of geography

At best, Palestine was always in a border area, both in terms of its climate and its location. On the one hand, its limited fertile areas and its rainfall meant that agriculture alone could not sustain the nation. On the other hand, it meant that people were pushed back toward the plateaus and pasturelands as shepherds. So, the culture of the simple nomadic life clashed with the trend toward commerce and trade and its complex political alliances. Those contacts with people from foreign lands with other views of the world and with other values disturbed the peace of a sheltered community.

Both the ruggedness of the land and its indefensible borders meant that Palestine could rarely accumulate much internal wealth and could really not hope to develop as a strong nation. Only in the rare times when the powers at both ends of the Fertile Crescent were weak or involved with their own local affairs could the people living in Palestine live undisturbed, and even then, the center of power gravitated toward Damascus and not to Samaria or Jerusalem.

The four distinct north-to-south zones into which Palestine was divided meant that it was easier for people to move north and south rather than east and west. It was really hard for the nation to achieve unity. Local groups often had more power and influence than larger regional movements.

The theology of geography

The desert experience which the people had before they entered the Promised Land was also a fact of geography which made a mark on their lives. Their wanderings in the wilderness gave them a fear of the desert. Yet it was there that they met God. Yahweh, they found, was the

Lord over the forces of the desert. And it was in the wilderness that they made their covenant with their God.

Thus, they could not fashion an image of God after any object in nature, because God was not in nature (Exod. 20:4, 5; Deut. 5:8). God was in their history, acting in their behalf in the Exodus. Nature makes no demands on people, but history does, and people must come to terms with their encounters with God. The faith of Israel had a living and growing edge because they found God in the events of their lives.

If there was one element of nature in which the Israelites could find God, it was in the rain and the storm. "The voice of Yahweh is upon the water; the God of glory thunders. . . . The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire; (Ps. 29:3, 7). Yet, the idea of God was not identified with the storm but with the force that led the people and delivered them even in the Exodus: "Yahweh is a man of war; Yahweh is his name" (Exod. 15:3).

Discovery

1. Ask each person in your group: What events in the Bible can you understand more clearly when the geography of the land is seen as part of the story? Or, if ideas come slowly, take several well-known Bible stories or Bible characters and ask: How does geography add more understanding and information to these events and these people?

2. Palestine was a small and comparatively poor country with little power in the world. Had Palestine been large, rich, and powerful, would this have changed the people's faith in Yahweh? In what ways?

Resources

Baly, Denis. *The Geography of the Bible*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. An excellent guidebook.

See the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* or a similar work for such articles as "Palestine, Geography of," "Arabah," "Galilee," "Jordan," "Judea," "Negeb," "Samaria, Territory of," "Shephelah," "Transjordan," and "Wilderness."

Inventory

1. List the four geographical zones of Palestine.

2. Name the three bodies of water in Palestine that are below sea level.

3. What is the approximate size of Palestine: the distance from Dan to Beersheba? the average distance from the seacoast to the Jordan River?

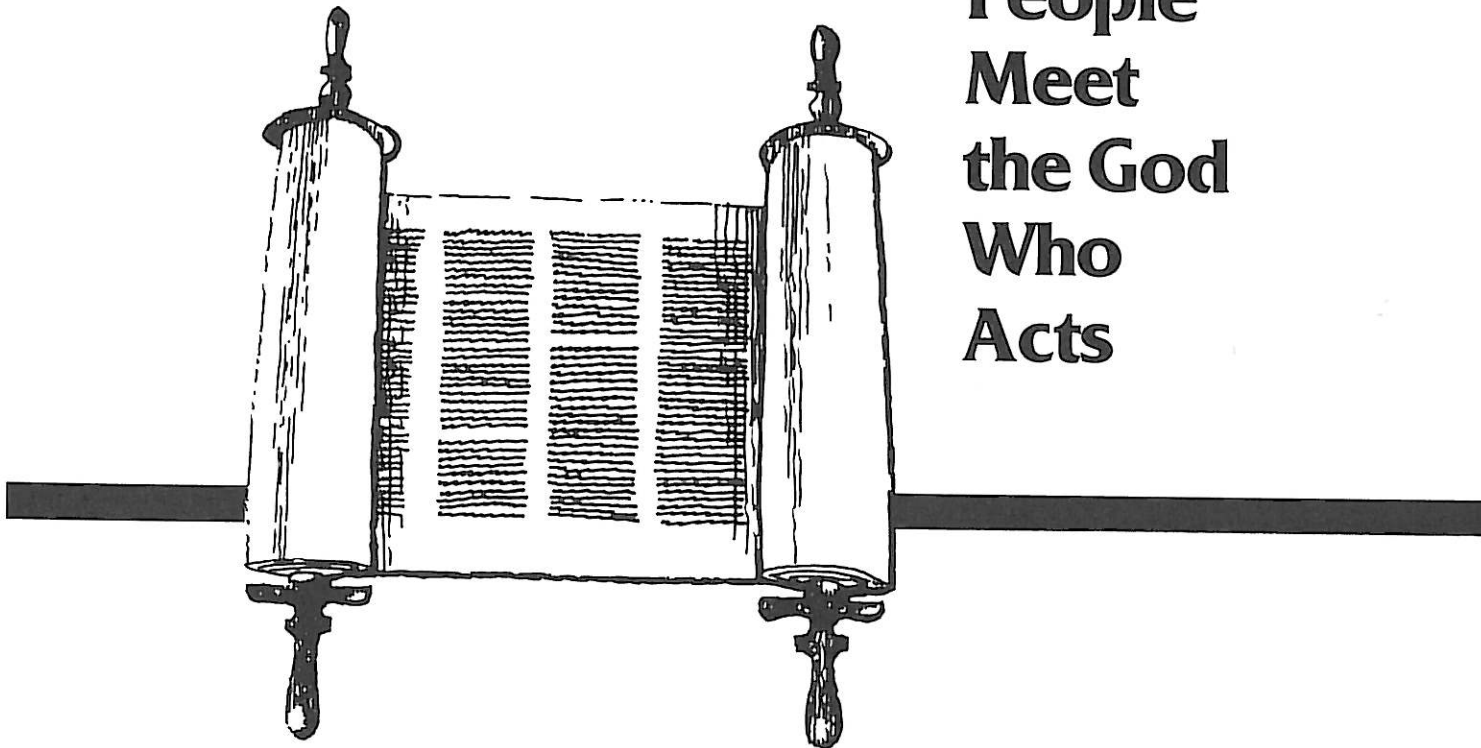
4. What minerals and ores are found in the soil of Palestine?

5. Identify:

Canaan
Carmel
Edom
Esdraelon
Galilee
Gaza
Gennesaret
Gilead
Huleh
Jezreel
Moab
Mount Hermon
Nazareth
Negeb
Qumran
Samaria
Shephelah
Transjordan

PART III

**The
People
Meet
the God
Who
Acts**



CHAPTER 6

The Founding Events

44

Gist

Exodus and Sinai are the founding events, encounters that bind together grace and law. God heard the groaning of the people in their bondage in Egypt, remembered the promises to the founding families, and acted. Once delivered, the people found themselves at Sinai, where in gratitude for their salvation, they committed themselves to live according to the will and law of God.

They went down into Egypt, just a small number of persons—this family, the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. But in coming out of Egypt several hundred years later, they were on their way, claiming the promise that had been given to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebekah, and to Jacob and his family. They were being born as a nation as God had told the founding families they would be. Now they were off to claim the second part of the promise—the land.

We come to an event of central import: the hinge of history on which all other events were destined to turn, both for Israel and for the church. Even if we do not know all the acts that went into the forging of that hinge, one thing we do know: all else turns on it.

We call it *Exodus*.

Setting the time for the Exodus

Let's lift out what we know about the setting for the founding events. We know of Egypt; we know of Moses, of slaves who were oppressed, and of people who fled, making an impossible dash for freedom. We know that they were delivered and that they came to Sinai. And through it all, we know of Yahweh, the God of the founding families, and now the God of the new nation, the God revealed in a new way and with a new name.

During the history of Egypt, a time came when cities were built in the Nile Delta. Actually, they were being rebuilt, we discover, when we come to the sites which in the Bible are called *Pithom* and *Raamses* (Exod. 1:11). It was during the reign of Ramesses II that cities were being renewed. One of them was Avaris, the former fortress of the Hyksos people, which Ramesses now made his capital. He called it "the house of Ramesses."

Many years earlier, the Egyptians had driven out the Hyksos, the foreign invaders who had ruled Egypt for almost two hundred years.

After that, the Egyptians enlarged their empire to its greatest extent so that their power reached all across Palestine and Syria and up to the Euphrates River. They were determined that no foe would ever repeat the humiliation that they had suffered at the hands of the Hyksos. Perhaps it was for this reason that Ramesses made the city which had been the center of Hyksos power the capital of Egypt. Being on the frontier with Asia, Avaris was the first line of defense against a possible future invasion.

Ramesses II, who reigned from 1290 to 1224 B.C., gives us a point in history from which to date the Exodus and the events that followed it. During the early thirteenth century, the kings of Egypt were open to petitions from their slaves such as those brought by Moses and Aaron.

God revealed as Yahweh

The Exodus began in the revelation of God and God's grace. God revealed himself to Moses with the new name of Yahweh (Exod. 3:13-15), showing that in this new name was the beginning of a new era. Moses and the people came to know Yahweh also as the God of the founding families (6:2, 3), though the families did not know God by that name.

Moses played a special part in the Exodus, a role unlike that assumed by any other person in the history of these people. He was more than the agent of Yahweh; he served as the source of their contact with God and as their source of revelation from God.

How did Moses come to discover Yahweh? Was Yahweh worshiped first under that name by the people of Midian, where Jethro was a priest (Exod. 3:1) of the clan among whom Moses lived for a time? Moses had a special relationship with Jethro, who assisted him in matters of organizing the tribes and was also a leader in ceremonies of Yahweh worship (18:10-12).

What we do know for certain is that Yahweh did make himself known to the people in their history. This is the testimony of the Exodus and the experience at Sinai.

Passover's greatest story

Exodus 1—15 is the record of salvation. In each episode, the testimony comes through: Yahweh is at work. Here we have more than a recital of historical events; we have one continuous confession of faith.

Yahweh used the very fact of the oppression to begin the process of redemption. The slaughter of the firstborn sons meant to destroy the people became the vehicle out of which a deliverer came: Moses was reared within the household of the enemy of Yahweh's people (Exod. 1:8—2:10).

Moses' first attempt to liberate the oppressed people of Israel ended in disaster. He killed a slave driver who was beating one of the Hebrews. Though he thought he had acted in secret, his deed became known and he had to flee to the desert to escape the wrath of Pharaoh. Worse than that, the Hebrews rejected his authority and the violence with which he tried to gain justice (Exod. 2:11-25).

In exile, Moses received a call from Yahweh (3:1—4:17) in which God disclosed himself through three powerful symbols: the burning bush, the holy ground, and the divine name (3:2, 5, 14). That call set him

Journal

Enter into your journal, one or more observations on each of the following readings:

Exodus 1. What was life like in Egypt?

Exodus 2. What things were being done to change conditions?

Exodus 3. What was the outline for the future events?

Exodus 14. Who engaged in battle? Who won the battle?

Exodus 15:1-18. The Song of Moses (which begins by quoting the Song of Miriam) is an ancient poetic version of the Exodus, more ancient than the prose narrative. What new information and new feeling does it bring to us?

Exodus 15:21. The Song of Miriam is perhaps the oldest fragment of writing in the Bible; it may be the witness of someone who was on the scene. How much of the meaning of the Exodus can you find in these two short lines?

Yahweh—Meaning in the Name

Exodus 3:14 says the name of Yahweh means, "I Am Who I Am."

Other attempts at unlocking the meaning put it into the third person: "Yahweh Who Creates/ Brings Into Being."

Another try: "It Is He Who Causes to Be What Comes Into Existence."

Seed

Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of Yahweh, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to be still. . . . Awake, awake, put on strength, / O arm of Yahweh; / awake, as in days of old, / the generations of long ago. . . . Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea, / the waters of the great deep; / that didst make the depths of the sea a way / for the redeemed to pass over? . . . All that Yahweh has spoken we will do (Exod. 14:13, 14; Isa. 51:9, 10; Exod. 19:8).

apart from all who had gone before him. Others, such as Abraham and Sarah, had received revelations of God. But with the disclosure to Moses came something new: a commission to carry the message to others—to Pharaoh and to the people of Israel (3:10; 6:6).

The second report of God's call to Moses appears in the Priestly document (6:2—7:7). P had a special interest in Aaron's role in the Exodus event as the founder of Israel's priesthood. Here Yahweh spoke both to Moses and to Aaron (6:13).

In this second call to Moses, the promise of the gift of the land given to Abraham was renewed and the people were promised adoption into the covenant as God's people. All of this came with the promise of deliverance from the "burdens of the Egyptians" (6:6-8).

When Moses and Aaron brought God's command to Pharaoh to release the people, they addressed the king in the same form in which the later Hebrew prophets would speak to the kings of Israel and Judah: "Thus saith Yahweh" (4:22; 5:1; 7:17; 8:1; 9:1). Aaron is even described as being like a prophet to Moses (7:1), and in another part of the Pentateuch Moses is held up as the first of all the prophets (Deut. 18:18).

How the Egyptians came to know Yahweh

The first approach to Pharaoh began the contest for the release of the people. Each request was met with more oppression which was followed by a series of plagues, each more costly and damaging to the Egyptians than the one before until the tenth plague reached the first-born son of each Egyptian family. The central theme of the encounters was that "the Egyptians shall know that I am Yahweh" (7:5; cf. 8:22; 9:14, 16; 10:1, 2).

Each time the oppression was increased and the efforts to destroy the people were escalated, the energy of Yahweh was released in ever greater measure. As Pharaoh, the oppressor, grew more resolute, his defeat became more certain. In their contests over the plagues, Pharaoh and Moses were working through a litany that affirmed at each step that miracle-working power belonged only to the God of Israel. Thus the wonders of Yahweh were multiplied in Egypt (11:9).

In the end, Moses won a dramatic victory over the powers of evil. Israel did not flee in secret under the cover of deceit. The powerful people of Egypt pleaded with them to go, willingly stooped down to beg for their prompt departure, and gladly gave of their silver and gold to speed them on their way (12:33-36). Thus the Exodus happened, the triumph of Yahweh's power and the proof of God's great love for his people.

But the Exodus was not yet complete, for the people still faced the testing of the sea (13:17—14:31). As he had done nine times before, Pharaoh relented and hardened his heart. He set out with his horses and chariots in pursuit of the Israelites whom he quickly trapped at the water's edge. But Yahweh intervened. A marvelous combination of the ordinary and the miraculous joined forces to provide the rescue. The waters were split by the rod of Moses and by a strong east wind that blew all night so that the sea bed was bare. The divine cloud and the darkness held the Egyptians back while the sea parted and the people escaped. Then, the mud in the bottom of the sea clogged the wheels of the heavy Egyptian chariots.

The Language of Salvation

From the Exodus event has come much of the language central to the Bible's vocabulary of salvation:

Bring out: 3:8, 10; 6:6;

12:51; 16:6; 18:1

Deliver: 3:8; 6:6

Lead forth: 13:21; 32:34

Mighty acts: 32:11; Ps.

145:4

Redeem: 6:6

Salvation: 14:13, 30; 15:2

Signs and wonders: 7:3;

Deut. 6:22; 7:19; 26:8;

34:11

At one time, Exodus 1—15 may have been part of the service of praise recited at each year's Passover feast. Its careful and dramatic construction shows that every word and every phrase had been honed to sharpen the believer's sense of the power and miracle in Yahweh's deliverance.

Liberation at the Reed Sea

The oldest form of the Passover liturgy is found within the poetry of Exodus 15, in the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam. We hear the most ancient couplet in the Bible sung in the solo voice of Miriam in verse 21:

Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

Here is the heart of the event—at the sea. The sea which was the obstacle to liberation, which threatened to become the agency of annihilation turned into the medium for their salvation. The soldiers and horses of Pharaoh closed in on the refugees trapped by the sea. Then, the sea opened up and rescued them and then closed over their enemies to seal their deliverance. Yahweh had triumphed gloriously.

The Greek translators of the Septuagint gave the name of the sea as the "Red" Sea, though a literal translation of the Hebrew text demanded *reed* instead of *red*. Luther, because he returned to the Hebrew text for his German translation, rendered the term correctly as *Schilfmeer* (sea of reeds).

Early English translators, following the Latin versions which followed the Greek, kept to "Red Sea" in Exodus 13:18; 15:4, and other places, which has complicated the plotting of the route of the Exodus. Had the fleeing slaves started out on a trek to the Red Sea (of which the Gulf of Suez is a part), they would have had to detour far to the south of the Nile delta and they would have been quickly overtaken by Pharaoh's horsemen. The Reed Sea may have been a part of Lake Menzaleh in whose fresh waters reeds would be expected to grow. If so, it was more directly along the way to the wilderness.

It was here that the faith of the people met its first test when they were trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army. The wind parted the waters allowing them to pass.

Yahweh is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation (Exod. 15:2).

This was the grace of God. God had heard their cry for release and liberation and had taken account of their needs (Exod. 2:23-25). God had acted.

The mixed multitude and the Hebrews

Who were these people redeemed from the bondage of Egypt? We met them as slaves building the store cities of Egypt. We know also that they were called *Hebrews* (1:22). In the records of Egypt, we read about a people called *Habiru* who were used as slaves of the government to work on royal projects. A pharaoh in the fifteenth century brought 3,600 Habiru to Egypt as prisoners of war.

From the inscriptions and records of the time, we learn that the Habiru were not a specific race. Rather, they were a true mixed

Two Lists of Plagues

In the ten plagues, we have a combination of two lists of scourges. The Yahwist (J) of Jerusalem knows of seven. His list appears in Psalm 78:43-57. To this list, the Priestly writer (P) added the plagues of gnats, murrain, and boils (Exod. 8:16-19; 9:1-7; 9:8-12) which then appear in Psalm 105:28-36 with the other seven plagues.

Nature Religion and the Status Quo

"The ancient paganisms were nature religions, the gods being for the most part identified with the heavenly bodies, or the forces of nature, and, like nature, without particular moral character. Their doings, as described in the myth, reflected the rhythmic yet unchanging pattern of nature upon which the life of earthly society depended.

"Through reenactment of the myth, and the performance of ritual acts designed for the renewal of the cosmic power, they were appealed to as maintainers of the *status quo*. . . . The ancient paganisms lacked any sense of a divine guidance of history toward a goal."

—Bright, *History of Israel*, 3rd edition, page 161.

multitude—fugitives, refugees, and poor people—who appeared in Palestine and Mesopotamia as well as in Egypt. When the people of Israel left Egypt, they had with them a "mixed multitude" and even "a rabble" (Exod. 12:38; Num. 11:4). We can be sure that it was not only the children of Jacob who wanted freedom from Pharaoh's bondage. Many people in Egypt must have wanted to escape. Some of them were Semites like the Israelites. Some were Habiru. Still others may have been Egyptians, for we recognize Egyptian names in the group, even in the family of Levi: Hophni, Phinehas, Merari, Aaron, and even Moses.

On their pilgrimage through the desert, the Israelites took in other peoples. For example, Moses' father-in-law Jethro was a Midianite. Jethro met the liberated people in the wilderness (Exod. 18:5-9; Num. 10:29-32) and his clan continued on with the people of Israel. Caleb, who figured in the life of the pilgrims later, was a Kenizzite, one of the clans of Edom (Num. 14:6; Josh. 14:14; Gen. 36:11, 15).

Meaning in the encounter not in the mass

Even so, the Exodus group may not have been large. The record says that the body that left Egypt may have numbered over a million people, for the narrator claims that it included 600,000 men able to do military service plus women and children (Exod. 12:37).

However, a million or more people with flocks and herds would have formed a continuous procession all the way from Egypt to Sinai, a procession far too large to have crossed the sea in one night (Exod. 14:24). The count was probably closer to a thousand, an assembly that could have been served by two midwives (Exod. 1:15). Likely, the figure was inflated in an effort to glorify an event that is its own reason for glory. The Exodus gets its meaning not from the mass of people involved but from the experience itself.

Some of Egypt's slaves probably left the country at different times and by different routes, meeting the Exodus group at later stages in their travels. Eventually, they all recognized each other as inheritors of the same experience of deliverance. The nation that they formed was a group of people related not just by family ties but by the bond of faith that God had saved them.

Sinai linked with Exodus

Immediately following the Exodus, the liberated people arrived at Sinai, a site which cannot be identified with any certainty, though tradition has placed it in the south part of the Sinai peninsula at a mountain called for centuries *Jebel Musa* (the mount of Moses). The specific spot is not nearly as important as the covenant that it came to represent.

The covenant at Sinai brought together the grace of God and the Law of God. Exodus was the drama of God's grace. God heard the groaning of the people in bondage, remembered the promises to the founding families, and acted (Exod. 2:23-25). At Sinai, the people responded to God's grace in a covenant in which they committed themselves to live according to the Law of God, the constitution of their nation (19:3-8).

Exodus and Sinai became the founding events for the liberated ones who were no longer oppressed slaves but a free nation. The Exodus was God's action and God's grace in the gift of liberation. Sinai was the grateful human response, a commitment to live according to the

will and law of God. Here is the central theme of the Pentateuch, the center of the Old Testament and of all biblical religion. All else that follows will be measured by these experiences. All events will be different because they will be illuminated by the Exodus and by Sinai.

The faithfulness (more often unfaithfulness) of the people will be measured against the grace of God in the Exodus. All other expressions of God's grace will be seen as confirmation of the Exodus. These founding events set the people apart from the people of other nations and from the people who worshiped other gods. They had a faith in the God who acts in history.

The feasts of the Canaanites were festivals of nature, handles to wind up the machinery of the natural order. Their rites were meant to spawn the fertility from which flowed all the coveted gifts of nature. But for those who had been saved in the Exodus, history, the arena of God's mighty acts, promised true prosperity. So, the faith acts of Israel's people affirmed their great deliverance by Yahweh.

When they arrived in their new homes, they set the Passover in the place of the Canaanite rites of spring (Exod. 13:3-5). The Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles), which recalled the wanderings of the people in the wilderness, replaced the fall olive festival (Lev. 23:33-36; 39-43). In both of these holy exercises, they lived once again through the days of bondage in Egypt and those years in the wilderness when the founding events molded them and changed them into a new people.

From the beginning, Sinai was the goal of the Exodus. Yahweh said to Moses: "When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain" (Exod. 3:12). By the grace of God, the Sinai covenant forged a special people.

Discovery

1. Ask each member of your group: What are the new insights that have come to you through the study of Exodus? About what things would you like to know more? Keep track of the answers and discuss the ideas mentioned most often and those that appear most central to the theme of the chapter.

2. What goes into the making of a nation or a congregation? How important is common ancestry? How important is a common experience of salvation? Which is more important? Why?

3. Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles renewed each year the remembrance of the founding events as Christmas and Easter recall the important events in the life of the church. Compare and contrast these two sets of festivals. How are they similar? How do they differ?

4. Grace and law are two strands in the life of God's people. How are these important elements defined by Exodus and Sinai?

Resources

Anderson, Bernhard W. "Liberation from Bondage," *Understanding the Old Testament*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Chapter 2, pages 46-74.

Inventory

Write the answers to these questions in your journal:

1. Who was the pharaoh of the Exodus?

2. Who were the Habiru?

3. What was the name of the sea of the Exodus?

4. Where may the oldest couplet in the Bible be found?

5. What is the approximate date of the Exodus?

6. What was the name of God revealed to Moses?

7. What are the feasts that commemorate the founding events?

8. Identify:

Aaron

Avaris

Canaan

Hyksos

Jethro

Moses

Pentateuch

Ramesses II

Reed Sea

Septuagint

Yahweh

CHAPTER 7

The Covenant for a People Under God

50

Gist

Far from being a dead legalism, the Law meant a living covenant of the people responding freely in grateful obedience to the God who had redeemed them. The terms to this special relationship to which they gave themselves appear in the absolutes of the Ten Commandments, in the special concern for justice reflected in their case law, and their drive for holiness. The wilderness testing of their commitment became a model for the later life of Israel.

Rules and regulations—what a drag!

That's the way we often feel. And the feeling gets reinforcement from the conventional wisdom that puts down the Old Testament law as a denial of the grace of God, as a binding and outmoded legalism.

Yet if we let the covenant law of Israel speak for itself, we find that for the people of Israel, the law was a source of endless celebration:

I long for thy salvation, O Yahweh
and thy law is my delight (Ps. 119:174).

This law was linked with liberation, with freedom, and with salvation. Wrapped up in the law was the grace of the God of Exodus. The law was their joyful response to their redemption.

Law as the compressed history of Israel

At Sinai, the people of God responded to what God had done for them in the Exodus. They made a covenant with Yahweh which committed them to be a separate people for God, to be aware of Yahweh's presence, and to live holy lives.

The Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22—23:33, repeated in part in Exod. 34) and the Holiness Code (Lev. 17—26) represent the character of this commitment. They attuned themselves to God's grace that had liberated them. The covenant made them a nation. It had the glue to hold the mixed multitude of people together.

Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers hold more than the record of the Sinai experience. They also contain material from later years. Here are the responses to the founding events given by Israel from the time of the monarchy up until the Exile.

Many of the laws in these books have ancient roots going back even to the days in the desert. But other parts of the law codes came later, after the people settled in the land and reflected on their history. So, in the Pentateuch, we have a compressed history with contributions from various periods of Israelite life.

Yet, the conviction remains that God gave the law at Sinai. Law, for the Israelites, did not issue from priests or kings, but only from God who was the king of kings. Though the law grew over the years, yet all law, it was felt, was part of the single event in the wilderness of Sinai.

Frightfulness of holiness

In terms of the biblical record, the interlude at Sinai extends from Exodus 19:1 to Numbers 10:10. All this space was given over to defining the relationship between Yahweh and Yahweh's people—obedience and conformity to the purpose of God.

The experience at Sinai began with theophany (a great vision of God, Exod. 19:16-23). The imagery was that of a great mountain storm or even of a volcanic eruption. The event suggested something of the frightfulness of holiness and the presence of God.

In later years, the tent of meeting and the tabernacle represented the divine presence in the midst of the people. It was a presence not to be taken lightly. On one hand, it was the glory of the people. But on the other, it was the threat of destruction. For, if the people did not measure up to Yahweh's standard of holiness, they would be punished.

Ten Words for welfare and protection

Right at the beginning, God gave Ten Words (or Commandments, Exod. 20:2-17). These words set the boundaries around life to consecrate it just as a cordon was put around the holy mountain for the protection and welfare of the people. The laws that followed in the Book of the Covenant were "ordinances" (21:1) which applied the principles of the Ten Words.

Yahweh was the God of unrepeatable events in history more than of the repeatable events of nature. Nature worship was an exercise in maintaining the status quo—an effort to keep the system going. But God called his people out of the routine of their bondage into a new order with a new future. The new society had a goal, an order that was open to change and to new life.

Unique in the Ten Words was the ban on graven images. This prohibition was a feature of Israel's religion from earliest times and it separated Israel from the idol religions of its neighbors. The ban on images was not a reaction against idolatry but an affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of God. Pagans believed that through the visible image they could manipulate and control their god. The people of Yahweh knew that could not be done and they allowed themselves no such temptation.

Wilderness for the special and select

What was it that held the tribes together through their wilderness wanderings for forty years? What sustained them during the even more difficult years of settling the land? It was nothing less than this special covenant that they had with their God, a commitment that gave them purpose. They knew that they were people set apart.

This sense "of set-apartness" appeared already in the experience of the plagues in Egypt. While the people of Egypt were attacked by each plague in turn, the people of God were spared. The Elohist (E) narrator singled them out as God's "own possession among all people" (Exod. 19:5).

The Song of Moses celebrated the special attention given to them:

Thou hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou
hast redeemed,
thou hast guided them by thy strength to thy holy abode
(Exod. 15:13).

Journal

Read the following passages and record some of your observations.

Exodus 20—23. The first part of the first chapter contains the Ten Words (or Commandments). Exodus 20:22—23:33 is known as the Book of the Covenant and is, in a sense, a digest of this part of the Pentateuch.

Leviticus 25. Note the effort to prevent economic exploitation and to give everyone a fresh start.

Numbers 21. The conquest of the land begins even before the wilderness wanderings end.

Seed

Then [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." . . . The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your God. . . . If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase . . . and you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land securely. . . . Great peace have those who love thy law; nothing can make them stumble (Exod. 24:7; Lev. 19:34; 26:3-5; Ps. 119:165).

During the wilderness experience, the marks of Yahweh's favor were readily evident: the pillar of cloud and fire, the angel, the miraculous gifts of quail and manna (Exod. 13:21; 14:19; 16:13, 15). All these gifts and signs belonged to the generation of people in the wilderness. In a special way, they had been elected by God (Lev. 20:26). Their age was a special time of separateness marked most uniquely by the presence of the man Moses, whose face reflected the glory of God (Exod. 34:29-35).

But almost nonstop rebellion

As in the case of the covenant, so in the case of election, it was always clear that election was by reason of the unmerited grace of God. Really, that was their only possibility, their only hope. For the record shows that Israel was cowardly, ungrateful, and rebellious.

The theme of rebellion seems almost nonstop. The covenant was broken almost as soon as it was made. It had just been ratified with solemn ceremony through the reading of the agreement and the sprinkling of the blood (Exod. 24:3-11) to which the people responded, "All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do" (24:3, 7). Within forty days, the people had broken the principal terms of the covenant; they made and worshiped a molten calf (32:1-6).

That tradition of broken promises with God had embedded itself deeply into human history. First came the Garden, followed by the sin and expulsion. Noah and his family celebrated their release from the ark with a sacrifice of thanksgiving and the covenant rainbow, but then came the story of Noah's drunkenness. And the beat went on. Even priests went wrong. Aaron and his sons were ordained in a most solemn ritual, following which Nadab and Abihu transgressed their vows (Lev. 10:1, 2).

Two kinds of covenant

Yes, the law might be broken time and again, but the law led the way to restoring relationships with Yahweh. Two kinds of covenants were active in the experience of the people. God made an *unconditional* covenant with the founding families (Gen. 12:1-3). The one made through Moses with Yahweh was a *conditional* covenant in which the people promised faithfulness (Exod. 19:8; 24:7).

Even though the people broke their covenant, God kept the contract, though not without consequence to the people. When the transgression of the golden calf was followed by other infidelities, a whole generation perished in the wilderness (Exod. 32:1-35; Num. 14:26-32). But God brought their children into the Promised Land.

Two kinds of law with justice for the poor

When we look at the law more clearly, we must ask: Where did the law come from?

Much of the law reflects an agricultural situation, which means that some of the regulations grew out of Israel's own experience as a farming people. But they also worked side by side with the cultivators of Canaan and with people from Mesopotamia who had a similar agricultural and pastoral background. The law of the goading ox (Exod. 21:28-32), for example, is similar to a law found in the code of Hammurabi, the noted lawgiver-king of early Babylon.

Yet some of the law is very ancient and may have originated in the desert. Much of it has the stamp of Moses on it as do the Ten Commandments. The mark of Moses is on the stream of Israelite law regardless of its source.

These laws come in two major varieties: absolute law and case laws. The absolute law is like that of the Ten Commandments: principles by which all other laws are measured. It says, "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." It marks out what is free and what is forbidden.

Case laws deal with specific offenses, for example, the goring ox. Such was the law applied by the judges appointed in the desert by Moses at the suggestion of Jethro, his father-in-law and the priest of Midian (Exod. 18:13-23). They applied the principles of the covenant and the commandments to the issues and disputes of real life.

One of the principles of the law was for righteousness and justice that would protect the weak, the oppressed, the poor, and the enslaved. Behind that principle stood the whole substance of the Exodus itself:

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exod. 22:21).

That was the overriding principle. Other words gave special attention to the widow, the orphan, and the poor (vv. 22-27). Justice was not a matter of social class but of redemptive action according to need. Lend money without interest and always exercise compassion to the poor—those were the instructions.

Holiness for a kingdom of priests

Leviticus comes to us as the priest's manual, but it was not a book for priests alone. It aimed to teach the difference between the holy and the profane, between the pure and the impure (Lev. 10:10; 14:57; 15:31). Many of the regulations about purity and impurity and about cleanness and uncleanness may seem strange to modern readers. Yet, through the laws of purification, the people affirmed the dedication of their life to Yahweh.

The priesthood did not spring up full blown in the desert, nor was the function of priesthood awarded immediately to a particular family. In the early years of the people's history, many local shrines were served by families from various tribes. For example, Samuel, an Ephraimite, was the priest of Shiloh.

Priestliness had a diffuse definition. If the people of God were elect and separate, it was all for a purpose. The reason was given at Sinai early on: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6).

Atonement for good health

From Leviticus 16 comes the institution of the Day of Atonement. This festival came into Jewish life long after the time of the wilderness wanderings, even after the fall of Jerusalem. Yet the day has ancient roots that go far back into the life of the people. The ceremony of the scapegoat is a ritual that must have been practiced in early times, perhaps even in the wilderness.

The Day of Atonement concerned itself with the spiritual health and wholeness of the community. The accumulated sins of the past year were removed and reconciliation between God and the people

No Levites in Leviticus

Except for two verses in chapter 25, the Levites receive no mention in Leviticus. The rules and regulations for Levites are in the Book of Numbers.

achieved. It was a solemn occasion and a day of fasting. It has been described as the "Good Friday of the Old Testament."

God gives the blood of sacrifice

The meaning of sacrifice is linked with the deeper meaning of the covenant in Leviticus 17. For sacrifice was not a human endeavor, as is often assumed, to which God was a spectator, albeit, an interested one. Rather, God actively took part in the sacrifice.

We can understand that the slaughter of the animal of sacrifice represented for the worshiper a surrendered life including time, property, and self. The blood of the victim summed this up most profoundly: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls" (17:11). The meal offering affirmed the same principle, where God said of the flour that was burnt: "I have given it as their portion of my offerings by fire" (6:17). The urgent emphasis here is that God is active in the covenant.

Recycle wealth and opportunity

The meaning of the covenant was further expanded in the Holiness Code, a special section in Leviticus 17 to 26. Speaking through Moses on Mount Sinai, Yahweh told the people, "You shall be holy; for I Yahweh your God am holy" (19:2).

Within the Holiness Code were orders for the sabbatical years and for the year of jubilee (25:1-24). Every seventh year, the land was to experience a sabbath of rest when the earth would not be plowed nor crops sown. And after seven sabbaticals, the fiftieth year was hallowed to "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (v. 10, the verse inscribed on the Liberty Bell of the United States at the suggestion of a member of the Society of Friends in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania).

The jubilee was to be a time for the cancellation of debts, a time to set slaves free, and a time to return property to its original owners. Exodus 23:10, 11 and Deuteronomy 15:1-11 give additional instructions for these special years, making them a time for aiding the poor and correcting past injustices.

This special initiative for justice was again rooted in the Exodus event and in the transformation that it brought to the life of the people: "For to me the people of Israel are servants, they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. 25:55).

Last item of business at Sinai—the tabernacle

The Book of Leviticus carries a special concern for the service of the tabernacle. Even the Holiness Code does not close without bearing witness to this most special feature of Israel's faith: "I will make my abode among you. . . and I will walk among you, and will be your god, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:11, 12; cf. Exod. 33:16).

When the Jerusalem temple was designed as the central sanctuary for Judah, the tabernacle provided the model (Exod. 29:43-45). Much that was written in the Priestly Code of Leviticus was written to support the role of the Jerusalem templekeepers.

Behind these later traditions was the remembrance of a simpler age when the tabernacle was known as the "tent of meeting." Then it served as a place where God and God's people (through Moses as their

Source of the Holiness Code

The Holiness Code of Leviticus 17 to 26 seems to be a separate collection within the book. It may have been a catechism for a sanctuary school.

The code has echoes of Ezekiel in it and may come from the time of Ezekiel, who may even be its writer.

Nehemiah 8:14-18 refers to Leviticus 23:33-43. Thus, in Ezra's day, the Holiness Code was part of the Pentateuch.

Holiness Formula

The theme for the Holiness Code is sounded in the refrain repeated with variations: "I am Yahweh who sanctify": Leviticus 20:8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32; cf. 19:2, 4, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 34, 37; 20:26.

representative) could meet together to order their relationships and work out the mission of legal righteousness which was the business of the covenant. For in the tent of meeting was the ark of the covenant, the symbol of the bond between God and God's people.

The building and dedication of the tabernacle was the last item of business at Sinai. Once the tabernacle had been dedicated and all provisions made for its ministry, camp was broken and the people of Israel moved away from Sinai and on to the Promised Land (Num. 10:11, 12).

Yahweh rides the ark of the covenant

As the people journeyed through the wilderness, the ark of the covenant went before them. It was the centerpiece of the tent-shrine that was the tabernacle and the throne of the invisible Yahweh. The earliest songs of Israel hailed Yahweh as king (Exod. 15:18; Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; Ps. 29:10; 68:24). The idea of the kingdom of God did not begin with the rise of the monarchy in Israel, but with the covenant and its clear theme of the sovereignty of God.

The Song of the Ark, an ancient bit of liturgy in Numbers 10:35, 36, reflects the conviction that from the throne on the ark of the covenant, Yahweh will wage holy war in behalf of his people:

Arise, O Yahweh, and let thy enemies be scattered;
and let them that hate thee flee before thee.

In these words, the ark is addressed in Yahweh's name, for the ark is an extension of the personality of God, a sign of God's presence in the midst of the community.

More than numbers in the wilderness book

Though the Book of Numbers, because of its title, is often seen as a book of statistics, it really contains more history than numerical data. The book might more aptly be called "In the Wilderness," for it carries the only record of the thirty-eight years of wanderings from the time the people left Sinai until they arrived at Jordan to enter the Promised Land.

They moved on toward Kadesh (Num. 13:26), a great oasis on the edge of the Sinai wilderness, fifty miles south of Beersheba, the settlement where Abraham and Sarah once made their home on the edge of Canaan. The years spent here yielded few narratives, short in substance when compared to the length of years passed over almost in silence. We know that an effort was made to invade Canaan from the south, but the people were driven back.

During this time the generation that left Egypt gradually died, including their most prominent leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam—none of whom ever reached the land of promise.

But before the death of Moses, the people were able to establish a base on the east bank of the Jordan with the capture of Heshbon (Num. 21:21-32) which was followed by other conquests and the taking of the kingdom of Bashan.

The conquest of the Promised Land began even before the crossing of the Jordan.

Inventory

1. What was the main item kept in the tabernacle?
2. Where may the Holiness Code be found?
3. Where are the Ten Words recorded?
4. What was to happen in the sabbatical year? in the year of jubilee?
5. What was the purpose of the Day of Atonement?
6. What was the meaning of the ban on the images in the Ten Commandments?
7. Identify:

Beersheba
Hammurabi
Jethro
Kadesh
Sinai

Discovery

1. Ask each member of your group: What have you learned about the covenant that helps you better understand the life of the people of Israel? Keep track of the various answers. Discuss the ideas and questions most frequently mentioned.

2. What is the place of the grace of God in the living out of the covenant?

3. Though rebellion and unfaithfulness were frequent responses to the covenant, the result seemed to have a positive meaning. What was it?

4. Separation and election were convictions that grew out of covenant making. For what purpose does God separate and elect a people?

Resources

Anderson, Bernhard W. "Covenant in the Wilderness," *Understanding the Old Testament*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall. Chapter 3, pages 75-97.

Imagine that you can step into a time machine which could transport you back across the years and set you down in Jerusalem before the temple during the days of Solomon. And then you could take another whirl and walk into a synagogue in Galilee during the days of Jesus, and sit in on the service and discussions. That would be the Bible in 3-D with wraparound stereo. Events that have so often seemed flat and colorless would stand up and dance.

We don't have that time machine, but we do have the next best thing—archaeology. During the last century, this science of digging into the ruins of ancient cities and civilizations has turned up truckloads of broken pottery and clay tablets from hill-sized heaps called *tells*. From all this apparent rubbish, archaeologists have extracted information that has increased our understanding of the Bible, proving that the Bible is much more amazing than we ever imagined it to be.

Archaeology is to dig

Literally, an archaeologist digs. Breaking through the ground that has buried an ancient city long forgotten, the archaeologist discovers new facts in sifting through old dust.

The archaeologist finds the remains of past human activity—the written records and the silent. The silent records are the artifacts—tools, jewelry, sculpture, coins, weapons, and buildings. The written include texts on stone, metal, clay, parchment, or papyrus.

To find these things, an archaeologist digs very carefully. Most often in the Near East, digging is done at tells, flat-topped mounds under which lie buried dozens of cities, whose remains are piled one on top of the other.

In the ancient Near East, important cities and towns were surrounded by walls of stone or brick. When the city was destroyed by war or earthquake, the debris of its broken and burnt houses, temples, and palaces was held in place by the remains of the city wall or its foundations which served as a terrace. The rubbish behind the wall did not wash away with the rain or erode in the blowing wind. When the next city was rebuilt by a later generation, the stones and brick were only leveled and new streets laid out and new buildings erected on the rubble of the former settlement.

CHAPTER 8

Broken Pots and Clay Tablets

Gist

The study of the remains of ancient civilizations sheds light on the life, customs, history, literature, language, and architecture of early Israel and its neighbors. Archaeology, as it illustrates, explains, and sometimes amends the biblical records, gives us the opportunity to meet the people of the Bible within their own world. As we understand the life of our ancestors and broaden our knowledge of the past, we understand what their faith meant to them thus enlarging our grasp of its meaning to us today.

Journal

Start a new page in your journal and write down three things that you would like to know about the life and culture of the people who lived in Bible times, things to which you think archaeology might give the answers.

Such cities, which were already built on a natural hill, just kept getting higher and higher, century after century. When the spies of the Israelites first entered Canaan, they returned with the discouraging report that the cities of the nations had "fortifications towering to the sky" (Deut. 1:28, NEB; cf. Num. 13:25-28). The cities they saw were settlements built on the elevated remains of other cities.

Sometime during the Greek and Roman eras, people stopped building and rebuilding their cities on these tells. Horse-drawn chariots were becoming more common and the narrow streets of the old walled cities proved to be much too narrow for the increased traffic. Besides, there was no space available for parking lots. So the tells were abandoned, and grass and weeds gradually hid the ruins from view. Thus, many old cities were forgotten and literally lost.

Just one layer after another

Digging through a tell, the archaeologist uncovers each successive city, starting with the remains of the most recent on the top and reaching the oldest settlement which would be built on bedrock or undisturbed earth at the bottom.

In excavating a site, a limited section of about 15 to 30 feet square is marked off and each layer of earth is carefully removed. Layers or strata can be distinguished by differences in color or texture of the earth and debris.

Artifacts found in each layer are labeled for later study and identification, and the content of the layer is carefully charted on diagrams and photographed. The location of each item found is important for the purpose of identification and dating. It is a time-consuming task, but most necessary. For once a particular section has been excavated, it has been destroyed and can never be put back together. All the information for later studies must be in the archaeologist's notebook.

The happiest find in a dig is a floor or a wall that leads to a floor. Objects found on a floor are most likely those that belong to the age of the community that built the floor. Artifacts found under the floor belong to an earlier period.

The only good artifacts are those which are found in the original place in which they were used. Since much of what is found in excavations has come from other places or has passed from one layer to another, it cannot be taken as authentic or true to the age being studied. Garbage pits dug down into a lower stratum introduce objects foreign to the time of a particular layer. Building stones dug out of the debris and reused in a building on a higher stratum cause confusion, especially if they carry inscriptions or dates of an earlier age.

Tell me how old it is

In identifying and analyzing materials found in a dig, the archaeologist is trying to understand the life of the people who lived in a particular city at a particular time. How did they make a living? What did they eat? How did they govern themselves? And at what time in history did they live?

Clearly, dating materials becomes one of the most important tasks. And the archaeologist has a number of tools to determine date.

The radiocarbon 14 method has been developed by nuclear physics. All living matter takes up carbon 14, which after death begins to

disintegrate at a fixed rate. By measuring the amount of radiocarbon 14 remaining in organic matter such as wood or paper, the approximate age of the material can be dated to within about a hundred years.

A potassium-argon technique also has some application with materials that are extremely old. This technique works by measuring the rate that potassium 40 breaks down into argon.

Thermoluminescence is a method that can be applied to inorganic matter such as pottery. Energy that has been stored in such material can be stimulated by heat and released as light which can be measured.

Pottery, because it is almost indestructible and because it always has its own style, has become a chief tool for dating ancient sites. A study of pottery styles and forms has provided its own system of dating through a ceramic chronology that has proved to be reliable and accurate. The form, decoration, content of clay, and method of making are all noted. All these things are keys that, with the aid of other information about the site and other discoveries, enable dating within a certain historic era with an accuracy of about a hundred years.

Pottery was so cheap that no one bothered to steal it, much less remove it. All the ruins of ancient cities have vast heaps of potsherds (broken pottery).

Written materials, even entire libraries of clay tablets and parchments, are sometimes discovered in excavations. But all too often, the written material is limited to inscriptions on stone stele (monuments) and ostraca (potsherds reused for notes and receipts).

In the Greek and Roman periods, coins began to appear. But these isolated materials are often hard to date because unlike pottery, coins and jewels were often carried from place to place and are often found in strata hundreds of years later than the era that produced them.

Written material outside an excavation can also assist in providing dates for certain sites. The Bible, for example, notes that the city of Samaria was built by Omri in the seventh year of his reign, which can be determined from other information to be 870 B.C. (1 Kings 16:23, 24). And again, the Bible (2 Kings 17:5, 6) as well as the court records of the Assyrian king Sargon II tell us that the city of Samaria was destroyed in 721 B.C.

Records from ancient times with specific dates like these are rare. But during recent years, our supply of ancient records has been increasing.

Amarna: letters from a pharaoh's file

In 1887, farmers working in a field near a village near the Nile River in Egypt discovered some clay tablets in some ruins near a place they called el-Amarna. They had discovered a lost city which for a short time had been the capital of Egypt.

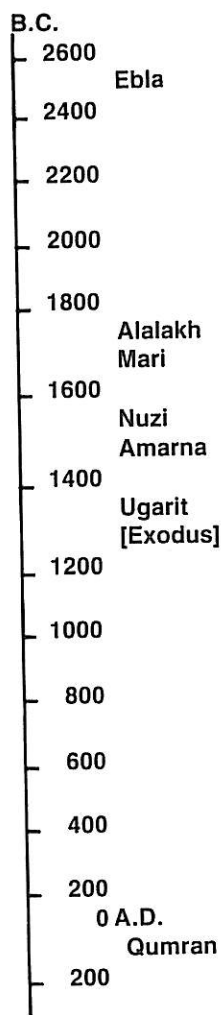
This city, called *Akhetaton*, had been built by a pharaoh of the fourteenth century B.C. (See "A pharaoh flirts with monotheism," Chapter 2, p. 15). Several hundred tablets were found in these ruins, mostly letters written to the king by governors of cities in Palestine and Syria under Egyptian rule.

From these letters, written about a hundred years before the Exodus, we learn that Gaza was the main Egyptian headquarters in Palestine at that time. Major city-states in the hill country were Shechem

Seed

Let us now praise famous men,/ and our fathers in their generations./ The Lord apportioned to them great glory,/ his majesty from the beginning./ There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,/ and were men renowned for their power . . . leaders of the people in their deliberations . . . those who composed musical tunes,/ and set forth verses in writing. . . . There are some of them who have left a name. . . . And there are some who have no memorial. . . . (Sirach 44:1-9).

Periods of History Represented by Near East Excavations



and Jerusalem. Letters from these and other cities tell us much about the political and economic life in Palestine 150 years before the Israelites arrived on the scene. They were already having concerns about the activities of people living among them whom they called the Habiru.

Mari: data on prophets, sons, and censuses

At the other end of the Fertile Crescent was Mari, an ancient city built at a bend of the Euphrates River about halfway between Babylon to the south and Haran in the north. The city was still thriving when Abraham and Sarah passed by on their way from Ur to Haran and on to Canaan.

In 1933 some shepherds climbed over a place called Tell Hariri looking for stones. They dug one out and found it to be a headless statue. This find eventually attracted the attention of French archaeologists who wanted to know what else was hidden in the tell. And they found a lot: a temple of the goddess Ishtar, a temple tower called a ziggurat (like the model for the Tower of Babel), and a large palace with almost 300 rooms.

Several of the rooms in the palace contained cuneiform tablets—20,000 when all counted. The writings came from the half century before the destruction of the city of Hammurabi of Babylon in 1757 B.C.

Of course, most of these records had to do with the care and feeding of the people who lived in all those rooms in the palace at Mari. But some of the tablets also dealt with the politics and economic life going on outside the palace. While the people in Mari spoke an Amorite language, their tablets were written in Akkadian, the diplomatic language of the day.

One set of writings noted concerns raised by the taking of a census, a situation similar to the problems faced by the Israelites when taking such a count. The law required a half shekel tax to ward off pestilence after a census (Exod. 30:12), something which did happen when David made a tally of the nation (2 Sam. 24:1-25). Apparently, the levy had been overlooked.

Adoption and inheritance customs get attention from the Mari writers. Property transfers in Israel were always made in such a way that property remained within the family. Six different Mari texts make reference to the same concern. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures provided that an adopted son would receive a double share of the family inheritance if his adopting parents chose to add other sons to the family in the same way. Such was also the practice in Mari.

Mari letters that tell about men and women who spoke in the name of their gods and gave prophetic utterances have many points of comparison with the prophetic movement that appeared in Israel a thousand years later. Though a direct connection cannot be found, Mari does give us information about how a prophet thought and worked.

Alalakh: buying a five-scribe city

Alalakh was a town in northern Syria along the Orontes River in what is now Turkey. Excavation into its ruins in the late 1930s and late 1940s brought several hundred tablets to light that showed that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries B.C., Alalakh was a city of 3,000 people with at least five scribes.

The king of Alalakh ruled with almost absolute power. He often sat as a judge to rule on the disputes and problems of the people of his kingdom. Many were deep in debt. And many times, the king would decide to loan money to his citizens to pay their bills. That was fine, but after awhile almost everybody was in debt to the king who controlled the life and destiny of many families.

And so, says a letter from Alalakh, they were forced to “dwell in the house of the king” to work off their debt. The same phrase appears in Psalm 23:6, though there it refers to a happier condition for the believer.

The king had gained control of Alalakh by trading another city to his brother for it. The sale and exchange of towns and cities seems to have been a common practice. Solomon and Hiram made a similar swap at one time (1 Kings 9:11).

In the case of Alalakh, we have a copy of the treaty made between the king and his brother with prologue, stipulations, witnesses, and curses like those that form the parts of some of the covenants found in the Bible.

Nuzi: family law for Hurrians

Family law is the subject of most of some 5,000 tablets found in the late 1920s at the ruins of Nuzi near the Tigris River, about 150 miles north of Baghdad in what is now Iraq. In the fifteenth century B.C., the city was a part of the kingdom of Mitanni, one of the powers that flourished for a time in Mesopotamia.

Most of the Nuzi people came from Hurrian background. Haran to the west was another Hurrian settlement, so it is thought that the family customs described in the Nuzi letters were likely similar to those practiced in the city where Abraham and Sarah and their relatives lived for a time (Gen. 11:31).

In Hurrian society, birthright was decided by the father, often from his deathbed, beginning his pronouncement with a formula like, “Now that I am grown old.” Similar words were spoken by Isaac when he intended to pass the birthright on to Esau (Gen. 27:2).

Nuzi marriage contracts sometimes noted that a slave girl was among the gifts given to a new bride. On their wedding days, both Leah and Rachel received such presents also (Gen. 29:24, 29).

Should a Nuzi wife fail to give birth to a son, it was expected in upperclass Hurrian families that the wife would offer a slave girl as a concubine to her husband. Should the slave give birth to a child, the wife could treat the offspring as her own. Such was the purpose evident in Sarah's offer of Hagar to Abraham (Gen. 16:2).

The Nuzi tablets also give us information about the Habiru people who appeared in many places from Mesopotamia to Egypt during the second millennium B.C. Here the descriptions and the names of these people seem to show that they were not an ethnic or tribal group, but a class of people, many of them poor and outcast.

Ugarit: the city that named a language

Not too far from the Mediterranean coast, in northern Syria, a farmer was preparing his field for planting in the spring of 1928 when his plow struck a rock. In trying to dig up the stone, the farmer found that it was part of a tomb. Professional investigators soon discovered that this was in fact an old cemetery, and that it must have belonged to a city. Not

far away was the tell called Ras Shamra (named for the yellow-flowered fennel that grew all over the mound).

French archaeologists began digging in the cemetery on April 2, 1929. After a month, they moved on to Ras Shamra, and on May 10, they found twenty cuneiform tablets written in an unknown language. It was an alphabetic language with no more than twenty-nine or thirty symbols.

Later, thousands more of these tablets were unearthed. When deciphered, the language proved to be a Canaanite dialect. They called it *Ugaritic* after the name of the city.

Ugarit's location had been long forgotten. But at one time, it was a thriving center engaged in commerce, in bronze, and in lumber with Egypt and Cyprus. Large piles of murex shells show that it had factories to manufacture the purple dye that could be extracted from these shellfish.

The Ras Shamra tablets, like written materials from the other sites already mentioned, provide information about the culture of these Semitic people of the fourteenth century B.C. Being Canaanites, they had collected the myths of Baal, some of which must go back to the third millennium B.C. The firsthand information that they provide about the gods El and Baal help us to see that Israelite ideas about Yahweh developed in a time when they knew about the Canaanite beliefs about these gods.

Ugaritic festivals and forms of worship show a kinship to those festivals and forms of worship that became a part of Israelite experience. And while we can note similarities, we can also see how the Israelites made basic changes in these rites.

The rules of Ugaritic grammar are much like those followed by Hebrew, which is also in this family of Semitic languages. The form of Hebrew poetry also resembles that of the Ugaritic epics with many of the same poetic devices being used in both languages.

Ebla: still more tablets to read

Not far from Ugarit and Alalakh in northern Syria, Ebla, another major ancient city came to light through the excavations begun in 1964 by archaeologists from the University of Rome. Ebla flourished in the third millennium B.C., in this region not far from Palestine.

In 1974, the royal archives of Ebla were discovered—a collection of over 16,000 tablets, the largest find of written material from this age in all of the Palestine-Syria region. This discovery is so recent that it will take time for study and analysis before we can really come to grips with this rich new source.

Dead Sea Scrolls: how Jewish was the church?

In early 1947, Muhammad adh-Dhih, a Bedouin boy, was throwing stones into caves on the west side of the Dead Sea along Wadi Qumran, trying to find a lost goat. Instead of the expected bleat of a kid, he heard the tinkle of breaking jars.

Closer examination of these caves, eight miles south of Jericho, showed that they contained jars with leather scrolls in them wrapped in linen cloth. These scrolls were found to include manuscripts of the Hebrew Scriptures a thousand or more years older than the oldest copies then known. They show that the text of the Old Testament we have received has been remarkably well preserved. Few errors seem to have

been made during the many centuries that the texts were copied and recopied by hand.

Other manuscripts from the Qumran library are adding a great deal to our understanding of the New Testament. These are materials written by members of the Jewish religious community that lived on the Qumran site for almost 200 years, a period that included the time of Jesus and the beginnings of the early church.

These people, called *Essenes*, were not mentioned in the New Testament, yet many of their concerns were shared by Jesus and the disciples as well as by the first Christians. Readings from the Essene library may show that the early church was far more Jewish than we have believed it to be.

Updates on Solomon and Ahab

Archaeology continues to illuminate the Bible by adding to our understanding and by enlarging our horizons. The Bible gives considerable attention, for example, to the wealth and fame of Solomon. But just how rich was Solomon? Were the chroniclers carried away by national fervor and led to exaggerate?

Excavations at Meggido, Ezion-geber, and other cities enlarged by David's son have shown that the days of Solomon were indeed a time when the nation was highly organized and wealthy. Israel was the most prosperous kingdom in the region at that time. If anything, the Bible has really understated the facts about the riches of Solomon.

Ahab's northern kingdom of Israel gets a lot of mention in the Old Testament, largely through the work of Elijah, the prophet. But excavations at Samaria have shown that during Ahab's reign, the country enjoyed a high degree of prosperity. And in the records of Assyria, we discover that Ahab was active in international affairs, making an alliance with Syria and Hamath and conducting war against Shalmaneser III of Assyria.

Limits, questions, and corrections

We know much about the Bible because of archaeology, and our understanding is sure to increase as more discoveries are made, as excavations continue, and as finds are studied and analyzed. But we must be aware of the limits of archaeology and the things that it cannot do.

Archaeology can confirm or give perspective on many items of history and culture. But some items well attested in the Bible have gone without notice in the explorations made so far. No evidence has been forthcoming to establish the historicity of persons or events before the time of the Israelite monarchy.

But the main concerns of the Bible deal with the acts of God. These are matters of faith and faith is beyond the realm of science. Archaeology can neither prove nor disprove theology. It deals with facts as they relate to the historical record rather than the affirmations of faith. Sometimes the facts uncovered in excavation may lead to conclusions that differ with the record given in the Bible.

For example, Jericho and Ai appear as the major conquests of Israel as the people entered the Promised Land. Jericho, according to the Book of Joshua, was the object of a dramatic assault which caused

Earthen Vessels

Pottery jars were the cash boxes and safety deposit vaults of ancient times (Jer. 32:14; Matt. 13:44).

That's the understanding behind 2 Corinthians 4:7: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." The clay pot symbolizes here our physical bodies.

Inventory

1. What is archaeology?
2. What are some of the methods used to date materials discovered by archaeologists?
3. Name three archaeological exploration sites in the Near East and information that has come from its findings.
4. What are the limits of archaeology?
5. Identify:

Cuneiform
Euphrates
Habiru
Hammurabi
Haran
Tigris
Ur

the walls of the city to collapse (Josh. 6:1-24). Farther on, Ai was also attacked and it was burned with fire (8:1-29).

Archaeologists have shown that major upheavals did take place in Canaan during the days of Joshua. A number of cities were indeed destroyed including Hazor in Galilee and Lachish in Judah. These cities were replaced by poorer and simpler settlements much as one would expect would be built by people who had just come into Canaan from the desert. But neither Jericho nor Ai offer any evidence of destruction during this period. Ai, in fact, had been uninhabited for a thousand years before the coming of Joshua and his people, and the name of the city had long been forgotten. For, Ai means "ruin" and it is unlikely that this was ever the name of any city that occupied the mound.

Some scholars think that Joshua's story of the destruction of Ai may actually refer to the conquest of Bethel which is not mentioned in Joshua. Bethel was only a short distance from Ai. According to evidence from excavations, Bethel was destroyed in the mid-thirteenth century B.C. by a fire that left several feet of ash and debris on the site which was later resettled by poorly built houses probably erected by Israelites.

Again, Jericho excavations show no evidence that anyone was living there during the thirteenth century. No pottery from the period has turned up in the site. There is no trace of any walls or of any material from that period, the site having been badly eroded.

We may eventually find solutions and explanations to these and other problems raised by recent findings. But we must be aware that the findings of archaeology may contradict as well as confirm the biblical record.

Linking up with our living past

Through archaeology, we have a link with the distant past, a past which comes ever closer to us as it widens our horizons to the civilizations that cradled the revelation that came from God to the people of faith. We can hear the sounds of forgotten languages, see how everyday life was lived out in ancient communities, feel with these people the dreads that harried them, and celebrate their triumphs.

Discovery

Ask each person to share from his or her journal one or two of the questions about the life and culture of the Bible to be answered by archaeology? Discuss some of these possibilities. How would one go about getting information as an archaeologist? Does the project involve faith or fact?

Resources

Cornfeld, Gaalyah. *Archaeology of the Bible: Book by Book*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

Magnusson, Magnus. *Archaeology of the Bible*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.

Paul, Shalom M. and William G. Dever. *Biblical Archaeology*. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1973.

Books

- Alexander, David and Pat. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973.
- Anderson, Bernard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*. Third Edition. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.
- Baly, Denis. *The Geography of the Bible*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
- Cornfield, Gaalyah. *Archaeology of the Bible: Book by Book*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962.
- Kramer, Samuel N. *Cradle of Civilization*. New York: Time, Inc., 1967.
- Magnuson, Magnus. *Archaeology of the Bible*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.
- May, Herbert G. *Oxford Bible Atlas*. Second Edition (paper). London: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Miller, Madeleine S. and J. Lane. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. Eighth Edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
- Schroeder, David. *Learning to Know the Bible*. Newton: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale: Herald Press, 1966.

Audio visuals

Abingdon Bible Map Transparencies for overhead projector

Set 1. Palestine — Old Testament

1A Physical Map of Palestine

1B The Exodus

1C The Kingdom of Saul

1D The Empire of David and Solomon

1E The Kingdom of Israel and Judah

\$13.95 from Abingdon Press, 201 Eighth Avenue, Nashville, TN 37202, (615) 749-6301.

Our Bible: How It Came to Us

3-part black and white motion picture from ABS

Part 1 - Formation of the Bible - 25 minutes

Part 2 - The Bible Crosses Europe - 24 minutes

Part 3 - Making of the English Bible - 35 minutes

How Our Bible Came to Us

5-part filmstrip (46 minutes total) from ABS, AVL

Part 1 - The Bible Is Put into Writing - 7½ minutes

Part 2 - The Bible Crosses Europe - 9 minutes

Part 3 - The Bible Comes to England - 11 minutes

Part 4 - The Bible Comes to America - 10 minutes

Part 5 - The Bible in the World Today - 8½ minutes

The Dead Sea Scrolls and Our Scriptures

82-frame color filmstrip, script, 1958. AVL

How the Old Testament Came to Be

76-frame color filmstrip, script, 1958. AVL

A Survey of the Bible

40-frame color filmstrip, record, script. AVL

American Bible Society (ABS): Write to Film Rentals, Audio Visuals, 1111 Lancaster Avenue, Rosemont, PA 19010

Audio Visual Library (AVL): Box 347, Newton, KS 67114

Suggested Resources

Time Line of the Bible

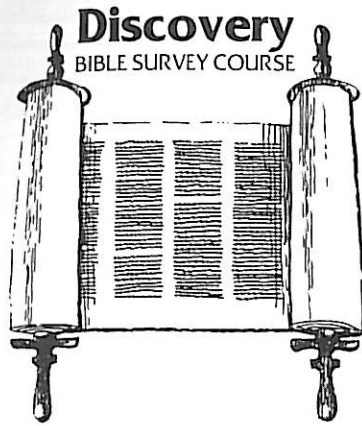
THE WRITING OF THE BIBLE	1300 B.C. (The Exodus)	(Joshua—The Conquest)	1200 B.C. (Period of the Judges)	1100 B.C. (Period of the Judges)
	THE LAW	ORAL TRADITION	ORAL TRADITION	
	FORMER: THE PROPHETS			
	LATTER: THE WRITINGS:			
CANONIZATION OF THE BIBLE				

THE WRITING OF THE BIBLE	600 B.C. (Fall of Jerusalem) (Exile) (Temple Rebuilt)	500 B.C. (Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem)	400 B.C. (Conquests of Alexander)	300 B.C. (Palestine under Syria)
	THE PENTATEUCH	THE PENTATEUCH	Job	II Zechariah)
	Joshua Judges	III Isaiah Joel Malachi	Proverbs Psalms	Chronicles Ezra-Nehemiah Ecclesiastes
	Samuel Ezekiel Obadiah II Isaiah	Haggai I Zechariah	Song of Songs Ruth Jonah Esther	
CANONIZATION				
PENTATEUCH BY 400 B.C.				
TRANSLATION				

THE SEFU

1000 B.C.	900 B.C.	800 B.C.	700 B.C.
Monarchy— David Solomon)	(The Divided Kingdom; Ahab, Elijah)	(Fall of Samaria)	(Hezekiah) (Josiah)
J	E	J	J
		E	E
			D
MEMOIRS AND OFFICIAL RECORDS		Amos Hosea	Isaiah Micah Kings Zephaniah Nahum Habakkuk Jeremiah
ORAL TRADITION			
			DEUTERONOMY (621 B.C.)

200 B.C.	100 B.C.	A.D.	A.D. 100
(Maccabean Revolt)	(Palestine under Romans) (Herod the Great)	(Jesus) (I Jewish Revolt)	(II Jewish Revolt)
Daniel		ORAL TRADITIONS WRITTEN COLLECTIONS Mark, Matt. Luke-Acts John I Peter Paul's Letters Hebrews Revelation	Letters of John Pastoral Epistles James Jude II Peter
PROPHETS 200 B.C.		Paul's Letters collected THE WRITINGS (O.T.) BY A.D. 90	The Four Gospels and Paul's Letters
LAGINT (250-100 B.C.)			Greek Versions (O.T.) of Aquila and Theodotion.



Book 1 Discover the Covenant People

Part I Yesterday's People Give Us a Treasure for Today

- Chapter 1. Hands on the Bible
- Chapter 2. Lands Around the Bible
- Chapter 3. Eyes of Faith to See the World

Part II Journey of Faith Across the Fertile Crescent

- Chapter 4. The Founding Families and Joseph
- Chapter 5. The Shape of the Promised Land

Part III The People Meet the God Who Acts

- Chapter 6. The Founding Events
- Chapter 7. The Covenant for a People Under God
- Chapter 8. Broken Pots and Clay Tablets

Book 2 Discover the Kingdom People

Part IV The Beginning of Nationhood

- Chapter 9. The Settlement of Land
- Chapter 10. The Rise of Kingship
- Chapter 11. The Kingdom United
- Chapter 12. The Theology and Politics of Zion

Part V Prophets and Politics

- Chapter 13. Agitators for Reform and Fomenters of Rebellion
- Chapter 14. Kings as Reformers
- Chapter 15. Covenant Renewed and Covenant New

Part VI Old Traditions Emerge in New Visions

- Chapter 16. Exile and Rebirth in Second Exodus
- Chapter 17. Restoration and Conflict

Book 3 Discover the People of the Way

Part VII Israel Puts Its Faith into the Book

- Chapter 18. The Festival Scrolls
- Chapter 19. The Treasury of Wisdom
- Chapter 20. Another Way of Reading History

Part VIII Hanging Tough in Hard Times

- Chapter 21. Visionaries and Revolutionaries
- Chapter 22. The Hidden Books of the Second Temple
- Chapter 23. Setting the Stage for the New Covenant

Part IX New Creation and New People

- Chapter 24. The New Testament and the New Testament People
- Chapter 25. The Gospel Carried from Jerusalem to Rome

Book 4 Discover the People of Faith

Part X The Faith of Paul

- Chapter 26. Letters of Paul and His Disciples
- Chapter 27. The Gospel According to Paul

Part XI The Gospel from Word of Mouth to Word on Paper

- Chapter 28. Three Portraits for a Redeemer
- Chapter 29. The Heroic Son of God
- Chapter 30. The New Moses
- Chapter 31. Liberator

Part XII Now the World Becomes Our Home

- Chapter 32. Faith Faces the World
- Chapter 33. Hope in the Hour of Persecution
- Chapter 34. The Gospel for All the World

FAITH & LIFE
BOOKSTORE
6.95

ISBN 0-87303-096-6