



# History of ancient Israel and Judah

The **history of ancient Israel and Judah** spans from the early appearance of the Israelites in Canaan's hill country during the late second millennium BCE, to the establishment and subsequent downfall of the two Israelite kingdoms in the mid-first millennium BCE. This history unfolds within the Southern Levant during the Iron Age. The earliest documented mention of "Israel" as a people appears on the Merneptah Stele, an ancient Egyptian inscription dating back to around 1208 BCE. Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient Israelite culture evolved from the pre-existing Canaanite civilization. During the Iron Age II period, two Israelite kingdoms emerged, covering much of Canaan: the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south.<sup>[1]</sup>

According to the Hebrew Bible, a "United Monarchy" consisting of Israel and Judah existed as early as the 11th century BCE, under the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon; the great kingdom later was separated into two smaller kingdoms: Israel, containing the cities of Shechem and Samaria, in the north, and Judah, containing Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, in the south. The historicity of the United Monarchy is debated—as there are no archaeological remains of it that are accepted as consensus—but historians and archaeologists agree that Israel and Judah existed as separate kingdoms by c. 900 BCE<sup>[2]:169–195[3]</sup> and c. 850 BCE,<sup>[4]</sup> respectively.<sup>[5]</sup> The kingdoms' history is known in greater detail than that of other kingdoms in the Levant, primarily due to the selective narratives in the Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, which were included in the Bible.<sup>[1]</sup>

The northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed around 720 BCE, when it was conquered by the Neo-Assyrian Empire.<sup>[6]</sup> While the Kingdom of Judah remained intact during this time, it became a client state of first the Neo-Assyrian Empire and then the Neo-Babylonian Empire. However, Jewish revolts against the Babylonians led to the destruction of Judah in 586 BCE, under the rule of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II. According to the biblical account, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar II besieged Jerusalem between 589 and 586 BCE, which led to the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the exile of the Jews to Babylon; this event was also recorded in the Babylonian Chronicles.<sup>[7][8]</sup> The exilic period saw the development of the Israelite religion towards a monotheistic Judaism.

The exile ended with the fall of Babylon to the Achaemenid Empire c. 538 BCE. Subsequently, the Achaemenid king Cyrus the Great issued a proclamation known as the Edict of Cyrus, which authorized and encouraged exiled Jews to return to Judah.<sup>[9][10]</sup> Cyrus' proclamation began the exiles'



*The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel*,  
produced by Edward Weller c. 1890

return to Zion, inaugurating the formative period in which a more distinctive Jewish identity developed in the Persian province of Yehud. During this time, the destroyed Solomon's Temple was replaced by the Second Temple, marking the beginning of the Second Temple period.

## Periods

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- Iron Age I: 1150<sup>[11]</sup>–950 BCE<sup>[12]</sup>
- Iron Age II: 950<sup>[13]</sup>–586 BCE

The Iron Age II period is followed by periods named after conquering empires, such as the Neo-Babylonians becoming the "godfathers" for the Babylonian period (586–539 BCE).

Other academic terms often used are:

- *First Temple or Israelite period* (c. 1000 – 586 BCE)<sup>[14]</sup>

The return to Zion and the construction of the Second Temple marked the beginning of the Second Temple period (c. 516 BCE – 70 CE).

## Background: Late Bronze Age (1550–1150 BCE)

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The eastern Mediterranean seaboard stretches 400 miles (640 km) north to south from the Taurus Mountains to the Sinai Peninsula, and 60 to 90 miles (97 to 145 km) east to west between the sea and the Arabian Desert.<sup>[15]</sup> The coastal plain of the southern Levant, broad in the south and narrowing to the north, is backed in its southernmost portion by a zone of foothills, the Shfela; like the plain this narrows as it goes northwards, ending in the promontory of Mount Carmel. East of the plain and the Shfela is a mountainous ridge, the "hill country of Judea" in the south, the "hill country of Ephraim" north of that, then Galilee and Mount Lebanon. To the east again lie the steep-sided valley occupied by the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, and the wadi of the Arabah, which continues down to the eastern arm of the Red Sea. Beyond the plateau is the Syrian desert, separating the Levant from Mesopotamia. To the southwest is Egypt, to the northeast Mesopotamia. The location and geographical characteristics of the narrow Levant made the area a battleground among the powerful entities that surrounded it.<sup>[16]</sup>

Canaan in the Late Bronze Age was a shadow of what it had been centuries earlier: many cities were abandoned, others shrank in size, and the total settled population was probably not much more than a hundred thousand.<sup>[17]</sup> Settlement was concentrated in cities along the coastal plain and along major communication routes; the central and northern hill country which would later become the biblical kingdom of Israel was only sparsely inhabited<sup>[18]</sup> although letters from the Egyptian archives indicate that Jerusalem was already a Canaanite city-state recognizing Egyptian overlordship.<sup>[19]</sup> Politically and culturally it was dominated by Egypt,<sup>[20]</sup> each city under its own ruler, constantly at odds with its neighbours, and appealing to the Egyptians to adjudicate their differences.<sup>[18]</sup>

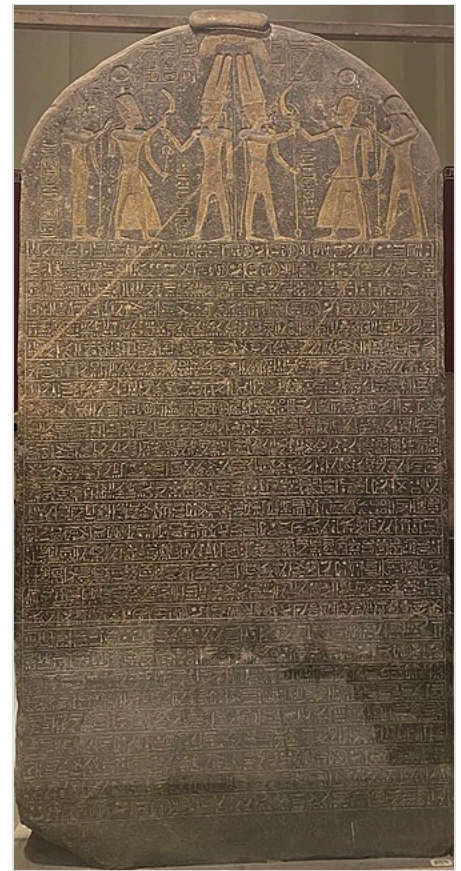
The Canaanite city state system broke down during the Late Bronze Age collapse,<sup>[21]</sup> and Canaanite culture was then gradually absorbed into those of the Philistines, Phoenicians and Israelites.<sup>[22]</sup> The process was gradual<sup>[23]</sup> and a strong Egyptian presence continued into the 12th century BCE, and, while some Canaanite cities were destroyed, others continued to exist in Iron Age I.<sup>[24]</sup>

The name "Israel" first appears in the Merneptah Stele c. 1208 BCE: "Israel is laid waste and his seed is no more."<sup>[25]</sup> This "Israel" was a cultural and probably political entity, well enough established for the Egyptians to perceive it as a possible challenge, but an ethnic group rather than an organized state.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Iron Age I (1150–950 BCE)

In the Late Bronze Age there were no more than about 25 villages in the highlands, but this increased to over 300 by the end of Iron Age I, while the settled population doubled from 20,000 to 40,000.<sup>[27]</sup> The villages were more numerous and larger in the north, and probably shared the highlands with pastoral nomads, who left no remains.<sup>[28]</sup> Archaeologists and historians attempting to trace the origins of these villagers have found it impossible to identify any distinctive features that could define them as specifically Israelite – collared-rim jars and four-room houses have been identified outside the highlands and thus cannot be used to distinguish Israelite sites,<sup>[29]</sup> and while the pottery of the highland villages is far more limited than that of lowland Canaanite sites, it develops typologically out of Canaanite pottery that came before.<sup>[30]</sup> Israel Finkelstein proposed that the oval or circular layout that distinguishes some of the earliest highland sites, and the notable absence of pig bones from hill sites, could be taken as markers of ethnicity, but others have cautioned that these can be a "common-sense" adaptation to highland life and not necessarily revelatory of origins.<sup>[31]</sup> Other Aramaean sites also demonstrate a contemporary absence of pig remains at that time, unlike earlier Canaanite and later Philistine excavations.

In *The Bible Unearthed* (2001), Finkelstein and Silberman summarized recent studies. They described how, up until 1967, the Israelite heartland in the highlands of western Palestine was virtually an archaeological terra incognita. Since then, intensive surveys have examined the traditional territories of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh. These surveys have revealed the sudden emergence of a new culture contrasting with the Philistine and Canaanite societies existing in Canaan in the Iron Age.<sup>[32]</sup> This new culture is characterized by a lack of pork remains (whereas pork formed 20% of the Philistine diet in places), by an abandonment of the Philistine/Canaanite custom of having highly decorated pottery, and by the practice of circumcision. The Israelite ethnic identity had originated, not from the Exodus and a subsequent conquest, but from a transformation of the existing Canaanite-Philistine cultures.<sup>[33]</sup>



The Merneptah Stele. While alternative translations exist, the majority of biblical archaeologists translate a set of hieroglyphs as "Israel", representing the first instance of the name *Israel* in the historical record.

These surveys revolutionized the study of early Israel. The discovery of the remains of a dense network of highland villages – all apparently established within the span of few generations – indicated that a dramatic social transformation had taken place in the central hill country of Canaan around 1200 BCE. There was no sign of violent invasion or even the infiltration of a clearly defined ethnic group. Instead, it seemed to be a revolution in lifestyle. In the formerly sparsely populated highlands from the Judean hills in the south to the hills of Samaria in the north, far from the Canaanite cities that were in the process of collapse and disintegration, about two-hundred fifty hilltop communities suddenly sprang up. Here were the first Israelites.<sup>[34]</sup>



A reconstructed Israelite house, 10th–7th century BCE. Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv.

Modern scholars therefore see Israel arising peacefully and internally from existing people in the highlands of Canaan.<sup>[35]</sup>

Extensive archaeological excavations have provided a picture of Israelite society during the early Iron Age period. The archaeological evidence indicates a society of village-like centres, but with more limited resources and a small population. During this period, Israelites lived primarily in small villages, the largest of which had populations of up to 300 or 400.<sup>[36][37]</sup> Their villages were built on hilltops. Their houses were built in clusters around a common courtyard. They built three- or four-room houses out of mudbrick with a stone foundation and sometimes with a second story made of wood. The inhabitants lived by farming and herding. They built terraces to farm on hillsides, planting various crops and maintaining orchards. The villages were largely economically self-sufficient and economic interchange was prevalent. According to the Bible, prior to the rise of the Israelite monarchy the early Israelites were led by the Biblical judges, or chieftains who served as military leaders in times of crisis. Scholars are divided over the historicity of this account. However, it is likely that regional chiefdoms and polities provided security. The small villages were unwalled but were likely subjects of the major town in the area. Writing was known and available for recording, even at small sites.<sup>[38][39][40][41][42]</sup>

## **Iron Age II (950–587 BCE)**

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According to Israel Finkelstein, after an emergent and large polity was suddenly formed based on the Gibeon-Gibeah plateau and destroyed by Shoshenq I, the biblical Shishak, in the 10th century BCE,<sup>[43]</sup> a return to small city-states was prevalent in the Southern Levant, but between 950 and 900 BCE another large polity emerged in the northern highlands with its capital eventually at Tirzah, that can be considered the precursor of the Kingdom of Israel.<sup>[44]</sup> The Kingdom of Israel was consolidated as an important regional power by the first half of the 9th century BCE,<sup>[4]</sup> before falling to the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE, and the Kingdom of Judah began to flourish in the second half of the 9th century BCE.<sup>[4]</sup>



Unusually favourable climatic conditions in the first two centuries of Iron Age II brought about an expansion of population, settlements and trade throughout the region.<sup>[45]</sup> In the central highlands this resulted in unification in a kingdom with the city of Samaria as its capital,<sup>[45]</sup> possibly by the second half of the 10th century BCE when an inscription of the Egyptian pharaoh Shoshenq I records a series of campaigns directed at the area.<sup>[46]</sup> Israel had clearly emerged in the first half of the 9th century BCE,<sup>[43]</sup> this is attested when the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III names "Ahab Sir'lit" among his enemies at the battle of Qarqar (853 BCE) on the Kurkh Monoliths. This "Sir'lit" is most often interpreted as "Israel". At this time Israel was apparently engaged in a three-way contest with Damascus and Tyre for control of the Jezreel Valley and Galilee in the north, and with Moab, Ammon and Aram Damascus in the east for control of Gilead;<sup>[45]</sup> the Mesha Stele (c. 830 BCE), left by a king of Moab, celebrates his success in throwing off the oppression of the "House of Omri" (i.e., Israel). It bears what is generally thought to be the earliest extra-biblical reference to the name "Yahweh".<sup>[47]</sup> A century later Israel came into increasing conflict with the expanding Neo-Assyrian Empire, which first split its territory into several smaller units and then destroyed its capital, Samaria (722 BCE). Both the biblical and Assyrian sources speak of a massive deportation of people from Israel and their replacement with settlers from other parts of the empire – such population exchanges were an established part of Assyrian imperial policy, a means of breaking the old power structure – and the former Israel never again became an independent political entity.<sup>[48]</sup>



Model of Levantine four-roomed house from c. 900 BCE

Finkelstein holds that Judah emerged as an operational kingdom somewhat later than Israel, during the second half of 9th century BCE,<sup>[4]</sup> but the subject is one of considerable controversy.<sup>[49]</sup> There are indications that during the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, the southern highlands had been divided between a number of centres, none with clear primacy.<sup>[50]</sup> During the reign of Hezekiah, between c. 715 and 686 BCE, a notable increase in the power of the Judean state can be observed.<sup>[51]</sup> This is reflected in archaeological sites and findings, such as the Broad Wall; a defensive city wall in Jerusalem; and the Siloam tunnel, an aqueduct designed to provide Jerusalem with water during an impending siege by the Neo-Assyrian Empire led by Sennacherib; and the Siloam inscription, a lintel inscription found over the doorway of a tomb, has been ascribed to comptroller Shebna. LMLK seals on storage jar handles, excavated from strata in and around that formed by Sennacherib's destruction, appear to have been used throughout Sennacherib's 29-year reign, along with bullae from sealed documents, some that belonged to Hezekiah himself and others that name his servants.<sup>[52]</sup>



Depiction of Jehu King of Israel giving tribute to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III from Nimrud (c. BCE – c. 841–840)

Archaeological records indicate that the Kingdom of Israel was fairly prosperous. The late Iron Age saw an increase in urban development in Israel. Whereas previously the Israelites had lived mainly in small and unfortified settlements, the rise of the Kingdom of Israel saw the growth of cities and the construction of palaces, large royal enclosures, and fortifications with walls and gates. Israel initially

had to invest significant resources into defence as it was subjected to regular Aramean incursions and attacks, but after the Arameans were subjugated by the Assyrians and Israel could afford to put less resources into defending its territory, its architectural infrastructure grew dramatically. Extensive fortifications were built around cities such as Dan, Megiddo, and Hazor, including monumental and multi-towered city walls and multi-gate entry systems. Israel's economy was based on multiple industries. It had the largest olive oil production centres in the region, using at least two different types of olive oil presses, and also had a significant wine industry, with wine presses constructed next to vineyards.<sup>[53]</sup>

By contrast, the Kingdom of Judah was significantly less advanced. Some scholars believe it was no more than a small tribal entity limited to Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings.<sup>[54]</sup> In the 10th and early 9th centuries BCE, the territory of Judah appears to have been sparsely populated, limited to small and mostly unfortified settlements. The status of Jerusalem in the 10th century BCE is a major subject of debate among scholars. According to some scholars, Jerusalem does not show evidence of significant Israelite residential activity until the 9th century BCE.<sup>[55]</sup> Other scholars argue that recent discoveries and radiocarbon tests in the City of David seem to indicate that Jerusalem was already a significant city by the 10th century BCE.<sup>[56][57]</sup> Significant administrative structures such as the Stepped Stone Structure and Large Stone Structure, which originally formed part of one structure, also contain material culture from the 10th century BCE or earlier.<sup>[58]</sup> The ruins of a significant Judahite military fortress, Tel Arad, have also been found in the Negev, and a collection of military orders found there suggest literacy was present throughout the ranks of the Judahite army. This suggests that literacy was not limited to a tiny elite, indicating the presence of a substantial educational infrastructure in Judah.<sup>[59]</sup>

In the 7th century Jerusalem grew to contain a population many times greater than earlier and achieved clear dominance over its neighbours.<sup>[60]</sup> This occurred at the same time that Israel was being destroyed by the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and was probably the result of a cooperative arrangement with the Assyrians to establish Judah as an Assyrian vassal state controlling the valuable olive industry.<sup>[60]</sup> Judah prospered as a vassal state (despite a disastrous rebellion against Sennacherib), but in the last half of the 7th century BCE, Assyria suddenly collapsed, and the ensuing competition between Egypt and the Neo-Babylonian Empire for control of the land led to the destruction of Judah in a series of campaigns between 597 and 582.<sup>[60]</sup>



"To Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah" – royal seal found at the Ophel excavations in Jerusalem



Siloam inscription found in the Siloam tunnel, Jerusalem (c. 700 BCE)

## Aftermath: Assyrian and Babylonian periods

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After its fall, the former Kingdom of Israel became the Assyrian province of Samerina, which was taken over about a century later by the Neo-Babylonian Empire, created after the revolt of the Babylonians and them defeating the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Babylonian Judah suffered a steep decline in both economy and population<sup>[61]</sup> and lost the Negev, the Shephelah, and part of the Judean hill country, including Hebron, to encroachments from Edom and other neighbours.<sup>[62]</sup> Jerusalem, destroyed but probably not totally abandoned, was much smaller than previously, and the settlements surrounding it, as well as the towns in the former kingdom's western borders, were all devastated as a result of the Babylonian campaign. The town of Mizpah in Benjamin in the relatively unscathed northern section of the kingdom became the capital of the new Babylonian province of Yehud.<sup>[63][64]</sup> This was standard Babylonian practice: when the Philistine city of Ashkalon was conquered in 604, the political, religious and economic elite (but not the bulk of the population) was banished and the administrative centre shifted to a new location.<sup>[65]</sup> There is also a strong probability that for most or all of the period the temple at Bethel in Benjamin replaced that at Jerusalem, boosting the prestige of Bethel's priests (the Aaronites) against those of Jerusalem (the Zadokites), now in exile in Babylon.<sup>[66]</sup>



One of the Al-Yahudu Tablets, written in Akkadian, which documented the condition of the exiled Judean community in Babylon

The Babylonian conquest entailed not just the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, but the liquidation of the entire infrastructure which had sustained Judah for centuries.<sup>[67]</sup> The most significant casualty was the state ideology of "Zion theology,"<sup>[68]</sup> the idea that the god of Israel had chosen Jerusalem for his dwelling-place and that the Davidic dynasty would reign there forever.<sup>[69]</sup> The fall of the city and the end of Davidic kingship forced the leaders of the exile community – kings, priests, scribes and prophets – to reformulate the concepts of community, faith and politics.<sup>[70]</sup> The exile community in Babylon thus became the source of significant portions of the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 40–55; Ezekiel; the final version of Jeremiah; the work of the hypothesized priestly source in the Pentateuch; and the final form of the history of Israel from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings.<sup>[71]</sup> Theologically, the Babylonian exiles were responsible for the doctrines of individual responsibility and universalism (the concept that one god controls the entire world) and for the increased emphasis on purity and holiness.<sup>[71]</sup> Most significantly, the trauma of the exile experience led to the development of a strong sense of Hebrew identity distinct from other peoples,<sup>[72]</sup> with increased emphasis on symbols such as circumcision and Sabbath-observance to sustain that distinction.<sup>[73]</sup>

Hans M. Barstad writes that the concentration of the biblical literature on the experience of the exiles in Babylon disguises that the great majority of the population remained in Judah; for them, life after the fall of Jerusalem probably went on much as it had before.<sup>[74]</sup> It may even have improved, as they were rewarded with the land and property of the deportees, much to the anger of the community of exiles remaining in Babylon.<sup>[75]</sup> Conversely, Avraham Faust writes that archaeological and demographic surveys show that the population of Judah was significantly reduced to barely 10% of what it had been in the time before the exile.<sup>[76]</sup> The assassination around 582 of the Babylonian governor by a disaffected member of the former royal House of David provoked a Babylonian crackdown, possibly reflected in the Book of Lamentations, but the situation seems to have soon stabilized again.<sup>[77]</sup> Nevertheless, those unwallled cities and towns that remained were subject to slave raids by the Phoenicians and intervention in their internal affairs by Samaritans, Arabs, and Ammonites.<sup>[78]</sup>



# Religion

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Although the specific process by which the Israelites adopted monotheism is unknown, it is certain that the transition was a gradual one and was not totally accomplished during the First Temple period.<sup>[79]</sup> More is known about this period, as during this time writing was widespread.<sup>[80]</sup> The number of gods that the Israelites worshipped decreased, and figurative images vanished from their shrines. Yahwism, as some scholars name this belief system, is often described as a form of henotheism or monolatry. Over the same time, a folk religion continued to be practised across Israel and Judah. These practices were influenced by the polytheistic beliefs of the surrounding ethnicities, and were denounced by the prophets.<sup>[81][82][83]</sup>

In addition to the Temple in Jerusalem, there was public worship practised all over Israel and Judah in shrines and sanctuaries, outdoors, and close to city gates. In the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the kings Hezekiah and Josiah of Judah implemented a number of significant religious reforms that aimed to centre worship of the God of Israel in Jerusalem and eliminate foreign customs.<sup>[84][85][86]</sup>

## Henotheism

Henotheism is the act of worshipping a single god, without denying the existence of other deities.<sup>[87]</sup> Many scholars believe that before monotheism in ancient Israel, there came a transitional period; in this transitional period many followers of the Israelite religion worshipped the god Yahweh, but did not deny the existence of other deities accepted throughout the region.<sup>[79]</sup> Henotheistic worship was not uncommon in the Ancient Near East, as many Iron Age nation states worshipped an elevated national god which was nonetheless only part of a wider pantheon; examples include Chemosh in Moab, Qos in Edom, Milkom in Ammon, and Ashur in Assyria.<sup>[88]</sup>

Canaanite religion syncretized elements from neighbouring cultures, largely from Mesopotamian religious traditions.<sup>[89]</sup> Using Canaanite religion as a base was natural due to the fact that the Canaanite culture inhabited the same region prior to the emergence of Israelite culture.<sup>[90]</sup> Israelite religion was no exception, as during the transitional period, Yahweh and El were syncretized in the Israelite pantheon.<sup>[90]</sup> El already occupied a reasonably important place in the Israelite religion. Even the name "Israel" is based on the name El, rather than Yahweh.<sup>[91][92][93]</sup> It was this initial harmonization of Israelite and Canaanite religious thought that led to Yahweh gradually absorbing several characteristics from Canaanite deities, in turn strengthening his own position as an all-powerful "One." Even still, monotheism in the region of ancient Israel and Judah did not take hold overnight, and during the intermediate stages most people are believed to have remained henotheistic.<sup>[89]</sup>



El, the Canaanite creator deity, Megiddo, Stratum VII, Late Bronze II, 1400–1200 BCE, bronze with gold leaf – Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago – DSC07734 The Canaanite god El, who may have been the precursor to the Israelite god Yahweh.



During this intermediate period of henotheism many families worshipped different gods. Religion was very much centred around the family, as opposed to the community. The region of Israel and Judah was sparsely populated during the time of Moses. As such many different areas worshipped different gods, due to social isolation.<sup>[94]</sup> It was not until later on in Israelite history that people started to worship Yahweh alone and fully convert to monotheistic values. That switch occurred with the growth of power and influence of the Israelite kingdom and its rulers. Further details of this are contained in the Iron Age Yahwism section below. Evidence from the Bible suggests that henotheism did exist: "They [the Hebrews] went and served alien gods and paid homage to them, gods of whom they had no experience and whom he [Yahweh] did not allot to them" (Deut. 29.26). Many believe that this quote demonstrates that the early Israelite kingdom followed traditions similar to ancient Mesopotamia, where each major urban centre had a supreme god. Each culture embraced their patron god but did not deny the existence of other cultures' patron gods. In Assyria, the patron god was Ashur, and in ancient Israel, it was Yahweh; however, both Israelite and Assyrian cultures recognized each other's deities during this period.<sup>[94]</sup> Some scholars have used the Bible as evidence to argue that most of the people alive during the events recounted in the Hebrew Bible, including Moses, were most likely henotheists. There are many quotes from the Hebrew Bible that are used to support this view. One such quote from Jewish tradition is the first commandment which in its entirety reads "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods before me."<sup>[95]</sup> This quote does not deny the existence of other gods; it merely states that Jews should consider Yahweh or God the supreme god, incomparable to other supernatural beings. Some scholars attribute the concept of angels and demons found in Judaism and Christianity to the tradition of henotheism. Instead of completely getting rid of the concept of other supernatural beings, these religions changed former deities into angels and demons.<sup>[89]</sup>

## Iron Age Yahwism

The religion of the Israelites of Iron Age I, like the Ancient Canaanite religion from which it evolved and other religions of the ancient Near East, was based on a cult of ancestors and worship of family gods (the "gods of the fathers").<sup>[96][97]</sup> With the emergence of the monarchy at the beginning of Iron Age II the kings promoted their family god, Yahweh, as the god of the kingdom, but beyond the royal court, religion continued to be both polytheistic and family-centred.<sup>[98]</sup> The major deities were not numerous – El, Asherah, and Yahweh, with Baal as a fourth god, and perhaps Shamash (the sun) in the early period.<sup>[99]</sup> At an early stage El and Yahweh became fused and Asherah did not continue as a separate state cult,<sup>[99]</sup> although she continued to be popular at a community level until Persian times.<sup>[100]</sup>

Yahweh, the national god of both Israel and Judah, seems to have originated in Edom and Midian in southern Canaan and may have been brought to Israel by the Kenites and Midianites at an early stage.<sup>[101]</sup> There is a general consensus among scholars that the first formative event in the emergence of the distinctive religion described in the Bible was triggered by the destruction of Israel by Assyria in c. 722 BCE. Refugees from the northern kingdom fled to Judah, bringing with them laws and a prophetic tradition of Yahweh. This religion was subsequently adopted by the landowners of Judah, who in 640 BCE placed the eight-year-old Josiah on the throne. Judah at this time was a vassal state of Assyria, but Assyrian power collapsed in the 630s, and around 622 Josiah and his supporters launched a bid for independence expressed as loyalty to "Yahweh alone".<sup>[102]</sup>

## The Babylonian exile and Second Temple Judaism

According to the Deuteronomists, as scholars call these Judean nationalists, the treaty with Yahweh would enable Israel's god to preserve both the city and the king in return for the people's worship and obedience. The destruction of Jerusalem, its Temple, and the Davidic dynasty by Babylon in 587/586 BCE was deeply traumatic and led to revisions of the national mythos during the Babylonian exile. This revision was expressed in the Deuteronomistic history, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which interpreted the Babylonian destruction as divinely-ordained punishment for the failure of Israel's kings to worship Yahweh to the exclusion of all other deities.<sup>[103]</sup>

The Second Temple period (520 BCE – 70 CE) differed in significant ways from what had gone before.<sup>[104]</sup> Strict monotheism emerged among the priests of the Temple establishment during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, as did beliefs regarding angels and demons.<sup>[105]</sup> At this time, circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath-observance gained more significance as symbols of Jewish identity, and the institution of the synagogue became increasingly important, and most of the biblical literature, including the Torah, was substantially revised during this time.<sup>[106]</sup>



The Canaanite god Baal, 14th–12th century BCE (Louvre museum, Paris)

## Administrative and judicial structure

As was customary in the ancient Near East, a king (Hebrew: מֶלֶךְ, romanized: *melekh*) ruled over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The national god Yahweh, who selects those to rule his realm and his people, is depicted in the Hebrew Bible as having a hand in the establishment of the royal institution. In this sense, the true king is God, and the king serves as his earthly envoy and is tasked with ruling his realm. In some Psalms that appear to be related to the coronation of kings, they are referred to as "sons of Yahweh". The kings actually had to succeed one another according to a dynastic principle, even though the succession was occasionally decided through coups d'état. The coronation seemed to take place in a sacred place, and was marked by the anointing of the king who then becomes the "anointed one (*māšīaḥ*, the origin of the word Messiah) of Yahweh"; the end of the ritual seems marked by an acclamation by the people (or at least their representatives, the Elders), followed by a banquet.<sup>[107]</sup>



"To Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah" – royal seal found at the Ophel excavations in Jerusalem

The Bible's descriptions of the lists of dignitaries from the reigns of David and Solomon show that the king is supported by a group of high dignitaries. Those include the chief of the army (Hebrew: שַׂר הַצָּבָא, romanized: *śar haṣṣābā*), the great scribe (Hebrew: שֹׁרֵט הַצָּבָא, romanized: *śar haṣṣābā*) who was in charge

of the management of the royal chancellery, the herald (Hebrew: מזכיר, romanized: *mazkîr*), as well as the high priest (Hebrew: כהן הגדול, romanized: *kōhēn hāggādôl*) and the master of the palace (Hebrew: על הבית, סוכן, romanized: *‘al-habbayit, sōkēn*), who has a function of stewardship of the household of the king at the beginning and seems to become a real prime minister of Judah during the later periods. The attributions of most of these dignitaries remain debated, as illustrated in particular by the much-discussed case of the “king's friend” mentioned under Solomon.<sup>[107][108]</sup>

## See also

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- [Biblical archaeology](#)
- [Chronology of the Bible](#)
- [Early Israelite campaigns](#)
- [Habiru](#)
- [History of Israel](#)
- [History of Palestine](#)
- [Assyrian captivity](#)
- [Babylonian captivity](#)
- [History of the ancient Levant](#)
- [Jewish diaspora](#)
- [Kingdom of Israel \(united monarchy\)](#)
- [Kings of Israel and Judah](#)
- [Kings of Judah](#)
- [Lachish reliefs](#)
- [Shasu](#)
- [Ten Lost Tribes](#)
- [Timeline of Jewish history](#)
- [Timeline of the Palestine region](#)
- [Time periods in the Palestine region](#)
- [Ancient history of the Negev](#)

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