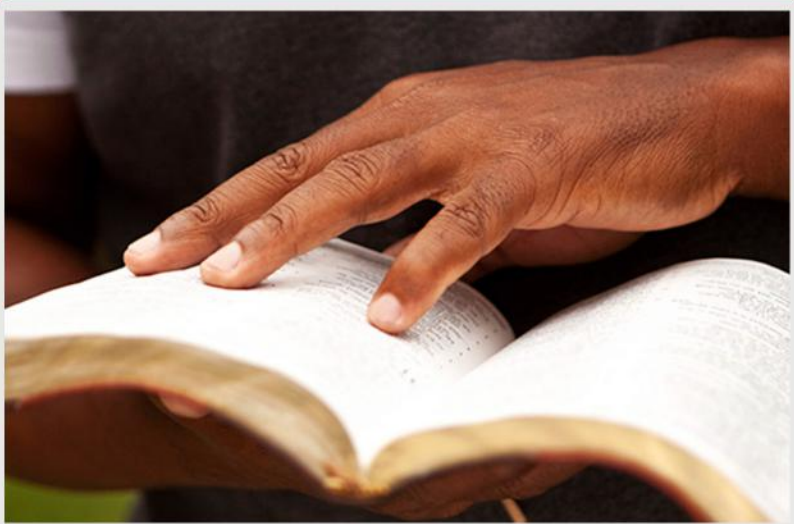


# AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND TO THE OLD TESTAMENT



**Isaac Boaheng**

*Foreword by Dr. Joel Mokhoathi*

 Noyam

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**An African Background to the Old Testament**

Isaac Boaheng

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*I wholeheartedly dedicate this book to my caring and  
loving mother, Mad. Mary Ampomah.*



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# Foreword

The book, *An African Background to the Old Testament* by Reverend Isaac Boaheng, is a resourceful introductory essay to the development, treatment and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (or the Old Testament). It introduces the reader to virtually all the technical but indispensable components that students of the Bible must be aware of and should take into thoughtful consideration when engaging with the biblical text. This is necessitated by multiple interfaces and contextual meanings of the biblical text, which must not always be taken at face value. This is because the Bible is full of rhetorical metaphors, allegorical statements and literal interpretations. This does not exclude the syntax, genre bending and lexis of Hebrew and, in some instances, the Aramaic language. Thus, the Bible comes to us as a literary document, even though it is inspired of God. The English term “Bible” which is derived from Koinē Greek, τὰ βιβλία (“*ta biblia*”) is a testament to this fact. It renders the Bible as a collection of books; in this case a collection of sacred or holy books.

The earliest collection of sacred Scriptures, which originally followed the oral compilation, is the Hebrew Bible. This came in the form of the Hebrew *Miqra*, meaning “a reading,” or *TaNakh*, an acronym for the three main divisions of the Hebrew canon: Law (*Torah*); *Nevi'im* (Prophets); and *Kethuvim* (Writings). Jews and also Christians, believe that God used an oral tradition to transmit his word to the people. Later, these words were put into writing, adapted and expanded upon (through Jewish commentaries on the Bible by rabbis) in order to reflect the communal experiences of God by the two kingdoms—the Kingdom of Israel in the North and the Kingdom of Judah in the South. As a document that is history laden—that is, there is a historical narrative toward the development of the Bible,



and also that the Bible has its own history—it becomes imperative to read and understand the Bible within a particular context.

This implies that there must be an appropriate appreciation of the Bible as a historical document that developed over time within certain socio-political, economic and cultural contexts. Therefore, it is to be taken as a valuable resource whose messages must be deciphered, understood, and communicated in light of meaningful discourses, and familiar forms of conveyance that the original recipients of the Bible were familiar with. This will enable contemporary readers of the Bible to treat it with high regard and interpret it in a manner that is worthy of its sacredness. In academic circles, this speaks to the three worlds of the biblical text: (1) the world behind the text—that is, the world that gave rise to it; (2) the world of the text—that is, what is in the text itself; and (3) the world in front of the text—referring to our world as readers of the text in contemporary times. These have been clearly captured and extensively discussed in this book.

Rev. Boaheng does not only highlight the importance of understanding the Hebrew Bible as an inspired book, but he also ventures to show that the kind of inspiration that was active in the writing of the Bible involved human activity. This is contrary to what Muslims believe of their sacred Scriptures. They hold that the *Qur'an* was dictated to the Prophet Muhammad as he captured every word (*ipsissima verba*) from Allah, and thereby implying that the *Qur'an* came through mechanical inspiration. Jews and also Christians, believe that God's sovereign activity prepared the writers of his word through their lives and experiences, as well as their vocabulary to write exactly what he wanted them to write—that is, supervised inspiration. This means that the writers of the Bible were superintended by the active action of God through his Spirit to capture the divine message.

This accounts for the socio-political, economic, cultural and geographical processes of the time, which feature significantly in the understanding and interpretation of the Bible. This is because the writers of the Bible often reflected critically upon their surroundings

and took the historical developments of their time seriously. These are concisely captured in this book. Among these, Rev. Boaheng outlined the following aspects: the geography, the historico-political, the socio-economic, the religious, and inter-testamental backgrounds of the Hebrew Bible. These adds more value and appreciation of the Bible and its message. Even more significant is the contextualization of the Hebrew Bible to the African context. There is no doubt that there are affinities between the Jewish and African cultures, and a comparative analysis of the two brings the two cultures close together.

By making a comparative analysis of the Jewish and African cultures, Rev. Boaheng enables the African readers of the Bible to appreciate the Old Testament and allows it to speak to their cultural context and ideals. It is in this regards that I unequivocally endorse this book as a work of art, which comprehensively covers key technical components that students of the Bible ought to know and apply in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. It is written in a clear and profound language but also preserving all the inherent lexical jargons and syntax accustomed to this field of study. Because of its simplicity, yet scholarly nature, it can be appreciated and used by various audiences, including lay-preachers, students in biblical and religious studies, Bible college lecturers or academics and Old Testament specialists.

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# Preface

When reading the Old Testament it is important to understand the background data against which the events took place and were documented. The world in which the authors lived informed their choice of words, their style of writing and the events they wrote about. One's knowledge about the Old Testament cultural context, for example, will enhance the ability to understand a given text properly and apply it appropriately. A text cannot mean to the contemporary reader what it did not mean to the original audience. Therefore, understanding a biblical text in its original context is a key step to understanding it in the contemporary context and applying it to a contemporary situation. For this reason, a study of the contexts within which the Bible was written is crucial to biblical scholarship. There are many books on Old Testament backgrounds. However, most of such books are written from a Western perspective such that they fail to connect the African socio-historical context to the biblical context. Consequently, the study of the Old Testament in Africa has been a challenging enterprise for so many years.

Old Testament scholarship is significant in the African academy considering the strong connection between the African and Old Testament worldviews. The nexus between African traditional socio-religious culture and Christianity in Africa is inseparable. For example, the African and Old Testament understanding of such concepts as sin, creation, family, marriage, community, priesthood, and sacrifice are very close. As such, African Old Testament scholars are better equipped to comprehend, appreciate and communicate these concepts better (in the African context) than their Western Old Testament counterparts. Certainly, the optimal maximization of the cooperation between the African and Old Testament worldviews requires adequate exploration of the connection between these two worldviews.

*An African Background to the Old Testament* is a brief introduction to the geographical, social, economic, political and religious backgrounds of the Old Testament from an African viewpoint. It is written to help (African) Bible students to have access to the right background information required for proper interpretation of Scripture within the African setting. The seven-chapter book, after a thorough examination of the geographical, social, economic, political and religious backgrounds of the Old Testament from an African perspective contends that Old Testament scholarship in Africa must be carried out by those with adequate understanding and experience of the African socio-cultural context and must be done through proper interaction with that context.

The book is written in a non-technical way to make it accessible to everyone. Every chapter is organized thematically in sub-headings. Each chapter also ends with a recap of the main points discussed and review questions to allow the student to reflect on what has been discussed before proceeding to the next chapter. Universities and Seminaries can use it as a textbook for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Old Testament Studies.

*August 2021*

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# Introduction

## **Why this book?**

The prime aim of every Christian is to know God's will for his/her life and to live in accordance with this known will. A principal source for knowing God's will for our lives is the Bible. In the process of interpreting the Bible for contemporary application, one has to know what the text in question meant for its original audience. A text cannot mean to the contemporary reader what it did not mean to the original audience. Understanding the Bible in its original context is very difficult for the modern reader because the contemporary world is distant from the biblical world in many respects. For example, the biblical world is an ancient world that is separated from the contemporary world by many centuries. Thus, there is a wide time gap between the ancient world and the modern one. The contemporary world developed from the western Mediterranean cultures of Greece and Rome but the biblical world developed in the eastern Mediterranean cultures of Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, Asia Minor, and Egypt (Africa).

Today's world which is heavily influenced by Western culture definitely has a different culture from that of the one with Eastern influences. The modern world changes rapidly as compared to the biblical world which was relatively stable. The biblical world was agricultural but the modern world is industrial. Biblical writers used several agricultural metaphors which are strange to many people living in modern urban areas. The description of the herder as "a draft animal" (Hos. 10: 11), the farmer as "an olive tree" (Jer. 11:16), the child bearer as "a vine" (Psa. 128: 3), the newborn as "first fruits" (Gen. 49: 3), Israel's enemies as "predators" (Isa. 5: 29) and Yahweh as "a shepherd" (Psa. 23) are examples of biblical figures that cannot be understood properly without adequate understanding

of the biblical world. Again, the biblical world gave priority to the community as opposed to the individualistic worldview found in many contemporary cultures. Resources were considered limited in the biblical world, but the modern world considers resources as renewable and unlimited. As a result of these and other differences, many readers of the Bible ask questions like: How was the world like in biblical times? How did the people in the Bible look like? What were the daily activities of the people in the Bible? Where are the places indicated in the Bible located in the modern world? Answers to these questions are crucial to the study of God's word and as such, every available effort must be geared toward finding answers to these and other related questions.

The quest for answers to questions like these has yielded many publications from which one can make a choice. Most of the existing are however written from a Western cultural perspective. Most Old Testament scholars (African and non-African alike) ignore the African worldview and therefore fail to provide African readers with the needed background. Most African scholars were trained by Western theologians or trained within the Western theological framework. Consequently, they take "the approaches and methodologies of their trainers as universal" and fail to show much concern for African concerns in their Old Testament scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Overreliance on Western approaches and methodological assumptions has not yielded the required results from African Old Testament scholarship. One has to appreciate the role of Western schools of theology in enhancing theological education in Africa. However, (African) scholars need to showcase the numerous connections that African society has with the biblical word so that Africans can better understand God's word within their own setting. African scholars like John S. Mbiti, David T. Adamo, Justin S. Ukpogon, Kwesi A. Dickson, Kwame Bediako and others have many publications in this regard. However, a survey of the works of these and other African scholars reveals the lack of

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin A. Ntrel, "Methodological challenges of Old Testament scholarship in the African context," *Newsletter on African Old Testament Scholarship* 5 (1998), 3. [Retrieved on June 24, 2020 from <http://www.google.com.ng>].

a book that examines the geographical, social, economic, political and religious backgrounds of the Old Testament from an African perspective. It is this literature gap that *An African Background to the Old Testament* is intended to fill. I have written this book with the hope that readers will gain a much deeper understanding of the complexity of the Old Testament as an ancient but timeless divine message that proves timely and relevant for each new *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) and generation.

### **Methodology**

Any careful African reader will not fail to notice the similarities between the Old Testament stories and those of the African society. The Old Testament is “an African Book” which can be read by any African with relative ease. No wonder Aloo O. Mojola made the following observation:

As soon as the first texts of the Old Testament appeared in African languages, the pioneer African readers of these texts could not avoid noticing the similarities between many of the stories of the Old Testament and stories from their own cultures, between many Old Testament religious practices and institutions and those of their own, in short, the Old Testament could easily have been read as an African book without much difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Old Testament will remain foreign to Africans if the affinity between the African and Jewish backgrounds is not showcased. In so doing, Western Old Testament courses that are basic to the study of the Old Testament should not be neglected. My approach in this book is to highlight key aspects of the strong affinity between the African and Jewish worlds and worldviews with the effect of bridging the historical and temporal distance, the geographical and social distance, the linguistic distance and the religio-cultural

<sup>2</sup> Aloo O. Mojola, “The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible in Africa: Challenges and prospects for interpretation and translation,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35(3) (2014):1-7, 3. The original had OT which I have replaced with Old Testament.

distance between the people of the Bible and people of Africa. It is predominantly (though not exclusively) a comparative approach. The book contributes to Africa's quest to decolonize biblical interpretation and Christianity.

Africans need to develop their own course contents and textbooks to promote African biblical scholarship. In addition to (Western) Old Testament courses that are basic to the study of the Old Testament, courses such as "African perspectives on the Old Testament," "African presence in the Old Testament," "a socio-historical study of Ancient Israel from an African perspective" and "An African cultural interpretation of the Old Testament" must be developed and taught in various (African) Universities and Seminaries to enhance African Old Testament scholarship. African scholars must develop textbooks on such courses and publish articles on these areas to enhance the teaching and learning process. I have therefore prepared this book as a suitable textbook for undergraduate and postgraduate university and seminary course, "An African Background to the Old Testament." To this end, I have included review exercises at the end of each chapter to help the reader reflect on the issues discussed before moving to the next chapter. I have also included illustrations (including maps, photos and others) to enhance the understanding of the reader. Where necessary and applicable, illustrations have been taken from various parts of Africa to give the discussion a solid African background. I have avoided the use of technical language without explanation and so the book can be accessed by ordinary readers as well as biblical scholars.

## **Overview of the Book**

The book is organized into seven chapters, the first serving as a general introduction. The second chapter deals with the geographical settings of the Ancient Near East in general and then, the geographical setting of ancient Israel in particular. Chapter three covers major empires (including Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks) that ruled the land of Israel/Palestine. Chapters four and five deal



respectively with the social and economic backgrounds of ancient Israel. Issues considered in these chapters include marriage and family life, water sources, commerce, social classes, occupation and systems of measurement. In chapter six the reader is taken through ancient Jewish religious tradition with its focal point being priesthood and temple worship. Chapter seven deals with the political, religious and socio-economic developments that took place during the intertestamental period. This chapter is not only significant for the understanding of the Old Testament but also for the appreciation of the context within which Christianity emerged from Judaism.



## **Chapter One**

# **INSPIRATION, CANONIZATION AND TRANSMISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

The Bible is the canonical collection of sacred writings of the Judeo-Christian faith. Many people—including kings, philosophers, fishermen, farmers, poets, statesmen and scholars— contributed to the documentation of the Bible. The biblical writers were mostly (except the authors of Luke, Acts and Mark) Jews but they came from different parts of the Jewish land and wrote from different parts of the world. About 40 people contributed to the writing of the Bible and a period of about 1400 years was involved. In this chapter, I introduce the reader to selected aspects of Bibliology, the study of the Bible, with particular reference to the Old Testament.

### **Introducing the Old Testament**

Christians divide the Bible into Old and New Testaments. What Christians call the Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible. To many Hebrews/Jews, there is nothing like the New Testament because their Messiah has still not come. Therefore, what Christians consider as the New Testament has no religious value to them. That is to say, some Jews do not believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah from God and so what Christians believe about him (Jesus) which is documented in the Christian New Testament is of no use to them. From the Christian perspective, God made a covenant with the people of Israel on Mount Sinai which they broke many times. Israel's inability to keep the covenant necessitated God's promise of a "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31ff) to replace the one that was broken. Thus, the Old Testament itself anticipated the coming of a second covenant/testament. The Christian understanding of the Old Testament is based on this kind of expectation, which looks beyond the condition of its time. The

New Testament makes it clear that the promised New Covenant was established through the ministry of Jesus Christ (see 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8:6-13; 9:11-15). Thus, the New Testament is a fulfilment of what the Old Testament promised.

The Hebrew Bible or the *Tanak* (which has origins in the ancient religion of Judaism<sup>3</sup>) is divided into three (3) sections. The first section is the Law (*Torah*) or Pentateuch made up of five (5) books, including, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The second division is the Prophets (*Nebhim*) consisting of eight (8) books, including Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Book of twelve (12) minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). The Writings (*Kethubim*), comprising eleven (11) books categorized as Poetical Books (Psalms, Proverbs, Job), *Megilloth*, five (5 ) Rolls, (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes) and Historical Books (Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles), form the third section. In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis (*Bershiyt*) is the first book and Chronicles (*Dibre Hayamim*) is the last book.

Protestants and Catholics do not agree as to the number of books that make up the Old Testament canon. Catholics recognize seven books (Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus or Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, Baruch), as well as extra material in Esther and Daniel as authoritative books in addition to the thirty-nine (39) books in the Protestant canon. These additional books are referred to as Apocryphal (hidden) or Deuterocanonical (second-canon) books. The Protestant Old Testament is a collection of thirty-nine books about the history and religion of the people of Israel. The Protestant Old Testament is divided as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Judaism is religion of ancient Israel and the world's oldest monotheistic religion. Aderents to this religion believe in one God who revealed himself through ancient prophets. The history of Judaism is essential to understanding the Jewish faith, which has a rich heritage of law, culture and tradition. Christianity emerged from Judaism.

1. **The Pentateuch** refers to the first five books of the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Pentateuch was the first collection of literature acknowledged as Scripture by the Hebrew community. This part of the Old Testament contains the stories of creation, the patriarchs and matriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the giving of God's Law, including the Decalogue (Ten Commandments).
2. **The Historical books** include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. These books share a prophetic view of history describing how the obedience or disobedience of God's people is directly tied to the blessings and curses of the covenant.
3. **The Poetic and Wisdom writings** include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.
4. **The Prophets** which further divides into the **Major Prophets** (including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel and the **Minor Prophets** (including Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). Whether a book belongs to the major or minor prophets is not based on the level of anointing on the writer or the importance of the book within the Christian community but based on its length. Shorter books are classified as minor and lengthy ones, major.

## **An Overview of the Old Testament Story**

The Old Testament can be summarized into nine main historical periods which are: The Creation, Abraham and the Hebrew Patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, Joshua and the Conquest of Canaan, Samson and the Judges, David and Solomon, The Divided Kingdom, The Destruction of Israel and Judah, and Ezra and the Return from Captivity. The story begins with the creation of the universe with humanity as the apex of God's creation. God placed the first humans, Adam and Eve, in a Garden and gave them permission to eat the fruit of every tree except one tree that was in the middle of the Garden, the *tree* of the

knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). All that God created was very good (Gen. 1:31) and the world was without sin. Sin entered the world when Satan, acting through the serpent (Gen. 3:1ff.; Rev. 12:9), deceived Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. The Fall affected the perfect divine-human relationship that existed previously; this is evident in Adam's attempt to hide from God (Gen. 3:8-10). Secondly, Adam's reference to Eve (after the Fall) as "the woman you [God] put here with me" (3:12) rather than his own earlier description, "the bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (2:23), underlines the negative effect that the Fall had on human-human relationship. Thirdly, the Fall destroyed humankind's relationship with the environment as evident in God's declaration that the earth, which before the Fall yielded its bounty for human benefit, would now yield its fruits only after humans have labored greatly (3:17-19). Fourthly, the Fall led to a change in Adam's and Eve's residence. God's act of driving them away from the Garden of Eden (3:23-24) also highlights the severing of the divine-human relationship. Lastly, the Fall made every human being (except Jesus Christ) inherit a sinful nature from Adam (Psa. 5:1-5; Rom. 5:12-21). This is what theologians refer to as the doctrine of "original sin."

Afterward, humanity struggled with the problem of sin. God promised a Savior who would be the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15) and the descendant of Abraham (Gen. 12:4). Abraham gave birth to Isaac after many years of childlessness and Isaac gave birth to Jacob (who was later given the name Israel; cf. Gen. 32:22-32) whose sons became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, the Jewish people, who God chose as an instrument for making himself known to other people, trace their descent from Abraham through his grandson Jacob. The Israelites became slaves in Egypt, and were later delivered by God through Moses who led them out of Egypt to go and occupy the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan. God made a covenant with them and inaugurated them as a nation at Mt Sinai (Exod. 19—34). The covenant stipulated their shared responsibilities both to one another and to God. Moses died on the way to Canaan (Deut. 34) and

Joshua became the new leader who sent them to the Land. Joshua took them to Canaan, conquered the occupants of the Land and then shared it among the twelve tribes of Israel. After Joshua, Israel was led by people referred to as Judges, including Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson (cf. the book of Judges).

Later, Israel asked God to give them a king (1 Samuel 8) and Saul became the first king. After Saul, David became king over Israel and was succeeded by Solomon. The accounts of David's ascent to kingship (1 Sam. 16:1-2 Sam. 5:10), David's exercise of kingship (2 Sam. 5:11-24:25) and David's transfer of kingship (1 Kings 1:1-2:46) point to God's hand in David's life. Israel's golden age includes the period of the reign of David and Solomon (2 Sam. 5:11-1 Kings 11:43). The nation Israel was divided into two after Solomon, each ruled by its own king (1 Kings 12:1-2 Kings 18:12). Samaria became the capital of the northern kingdom (referred to as Israel) comprising Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulun whilst Jerusalem (which was the capital of United Israel) became the capital of the southern kingdom (also referred to as the kingdom of Judah) made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The word "Israel" may therefore refer to the man Jacob, the descendants of Jacob (that is, the twelve tribes of Israel), or the northern kingdom made up of ten tribes.

The northern kingdom was conquered in 722 BCE by Assyria and the southern kingdom in 586 BCE by Babylon. The Fall of Israel happened because all the kings in the northern kingdom of Israel were wicked people who worshipped idols and they forsook God's commandments. The Fall of Judah happened because they had forsaken the Lord and disaster was inevitable. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem and took them out of the land to Babylon.

Later (around 540 BCE), Persia conquered Babylon. Persian tradition was to allow conquered people to return to their homelands

and rebuild their cities and temples as long as they pay taxes to the Persian Empire. Therefore, King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return, having stayed in Babylon for 70 years. Unfortunately, only a small portion returned. The first move back to Israel was led by Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple and re-establish Jewish religious rituals (Ezra 1:5 - 6:22). They found Jerusalem in ruins with a mixed breed of corrupt Jews (Samaritans) living there. Yet, they laid the foundations for the new Temple, and built an altar to the LORD in 536 BCE. They completed the Temple construction in 516 BCE, exactly 70 years after they were taken captive, just as Jeremiah had predicted. Prophets Haggai and Zechariah served as an inspiration to the people. Later (458 BCE) more Jews returned under the leadership of Ezra, a Priest and a Scribe. Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron the chief priest (7:1-32; 8:33-10:44), thus he was a priest and scribe in his own right. His coming brought spiritual renewal and reforms to the Jewish society. Not long after this, Nehemiah obtained permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which miraculously happened within fifty-two (52) days (445 BCE). Nehemiah went back to Babylon and later (ca. 433 BCE) returned to enhance social and religious reforms (Neh. 13). Most of the Jews returned; some (including Daniel and Esther) however remained in exile and considered the place as their home.

### **God's Revelation**

Humans cannot know about God if God does not first of all reveal himself to them. God is the source of divine revelation. God's revelation to humanity has come in two forms, namely, general revelation and special revelation. General revelation means the general truths about God which can be known through nature, history, and the constitution of the human person. This revelation is not time bound; neither is it geographically bound. It is available to all people at all times, and in all places. The Psalmist alludes to general revelation when he writes "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day

they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge” (Psa. 19:1-2 NIV). Paul says it this way, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20NIV). Both writers underline the testimonies that nature and human conscience give to God’s existence. General revelation means no one can have a legitimate excuse for not knowing about God.

Evidence of God’s existence exists in all human societies and so people in societies that have been Christianized knew God even before Christianity was introduced to them. In Africa for instance, almost every society had a name for God (before the advent of Christianity) which were adopted in mother-tongue Bible translations as the local name for God. Examples of such names include Akan: *Nyankopɔn*, Ewe: *Mawu*, Akiyuku: *Ngai*, Yoruba: *Olodumare* and others. References were made to God at such events as naming ceremonies, pouring of libation and the like even before Christianity was introduced to Africans. There is therefore no excuse for not knowing about God. General revelation has at least two limitations. In addition to its insufficiency in leading humanity to salvation, general revelation has been blurred by the Fall of humanity and so it leads people to worship creatures rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:21-23, 25).

On the other hand, special revelation has to do with the manifestation of God to a particular people at particular times and places as means of bringing salvation to those people. Key means by which special revelation have come to humanity include physical appearances of God (Gen. 15:17; 16:7-13; 18:1; 32:24-30; Judg. 2:1-4), dreams (Gen. 28:12; 37:5) and visions (Gen. 15:1; Ezk. 8:3-4), miraculous means (Exod. 4:2-9), through prophets (Deut. 18:15-22), angels (Dan. 9:20-21; Luke 2:10-11) the written Word of God (the Bible) which is inspired, profitable, and sufficient (2 Tim. 3:16-17), and (most importantly and perfectly) through Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14).



All Bible students need to appreciate the progression in God's special revelation. God's special revelation was revealed progressively such that the sections of the Bible that were written later contain a fuller revelation of God than the earlier sections. A key implication for the study of the Scripture is that there is the need to consider the entire teaching of the Bible on a particular issue before drawing conclusions.<sup>4</sup> Progressive revelation is the progression from truth to more truth and finally to the full truth. The writer of Hebrews notes that God revealed himself "at many times and in many ways" in the past but in the last days he has revealed himself through the Son (1:1). Adam received a bit of God's truth, and so did Noah; God spoke more fully to Abraham, unveiling more of himself and his purposes. He revealed himself supremely in the Old Testament through Moses. However, in the fullness of time (in these last days) he has revealed himself fully in the person of Jesus Christ who is the exact representation of the Father's being (Heb. 1:3). That is how progressive revelation works. Even though the Bible was divinely revealed and inspired there are traces of background information in it (as I will explain in the next section).

### **Inspiration of the Bible**

The doctrine of inspiration means the human authors and editors of the Bible were led or influenced by God with the result that their writings may be considered the word of God. The Bible attests to its own inspiration when it says biblical authors wrote under the influence of the Holy Spirit (see Job 32:8 and 2 Tim. 3:16). From the Greek word *theopneustos* (translated "inspired" or "God-breathed" in 2 Tim. 3:16) one can deduce that biblical inspiration means the Bible is the breath of God or that the Bible has come from God's own mouth. Inspiration, unlike revelation, deals with how God's revealed word was documented.

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<sup>4</sup> Isaac Boaheng, *Is The Bible Really the Word of God?* (Sunyani: Jonnette Secretarait, 2020), 39-40.

Josh McDowell (paraphrasing Geisler) defines inspiration as “the mysterious process by which God worked through human writers, employing their individual personalities and styles to produce divinely authoritative and inerrant writings.”<sup>5</sup> One can deduce some facts about inspiration from the above quote. In the first place, biblical authors were free to employ their own literary styles and peculiarities. One, therefore, finds traces of the background of biblical authors in their (the authors’) writings. King David (a former shepherd) considers the LORD as (his) Shepherd (Psa. 23:1), Isaiah (being familiar with priesthood) reveals some deep cultic truths in his book (1:10-20; 2:6-8; 52:13-53:12), Luke (a medical officer) shows more interest in healing stories than any other Gospel writer, and Paul (a lawyer) employed legal terms such as condemnation, justification and others in his writings (eg. Rom. 3:28). Anyone who has read Afua Kuma’s *Jesus of the Deep Forest*, will appreciate the influence of one’s background in the person’s perception of God. The following quote is illustrative of this point.

She depicts Jesus’ supremacy over every spiritual rule and authority as follows: “If Satan troubles us, Jesus Christ, You who is the Lion of the grasslands, You whose claws are sharp, Will tear out his entrails, And leave them on the ground For the flies to eat. Let us all say, Amen!”<sup>6</sup> Afua Kuma’s description of Jesus is directly informed by her background as an Akan farmer who cultivates in a deep forest at Kwahu in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Like other farmers, Afua’s daily farming activities brought her into contact with many wild animals including the lion, bear, python, elephants, snakes, crocodiles, among others. She depicts Jesus as the lion who can overcome all the animals in the forest. By so doing, Afua underlines the omnipotence of Christ. The metaphor of tearing out the entrails of his enemies is also picked from the forest setting. Afua’s point is that with Jesus as her protector, no enemy can overcome her

<sup>5</sup> Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 334.

<sup>6</sup> Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises* Translated by Jon Kirby (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2011), 49.

because Jesus can overpower any animal that comes to attack her. This view about Christ is very important in the African context, for example, where people express much fear about evil forces. All these discussions about Afua Kuma's quote are meant to make the point that one's perception and/or description of God and/or an event is informed by the person's background and experiences. Therefore, it is natural that though the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, it has traces of the backgrounds of its authors in it. This fact makes the study of the background of the Bible a crucial task.

In addition, the Bible shows human thought patterns such as memory lapses (1 Cor. 1:14-16) and human emotions (Gal. 4:14). This leads us to the next fact about inspiration, namely, though inspired, the documentation of the Bible was not a mechanical process whereby God treated the biblical authors as dictating machines or tape recorders. In other words, the biblical authors did not act as "secretaries" who wrote what the Holy Spirit dictated. If it were so then the writers are not responsible for what they wrote. Rather, God used the human authors as living and responsible beings. The revelation came through various ways including dreams, visions through audible voices, and angels. For example, Luke conducted extensive research on existing materials before writing his gospel (Luke 1:1-4).

Next and more importantly, the doctrine of inspiration applies to the original autographs (in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) rather than every copy or translation (whether ancient or modern). Though the Bible is inspired, not every copy or every translation of the original is without error. There may be minor errors in the manuscript,<sup>7</sup> copies or translations. The original copies were however without any scribal errors because God safeguarded the writing process to be free from errors. By comparing the numerous available copies of manuscripts, one finds that God allowed some minor mistakes to have their way through the copying process. As a result, there are some variant

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<sup>7</sup> A manuscript is any surviving hand-written copy of an ancient document that predates the invention of the printing press in 1455.

readings (that is, different readings of the same text) of biblical texts. Textual variants usually result from differences between the wording of two or more copies of manuscripts due to (but not limited to) “changes in a letter, a word, a phrase or even additions and omissions of whole sentences or paragraphs.”<sup>8</sup> I have argued elsewhere that “If only one manuscript of the Old and New Testaments had survived, there would have been zero variants. Yet, this single manuscript would probably have become some sort of ‘idol’. This might be the reason why God did not preserve just a single manuscript.”<sup>9</sup> I once had the opportunity to see about a five-hundred-year-old manuscript of the book of Genesis. Phones were to be left outside or put off when entering the library where it was kept. No one was allowed to touch it. The security apparatus that was put in place before allowing people to have just a look at the manuscript shows clearly that the existence of a single manuscript without any error would have led to the idolization of that manuscript. The obvious conclusion from the foregoing is that, to say that the Bible is inspired means speaking of the “Bible” in the sense of original copies (in the source languages) or in the sense of perfectly copied or translated versions. Portions of Scripture that contain copying or translating error cannot be said to be inspired.

Finally, the inspiration of the Bible does not mean everything contained in the Bible is prescriptive (instructive) for us. In fact, some portions are only descriptive. For example, the records of polygamy (Gen. 4:23; 1 Kings 11:3), the lies of (Satan [Gen. 3:4; cf. John 8:44], Abraham (Gen. 20:2), and Rahab (Josh. 2:4), atheism (Psa. 14:1) and other sins are simply descriptive of what happened rather than instructive for one to emulate. People who are ignorant of this fact may argue that the Bible teaches immorality, lies and others. The point is that while the whole Bible is true (John 17:17), this truth is

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<sup>8</sup> Craig L. Bloomberg and Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 5

<sup>9</sup> Boaheng, *Is The Bible Really the Word of God?*, 42.

“found in what the Bible *reveals*, not in everything it *records*.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Canonization of the Old Testament**

The development of the Hebrew canon took place over a long period.<sup>11</sup> At the time of canonizing the Hebrew Scriptures, many documents existed and circulated among the Hebrew people. Not all these materials could find their way into the canon. The biblical reference to documents such as the book of the wars of Yahweh (Num. 21:14ff.), the book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18), the book of the acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41) and the book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel (2 Kings 13:12) suggests that some ancient Jewish documents are extinct. The canonization of Scriptures, therefore, has both positive and negative connotations; positive in the sense that some books were accepted as sacred and authoritative and negative in the sense that the process led to the exclusion of certain books. The canonization process, however, was not done anyhow. God superintended the process such that it was carefully executed. Certain questions were raised to guide the process.

Several factors were considered in the process of canonization, a few of which are outlined below. The first question was about the authority of the writer. To be canonized, a book must have been written, edited, or endorsed by a prophet. This criterion was based on the fact that prophets were spokespersons of God and therefore if one needed to know what God had said, one had to know what the prophet had said on God’s behalf. Therefore, to be canonized, a book needed to have been written before the silent period, the period in the history of Israel when we are told that there were no prophets of God (that is, after 400 BCE and before John the Baptist). Another factor that was considered was the edifying power of the book under consideration. Books were expected to give some internal pieces of evidence of their unique character, as inspired and authoritative and

<sup>10</sup> Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Victor Books, 1992), np. Emphasis original.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the canonization process, consult *Is The Bible Really the Word of God?*, 58-109.

as books which do not contradict previously known facts about God. An additional test for canonicity was the acceptance or rejection of a book by the people of God. Books that were accepted by the Jews were in wide circulation. Many copies of such books were made which in turn ensured their survival after the exile. Such books could be canonized. To be brief, the wider the geographical area over which a document was accepted among the Jewish community, the greater the chance of becoming canonized.

The Old Testament had not been put together (as we have it today) by the time of Jesus' death. That is to say, the canonization process was not completed for the Old Testament at the time of his death. Yet, during his lifetime, Jesus recognized the Law and the Prophets as Scripture. The writings were still in the process of canonization. In 70 AD a group of Jewish scholars met at Jummia and finalized the process. It is important to note that the books that were accepted as part of the canon had already gained acceptance before the meeting. The meeting only made this recognition official. One should therefore not think that the canonization process was manipulated by these scholars.

### **African Oral Culture and the Old Testament**

The Old Testament was transmitted through oral tradition for a long time before it was documented. After an event happened, people talked about it for a long time, passing it across generations until it was finally documented. The African society, like ancient Israel society, is an oral society. There is a proverb that states, "In Africa, when an old man dies, it is a library that burns down." This saying emphasizes the role oral tradition and oral history play in African cultures. African oral tradition refers to verbalization as means by which humans express their feelings, purposes, inclinations, and desires using language that both the speaker and the listener know. African oral texts can be found in religious poetry, praise poems, elegies, myths, proverbs, pithy sayings, liturgy, songs, dances, artistic expressions, artifacts and the likes. In most African societies, story-

telling activities take place in the night after the hard day's work. People gather around the fire and listen to stories that teach them moral lessons. The history of various societies is transmitted through storytelling and other similar activities. The orality of traditional African society and the functions it plays are noted by L. Gunner in the following quote:

Orality needs to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organized their present and past, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced on power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to the “the word”, language, as the means by which humanity was made and constantly refashioned.<sup>12</sup>

The oral tradition that Africans share with ancient Israelites has the potential of enhancing the African interpretation of historical narratives. For example, when the African comes across repetitions in biblical narratives (such as what we have in Gen. 5) he/she has to appreciate that repetition is an oral technique aimed at making a piece of information easily memorable. The age at which someone gave birth to his first son is given; the name of that first son is given; the fact that he gave birth to other sons and daughters is stated; the total years the person spent on earth before dying is also stated. The repetitive pattern signals orality in the transmission of the information before it was finally written down. Many portions of the Hebrew Scriptures were transmitted orally for so many generations before they were committed to writing. This is also found in African stories. African folklore tradition employs repetition to help listeners to process the information given and to remember it easily. More importantly, it must be noted that oral traditions that were handed down were fluid

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<sup>12</sup> Liz Gunner, “Africa and orality,” T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson (eds.), *African literature: An anthology of criticism and theory*, pp. 67–73 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 67.



and not supposed to be static. Africans can easily understand the Old Testament in the context of an orality-of-tradition culture.

### **Biblical Languages**

The Christian Bible was originally written in three languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The Hebrew language belongs to the Semitic language family. The Semitic language family of languages is spoken in the Middle East, North Africa, and East Africa, which is a sub-group of the Afro-Asiatic family. According to Mojola “The Semitic languages of the Middle East are part of a larger language family, the Afro-Asiatic language family which includes numerous languages found in North Africa, the Sahel region, the horn of Africa including Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somali, most of northern Kenya and parts of Tanzania.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, there are many African societies whose languages are similar to the Hebrew language.

The Hebrew language has undergone a lot of significant changes (throughout the centuries) that make Modern Israeli Hebrew remarkably different from the Hebrew that was used by ancient Israelites. The Hebrew language that existed during biblical times (from the 12th century BCE to the 5th century BCE) is referred to as biblical Hebrew to distinguish it from modern Hebrew. Except for a portion of Daniel and Ezra, all the Old Testament was written in biblical Hebrew. For this reason, knowledge about biblical Hebrew usually comes from the study of the Hebrew Bible. Scholars identify three major stages in the development of the Hebrew language, “the archaic period (12th-11th centuries BCE), the standard period (11th-6th centuries BCE), and the late-stage period (6th-5th centuries BCE). Most of the materials recorded in the Hebrew Bible are from the standard period.”<sup>14</sup>

At first, biblical Hebrew had no written vowels. All Hebrew words were formed from only consonants. This Hebrew text without

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<sup>13</sup> Aloo O. Mojola, *Issues in Bible Translation: Navigating Troubling & Tempestuous Waters* (Nairobi: Tafsiri Printing Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Boaheng, *Basic Biblical Hebrew* (Sunyani: Jonnette Secretarait, 2019), 13.



the vowels is referred to as **Unpointed Text**. People supplied vowels in spoken Hebrew. As a convention, all verbs (with few exceptions) used the /a/ sound while their noun counterparts used the /e/ sound in the first vowel position. Ancient Israelites transferred the right pronunciation of words through oral tradition that was handed over from generation to generation. Hebrew speakers supplied fixed vowel sounds in their reading and conversation based on their knowledge of the language. Later, around 500 BCE (or earlier), Jewish scholars (called the Masoretes) added vowels to written Hebrew to “maintain correct pronunciation that had been passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition.”<sup>15</sup> What they obtained through the pointing system became known as the **Masoretic Text (MT)**.

The Aramaic language belongs to the Semitic subfamily of the Afroasiatic language family. It was the main medium of communication in the Near East from the 6th to 4th century BCE. The Babylonians spoke this language until their conquest by Alexander the Great who introduced Greek to them and eventually made it their official language. The exilic Jews also spoke Aramaic such that by the time they returned to their land most of them had lost the Hebrew tongue altogether. The Targums, the Aramaic version of the Hebrew Scriptures, were prepared to cater for the linguistic needs of these Jews. Jesus spoke Aramaic. New Testament expressions like *talitha cumi* (Mk. 5:41), *ephphatha* (Mk. 7:34), *Eli Eli, lama sabachthani* (Mk. 14:36) are Aramaic expressions. Parts of the books of Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26) and Daniel (2:46-7:28) were also written in Aramaic.

Greek is an Indo-European language spoken primarily in Greece. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, specifically Koine Greek, even though some authors often included translations from Hebrew and Aramaic texts. Thus, in the gospel one finds the Greek version of what Jesus, for example, said in Aramaic. Koine Greek emerged in the 4th century BCE and was used until about the 6th century. The development of the Greek language took place in four phases, the Ancient phase (14th to 4th century BCE);

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<sup>15</sup> Boaheng, *Basic Biblical Hebrew*, 28.

the Hellenistic and Roman phase (4th century BCE to 4th century CE); the Byzantine phase (5th to 15th century CE); and the Modern phase (after 15th century CE).

## **Transmission of the Old Testament text**

Throughout history, human beings have written on many materials including leaves, cave walls, clay, stones, and others. In ancient times, biblical manuscripts were written on one of three materials: Papyrus, Parchment, and Paper, with a few minor exceptions such as verses written on amulets and pots.

### **Stone Tablets**

Early attempts at pictographs were made on the surfaces of rocks, the walls of caves and cliffs. Later, monuments were erected on which inscriptions were made. One such example is the triangular inscription of Darius the Great, at Behistun in present-day Iran. Famous stones include Moabite Stone and Rosetta Stone which contained three scripts namely, hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek. The Decalogue is the main Old Testament text which was written on tablets of stone. Below shows two stone tablets.<sup>16</sup>



*Fig. 1.1 Stone Tablets*

<sup>16</sup>Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=Stone+tablet+old+testament&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk00bYrW7AVj42v6TrS8Mh13A2fBVxA:1624901> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

### ***Clay Tablets***

For economic reasons and durability, the use of clay tablets in writing was a common practice in the ancient near east. Characters were jabbed upon the soft clay surface and then dried or baked before storing it on shelves or in boxes. Archaeological studies have discovered thousands of ancient clay tablets. For example, in 1906, 1000 clay tablets were discovered from the ancient Hittite capital at Boghaz-koy in Turkey. In 1925, 20000 clay tablets were found at Nuzi which contained documents connected to the patriarchal period and in 1936, 22000 tablets were found at Mari in connection with Abraham's journey from Ur to Haran. Below shows the clay tablet for Genesis.<sup>17</sup>



***Fig. 1.2 Clay Tablet***

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<sup>17</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=Clay+Tablets+from+bible+&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjjpNPt7brxAhVMYBoKHZbeDkcQ2-> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

### ***Wooden Tablets***

Wooden tablets were also used in ancient times as writing materials. The Greco-Roman world used wax-coated *tabellae* collected together like sheets of paper in book form. Slats of wood with writing on them have been found in the caves at Murabba'at, at the Dead Sea, which date from about AD 130. The use of wooden tablets might have informed the instruction to the prophet to “take a stick of wood and write on it” (Ezek. 37:15). Below shows a wooden tablet.<sup>18</sup>



***Fig. 1.3 Wooden Tablet***

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<sup>18</sup> Retrieved from [https://www.google.com/search?q=Wooden+Tablets+bible&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk00k15VKRD\\_zuWe4ycPkK-\\_qlweElw:1624902077406&source](https://www.google.com/search?q=Wooden+Tablets+bible&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk00k15VKRD_zuWe4ycPkK-_qlweElw:1624902077406&source) [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

***Papyrus***

Papyrus was obtained from the papyrus plant by dividing it with a needle into thin strips, being careful to make them as wide as possible. It was invented in Egypt in about 3000 BCE to record Pyramid Texts and the Prisse manuscripts.<sup>19</sup> The best quality material was known to have come from the centre of the stalk, with lesser grades coming from nearer to the edges. The best papyrus could be sliced thin enough that the final product was flexible and even translucent, like a heavy modern paper, though it could not be folded easily. The strips were placed upon a table and moistened with water from the Nile. Papyrus sheets came in all sizes, depending on the size of the usable strips cut from the plant. The largest known papyri are as much as two-thirds of a metre wide, but the typical size was about half that size. On the scroll, the text was written in columns about 2 ½ to 3 inches wide, and just over ½ an inch apart from one another. Scrolls of papyrus were rolled out horizontally rather than vertically. They were about 10 inches high and up to about 35 feet in length.

One can infer from Job 8:11 and Isaiah 18:2 that the biblical writers were familiar with the use of papyrus. Yet, there is no existing Old Testament papyrus manuscript. A good number of New Testament papyrus manuscripts, however, exist. The non-availability of papyrus outside Egypt, the danger of punching it in the process of writing, its high fragility when dried, and that likelihood of being damaged under moist conditions, are some of its disadvantages. A biblical papyrus is shown below.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Owusu Bediako, *History of the Bible* (Accra: Advocate Publishing Limited, 2008), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=Papyrus+in+old+testament&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk03j131JYVuMl0gLHLvviV3dTpemKA> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

**Fig. 1.4 Papyrus*****Parchment***

It is a writing material made from the skin of goats, sheep and calves. The process of making parchment was long and gradual. Unlike vellum, parchment was not prepared by tanning but rather by stretching, scraping and drying under tension. It is not very flexible, it does not take ink very well, and it will usually have hair and roots still attached. It has the advantage of being reusable and more durable than papyrus. Some such leather scrolls are still in existence and date back to 1500 BCE. The name parchment derives from the city where it was invented (*Pergaminus* in Latin). It was by far the most durable, but also the most expensive and it is difficult to get large numbers of sheets of the same size and colour. Papyrus was much cheaper, but would wear out more quickly and, since it is destroyed by damp, few copies have survived to the present day, except those from Egypt (and even those were usually badly damaged). Most of the Dead Sea Scrolls are made of leather. A parchment is shown below.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=Parchment+in+bible+times&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk03y7yS2nqe1IWebhpP8KSGuFaxwUw> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].



**Fig. 1.5 Parchment*****Vellum***

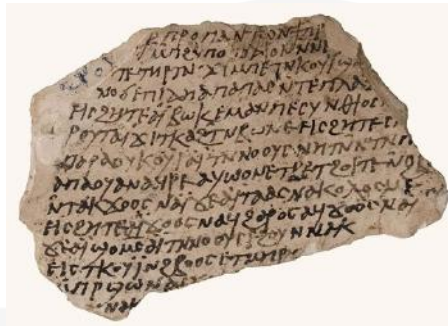
Vellum refers to the best quality animal skins and was made from calves, while parchment refers to all other animal skin used in papermaking such as bulls and goats, and was inferior in quality to vellum. Vellum was prepared by tanning the leather in such a way that both sides became useful for writing. Because it could last long, vellum could preserve the text for a long time. Below shows a vellum.<sup>22</sup>



<sup>22</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=vellum+in+ancinet+bi-ble&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKewi7j8-Z9brxAhVKiRoKHXHvD1YQ2-> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

**Fig. 1.6 Vellum****Ostraca**

The ancient world was familiar with the use of ostraca (singular *ostrakon*) as writing material. Ostraca consist of broken pieces of pottery. They were cheap, available and could easily be written on with pen and ink. Ostraca from the Israelite period have been found in the royal storehouse of the Israelite kings at Samaria. Greek ostraca containing a portion of the Gospels inscribed on them, have been discovered in Upper Egypt. An ancient ostrakon is shown below.<sup>23</sup>

**Fig. 1.7 An ancient Ostrakon****Conclusion**

This chapter has covered relevant aspects of Bibliology, including such issues as inspiration, canonization, the text and transmission of the Old Testament. The issues discussed are foundational to the study of the Old Testament and it will serve to prepare the reader for the issues in the subsequent chapters. A key conclusion from this chapter is that though the Bible is inspired by God, it also has human nature. In the next chapter, I take the reader on a tour of the geography of the Bible world.

<sup>23</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=an+greek+ostraca&tbm=isch&ved=2ah> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].



## **Review Questions**

1. What is your understanding of the Christian doctrine of inspiration?
2. In what ways could the background of a biblical writer have possibly influenced his texts? Explain with relevant examples.
3. What does it mean to say “The Bible is a divine revelation”?
4. If the Old Testament is God’s word, how come it was written by human beings?
5. To what extent do you agree that your mother-tongue Bible is God’s word for your community?

## **Chapter Two**

### **GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND**

The geographical setting of the Old Testament is relevant to Old Testament scholarship because God's dealings with humanity took place within particular geographical and cultural settings. A careful reader of the Bible would realize the role geography and history play in understanding the biblical message. At the same time, it would be noted that the Bible does not record every historical event that took place in biblical times. This is attested by the many reminders to readers to consult other sources for information which are either not recorded in the Bible or are less elaborate in it (cf. Num. 21:14; 1 Kings 14:19; 2 Kings 23:28). It, therefore, follows that the Old Testament alone may not give us all the details we need about the geography and history of the biblical world. Therefore, a study of the general context of Ancient Near East is necessary for the proper comprehension of the Old Testament world. My focus in this chapter is to examine first, the geographical settings of the Ancient Near East in general and then, the geographical setting of Israel in particular.

#### **The World of the Old Testament**

The Old Testament world is usually identified with the “Fertile Crescent”, an area which includes the Nile River valley and delta, the narrow plains along the Mediterranean coast of Syro-Palestine, and the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. The Fertile Crescent is part of what is often referred to as the Middle East. It was American archaeologist James Henry Breasted who coined the term “Fertile Crescent” in 1914 to describe this archaeologically significant region of the Middle East. Breasted's description is accurate because on a map, this region looks like a crescent or quarter-moon and at the same time, this area contained unusually fertile soil and productive freshwater and wetlands. The Fertile Crescent is located approximately between 20 and 40 degrees north latitude and between 25 and 50 east longitude, including all of Palestine, Syria, Egypt and

Mesopotamia, except the far north of Asia minor, most of Armenia, western Median, Elam, all except the extreme south and southeast of Arabia, north Nubia, the eastern part of Libya, Cyprus, Crete, and the eastern of the Aegean.<sup>24</sup> Other areas such as southern Ethiopia, south Arabia, and southern Russia (that is, the land of the Scythians) also play an important part in Old Testament history. The Fertile Crescent is located at the point where Africa, Europe and Asia meet, and hence, it has been the meeting spot for many people and cultures. It was the center of civilization in antiquity and a site of great achievements. Three geographic locations are key in our discussion of the biblical world. They are Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt.

Geographically the societies of the Ancient Near East are connected with those of Africa. Readers of the Old Testament and even the entire Bible realize that North and North-Eastern Africa (and for that matter Africa) are part and parcel of the story of the Bible right from the Genesis stories. There are several references to African countries like Egypt and Kush (or Ethiopia) in the sacred text. The Old Testament provides data on movement to and from Africa and contacts between Africa and the Fertile Crescent. The people and some of the key personalities in the Old Testament are not strangers to the African world. Africa and Africans have a significant place in the Bible. For example, Old Testament African characters like Nimrod (Genesis 10), Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 10), Cushan-Rishathiam (Judges 3), and Abishag (1 Kings 1, 2) were prominent people.

### ***Mesopotamia***

From the Greek word meaning “the land between the rivers”, Mesopotamia refers to an ancient region<sup>25</sup> (not a country) of Western Asia situated between and around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in the northern part of the Fertile Crescent including ancient Syria,

<sup>24</sup> William F. Albright, “The Old Testament World,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* vol. 1 edited by George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 235.

<sup>25</sup> By region, I mean an area of the earth with consistent cultural or physical characteristics. The Middle East for example is a region rather than a country.

Accad, Babylonia, and Sumer.<sup>26</sup> Hiddekel (the Tigris), and Phirat (the Euphrates) are two of the four rivers listed in Genesis 2:10-14 in association with the garden of Eden, the other two being Pishon and Gihon. Mesopotamia is part of a U-shaped area from the Mediterranean coast to the Persian Gulf, the Fertile Crescent. This region in modern days roughly corresponds to most of Iraq, Kuwait, the eastern parts of Syria, Southeastern Turkey, and regions along the Turkish–Syrian and Iran–Iraq borders. Along these rivers were about 600 miles of land stretching from the mountainous areas on the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent to the expansive alluvial plains of the Persian Gulf. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers begin in the Taurus mountains of Turkey (where rain and melting snow feed them) and follow separate paths (the Tigris flowing about 1,180 miles (1,900 km) and the Euphrates about 1,740 miles (2,800 km) before coming together to form the Shatt al Arab (meaning, “stream of the Arabs”), which flows slowly for 120 miles (193 km) before emptying into the Persian Gulf.<sup>27</sup> Both the level of the Shatt al Arab and the tides in the Persian Gulf were determined by the amount of water carried by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The Euphrates was the biggest river in southwest Asia, and in Deuteronomy 11:24, it is referred to as “the river.” It has two river sources, namely, the Murat and the Kara Su both of which begin in the Armenian Highlands of northeastern Turkey and come together at Keban to form the Euphrates River. It curves southeastward to flow into the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates became the major transportation and communication channel between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The Euphrates got to its lowest level around the end of summer and reaches floodwater in May when the snow melted into it and winter rained in its upper course.

The Tigris is sourced by Lake Hazar, located in the Taurus Mountains of eastern Turkey. It flows along the border between Turkey and Syria and enters Iraq. After travelling about 1146 miles

<sup>26</sup> See Victor H. Matthews and James C. Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context* Third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 5.

<sup>27</sup> See Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 5.

along the foot of the Zagros mountains, the Tigris joins the Euphrates 40 miles from the Persian Gulf.<sup>28</sup> It then winds in Babylon (Dan. 10:4), joined by sources from the Persian mountains, the Greater and Lesser Zab, Adhem, Diyala rivers.

The Tigris-Euphrates drained an area of about 475,865 square miles (765,830 square km) much of which was the desert region. Water from the rivers makes it possible for people to live in this hot, arid environment. The force with which the rivers descend from the Taurus Mountains erodes or wears away tiny particles of rock and soil from the mountains. These particles are carried along with the rivers until they reach the point where the slow flow of the rivers makes them settle at the bottom of the rivers. This nutrient-rich sediment settles on the land alongside the banks when the rivers overflow, making the soil better for growing crops. The southernmost reaches of these rivers form a marshy area which became the home of the earliest occupants of the region.<sup>29</sup> Along with the hilly areas of the southern Caucasus mountains, the two rivers are wide apart; however, by the time they get near the ancient Babylonian site, they are only a few miles apart.<sup>30</sup>

Ancient people (who were mainly farmers and shepherds) preferred living in valleys in order to have fertile soil for farming, get a source of water, and have protection against invaders. The result was that the first civilizations arose in river valleys. Examples of such areas include Egypt and Kush (Nile River), Mesopotamia (Tigris and Euphrates Rivers), India (Indus and Ganges Rivers) and China (Huang He River).

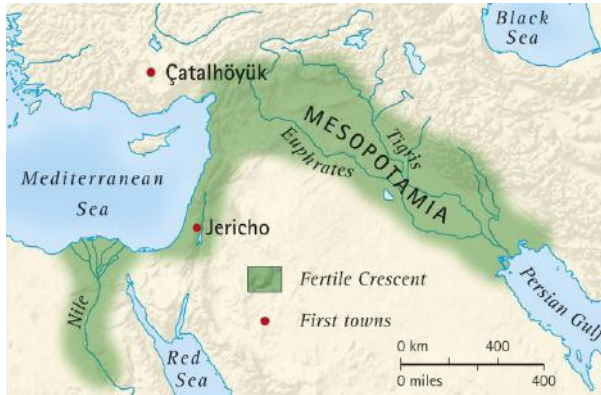
However, the rainfall is usually minimal throughout the region. Therefore, the people of Mesopotamia had networks of canals that irrigated the flood plain, making the lower part of the region suitable for agricultural activities. Through irrigation, people could

<sup>28</sup> James M. Houston, "The Geographical Setting of the Bible," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Vol. 1, edited by Frank Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 87.

<sup>29</sup> Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 6.

cultivate a large amount of land and get a surplus for economic gains.<sup>31</sup> The area had no barriers to protect the people from outside influence and invasion. The map below shows the Mesopotamian region.<sup>32</sup>



**Fig. 2.1 Map of Ancient Mesopotamia**

People lived in the Mesopotamia region as early as 10 000 BCE. These people were nomads or wanderers who lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering wild grains and other plants. Later, the nomads began to settle in villages where they built houses from clay bricks that were hardened in the sun. The earliest occupants of Mesopotamia lived along the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys in circular dwellings constructed from mud and brick. Human settlements in Mesopotamia were wide apart and separated by wide stretches of desert. Ancient civilization began from Mesopotamia around 3 500 BCE (for which reason it is referred to as “the cradle of civilization”) and spread west to Egypt and east to India and China. These three civilizations came together to form an ancient international trade network that eventually spread across the connected lands of Eurasia and North Africa.

<sup>31</sup> Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=mesopotamia&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk00pjdtMEzGsaml1p7uqLDentznwIA> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

Mesopotamia settlers faced major challenges including unpredictable floods that destroyed crops, homes and people, the presence of marshy areas that were unsuitable for farming and the vulnerability of the area to attack and invasion. The major occupation in the area was agriculture which was controlled by government officials. Because much of southern Mesopotamia was flat and featureless, there were periodic unpredictable devastating floods in the region, especially along the Euphrates River. The flood, which left nutrient-rich silt on the land to enhance farming activities, could cover a large area and even wash over whole cities, as, for example, it happened to ancient Ur. This series of devastating floods might have led to the documentation of flood epics in some ancient literature from Mesopotamia. The occurrence of floods could have resulted in a change of the course of the Euphrates River, a situation which could have also led to the isolation of cities located on its bank from the easy access to the water supply. Some people even had to leave their cities to resettle at places where they could now get water for agriculture and other activities. To overcome this challenge, farmers learnt to construct irrigation systems that turned the dry valley into a prosperous center of all-year-round agriculture to support the lives of many people. The people also caught fish in the rivers and hunted birds and other animals that lived along the shores. More so, the rivers served as an important route for travel and trade.

The biblical patriarchs lived in the northern part of Mesopotamia in the area of Haran-Aram between the Tigris and the Euphrates. Some biblical references to Mesopotamia could be noted. Abraham sent his servant to Nahor in Mesopotamia to look for a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:10). Jacob sojourned among Amorites in Paddan-Aram (Gen 28:1-9). The pagan prophet came from Pethor of Mesopotamia (Deut. 23:4). In the time of the judges, God sent the king of Mesopotamia (named Cushan-Rishathaim) to afflict the rebellious people of Israel (Judg. 3:8, 10). Mesopotamia is again mentioned in 1 Chronicles 9:6 as the place from which the Amorites hired chariots and cavalry troops in their war against King David.

Ezekiel 16:3 identifies Abraham as an Amorite. The New Testament records that some people from Mesopotamia were present at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). The final reference to Mesopotamia is found in Stephen's speech in which he spoke of Abraham's original home, Ur of the Chaldeans, as being located in the region of Mesopotamia (7:2). The Sumerians (ancient Sumer's city-states) (3000 BCE—1800 BCE), Babylonians (Babylonian Empire) (1800 BCE—1200 BCE), Assyrians (Assyrian Empire) (1200 BCE—539 BCE) and Persians (Persian Empire) (539 BCE—330 BCE) are some of the major groups of people who lived in Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamian texts have creation accounts which are sometimes compared to the Genesis account. For example, according to the *Atrahasis Epic* (c. 1635 BCE) Mami (or Nintu) who is the mother goddess, with the help of the wise god Ea used clay mixed with the blood of a slain god (called Aw-ilu) to create humans. In the Babylonian *Enuma elish* (c. 1200 BCE), it was Marduk who slew Qingu, the leader of his enemy gods and used Qingu's blood to create humans with the assistance of Ea. Like the Genesis account, this story also mentions the deep, the separation of heaven and earth, the divine component of humans, the responsibility of humans to work the soil and the divine rest after creation.

### ***Anatolia/Asia Minor***

Anatolia or Asia Minor (Lesser Asia) is the region located northwest of the Fertile Crescent. It is the area bounded to the north by the Black Sea, to the east and south by the Southeastern Taurus Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea, and to the west by the Aegean Sea and Sea of Marmara; culturally the area also includes the islands of the eastern Aegean Sea. This was rich in minerals which the inhabitants traded with other people in the ANE. This area was also prone to invasion.



The map below depicts Asia Minor in ancient times.<sup>33</sup>



*Fig. 2.2 Map of Anatolia*

The Hittite Empire occupied the Anatolia region during the second millennium BCE. The Hittites, who were powerful rivals to Egypt for the control of the Syro-Palestine, were military people, hiring out of as mercenaries and exporting military technology throughout the Ancient Near East. They formed a treaty with their conquered foes and this treaty was similar to the one that was used by the Hebrews for structuring the writing of the covenant between Israel and their God (Exod. 19-24). The Old Testament records some laws that are parallel with some Hittite laws.

## *Egypt*

Egypt—located in north Africa and extending from the Mediterranean Sea on the north to the first waterfall on the Nile River in the south—is one of the nations that achieved the earliest civilization. The Hebrew word for Egypt is “Mizraim” meaning “Two Egypts” referring to one of the sons of Ham who founded the country (Gen. 10:6; 1 Chron. 1:8). Apart from the narrow region along the Nile, almost all other

<sup>33</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=Anatolia+ancient&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk00oupbh38mjThAddQu9n1TezALiG> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

parts of Egypt are arid wastes and deserts. Information about Egyptian history comes from the Bible, Egyptian and Greek historical records, and archaeological data. According to Egyptian chronology, ancient Egyptian civilization comes after prehistoric Egypt. A useful piece of information about the history of Egypt came from Manetho, an Egyptian priest. According to Manetho, the kings who ruled Egypt between 3100 BCE and 332 BCE came from 31 dynastic families. Some of these kings were strong, others were weak. In about 3100 BCE the political powers of Upper and Lower Egypt merged under Menes to become the preeminent civilization in the Mediterranean world. In this period, Egypt was isolated from other societies (being “cut off from the west by the Sahara, from the south by Nilotic cataracts, and from the east by the waters of the Red Sea and the desert of the Sinai Peninsula”) and so it developed its own civilization independently.<sup>34</sup> The isolation of Egypt negatively affected the development of its civilization. Because of the many barriers around the country, the Egyptians could easily prevent others from entering their society. Consequently, from the very early stage of its civilization, Egypt lacked the external stimulus needed for its highest development.

The Egyptian society was built along the Nile River which supplied it with water. The Nile River is the longest in the world flowing 4132 miles (or 6650 km) north through eastern Africa from its headstream, the Ruvyironza River in Burundi to a delta and the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea in the northeastern part of Egypt. The land of the Nile possessed an almost perfect climate for cultivation in that though it was a warm land, the fresh sea breeze made it cool enough to support plant life. The Nile flows north from the mountains of Kenya to the Mediterranean, where it forms a fan-shaped estuary similar to that near New Orleans on the Mississippi River. It served as a route for transportation though travelers could not usually sail its southern course due to cataracts (that is, rapids and waterfalls) in the southern part.<sup>35</sup> The narrow strip of land along the Nile constituted

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<sup>34</sup> Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 8.

the major land for agricultural activities. The Nile, unlike the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, had an established cycle of flooding which left new layers of fertile soil on the irrigated regions of Egypt. The Nile river had a uniform valley which served as an excellent basis for a unified social and political organization. The Egyptians were the only ancient near east people to develop a well-structured, positive concept about the afterlife.<sup>36</sup>

Egyptian dynasties can be categorized into three key eras: the Old Kingdom (2700-2200 BCE); the Middle Kingdom (2000-1800 BCE) and the New Kingdom (1570-1100 BCE).<sup>37</sup> The gaps in between these periods represent the periods of weakness. During the time of weakness, many non-Egyptians entered the country. At a point in time, a group referred to as Hyksos (“rulers from a foreign land”) took control of parts of the country (c. 1638–1530 BCE). It is possible that Joseph’s dominance in Potiphar’s household and his subsequent rise to national power (Gen. 41) took place during this period or one of such periods. The New Kingdom era covers the biblical period before the birth of Moses, the exodus and wilderness wanderings, the conquest and settlement in the Promised Land, the period of Judges and the time of Samuel. The new dynasty was made up of kings who the Bible describes as not knowing Joseph (Exod. 1:8). The new kings made the Israelites slaves and forced them to build the stone cities of Pithom and Rameses (Exod.1:11). The Israelites are also seen as a security threat (Exod. 1:10). In the last 200 years of this period, the national capital was moved from Thebes to Rameses in the delta area.

There are literary documents of historical and religious significance from the New Kingdom era. They were written on papyrus, ostraca, tombs and temple walls. The New Kingdom collapsed due to corruption, inflation, strikes and abuse of religious power.<sup>38</sup> After the

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<sup>36</sup> Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 381.

<sup>38</sup> Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 383.

New Kingdom era, Egypt came under the control of Libya, Ethiopia, Assyria, Persia, Greek and finally Rome in the New Testament times. David's and Solomon's reigns fell within the Late Period of Egyptian history (1100-330 BCE). Israel's strength in those days might have been due to the fragmentation and weakness of Egypt in the same period. Solomon's ability to marry Pharaoh's daughter is a possible sign of Egypt's weakness (1 Kings 3:1). After Solomon's death, Shishak (a Libyan who had become Pharaoh) attacked Rehoboam and plundered the palace and temple gold (1 Kings 14:25-28). Later, Zerah (an Ethiopian general or Pharaoh) led Egypt to attack King Asa of Judah, but Asa was miraculously saved by God (2 Chron. 14:9-15; 16:8).

Egypt excelled in painting, sculpturing, and architecture. Egyptian weather was hot and dry with small annual rainfall and hot temperatures almost throughout the year. The people adopted a form of dressing and architectural designs that were suitable for their climate. Abraham's journey to Egypt falls within the Middle Kingdom era (Gen. 12:10-20). Egyptians built canals and dikes to ensure that they could engage in all-year-round farming, a practice that made them have abundant food not only for themselves but for others as well (cf. Gen. 12:10; 41:53-57). This period was characterized by fishing, hunting and other agricultural activities. Agricultural activities flourished greatly through new irrigation projects. Egypt traded with Phoenicia, undertook mining activities in the Sinai desert during this period. The Israelites spent 430 years in Egypt (Exod. 12:40) between the time of Joseph and Moses. It was the place where Jesus was temporarily taken to in order to avoid been killed by King Herod (Matt. 2:13-15).

### **Egyptian Pyramids**

Ancient Egypt built pyramids (masonry structures) using advanced technology. The pyramids were royal tombs, a final resting place for Egyptian pharaohs, or kings. Egyptian pyramids were built during the period when Egypt was one of the richest and most powerful countries

in the world. These pyramids, especially the Great Pyramids of Giza, are some of the most magnificent man-made structures in history. Their massive scale reflects the unique role that the pharaoh, or king, played in ancient Egyptian society. Egyptians started building these structures from the beginning of the Old Kingdom to the close of the Ptolemaic period in the fourth century AD. However, the peak period for constructing these structures began with the late third dynasty and continued until roughly the sixth (c. 2325 BCE). Several pyramids have a series of lengthy curses, magical spells, and ritual formulas inscribed on the walls of the burial chambers. The belief is that the dead Pharaoh would use these for protection on their journey to the world of the dead. Besides the pyramids were built large open-air temples where various religious rituals were performed in honor of the king. A school of thought suggests that the Israelites were used as the labour force in constructing pyramids when they became slaves in Egypt.

The Great Pyramid of Giza was constructed as a tomb for the Egyptian pharaoh Khufu. This magnificent structure is estimated to have been completed sometime between 2560 BCE and 2540 BCE. The pyramid, which initially had a height of about 481 feet, remained the world's tallest man-made structure for thousands of years until it was surpassed in the early 1300s by England's Lincoln Cathedral. It now stands around 455 feet tall due to erosion. It covers an area of 13 acres with an estimated 2.3 million stones, each weighing a ton or more on average. Below shows the Great Pyramid of Giza.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=ancient+egypt+in+biblical+times&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk02VjCRJIPzXt7wHAA> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].



*Fig. 2.3 The Great Pyramid of Giza*

### **Ancient Egyptian Religion**

Religion played a central role in the life of ancient Egypt. Egyptian religion was polytheism, the belief in the existence of many gods most of which were personifications of nature, such as the Nile, the sun and the earth. Ancient Egyptians considered their Pharaohs as descendants of gods, and therefore deities themselves. This makes the Pharaohs different from the kings of Israel. The latter were never considered divine because God was the king of Israel (1 Sam. 8:7). The Pharaohs therefore had great power over the people. They were considered omnipotent beings. The Pharaohs were mediators between the people and the cosmic gods of the universe. People were dedicated to their gods and worshipped them daily through music, dance, offering of sacrifices and other means.

Every aspect of their daily lives depended on the goodness of the gods and of their divine son, the king (Pharaoh). At first, only the Pharaohs had the possibility of enjoying eternal life after death. However, with time the same eschatological hope was extended to all the people, the possibility depending on one's character in this life. The people believed that the gods were ultimately involved with all aspects of life. The gods were responsible for rain, growth of crops, birth and death, sunshine and every other thing concerning life. Many of their gods were symbolized by animals (bull, crocodile, falcon,

ram, jackal) or part-human and part-animal statues. The gods were treated like kings in their temples.

The people practiced magic. Magical texts were written in tombs to protect the dead against would-be robbers. The sick or injured were treated with magical spells and religious rituals. If the magic did not work it was considered the will of the god, and not a failure of the magician. The Egyptians had elaborate beliefs about death and the afterlife. In the cosmology of ancient Egyptians, death transfers a person from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Burial rites are very important religious in Egypt. The Egyptians held the belief in the existence of a life force (called *Ka*) which lived in and accompanied the body throughout life. The *Ka* leaves the body and takes its place in the kingdom of the dead. The *Ka*, however, cannot exist without a surviving body; hence the corpse must be preserved to ensure the survival of the *Ka*.

Consequently, Ancient Egypt developed an advanced method of embalming or treating the dead body. The process was called mummification. Mummification involved the removal of all moisture from the body, leaving only a dried form that would not easily decay. The mummification process took seventy days. The preservation of the corpse had religious significance (as noted earlier). Jacob's body was preserved using this technique. Forty days were used in his case (Gen. 50:3) probably because he was not to be preserved for a very long time as the Pharaohs. The body was to be transported to the Land of Canaan to be buried in the family cemetery and so preservation was very important to prevent decay. Mummification was also meant to ensure the resurrection of the body.

The embalmers were special priests who knew not only the right rituals and prayers to perform at various stages but also had advanced and detailed knowledge of human anatomy. The embalmers first removed all internal parts that might decay rapidly. The brain was removed by carefully inserting special hooked instruments up through the nostrils in order to pull out bits of brain tissue. The organs in the abdomen and chest area are also removed through a



cut usually made on the left side of the abdomen. The heart is not removed because it is believed to be the center of a person's being and intelligence. Next, the embalmers removed all moisture from the body by covering the body with natron (a type of hygroscopic salt) and by placing additional natron packets inside the body. When the body had dried out completely, embalmers removed the internal packets and lightly washed the natron off the body, leaving the body very dry though recognizable. Next, the mummy is wrapped in hundreds of yards of linen.

As mentioned earlier, Egypt's traditional religion was polytheistic in nature. There were regular sacrifices and festivals dedicated to different gods. One of such gods is Osiris who was personified as the king of the underworld, where people went after death. Osiris was also a fertility god. Osiris was depicted as a mummy with his arms crossed on his breast, one hand holding a crook, the other a flail with an Atef-crown—made of the white crown of Upper Egypt and two ostrich feathers—on his head. He is the god of the resurrection into eternal life; ruler, protector, and judge of the deceased. Osiris was the first child of Nut and Geb, and brother of Set, Nephthys, and Isis, who was also his wife. There is an Egyptian myth that says Osiris was slain or drowned by Seth, who tore the corpse into fourteen (14) pieces and flung them over Egypt. Horus (a god of the sky) avenged Osiris' death. The beliefs about Osiris gave hope to the people that they will also enjoy prosperity and immortality in the afterlife due to fertility in this life. The Egyptians celebrated Osiris festivals annually to symbolically reenact the god's fate. A key activity in the celebration was the construction of the "Osiris garden," a mold in the shape of Osiris, filled with soil. The mold was moistened with the water of the Nile and sown with grain. The sprouting grain symbolized the strength and fertility of Osiris. Other significant gods are mentioned in the next section.



## **The Plagues of Egypt and the Exodus**

My focus here is on the gods whose power was challenged in the plague. One Egyptian god was named Hapi. He was a water bearer and exercised power over the Nile River. This god was responsible for the annual flooding or inundation of the Nile. Hymns were composed in his honour, though there were no temples or formal cult erected for him with the exception of few ones at the narrows of Jabal al-Silsila in the south. Hapi was represented as a fat man with swelling, hanging breasts (signifying prosperity). The first plague that God gave to the Egyptians was that of turning the water into blood (Exod. 7:14–24). This plague was to challenge the god Hapi to reverse God’s act if he had such power. The plague remained for seven days in which the water in Egypt remained blood, unsuitable for drinking. The seven-day period symbolized perfection, completion, meaning God demonstrated perfectly that he was superior to the Egyptian god of the river.

Heket (probably meaning “ruler” or “sceptre”) was an ancient Egyptian goddess of childbirth, renewal and fertility who is depicted as a frog, or a woman with the head of a frog. The second plague involves frogs coming up from the river and jumping to people’s houses, into their food and were scattered everywhere, without any magician having the capacity to stop them (Exod. 7:25–8:15). The magicians of Pharaoh did a similar thing but Moses was able to make the frogs go away. This plague was an attack on Heket. If Heket was powerful, she should have prevented the frogs from leaving the river or forced the frogs to return to the river after they had left.

The Egyptian god Geb was a god of the earth who exercised power over the dust. The Egyptian god Geb was powerful over the dust of the earth. The third plague was a defeat to Geb in that if it had power, it would have prevented lice from coming out of the dust of the earth (Exod. 8:16–19). This plague led to the humiliation of Pharaoh’s magicians who were unable to compete and confessed: “this is the finger of God” (8:19).

Khepri was an Egyptian god representing the rising or morning sun. He was the god of creation, movement of the Sun and rebirth. Khepri had the head of a fly. He was the one that the Egyptians looked up to when swarms of flies came upon the land of Egypt but he could not save them since he was powerless (Exod. 8:20–32).

The Egyptian goddess Hathor was the goddess of the sky, of women, protection, fertility and love. She was depicted with the head of a cow. The fifth plague (Exod. 9:1-7), involving the death of cattle and livestock, not only affected the Egyptians by creating a huge economic disaster, in areas of food, transportation, military supplies, farming, and economic goods that were produced by this livestock but also served as an indictment on the power of Hathor.

The Egyptian goddess of medicine and peace was called Isis. The husband of Isis was Osiris and her son Horus. The power of Isis transcended that of all other deities. The sixth plague was of ashes turning to boils and sores that no power could heal (Exod. 9:8-12). Egypt was known for cleanliness, but this plague pronounces the people “unclean.” In this plague, the magicians who have been seen throughout the previous plagues are nowhere to be found. Naturally, everyone would look up to Isis for healing. Isis however was powerless and so could not help.

The seventh plague was meant to show how powerless Nut, the Egyptian goddess of the Sky, was. As the goddess of the sky, Nut swallowed the Sun in the evening and gave birth to it again in the morning. Nut is said to be the mother of gods like Osiris, Seth, Isis and Nephthys. In this plague hail from the sky and turn to fire as it hit the ground.

The god Seth, son of Geb (Earth) and Nut (sky), brother of Osiris, was god of the desert, foreign lands, thunderstorms, eclipses, and earthquakes. When locusts came from the sky in the eighth plague, God was teaching the people that Seth had no power over the sky to prevent the locusts from coming. This plague was the second wave of destruction to follow the hail, and whatever crops were left intact

after that display, were now completely destroyed by the swarms of locusts that were released from the sky.

Ra was the Egyptian god of the Sun. As Sun the Egyptians looked up to Ra to give them light in times of darkness. In the ninth plague darkness completely covered Egypt for three days. The Sun, the most worshipped God in Egypt other than Pharaoh himself, gave no light. God demonstrated his mighty power and control over the sun through this plague.

The final plague challenged the power of Pharaoh whom the people thought has absolute power. Pharaoh was worshipped by the Egyptians because he was considered to be the greatest Egyptian god of all, the incarnate son of Ra. The killing of firstborns happened in the tenth plague and Pharaoh could do nothing about it.

The number ten signifies the fullness of quantity. The ten ancient plagues of Egypt represent the fullness of God's expression of justice and judgments, upon the unrepentant soul. The ten plagues mean Egypt was completely plagued. Old Testament students must read the accounts of these plagues in the light of our discussions on the Egyptian deities whose powers were challenged by the plagues. In the discussions one realizes that different gods/goddesses had different abilities but the God of Israel is universally able, meaning he can exercise power over every aspect of the universe and beyond. This is suggestive that Israel's God is the Creator and one with Universal power, in fact, he is the Sovereign One.

### **Cush and African Presence in the Old Testament**

In the Pentateuch, Cush appears in the Eden narrative (Gen. 2—3). The author of Genesis names four rivers that flowed out from Eden. The name of the second river is the Gihon, which winds through the whole land of Cush (Gen. 2:13). Gihon and Cush are most certainly located in Africa. Even though the Garden of Eden may not necessarily be located in Africa (an African location is possible), Africa is part of the global map described in the Eden narrative. Cush was a son of Ham, probably the eldest, and the father of Nimrod

(Gen. 10:8; 1 Chron. 1:10). In the Old Testament, the term “Cush” sometimes refers to a country south of Egypt. Key scholarly views on the location of Eden include: (i). Eden is located in eastern Turkey, in Armenia, close to the headwaters of the Tigris and the Euphrates. In this case, the Pishon and the Gihon rivers are identified with the Araxes and the Murat. This view locates Eden at a high altitude, from which rivers flowed down. However, the climatic conditions of eastern Turkey do not match the warm conditions implied in the biblical narratives. (ii). Eden is located in southern Mesopotamia (or modern Iraq). This location matches the warm climatic conditions in the vicinity of the two identifiable rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. However, the strong biblical evidence for locating Gihon and Cush in Africa opposes this view. (iii). Eden is located somewhere in the Middle East to East Africa. The warm climate of this region and the fact that the “land of Cush” usually refers to the land south of Egypt but north of Ethiopia support this view. The location of the Tigris and the Euphrates however does not favor this position. The obvious conclusion is that one cannot be certain where Eden is presently located.

Geographically, Cush comprised the region between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile which roughly correspond to modern-day northern Sudan and some part of southern Egypt.<sup>40</sup> The Greeks and Romans referred to the people of Cush (that is, the Cushites) as “Ethiopians.”<sup>41</sup> The term “Cush” appears fifty-six times. “Cush” does not refer to a particular thing. However, in most of its appearances, it refers to black people living somewhere in Africa, south of Egypt.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Philip Lokel, “Previously Unstoried Lives: The Case of Old Testament Cush and its Relevance to Africa,” *OTE* 19(2) (2006): 525-537, 525.

<sup>41</sup> Lokel, “Previously Unstoried Lives,” 525.

<sup>42</sup> Lokel, “Previously Unstoried Lives,” 526. Pentateuch: Gen. 2:13; 10:6,7,8; Num. 12:1,1; Prophets: 2 Sam. 18:21 (x2), 22, 23, 31, 32 (x2); 2 Kings 19:9; Isa 11:1; 18:1; 20:3,4,5; 37:9; 43:3; 45:14; Jer 13:23; 36:14; 38:7,10,12; 39:16; 46:9; Ezek. 29:10; 30:4,5,9; 38:5; Amos 9:7; Nah 3:9; Zeph. 1:1; 2:12; 3:10; Writings: Pss 7:1; 68:32; 87:4; Job 28:19; Est 1:1; 8:9; Dan 11:43; 1 Chr 1: 8,9,10; 2 Chr 12:3; 14:8,11,12 (x2); 16:8; 21:16).

“Cush” may also refer to Babylonian Kassites or to a tribe probably occupying the south-western border of Judah (cf. Gen 10: 6,7,8). Some Cushites settled in other places including Palestine. This explains why Jeremiah was able to make use of their colour in a proverbial manner to proclaim God’s oracle (Jer. 13:23; see also Num. 12:1). Isaiah described them as ‘tall’ and ‘smooth-skinned’ (cf. Isa. 18; see also Isa. 45:14). The Greek historian Herodotus described them as “men tall and handsome” and they were referred to as “Ethiopians” due to their dark complexion.<sup>43</sup> According to Lokel, Herodotus’s assertion that Ethiopians are “black because of the heat” agrees with the Arabic geographical term Sudan (from *bilad-al Sudan*, meaning “land of black people”) which is often used in connection with Cush.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that bodies features like height and deep dark skin colour fit Africans more than any other group of persons. Rather than appreciating this fact some Western and Jewish rabbinic interpreters pin Ham down by connecting him to the curse of Canaan.

According to Justin S. Ukpong, a fifth-century AD Midrash text which in addition to assigning the curse of Noah, meant for Canaan, to Ham states: “Your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned.”<sup>45</sup> Ukpong furthermore cites a six-century AD Babylonian Talmud text which states: ‘The descendants of Ham are cursed by being black and are sinful with degenerate progeny.’ He again cites a six-century AD Babylonian Talmud text which states: “The descendants of Ham are cursed by being black and are sinful with degenerate progeny.”<sup>46</sup> These interpretations are unacceptable because they contradict what the Old Testament itself says and what extra-biblical Greek literature says about Cush and African people. Cush was never cursed; on the contrary, he received a double blessing as the firstborn (see Gen 9:25

<sup>43</sup> As cited in Lokel, “Previously Unstoried Lives,” 527.

<sup>44</sup> Lokel, “Previously Unstoried Lives,” 527.

<sup>45</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and hermeneutical directions,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000):3-18, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and hermeneutical directions,” 8.

and 10:6). God had blessed him together with his family (Gen. 9:1) before the incident that led to the curse came. The fact is that no one can curse the one who God has blessed (cf. Num 23:20). This probably explains the reason why Noah could not curse Ham (who had done evil against Noah) and so had to curse Canaan, Ham's yet-to-be-born son (Gen. 9:25). There is no legitimate biblical warrant for discrimination against black people based on the faulty assumption that they are cursed.

It seems to me that the Cushites were conspicuous because of their black colour just as a white person would stand out from a black-dominated population. I will cite an example from the African context to illustrate this point. The Akan of Ghana refers to the white person as *broni/bronyini*, the Swahili of East Africa will say *muzungu* and the Zulu of South Africa use the designation *mlungu*. Whenever a white individual is passing by, one often hears Ghanaians (or Africans, especially children) calling *broni/bronyini* to signify the presence of a white person amid black persons. These children are not being racist by are simply prompted by the white colouration in such a way that they call attention to the presence of the white person in a way that seems they are being racists. David T. Adamo has reported a similar experience he had while on a study tour in Israel during his studies. Because of his black colour the Israeli children were calling out to him as "Cush!"<sup>47</sup> In extra-biblical literature, Cush and Ethiopia refer quite broadly to black Africa. Adamo further states:

I discovered later that Africa and Africans were mentioned more than any other foreign nations and peoples in the Bible. They were mentioned in every strand of biblical literature. They made economic, religious, military, social, and political contributions in ancient Israel. In fact, Africa and Africans were mentioned in the pages of the Old and New Testament about 867 times. (In fact, I mean that no other nations, except Israel, were mentioned so frequently in the Bible). But unfortunately, this aspect of biblical studies is neglected. The most unfortunate

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<sup>47</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, *Decolonizing African Biblical Studies* (Inaugural Lecture: Delta State University, Abraka, N.d), 30.

thing is that ordinary Bible readers cannot identify Africa and Africans in the Bible unless they are literate in the biblical languages (Greek and Hebrew).<sup>48</sup>

In the Bible, the Cushites were regarded like any other group of people with whom Israel interacted. One needs to appreciate how the Cushites impacted Israel's social (Num. 12:1; Isa. 18:2; Jer. 36:14), economic (Isa. 18:7; 45:14; Job 28:19), political and/or military (2 Sam. 18:19-32; 2 Kings 19:9; Isa. 18:1-2; 20:3-5; Jer. 38-39; Ezek. 30:4-5.9; Dan. 11:43; Nah. 3:9; Zeph. 2:12; 2 Chron. 14:8-14) and religious lives (Isa. 11:11; 18:7; 43:3; Amos 9:7; Zeph 3:10; Pss 68:32[31]; 87:4). Isaiah (20:3-5) gives a dramatic picture of the conquest of Egypt and Cush. Here, the Prophet compares the way Cush is debased and humiliated to what happened to him when he (the prophet Isaiah) walked naked and barefooted for three years. A study of the text in its context shows that Isaiah's interest is not primarily in the debasement of Cush. Rather, he uses the analogy to warn the people against joining the anti-Assyrian plot that was motivated by the king of Ashdod. Non-adherence to Isaiah's counsel would spell doom for Judah. Isaiah (chapter 37) presents a powerful Cushite military figure in the person of King Tirhakah whose military might is connected with Jerusalem's liberation (v. 9). Isaiah 45:14 suggesting some form of subjugation for the Cushites by predicting that they will bow low in chains. Here, one needs to realize that this fate will not befall Cush alone but will also include its allies, the Egyptians and the Sabeans. More important is the fact that "this text is not really meant to be understood historically in the sense that what is described did indeed transpire. It would rather seem that the text is meant to exhort and elevate the faltering self-esteem of a nation recovering from the historical trauma of the Exile."<sup>49</sup> Ezekiel 30:4,5,9 presents the eventual downfall of Cush. However, as with Isaiah 45:14, Cush shares this destiny with Egypt, Put, Lud, Arabia,

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<sup>48</sup> Adamo, *Decolonizing African Biblical Studies*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Lokel, "Previously Unstoried Lives," 529.



and Libya. “Cush had its low moments as it interacted with other peoples of the Levant. And the seemingly negative portrayals of Cushites can be linked to particular historical events and not necessarily to a persistent Old Testament ideology of behavioural defects or character flaws indicative of racist thought.”<sup>50</sup> Finally, text presenting negative views about Cush needs to be placed in the right context to be able to interpret them appropriately. It should be emphasized that not all the Old Testament references to Cush necessarily refers to Africa. Some references to Cush may refer to Kassites in Babylon.

### **Geography of Ancient Israel**

Generally speaking, the Old Testament story covers the whole of history, starting from creation to consummation; from the beginnings of the universe and of human existence to the coming of the kingdom of God kingdom and the renewal of the created order. However, the primary concern of the Old Testament is how God dealt with a particular group of people, the people of Israel within their historical and geographical context. Therefore, a proper understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament cannot be achieved without an adequate understanding of the context within which it evolved. It is in the light of this that I now proceed to consider the geographical background of the land which Israel occupied. This section together with the previous one gives the background against which the Old Testament is to be understood.

Ancient Israel started in a location known as Canaan, which corresponds to modern-day Israel, Jordan and Lebanon. This area was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the west and included desert and mountains, creating a contrast between arid and fertile zones. Ancient Israel is the birthplace of the three great monotheistic world religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The term Hebrew (meaning “from across”) refers to Abraham and his followers; the term Israelites refers to the descendants of Abraham’s grandson Jacob

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<sup>50</sup> Lokel, “Previously Unstoried Lives,” 529.



(who was renamed Israel which means “he who has wrestled with God”); and the term Jews named after Jacob’s son Judah, ancient father of the tribe of King David’s dynasty. The available sources of water were rivers, springs, wells, and summer dews. They also made use of technology in storing water (cisterns, reservoirs) and channels (aqueduct) to transport water from place to place

The geographical setting of interest for Old Testament students is concerned to include the land referred to variously as Israel, Judah (or Judea), Canaan and Palestine. The Old Testament refers to the land occupied by the United nation of Israel (after deliverance from Egyptian slavery) as “the land of Canaan” (see Exod. 6:4; Num. 13:2; Deut. 32:49; Josh. 24:3), and later as “the land of Israel.” The division of the kingdom of Israel into two (after the death of Solomon) created the southern kingdom referred to as Judah and the northern kingdom referred to as Israel (cf. 2 Kings 5:2; 6:23). The name Judah was used for the southern kingdom before and also after the Babylonian exile (see 2 Chr. 15:8; Neh. 5:14; Jer. 31:23; 40:12; Amos 7:12), and even after its “political expansion under the Hasmoneans” to include “much of the area formerly designated “Israel.”<sup>51</sup> The land of Palestine was first used by the Greeks in the fifth century BC, to refer to “the whole area until after Bar Kochbas revolt in AD 135.”<sup>52</sup> Initially, Palestine referred to the land located on both sides of the Jordan River, but later it was used to refer, primarily, to only the region that lies on the west of River Jordan.<sup>53</sup>

The land of Israel is situated between the continents of Africa and Asia, with Mesopotamia (the region from which important empires such as the Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian emerged from Mesopotamia emerged) lying on the east. The Hittites were located to the north and west from the sixteenth to the thirteenth centuries BCE with Egypt in the south. The location

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<sup>51</sup> Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Introduction: Text, Interpretation, Themes* (London: APOLLOS, 2016), np.

<sup>52</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Introduction*, np.

<sup>53</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Introduction*, np.

of Israel on the “Fertile Crescent” (a piece of land along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers with fertile soil for agricultural activities and regular source of water for domestic use) made it a place where every nation desired to possess. Egypt, one of the world’s earliest civilizations was always expanding its influence northwards while the empires that emerged from Mesopotamia also desired to move downwards into Egypt, which they perceived as a rich prize.<sup>54</sup> The trade between the two major regions of civilization (that is, Egypt and Mesopotamia) could not be done without passing through the land of Israel. The strategic location of Israel is the reason why it had cultural links with Egypt and Mesopotamia. For example, Abraham, the first ancestor of the Israelites, was from Ur which was a significant city in a Mesopotamian dynasty. Israel as a nation spent several years in Egypt, initially as guests and later as slaves. That Israel was influenced by these two regions (even in the Promised Land) is also betrayed by Joshua’s challenge to his people to “throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:14 NIV).

Routledge follows Smith’s description of the geography of Israel which I also adopt in the following discussion.<sup>55</sup> According to Smith, the land of Israel may be divided into six areas running from north to south, each of which has distinctive geographical and climatic features. To the Far East was the Transjordanian desert. There is a coastal plain next to the Mediterranean Sea. Apart from an interruption by Mount Carmel, this plain extends south of Tyre and includes the lands of the Philistines. As a significant trade route in ancient times, this area, the Way of the Sea (Isa. 9:1; cf. Exod. 13:17) was usually under the control of one of the world empires.

Between the coastal plain and the hill country of Judah, (to the north and east) is the Shephelah (lowlands), a small fertile area comprising the foothills which (in ancient times) provided a route eastwards from the coast into Judah, and served as the scene of

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<sup>54</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Introduction*, np.

<sup>55</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Introduction*, np.

fighting with the Philistines (eg. Judg. 14 – 15; 1 Sam. 17; 2 Chr. 28:18). Because the Philistines and other people could attack Judah from this region, it was fortified. Lachish was the capital of this region, from the fourteenth century BC.

To the east of the coastal plain and the Shephelah lies the hill country, a mountain range that runs for most of the length of the land, broken by the plain (or “valley”) of Jezreel, and extending west to the coast, at Mount Carmel. The hill country of Judah (e.g. Josh. 14:12; 21:11) and of Ephraim (Judg. 2:9; 3:27; 1 Sam. 1:1) lie to the south of this region. The north of the hill country includes upper and lower Galilee (Josh. 21:32; 1 Kings 9:11; 2 Kings 15:29; Isa. 9:1). After the conquest of Canaan, the hill country became a very significant region of Israelite settlement (cf. Josh. 11:21; Judg. 1:19). Major cities in the northern hills include Shechem, which became the first capital of the northern kingdom under Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:25), and Samaria, which was built by Omri as his capital (1 Kings 16:24). Jerusalem is located on the border of the hill country of Judah and Ephraim. This area belonged to the tribe of Benjamin (Josh. 18:28).

Further east is the Jordan Valley, which extends from Dan (in the north) to the Dead Sea, the world’s lowest natural point. The Jordan valley is part of a rift valley that extends from Turkey to East Africa. In 2 Kings 6:1-4, the Jordan valley is portrayed as a woodland region. South of Dan lies Lake Hulah, and south of that lies the Sea of Galilee. The Arabah, a dry valley running south to the Gulf of Aqaba lies beyond the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea has no outlet and has a very high concentration of mineral salt such that any living organism immersed in it dies due to dehydration caused by the transfer of water from the cells of the organism to the highly concentrated solution of the Dead Sea.

To the east of the Jordan are the Transjordanian hills which rise steeply out of the Jordan Valley, and then slope eastwards toward the desert. In the north was Bashan, a fertile region known for the quality of pasture for cattle and well-built cattle (cf. Ezek. 39:18; Amos 4:1) and to the south of Bashan was another fertile region, Gilead, which became the inheritance of the tribes of Reuben, Gad

and the half-tribe of Manasseh (Josh. 12:5–6; 13:8–13), and perhaps Ephraim (Judg. 12:4).

### **Climate of Ancient Israel**

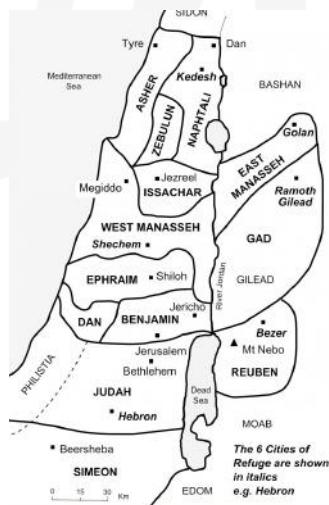
The climate of Israel comprises wet winter months (rainy season, from October to mid-April) and dry summer (dry season, from June to September). Toward the end of October heavy rains begin to fall, for several days at intervals to open the agricultural year. It loosens the soil that has been hardened and cracked by the long summer so that farmers can begin ploughing their farmlands. These falls correspond to what the Bible refers to as early or former rain. The average rainfall is not high between October and November. It however increases through December, January and February before declining again in March and ending in mid-April. What the Bible refers to as the latter rains refer to the heavy downpour between March and April. Rainfall is relatively heavy in the North and center of the country, with much less in the northern Negev and almost negligible amounts in the southern areas.

The winter season is characterized by the falling of both hail and snow on the hills. Hail often comes with rain and with thunderstorms, at intervals through the winter and comes frequently during the spring. Snow also falls to reach a depth of about two feet and could lie for five or more days. In the Central Range of the region, however, the land hardly freezes and snow could disappear within a day. Ice usually covers the surface of the pools at Jerusalem. In May, rainfall is very rare and from this time till October, there is neither rainfall nor clouds nor thunderstorms. What may occur is morning mists. Bushfire is also not uncommon in this period. The dryness of the ground coupled with scorching east winds from the desert contributes to the introduction of irrigation systems and thick-walled architecture.

### **The Twelve Tribes of Israel in the Promised Land**

The twelve (12) Tribes of Israel descended from Abraham through his

son Isaac and grandson Jacob. According to Genesis 35:22-26, Jacob had twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. These children became the patriarchs (fathers) of the twelve original Tribes of Israel. Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh as his own sons before he died (Gen. 48:5-6) and so each also became a tribe. This gives us fourteen tribes. However, in some passages Joseph is replaced by his sons (e.g. Deut. 33). Levi did not receive tribal territory like the other tribes. Given this understanding we still get twelve tribes. After the Israelites had moved from Egypt to the Promised Land (the Holy Land or the Land of Canaan), they divided the Land among the twelve tribes. The Levites did not receive any land, as they were the priesthood of the nation of Israel. They were given forty-eight (48) cities scattered around Israel and located within the territories of the other tribes (cf. Josh. 21:1–42 and 1Chron. 6:54–81). The map below shows the conquered land of Canaan and its allocation among the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Josh. 13:8 – 17:18).<sup>56</sup>



**Fig. 2.4 The Twelve Tribes of Israel in the Promised Land**

<sup>56</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.thebiblejourney.org/biblejourney2/27-the-israelites-move-into-canaan/canaan-is-divided-among-the-twelve-tribes/> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has related the biblical world to the African world. It has been established that the Old Testament world cannot be fully discussed without making reference to Africa. As early as the Eden narratives, Africa was part of the Old Testament story. The various geographical areas discussed are meant to build a foundation upon which the reader can explore the geography of the Old Testament world in detail. In the next chapter, I consider the historico-political history of the Old Testament world.

## **Review Questions**

1. How does the geography of a region affect human development?
2. What cultural and scientific achievements made the Fertile Crescent important?
3. Who were the people who occupied the Fertile Crescent and how did they change the culture?
4. Why is it not possible to study the geography of the Old Testament world without making reference to Africa? Support your answer with illustration(s).

## Chapter Three

### HISTORICO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In biblical history, the land of Israel/Palestine was ruled by major empires such as Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. The discussion in this chapter is not so much concerned about chronology because some of these political powers existed concurrently. I discuss some of these and other super powers briefly according to their interactions with ancient Israel.

#### **Sumerian Empire**

Scholars believe that the first cities in the Near East Mediterranean basin appeared in Sumer, which was located in southern Mesopotamia.<sup>57</sup> The Sumerians, the people of Sumer are known to have inhabited southern Mesopotamia from the fourth into the early second millennia BCE. They became a dominant force in Lower Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, during what is usually referred to as the Early Dynastic Period until the rise of the Akkadian Empire. The area derives its name from an ancient Akkadian name for this region, “Shumer.”<sup>58</sup> The kingdom of Sumer was created by Sargon I who hailed from northern Sumer. The Sumerians are not well known not only because of the lack of attention given to them in the Bible but also because their language was not much related to any other known language of the ancient world (or of any period).<sup>59</sup> Neither do their architecture nor artifacts indicate any ethnic ties with cultures of other regions. Sumer became the earliest known civilization in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia, modern-day southern Iraq, during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze ages. Their natural resources were wood, stone and metal, but food surpluses allowed for the specialization of labor and increased trade

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<sup>57</sup> Charles Gates, *Ancient Cities: The archaeology of urban life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece, and Rome* Second edition (New York: Routledge, 2011), 30.

<sup>58</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31.

along rivers and to the Mediterranean.

The Sumerians formed pictographs (picture writing) on clay tokens and later on clay tablets<sup>60</sup> as a means of communication and to do accounting, record events, and teach such things as Astronomy, chemistry and medicine. This earliest-known writing which was called cuneiform was adapted by different language families such as the Semitic (Akkadian and Ugaritic) and Indo-European (Elamite/ Old Persian, Hittite, and Urartian) for some 3000 years but gave way to the simpler Phoenician alphabet and its derivatives like the Latin alphabet used for English today.<sup>61</sup> The name “cuneiform” (meaning “wedge-shaped”) was adopted for these symbols because of “a narrow V-shaped wedge that was combined in various ways to represent single sounds, syllables, and entire words.”<sup>62</sup>

These writings form were carved onto wet clay tablets that were later dried naturally, or by baking in a kiln. The baked tablets lasted longer than the naturally dried ones. Charles Gates has noted that “Cuneiform writing developed from a pictographic or “protocuneiform” system first used during the later Protoliterate period for temples to keep track of their accounts.”<sup>63</sup> Education was the prerogative of only males who used writing tools made from sticks and reeds for writing. The Sumerians are credited with writing the world’s oldest story, the Epic of Gilgamesh, about the life of a Sumerian king. Women could not do most jobs, own property, or become priestesses. The government was controlled by priests. An ancient cuneiform is shown below.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31.

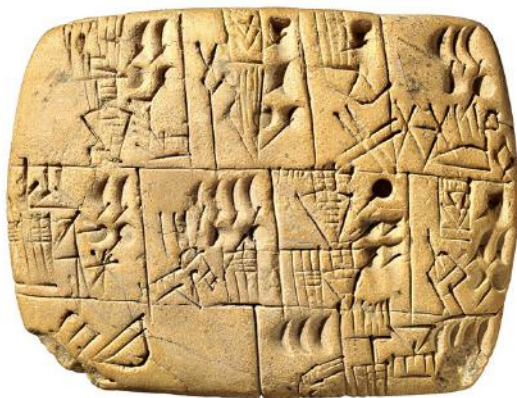
<sup>61</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 39

<sup>62</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 39

<sup>63</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/ancient-near-east1/the-ancient-near-east-an-introduction/a/cuneiform> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].





**Fig. 3.1 Sumerian Cuneiform**

In terms of religion, the Sumerians were polytheistic (that is, they believed in many gods and goddesses). Their gods were considered as residing in statues housed in temples including large pyramid-like structures called ziggurats. A ziggurat religious tower made of mud bricks and located near temples. These houses became the focus of both ritual and economic activity as well as the regional administrative center. Priests were appointed and trained to feed the god statues twice each day and to supervise the worship of seven great gods: earth, sky, sun, moon, salt water, fresh water, and storm. Daily sacrifices (of goats and sheep) were made to the gods. There was a patron god or goddess in each Sumerian city. They held that the world was created by four main gods, namely, gods of the sky, wind, foothills, and freshwater, who also controlled the universe. They also believed that their gods looked and acted like people. Among the prehistory settlements discovered through archaeology is Uruk which was the dominant city of early Sumer. The site of Uruk (the Erech of Gen 10:10) shows a progression from village to city.<sup>65</sup> In Uruk were discovered two main temple areas, the *White Temple*

<sup>65</sup> Paul Lawrence, *The Lion Atlas of Bible History* (Oxford:Lion Hudson, 2006), 22.

(dedicated to the worship of the sky god, An (or Anu in Akaddian) and the *Eanna Precinct* (dedicated to An's daughter *Inanna*, who is known to be the goddess of fertility, sex, and war).<sup>66</sup> The *Eanna* temple had its interior wall-faces decorated with a geometrical pattern of differently-coloured terracotta cones, some of which measure 10 cm long.<sup>67</sup> Historians date it to the late fourth millennium BCE.

The Sumerians, like traditional Africans, made human sacrifices for their kings. In 1927 an excavation discovery by C. L. Wooley showed some evidence of human sacrifices in some Royal Tombs in Ur.<sup>68</sup> In some cases, as many as seventy-four servants were sacrificed in the Great Death Pit.<sup>69</sup> Other discoveries were the headdress of the queen of Pu-abi, a dagger with a gold blade and other items.<sup>70</sup> One could deduce that the Sumerian royals had elaborate outfits.

Sumerians had an independent, self-governing city as their basic political unit, a feature they share with ancient Greece.<sup>71</sup> A Sumerian city was further divided into districts, residential, administrative (including palaces, if present), industrial (including craft workshops), and a cemetery. Sumerian myth has it that monarchy first started in the city of Eridu and was later spread across other parts of the region.<sup>72</sup> The Early Dynastic period was characterized by territorial disputes over agricultural lands. Inter-city wars drove people from rural areas into the cities, which were now fortified with walls. The situation led to the reinforcement of the city-state as the basic political, religious, and social unit. In the process, about thirty cities came together with Nippur as its religious center.<sup>73</sup> The leader of this federation bore the title “King of Kish”, named after

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<sup>66</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 32, 34.

<sup>67</sup> Lawrence, *The Lion Atlas of Bible History*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence, *The Lion Atlas of Bible History*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Lawrence, *The Lion Atlas of Bible History*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Lawrence, *The Lion Atlas of Bible History*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31.

Kish which was the administrative base of the league.<sup>74</sup> Different social classes, comprising kings, priests, merchants and skilled workers (artisans), laborers and farmers, and slaves were mixed together; they were not segregated in their separate neighborhoods. Neighbourhoods were also divided by such features as streets, walls, and water channels. Ur, Abraham's hometown was also one of the great Sumerian cities, which like other great cities was walled. This city which was inhabited for several thousand years, from the fifth well into the first millennia BCE, became famous for its sixteen Royal Tombs. Archeological excavations from the Royal tombs indicate that the Urs had an "elaborate mortuary ritual that included human sacrifice."<sup>75</sup> The Urs, like Africans, buried the dead with a lot of household items after and an elaborate funeral rite. King Ur-Nammu was the greatest leader of this city of Ur.

Their number system was based on 12, which forms the basis for our 60-minute hours, 24-hour days, 12-month years, and 360-degree circles. Mathematics was used for architecture (arches, columns, and ramps), irrigation and surveying. Their major cities were Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Uruk (biblical Erech), Bad-tibira, Lagash, Nina, Girsu, Umma, Shuruppak, Isin, and Nippur.<sup>76</sup>

## **The Akkadian Empire**

The Akkadian empire was founded by Sargon, the first ruler of the city of Akkad, which he established as his capital. A strong king and skilled general, Sargon used his military skills to win territory for his empire. Akkadians were a Semitic people, who had long been present in the region. the Akkadians spoke a language that differed from the Sumerians. Sargon appears to have risen to power in the city of Kish and quickly managed to get control over the whole Mesopotamian region. Sargon was succeeded by his son under whose rule the empire

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<sup>74</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31-32.

<sup>75</sup> Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 47.

<sup>76</sup> Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly and Edwin M. Yamauchi (eds.), *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1998), np.

faltered. The empire was however revived by Naram-Sin, Sargon's grandson under whose rule the empire declined around 2200 BCE as a result of internal pressures and external threats.

The Akkadians were noted for collecting tributes (money and goods) from the people they conquered. They borrowed irrigation techniques, writing, and religious beliefs from the Sumerians. Akkadian's achievements included their own language and three-dimensional sculptures called steles.

### **Canaanite Gods/Goddesses**

Ashtoreth is a Canaanite goddess of fertility, love, and war and the daughter of the god El and the goddess Asherah. In the Old Testament, one finds the plural form, Ashtaroth, more often than the singular form, Ashtoreth which appears only in 1Kings 11:5; 11:33; 2 Kings 23:13. The Hebrew scribes replaced the vowels of the name Ashtart or Ashteret with the vowels from the Hebrew word for shame, *boshet*, to bring shame and dishonor to the memory of the goddess. It was this process of exchanging vowels that resulted in the formation of the word Ashtoreth (Greek: Astarte). In Canaanite mythology, Ashtoreth is the sister of the goddess Anath and the spouse of the god Baal. The belief in the existence of many gods is also found in traditional African societies. There are family gods, community gods and national gods. Different gods have power over different aspects of life. Africans can therefore easily appreciate the Canaanite gods and others.

### **The Babylonian Empire**

One of the most powerful and famous civilizations to arise in Mesopotamia was Babylon (1900 - 500 BCE). The name is thought to derive from *bav-il* or *bav-ilim* which, in the Akkadian language of the time, meant 'Gate of God' or "Gate of the Gods" and "Babylon" coming from Greek. Babylon was an ancient Akkadian-speaking state and cultural area based in central-southern Mesopotamia. King Hammurabi (reign 1792-1750 BCE) after assuming power

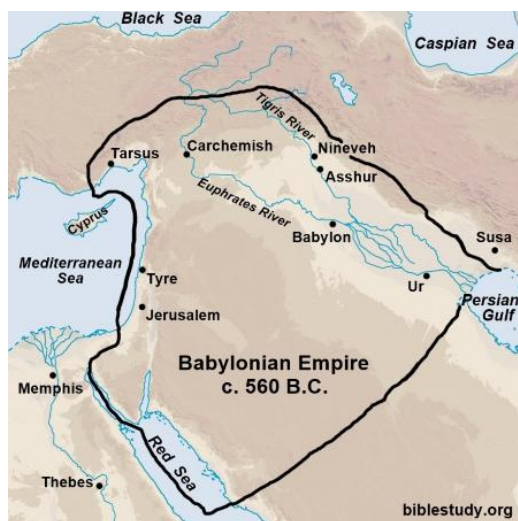
in 1792 BCE organized his army and attacked cities controlled by Amorites to the north and south of Mesopotamia, conquered them and united them to create the Babylonian empire. Afterward, he sent his own tax collectors, judges, and governors to rule distant cities and encouraged growth and trade. The Babylonian empire arose after the fall of the Empire of the Third Dynasty of Ur, which had ruled the city states of the alluvial plain of Mesopotamia for more than a century. In 1600 BCE, the Babylonian kingdom fell under the pressure from some people from the North, especially the Assyrians. Hammurabi's empire included much of modern-day Iraq, extending up from the Persian Gulf along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The city of Babylon features in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). Babylon also appears prominently in the biblical books of Daniel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, among others, and, most notably, the Book of Revelation.

King Hammurabi published a set of laws known as the Code of Hammurabi, history's first known written laws for his people. The code of Hammurabi refers to a set of rules or laws enacted by the Babylonian King Hammurabi to govern the people living in his fast-growing empire. The code contains about 300 laws that touch on a wide range of subjects, including homicide, assault, contracts, marriage, divorce, robbery, murder, debt, adoption, tradesman's fees, agricultural practices, and even disputes regarding the brewing of beer. Each law consists of a potential case followed by a prescribed verdict. These laws influenced the ancient world even after the death of Hammurabi.

Most people in Babylonia were farmers who planted crops for consumption. The people used wool for clothing and some traded in gold. They are also noted for bronze and stone sculptures; they used gold and precious stones to make jewelry. Built irrigation canals. The map below shows the ancient Babylonian empire.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.biblestudy.org/maps/babylonian-empire.html> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].



*Fig. 3.2 The Babylonian Empire*

Nabopolassar (625 – 605 BCE), the father of Nebuchadnezzar, became king of Babylon in 626 BCE. In 612 BCE Nabopolassar led a coalition of armies to conquer the Assyrian capital city of Nineveh. This incident made Babylon become the world's new superpower. In 609 BCE Pharaoh Neco (Necho) of Egypt begins to travel through Judah and Israel on its way north to fight the Babylonians. King Josiah of Judah makes attempts to stop the Egyptians but fails and gets killed in battle at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29-30; 2 Chron. 35:20-35).

Nebuchadnezzar (605 - 562 BCE) succeeded Nabopolassar and became the greatest of all Babylonian monarchs. In 605, he attacked Jerusalem during the reign of Judah's King Jehoiakim (2 Chron. 36:7). He took some Israelites including Daniel and his friends into captivity. In 597 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem again when Jehoiachin was king of Judah (2 Chron. 36:10). He took Jehoiachin, the Prophet Ezekiel and others captive to Babylon. He set up Zedekiah as the new King of Judah (2 Kings 24—25). In 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem for the third time when

Zedekiah was king of Judah. The Babylonians not only destroyed the city but also burnt the Temple and carry away all its treasures. Judah remained in exile for seventy years before returning to the Land.

Another Babylonian king was Amel-Marduk (561-560 BCE) who took King Jehoiachin of Judah out of prison and gave him a place at his table (2 Kings 25:27-30, Jer. 52:31-34). After Amel-Marduk, King Nabonidus ruled from 555 to 539 BCE. His son Belshazzar was responsible for defending the capital city and he co-ruled with his father from 553 BCE onwards. It was Belshazzar who saw God's handwriting on a wall and requested Daniel to interpret the meaning of "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*" (Dan. 5:25). In 539 BCE Babylon fell into the hands of Persian King Cyrus.

### **The Assyrian Empire**

The Assyrians were one of the ancient major peoples to live in northern Mesopotamia near the start of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers corresponding to most parts of modern-day Iraq as well as parts of Iran, Kuwait, Syria, and Turkey. The early people of Assyria were made up of ancient tradesmen (Gen. 10:22) who perhaps migrated from Babylonia. The Assyrian Empire started off as a dominant regional force in Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE and rose to power "at a time when almost every other region of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean was still reeling from the economic and demographic depression which had accompanied the transition to the Iron Age around 1000 BCE."<sup>78</sup> It however, fell several times throughout history. King Shamshi-Adad, one of the most powerful leaders of Assyrians led his people to power after the fall of the Akkadian empire. He succeeded in expanding the empire to control much of the north and in the process made the Assyrians very wealthy. After the death of Shamshi-Adad (in 1781 BCE) the

Assyrians fell under the control of the Babylonian Empire who had

<sup>78</sup> Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "World Hegemony, 900–300 BCE," Daniel C. Snell (ed.), *A Companion to The Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 49.



been in control of southern Mesopotamia all this while.

The Assyrians rose to power again from 1360 BCE to 1074 BCE, thus conquering the whole of Mesopotamia (including the Babylonians) and expanding their empire to include Egypt Babylonia, Israel, and Cypress under powerful leaders one of whom was King Tiglath-Pileser I (1120-1100 BCE). King Tiglath-Pileser I built the empire and extended its boundaries during his period. The Assyrians had lived in the land long before Israel became a nation; yet, it was only in the early stages of kingship in Israel that they took interest in the area that was located to the west of their land. It was king Tiglath-Pileser I who first showed interest in the land westwards of the Assyrian homeland. Improper planning on his part made him unable to set a firm power in the areas he conquered which included some northern territories. The outcome of this military adventure thought the Assyrians the need to build a strong administrative structure to take care of their conquered territories. They also built a very strong and disciplined army that was ever ready for battles. Isaiah (5:26-29) describes the nature of the Assyrian army.

After the death of King Tiglath-Pileser I, the Assyrian empire declined in power and influence, the Assyria decided to direct her policies homeward, a situation which made surrounding nations enjoy peace and stability.<sup>79</sup> Assyria's decision not to interfere in other nations' affairs during this period contributed to the boom in Israel's and Judah's economy.<sup>80</sup> This success led "not only to the weakening of Aram-Damascus and the end of its hegemony over Syria-Palestine but also to the close commercial and economic ties between the two kingdoms."<sup>81</sup> The two leaders used their favorable foreign political situation and the absence of an Israelite-Judean war to form a political alliance which further entrenched their peace and prosperity.

The results were the recapture of Israel's territories previously taken

<sup>79</sup> J. L. Mackay, *Isaiah* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2008), 14ff.

<sup>80</sup> H. H. Ben-Sasson *et al.*, *A History of the Jewish People* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1979), 128.

<sup>81</sup> Ben-Sasson *et al.*, *A History of the Jewish People*, 128.



from them (2 Kings 13:25), as well as the extension of her border as far north as Hamath (2 Kings 14:25, 28; Amos 6:14). Judah, on the other hand, conquered Edomites and the Philistines and fortified Jerusalem strongly (2 Chron. 26:1–15).<sup>82</sup>

The final, and perhaps strongest of the Assyrian Empires ruled from 744 BCE to 612 BCE during which time Assyria was ruled by a succession of powerful kings like Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Ashurbanipal. In 722 BCE the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and carried away thousands of Israelites and resettled them in various parts of the Assyrian empire.

The Assyrians were most famous for their fearsome military power; in fact, fighting was part of their life.<sup>83</sup> People knew them as ruthless warriors. The fact that they were able to mobilize large troops for war might be due to rapid population growth in these times.<sup>84</sup> The greatest achievements of the Assyrians included their invention of new weapons and war strategies including horses and iron weapons, the use of battering rams and moveable towers

Their deadly chariots and their iron weapons made them more powerful than their enemies who usually carried copper or tin weapons and were less skilled in riding chariots. The Assyrian army was hierarchical with the king at the top with the primary role of conducting war in the interest of the god Assur and the state; and under the king was “a large, pyramid-shaped hierarchy of officers, who between them took care of all state responsibilities.”<sup>85</sup> The map below depicts the Assyrian empire.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ben-Sasson *et al.*, *A History of the Jewish People*, 128ff.

<sup>83</sup> Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East* Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 230.

<sup>84</sup> Beaulieu, “World Hegemony, 900–300 BCE,” 49.

<sup>85</sup> De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 230.

<sup>86</sup> Retrieved from <https://visualunit.me/2016/01/19/assyrian-empire-map/> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].



**Fig. 3.3 The Assyrian Empire**

When Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE) assumed power, he did not abandon the policies of Assurnasirpal. He intensified efforts to reduce the various Aramean and other states of the Levant to Assyrian clients and consolidated and extended the provincial system in the regions east of the Euphrates, within Assyria’s traditional sphere of interest.

### **The Persian Empire (539–331 BCE)**

Persia is an ancient empire, extending from Afghanistan in the east to Thracia in Europe and Nubia in northeastern Africa for a period of two centuries. The Persians trace their root to a Medic tribe which settled on the eastern side of the Persian Gulf and spoke the Aryan dialect belonging to the eastern division of the Indo-European group. The Persian Empire refers to a series of local imperial dynasties that centred in Persia/Iran from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and traced its ancestry to a man called Achaemenes. The Persians first rose to power under the leadership of Cyrus the Great (great-great-grandson of the first Persian king, Achaemenes), who utilized a strategy of religious and cultural toleration to maintain order. Before this time, the Persians or the Achaemenids, who were ruled by Cyrus’s grandfather, Astyages, paid tribute to the Medians. What Persia got in return for their tribute was basically protection from their masters. At a point in time, Cyrus came into conflict with his grandfather, rebelled against him and

succeeded. After defeating Astyages, Cyrus celebrated his victory by building a city on the site of the battle and naming it Pasargadae (after his tribe). Cyrus then took over leadership, though not all the people accepted him as their new ruler. The situation made Cyrus adopt a strategy of bringing lesser kings under his rule to solidify his power, a plan which succeeded and earned him the title “Cyrus the Great.” Cyrus built the earliest capital at Pasargadae in central Fars.

Cyrus became king in 559 BCE and defeated the Median ruler Ishtumegu in 550 BCE and “took over the entire territory the Medes had controlled, and he and his immediate successors pursued rapid military expansion, creating an enormous empire.”<sup>87</sup> Cyrus was a successful military commander; he defeated King Croesus of Lydia in 547 BCE and expanded his kingdom to the Aegean Sea and Greek cities on the Anatolian coast. He won a battle against Babylon in 539 BCE but unfortunately died in a battle in 530 BCE. To ensure that conquered regions continued to function economically and reduced the chance that they would rebel against him, Cyrus adopted a strategy that allowed the people he defeated to live in their home countries and practice their religious traditions as long as they continue to provide him with tribute revenues. This made Persian rule different from that of Babylon who moved people to different locations after conquering them. This was achieved by placing local rulers in place after conquering a place, and he allowed the local population to continue practicing their preferred religious traditions. Therefore, when Cyrus took over the areas under the control of Babylon which included the Israelites, he reversed the Babylonia practice of relocating conquered populations to new areas in order to break up their political and cultural unity and make them less dangerous to the ruling power, by allowing the Jews, who had been relocated by the Babylonians, to return to Israel and establish a tributary state. This was not just an act of generosity; it also ensured that the Jews continued to be loyal to Cyrus and supported his policies. He was known in Persia as a wise and tolerant ruler for which reason he gained the goodwill

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<sup>87</sup> De Microop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 287.

of the varied ethnic and religious groups within his large empire. Cyrus was succeeded by successor Cambyses (ruled 529-522 BCE) who in 525 BCE expanded the empire as far as Egypt.<sup>88</sup> He became king of Egypt and attempted to extend the empire along the north African coast and into the oases and Nubia but failed. Cambyses died in 522 BCE on his return journey from Egypt and was succeeded by a general named Darius.<sup>89</sup> Darius (ruled 521-486 BCE ) succeeded in conquering Libya and taking tribute from Nubia. His attempt to invade Scythia was unsuccessful, though he succeeded in subjecting some of its people.<sup>90</sup> Darius could not conquer Greece. Darius's successor Xerxes tried to avenge the Persian losses by launching another attack in 480 BCE. However, his successor, Xerxes (ruled 485-465 BCE) made the conquest of Greece one of his primary goals but failed on many occasions, and finally abandoned this idea and put a halt to the expansion of his kingdom as well.<sup>91</sup> Darius faced opposition from his own people but finally established himself as the sole ruler of Persia and reconquered the rebellious regions as well. Darius responded to the challenges of his people by dividing the population into provinces and appointing satraps to take charge. His purpose was to prevent regional leaders from becoming too powerful.

## Conclusion

The historico-political context within which the Old Testament emerged has been the subject of discussion in this chapter. In interpreting Old Testament texts one has to know the historico-political context which informed the particular text. The interaction between Israel and each of the empires is useful in determining how one should understand and apply the Old Testament.

## Review Questions

<sup>88</sup> De Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 287.

<sup>89</sup> De Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 289.

<sup>90</sup> De Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 289.

<sup>91</sup> De Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 289.

1. How was the history of ancient Israel affected by the activities of the ancient Babylonian empire?
2. Write about the ancient Assyrian empire and its relationship with Israel.
3. How does your community compare and contrast the Babylonian community?
4. Describe the ancient Akkadian empire. How relevant is this empire in Old Testament scholarship?
5. What role does Sumerian civilization play in Old Testament studies? Illustrate your answer with relevant examples.



## Chapter Four

### SOCIAL BACKGROUND

In the previous chapter, I outlined the historico-political setting of the Old Testament world. In this chapter, I focus on the social background of ancient Israel, relating it to the social life of traditional Africans. The communal worldview of Africa, interdependence and interconnectedness in traditional African society are given biblical supports. In the end, the reader realized a very strong affinity between the African social life and Old Testament social background.

#### **Nomadic Lifestyle**

Nomadic societies were characterized by: (a) geographical mobility (lack of permanent dwelling); (b) absence of ownership of property such as land (because people kept on changing where they lived); (c) traditional way of life (usually practiced and passed on from generation to generation); (d) strictly defined social norms (with prescribed punishment for violators); (e) existence of local culture including dialect, dresses, marriage ceremonies, and death and birth practices); (f) profession, usually farming, animal keeping, labor and small cottage industry; (g) resistance to social change (because of a strong preference for old ways of doing things).

Nomadic people roam from place to place with their luggage on the backs of camels, horses and donkeys in search of a means of livelihood such as food and water both for themselves and for their animals. Records about ancient Israel indicate that they traveled from place to place and lived in tents, but when they settled down, they built houses with stone, wood, and/or mud bricks. Nomads shelters were usually grouped together and extended families occupied these groups with a shared courtyard. The timing for the movement from one place to another and the extent of one's stay in a particular location was informed by the rainfall pattern and availability of food, among

others.<sup>92</sup> Flat stones were used for stools. Everyone slept on the floor.

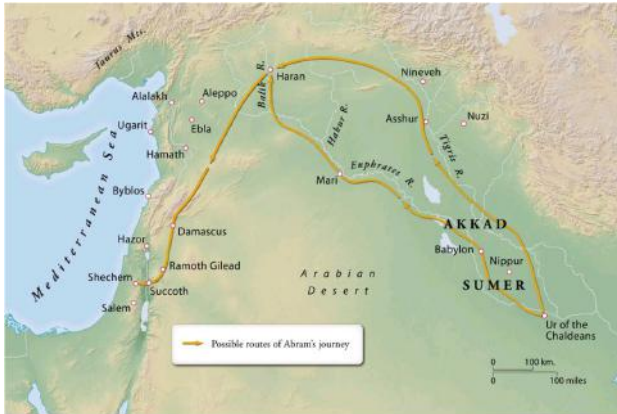
Discussions about nomadic life in ancient Israel must begin at least from the time of the patriarchs (namely, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph). The patriarchal era could be placed at the end of the third millennium BCE (ca. 2200–2000 BCE). Genesis 12–50 records Abram’s emigration from Ur of the Chaldeans, located in southern Mesopotamia, to Canaan (ca. 2091 BCE) and the events surrounding the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in and around the Promised Land or the land of Canaan. The concluding part accounts for the events leading to the migration of Jacob and his family to Egypt (in about 1876 BCE) 215 years after Abram had entered Canaan. Chronological markers found in Exodus and Genesis place Abram’s birth in 2166 BCE. This era falls in the Ur III Period (ca. 2130–2022 BCE) when southern Mesopotamia enjoyed relative peace and economic gain and Abram’s hometown, Ur, controlled most of the other city-states in the region. Abram, therefore, moved from culturally advanced and economically prosperous Ur based on faith in God’s promise (Gen. 11:31; 12:1-4; Acts 7:4). Abram was about seventy years old (ca. 2096 BCE), when he left Ur of the Chaldees for the “land of Canaan” together with his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, his father, Terah; and a group of household retainers (Gen 11:31). He either headed north before turning westward through the Jezirah to Haran (about a distance of ca. 670 miles) or moved northwest, alongside the Euphrates River, to the city of Mari, and from there moved to Haran through the Euphrates and Balik rivers (a distance of about 630 miles).

At age seventy-five (ca. 2091 BCE; Gen 12:4), Abram departed from Haran, setting out for “the land of Canaan” (12:5). Abram’s first stop in the land of Canaan was Shechem located near the watershed between the twin mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. Abram later moved from Shechem and traveled south, through the

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<sup>92</sup> W. S. Lasor, D. A. Hubbard and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI/ Cambridge: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1996), 42.

Hill Country of Ephraim, to a mountain located east of Bethel and west of Ai, pitched his tent and constructed another altar there (Gen. 12:8).



***Fig. 4.1 Abram's Journey from Ur to Shechem***

The stories of the earliest Hebrews (including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) are strongly nomadic. These people camped in the vicinity of towns (Gen. 12:6-9; 33:18-20) and lived as aliens in some towns (Gen. 20:1ff). They engaged in agricultural activities (Gen. 26:12ff), but were more into livestock keeping (cattle-breeding, sheep-rearing) and so had to move with the livestock when they were to leave their place of residence. Even when they camped at one place, they traveled a considerable distance to get foliage for their animals (cf. Gen. 37:12, 17). Part of the care of sheep consisted of shearing them at a certain season of the year. The wool that was sheared was used for making clothes. Watering of animals was also done daily. In Genesis 24:20 we read “So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels” (NIV). These troughs (made of wood or stones) were placed near wells for convenience in watering animals. Bigger troughs were hallowed out of large and long stone blocks from which



many animals could drink at the same time. Others were small and so could accommodate one or two animals at a time.<sup>93</sup> Men were responsible to draw water to fill the troughs using wheels or pulleys. In the absence of such machinery, women took it upon themselves to fetch water into the troughs.

Material success centered upon the increase of flocks and herds, the search for pasture-lands and wells of water. Except for Esau's hunting activities which could be considered as his occupation, the few references to the killing of wild animals show this to have been carried as a form of self-defense. References to fishing as an occupation are also lacking in the biblical data.

Sojourns in various places and struggles with hostile tribes are biblically attested. The dwellings of a people indicate the nature of the life that they lived. As nomads, the early Hebrews lived in tents. The reference to tents as shelter is found not only in the time of the patriarchs (Gen. 24) but even generations after the conquest (Judg. 19:9; 20:8, 1 Sam. 13:2; 1 Kings 8:66). The tent furniture and utensils of the nomads must surely be few, simple and easily transportable. The tent sanctuary, known as the "tent of meeting" which Moses set up at Sinai reflects the nomadic life of Israel.

Even after settling in the Promise Land, the disbanded army returned, "every man to his own tent" (1 Sam. 4:10; 2 Sam. 18:17). Later, houses were no more referred to as tents (1 Kings 22:17). Metaphors of the nomadic life of ancient Israel were found in expressions such as the representation of death with expressions like the cut tent-rope or the peg which is pulled out (Job 4:21) or the tent itself which is taken away (Isa. 38:12). Broken ropes/tents signify desolation (Jer. 10:20) and tents with tight ropes and firm pegs represent security (Isa. 33:20). To increase the number of tents means to extend one's boundary (Isa. 54:2). Nomadic lifestyle also informs the references to YHWH as the Shepherd (Psa. 23; Isa 40:11; Jer. 23:1-6; Ezek. 34). The nomads kept livestock and so were familiar

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<sup>93</sup> James M. Freeman, *The New Manner and Customs of the Bible* edited by Harold Chadwick (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 38.

with shepherding. Herding was often carried out by children who were not qualified by age to be part of the army (1 Sam. 16:11).

Nomadic life is not new in Africa. Writing from an African perspective, Ibn Khaldon (an early North Africa historian of the late 13th and early 14 century) defined nomads as, “the nations that rely on agriculture and herding animals to fulfil their needs. Those nations use only what they require in their eating and dressing habits especially the things that nature can offer. Their homes are either tents made from animal hair and skins, or caves.”<sup>94</sup> Khaldon identified three categories of Nomads as follows. The first category is **Settled Nomads** who, though are nomads, settle at a place for some time to undertake agricultural activities to earn their living. They prefer to live inside oases and nearby riverbanks as such locations will ensure the availability of water for their survival. The second category is **Semi-Stable Nomads** who move and live within a limited zone based on where they would get water and pasture for their flock. The third category is **Bedouin Nomads** who live wild and “practice long nomadic movements of a seasonal migration because their lives are related only to camels which demand from them to move deeper into the nowhere of the Sahara desert for diversification of food.”<sup>95</sup> The Fulani tribes of West Africa, are one of the last nomadic peoples globally. Even today, there are many nomadic people in different parts of Africa. For example, in Ghana, there are Fulani herdsmen who move from place to place with their flocks in search of water and pasture for their animals. Some of them have relatively permanent dwellings while others do not have permanent homes.

### **Family and Community life**

The Jews lived in communities—a community refers to a social group whose members live together with common interests (and sometimes, with common property). At the heart of the community is the family

<sup>94</sup> Mohamed El-Gasmi, “North African Nomads – Explained” (2019), np. [Accessed, online, from <https://www.walkingwithnomads.com/north-african-nomads-explained/> on 24/5/2021]

<sup>95</sup> Mohamed El-Gasmi, “North African Nomads – Explained”, np.

which may be nuclear or extended. Members of the family were united by religious observances and economic interdependence. The nuclear family comprises spouses and their children. The extended family however goes far beyond the nuclear family to include brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins and others. Slaves were also part of the household. The Torah depicts the Israelites as people related to one another as members of an extended family—twelve tribes descended from Jacob—though their relationship is not only genealogical. The basic community in ancient Israel was the household (*bayit*) of which the father was the head. Like many traditional societies, ancient Israel society describes Israel's political system as kinship.

Patterns of kinship in the Bible are preserved in genealogies which not only describe blood relations but also economic relationships, social class, financial status, and the power which a household can exercise in the community as a whole. The father was responsible for protecting and providing for his family. He had the responsibility of adopting or excommunicating sons and daughters; recruiting workers and warriors; negotiating marriages and covenants; hosting guests; and choosing heirs.<sup>96</sup> The mother in the household was responsible for: bearing children and ensuring that other women in her household also bear children; managing the household by supervising domestic production; rationing and preparing food; teaching her children; resolving domestic conflicts and designating heirs.<sup>97</sup> The biblical world was patriarchal in nature. "Patriarchy in ancient Israel was based not on the subordination and exploitation of women, but rather on the efforts of all the men and women in its household to survive."<sup>98</sup> Therefore, patriarchy is not sexism, a form of prejudice and oppression based on the erroneous assumption that women are biologically inferior to men. Women often helped manage herds, clear new fields, construct terraces,

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<sup>96</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 8.

<sup>97</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 23.

<sup>98</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 23.

harvest, thresh, and winnow the fields, orchards, and vineyards. They also planted, hoed, weeded, and picked household gardens. The mother was responsible for teaching the women and children in the household. When boys grew into young men and could take part in communal labor the father became responsible for the education.<sup>99</sup> The mother continued to teach girls who became young women and could conceive children. Teaching and childbearing were therefore comparable if not identical roles. The mother of the household taught children how to walk, how to talk, how to read and write, how to dress themselves, and how to feed themselves (Hos. 11:1-4), how to help with gardening, herding, cooking, weaving, and making pottery. The mother was the children's storyteller. Jewish women were the mistress of the home but they were prohibited from witnessing in the court.<sup>100</sup> The Jewish prayer "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who has not made me a woman" should not be seen as evidence for misogyny. Rather, it is to be understood in the context of the inability of women to fulfil all the demands of the law (especially as they might sometimes not be in the required state of purity) "which is the highest privilege" in rabbinic tradition.<sup>101</sup> There are many statements in the rabbinic literature that give positive estimates about women.<sup>102</sup> Household duties of women also included grinding flour, cooking, laundry, making beds, and spinning wool. The husband was expected to provide her with food, have satisfactory sexual relations with her, provide for her children and avoid striking her. The woman had a greater influence on the family than the man.

The household could enter into covenant with the clan, the village, and the tribe to seek protection and enrich its land and children. Households with similar traditions constituted a sib or clan. It was the clan which told ancestor stories like those of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel in Genesis (25:20—37:2) and those of David's rise to

<sup>99</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 27.

<sup>100</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity* second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 71.

<sup>101</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 71.

<sup>102</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 71.

power in the books of Samuel and Kings (1 Sam. 13: 1-2 Sam. 1:27). Clans sharing the same natural resources constituted a village which determined how its springs, wells, cisterns, fields, and vineyards were to be preserved, exploited, and shared by various clans (Josh. 13-19).

The extended family system of the Jews parallels that of Africans. The value of life, in the African worldview, is closely linked with one's unity with other people. This fact is expressed in the maxim: "I am related by blood, therefore, I exist or I exist because I belong to a family." African family and social life parallel that of ancient Israel. The traditional African family comprises parents, children and grandparents and others. This is what is termed the extended family system. Westernization has however introduced Africans to another family system which consists of only a couple and their children. Families come together to form a clan which also bonds people together. In the Jewish community no one desires exclusion from the family. The long genealogies in the Bible (cf. Gen. 5) do not only underscore the concept of orality but also underlines the fact that ancient Jews cherished the extended family system. Some Africans practice matrilineal inheritance, meaning a kinship system in which ancestral descent is traced through maternal lines. Others practice patrilineal inheritance, that is, a kinship system in which ancestral descent is traced through paternal lines. The Ga of Ghana and the Ibibio of Nigeria have a patrilineal descent system of inheritance. The Akan of Ghana have a matrilineal system.

Like ancient Jews, traditional Africans live in nuclear households, often with their relatives in clusters of houses around a common courtyard. They live in houses made of mud brick with a stone foundation and perhaps a second story of wood. In the biblical world, the houses consisted of three or four rooms, and also had sleeping space on the roof. They reserved one of the first-floor rooms for housing domestic animals, mostly sheep and goats. The home was a place for instruction; God exhorted the Israelites to love, honor and train their children in the faith (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 6:1-9). African children are taught to be respectful and to honor the elderly

in the society. They are taught to help elders to carry their loads and to greet when they meet the elderly. African folklore tradition is used to teach children about the history of the society and moral lessons. African storytellers are usually older women such as grandmothers. African stories personify many animal characters such as the spider, elephant, jackal, hyena, goat, fox, dog, snake and others. In many communities, the spider is depicted as clever and shrewd, the hyena greedy, and the goat promiscuous. The following quote about the African way of learning traditional values is noteworthy:

The context in which young people learn [these values] is fellowship with older, wise persons. In a society in which the spoken word is more important than the written, written fellowship with old, experienced persons is an essential task in life, since the young person who is growing up must not only learn how to master life but must also acquire the art of speaking.<sup>103</sup>

There was romance in the world of the Bible, just as there is romance in every other world. The Bible describes romance not only between unmarried men and women, but also between husbands and wives (Gen. 24: 67; 29: 16-20; Judg. 14 : 3; 1 Sam. 1: 5; 18:20; 25:44; 2 Sam. 3: 15; 11:27), and between husbands and concubines (Exod. 21:7-11). Ancient Jewish worldview allowed marriage within one's own family or bloodline (Gen. 24:3-4). Also, it was possible to marry a woman and her sister simultaneously. Marriage ceremonies in ancient Israel involved seeking the consent of both partners. To tender a marriage proposal or covenant (Mal. 2: 14), the father of the household of the groom sent an expensive gift to the father of the household of the bride (Gen. 34:12; Exod. 22:16; Deut. 22:29; 1 Sam 18:25). The father of the bride indicated his acceptance of the proposal by allowing the groom to take the bride to his household (Deut. 20:7; 28:30; Exod. 21:10). The groom spread his cloak over the bride to sanction the covenant (Ruth 3:9).

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<sup>103</sup>Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal claims of Western Morality*, translated by Brain McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 25.

As noted earlier the biblical worldview prioritizes communal life. The welfare of the society is more important than the welfare of an individual. African sense of community and solidarity for one another is expressed by the Ubuntu philosophy of “I am because you are, you are because I am.” Communal institutions such as the kinsmen, compound relations, village and tribe are a powerful tool in determining a person’s destiny in the community. Like, ancient Israelites, each individual belongs to a family comprising, the living, the dead and the unborn. When the writer of Hebrews talks to his Jewish audience about “the cloud of witness” he is talking about something similar to the African worldview that the ancestral spirits constantly watch what the living are doing. In Africa, one’s unity with others in the society, whether biologically related or not, is a key determinant for one’s humanity and worth. This concept is expressed in the Zulu saying “I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.” Therefore, in Africa to be isolated from the community is undesirable.

The Old Testament view that God created human beings in his own image relates well with the African worldview that humans are God’s children. The Akan of Ghana, for example, express this thought by saying *Nyimpa nyinaa ye Nyame nye mba* (“All humans are God’s children”). If all humans are God’s children then humans have to unite regardless of race, gender, age, or ethnicity.

### **Communal Worldview and Genealogical Records**

The communal sense of life makes genealogy (that is, the list of descendants of a person or a group of people) very important in both ancient Israel and African worldviews. Oral genealogies are part of the world’s intangible cultural heritage. Biblical genealogies provide the link from Adam to Jesus. Most of the records are detailed though not exhaustive. Biblical genealogies are not necessarily meant to be complete; there are usually gaps. The book of Genesis records the descendants of Adam and Eve. The enumerated genealogy in chapters 4, 5, and 11, accounts for the lineal male descent to Abraham,



including the age at which each patriarch fathered his named son and the number of years he lived thereafter. Other genealogical records are given in Genesis 16; 19; 29 and 46 where Abraham's descendants are listed up to the time of their descent to Egypt. Numbers 1—3; 13; 26 and 34 also list the genealogy of Israel's children who were on their way to the Promised Land. Biblical genealogies related to the kingship were meant to preserve the history of the nation/state. In 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as 1 and 2 Kings there are records of four centuries of the kings who reigned in Israel. These records were very important in the post-exilic period as they enabled those returning from the exile to determine those whose Jewish heritage had remained pure as opposed to those who had lost their true Jewish heritage due to intermarriages with foreigners (Ezra 2; 7; 10; Neh. 7-8; 10-12).

In African knowledge about families, family history, and the tracing of their lineages are passed from generation to generation through oral transmission. Most Africa families have “storytellers” who memorize the oral traditions of the tribes/clans, including names of ancestors going back six to thirty generations, and then pass it on to the younger generations. The children are then encouraged to collect as many names as possible and come back to either sing or recite. This is done so that by the time they grow old their will have sufficient information about their ancestry. African genealogical records are kept for economic, social and political reasons. For example, an important socio-economic function of genealogy is the management of inheritance. This comes to play when it is time to determine who should inherit family property such as land, golden ornaments or precious beads. The head of the family uses the genealogy to determine who is the right person to take custody of the property. Also, genealogies are essential in determining whether a proposed marriage is incestuous or not. Genealogical information also plays a critical role in the succession to a throne or the head of the lineage. Chieftaincy matters are taken seriously in Africa; selecting the wrong person for a throne can lead to serious chaos in



the community. Genealogy helps kingmakers to determine the right candidates at every point in time. The installation of a chief in most African societies requires the person to recite his family genealogy. This is meant to connect the person to his ancestors. It also proves the legitimacy of the person to be installed. Africans can therefore read biblical genealogy with meaning because of their familiarity with such records.

## **Marriage**

Jewish marriages were contracted between families, as in African societies. It was effected in two phases, including the first which was betrothal (that is, the “acquisition” of the bride) and the wedding proper (involving taking the bride into the husband’s home). The betrothal had the legal force of the marriage and could only be broken through a divorce (cf. Matt. 1:18-19). By paying the dowry the marriage was considered a legal fact even if the official marriage ceremony had not taken place.<sup>104</sup> Betrothal involved the payment of bride price (or part of it) to the family of the woman. The marriage “contract” (*ketubah*) spelling out the duties of the husband to his wife and the amount due her in case of divorce or death of the husband was given to the man. Though the bridegroom could move into the father-in-law’s house to stay with the husband without any additional ceremony, rabbinic tradition discouraged this kind of arrangement.<sup>105</sup> The father of the bride-to-be set a price for her to compensate him for the cost of her upbringing and for the loss of her services after the marriage. If the bridegroom had no means of paying the bride price he could render services in its place (Gen. 29:15-30; Josh. 15:16-17). It is in this light that Saul promised to offer his daughter in marriage to anyone who could kill Goliath (1 Sam. 17:25). The service rendered in killing Goliath becomes the bride price required in this marriage. A young man who wanted to marry a girl but could not afford the bride price could often find a way to perform a service in place of

<sup>104</sup>Freeman, *The New Manner and Customs of the Bible*, 56.

<sup>105</sup>Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 68.

the dowry. The marriage feast lasted a week (or seven days). Thus, the statement “Finish this daughter’s bridal week” (Gen. 29:20, NIV) meant to complete the week of festivities for the bride and the groom (see also Judg. 14:12). The final marriage ceremony took place under a canopy (Heb. *huppah*). The bride prepared for the ceremony by bathing, anointing, and clothing with special adornments. She then moved to the father’s house amid singing, drumming, dancing. The occasion usually took place in the night and so torchlights were used to accompany her. From here, the bride is introduced to the groom’s house where a canopy is set to accommodate the crowd. Seven blessings are pronounced upon the couple, the marriage contract is read and a weeklong feast begins. The consent of the couple to live together as husband and wife was very important in the ceremony. Jewish men were encouraged to marry at age 18.<sup>106</sup>

Marriage was not a single event, but a drawn-out process of negotiations (Gen 24: 52-54). In the case of Rebekah’s marriage, the dowry was paid to her brother (Gen. 29:18). Apparently, Rebekah’s father was not alive and so the brother acted as the family head. Rebekah’s marriage also shows that gifts were given to the woman. The wedding gifts constituted a token of the man’s ability to provide for the woman after their marriage. Both refusal to give these gifts or to accept them was unacceptable. Rebekah wore a veil as a symbol of modesty and respect (Gen. 24:64-65).<sup>107</sup>

Like ancient Israel, African marriage is a social event involving two families/communities. In many parts of Africa, when a man meets a woman he wants to marry, he proposes marriage to her. This is followed by an engagement ceremony followed by a period of courtship before the actual marriage rite. The engagement ceremony, which takes place in the presence of the families of both parties, serves as a curtain-raiser. The Akan of Ghana call it *kɔkɔkɔ* (knocking) and the Ewe of Togo and Ghana also call it *vofofo*. The knocking fee is any culturally appropriate item (such as drinks) given

<sup>106</sup>Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 68.

<sup>107</sup>Freeman, *The New Manner and Customs of the Bible*, 41.

to the would-be bride's family to officially announce the intended marriage between the would-be couple. For the Akan, knocking is a one-time event. In the case of the Eve, it takes place in two phases, the first being the sending of a delegation from the would-be groom's family head to the head of the would-be bride's family to make the intended marriage known. The ceremony takes place at dawn and involves giving "door-knocking drinks" (*vɔfoha*) to the would-be bride's family. This is followed by the presentation of a second round of drinks and cash (*tabiabia* and *tabianuwo*) to the would-be bride's family to end the engagement. The acceptance of these gifts gives the man the legal right to associate himself with the woman.<sup>108</sup> A date is then set for the marriage ceremony and the subsequent consummation of the marriage.

### **Communal Worldview of Wealth and Interdependence**

The communal worldview of the biblical world is further strengthened by laws meant to cater for the welfare of the entire society, especially the needy and the marginalized. The Old Testament worldview requires Jews to forego some of their crops for the poor and strangers (Lev. 19:9-10). Again, the Jews were to leave their lands fallow after every seven years (Exod. 23: 10-11). The poor could gather food from these lands, and the wild animals could eat what the poor left. All these were measures put in place to ensure the survival of every member of the community. Charity tithe (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12-15) was also given for the benefit of the Levites (who had no allotment or inheritance of their own) and widows, sojourners and orphans so that they too would have food to eat.

The African worldview places high value on interdependence. The Kiswahili word *harambee* ("pulling together") captures the communal sense of life as well as interconnectedness and interdependence among people. Possessions are to be used for the benefit of the society. The value of wealth is found in how it benefits

<sup>108</sup>Chris Abotchie, *Social Control in Traditional Southern Eweland of Ghana* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1997), 33.

the community, not the individual. This fact is expressed among the Akan with the saying “If there is a *sika peredwan*<sup>109</sup> in a town, it belongs to the whole community.” The wealthy are considered truly wealthy based on how generous he/she is to others. Humanness includes being generous, hospitable, friendly and caring and compassionate. It means sharing what you have. In most African villages, the hunter comes from hunting, prepares his catch and shares it among all the people in his village. The farmer comes home and also does the same to his/her farm yield. People pluck corn from other people’s farms, harvest cassava, plantain and other foodstuff and inform the owner of the farm when they get back home. This is a normal practice in many traditional African societies. The communal view of wealth is further strengthened by the African idea that one may lose their wealth if they fail to share. The African saying “Money has wings” is meant to make the point that wealth will move from a selfish person to a generous one. The African worldview of wealth is intended to make people generous rather than being tightfisted so that in the end no one in the community will have too much resources when others have too little. In Deuteronomy 15:4-6, God promised the Israelites a poverty-free community if they would obey “the whole command” he had given them which included “the full integration of marginal groups and the poor into the life of the nation.” God’s point was that if they care for one another and share their resources with the entire community, no one would be considered poor because everyone will have enough for his/her basic needs.

### **Circumcision Rite**

Circumcision is the complete or partial removal of the glans of the penis. In the Old Testament, circumcision signifies God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:11-14). Therefore, “by circumcision, a testimony was given to the world, and a person was sealed in his membership with the organized community of the

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<sup>109</sup>Peredwan was a unit of British colonial currency that was used in Ghana until 1957 (gold valued at £8.2s).

covenant.”<sup>110</sup> Israel practiced circumcision whilst in their Egyptian bondage (Josh. 5:4–5). Under the Mosaic Law, newborn males were circumcised at the age of eight days (Lev. 12:3), and strangers were required to be circumcised before being allowed to take part in the Passover (Exod. 12:48). Joshua states that he brought a circumcised people into the promised land (Josh. 5:7). It was not a practice peculiar to Israel. Some of Israel’s neighbors practiced circumcision while others did not. Jeremiah 9:25-26 lists “Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all those with shaven temples who live in the desert” as circumcised. As they perform circumcision, Israelites permanently acknowledge their responsibility to serve Yahweh.

Among most African societies, male circumcision was and is still a very important ritual. The Xhosa-speaking people of southern Africa, like many other Africans, consider circumcision as a principal rite of initiation.<sup>111</sup> The Xhosa people have their circumcision ritual in three phases, namely, surgical operation, seclusion and integration.<sup>112</sup> All these three rites must be performed to consider a male person socially matured. The surgical operation is preceded by preparatory rites including the sacrificing of a beast and the shaving of the boy’s head. Initiates are expected to be meat cut from the right leg. The severing of the foreskin is done outside of the lodge by a traditional surgeon (Xhosa: *ingcibi*). The initiates repeat the following statement after the *ingcibi*, “You are the man.” The severed foreskin is given to the parents to be buried later and the wound is covered with herbs. The newly circumcised person then secludes himself for some time which can last for more than a month before finally reincorporated into the society through some ceremonies. Though circumcision rites differ from community to community, most Africans share key aspects of the Xhosa circumcision rite outlined above. It must be noted

<sup>110</sup>Palmer Robertson, *Covenants: God’s way with his people* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publication, 1993), 54.

<sup>111</sup>P. Magubane, *Vanishing cultures of South Africa* (Cape Town: Struik, 1998), 33.

<sup>112</sup>J. Papu and P. Verster, “A Biblical, Cultural And Missiological critique of Traditional Circumcision among Xhosa-Speaking Christians,” *Acta Theologica* 2, (2006):178-198, 179.

that in the Bible, circumcision signified one's covenant relationship with God rather than one's state of maturity.

## **Conclusion**

Against the backdrop of the strong connection between the social contexts of traditional Africans, the African must stand in a better position in appreciating the family and community life found in the Old Testament. The community of God's people is to live in peace and harmony and in solidarity with one another. God's people must therefore promote interdependence and assist one another so that no one will have too many resources when others have too little. Polygamous marriages in the Old Testament have parallels in traditional African societies. However, polygamy when considered in the entire biblical context is not something that God intended as the ideal marriage practice. In this case, Africans are to have their worldview about marriage (with regards to polygamy) shaped by the biblical teaching on the subject. This means that while aspects of the African worldview can enhance the biblical message, others stand in opposition to the biblical worldview.

## **Review Questions**

1. How does the concept of community in ancient Israel compare and contrast with the African understanding of community?
2. What are nomadic societies? Explain the key feature of nomadic societies.
3. How would you relate the place of Land in the Old Testament to the African context?
4. To what extent do you consider the African family system as a perfect parallel to the family system of ancient Israel?

## **Chapter Five**

### **ECONOMIC BACKGROUND**

The economic system of any group of people is very important in understanding their culture because economic activities form part of the everyday life of any human community. In this chapter, the economic system of ancient Israel is explored in the light of traditional African economy.

#### **The Value of Land**

The importance of land in the biblical world is seen in God's promise to give Abraham land as his inheritance (Gen. 12:1-4). Initially, God did not make known to Abraham the land he promised him. The promise of the land was a vital part of the covenant with Abraham:

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God (Gen. 17:7-8 NIV).

Here, God identifies the land as the Land of Canaan. Land is central to God's covenant with Abraham. At the core of the Old Testament story is "the Promised Land," and the main action of the story basically concerns people's relationship with this piece of land whether moving toward or away from it, their "home." The Land of Canaan was God's property which he gave to Israel (Josh. 24:11-13) as tenants (Lev. 25:23). The predominantly agricultural society makes land ownership a very important issue in the story. From the Old Testament perspective, every family was to own a piece of land, where everyone could sit under his own vine or fig tree (1 Kings 4:25; Mic. 4:4).

After their conquest, Israel shared the Land among the individual tribes and families (Josh. 13—22). The land belongs

to families and individual members of the family are allowed to cultivate it. Since it does not belong to the individual family members, no individual has the right to sell the family land. To sell land is to deprive the family of its means of living. Naboth's refusal to sell his family land even at the king's request (1 Kings 21) is suggestive that land belonged permanently to the family. When selling of land was inevitable due to financial crisis, a close relative had the right to buy it back so the family does not lose it permanently (Ruth 4:2-4). The land was eventually supposed to revert to the original family at the year of Jubilee, that is, every fiftieth year (Lev. 25:23). Inheritance laws ensured that land remained within the family/tribe (Num. 27:7-11).

Africa is a predominantly agricultural society and so land is very important. The importance of land ownership in Africa is the reason why communal clashes over land are common in the continent. Most families depend on the land for subsistence living. To dispossess a family of their land is to dispossess them of their source of living. Family land is transferred from generation to generation and hence it is not appropriate for one to sell such land.

### **Farming Activities**

One of the main occupations in ancient Israel was farming. Farming activities included clearing fields and hillsides of stones; building stone terraces and walls; transporting soil for terraces; applying fertilizer (such as manure dropped by grazing herds) to the soil; plowing the soil; planting crops; hoeing weeds, pruning vines; pulling flax and harvesting.<sup>113</sup> Efficient clearing and plowing of the land was a prerequisite for successful farming activities. The use of clearing and planting techniques by the Hebrews goes back to "10, 000 BCE when at first Stone and then Bronze Age peoples set fires to flush game, and farmers used slash and burn techniques to clear the hills of maquis brush and terebinth oak."<sup>114</sup> Farmers came together and

<sup>113</sup>Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 38.

<sup>114</sup>Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 42.



did most of these activities. The kind of crops planted by the farmer depended on the nature of the physical environment.

Farmers maximized the use of the resources available to them by managing their time, pooling their resources together and having as many children as possible to serve as farmhands. Planting of a single crop was done in stages over a period of time to ensure that farmers do not lose their entire crop when the planting and harvesting rains were off-cycle. Farmers also planted a variety of cereals with tree, vine, fruit, and nut crops. This was meant to allow farmers to spread out their work. Trees and vines did not require attention at the same time as cereals and so the farmer could finish working on one crop before attending to the other without causing any problem. At the same time, planting a variety of crops ensured that the farmer does not lose everything planted to a particular plant disease. For example, if a disease attack the cereals the other crops will remain healthy and mature for the farmer to harvest; only the cereals will be lost. Should the vines fail for whatever reason, there is still a chance that the others would survive. After harvesting, they would plow the land, and left it uncultivated until the beginning of the next season. The process was meant to destroy weeds, conserve moisture, and somewhat offset the destructive effects of soil mining. Portions of every harvest were stored to make up for any shortfall in the produce of the following year and/or to cater for population growth. Pit silos were dug for such purposes. The biblical world was an agricultural world. Influenced by their agricultural setting, most writers used metaphors from agricultural settings in communicating God's message to the people. For example, Hosea refers to Israel metaphorically as a silly dove (7:11); a trained heifer (10:11); a luxuriant grapevine (10:1); grapes (9:10); a lily (14:5); an olive tree (14:6) and chaff blown from the threshing floor (13:3).

Africa is a predominantly farming community (as noted earlier). Agriculture employs about two-thirds of the continent's working population. Farming activities in Africa depend largely on the rainfall pattern. Drought is therefore undesirable. Famine could

occur due to poor rainfall or some natural disaster. In that case, people migrate to other places in search of food. This parallels Abraham's, Isaac's and Jacob's journeys to Egypt and Ahimelech's journey to Moab together with his family to search for food (Ruth 1:1-2).

### **Water sources**

The hot, dry climatic condition of the ancient near east made it necessary to find a reliable source of water. This led to a lot of human inventions, some of which are considered briefly in this section.

#### ***Cistern***

Cistern (Hebrew: *bor*) means hole, pit. It refers to a downwardly slanted or pear-shaped receptacle of some type (similar to a man-made lake) that can keep water directed into it. Cisterns were very important in ancient Israel because of the lack of natural springs in the area. Rainwater collected in cisterns ensured the availability of water during the dry season. The rainwater is directed into the cistern through a small opening at the top. The water-holding capacity of a cistern depends on the material of which it is made. At first, most cisterns were hallowed out of limestone; but most of the water escaped because of its porous nature. It could also be dug in the ground or in large rocks.

To improve its water-storage capacity, people covered the bottom and wall with plaster made of lime. This innovation ensured the minimal loss of water during storage. The opening of the cistern was relatively small and usually covered with a large stone so that the water could remain clean, free of dust and debris. The stone cover allowed water to get into the cavity and so it was not to be removed before water could enter the cistern. References to cisterns can be seen in Genesis 37:24 and Jeremiah 2:13; 41:7, 9.

#### ***Well***

A well refers to a hole dug into the earth to provide water. Generally speaking, cisterns dug in the ground, spring, fountain can be

considered as a well of one form or the other.<sup>115</sup> In ancient Israel, wells were usually dug in limestone rocks and sometimes provided with descending steps that people could use to dip directly from the pool of water (cf. Gen. 24:16). Another way of getting water from the well was to use containers attached to ropes which are usually lowered into the water and pulled up to collect the water. It was the curb of one of such wells that Jesus sat when he talked with the woman of Samaria (John 4:16).

Wells could be sited outside towns where they became local landmarks and meeting places (cf. Gen. 24:11, 20) or at isolated places nearly grazing fields (Gen. 29:3, 8-10; Exod. 2:15-18). Wells that were located in open spaces and subject to dust blown by the wind were covered with flat stones (Gen. 29:2-3). Because of the necessity of water in human life, the ownership and use of wells were taken seriously (Gen. 21:25; Exod. 2:17-19). Old dry wells could be turned into prisons (Gen. 27:24; Jer. 38:6). While the Bible does not tell how wells were dug one could deduce that they were very deep and so it was a tedious task to dig a well. Jacob's well is 75 feet deep and it was once twice that depth.<sup>116</sup> Deep wells were preferred to shallow ones because the latter could easily dry up in the dry season.

## **Commerce and Transport**

Ancient near east nomadic life was characterized by agricultural activities and commerce. The land of Palestine was a key player in commerce because of its location at the bridge of three continents. Palestine played a major role in world trade. As early as the second millennium BCE, international trade routes passed through Palestine as hinted by Genesis 37 where Ishmaelite caravans carried goods from Canaan to Egypt. A caravan refers to a group of travelers moving together, through dangerous territory. Protection against desert bandits and other dangerous attackers is usually the main motivation for moving together. Trade highways passed through the deserts, followed

<sup>115</sup>Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1310-1311.

<sup>116</sup>Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1311.

along the foot of mountain barriers or along the coastal region.<sup>117</sup> Other trade routes passed through the Sea of Reed and the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>118</sup> Camels were used for transporting goods like spices, balm, myrrh and others from one place to the other across the desert (Gen. 37:25). Ezekiel 27:12-25 gives a survey of the nations with whom the Tyrians were connected in commerce.

At the early stages in human history, trade was done through the barter system. However, in the later development, societies developed means to measure, weigh, and exchange goods. The need for standardization of trade values became obvious. The system was however confusing because different cities developed their own standard of measurements. In biblical terms, weighing (pounds) and measuring (volume, length, and area) are two different functions.

One of the most difficult areas in Bible translation is the translation of biblical measurements. These units are about forty. The difficulty arises because most modern readers and translators are not familiar with those measurements. In fact, many of these measurements do not fit into the modern system of measurements. More so, there are different systems existing side by side, making it difficult to pinpoint which system is to be followed. Again, ancient Hebrews actually lacked precision in Mathematics, biblical metrology is far from being an exact science and consequently, no reliable or coherent system has been established. For this reason, there is no scholarly consensus as to what value to assign to each of these units on the modern scale. The result is that modern translators do not follow the same system of conversion.

## **Pottery**

Pottery is a common artifact in the ancient near east world. Pottery works played a role in almost every aspect of human life in the ancient world. As early as 5500 BCE, people made hand-formed pottery in the southern Levant. Pottery was used as storage jars for

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<sup>117</sup>Houston, "The Geographical Setting of the Bible," 90.

<sup>118</sup>Houston, "The Geographical Setting of the Bible," 90.

keeping water, wine, and dry foods for domestic use throughout the year. Also, larger jars with narrow necks and two handles each could be used to transport goods over a long distance. Pots were also made for cooking. Below are some pottery artifacts.<sup>119</sup>



***Fig. 5.1 Pottery***

Ancient Israel produced pottery from clay. Clay is suitable for pottery works because of its ability to take different shapes and its ability to harden when exposed to heat. The clay is trodden by the feet in order to prepare it for pottery work. The prophet Isaiah speaks of this action when he says, “He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay” (Isa. 41:25b). Several biblical passages allude to the potter’s craft. Examples of such references are those which talk of bowls of different sizes (Exod. 8:3; 12:34; kneading trough Judg. 6:38; 2 Kings 2:20), cooking pots (Judg. 6:19; 2 Kings 4:38); jars and pitchers (Gen. 24:14; 1 Sam. 26:11) and lamps (Exod. 27:20; Prov. 31:18). In Jeremiah 18:1-6, the Prophets give a vivid picture of pottery-making. The passage presents a description of the potter’s workshop (18:1-4) and uses figurative language to describe the potter’s work. God is the potter and his people are like clay in God’s hand, whom God can re-form (18:6). The prophet Nahum also

<sup>119</sup>Retrieved from <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/05/lectionary-blog-3/> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].

refers to the preparation for baking pottery when he says: “Make strong the brickkiln” (Nah. 3:14 KJV).

## **Metrology**

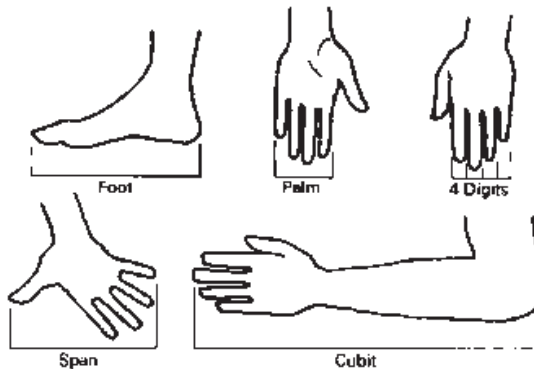
Like it is in today’s world, people living in various communities develop a common way of measuring length, volume, weight and others. This is important so that standards could be obtained for the exchange of commodities among people. Before standards were set the barter system of trade prevailed. Complexity in human society and unfairness in barter trade was what necessitated the setting of standards. In this section, the study takes a look at how ancient Israel measured quantities.

### ***Measurement of Length***

Initially, body parts like figure, arm, hand, foot, were used to measure length. finger, palm, span, and the distance between the tip of the middle finger and the elbow. The primitive carpenter used the finger to take the smallest measurement just as the Romans derived the “inch” from the thumb. Distances were related to the distance a person could walk in a day, or the distance traveled by an arrow and so on.

The cubit is the main unit of linear measurement used in the Bible. It is the distance between the elbow/forearm to the tip of the middle finger. The variation between the length of the human arm from person to person leads to the fact that there was no absolute cubit standard. Usually, it varied from seventeen to eighteen inches. The cubit determined a measure for many aspects of life in ancient Israel. For example, a Sabbath day’s journey measured 2,000 cubits (Exod. 16:29). It was used in reference to the height of a man (1 Sam. 17:4), the depth of water (Gen. 7:20), and approximate distances (John 21:8), the ark (Gen. 6:15-16), the Tabernacle (Exod. 26-27), the Temple and its furnishings (1 Kings 6:7), and the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 3:13). Two different cubits were used, namely, the long or royal (architectural) cubit and the short (anthropological) cubit. Scholars believe the long cubit is approximately 52.5 centimeters (7 hands)

and the short cubit is about 45 centimeters (6 hands).



**Fig. 5.2 Measurement of Length**

The rod/reed is equivalent to six cubits. Rod and reed appear to be interchangeable (see Ezek. 29:6; 40:5). The span is the distance between the tip of the stretched-out extended thumb and the tip of the little finger. It was half the common cubit (Exod. 28:16; 1 Sam. 17:4). The ephod (Exod. 28:16) and the breast piece (Exod. 39:9) were a span squared. Goliath's height was six cubits and a span (1 Sam. 17:4). The handbreadth/palm is the width of the hand at the base of the four fingers or the breadth of the palm at the base of the fingers (1 Kings 7:26; 2 Chron. 4:5). It is equivalent to a sixth of a cubit.

### ***Measurement of Volume***

Volume measurements involved either liquid capacity or dry capacity. At first, human limbs were used to measure volume. The small units were: (a) *komez* (*qomez*) meaning "handful" (cf. Lev. 2:2; 5:12), equivalent to the grasp of three fingers; (b) *hofen* (Exod. 9:8), equal to the entire palm of the hand; and (c) *hofnayim*, two handfuls. Later standardized measures were used for measurements.

Israel adopted from the Canaanites the Mesopotamian system of measuring volume with the following major units. The homer



(equivalent to the normal weight carried by a donkey) was the standard unit for dry measure (Ezek. 45:11-14; Hos. 3:22).<sup>120</sup> Leviticus 27:16 equates a homer of barley to 50 shekels of silver. Measurements were also related to receptacles which the farmer used at home and in the field. In this regard, the omer was used to represent a bundle of ears of corn or a quantity of wine in the measure of a skin (jar) (1 Sam. 1:24). For this reason, the *omer* is also sometimes translated as “sheaf” or “sheaves” (Lev. 23:10-12, Ruth 2:7). A sheaf was considered a quantity of grain big enough to bundle (Exod. 16:22, 32 - 33, 36). The *ephah* was the most frequent measure for capacity. It is a tenth of *homer* (Exod. 29:40; Isa. 5:10). The *seah* which is probably a third of an *ephah* (1 Sam. 25:18; 1 Kings 7:1) is another unit for measuring capacity. The *kab*, equivalent to 1.2 litres or 1.6 quarts, is mentioned only in 2 Kings 6:25). *Kor* is the same as the *homer* (Ezek. 45:14) and was used to measure flour (1 Kings 4:22) wheat and barley (2 Chron. 2:10; 27:5).

### ***Measurement of Weight***

Israel first used the balance to determine the weight of substances. The biblical balance consisted of a beam supported in the middle with a pan suspended by strings on each side. Usually, a substance of known weight is placed in a pan at one end and the unknown weight is also placed in another pan at the opposite end. The known weight is adjusted by adding to it or removing from it until each side is equal, indicated by the balanced position of the beam. At the balanced position, the unknown weight is equal to the known weight. Variation existed between weights as one moved from place to place. Weights could be in the form of a cube, a sphere, a cone, a cylinder and so on. Some had their value on them, others did not have any value on them. Traders sometimes carried their own weights of known value so they could verify if they were given the right quantity (Deut. 25:13; Prov. 16:11). The Bible mentions a lot of weights, some of which are outlined below.

<sup>120</sup>Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1309.

The heaviest weight in the Hebrew system was the *kikkār* (Greek: *talanton*; English: talent).<sup>121</sup> The Hebrew *kikkār*, probably of Mesopotamia origin, was the basic unit of weight among the ancient Hebrews. In Mesopotamia, it was divided into sixty minas. In the sacred system of weights, the Talmudic talent was equal to 60 Talmudic minas. Prior to its use in the Bible, it was known by the same name in Ugaritic, pronounced *kakaru*. From Exodus 38:25-26, one realizes that half a shekel was brought by 603,550 men and it amounted to 100 talents and 1,775 shekels. Thus, a talent was 3,000 shekels among the Hebrews. In Mesopotamia, where this system might have originated, a talent was 3,600 shekels. Talent was a unit of weight used by many other ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. Homer knew about talent and described how Achilles gave a half-talent of gold to Anrilochus as a prize.<sup>122</sup> The talent was used to weigh gold (2 Sam. 12:30), silver (1 Kings 20:39), iron (1 Chron. 29:7) and bronze (Exod. 38:29). The talent could also refer to money (Matt. 25:15-28). Another weight was the *kesitah* (meaning “lamb” and so might have been shaped in the form of a lamb).

The *kesitah* was of an unknown value (Gen. 33:19). Jacob bought a piece of land from Hamor of Shechem for a hundred *kesitah* (Gen. 33:19). The mina was also another measure of weight used in ancient Israel. One mina was equivalent to 50 shekels, similar to the Canaanite system (cf. 1 King 10:17; Ezra 2:69). In Luke 19:13, 16, the mina has a value of approximately one pound of money.<sup>123</sup>

The shekel is the most common weight Hebrew system (Josh. 7:21; Ezek. 4:10). In some places, no unit is given in the text and this is taken as an ellipsis for the *shekel*. For example, the frequent use of the shekel in Genesis 20:16 makes the writer write “a thousand pieces of silver” without specifying shekel and yet expects his audience to understand it (see also 37:28; Judg. 17:2–4, 10).

<sup>121</sup> Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1308.

<sup>122</sup> Homer, *Delphi Complete Works of Homer* (Np: Delphi Classics, 2015), np.<https://books.google.co.ke/books?id=L2cbAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT1812&lpg=PT1812&d>

<sup>123</sup> Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1308.

The common shekel and the sanctuary shekel (Exod. 30:13; Ezek. 45:12) have the same value of 20 *gerahs* (Lev. 27:25).<sup>124</sup> 2 Samuel 14:26 makes reference to the royal shekel. The *gerah* was the smallest weight in the Hebrew system. Half a shekel is referred to as a *bekah*. This was the weight in silver that was paid by every Israelite as a religious tax (cf. Exod. 30:13; 38:26). There was another weight referred to as *pim* which was equivalent to about two-thirds of a shekel (1 Sam. 13:21).<sup>125</sup> *Pim* occurs only in this passage. Archaeological excavations have found some weights with “*pim*” inscribed on them.

From the discussion so far, it is clear that some of the names for the measurements were derived from parts of the body or from containers like sacks or jars, of substances measured, or from tools used for measurements which include reeds and rods. Obviously, the size of the various body parts (including fingers, forearms, hands and others) and the size of sacks or jars varied from person to person and from sack/jar to sack/jar respectively.<sup>126</sup> For this reason, variations existed in measurements that depended on body parts, sacks, and jars.

## Conclusion

A careful reader of this chapter will realize that much of the Old Testament story has economic undertones. The chapter will serve as a hermeneutical key for Old Testament students. One must know the local equivalence of the measures discussed so that one can better understand what the Bible teaches. In the next chapter, I will take the reader through key religious traditions associated with the Old Testament.

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<sup>124</sup> Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1308.

<sup>125</sup> Youngblood (ed.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1308.

Gleason L. Archer Jr., “The Metrology of the Old Testament,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* edited by Frank E. Gaebelstein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 376.

## **Review Questions**

1. How does the concept of community in ancient Israel compare and contrast with the African understanding of community?
2. How does the biblical system of measurement differ from the system of measurement in your community?
3. Describe water systems in ancient Israel.
4. Relate the place of Land in the Old Testament to the African context.



## **Chapter Six**

### **RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND**

The Old Testament is a religious book. Therefore, it is full of various religious traditions that may or may not have parallels in the African community. The chapter begins the discussion of the religious background of ancient Israel from the institution of the priestly order. The Levitical priesthood is the focus of this discussion. The chapter then moves to outline key features of ancient Israel worship life as well as the Passover festival and ends with the place of the synagogue in ancient Israel.

#### **Priesthood in ancient Israel**

Worship in ancient Israel centred around the priestly order. The priests of ancient Israel were a class of male individuals, who were patrilineal descendants from Levi and served in the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple and Second Temple until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Thus, according to the priestly tradition of ancient Israel, priests were drawn from the tribe of Levi, within which was a 3-fold hierarchy, namely, the high priest (Aaron and his successors), the priests (Aaron's sons), and the other Levitical clans. One cannot be certain about the reason why God chose the Levites as priests. However, they might have been chosen because of their loyalty to God when Israel worshipped the golden calf at the base of Sinai (Exod. 32:26-29).

The priests served as mediators between God and the people. Figuratively, the entire nation of Israel was considered as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5-6; Lev 20:26; Deut 14:2). The duties of the Levites included guarding the sanctuary manual labour, receiving tithes and offerings from the people (Num 4:5-15; 8:24-26; 18:1-7, 21-24). The priests were responsible for maintaining the proper divine-human relationship through proper administration and ministry of the sanctuary and by taking custody of and administering the Mosaic Law.

The high or chief priests were descendants of Aaron (the elder brother of Moses), unblemished in body, and character, ordained and consecrated, among others (Exod. 28-29; Le. 21:6-8). The high priest was the supreme religious head of the people. He must not show grief for the dead, even if the deceased is his close relative. To abandon his duties because of bereavement amounted to profaning the sanctuary (Lev. 21:12). He was to marry a virgin (Lev. 12:14) or a believer in God. He was to maintain his holiness throughout his married life.

A high priest was to be consecrated (set apart) and installed by a seven-day ritual at the tabernacle or Temple (Exod. 28—29). He was cleansed by a ritual bathing (v. 4), then dressed in the priestly garments and symbols he must wear in the conduct of his priestly duties. He was then anointed with oil. Sacrifices of sin, burnt and consecration offerings were made for him and he was anointed again with oil and blood sacrifice. The consecration rite was to set the priest apart to serve God in the office into which he had been called (Exod. 28:41; 29:9; Psa. 106:16).

The high priest wore a special garment symbolic of his role as a mediator between God and his people. The key elements of the high priests are the following. The ephod made of royal colors of blue, purple and scarlet and sewed with gold thread (Exod. 28:31-34). The front and back of the ephod were made to be as one garment by a sash or girdle (made of blue, purple, and scarlet linen intertwined with golden threads) which was tied about the priest's waist. There is also a breast piece of judgment which is a small square-shaped pouch worn over the breast and fastened to the ephod. It has twelve precious stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. In it were also Urim (meaning "lights") and Thummim (meaning "perfections") placed directly below the heart serving as the medium by which Aaron could determine God's will each time he enters the sanctuary, to inquire of God for judgment (cf. 28:15-30). In addition to the robe of the ephod (28:31-35, 39:22-26) was a plain blue sleeveless garment worn directly beneath the ephod and probably extending some inches below it. There was a row of pomegranates embroidered upon the

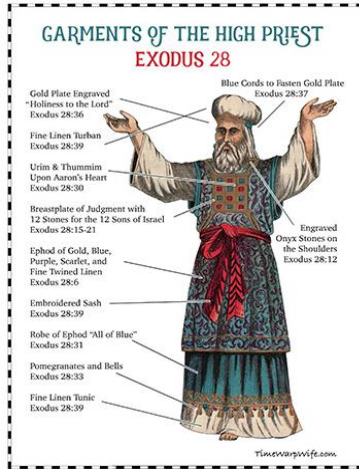
hem (see Exod. 39:24) interspaced with tinkling golden bells which sounded as the priest moved. The sound made by the bell helped the people to know whether Aaron was still alive and active in the Holy Place or had been struck dead in God's presence due to sin. The pomegranates signified fruitfulness and the sweetness of God's word as spiritual food. The High Priest wore a turban or mitre of linen on his head (28:36-38, 39:30, 31) which was bound around the head in coils. There was a golden plate attached to the front of the mitre with the inscription "HOLINESS TO THE LORD" which served as a constant reminder of holiness to God's covenant people, the Israelites

The high priest could only enter the Holy Place under the covering of these robes—if he showed up in any other attire, or worse still in his undergarments, he would die. The robe is "worn" for its bells, their sound alerting the divine presence to Aaron's approach as he enters the sanctuary "so that he not die" (Exod. 28:35). Whenever the priest wore his garments and performed his priestly duties, he bore the names of sons of Israel for remembrance (Exod. 28:12); bore the names of the 12 Tribes of Israel (Exod. 28:15-21); discerned God's judgment on behalf of Israel (Exod. 28:30); ministered to God in the Holy Place on behalf of the people of Israel (Exod. 28:35), he performed ceremonial and sacrificial duties in the Holy Place. The diagram below illustrates the priestly garments.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Retrieved from <https://timewarpwife.com/exodus-bible-study-week-5-part-1-exodus-29-32/> [Accessed online on 5th July, 2021].





**Fig. 6.1 The Garments of the High Priest**

The role of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) which is the holiest day of the year in Judaism (that is the highest holy day of the Jewish calendar), needs attention. *Yom Kippur* is a solemn festival, at the end of September when the High Priest makes atonement for his sins and those of the entire Jewish community (Lev. 16; 23:27; 16:29; Num. 29:7). *Yom Kippur* is celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month. It was a Sabbath day on which no work is done. On this day the high priest takes a goat (the 'scapegoat') and symbolically heaps the sins of the people upon it before driving it out into the desert, never to return again (see Lev. 16:5-10 & 20-22). In the epistle to the Hebrews, the writer contrasts this annual ceremony of atonement performed by the High Priest with the once-for-all sacrifice made by Christ on the cross at Calvary (cf. Heb. 9:6-7; 23-28).

## **Worship**

Even though people called upon the Lord long before the exodus (see for example Gen. 4:26), it is in the Decalogue (Exod. 20) that

one finds detailed regulations about acceptable and not acceptable worship in the people's relationship with God. God's purpose for giving these regulations was to put his people on the right course before they entered the Promised Land. The first commandment establishes the fact that only YHWH is the proper recipient of worship. The command prohibited idolatry or the worship of false gods and demands that the people worship only the true God, who is YHWH (Exod. 20:2-3). The second commandment forbids them to worship God with human inventions. It states: "You shall not make for yourselves any graven image"(Exod. 20:4). This means nobody has the right to represent God by any physical image whatsoever (cf. Deut 4:15-16). The main point is that it is the Creator who is the recipient and regulator of worship, and not the creature.

Deuteronomy 12 reviewed regulations on the ways to offer worship to God. In the review, God forbids his people to copy the pagan ways of worship. In line with this, Israel was asked to remove the remnants of corrupt worship from their midst (Deut. 12:2-3). They were to destroy "all the places" where pagans worship their gods. They were instructed to ruthlessly demolish all the implements associated with false worship: "You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place" (v. 3, NASB). God also warned Israel not to add anything (including practices such as the burning of children in the fire to their gods) to their worship life based on the pagan way of worship or seek help from their gods (Deut. 12:30-32).

Israel's worship could be corporate or private. In Genesis 12:7, Abram, at Canaan "built an altar to the LORD who appeared to him" – also at Bethel (Gen. 12:8; cf.13:4). Others include, Jacob (Gen. 28:18-22; 32:22-30), and Moses (Exod. 3:5, 6; cf. Josh. 5:13-15).

After establishing the priestly office, sacrifices and intercession became the function of the priests. Saul, therefore, erred when he made a sacrifice to God in a distressing circumstance (1 Sam. 13:1-

15). Samuel (who was to make the sacrifice before Israel's war with the Philistines) had not arrived and Saul was faced with a formidable number of enemy troops. Saul then decided to make a burnt offering himself, without waiting any longer for Samuel. Later, in Israel's war against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15) Saul decided to save some animals and offer them as a sacrifice to God even though he had been commanded to destroy everything in the war. Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king" (vv. 22-23 NIV). A key lesson is that any act of worship that contradicts God's will is unacceptable. In addition, acceptable worship is one that not only enhances one's relationship with God but also one's relationship with other humans and the environment. This became a key message in the prophecies of such prophets like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and others.

Israel did not worship God at a fixed place until they conquered and settled the land of Canaan. In the desert God promised to choose a place for them to worship him; God would manifest his presence in this place and all sacrifices connected to worship were to be brought there (Deut. 12:11 cf. 12:5, 14). Initially, Shilo was the religious capital of Israel. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant (or the Ark of the Testimony) was kept. Later, during the reign of King David, Jerusalem was made the permanent location for the ark, thereby establishing Jerusalem as the center for the sacrificial ordinances associated with the Levitical priesthood. Worship in those days took place in the tabernacle which was built according to a divine blueprint (Exod. 25-31). God instructed the Israelites: "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you." (Exod. 25:8-9; Exod. 25:40; 27:8; Num. 8:4). The Ark of the Covenant was placed within the tabernacle as a symbol of divine presence among the Israelites. Later, David provided Solomon with a

plan for building the temple: “Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple, its buildings, its storerooms, its upper parts, its inner rooms and the place of atonement. He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD and all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries of the temple of God and for the treasuries for the dedicated things. He gave him instructions for the divisions of the priests and Levites, and for all the work of serving in the temple of the LORD, as well as for all the articles to be used in its service) (1Chron. 28:11-13 NIV). Solomon took over from David as a king and then built the temple according to the heavenly blueprints left by David. This temple was destroyed during the Babylonian conquest in 586 BCE. After the seventy-year exile, Israel rebuilt the temple and this became known as the second temple. This temple was also destroyed in 70 AD.

### **The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread**

The Jewish religious calendar included the observance of the weekly Sabbath, the monthly New Moon festival, and the annual festivals (1 Chron. 23:21; 2 Chron. 2:4; cf. Col. 2:16). The Passover, Weeks (Pentecost) and Tabernacles were three feasts which brought large crowds from Palestine to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41ff) and the Diaspora (Acts 2:5ff.). *Yom Kippur* (The Day of Atonement) has been outlined earlier in this chapter. My focus on the Passover is informed by its significance in Christian theology, more so Old Testament theology.

The Passover was the first of the three great Jewish festivals with both historical and agricultural significance (the other two are *Shavu'ot* and *Sukkot*). It was celebrated for seven days in Israel and eight outside Israel. God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and send them to the Land of Canaan which he (God) had promised to give to the Hebrews as their inheritance (Exod. 3). Consequently, Moses asked the Egyptian King Pharaoh to allow the Hebrews to move to the Promised Land. Pharaoh's unwillingness to allow the Israelites to leave his land resulted in divine judgment upon the land. God sent a series of ten plagues to pressure the Egyptian

ruler including water turning to blood, frogs, lice, flies, livestock pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and finally the killing of all firstborn children. Each time, Pharaoh promised to free the Hebrews but rescinded his decision when the plague is lifted - until the last one. The event surrounding the last plague is what led to the institution of the Passover festival. In Exodus 11, God tells Moses about a final plague which involves the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians at midnight. Moses warns Pharaoh that weeping and wailing will fill Egypt as the result of Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Pharaoh's strong determination to keep the Israelites as slaves made him refuse to grant Moses' request.

God (through Moses) asked the Israelites to slaughter a year-old kid without blemish, taken from the sheep or the goats (Exod. 12:5) on the night of 14th of Nissan. The blood was to be kept in a basin (Exod. 12:22), and from it, the blood was supposed to be put upon two of the doorposts and the lintels of the houses in which the flesh of the slaughtered animal is to be eaten (Exod. 12:7). Exodus 12:18 commands that Passover be celebrated, "from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening." The blood was to be a sign of the presence of the Hebrews in the building so that the angel of destruction who was to pass through the land and cause destruction that night would "pass over the Hebrews" and not harm them. It serves as a protective shield and a mark of identification for the Hebrews. That night the Hebrews ate roasted lamb and unleavened bread, preparing for their journey to the Promised Land. The flesh of the animal could only be prepared by roasting. The people were not allowed to eat it raw or boil it with water. The whole animal was to be roasted, including its head, its legs and its inward parts (Exod. 12:9). Moreover, the whole flesh should be consumed on the same night (the night of the liberation). Any leftover should be burnt with fire (Exod. 12:10). The reason why they were asked to eat the whole flesh of the animal is not known; however, it probably signified the unity of the Israelites who participate in the ritual. The Passover ritual

required the Israelites to eat the roasted meat with unleavened bread (Exod. 12:8), the unleavened bread signifying the fact that the people had no time to put leaven in their bread, and wait for it to rise before baking, as they prepared their meals as slaves in Egypt. This specific dietary requirement is stated in Exodus 12:14, “You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread” (bread made without yeast)

The following morning Egyptian houses were filled with mourning, because “there was not a house without someone dead” (Exod. 12:30). Pharaoh, now convinced that he could not defeat God, permitted the people go. After this event, God asked the Israelites to celebrate this event yearly. Therefore, the institution of Passover (*Pesach*, which *Pesach*, means “passing over” or “protection” in Hebrew) emerged from God’s gracious intervention on behalf of the Israelites when he “leaped or passed over”, (Heb. *pasach*) their houses during the slaying of the firstborn in all the houses in Egypt. Passover commemorates Israel’s departure from Egypt in haste in 1447 BCE.

Aside from the historical setting (Exod. 12), the Old Testament records the legislation prescribing the details of the feast (cf. Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:2ff.; Deut. 16:1ff) and the celebration of the feast by the Israelites after their settlement in the Promised Land (cf. Josh. 5:11; 2 Kings 23:21ff.; 2 Chron. 30:1ff.; 35:1ff.; Ezra 6:19ff.). Passover begins on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Nissan. Agriculturally, the Passover signified the beginning of the harvest season in Israel. The primary observances of Passover are related to the Exodus from Egypt after 400 years of slavery as told in the first fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus. The Passover was a weeklong (seven days in Israel but eight days outside Israel) festival. The first and last days of the festival are days of rest when no one is permitted to work. Work is permitted on the intermediate days, referred to as *Chol Ha-Mo’ed*. The liturgy for the Passover requires the youngest participant to ask about the origin and significance of the celebration (Exod. 12:25–27) and the family head or the host (in this case Jesus Christ) to respond

by recounting the biblical account of the deliverance of the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage (see also Deut. 26:5-9). At this point, the Haggadah<sup>128</sup> (that is, a book that tells the story of Passover) is read to recount the story behind the Passover. The name Haggadah stems from Exod.13: 8: “You shall tell your son on that day: This is what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt,” and consisted basically of midrashic interpretations of biblical passages associated with the Exodus.

Jesus attended the Passover festival in Jerusalem in the spring of 27AD (see John 2:13-25). The Last Supper, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus took place during the Passover festival in the spring of 30AD (Matt. 26:17-19). Jesus reinterpreted the bread and wine for the Passover in terms of his body and blood. Paul refers to Christ as the Passover lamb. Paul’s typological interpretation is key in understanding the death of Christ and its relevance for Christians. Jesus fulfills the Passover and becomes the ultimate Passover sacrifice.

The Passover meal included the roasted lamb, unleavened bread<sup>129</sup>, a bowl of salt water, a bowl of bitter herbs, fruit sauce, and wine (Ex 12:8). Though opinions are divided, the popular view is that the bitter leaves reminded the Israelites of their painful experience in Egypt, from which God delivered them. The blood was to be applied using a bunch of hyssops (Exod. 12:22). The hyssop may be considered as a “lightning conductor” which protected the officiant of the ritual from having direct contact with the blood (considered holy in this ritual).

## **The Synagogue**

The synagogue played a very significant role in the life of the Jews. Initially, synagogue referred to the assembly of people; later it came to apply to the Jewish place of worship as well as a place to study or a community center. Some scholars sometimes trace the Jewish synagogue to Psalm 74:8 and Jeremiah 39:8. Others have also traced

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<sup>128</sup> The Hebrew word “*Haggadah*” means “telling.”

<sup>129</sup> The unleavened bread that Jews eat during Passover is referred to as *Matzah*.



the origin of the Jewish synagogue to Pharisaic tradition. It seems safe to say that synagogues appeared after the destruction of the Temple as alternative places of worship. After the scattered nation returned, synagogues continued to be places of worship. Synagogues were located everywhere (including Palestine and in the Diaspora) unlike the Temple. Archaeological studies have led to the discovery of synagogues located at Masada, Herodion, Magdala, and Gamala, possibly dating before 70 AD.<sup>130</sup> Synagogues have also been found within Palestine at Capernaum, Chorazin, Hammath Tiberias, Bar'am, Beth Alpha, and Maaon and outside Palestine at Ostia, Stobi, Delos, Sardis and Dura Europus.<sup>131</sup> Though these synagogues do not show any common architectural plan, they share common features some of which are outlined below.<sup>132</sup> Jewish synagogues were as much as possible oriented toward Jerusalem (to the east). Diaspora synagogues were either located near a source of water (such as the sea or a river) or had cistern built near the entrance. They were built on high ground or above surrounding houses. They (unlike the temple) had no altar but rather a portable ark for keeping the biblical scrolls. The ark had a platform on which readers stand. There was a chair on which the preacher sat to preach (cf. Luke 4:20). There were also benches lining the walls and a chief seat ("Moses' seat"; Matt. 23:2) for the ruler. Many synagogues also had a lampstand (menorah) and guest rooms attached to the assembly room. In the synagogue, men and women sit separately, and everyone (except young girls) puts on a head cover. Services in the synagogue could be led by a rabbi, a cantor or a member of the congregation.

The synagogue serves as a place for community, religious and social activities for the Jewish society.<sup>133</sup> First, the synagogue served as a place of worship and substituted the temple worship. Prayers were said in the synagogue, scriptures were read and exhortations were given. Second, it was the place for instructing young people in

<sup>130</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 473.

<sup>131</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 474.

<sup>132</sup> Gleaned from Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 474-475.

<sup>133</sup> Gleaned from Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 540.

the law, its interpretation, as well as the tenets of the Jewish faith. Third, it served as the local court for the administration of justice. Finally, it served as a social center where people in the community met weekly to have discussions about the society. In this regard, it was a place for collecting and dispensing money and other items for the aid of the poor and needy within the community. In short, the synagogue served as a schoolhouse (*beth midrash*), house of prayer (*beth tefillah*), meeting house (*beth kenesseth*), and house of judgment (*beth din*).

There were a group of elders responsible for maintaining discipline in the synagogue. People who contravened the rules were punished by ex-communication which could last for a month or more (John 9:22-34) or whipping (cf. 2 Cor. 11:24). The officials in a synagogue included the ruler (*archisynagogos*) of the synagogue (Mark 5:22) who was selected from the leaders, the attendant (*hazzan*) responsible for bringing for the scrolls of scripture for reading (Luke 4:20), maintaining the building and its furniture, and announcing the beginning and end of the Sabbath.

## **Conclusion**

The religious traditions of ancient Israel have been the subject of this chapter. The discussions clearly show that Africans stand a better chance of appreciating the Old Testament because of the strong connections between religious rituals in African society and the Old Testament world. For example, blood sacrifice attains atonement for the offerer in both African primal worldview and Old Testament religious traditions. This fact, for instance, can serve as a useful tool for developing the doctrine of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice which unlike the African and Old Testament sacrifices, attained complete atonement, making it unnecessary for any more sacrifices to be made by anyone for atoning purpose(s).

## **Review Questions**

1. Explain how priesthood in the Old Testament context compares to the priesthood in your community.
2. Explain the relevance of the Passover in Old Testament scholarship.
3. Critically examine the role of the high priest in Judaism.
4. What was the role of the synagogue in Old Testament religious beliefs and practices?
5. Discuss the Old Testament requirements for acceptable worship.
6. What are the benefits of worship? What are the dangers of not worshipping rightly?

## Chapter Seven

### INTERTESTAMENTAL BACKGROUND

Old Testament kings, including Saul, David and Solomon, rule over the twelve tribes of Israel before the nation split into the ten-tribed northern kingdom of Israel (with Samaria as its capital) and the two-tribed southern kingdom of Judah (with Jerusalem as its capital). The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom (in 722 BCE) and took many of its inhabitants to Assyria. This was followed by the conquest of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians led by King Nebuchadnezzar (in 586 BCE) resulting in the exile of inhabitants in the southern kingdom into Babylon. The Persians then conquered the Babylonians and allowed exiled people (who wished to return to their native lands) to go back to their own land. Under the Persian rule, there began the intertestamental period, which refers to a period (“the four hundred silent years”) which shows a gap in the biblical record (though non-biblical literature has survived). This chapter focuses on the political, religious and socio-economic developments that took place during the intertestamental period. This study is not only significant for the understanding of the Old Testament but also for the appreciation of the context within which Christianity emerged out of Judaism.

#### **The Greek Era (334-63 BCE)**

##### ***Alexander the Great's Rule (334-323 BCE)***

After the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, the two city-states just tried to control each other. In the midst of the war, Macedonia emerged as a new empire led by King Phillip II who killed off other competitors for the throne to become king. Philip was captured by the Thebans 369-367 and learnt Greek military tactics here. Philip had Macedonia and led it in a resurgence of military, economic and political power among other states in Greece. Philip was an awesome military leader. He fought war all year round, winter and spring.

Alexander was born in northern Greece in July 356 BCE to King Philip II of Macedonia.<sup>134</sup> Alexander's mother was Philip's fourth wife, Olympias. There are legends pointing to the supernatural origin of Alexander. One tradition links Alexander with Heracles, the son of the Greek god Zeus whilst another tradition says he was conceived supernaturally because his father stopped sleeping with his mother when he saw a serpent lying next to her.<sup>135</sup> Philip brought Aristotle to educate his son Alexander. He was taught military tactics by Aristotle. He also learnt philosophy, rhetoric, geometry and other subjects. Aristotle impressed upon him the value of Greek culture and philosophy.

In 336 BCE, Philip II was assassinated at his daughter's wedding and Alexander succeeded him as king over Macedonia at the age of twenty.<sup>136</sup> The murder has been attributed to the Persians who sensed an imminent attack from Philip or Olympias who wanted her son to become king.<sup>137</sup> The story of Alexander makes him the best candidate for the king in Daniel's prophecy, "Then a mighty king will appear who will rule with great power and do as he pleases" (Dan. 11:3). He is also the "goat" of Daniel's vision: "Suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between his eyes come from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground" (Dan. 8:5).

Thebes, another Greek city, rebelled against Alexander but was completely destroyed by Alexander who also enslaved the people of the city (Thebes). After this Alexander invaded Persia as an act of revenge for previous Persian attacks on Greek cities. His determination to conquer the whole known world of his day occupied him for the rest of his life. He was always with his military, leading the army and its support team (such as philosophers, poets, scientists, and historians) across thousands of miles for military expeditions. In 334 BCE Alexander's army, numbering about 30 000 foot soldiers

<sup>134</sup> Warren Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 2.

<sup>135</sup> Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World*, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World*, 4.

<sup>137</sup> Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World*, 4.

(including archers and javelin throwers) and 50 000 calvaries, moved from Macedonia to Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) across the Hellespont (the narrow water body that separates Europe, the West from Asia, the East).<sup>138</sup> He won victory over the Persian army at River Granicus (in 334 BCE) and walked through present-day Turkey, liberating Greek cities from Persian control. In 333 BCE, he defeated Persia at Issus, cutting to pieces the armies of King Darius III, in fulfillment of Daniel's vision: "I saw him [that is the "goat"] attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering his two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against him; the goat knocked him to the ground and trampled on him, and none could rescue the ram from his power" (Dan 8:7). Alexander took control of the Lebanese port city of Tyre in 332 BCE after a seven-month siege. He gained control over Syria and Palestine. Egypt surrendered to him without a fight and immediately crowned a pharaoh and son of the Egyptian god Osiris. He founded a city in Egypt at the mouth of River Nile and named it Alexandria, after himself. In 331 BCE, Alexander fought Darius again at Gaugamela, near Arbela in northern Iraq; he captured Darius's mother, wife and children, though king Darius III himself escaped.

Alexander entered Babylon, Susa and Persepolis, burning the latter to the ground. After a hot pursuit, Darius was murdered by one of his own soldiers at Da. He extended his territory across three continents—from Egypt to Afghanistan and western India. His invasion of India came after he married Roxana (Roxane/Roxanne), the beautiful daughter of a leading Persian. Alexander wanted to continue extending his empire, but his army refused to go on. On his way home, Alexander got sick in Babylon (in 323 BCE) and died the same year. He died at 33 and was taken to Egypt to be buried in a golden coffin supposedly at Siwah Oasis, near his "father" Zeus-Amun; however, he was entombed in Alexandria.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World*, 4.

<sup>139</sup> Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World*, 4.

Whatever his intentions, Alexander, through his military campaigns, was committed to creating a world united by Greek culture. He made a simplified form of Greek (known as Kione Greek) became the common language throughout his empire. Kione Greek became the language for both commerce and everyday communication. Those who did not speak Greek became known as Barbarians. Greek lifestyle, attitudes, worldview, thought forms, architecture, art, music, sports, theatres, myths, among others also spread throughout his empire. The spread of Hellenistic culture was facilitated by several factors.<sup>140</sup> The first factor is physical presence and interaction with local people which resulted from the movement of large armies through various geographical localities. The army's need for food, shelter, supplies, transportation, local knowledge and recruits led to inevitable interactions with the local people. Victories won not only meant military superiority but also cultural and religious superiority. Greek gods were seen as more powerful than those of the conquered people, a situation which resulted in a syncretic lifestyle. In India for instance, statues erected for Buddha after Alexander's era were made like Apollo wearing Greek clothing.

The religion of Greece was coarse and superstitious, and its sensuous nature attracted many adherents. Alexander also influenced his empire through alliances with local people through which he taught upper-status local young people Greek language and culture. Alexander also impacted the world through the establishment of cities (more than seventy cities) most of which he named after him. Finally, Alexander did not only influence other societies with his culture; he also allowed other cultures to influence him and this pragmatic approach made people readily accept the Greek culture. For example, he learnt the Persian culture of the kneeling of the inferior before the superior (referred to as *proskynēsis*). Ferguson lists the following features that followed Alexander's conquests: (1) The unprecedented increase in the number of Greeks abroad; (2) the accelerated speed of spread of Greek culture; (3) the emergence of the world economy

<sup>140</sup> Carter, *Seven Events that shaped the New Testament World*, 8-10.



with one currency (silver coins) based on the Attic standard; (4) the further spread of Greek language; (5) spread and acceptance of Greek thought-forms by non-Greeks; (6) increase in literacy rate; (7) the spread of Greek deities and cultus resulting in old Semitic gods acquiring Greek names; (8) the emergence of Philosophy as a way of life; (9) the framework of human society around *polis* (a Hellenistic city, examples being Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Joppa, Samaria and others) and emphasis of public life; and (10) emphasis on individualism.<sup>141</sup> The Greek gymnasium, stadium, hippodrome, theatre and the celebration of Greek festivals also facilitated the spread of Greek culture.

Alexander left no adult heir in spite of the many wives he had.<sup>142</sup> Several successors (called (Greek: *diadochi*) were ineffectual, and wars among his generals resulted in the murder of his half-brother and his twelve-year-old son by Roxana.<sup>143</sup> His generals fought one another in their attempts to take charge of Alexander's empire. The control over Palestine changed hands between Antigonus (who reigned over Asia Minor) and Ptolemy (who ruled Egypt in 320, 312 and 302 BCE).<sup>144</sup> In 301 BCE the general decided to hand over Palestine to Ptolemy. Antigonus was the more likely successor but most of the generals gave their support to Ptolemy. Seleucus, who held Syria, disagreed with the other generals but because Ptolemy had already occupied the place and Ptolemy had once protected him (Seleucus), the latter did not press the issue further and so Palestine came under the control of Ptolemy for the next century (starting from 301 BCE). After many years of struggle among the generals, Alexander's empire was divided into four (cf. Dan. 8:8-9, 21-22; 11:3-4) and given to four generals. Lysimachus who took Thrace and the greater part of Asia Minor; Cassander who controlled Macedonia

<sup>141</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 13-14.

<sup>142</sup> His wives included Olympias, Stateira, Daruis' oldest daughter and others.

<sup>143</sup> David A. DeSilva, "The Hellenistic Period," *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* edited by Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 428.

<sup>144</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 380.

and Greece; Ptolemy who ruled Egypt, Palestine, Cilicia, Petra and Cyprus; and Seleucus I Nicator who ruled the remainder of Asia and founded the Seleucid Empire comprising Mesopotamia, the Levant, Persia, and part of India. Biblical history is concerned with the last two dynasties because of their influence on Jewish history in the intertestamental period.

### ***The Greek Pantheon***

The Greek pantheon (pan (all) + theos (god) = pantheon) refers to the gods of the Greeks. Twelve major deities of the Greeks are referred to as the twelve Olympians. Each of these is described below. The twelve main Olympians are:

1. Zeus (Jupiter, in Roman mythology): Zeus is the king of all the gods (and father to many) and god of the sky, weather, law and fate. He is the youngest son of Cronus and Rhea. He is married to his sister, Hera. Zeus overthrew his father with his mother's assistance to rise to the throne. Greek Olympic games were held in his honor.
2. Apollo: Apollo is the god of prophecy, music and poetry and knowledge. He is the son of Zeus who exercises the power of the sun, youth, music, archery healing (medicine). His twin sister is Artemis.
3. Artemis (Diana, in Roman mythology): Artemis, the twin sister of Apollo, is the goddess of hunting, animals and childbirth.
4. Hades: Hades is the king of the underworld and the dead, and the brother of Zeus. He keeps all who enter the underworld without allowing them to leave. For obvious reasons, Hades is the least-liked god.
5. Poseidon (Neptune, in Roman mythology): Poseidon is the ruler of the seas who guides sailors in their activities. He is the brother of Zeus who causes earthquakes, shipwrecks and drowning.

6. Hera: Hera is the queen of the gods and wife of Zeus who is constantly jealous of Zeus's affairs. She exercises power over women, marriage, and childbirth. The peacock (symbol of pride) and the cow (big eyes) are her sacred animals.
7. Dionysus: Dionysus is the god of wine, festivity, pleasure, and orgiastic excess. He is the son of princess Semele and Zeus.
8. Athena (Minerva, in Roman mythology): Athena is the Greek goddess of wisdom, war, and crafts. She is the favorite child of Zeus and sprung from his head, fully grown after Zeus had swallowed her mother Metis, the Titaness of wisdom. The Greek city, Athens, was named after her.
9. Hermes (Mercury, in Roman mythology): Hermes is the Greek god of shepherds, trade, literature, and good fortune. He is also the messenger for the gods, son of Zeus and Maia, and one of the Pleiades.
10. Demeter: Demeter is the goddess of the harvest who provides humans with fruits and grains. She is the custodian of agricultural knowledge and she teaches humans how to plow and plant.
11. Aphrodite: Aphrodite is the goddess of love, sex, and beauty. She is believed to have emerged from the foam generated when the severed testicles of her father, Uranus, were thrown into the sea by his son, the Titan Cronus.
12. Ares (Mars, in Roman mythology): Ares is the god of war, the son of Zeus and Hera and half-brother of Athena. He represents the distasteful aspects of brutal warfare and slaughter. He is perhaps the most unpopular of all the Olympian gods because of his quick temper, aggressiveness, and an unquenchable thirst for blood.

Other gods and goddesses sometimes included in the roster of Olympians are:

- i. Hephaestus (Vulcan, in Roman mythology): Hephaestus is the god of fire, metalworking and sculpture. He is the patron god of metal craftsmen. He is the manufacturer of Zeus's thunderbolts. He also manufactures weapons and armor, arrows, shields for the gods and goddesses
- ii. Persephone: Persephone is the daughter of Demeter and Zeus. She is the queen of Hades who is perceived as a very beautiful goddess.

### ***The Ptolemies of Egypt (301-198 CE)***

The Ptolemaic Empire which centered in Egypt was named after its founder and first ruler, Ptolemy, son of Lagus. The capital of this empire was Alexandria and all the people who ruled were referred to as the Ptolemies, after the name of the first ruler of the empire. The Ptolemies controlled Palestine for over 100 years, with one of their key achievements being the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Ptolemy Cleopatra who died 30 BCE was the last of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Most of the events that took place in this century are connected with Daniel 11:5-45.

The fundamentals of Jewish religious traditions remained unchanged throughout this period; it was basically a religious setup headed by the high priest, who performed both civil and religious duties.<sup>145</sup> The high priest together with the council of elders formed a ruling board for the Jewish society. The Jews enjoyed relative peace as the Egyptian-Syrian conflict did not have a great effect on the interior. Ptolemy I brought many Jews to Egypt and Alexandria turned into a major center for Jewish dispersion. The Jews multiplied and played key roles in the political and economic life of Egypt. With

<sup>145</sup> Addison G. Wright, Ronald E. Murphy and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "A History of Israel," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2011), 1239.

time, it became necessary to have the Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek so as to allow Greek-speaking Jews in the Diaspora to participate fully in Jewish worship. The Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible) was published in response to this quest and this was the most significant religious achievement of the Ptolemy as far as the Jews are concerned.

### ***The Seleucid rule (198 – 167 BCE)***

The Ptolemies and the Seleucids became arch-rivals, often engaging in wars of supremacy. The land of Israel (or Palestine) lying between these two rivals, became the main battleground for the many clashes between these two dynasties. After several attempts to take control over Palestine, Antiochus III the Great (223-187 BCE) finally (in 198 BCE) took over Palestine from the Ptolemies. The Jews readily and quickly changed allegiance and accepted Antiochus as their new ruler. The Seleucid's rule paved the way for one of the most heroic epochs in Israel's history. The Seleucid empire was centered in Syria with Antioch as its capital. Most of the rulers were named Seleucus, after the first ruler; others were named Antiochus, after the capital city. Together, they are referred to as Seleucids. Under the Ptolemies, the Jews enjoyed relative peace because they continued to enjoy the status that had been theirs under the Persians. At first, the Seleucids were tolerant and did not interfere in the religious affairs of the Jews; therefore, the Jews enjoyed some religious autonomy.

This situation changed when Seleucid King, Antiochus IV tried to force the Jews to accept Greek culture and then serve Greek gods instead of YHWH, the God of Israel. Antiochus took the title Epiphanes (which means "God made manifest"), signifying that he was a deity manifested (cf. Dan. 11:21-45). He forced his subjects to worship him (2 Macc. 6:2). He strengthened Hellenization and was determined to eradicate the Jewish religion for which reason he took the following steps (cf. 2 Macc. 1:41ff). Against the Jewish tradition of appointing high priests from the tribe of Levi, Antiochus made the high priestly office a political one, appointing and removing high

priests at will. He appointed Jason as a High Priest after receiving a huge bribe from him. The legitimate high priest at the time, Onias III was murdered in Antioch (2 Macc. 4:33ff.) and his obvious successor Onias IV fled to Egypt where he founded a temple at Leontopolis for the military colony of Jewish settlers.<sup>146</sup> High Priest Jason behaved like a Seleucid official and facilitated the spread of Hellenism throughout the Jewish land. He replaced the temple-state nature of Jerusalem with a Greek city-state which has a council, list of its citizenry, gymnasium, and *ephebeia*, and renamed it Antioch.<sup>147</sup> Young Jews began to wear the broad-brimmed Greek hat, young priests rushed to finish their temple duties to go and exercise naked in the Greek manner at the gymnasium, and some youth went for surgeries that could help them hide their circumcision in order to avoid being ridiculed by the Greeks (1 Macc. 1:13-15; 2 Macc. 4:10-17).<sup>148</sup>

Later, Menalaus (Menahem) replaced Jason as High Priest after the former offered a high amount to Antiochus. Antiochus removed some valuable treasures from the Jewish Temple and destroyed some Jewish religious writings (including the Torah). The whole situation divided the Jews into two, Hasidim (the “pious”) and Hellenizers who supported Greek culture. By plundering the temple, Antiochus hoped to get resources for his military expedition against Egypt. At the peak of his preparations against Egypt, Rome intervened and forced Antiochus to withdraw. Information got to Jerusalem that Antiochus had died and so Jason attempted to drive out Menalaus but later abandoned the city due to an attack from the Syrian army. Upon his return from Egypt Antiochus broke down the walls of Jerusalem and constructed a new citadel to dominate the temple area. A garrison was built there in an attempt to convert the city into a military city.

Jewish sources say that in 168 BCE, Antiochus decreed against Jewish religious practices such as the celebration of feasts, the performance of sacrifices, the observance of the Sabbath, dietary

<sup>146</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 381.

<sup>147</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 381.

<sup>148</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 381.

laws and the circumcision of children (1 Macc. 1:41-64).<sup>149</sup> Further, Antiochus erected pagan altars throughout the Jewish land and offered animals that were religiously unclean (according to Judaism) on them. He forced Jews to eat pork meat and slaughtered women who had circumcised their children, together with their families. Antiochus also required offering to be made to the Greek god Zeus. Not satisfied with these violations, Antiochus mounted an altar for Zeus on the altar of YHWH and as a supreme insult to Judaism, offered a pig on it in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Since the feast of Dionysus included the sacrifice of pigs, Antiochus' act indirectly meant he was identifying YHWH with Dionysus. This act provoked a violent response from some Jews, though many were following the Antiochus' directives.

### **The Maccabean Period (166-63 BCE)**

The attempts by the Syrians (led by Antiochus) to eradicate the Jewish religion were met with great resistance from some pious Jews, resulting in the death of many people in defense of their faith (see 1&2 Macc. for a detailed account of this revolt and the early years of Jewish religious freedom). Gradually Antiochus' policies reached rural areas. When a representative of the government reached the Judean village of Modein (or Modin) and attempted to persuade Mattathias (an elderly priest) to make sacrifices to the Greek god to set an example for the citizens, Mattathias refused.<sup>150</sup> When another Jew attempted to make the sacrifice, Mattathias killed him together with the royal agent. He demolished Greek altars in his village and assassinated the emissary of Antiochus. He fled with his sons to the hills of Judea and asked for support from pious Jews and after many people joined them, the protest group became a well-organized resistance movement. The Mattathias family (including him and his five sons, namely, Judas, Jonathan, Simon, John and Eleazer) who led the Revolt is referred to as the Hasmoneans, after Hasmon, great-

<sup>149</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 381.

<sup>150</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 383.



grandfather of Mattathias or the Maccabees, from the nickname (Maccabeus meaning “Judas the Hammer”) which was given to Judas.<sup>151</sup>

After his death, his son Judas Maccabees took over the opposition movement. The Maccabean war also triggered a civil war between pro-Hellenistic and anti-Hellenistic Jews. Judas and his group raided villages, overthrew pagan altars, killed Jews who supported Hellenism, and circumcised Jewish children by force. After many Jews were attacked and killed on a Sabbath day and they refused to protect themselves because they judged it religiously unacceptable to fight on the Sabbath, even the pious ones decided to dispense with Sabbath observances when a situation on the Sabbath required self-defense. Such a war fought on the Sabbath was considered a holy war. The revolt against the Syrians became known as the Maccabean Revolt, a 24-year war (166-142 BCE). Judas and his group defeated every batch of Syrian soldiers sent to attack them. Other military engagements by the Syrians, however, could not allow them to attack Judas and his people with their full force.

In the heat of the protest, Antiochus (in 165 or 164 BCE) removed the ban on Jewish religious activities, though he left Menelaus in the high priesthood and the garrison he had built.<sup>152</sup> Judas sent troops into Jerusalem to get the Syrians occupied while the temple areas were rededicated. Then the burnt offering that had been defiled was dismantled and the stones deposited “in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them” (1 Macc. 4:40). This statement alludes to the cessation of prophecy during the intertestamental period. A new altar was constructed as prescribed by the law. The war continued even after the death of Antiochus Epiphanes (in 163 BCE). After his death in a battle (in 160 BCE), Judas Maccabeus’ brothers Jonathan and then Simon succeeded him as leaders of the opposition movement.

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<sup>151</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 384.

<sup>152</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 384.



By 144 BCE total religious independence was attained and the Jews extended their territory through later wars with the Syrians.

Jonathan rebuilt the damaged walls of Jerusalem and its other structures. Even after the Maccabean war ended, Greek culture exerted great influence in Judea, until the Roman general Pompey took control of Syria in 63 BCE and made Judea a Roman province.

### **The Roman Era (63-4 BCE)**

The independence of the Jews ended in 63 BCE when a Roman general named Pompey conquered Syria and entered Israel. Aristobulus II of Israel, acting as king of Israel, locked Pompey out of Jerusalem resulting in the capture of the city by force. Pompey entered the Holy of Holies and was amazed to find only emptiness. He appointed Hyrcanus as the high priest, though his priestly authority was limited to Judea and Idumea. He also gave independence to Greek cities in the region of the Decapolis (“ten cities”). He carried many slaves to Rome who after their emancipation added remarkably to the Jewish community in Rome.

Between 57 and 58 BCE, Aristobulus II and his sons attacked Rome on three occasions. Pompey was assassinated in 48 BCE. After this, Julius Caesar went to Egypt but was blocked at Alexandria by supporters of Ptolemy XII. Timely assistance from Antipater the Idumaean brought victory to Caesar. Caesar responded with favors to the Jews. He reduced the tribute they paid and exempted them from military service. In 47 BCE, Caesar appointed Antipater as procurator of Judea. He also made Antipater a Roman citizen and also named Hyrcanus ethnarch (“ruler of a people”).

Antipater was the founder of the Herodian Dynasty and father of Herod the Great. In 43 BCE, he was poisoned. Antipater’s son Herod, eventually became the king of the Jews around 40 BCE. He fled to Rome where he was declared king by the senate. Herod appointed his brother-in-law (Aristobulus III) as the high priest. Herod made a significant contribution to promote Judaism by building of the second Jewish temple. The project began in 20 BC and was completed in

AD 63, just seven years before its demolition (in 70 AD). Josephus described the building as follows:

The exterior of the building was designed to astound the mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white...from its summit protruded sharp golden spikes to prevent birds from settling upon and polluting the roof...some of the stones in the building were 45 cubits in length, 5 in height, and 6 in breadth. The retaining wall was the most prodigious work that was ever heard of by man.<sup>153</sup>

Herod ruled firmly and ensured peace and order in his society. His kingdom experienced both political and socio-economic development during his reign. He was the king at the time Jesus Christ was born (Matt. 2).

### **Jewish Sects**

Different factions emerged under the Hasmonean rule of which three are of interest to the present study: The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Each of these groups is outlined briefly below. Data on these texts are extracted from the writings of Josephus, the New Testament, and Rabbinic Literature (Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash). The Talmud is a collection of sixty-three books containing Jewish civil and canonical laws based on interpretations of Scripture. A major part of the Talmud is the Mishnah which is the collection of rabbinic discussions concerning the interpretation of the Mosaic law.

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<sup>153</sup> Josephus as cited in Kwaku Boamah and Isaac Boaheng, “There is Nothing New Under the Sun: A Comparative Study of the Politics at the Time of Jesus to the Ghanaian Politics,” *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 4(3), (2021):116-131, 119.

### ***The Pharisees***

The New Testaments depicts Pharisaism as a dominant religious ideology in first-century Palestinian Judaism. Pharisees were a group of Jews who were devoted to the Torah and its strict adherence. Though scholarly attempts to trace the origin of the Pharisees to the Old Testament prophets is not lacking, the first mention of this sect appears in the time of Jonathan Maccabee (152-142 BCE).<sup>154</sup> It is not likely that the full-blown sect that appears in the Hasmonean period was not formed earlier. Therefore, it appears that the origin of the group preceded the Hasmonean rule. It is possible that the Pharisees emerged out of the Hasidim (*Hasidaioi* or Hasideans, a group of deep piety Jews who opposed the inroads of Greek culture) at the time of the Maccabean revolt (1 Macc. 2:42; 7:13; 2 Macc. 14:6). After a successful revolt those who refused to drop out of political life and withdraw to the wilderness as did the Qumranians had to follow one of two courses with regards to the Jewish laws. The first course was to expand the traditional legal system to meet new circumstances and reinterpret them in accordance with new beliefs whilst the second was to leave the new situation outside the scope of the legal system and then leave the new beliefs unrecognized.<sup>155</sup> Those who followed the first option were the Pharisees and those who followed the second were the Sadducees. Any time before 340 BCE is acceptable based on the available data.<sup>156</sup>

Proto-Pharisaic thoughts countered Hellenistic ideas. At this time the differences between the Sadducees and the Pharisees were not demonstrated openly; this made the latter enjoy “some sway with the Hasmoneans.”<sup>157</sup> Later, the John Hyrcanus’ (a Hasmonean leader and Jewish high priest of the 2nd century BCE) split with the

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<sup>154</sup>Gregory R. Knight, “The Pharisees and the Sadducees: Rethinking their Respective Outlooks on Jewish Law,” *BYU Law Review* vol.3 (1993),931.

<sup>155</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 481.

<sup>156</sup> Knight, “The Pharisees and the Sadducees,” 931.

<sup>157</sup> Knight, “The Pharisees and the Sadducees,” 932.

Pharisees led to the expulsion of the Pharisees from the Sanhedrin by the Sadducees.<sup>158</sup> The expelled members were referred to as *Perushim*<sup>159</sup> (meaning “Separatists”), a name which was used in “contempt and derision” but was considered by the Pharisees (who interpreted it as “‘exponents’ of the law”) as a title of honor.<sup>160</sup>

The Pharisees had a passion for scholarship and intellectual development.<sup>161</sup> They were devoted to the strict interpretation and adherence to the interpretation of the Torah. Josephus has noted that the Pharisees “seem to interpret the laws more accurately”<sup>162</sup> and that they supposedly “excel[led] others in the accurate knowledge of the laws of their country.”<sup>163</sup> By the time of Jesus, this sect had become the most influential in the local synagogues, where they could impart their view to their audience.

Pharisees were not a political group. They were a religious sect of predominantly middle-class men who were merchants and businessmen. Their concern was to give contextual and contemporary relevance of the Jewish law to the Jewish society through elaborate arguments. Yet, because the average Pharisee lacked formal education in biblical interpretation, they depended on the professional scholars, the Scribes (of which majority were Pharisees) to have an interpretation of legal matters. To ensure strict adherence to the law, the Pharisees built hedges around them (the law). For example, if the law said that one could not walk more than two kilometers on the Sabbath, the Pharisee would say people could not walk a kilometer. In this case, those who walked more than a kilometer but less than two kilometers would still be within God’s acceptable range. These precautionary measures added to the law resulted in countless prohibitions in their oral traditions. The Pharisees’ teachings about the law consequently

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<sup>158</sup> Knight, “The Pharisees and the Sadducees,” 932. Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 481.

<sup>159</sup> The singular is *parash*, meaning “separatist” or “separated one.”

<sup>160</sup> Knight, “The Pharisees and the Sadducees,” 932.

<sup>161</sup> Knight, “The Pharisees and the Sadducees,” 932.

<sup>162</sup> Josephus, Wars, supra note 7, at 1:110.

<sup>163</sup> Josephus, supra note 9, at 38:191.

became so binding and blinding. They traced their scribal oral tradition to Ezra who linked them to the prophets. Because most scribes were Pharisees, the New Testament writers often mentioned scribes and Pharisees together. They were very legalistic. Some examples in the New Testament alluding to the scrupulous concern of the Pharisees with the minutest detail of their legalism are: the tithing of herbs (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42); the wearing of conspicuous phylacteries and tassels (Matt. 23:5); the careful observance of ritual purity (e.g., Mark 7:1 ff.); frequent fasting (Matt. 9:14) and distinctions in oaths (23:16ff.).

Josephus estimates the number of Pharisees in the first century as six thousand and attributes to them the greatest influence of any religious sect on the common people. The Pharisees survived the fall of Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the Pharisees invented new religious life for the Jewish people with a new religious center apart from the Temple. A Pharisee named Johanna ben Zakkai escaped during the siege and fled to Jamnia where he established a rabbinic school. The Jewish Encyclopedia lists seven types of Pharisees, five of which were hypocrites, and two were good:

1. The **“Shoulder Pharisee”** who paraded his good deeds before others like a badge on the shoulder. . Jesus began His diatribe against the Pharisees by mentioning the shoulder (Matthew 23:4).
2. The **“Wait-a-little Pharisee”** would ask someone to wait for him while he performed a good deed.
3. The **“Blind Pharisee”** bruised himself by walking into a wall because he shut his eyes to avoid seeing a woman.
4. The **“Pestle Pharisee”** walked with a hanging head so as to not observe alluring temptations.
5. The **“Ever-reckoning Pharisee”** was always counting his good deeds to see if they offset his failures.
6. The **“God-fearing Pharisee”** was righteous like Job.
7. The **“God-loving Pharisee”** was like Abraham.

Two traditions of interpretations developed among the Pharisees, the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. Rabbi Hillel (70 BCE-102 AD) was one of the greatest interpreters among the Jews of Palestine. He was born in Babylonia and established a school in Jerusalem which was named after him. He was known for his humility and love. His rabbinic school typically followed the seven interpretive rules. The seven rules are: (1) that which applies in a minor case will apply in a major case; (2) when the same words apply to two cases, the same considerations should apply to both; (3) if the same phrase appears in more than one passage, then a consideration found in one of them applies to all; (4) a principle can be formulated from two or more texts and then apply to other texts; (5) a general rule may be particularized in another verse, or a particular rule may be expanded into a general principle; (6) difficulty in one passage may be clarified by means of another similar passage; and (7) interpretation must be done in light of a broader literary and grammatical context. These rules are designed to show how the Torah is organized to capture a single, unified progressive revelation. Hillel also arranged, under six topics, the many rules that had developed among the Jews pertaining to the 613 commands in the Mosaic Law. The school led by Shammai followed a very strict and conservative system of interpretation. Jesus seemed to subscribe to their view on marriage.

The belief system and teachings of the Pharisees can be summarized as follows: First, the Torah and the Jewish oral traditions or “traditions of the elders” (cf. Matt 15:2 believed to have been handed down from the time of Moses and which eventually became codified in Judaism as the Mishnah, which is part of the Jewish Talmud) were the twin pillars of the Pharisaic system. The Pharisees differed from the Sadducees in giving divine authority to the interpretation and applications of the law. Thus, the Pharisees considered the explanations and supplementary materials to the written Torah as binding and as equally authoritative as the Torah itself. The Pharisaic scrupulous concern for the minutest details of the Law is evident

in the gospels: their practice of tithing herbs (Matt. 23:23), their careful observance of ritual purity (cf. Mark 7:1-23; Matt. 15:1-20), their frequent fasting (Matt. 9:14) and their Sabbath-keeping (Mark 2:23—3:6; Luke 6:1-11). They encourage the lay people to observe the same purity regulations in their daily lives that were expected of priests serving in the temple because (in their view) every house was a temple, every table was an altar and every man, a priest.

Second, the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, believed in the existence of angels, evil spirits (demons) and the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6-8). For the Pharisees, angels and evil spirits exist in hierarchical order. Third, they held the eschatological belief of a final reward for good deeds and eternal detention of wicked souls forever under the earth. Fourth, they eagerly looked forward to the coming of God's kingdom and the fortune of Israel. Fifth, they ascribed all things to fate and yet allowed a place for human free will (or freedom of choice). Sixthly, though the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, hated foreign rule, they were tolerant to foreign rule and loved to maintain peace and tranquility in the society.

### ***The Sadducees***

The origin name “Sadducees” is a debatable issue. It has been suggested that “Sadducees” relates to the word “zedek” which means “to be righteous.” The fact that the Sadducees were not particularly distinguished for their righteousness makes this position unlikely. Another suggestion is that the Sadducees got their name from a man named Zadok, the Davidic High priest mentioned in 2 Samuel 8:17 or the father of the priestly families in Solomon's time. The lack of evidence for this position makes this suggestion not conclusive. As a matter of fact, not all the Sadducees were priests, and some Qumranians were also priests of the Zadokite line and these were not Sadducees.<sup>164</sup>

They were mainly high-class priests (who controlled the high priestly office) and wealthy aristocrats (Acts 5:17). As such,

<sup>164</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 490.



they were fewer than the Pharisees. As an aristocratic minority, the Sadducees had no following among the ordinary people. They combined conservative religious views and practices with political life. The participation in politics and practical sense of survival made them open to certain Greek cultural influences. Under the Greek rule they welcomed Hellenism;<sup>165</sup> under readily showed support to the Roman overlord. Thus, the Sadducees encouraged collaboration with the ruling power without any concern for the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Jewish Messiah. They were loosely held together by their desire and determination to maintain the *status quo*.<sup>166</sup> They controlled not only the high priesthood but also controlled the temple and the Jewish Supreme Council, the Sanhedrin. They did not survive the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. After the destruction of the temple, their program collapsed and they no more influenced the Jewish religious system.<sup>167</sup>

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the body, angels or spirits (the supernatural). They were conservative in their religious interpretations. They accepted only the written Torah as authoritative and rejected the Pharisaic oral law. Their own oral laws were also not considered as equally binding and authoritative as the written Torah. Against the backdrop that the Sadducees did not accept any part of the Hebrew Scriptures apart from the Torah one can appreciate why Jesus, in responding to their question about the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33) referred to a passage in the Torah (Exod. 3:6) to argue for the fact of bodily resurrection and not one of the more obvious passage from other books like Isaiah or Daniel (12:1-3). Jesus quoted from the Torah to meet them on their own ground. They did not believe in reward and retribution in a future life; for them, the soul dies with the body. They rejected the idea of fate held by the Pharisees and the Essenes, and argued that the outcome of a person's life depends on his/her own free choices. According to Josephus, the three major sects disagree on the human

<sup>165</sup> Hellenism derives from the word Hella, the ancient name for Greece.

<sup>166</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 486.

<sup>167</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 486.



will: the Essenes are very deterministic, the Pharisees try to combine determinism and free will, but the Sadducees believed that all human affairs result from human freedom.<sup>168</sup>

### ***The Essenes***

The origin of the name “Essenes” is not easy to trace. However, it has been suggested that it relates to the Greek word *hosiotes* (“holiness”) or to the Aramaic *hasayya* (“pious ones”).<sup>169</sup> It seems from the two suggestions that the word “Essenes” relates to holiness or purity. Founded in about 165 BCE, the Essenes were a small religious sect that numbered not more than a few thousands. They were a separatist group that emerged from the conflicts of the Maccabean era and were destroyed during the Jewish revolt which took place in 68 AD. The gospel writers made no reference to the Essenes though they were a prominent group in first-century Palestine. Admission into this group required a one-year waiting period and a two-year probationary period, a relinquishing of private property (wealth) into a common treasury due to the strong love they had for one another (similar to what the early Christians did in Acts 4:32-37) and swearing of oath at an initiation ceremony.<sup>170</sup> Members were required to live a disciplined life, have regular purification baths (similar to Christian baptism), participate in a common meal (similar to the Christian Eucharist) in anticipation of the messianic banquet, study Scriptures regularly.<sup>171</sup> The Essenes also exhibited the pursuit of esoteric practices, healing, and various forms of divination. They wore white robes and meditated before taking their common meals.

Most of them were not married though they did not prohibit marriage. At a point in time, they considered the Jewish community so corrupt that they separated themselves and settled at Qumran near the Dead Sea. The Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea

<sup>168</sup> Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.14 [162-166]; *Antiquities*, 18.1.3-4 [12-17].

<sup>169</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 489. See also Ferguson’s footnote 220.

<sup>170</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 489.

<sup>171</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 489.

Scrolls was an Essenes group or a sect similar to the Essenes.<sup>172</sup> They did not only copy the Scriptures; they wrote commentaries on some of the Old Testament books by contemporizing all prophecy into their own existential settings (*Pesher*). For example, in the Qumran community, the “righteous” in Hab. 1: 4 is interpreted as “Teacher of Righteousness”, the founder and leader of the Qumran community.

Like the Pharisees, the Essenes meticulously observed the Law of Moses, the sabbath, and ritual purity. However, they considered the temple priesthood as corrupt and rejected most of the rituals associated Jewish sacrificial system. Consequently, they refused to take part in temple worship. They also professed belief in immortality and divine punishment for sin. But, unlike the Pharisees, the Essenes rejected the resurrection of the body and did not involve themselves in social activities. They however had a strong eschatological expectation of divine judgement and deliverance and looked forward to the prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron, as well as the Jewish Messiah.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the political, religious and socio-economic developments that took place during the intertestamental period. The discussions offer the immediate context into which Jesus Christ was born and the context in which Christians emerged out of Judaism. In the New Testament, one finds Jesus’s numerous encounters with the Jewish sects, especially the Pharisees. Therefore, this last chapter serves as a useful link between the Old and the New Testaments.

## **Review Questions**

1. What role did the Pharisees play in the religious life of ancient Israel?
2. Examine the beliefs and practices of the Essenes.
3. Who were the Sadducees? What were their beliefs?

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<sup>172</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds to Early Christianity*, 489. The former position is more likely.

4. Discuss the influence of Alexander the Great on the first century Greco-Roman world.
5. Critically examine the Maccabean revolt and its impact on Jewish beliefs and practices.



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## ABOUT BOOK

An African Background to the Old Testament is a brief introduction to the geographical, social, economic, political and religious backgrounds of the Old Testament from an African viewpoint. It is written to help (African) Bible students to have access to the right background information required for proper interpretation of Scripture within the African setting. The seven-chapter book examines the geographical, social, economic, political and religious backgrounds of the Old Testament from an African perspective. The main contention is that Old Testament scholarship in Africa must be carried out by those with adequate understanding and experience of the African socio-cultural context and done through proper interaction with that context.

An African Background to the Old Testament is written in a non-technical way to make it accessible to everyone. Every chapter is organized thematically in sub-headings. Each chapter also ends with a recap of the main points discussed and review questions to allow the student to reflect on what has been discussed before proceeding to the next chapter. Universities and Seminaries can use it as a textbook for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Old Testament Studies

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