

Ancient Israel: Introduction and Historical and Cultural Context

Chronology: Ancient Israel

2000-1300 BCE - Israel's patriarchal period, followed by Israelites' descent and sojourn in Egypt (i.e., the era described in stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, et al, in Genesis)

1300-1000 BCE - Exodus of Israelites from Egypt, migration(s) to and settlement of Israelite tribes in the "Promised Land" (Canaan), followed by a period of non-hereditary rule in the land by Judges during which the inhabitants of the land was gradually conquered (i.e., the era described in books of Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges)

1000-587 BCE - Monarchic period, during which Israelites tribes were united as a one (and later two) political as well as cultural and religious entity, under the rulership of kings (i.e., the era described in books of 1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings)

1030-1010 BCE – King Saul becomes first king of Israel

1010-970 BCE – Establishment of Davidic monarchy: King David, ruling with Jerusalem as his capital

970-931 BCE – King Solomon (son of David); building of the Jerusalem Temple, which contributes to the centralization of Israelite worship in Jerusalem

931 BCE – The death of King Solomon sees the split of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) from the Southern Kingdom (Judah)

ca. 760-746 BCE – Judean Prophet Amos active

ca. 738-688 BCE – Judean Prophet Isaiah active

722/721 BCE - Northern Kingdom (Israel) conquered by Assyrians, population dispersed (= "lost tribes of Israel")

715-687 BCE – Judean king Hezekiah, who safeguarded the Southern Kingdom (Judah) from Assyrian conquest, attributed his success to the piety of king and nation, and enacted religious reforms to promote monotheism and the centralization of all worship in Jerusalem.

600-580 BCE - Judean Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel active

620 BCE – Judean king Josiah, who enacts "Deuteronomistic Reforms," following in the footsteps of Hezekiah to promote monotheism and the centralization of all worship in Jerusalem

586 BCE - Southern Kingdom (Judah) invaded by Babylonians, and Jerusalem Temple destroyed; many leading Judeans and others exiled to Babylonia, while others flee elsewhere (e.g., Egypt) – beginning of Babylonian Exile (major pivot in Israelite history, such that texts and traditions are often categorized as "pre-exilic," "exilic," or "post-exilic")

This period saw the formation of much of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., those biblical books called the Tanakh in Jewish tradition and the "Old Testament" in Christian tradition). The Exile itself was a major impetus for writing down, compiling, and reworking older texts and traditions.

During this period, Israelite culture and religion was shaped through interactions with [1] Egyptians (both during the Exodus and afterwards), [2] Canaanites (esp. during the period of settlement and conquest of Canaan), and [3] the dominant ancient Near Eastern empires during the Monarchic Period, esp. Assyrians and Babylonians.

Some Key Terms and Concepts

Eschatology: Beliefs concerning the end (Greek for "end" = *eschaton*), whether of the individual human life (**Individual Eschatology**) or of all earthly/human beings (**Collective Eschatology**).

Apocalypticism: A type of collective eschatology that posits that all of history as we know it will come to an end.

Theodicy: Beliefs concerning divine justice

Cosmology: Beliefs concerning the structure and contents of the cosmos (i.e., the entire universe, including the earth and whatever lies beyond).

Ouranology: Beliefs concerning the structure and contents of the skies/heavens in particular.

Anthropology: When used in the context of the ancient world = beliefs concerning the nature and character of the human being (including concepts of the soul and/or spirit as they relate to the physical body).

Soteriology: Beliefs concerning salvation.

Heavenly Ascent: Idea that humans can rise to visit to heaven, whether during life or at/after death.

Resurrection of the Body: Idea that the dead can be revived in their physical bodies, whether one by one and/or all at once at the end of time.

Immortality of the Soul: Idea that there is a part of a human individual that is separate from the physical body and will survive death and will live on forever as a non-embodied entity.

2. Egypt

- Egyptian religion involves the worship of many gods, including two gods of the dead, Anubis (associated esp. with mummification and embalming) and Osiris (associated with death but also vegetation).
- Osiris is most important for our purposes, as he himself rises from the dead. Osiris is killed by his brother Seth and is dismembered. After pieces of his body are recovered by Isis and he is mummified by Anubis, he is revived and becomes ruler of the underworld. Osiris' mummification is the basis for mummification of other Egyptians, esp. Pharaoh, who is often seen to be a god himself and avatar of Osiris.
- The sun-god, Re, is similarly seen to die and rise again, with each sunset being a death and each dawn a resurrection. He is later identified with Osiris.

Eschatology: Generally, death is not seen as an end, but a transitional state; this is connected to concept of time as cyclical – as in Nature in general, but esp. due to unique geography of Egypt, due to flooding of the Nile. Passage to death compared to a journey to next life, with guides along the way, as well as judgment by Maat (goddess of justice) to determine fate after death.

Anthropology: Human being as composite of corporeal (body, heart) and non-corporeal parts (*ka*, *ba*), but survival beyond death necessitated the proper funerary rites (most notably mummification). After burial, funerary rites ensure the well-being of the dead, such that living in dead were seen to be in continued contact. Ghosts, however, are rarely mentioned.

Cosmology and ouranology: World of the dead lies to the West (cf. sun rising in East). Some interest in heavenly ascent suggested by pyramids and references to Pharaoh's ascending to the skies

3. Mesopotamia

Eschatology: Death established by the gods (see Gilgamesh); mortality is part of the human condition.

Anthropology: Humans originally made from flesh and blood of slain god (see Atrahasis); mix of immortal and divine spirit (manifest, e.g., in human breath) and corporeal body that decays. Death is death of flesh and separation of the two. Restless ghosts thus roam the earth, retaining emotions and desires, such that the dead needed to be cared for (i.e., a cult of the dead) lest they wreak havoc on earth; proper funerary rites were thus critical as was continued attention from ancestors.

Cosmology and ouranology: Realm of dead once thought to reside in a distant place on earth (by Sumerians), but later (by Assyrians and Babylonians; with expanded knowledge of the earth) was transferred to netherworld below. Most common is a three-tiered view of the cosmos with heaven, earth, netherworld piled like a sandwich. The surface of the earth was the boundary between the realm of the dead and the realm of the living, but one could dig a hole to consult with ghosts. The netherworld is a very gloomy place. By contrast, heaven (which often has multiple layers, made of precious stones) is the abode of gods. In principle, no human can set foot there—although a couple exceptional figures, esp. those who lived in primordial times before the Great Flood, are said to have been taken up during life to see the sights of it.