THE HEBREWS IN CANAAN

The biblical accounts of Hebrew genealogy and history are credible in most instances, as far as can be ascertained from archaeological and historical research. They were not written in their present form, however, until centuries after the events described; therefore they require careful interpretation. In a confession of faith that Moses imparted to the assembled Hebrews, he said, "A wandering Aramaean was my father" (Deuteronomy 26:5). This characterization of the ancestors of the Hebrews as Aramaean nomads ("wandering" signifying the nomadic state of constant economic hardship) is more or less accurate. In addition to Aramaean blood, the physical ancestry of the later Israelites included a mixture of other strains, such as Amorite and Hittite. The physiognomy typical of the ancient Hebrews, as depicted in Babylonian friezes, was similar to that of the Hittites. The Hebrew language belongs to the northwestern Semitic language group.

The 12 Tribes

The history of the tribes as told in the Hebrew Bible must be viewed in light of the national consciousness developed by the Jewish scribes who compiled and edited the historical books in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. In their efforts to tell a continuous and detailed story establishing a common ancestry, these scribes undoubtedly recorded legends as history; nevertheless, the biblical narrative is in accord with historical theory. The Scriptures tell of 12 Hebrew tribes, descended from 12 sons of the patriarch Jacob: Asher, Benjamin, Dan, Gad, Issachar, Joseph, Judah, Levi, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, Zebulun. Biblical scholars view the Jacob story as an etiological, or explanatory, account, with actual tribal history cloaked in the guise of personal experiences. Thus, the tribes were interrelated by blood, and some—such as Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah (sons of one mother)—maintained an even closer alliance. The tribes of Asher and Gad (named as descendants of servants) were subordinate tribes. Another instance of tribal history written as personal experience is the covenant between Jacob and Laban (see Genesis 31:44-54), which reflects an early treaty between Hebrew and Syrian tribes, delimiting the borders of their grazing lands to the north of Gilead.

Tradition and historical theory trace the Aramaean ancestors of Israel (used collectively) to the district of Ur in Sumer, on the lower Euphrates River. About the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC a group of Aramaean tribes migrated to the region around Carrhae (now Harran, Turkey), an ancient Babylonian colony. Several centuries later several family units of these tribes migrated to the west and south, settling in scattered groups around the Jordan River. The Jordan settlers became the Hebrew tribes, including the Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and the Yahweh-worshiping Hebrews. In the Bible this period of tribal migration is known as the age of the patriarchs.

The Exodus

Some of the tribes, traditionally belonging to the Joseph group, migrated into Egypt, probably during the period of the Hyksos kings (the predominantly Semitic conquerors of Egypt) between 1694 and 1600BC. There they prospered until the Hyksos were expelled about 1570BC, and as a result the Hebrews were persecuted as aliens and forced into slavery. The Exodus is viewed by many historians as the successful effort of the Hebrews in Egyptian bondage to be reunited with other Hebrew tribes with which they retained a sense of kinship. No archaeological records of the Exodus exist, even on Egyptian monuments, probably because the Egyptian Hebrews numbered at most a few thousand and probably less than that. Their flight evidently caused no great concern in Egypt.

In Jewish history, however, the Exodus assumed major proportions. It was led by Moses (the first great prophet) who, on Sinai, the sacred mountain, received the covenant with Yahweh (see Sinai, Mount). This early religion incorporated in itself and bequeathed to later Judaism nomad concepts of the position of property, individual rights, sexual morality, and the essential equality of all members of the community. Personal liberty and the love of freedom—characteristic of the wandering Semites—in addition to the concept of a God who is creator, lawgiver, and king, became part of the religion of Israel and later became part of its political theory.

The conquest of Canaan in the 2nd millennium BC was accomplished as much by intermarriage and alliance with the Canaanites as it was by military conquest. Moreover, the invaders had an undisturbed and unique opportunity to acquire dominance: The Egyptian, Hittite, and Sumerian empires were no longer strong, and Assyria, the potential great power, had not yet organized its forces. Under Joshua, the successor to Moses, the Yahweh tribes crossed the Jordan River, conquered the town of Jericho and the surrounding plain, and established themselves in western Palestine. Although numerically they were not superior to the Canaanites already resident, the Yahweh tribes were united by their religious covenant, their tradition of common descent, and their democratic ideal. During the period of the judges (the great military and civil leaders), the Hebrews, now known as the Israelites, secured their land. They fought off invasions by the Moabites, the Midianites, and especially the Philistines, an Aegean people who were attempting to settle on the coast of Palestine.

THE KINGDOM

With the accession of Saul, the first Israelite king, about 1020BC, the Israelites became truly united as a political entity. With David, Saul's successor, the kingdom acquired greatness.

The Kingdom under David

In both Jewish history and religion, David is considered second only to Moses. He is regarded as the true founder of Israel, the instrument of the religious and political system foreshadowed on Mount Sinai. He captured Jerusalem, the strongest fortress in Palestine, and made it his capital. Under his direction, the Israelite army broke the power of the Philistines and conquered Edom, Ammon, and Moab. David organized religious services and arranged the duties of the priesthood, establishing the religion of Israel as supreme in Palestine. At his death all the countries surrounding the Israelite Kingdom were either subjugated or bound by treaties of friendship.

The Kingdom under Solomon

David's son and successor, Solomon, is known as the builder of the Temple at Jerusalem, which became a symbol of Israelite glory and splendor. Solomon was a powerful ruler who brought prosperity to his people by carefully using the treasures inherited from his father, by unifying the internal administration of his kingdom, and by promoting commerce and industry through the opening of trade routes linking Africa, Asia, Arabia, and Asia Minor. Solomon also tried to strengthen the political position of his kingdom by marrying influential women of many of the neighboring principalities. His royal behavior, however, as well as his elaborate building program—typified by various remains at Megiddo, Israel, excavated between 1925 and 1939 and after World War II (1939-1945)—proved costly in human and economic terms. Forced labor and high taxes provoked dissatisfaction and resentment among the population and caused political instability. Edom, in the southeast, successfully revolted, and the district of Damascus, in the northwest, made itself independent of Israelite influence. The oppression of Solomon's rule and his sybaritic way of life, which was directly opposed to the stern nomadic traditions of the Israelite religion with its democratic ideal, resulted in the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death, about 922BC.

The Divided Kingdom

Upon Solomon's death Jeroboam, a former servant of Solomon, returned from Egypt, where he had lived in exile following a failed plot against Solomon's life. When a delegation under Jeroboam requested guarantees of reform from Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam, they were refused. In the dissension that followed, Jeroboam was supported by Sheshonk I, king of Egypt, called Shishak in the Bible, who invaded and plundered the kingdom of Rehoboam and despoiled the temple. The kingdom was then divided. The rebel leader became king, as Jeroboam I, over the northern parts of the old kingdom known afterward as the Kingdom of Israel; according to biblical tradition, its inhabitants included 10 of the original 12 tribes—all except Judah and Benjamin. Rehoboam remained king over the southern parts of the kingdom, known afterward as the Kingdom of Judah; about 775 sq km (about 300 sq mi) in area, it was

reduced to a secondary power. Separate religious shrines and sanctuaries were established at Dan and Bethel in Israel, and although the two states retained their feeling of blood kinship, they were divided politically.

Jewish history for the next two centuries became a series of struggles among petty states as Israel, Judah, Moab, Edom, and Damascus warred against one another. For a time, in the early 9th century BC, Israel became a major power under the great king Omri. Omri founded Samaria in about 870BC as the capital of Israel, and under his direction a period of peace was instituted. Under Ahab, his son and successor, however, Israel was shaken by internal strife concerning the most vital topic: religion. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, a princess of Tyre, attempted to incorporate her pagan deity, the Phoenician god Melkarth, into the religion of Israel. Foreign religious influences had long been filtering into both Israelite kingdoms, but Jezebel's boldness resulted in great popular protest. Such protest was political as well as religious, for the ethical system of the Mosaic Law concerned government as much as it did worship, and autocracy could be construed as sin. A series of prophets waked the conscience of the Israelites. In the northern kingdom, Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea called for a return to the rugged, democratic desert principles. In Judah, Isaiah and Micah inveighed against idolatry and luxury. Thus religious struggle was added to military conflict. In the 8th century BC the power of Assyria, grown to a position of dominance in the Middle East, advanced to the frontiers of the disorganized states, and disaster was inevitable.

Assyria had, for more than a century, attempted to conquer ancient Palestine. In 853BC the first major Assyrian invasion, led by Shalmaneser III, had been turned back at the Battle of Karkar by a coalition of the little states, including Israel, under Ben-hadad I, king of Damascus. Assyria withdrew, but its forces continued to harry the Palestinian borders. In 734BC, when incessant quarreling among the weakened Palestinian states precluded another coalition, an Assyrian army under Tiglath-pileser III invaded and conquered Israel. Only the fortress of Samaria held out until 722 to 721BC, when the Assyrians besieged and took the city. The kingdom of Israel was destroyed, and many of its inhabitants were deported. Thenceforth they were known as the Lost Tribes. Samaria was repopulated with emigrants from Mesopotamia, who adopted the Israelite religion and became a sect known as Samaritans. Although the kingdom of Judah became a tributary of Assyria, it retained its nominal independence for another 135 years.

The Fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar

During the next century Judah maintained its identity, while the balance of Middle Eastern power shifted from Assyria to Egypt and, finally, to the renascent Babylonian Empire of the Chaldeans. The Judean Kingdom, however, refused to submit to Chaldea as it had to Assyria. In 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar II, ruler of Chaldea, faced with defiance in Judah, conquered Jerusalem. Most of the Judean nobles, warriors, and artisans were taken to Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar made the Davidic prince Zedekiah king of Judah. In 588BC Zedekiah led a revolt against Chaldea, and two years later Nebuchadnezzar's army destroyed Judah and razed Jerusalem. All Judeans who were potential leaders of revolt were taken to Babylon. Another group fled to Egypt, taking with them, despite his protests, the prophet Jeremiah. Only the poorest Judean peasants remained. The Babylonian Captivity marked the end of the political independence of ancient Israel, except for a brief revival more than four centuries later.

SUBJECT JUDEA

At the time of the dissolution of Judah, Judeans were living in Egypt, in Babylon, and among the peasants in Palestine.

Life in Babylon

The most important of these communities was in Babylon. There the exiles found a thriving colony of their coreligionists composed of the Judeans deported in 597BC and others who had settled there during the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel in 721BC. Under the direction of the priest and reformer Ezekiel, the Babylonian community retained its separate identity by replacing political Israel with spiritual

Israel. The religion was ritualized and made liturgical to govern the life of the exiles. Scribes began to compile the traditions of the Israelites in the books destined to become the Bible. Prayer meetings took the place of worship in the temple. An anonymous prophet (called Deutero-Isaiah because his speeches form the second part of the biblical book of Isaiah) prepared the faithful exiles for a new life in a rebuilt Jerusalem.

Return to Jerusalem

In 539BC Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, conquered Babylon. The next year he issued an edict emancipating the Jews. About 42,000 members of the Babylonian community prepared to return to Palestine, taking all their wealth, contributions from those remaining in Babylon, and, according to tradition, contributions from Cyrus himself. Led by Zerubbabel, a prince of the house of David, the expedition journeyed to Jerusalem. The country was still lying waste from the havoc of the Chaldean wars, and the emigrants despaired at the enormous task confronting them. The resulting apathy of the returned Jews was alleviated by the work of two religious leaders, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who held out, as Ezekiel had done before them, the rewards of spiritual life as the ultimate goal. The Jews turned their attention to rebuilding, and in 516BC the Second Temple was completed. The latter date is regarded, in the Jewish tradition, as the true end of the exile in Babylon, which thus endured 70 years from 586 to 516BC.