

Engaging the Jewish World Their 4000-Year Story and Why It Matters to Everyone Lesson # 1- The Biblical Age

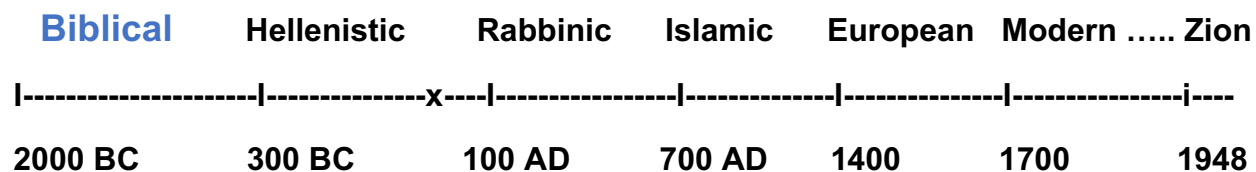
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Introduction

This lesson is an overview of the first era—**The Biblical Era**. We are dividing Jewish history roughly into seven eras, though these are necessarily fuzzy boundaries that overlap. This period covers 1700 years; from three to five times longer than any of the following eras. This is the foundational era, from which all their subsequent story is rooted. It begins with the father of the Jewish people, Abraham, and concludes about a century after the last prophet, Malachi and the rise of the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great. **The era in brief—from the birth of the Jewish people to the rise of Hellenism.**

This is the story of God calling and forming the Jewish people, developing their God-given identity, the covenants that inculcated and nurtured their knowledge over the generations of the one true God, their growing understanding of the Kingdom of God, through the blows of history and prophet word that shaped them. The first coming of Messiah is marked with “x” on the line below.



1

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Each era has three developments in common: 1) Adoption of a new *Language*, 2) *Learning*; involvement in new realms of cultural activity, and 3) *Lasting Effects* on the Jewish mind and a lasting *Legacy* to the human race. Look for these as you read. Then after reading, fill in the blanks at bottom for the three developments for this first era.

ERA 1) The Biblical Age (Israel and Canaan) - 2000BC- 300BC

The first encounter of the Hebrews with a culture other than that native to Abraham was with the land of Canaan and its Gentile peoples, lasting from 2000 BC: the call of Abraham, to 586 BC: the fall of Jerusalem, and then the return to the land 70 years later under Ezra and Nehemiah. This period covers the ancient Jewish people from Abraham's first sojournings in the land of Canaan, through their forging as a people in the crucible of Egypt, their first settlement of the land until their first exile from the land and destruction of the First Temple. This is the era of the patriarchs, the 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the Conquest of the land under Joshua the son of Nun, the Judges, the Kings, the split into two kingdoms, the fall of the Northern Kingdom, and finally the fall of the Southern Kingdom, the destruction of the Second Temple and the Exile to Babylon, and the first Return to Zion, during the Persian empire period and the closing of the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures ("Old Testament").

Jewish Origins

Let's start from the beginning. The Jewish people descended from Shem, one of the three sons of Noah; thus they are called Shemites (Semites). Terah, the father of Abraham, descended from the line of Shem. Genesis 14:15 calls the one destined to be the forebear of the Jewish people "Avram ha Ivri" (Abram the Hebrew). The word for "Hebrew" in the Hebrew language, "ivri," likely comes from the name Eber, one of the descendants of Shem, listed in the "Table of Nations" of Genesis 10. But "ivri" means "one who crosses over." The Shemite who crossed over in response to the call of God

2

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became the first Hebrew and the father of the Jewish people.

Our Father Abraham: The Call and the Covenant

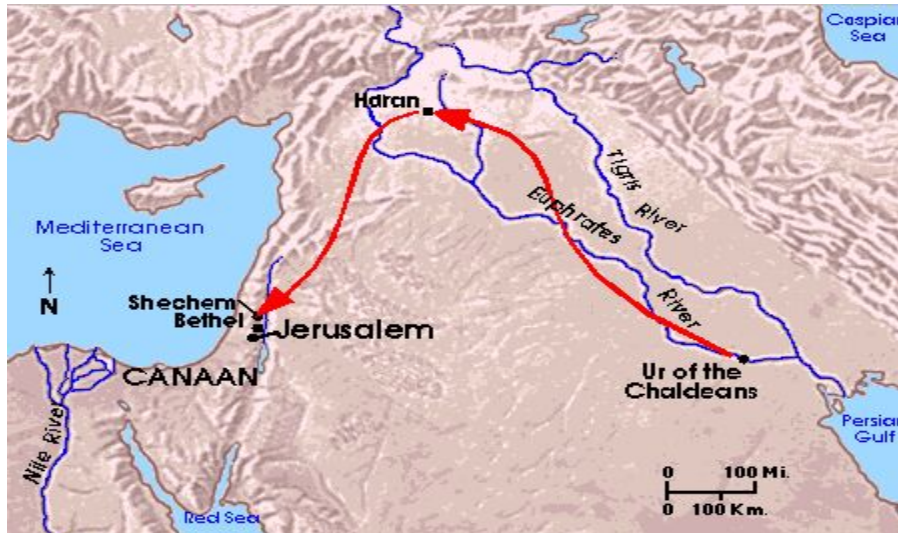
In response to the call of God, Abraham crossed over the rivers and deserts from Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia, in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley (modern day Iraq), crossing the Syrian Desert, and journeyed into the land of Canaan. His native language was not Hebrew, but a northwest Semitic language, probably Akkadian.

God chose Abraham as the man with whom He wished to be associated through all history. He is the man to whose name the Creator was pleased to hyphenate His own to the end of time—the “God of Abraham,” and later, “the God of Israel.” God elected not a spiritual elite, but a whole physical flesh & blood people— Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob, the people of Israel. God thereby lays claim to the physical as well as the spiritual dimensions of His created order.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of our Abraham. He is the natural father of the Jewish people (and Ishmael’s line) first, but also the father of all who follow his greatest descendent, Jesus the Messiah (all Christians are children of Abraham by faith, Galatians 3:7). The Arab and Muslim world also claim him as their spiritual father, through Ishmael. With a population of about **14 million Jewish people** today, about 2.5 billion professing Christians, and about 1.4 billion Muslims, that is roughly 4 billion people out of the 7 billion total population of the world. Thus nearly 60% of the world look to Abraham as spiritual father.

3

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Abraham's Journey in Response to the Call of God

If you were to travel to the State of Israel today where about 6.5 million Jewish people live, or to New York City, USA where over two million Jewish people live, you could attend a “Brit” (a circumcision ceremony) or a “Bris,” as it is called by American Jews, every day if you wished. After a Jewish couple gives birth to a male child, they will invite their family and friends to the Bris ceremony. A rabbi who specializes in Jewish ritual circumcision, called a “mohel” will officiate at the ceremony. He is trained in how to cut the foreskin of the child’s male organ in a safe and proper way and knows all the traditional prayers and blessings to say over the child and with the family for this special occasion. There will be a party for relatives and friends with food and wine. This is the time when the naming of the new son takes place— a new name to a new son on the eighth day.

This ancient, yet still living tradition and rite of passage in Judaism, with its accompanying ceremony is sourced in the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic covenant is not only the source of the formation of the Jewish people, but the fountainhead of the blessing of God’s plan of redemption of the world, Israel/the Jewish people being the carrier of that plan and promise. The Abrahamic covenant is foundational to our understanding the Jewish people and God’s master story of

4

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redemption. It is indeed the spiritual spinal cord arching through all the covenant promises in the unfolding of God's purposes in history.

The Abrahamic covenant was first promised to Avram at his call in Ur (Gen.12:1-3), it was actually enacted in Canaan via the ritual of cutting the animals and passing between the parts (Gen.15), reaffirmed at the instituting of the sign of the covenant (circumcision) for all of Abraham's household (Gen. 17:8 [the land], and v. 19 [the son through Sarah]), and reinforced and reiterated after Abraham passed his final test of faith (Gen. 22), with the newly added promise that his descendants would "conquer their enemies" (22:17c).

The covenant comprises four features:

1. Abrahams's name would become great, as a great nation would come from him, and he would become "the father of many nations" (12:2; 17:4).
2. Descendants innumerable through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, ultimately through the Messiah (17:6 the son through Sarah; finally Messiah (Galatians 3:8,16).
3. The land of Canaan as an everlasting possession (15:18-21; 17:8).
4. Divine blessing and protection (12:3).

Together with the spiritual and eternal blessing of the covenant through his descendants, climactically through his Greatest Son, the Messiah, there are two very earthy aspects of the covenant, fundamental to the Jewish people—the sign of the covenant and the land—the Land of Israel. Every people group or nation needs a land on which to live and thrive. God promised the Land of Canaan to the people of Israel as "an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8; Ps. 105:9-11). This later became known as "the land of Israel."

The Abrahamic covenant was *unconditional*. When God cut covenant, it was in the form of the ancient custom(see Jeremiah 34:18-20). God had him cut animals in pieces; then the parties to the covenant walked through the pieces, thereby asserting that the same cutting-up should happen to them if they broke the covenant. However, God put

5

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Abraham to sleep, while God Himself passed between the animal pieces, symbolized by the burning torch that passed through them (Gen. 15: 12, 17). That Abraham was in a deep sleep shows that promises did not involve any action or merit or work for him to fulfill by his own efforts.

Thus, the covenant was also *unilateral*. Contrary to most ancient covenants of this type, Abraham did not walk through the animal pieces as a pledge. Only God did. As the writer to the Hebrews explicated, God thereby swore by Himself that He would unilaterally secure the covenant promise (Hebrews 6:13-14).

Now note—the Mosaic (or Sinaitic) Covenant of law (Exodus, Leviticus), on the other hand, was *conditional* and bilateral, “*If you obey my voice... then you shall be...*,” (Exodus 19:5-6). This is where many interpreters confuse covenants. The Mosaic covenant was due to be transcended by the New Covenant through Messiah. The Mosaic covenant is the whole context of the chapter where the writer to the Hebrews says, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” (Hebrews 8:13).

But the Abrahamic covenant remains in effect. As Paul makes clear in Romans 11:28b-29, “... *in regard to election they [the Jewish people] are dearly loved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.*” (ESV). I like the way the New Life Version translates it, “*But God still loves the Jews because He has chosen them and because of His promise to their early fathers. God does not change His mind when He chooses men and gives them His gifts.*” (NLV). As to the land promise, God is justified to providentially bring them back to the land through the Zionist movement in the 20th century—even though the people remained in unbelief—because it is an unconditional covenant, not based on works, but God’s own gracious purposes.

Into Egypt to Forge a Nation

After three generations, Abraham’s descendants began to absorb the language of Canaan, and some of them married Canaanite women. Then all of Jacob’s family went down to Egypt, preceded by Joseph, who was sent by God to prepare the way.

6

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Egypt was where they were incubated toward their birth as a nation. They had married Canaanite wives, who taught their children their own Canaanite tongue. Then during their 400 years in Egypt, this amalgamated with their ancestral Aramaic/Akkadian and morphed into early Hebrew, which Moses would have spoken.

The Greatness of Moses

We must ponder the greatness of Moses. It is difficult to assess whether Abraham or Moses is second only to Yeshua in terms of greatness. If the measure of greatness is influence for good on the world, then Abraham and Moses are second and third only to Jesus. Moses' influence was of a very different kind than Abraham's—Abraham is father to many nations; Moses's influence on the world is through the moral/ethical quality of the one chosen nation.

The Mycenaean Greeks (1600 B.C.- 1100 B.C.) were Late Bronze Age contemporaries of Moses, but there is little evidence they developed significantly in the fields of science and mathematics, certainly not to the degree the Egyptians had. Scripture states that Moses was educated in the best knowledge of the Egyptians and was raised as a prince of Egypt. He had a formidable intellect, to be sure. That in the providence of God, Moses had the very best education from the most advanced civilization of his day seems evident.

Moses did not write every word of the Torah, but he likely wrote a substantial part of it, and he definitely was the mind behind it. By the criterion of influence for the good on human civilization, consider the massive influence of the Five Books of Moses (the Torah), and the moral influence of the Ten Commandments on Western law and culture and even in Islamic civilization.

Consider the Jewish people themselves as to their influence on civilization, and then consider that Moses is the seminal mind God used to lay the sources of that influence. The West's "Judeo-Christian" civilization, the Bible, monotheism, its moral and ethical impact on the world is colossal. For one institution often taken for granted, we can think of the practice of the seven-day week; the Sabbath/Sunday; one day of

7

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rest after every six; this is from Moses. Arguably, no one has had more influence for good on humanity other than Jesus. One could argue the case for Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius; but the case would fall short. These others would fall short of Moses in terms of both their extensiveness of influence and of the moral quality of that influence.

Consider how Moses was a fully bi-cultural man. He was a Hebrew, but grew up as a prince of Egypt, fully acculturated into high Egyptian culture. He then returned and identified with his own Hebrew people again. He could bridge two cultures completely. And then of course, we consider his intimate communication with the God of the universe, his role as Lawgiver, bridging the gap as mediator between humans and God, foreshadowing Messiah as Mediator. Moses is unparalleled and surpassed only by Jesus.

Passover and Liberation Toward Nationhood

The Passover has a singular significance for the founding of the nation of Israel, and as a paradigm of redemption for world. In Thomas Cahill's words, it is one of "the gifts of the Jews" (1998). Of course, it is more accurately a gift of God mediated through the Jewish people. But the mediators are to be recognized and honored for their role, which entailed much suffering.

Michael Novak makes the case in his work, "The Universal Hunger for Liberty" (2004) that all humans yearn for freedom. The long Western tradition of valuing and championing forms of civil and political freedom (of speech, of religion, of the press of assembly) must acknowledge its sources are rooted here. The United States of America, the modern nation most famous for championing freedom, holds as a major symbol of those values—the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Upon it is inscribed a verse from the Torah, "*Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.*" (Leviticus 25:10). This was a liberty first proclaimed over the land of Israel.

Freedom is a major theme of Passover. The Jewish people call the Feast of Passover, “the Festival of our Freedom.” The Exodus from Egypt is “The Great Liberation.” It is called “The Festival of Our Freedom” in Jewish tradition. In Hebrew Scriptures, the theme of liberation is repeated over 120 times. The fact that in the Book of Exodus, chapter 1 spans a period of four generations, chapter 2 spans eighty years, and chapters 3 – 40 span just that one year of liberation relays the importance of the theme in the early founding of the nation.

Freedom is the condition to which all people aspire, and God’s act of freeing Israel from slavery is an example of the freedom He wants for all people. He wants all people to be free to be the people God created us to be. God desires all people to be free from slavery of any form, including slavery to sin. He wills that all humans be free to worship Him and live our lives in peace and without fear of abuse by others. Yet many modern conceptions of freedom are deficient in understanding the nature of true freedom. The predominant contemporary view is that freedom means the freedom to do whatever you want, rather than the freedom to be all we were meant to be by God’s design.

There is a gem of a saying from *Pirque Avoth* 6:2 (“Chapters of the Fathers”), a collection of Jewish tradition from early centuries A.D., which goes, “For there is no freedom without the learning of the Torah”... freedom exists only within the forms given by the Word of God. *Form without freedom* (the experience of Israel in slavery) can lurch into a chaos of *freedom without form* (like the anarchy and guillotines during the French Revolution).

True freedom exists only within God-given forms. *Freedom within form* is the model of the Exodus—the people of Israel were liberated from form without freedom, but not so as to be released into a freedom without form; but rather to gather at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Law of God, obedience to which would give them true freedom—*freedom within form*. Confirming that America’s best sources for freedom are from these Jewish and Biblical sources is the great prayer from the poem and later song, “America the Beautiful” by Katharine Lee Bates (1859-1929),

9

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“America, America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law”

At this point the people of Israel had the four elements (four “L’s” needed to comprise a nation): a **Lord** [*Yahweh*], **Land, Law, and Language**). They had the LORD since Abraham, the Land of Canaan promised to them (soon to be called “the Land of Israel”), the Torah given to them at Sinai, and the language of Hebrew had developed uniquely among them.

Hebrews and Later Jews

How did the Hebrews come to be called “Jews?” Abraham and his family and his descendants who went down to Egypt were not yet called “Jews.” Abraham was an Iraqi, not even Jewish, so you might ask, how can you say that Abraham is the father of the Jewish people? God changed the name of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, to “Israel” (Genesis 32: 27-28). Then Israel’s twelve sons became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, so the Israelites are called “the children of Israel.” After King Solomon, the nation of Israel divided into a northern kingdom called “Israel” or “Ephraim,” and a southern kingdom called “Judah,” named after Jacob’s son, Judah.

The Assyrians took the northern kingdom into captivity about 2700 years ago in (between 740 and 721 BC.) These children of Israel never returned and assimilated into the cultural melting pot of the societies in which they lived. Thus arose the legends of the “Ten Lost Tribes” or the “Lost Tribes of Israel.” Then in 586 B.C. the Babylonians finally destroyed Jerusalem and the first Temple. Then they took the Hebrews from Judah into captivity to Babylon for 70 years. This time is called the “Babylonian Exile” or “Babylonian Captivity.” The Jewish people were known as “Israelites” or “Hebrews” until

10

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they returned from the Babylonian Exile. Those who returned were from the southern Kingdom of Israelites dominated by the tribe of Judah. They came to be called “Jews” as a derivative of the name “Judah” (as it sounds: Judah – Jews).

Since then, it became customary to call the whole peoplehood descending from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his twelve sons— the Jewish people. Thus we, retrospectively, call Abraham the father of the Jewish people. “Judah” (ye-hu-dah) means “praise” in Hebrew. So “Jews” (ye-hu-dim) means “praisers of God” in the Hebrew language; this name expresses the character God intended them to have and who they are meant to be—those who praise the one true God. The character and destiny of the Jewish people is that they are praisers of God.

The Jewish people are thus not merely an ethnic or racial group nor merely a religious group. They are both of these, but more; they are a peoplehood. They are the only people with whom God made a covenant as a nation. Some Gentiles (people of other nations) have joined them by intermarriage over the years. Some families and individuals assimilated and lost their Jewish identity. But those Gentiles who joined the Jewish people and who wanted to identify with them, learned to live like them, and over time, their families became part of the Jewish peoplehood. So the Jewish people are one continuous peoplehood through history from Abraham to the present.

Jewish Worldview: Gifts to Western Civilization

A book you must read if you’re interested in the contribution of the Jewish people to the world is *The Gifts of the Jews* by Thomas Cahill (1998, Nan A. Talese, Doubleday, New York). Cahill is not an evangelical believer, but he has great insights into the Jewish people. One of the lasting gifts from the Jews to the world from this period was their view of time. Before them, all the peoples of the world had a cyclical, rather than linear, view of time. Time was like a snake catching its tail. Abraham, due to God’s revelation, was the first one to break out of that cycle. A long quote from Cahill:

“So, ‘wayyelekh Avram” (Abraham went”)- two of the boldest words in all literature. They signal a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility. Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going, but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his God. Out of Mesopotamia, home of canny, self-serving merchants who use their gods to ensure prosperity and favor, comes a wealthy caravan with no material goal. Out of ancient humanity, which from the dim beginnings of its consciousness has read its eternal verities in the stars, comes a party traveling by no known compass. Out of the human race, which knows in its bones that all its strivings must end in death, comes a leader who says he has been given an impossible promise. Out of mortal imagination comes a dream of something new, something better, something yet to happen, something in the future.

If we had lived in the second millennium BC, the millennium of Abraham, we could have canvassed all the nations of the earth, and what would they have said of Abraham’s journey? In most of Africa and Europe, where prehistoric animism was the norm, and artists were still carving and painting on stone the heavenly symbols of the great wheel of life and death, they would have laughed and Abraham’s madness and pointed to the heavens, where the life of earth had been plotted from all eternity. “His wife is barren as winter,” they would say. “A man cannot escape his fate.” The Egyptians would have shaken their heads in disbelief. “There is none born wise,” they would have said, repeating the advice of their most cherished wise men. “Copy the forefathers, teach him what has been said in the past and you will set a good example.” The early Greeks might have told Abraham the story of Prometheus, whose quest for the fire of the gods ended in personal disaster. “Do not overreach, they would advise. Come to resignation.” In India, he would have been told that time is black,

12

irrational, and merciless. “Do not set yourself to the task of accomplishing something in time, which is only the dominion of suffering, and which only returns again and again.” In China, the now anonymous sages whose thoughts would eventually influence the I Ching would caution that there is no purpose in journeys or any kind of earthly striving. “The great thing is to abolish time by escaping from the law of change.” The ancestors of the Maya in America would point to their circular calendars, which like those of the Chinese repeat the pattern of years in unvarying succession, and would explain that everything that has been comes around again, and that each man’s fate is fixed. On every continent, in every society, Abraham would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, and Siddharta would one day give their followers: “Do not journey, but sit. Compose yourself by the river of life. Meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow, on all that is past or passing or to come, until you have absorbed the pattern and have come to peace with the great wheel and with your own death and the death of all things in the corruptible sphere.” (pp.63-64).

That was Abraham’s world. But he said, “No. God has called me, and I’m going answer his call.” In answering God’s Voice, and beginning the journey, he left the world of “the Wheel” behind. Out of that response came the Western view of linear time with all its values: that time has a beginning and an end, that it’s going somewhere, that progress is possible, that we have unique destinies, because the One and Only High God, the Creator of all things so planned it that way. This is a major contribution Abraham and the Jewish people bequeathed to the world through the Hebrew Scriptures.

13

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Ancient Mayan Circular Calendar

Assault by the World: into the First Exile

After they entered the land of Canaan, they gave up nomadic existence for an agricultural, peasant, sedentary existence. Their culture also changed as they began to absorb influences from the surrounding peoples. We see Canaanite influence in names like "Leviathan" (e.g. Job 41:1, Psalms 7;14), and in images like Yahweh riding upon the clouds in Psalm 68:4 which was used earlier in Ugaritic mythic poems about Baal and Anath. They absorbed and accommodated to religious activity from Canaan: fertility cults, worship of the Baalim and the Ashtoroth, even human sacrifice. The conquerors were themselves conquered by the culture of the conquered people. Not all cultural activity is good. Israel's involvement in pagan practices and idolatry eventually brought God's judgment and exile from the land.

The life of the people of Israel in the land is a story of moral decline. The loose confederation of tribes under a theocracy (God as King), under the judges gave way to

a monarchy; the people pressed for a king, even though it was not ideal for them. Samuel the Prophet warned the people about the conscription to his army and taxes that would come with a king. The people insisted, so God gave in to them, saying to Samuel, “they have not rejected you, they have rejected me.” The kings were a disaster. Once the kingdom split, the Northern Kingdom has no good kings; all were bad. The southern Kingdom had a few good kings (Hezekiah, Josiah).

The story and reign of King David, despite his sin and failures is remembered as a Golden Age for Israel. David is the storied king and progenitor of the coming Messianic King.

David’s son King Solomon was storied for his wisdom. The words “wise” and ‘wisdom” appear 21 times in I Kings chapters 1-11. Yet after Solomon’s wisdom fails, these words never again appear in the second half of I Kings. Israel is shown that her hope does not lie in human wisdom, like the Greeks hoped from their “philosopher kings.” Her hope must be in Yahweh Himself.

The story of Elijah and Elisha is central to this period of the kings (their story is as long as the Gospel of Mark). There was a titanic struggle for the true worship of Yahweh against idolatry. Without the ministries of these two prophets, Israel would have sunk beyond recovery into degraded idolatry and immorality. Even with their ministry and the prophetic movement that followed them, warning them and calling them back to faithfulness to the Torah, Israel was intransigent and unrepentant until finally the ax of Yahweh just fell— He allowed them to be conquered by their enemies, the Babylonian empire. They invaded the land of Israel in 586 B.C. They burned and destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed the First Temple built by Solomon, and tens of thousands of

15

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Israelites were killed and taken into exile. This was the end of the First Jewish Commonwealth in the land of Israel.

This was the lowest point, the nadir for Israel, a calamity of the first order. When in exile, this Psalm 137 expresses their utter sorrow and great loss:

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
² On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
³ For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴ How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?
⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill!
⁶ Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!

Summary: Language, Learning and Legacy of the Era.

The new language acquired by the Israelites in this first era is **Hebrew** (Abraham spoke Aramaic and his grandson Jacob's sons were beginning to speak various Canaanite languages before their descent into Egypt). The **legacy** to the world (or gift to the world) and **lasting effects** on culture of the Jewish people of this first period are: the **Hebrew Scriptures**, which were largely, though not completely, formed by the end of this period. The post-exilic literature (Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah,

Malachi) was yet to be written and the canon (list of authoritative books) was yet to be settled.

Another legacy/gift to the world is ***the linear view of time*** (*most of the world prior to this held to a cyclical view of time, that hindered progress and hope*). God's call to and covenant with Abraham was a promise of something in the future. Abraham's obedience to the Voice of God, took him on a journey out of the cyclical view of time into the linear view of time. This gave hope for something new and better in the ancient world. Abraham was called out of the old views of fate and of a human destiny determined by the constellations of the stars at one's birth, and of the Great Wheel of Life and Death, as expressed in the teachings of karma and reincarnation.

Quotes

Think about how these quotes apply to the essay you just read. Write out an insight you received:

"Christianity is faith; Judaism is fate." (Unknown origin)

"We owe to the Jews a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be the most precious possession of mankind, worth, in fact, the fruit of all other wisdom and learning together."
—Winston Churchill

"In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he personally had gone forth from Egypt"
—The Passover Haggadah

*“If there is no bread, there is no Torah;
If there is no Torah, there is no bread”
—Pirkei Avot 3:21*

The Biblical Age (Israel and Canaan) - 2000BC- 300BC

Review of the Three Developments of Each Era:

- 1) **Language:** adoption of a new one.
- 2) **Learning:** Involvement in new realms of cultural activity
- 3) **Legacy:** to the world and/or the retained **Lasting Effects** (on the character or culture of the Jewish People).

Fill in the blanks :

1) Language(s) - _____

2) Learning - _____

3) Lasting Effects/Legacy – _____

Jewish Humor – The Core Bulwark against Assimilation- Circumcision and the Mark of the True Believer

“A young Jewish scholar left Russia and went to America. After many years he returned to the old country. His old mother could hardly recognize him. He was dressed in the very latest fashion.

“Where is your beard?” his mother asked, troubled.

“Aw Mama, Nobody wears a beard in America,” he said.

“But at least you keep the Sabbath?”

“Mama, In America almost everybody works on the Sabbath.”

The old mother sighed.

“And how is it with the food?” she asked hopefully.

“My Mama,” answered the son, apologetically, “it is too much trouble to be kosher (keep the Jewish food laws) in America.”

The old mother hesitated. Then, in a quiet voice, she whispered,

“Tell your old mother, son— are you still circumcised?”

Reflection: this story/joke shows the eroding effects of modernity on Jewish identity to the dominant Gentile environment, a challenge that all Jewish people experience, especially in the West. This young scholar left the Jewish community, and was also abandoning his Jewish identity, assimilating into modern American culture, down to the core of his identity, beyond the cultural to the physical (or at least so feared his mother).

Circumcision is the core and ineradicable mark of the covenant, enduring and personal, for every Jewish man. This was part of God's intention in the covenant of circumcision—to impart an indelible mark of the covenant on His covenant people, to preserve Jewish identity throughout time. It is the first rite of passage in the Jewish life cycle, a fundamental practice of Judaism, functioning to transmit the heritage of election and covenant over the generations.

The Apostle Paul had to warn Jewish believers that since the coming of the Messiah, there is no salvation or salvific merit in circumcision (Galatians 5:1-12). Nevertheless, Paul took Timothy and had him circumcised to demonstrate faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham (Acts 16:1-3). Messianic Jews today demonstrate their continuity with the Abrahamic covenant and their solidarity with the Jewish peoplehood by continuing the 4000-year-old celebration of the rite of passage of “Brit Milah”/”Bris”- on the eighth day of the child's life.

An application to all believers in Yeshua is as follows— If you are a non-Jewish follower of Yeshua, Is there a mark upon your life, for life? one that is indelible, that cannot be taken away? ...one that will be proof you are one of the covenant people of God?

In the New Covenant Scriptures (New Testament), water baptism is given as a sign of the New Covenant, and is called a “circumcision of the heart,” ...

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Messiah, having been buried with him in baptism,...” (Colossians 2:11-13). This was what the Hebrew prophets also preached, *“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;”* (Jeremiah 4:4).

The cutting instrument is not finally the circumcision knife, but the cross, removing not merely the foreskin, but the whole of “the flesh”(Romans 6:6; 8:6-10). The outward sign was to express the inward reality. So, water baptism (immersion) is the outward symbol of a heart that is surrendered to the Lordship of Messiah Yeshua, embraced death to the sinful nature and the life in the Spirit. Yeshua taught that such a total surrender to him would bring true life,

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark 8:35-37).

One who has surrendered to Yeshua, is transformed and enabled to live a life of *agape* love. This quality of life is the mark of one who has experienced the circumcision of the heart. Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book in the 1970s entitled, *“The Mark of the Christian”* in which he stated,

“Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts.” ...

“At the close of his ministry, Jesus looks forward to his death on the cross, the open tomb and the ascension. Knowing that he is about to leave, Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to come. It is here that he makes clear what will be the distinguishing mark of the Christian:

*‘My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this** all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’* (John 13:33-35). The mark of the true follower of Jesus is genuine *agape* (self-sacrificial) love.”

Thus, Messianic Jews (*who bear both the circumcision in the flesh as all Jews as the mark of the Abrahamic covenant, and also the circumcision of the heart in Messiah Yeshua*) and Gentile followers of Jesus, or “Christians” from the nations (*who bear only the circumcision of the heart*) are one in the Body of Messiah. We are together the

20

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people of the circumcision of the heart. Though there is diversity within the one People of God, we are finally a unity, one in Messiah through the circumcision of Messiah, evidenced in His love in us.

Accompanying Stories/Studies to Period #1:

“Our Father Abraham”

“The Abrahamic Covenant—It’s Sign and the Promise of the Land”

“Abraham and the Messianic Promise”

“Jacob Wrestles with God and is Named “Israel”

“Moses Leads to Nationhood & Passover”

“The Story of Ruth: The Gentile Woman Who Became a Mother in Israel, Ancestor of the Jewish Messiah, and a Model for All Gentiles”

“Purim - Esther and the Salvation of the Jewish People”