

Chapter

1

The Early Israelites

Adapting to a Changing World

investigate

- How did our ancestors adapt to their new surroundings?
- What made it possible for them to maintain their religious identities?
- How have their lives influenced ours?

Key Words and Places

Judges	Babylonian Kingdom
Philistines	Exile
Jerusalem	Prophets
Holy Temple	Diaspora
Israel	Persians
Judah	Second Temple
Assyria	



The BIG Picture

Every year, when you enter a new grade, your life changes. You have new teachers, classmates, subjects, and lunch choices, maybe even a new school. To adjust, you may need to change. You may need to become more disciplined in studying, or be less picky about what you eat, or wake up earlier to get to school on time.

Just like individuals, communities often face the need to change. In fact, Jewish history is filled with such situations. It began with our ancestors. At first, local chieftains led the Israelites. When they could no longer provide adequate leadership, the Israelites united under a king. Over time, the Israelite kingdom was built, split in two, and destroyed. Many Israelites were forced out of our homeland. Some returned to rebuild it, while others continued to live in foreign lands.

But despite the numerous adaptations, our ancestors maintained their core religious beliefs and identities. While other ancient peoples were conquered, absorbed into the larger culture, and disappeared, the Israelites continued to survive and thrive. How the Jewish people continue to adapt and flourish is what this book is all about.

1200–1050 BCE

- Settlement of Canaan by Israelites, according to Bible

about 950 BCE

- First Temple built

928 BCE

- Kingdom of Israel divided into two ministates: Israel and Judah

776 BCE

- **World History:** First Olympic Games held in Greece





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Early sraelite society was tribal. A village could be made up of a single clan, and a group of clans formed a tribe. Local **judges**, or chieftains, ruled over the tribes. Often, one judge had authority over a single tribe. Judges were responsible for settling disputes between people and also led their tribes in times of war.

But the neighboring **Philistines** developed superior military technology, such as iron spears and chariots, and began pushing into sraelite territory. The sraelites needed a more centralized leadership than the local judges could provide. They needed one leader who could unite them in their fight for survival.

And so, the Bible tells us, at God's command, Saul was anointed the first king of srael. But Saul was more like a tribal chief than a king. The territory he controlled was not very large and he had no palace or capital city. Although he was a great warrior, Saul was unable to unite the sraelites.

722 BCE

- Northern kingdom of Israel destroyed by Assyrians

586 BCE

- Judah defeated by Babylonians; Jerusalem and Temple burned to the ground

539 BCE

- Babylonian Empire falls to Persians

about 516 BCE

- Second Temple dedicated in Jerusalem

445 BCE

- Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem; helps Jews rebuild Judah



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The Book of Judges tells of a judge named Deborah: “Deborah, a prophet and the wife of Lappidoth, led Israel at that time. She would sit under the Palm of Deborah...in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come up to her for judgments” (Judges 4:4–5).

When the Israelites were attacked by a Canaanite king, they turned to Deborah. She chose a man named Barak to lead the Israelite army, but he didn’t want to go without her help. Together, they led the Israelites to victory.

How might Deborah’s judgments have been influenced by the Israelite belief in God’s concern for people?



Upon her victory in battle, Deborah the prophet sang, “Hear O kings...I will sing to Adonai...the God of Israel” (Judges 5:3).

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It was Israel’s second king, David, who succeeded in uniting the Israelites. David fought back the Philistines and also captured the city of **Jerusalem**, establishing it as the kingdom’s political and religious capital. During the more than thirty years of his reign, King David unified a bitterly divided people and developed Israel into one of the strongest powers in the region. He fought back the Philistines so that they never again posed a threat to Israel’s survival.

The kingdom grew even stronger under the reign of David’s son, King Solomon. Solomon centralized Israel’s government in Jerusalem and increased its wealth and status by developing Israel into a center of international trade.

According to the Bible’s book Kings, Solomon fortified many cities and built a wall around Jerusalem. However, he is probably best remembered for his huge construction projects. The most famous was in Jerusalem the **Holy Temple**, or Beit Hamidash, which was completed around 950 B.E.

Despite his many accomplishments, King Solomon’s reign created religious conflicts and economic problems that weakened the kingdom. When he died, the united kingdom of Israel cracked into two ministates **Israel** in the north and **Judah** in the south. Without a central government and a strong military, each struggled to survive in a dangerous region. Their struggle increased as a new power arose the kingdom of **Assyria**, which was in the northeast modern day Iraq.



The Book of Samuel tells the story of how, as a young man, David slew the great Philistine warrior Goliath of Gath using only his shepherd's slingshot. The Philistines panicked at the sight of their fallen warrior and they retreated.

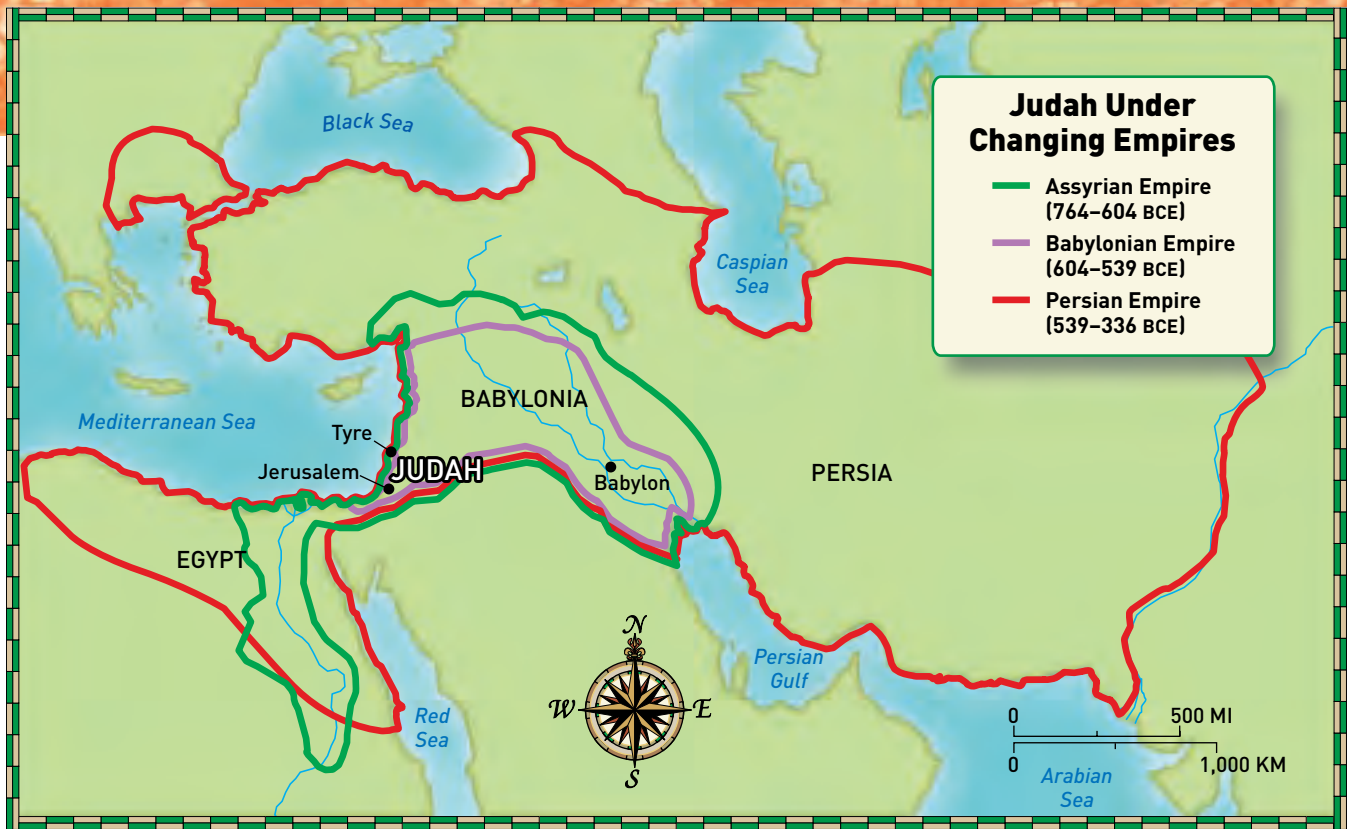
Israel and Judah banded together with other small states in the region to prevent the Assyrians from taking control. Unfortunately, they could not withstand the might of the Assyrian army. In 722 B.C.E., the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed. According to the Book of Kings, more than twenty seven thousand Israelites were deported to the interior of the Assyrian Empire. The southern kingdom of Judah was spared when its king agreed to pay the conquering Assyrians a ransom in silver and gold.

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The Assyrian kingdom was eventually brought down by rebellious states outside of Judah in the east. But Judah was still sandwiched between two competing powers: Egypt in the south and the **Babylonian kingdom** in the northeast. In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, swept into Judah. He forced King Jehoiachin and the kingdom's spiritual



This stone sculpture shows an Assyrian military officer bringing two Judeans from the town of Lachish to the Assyrian king.



When the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BCE and, later on, when the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, many Israelites were exiled to what is now modern-day Iraq and Iran.

leaders and leading citizens out of Judah into **exile**. In addition, he levied heavy taxes on the remaining population. When Judah rebelled a few years later, the Babylonian army returned and laid siege to Jerusalem. In the summer of 586 BCE, Jerusalem and the temple were burned to the ground.

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had not just devastated a city and destroyed the Holy temple—he also destroyed a way of life. For the people of Judah, family, work, and religion had all revolved around the land. Their families had tilled the soil and then paid tribute to God by bringing the fruits of their labor to the temple in Jerusalem. Now deprived of their temple, land, and leaders, they had no place to worship

God, no place to farm, and no one to lead them. The impoverished people of Judah and the devastated exiles were like homeless orphans.

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Before the exile, the **prophets**, such as Amos and Isaiah, had criticized the people for their faithlessness and immoral ways. Now the prophets comforted the Israelites with a message of hope. The God of Israel had not been defeated by the Babylonian gods, Jeremiah taught. Instead, God had used Nebuchadnezzar as a tool to punish the Israelites for their sinful ways. The prophet Ezekiel held out hope that

Famous ★ FIGURES

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In the difficult years between Solomon’s death and the Temple’s destruction, “prophets” arose among the Israelites. The prophets saw themselves as called upon by God to speak God’s word. They taught God’s ethical teachings—such as the values of justice, honesty, and tzedakah. Sometimes, they also predicted the future and gave kings political advice.

What would you do if a president or other politician in your country were abusing power and behaving unethically? If you were a prophet, you would speak up. That made the job of prophet dangerous. The prophet Elijah experienced this danger firsthand.

King Ahab of Israel and his wife, Queen Jezebel, enriched themselves at the expense of their subjects. They also encouraged Israelites to worship idols and the Canaanite god Ba’al alongside God. Elijah spoke up, criticizing Ahab and Jezebel. By doing so he took an enormous risk. Unlike previous kings who had respected the prophets and treated them as trusted advisers, Ahab called Elijah “my enemy” and a “troubler of Israel.” Elijah was forced to flee the northern kingdom of Israel.

How can Elijah’s courage be a model for you? For example, if you saw a bully taking advantage of another student, what would you do?

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“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, as we remembered Zion [Jerusalem].”

These famous words from Psalm 137 express the exiles’ heartbreak. How could God have allowed the Holy Land and Temple—God’s dwelling place—to be destroyed? Many still believed that specific gods had power over specific places. So, they questioned if it was possible to worship the God of Israel outside of Israel. Could the God of Israel hear them from far away, from the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates?

Far from all that was familiar to them and living among strangers, the Israelites were often unhappy, even fearful. Have you ever been far from home, for example at camp, or ever moved to a new neighborhood or attended a new school? What did it feel like the first few days or months? Why?

What helped you adapt to your new surroundings?



Today, the prophets continue to comfort us. His sign in Israel's Ben Gurion Airport includes Jeremiah's words of hope, "our children shall return to their country." Jeremiah reminds us that the Jewish people wait for the return of Israeli soldiers who are missing in action.

the exiles would return to Israel, saying "God has said 'don't be afraid ... my people, I shall bring you back to the land of Israel. I shall put my breath in you, and you will live again.'"

There was another great prophet of the exile, whose name has been lost to history. His prophecies make up the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah. His prophet assured the people that God would hear their prayers in exile.

God, he also taught, was the God of all people, regardless of their religion or where they lived. "Our redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called 'God of all the Earth.'" Isaiah.

Today, we take it for granted that people can worship God from anywhere. But in the time of exile, it was a new idea. It was an idea that would help the Jewish people survive and even prosper in a new land.

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For over twenty five hundred years, many Jews have lived in the **Diaspora**, or countries outside of Israel. In fact, living in the Diaspora feels normal to Jews today. But for the Jews in Babylonia, it was a huge adjustment, much as it would be a staggering change for us if most of the people living in the United States or Canada were sent to live in Latin America.

The prophets recognized the importance of helping the exiles return to the normal routines of life. Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the Jews in Babylon. In God's name, he urged them: Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruits. Take wives and bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease in numbers. And see peace for the city to which God has exiled you, and pray to God on its behalf for in its peace you will have peace. Jeremiah .

The exiles took Jeremiah's words to heart.

They set up communities within the larger non Jewish population, taking part in business and even politics.

In 539 B C, the Babylonian Empire fell to the **Persians**. Fortunately for the Jews, the Persian ruler, King Cyrus, went out of his way to show respect to his new subjects' gods. To gain support and favor with the Jews, Cyrus permitted the exiles to return to Judah and rebuild the temple.

Despite their joy in hearing this news, most Jews chose not to resettle in Judah. The journey would be dangerous, and life in Judah was difficult now that it had become an isolated province of a large empire. In contrast, Babylon was a thriving capital city.



Who might have used this ancient pitcher and necklace? Perhaps someone your age poured water from the pitcher. Perhaps someone who returned to Judah from Babylonia wore the necklace.

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The first Jews to return to Judah began rebuilding the Beit Hamidash. The **Second Temple** was completed in about 516 B C, seventy years after the destruction of the first temple the temple that Solomon built. The dedication was celebrated with great joy. It was also touched with sadness for those old enough to remember the splendor of the original temple.

The modest building that now stood in its place paled in comparison.

The next fifty years were difficult for the people of Judah. The Persians were willing to let Jews live in the land, but they would never permit an independent Jewish government. Judah remained poor and sparsely populated.

In 520 B C, Judah was invigorated when a scribe and religious leader named Ezra led nearly fifteen hundred Jews back from Babylonia. Ezra was determined to revitalize the religious life of Judah. Empowered by the

Persian government, he appointed judges and officials to teach the laws of the Torah and to make rulings based on them.

Ezra sent word to the Jewish community in Babylonia about the difficult conditions in Judah. Nehemiah, who was the highest ranking Jewish official in the Persian court, was disturbed by what he heard. He convinced the Persian king to make him governor of Judah. Shortly after Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he set the entire city to work as an emergency force to rebuild Jerusalem's destroyed walls. No longer would the city be raided or threatened by neighboring enemies.

Nehemiah also rebuilt Judah's economy. He ordered a one-time cancellation of all debts and restored the annual temple taxes. Nehemiah understood that economic revival would require making Jerusalem into an urban center.

The city's population was too small to support the changes Nehemiah wanted to make. So he resettled 10 percent of Judah's rural population in the city.

Rebuilding Jerusalem

After the Babylonian exile, Judah made a strong comeback under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. The population of Jerusalem increased and was revitalized. Not only had the Jews figured out how to survive in the Diaspora but they also demonstrated an unbreakable tie to the land of Israel.

But then as now, empires rise and fall, and Jewish communities often are deeply affected by these shifts in power. The rise of an extraordinary leader in the Diaspora was about to bring Jews under the control of the Roman Empire. New challenges were on the horizon.

Reading Torah

Reading Torah aloud in synagogue is a time-honored tradition today. But at one time it was an innovation. It began with a public Torah reading by Ezra in 444 BCE.

Imagine the scene: Massive groups of people come to Jerusalem and gather around a wooden platform. Slowly, Ezra makes his way up the platform. As he opens the scroll, men, women, and children rise as one. The crowd hangs on every word Ezra reads from the Torah—these are the beliefs that unite the Jewish people. "Amen, amen," the people cry.

Because the Judeans spoke Aramaic, they needed translators to help them understand the Hebrew text of the Torah. Similarly, we now use English translations of the Torah. Describe another way that your synagogue helps its members participate in Jewish life.



Why do you think we continue to read from the Torah as part of our synagogue prayer services? Who reads from the Torah in your synagogue—the rabbi, cantor, or congregants?



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The Babylonians did not discriminate against the Jews because of their religion or nationality. This helped the Jews achieve economic success. It also encouraged them to adopt the culture of their new land.

Some Jews not only adapted to their surroundings, but also abandoned Judaism. Still, many remained faithful. Religious rituals such as observing Shabbat, keeping kosher, and performing a circumcision, or *brit milah*, took on new importance. In addition, Jewish communities came together by gathering for communal prayer at city gates or near lakes and rivers. These practices eventually gained widespread acceptance. They further unified the Jews and strengthened their religious and cultural identities.

1. What secular holidays or traditions help you identify with all the citizens of your country?

2. What religious holidays or traditions help you identify with other Jews?

3. Imagine a Jewish community living one hundred years from now. Describe one belief or tradition you think they are likely to have in common with you. Why do you think so?
