

## *Chapter 9: Historical Overview of Old Testament Times*

### **Key Terms**

- Mesopotamia: the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers
- patriarch: one of the primary ancestors of Israel
- Assyrian Empire: major power in the ancient Near East ca. 1076–612 BC
- Egyptian Empire: major power in the ancient Near East ca. 2000–1200 BC
- Babylonian Empire: major power in the ancient Near East ca. 612–539 BC
- Persian Empire: major power in the ancient Near East ca. 539–332 BC
- Late Bronze Age: period lasting from 1500 to 1200 BC during which major ancient Near Eastern powers were in a constantly fluctuating stalemate
- Iron Age I: period lasting from 1200–1000 BC during which a power vacuum existed in the ancient Near East, allowing for the rise of the Israelite nation

### **Key Ideas**

- The establishment of Israel occurred in real time and space.
- Various empires constantly vied for control of the ancient Near East.
- International politics played a significant role in the history of Israel and Judah.

### **Chapter Summary**

The Mesopotamian culture was founded by the Sumerians. Sargon I, known as the first empire builder, ended the rule of the Sumerians. His rule was in turn ended by the Gutian people, who dominated the region for the next century. Under Ur-Nammu, the city of Ur broke the monopoly of the Gutians and began a revival of Sumerian culture. Ur was eventually overthrown by the Elamites. The history of the patriarchs is set against this backdrop. However, there is much uncertainty as to the exact dating of Abraham's life and travels, as well as the identity of the city "Ur" mentioned in the biblical text.

After the fall of Ur, the city-states gained more control and power over their local regions. The city-state of Babylon, comprised primarily of Amorites under the rule of Hammurabi, eventually rose to gain dominance over the other city-states. Hammurabi is best known for his collection of legal decisions, the most extensive yet found in the ANE. After Hammurabi's death, the Babylonian Empire began to decline until the city was sacked by the Hittites. The destruction of Babylon led again to the rise of city-states, which primarily controlled their own geographic regions.

The Old Kingdom in Egypt, roughly concurrent with the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia, tremendously impacted Egyptian culture and politics. The patriarchs first came into contact with Egypt during the reunification of Egypt under Mentuhotep and (later) Amenemhet I. The enslavement of the Israelites probably took place after the Egyptian defeat of the Hyksos. Rameses II of the thirteenth century is often posited as the pharaoh of the exodus.

During the Late Bronze Age, the Syro-Palestine corridor became a much-desired and fought-for area because of its strategic position. International politicking, primarily concentrated in Syria, left the Israelites largely free to pursue their settlement of Canaan.

The beginning of the Iron Age brought the fall of the Hittites and the decline of the Egyptians and Assyrians. This decline was partly caused by the emergence of the Sea Peoples, including the Philistines. The Iron Age also brought technological development in the form of iron tools and weapons. The power vacuum resulting from the decline in international politics allowed the emergence of smaller empires, such as that of Israel under David and Solomon.

During the judges period, Samson was able to limit the control of the Philistines. Upon the death of Saul, the Philistines gained control of a large area of Canaan. David, however, successfully regained control of the Israelite territory, and he went on to conquer most of Syro-Palestine. Though Solomon inherited a substantial empire, he achieved very few military successes himself; upon his death, the Israelite empire nearly collapsed. During the period of their existence as separate states, Israel and Judah alternated between conflict and peace. The eighth century closed with Judah and Israel both enjoying autonomy and prosperity, but suffering from spiritual decadence.

Under the leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III, Assyria rose to become the first "world class" empire in history. During this time, the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated, Samaria destroyed, and its inhabitants deported. The Bible records how the Assyrian king Sennacherib attempted to move against Judah, but was defeated by Yahweh, who fought on behalf of faithful Hezekiah.

The next two centuries witnessed the decline of the Assyrian Empire and the subsequent rise of the Babylonians, led by Nebopolassar. The final defeat of Assyria was carried out by Nebuchadnezzar, who subsequently became the king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The kingdom of Judah came under the complete control of the Babylonians in 587 BC, when Jerusalem was completely destroyed and its inhabitants exiled.

With the death of Nebuchadnezzar came the decline of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which was followed by the Medo-Persian Empire under Cyrus. Under his rule, the Israelite exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. Under the sponsorship of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls. The Persian Empire came to an end with the lightning-quick conquest by Alexander the Great in 331 BC.