

## CHAPTER 2

# The Ship, the Sword, and the Book: Western Asia, ca. 1500–400 B.C.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Describe the Canaanites' and Phoenicians' societies and explain their historical significance.
2. Discuss Assyria as an imperial power.
3. Explain the accomplishments of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.
4. Discuss the main characteristics of the Persian Empire and its leading religion, Zoroastrianism.
5. Compare and contrast the Assyrian and Persian Empires' military capabilities and imperial policies governing conquered regions.
6. Define ethical monotheism and trace its development among the ancient Israelites.
7. Summarize the political history of the Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews until c. 599 B.C.
8. Explain the concept of the Covenant and its significance in Hebrew history.
9. Compare the Jewish tradition and Zoroastrianism.

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

- I. Traders Invent the Alphabet: Canaanites and Phoenicians, ca. 1400–450 B.C.  
Canaanites were the cradle of Western writing.
  - A. The Canaanite City-States, ca. 1400–1200 B.C.
    1. The cosmopolitan, trading city of Ugarit connected Cyprus and Anatolia with land routes to Babylonia.
    2. In an alphabet, each symbol indicates a distinct sound.
    3. Though not the oldest, the alphabet invented in Ugarit became the basis of subsequent Greek, Roman, and Western alphabets.
  - B. The Phoenicians, ca. 1050–450 B.C.
    1. Heirs to Ugarit, destroyed by the Sea Peoples, the Phoenicians were master merchants and seamen.
    2. The Phoenicians planted colonies throughout the Mediterranean, the most important being Carthage.
    3. Derived from the Ugaritic script, the Phoenician alphabet became the basis of the Greek alphabet, ca. 800 B.C.
    4. Ancient sources say that child sacrifice was a common practice among the Phoenicians.
    5. Though political independence was lost in 750 B.C., Phoenician culture survived and the Phoenicians spread aspects of their civilization to the Western Mediterranean.

- II. Assyrians, Neo-Babylonians, and Persians, ca. 1200–330 B.C.  
 Military and administrative innovations produced three great multi-ethnic empires, which promoted the idea of universal kingship and bequeathed it to the West, and to the Middle East.
- A. Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians
1. Building on the remnants of an earlier state, the Assyrians were the first to conquer and rule both Mesopotamia and Egypt.
  2. The Assyrians combined iron weaponry, cavalry, superb organization, and ruthlessness.
  3. Neo-Babylonians and Medes destroyed the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.
  4. King Nebuchadnezzar II revives Babylonia and conquers Judah.
    - a) Destroys Solomon's Temple, carries temple treasures to Babylon
    - b) Exterminates the immediate members of Judea's royal family
    - c) Deports leading Judean families to Babylon: the Babylonian Captivity
  5. Neo-Babylonians develop advanced astronomy for purposes of divination (astrology).
- B. Building the Persian Empire
1. Persians overthrew their Mede rulers and within twenty years conquered an expanding empire that lasted two hundred years.
    - a) Cyrus I "the Great" (559-530 B.C.)
    - b) Cambyses (530-522 B.C.)
    - c) Darius I "the Great" (522-486 B.C.)
  2. Reasons for Achaemenid success
    - a) Military prowess based on an ethics of "riding, hunting and telling the truth," a conglomerate army, a crack infantry core, an Assyrian cavalry, and a Phoenician navy
    - b) Generosity and tolerance in the treatment of enemies and subjects
      - i) Yet rebellion was met with destruction, mass killings, and deportations
    - c) Skillful organization included *satrapies* under royal supervision, good roads, and a messenger system
    - d) Rule of law and prosperity
    - e) Common language (Aramaic)
- C. The King of Kings
1. Persian weakness included the dependence on royal charisma, the persistence of native resentment, and the dangers of insubordinate or rebellious satraps and satrapies.
  2. Exalted royal authority (king of kings) to counter rebellious tendencies
    - a) Persian rulers claimed a mandate from Ahura Mazda
- D. Zoroastrianism
1. Highly ethical religion that influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
  2. A single god, Ahura Mazda, who begets the Beneficent Spirit and the Hostile Spirit, one who chooses the truth and the other who chooses the lie
  3. Centrality of ethical dualism: each person must choose between good and evil
  4. Each individual will be resurrected and judged at the Last Judgment.
    - a) Zoroastrianism is rich in eschatology and apocalyptic
  5. Subsequently, Zoroastrianism was led by *magi* and added more deities.

## III. Israel, ca. 1500–400 B.C.

The monotheism of the ancient Hebrews distinguished them from their much more powerful neighbors and would eventually give rise to modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## A. The Hebrew Bible as a Historical Record

1. Some scholars view the Hebrew Bible as man-made and based on sources dating to 1000 B.C.
2. The books of the Bible consist of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.
3. The covenant between God and his people is central.
4. There are influences from the broader ambient culture and literature of the Middle East, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Zoroastrian influences.

## B. The Emergence of Hebrew Monotheism, ca. 1500–600 B.C.

1. Some scholars believe that the actual history of the Hebrews differs from the Biblical account and that the Hebrews were a mix of invaders, nomadic shepherds, and an underclass.
2. The Israelites gradually accepted the revelation of monotheism, with persistent resistance from polytheists, sometimes even from the Kings themselves.
3. Reconstructed history from Abraham to the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon
4. The Ten Commandments were supplemented with hundreds of other laws in the Deuteronymic Code.

## C. Exile and Return, 598–ca. 400 B.C.

1. The Babylonian Captivity created a cultural awareness among the far-flung Jewish communities of the Diaspora.
2. The Judeans, henceforth known as Jews, were permitted to return and rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem, but for the first time, being Jewish was not tied to place of residence.

## D. The People of the Covenant

1. Basic Israelite political theory: equality, limited government, and rule of law
2. Equality limited to men, but women were not insignificant
3. Law took intention into consideration, a form of commutative justice
4. Law and Tradition made a distinction between power and righteousness

**LECTURE TOPICS**

1. Develop the theme of derivative civilizations lying between the two original civilizations, Mesopotamia and Egypt.
2. Compare the three empires of this section: Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian. Use the basic categories of the economy, the social system, politics, and intellectual/cultural achievements.
3. Outline the history of the ancient Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews and briefly continue the story until the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70.
4. Examine sections of the Hebrew Bible that supplement the discussions in the textbook. This could include a comparison of the two stories of creation (Genesis 1 and 2), the Fall and its consequences, the Nephilim (Genesis), various covenants such as the covenant between God and humanity after the Flood and the covenant between David and Jonathan, the lifestyle laws in Leviticus, and the Book of Job.
5. Consider the role of revelation, inspiration, kingship, and prophecy in Ancient Israel from the Prophet Samuel onwards.
6. Consider how the story of Ruth is representative of the prophetic traditions of the Jews.

7. Supplement the textbook's discussion of monotheism with an explanation of the Hebrew concept of a transcendent God and the concept's historical significance, especially with relation to human attitudes towards nature.
8. Compare and contrast the Assyrian and Persian approaches to creating and governing a universal empire that is made up of diverse peoples and cultures and religions and languages.
10. Compare and contrast the Greek sources for the Assyrian and Persian Empires with the Assyrian and Persian sources, which is significantly a comparison between the analytical narratives of the Greeks with the monumental inscriptions of the Assyrians and Persians, although there are local chronicles from the ancient Middle East that were unknown to the Greeks.
11. Scientific and cultural contributions of the ancient Middle Eastern Empires of the Canaanites, Phoenicians, Assyrians, Persians, Neo-Babylonians, and Israelites

## SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Armstrong, Karen A., *History of God: The 4000-year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 1993.
2. Bible in translation: *The Tanakh, Stone Edition: the Torah, Prophets, and Writings* (Artscroll Mesorah, 1997). A widely used Hebrew/English edition of the scriptures, preferred by Orthodox Jews.
3. Boyce, Mary, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 2001
4. Buber, Martin, *The Prophetic Faith*.
5. Curtis, J.E. and Tallis. N., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia*, 2005.
6. Flanders, Henry Jackson et al., *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1988.
7. Friedman, Richard E., *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 1997.
8. Ginzberg, Louis, *The Legends of the Bible*, 1909. Still a classic.
9. Ginzberg, Louis, *The Legends of the Jews*, seven volumes, 1909.
10. Goldstein, Jonathan, *Peoples of an Almighty God: Competing Religions in the Ancient World*, 2002.
11. Grant, Michael, *History of Ancient Israel*, 1997.
12. Kriwaczek, Paul, *In Search of Zarathustra*, 2003.
13. Myers, Carol, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 1988
14. Negev, Avraham, ed., *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, 2005.
15. Rawlinson, George, *Phoenicia: History of a Civilization*, 2005.
16. Rizza, Alfredo, *The Assyrians and the Babylonians: History and Treasures of an Ancient Civilization*, 1997.
17. Van de Mieroop, Marc, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 2nd edition, 2007.
18. Saggs, H.W.F., *The Might that was Assyria*, 1990.

**RESEARCH/CLASSROOM DEBATE/DISCUSSION TOPICS**

1. Further research and discuss the Phoenicians: who were they and what were their significant contributions?
2. What were the causes of the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire? Was it inherently unstable? Note that it survived longer than the United States has been in existence.
3. Lead a classroom discussion on the Greek sources for the Assyrian and Persian Empires with the Assyrian and Persian sources, which is significantly a comparison between the analytical narratives of the Greeks with the monumental inscriptions of the Assyrians and Persians, although there are local chronicles from the ancient middle east that were unknown to the Greeks. Also, Arabic language poetic retellings of Old Persian language myths and sagas and legends have survived, such as the Shah Nahme.
4. What elements of Judaism, early Christianity, and Islam can be traced back to earlier Near Eastern cultures (examples include the Biblical story of the Flood and the idea of the Last Judgment)?
5. Compare and contrast Persian ethical dualism and Hebrew ethical monotheism. To what degree did religion affect these societies' political, cultural, and intellectual development?
6. Lead the students in a discussion concerning the ways in which the Assyrians and Persians did or did not rely on violence and terror. The "Visual Record" description of the Siege of Lachish, on pages 44-45 of the textbook, can be a base of departure. One interesting question is that, although the death penalty may or may not deter murder, it certainly might deter shoplifting or speeding. The disturbing point to consider is that terror works, at least for a while.
7. The Hebrew Bible is a rich resource about ancient Hebrew culture. Have students read excerpts from those books that deal with the law in more detail (Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and lead a discussion: What attitudes do the laws reveal? What role might each law have played in maintaining Hebrew society?
8. Have the students write for ten minutes evaluating the statement: "Hebrew religion by about 425 B.C. was unique among the religions of the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean." In this free-writing assignment, students should try to enumerate points of uniqueness or show similarities with other religions (of the ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Canaanites, and Zoroastrians). Then have the students form pairs and swap essays. Each student should then try to find weaknesses in his/her partner's arguments.
9. For homework, ask students to do a web search on a particular Biblical topic (such as "Hebrew prophets" or "historicity of Old Testament"). Each student should write a summary on three of the websites she/he found, discussing the author(s) of the site, their professional positions and affiliations, and the points of view expressed in each site. Students might also discuss the verifiability of claims made on each site. This can serve as the basis of discussion at the following class meeting.
10. Have the students select, research, and write a short biography of a biblical figure such as Abraham, David, Deborah, or one of the prophets.
11. Many have emphasized the patriarchal character of Hebrew, Israelite, and ancient Jewish society. Research Hebrew scripture to find what evidence could be used for this conclusion. Look, for instance, at the Fall, the legend of Lilith, Leviticus 12, and Solomon's wives and his offense against God. What appear to have been the consequence of this attitude towards women?
12. Have students consider the nature prophecy: People in the modern world often associate prophecy with predicting the future, yet prophecy in Ancient Israel and Judea spoke more often of religious, moral, and ethical reform, as well as the hardships of the poor.

## RESOURCES

1. *Babylonian Empire*, [http://www.livius.org/ba-bd/babylon/babylonian\\_empire.html](http://www.livius.org/ba-bd/babylon/babylonian_empire.html).
2. *Encyclopedia Phoenicia: A Bequest Unearthed, Phoenicia*, <http://phoenicia.org>.
3. *Engineering an Empire: The Persians*, (third series), The History Channel, 2007.
4. *Internet Jewish History Sourcebook*,  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pgc.asp?page=jewish/jewishsbok.html>.
5. *Iron Age(1200–550 B.C.)*,  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pgc.asp?page=jewish/jewishsbok.html>.
6. *Mysteries of the Bible*, volume 1–3, The History Channel.
7. *Near East Image Index*, <http://eawc.evansville.edu/pictures/nepage.html>.
8. *Persopolis*, <http://persia.org/imagemap/persopolis.html>.
9. *Sumer, Babylon, Assyria*, Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 26 minutes, 1991.
10. Weber, Eugen, “Mesopotamia” and “From Bronze to Iron,” *The Western Tradition*, WGBH Boston, 1989.
11. Livius, *The Achaemenids*: <http://www.livius.org/aa-ac/achaemenians/achaemenians.html> .
12. *Internet Sacred Text Archive: Judaism*. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/>.
13. *Jewish Texts and Torah: Articles and Online Discussion*. <http://www.nmmc.net/Guide/jtt.html>
14. *Internet Sacred Text Archive: Zoroastrian Texts*. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/zor/index.htm> . Go to the Zend Avesta.
15. *Avesta & Zoroastrian Archives*. <http://www.avesta.org/> This is a religious site maintained by modern Zoroastrians.