

OLD TESTAMENT OVERVIEW & HISTORY OF ISRAEL

Adapted from various, reliable sources

Abraham and the Patriarchs

It is difficult to assign an exact beginning to Hebrew history. But if we regard Abraham as the forefather of the Israelites, it is clear that they had their roots in ancient Sumer.

Abraham came from Ur, a Sumerian city (Gen 11:31). Abraham became prosperous in Haran in northwestern Mesopotamia, then later moved to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:5), where he received God's assurance that he would be the ancestor of a mighty people.

Abraham's promised son ISAAC had two sons of his own, Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob for the renewal of His promise to Abraham (Gen 28:13-15). Jacob later moved from Haran, where he had married Leah and Rachel, daughters of Laban, and settled in Canaan. Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel after an encounter with God (Gen 32:24-30), had 12 sons. Eleven of these sons plotted to sell their youngest brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

Years in Egypt

When God prospered Joseph and made him a high official in Egypt, the brothers were forgiven, after being humiliated. They were instructed to bring their father and other family members to Egypt, where they settled in the fertile Goshen area for over two centuries. Then a Pharaoh who did not acknowledge Joseph's achievements came to power. The descendants of Israel, now known as Hebrews or Israelites, were uprooted from their land and forced to work on the rebuilding of great Egyptian cities.

After the Israelites experienced considerable suffering, God appointed Moses to liberate His people from bondage. Moses had been born to Hebrew slaves. He was set adrift in a basket on the Nile River in an attempt to prevent him from being killed by Pharaoh's

troops. An Egyptian princess rescued him and brought him up as her own son.

Fleeing later from Egypt because of a crime that he had committed (Ex 2:12), Moses experienced a divine revelation in the wilderness. He was ordered by God to return to Egypt where, with Aaron his brother, he would confront Pharaoh and demand the release of the captive Israelites. Pharaoh's stubborn refusal finally resulted in the death of the Egyptian firstborn, after which Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea to safety in the Sinai region.

The Covenant at Sinai

God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai (Horeb) and entered into a relationship with the twelve tribes, which bound them to Himself and made them, in effect, the nation of Israel. The relationship was in the form of a Covenant, or a written contract.

This covenant is fundamentally important for Israelite history. Through it a number of independent tribes were bonded together into one Hebrew nation and given a specific destiny as the people chosen by God as a channel for divine revelation. The Israelites, however, were not to behave just like any nation of the ancient world. All of these were pagan, following depraved and corrupt moral practices as part of their worship.

The Israelites were to live as a religious community in which each member cared for the others. The exploitation of such helpless persons as strangers, widows, and orphans was strictly forbidden under the Mosaic Law (Deut 24:17), since God Himself was their champion (Deut 10:18).

God promised to provide a land for the Hebrews in which they could settle in obedience to covenant law as a holy nation

(Ex 19:6), and be witnesses of His existence and power to all the neighboring nations.

Throughout their history, God's covenant people were meant to be an example of spirituality to the world. This, rather than political activity or territorial conquest, was to be their true destiny. Unfortunately, much of Israelite history was marked by periodic disobedience of the covenant laws.

Israelite history began badly with an idolatrous act. The people made and worshiped a golden calf while Moses was still on Mount Sinai (Ex 32:1-6). After their punishment, the covenant was renewed and work began on the building of the Tabernacle. The structure was portable, and it moved with the Israelites whenever they wandered in the wilderness. Subsequent Hebrew temples were to reflect something of its structure.

The Wilderness Years

Because the Israelites disobeyed God by refusing to enter Canaan (Num 14:30-35), they were compelled to wander for a generation in the wilderness. These aimless wanderings are summarized in Num 33. The people apparently moved between various oases in the Sinai wilderness. After Aaron's death (Num 20:22-29), the Israelites moved steadily toward Moab and prepared to conquer Canaan. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh, who owned large herds, were allowed to settle in the conquered Transjordan lands and to raise their cattle. The remainder of the Israelites prepared to cross the Jordan River at Jericho and occupy the Promised Land. Moses was not permitted to lead the Israelites to victory because he had not carried out God's will properly (Deut 32:51). Instead he was allowed to view Canaan from the summit of Mount Nebo. After this, he died and was buried in Moab (Deut 34:6).

Conquest of Canaan

Jericho was like a town under siege when JOSHUA, who had been commissioned as leader shortly before Moses died (Deut 34:9), advanced to overthrow it. He obeyed God's instructions regarding the attack upon the fortress-like city that guarded the entrance to Canaan. The Hebrews marched around it daily for six days, and it collapsed dramatically on the seventh day (Josh 6:12-20).

The next assault was on nearby Ai. This offensive, however, met with disaster because an Israelite named Achan had defied God's instructions about not taking plunder from Jericho. When his sin was discovered, he and his family were stoned to death (Josh 7:25), after which Ai was overthrown.

Shortly afterwards, Joshua was tricked into sealing a covenant with the neighboring Gibeonites. This was followed by a defense of the royal city of Gibeon against the attack of five Canaanite kings who resented the pact made with Joshua. The kings were captured and executed (Josh 10:16-27). Then Joshua proceeded to conquer the southland, where Lachish and Hebron were important cities. Jerusalem, however, was not captured at this time, nor was Megiddo in central Palestine.

The final phase of occupation involved northern Palestine, where Joshua was confronted by a military group led by Jabin, king of Hazor. Perhaps because the Israelites were anxious to keep the cities intact, none were destroyed except Hazor, the chief city of the north. This policy proved costly in later years. Although the Israelites had occupied the Promised Land, they had not conquered the people completely. Once the Canaanites were able to reestablish themselves, they presented serious problems for the Israelites.

Period of the Judges

After Joshua died, individual charismatic leaders known as judges provided leadership for the Hebrew nation. This event coincided with increasingly independent activity by the

Israelite tribes, caused partly because of Canaanite resistance to the conquerors. This lack of centralized leadership meant that covenant law was not being observed, and it was being replaced by idolatry.

Although the judges tried hard to correct local problems, they were no match for the increasingly militant Canaanites, or for Eglon, a Moabite ruler who oppressed some of the Hebrew people for 18 years before being killed by a left-handed judge named Ehud (Judg 3:15-30). By this time Hazor had been reoccupied by Canaanites under Jabin, their king, who made several northern tribes his subjects for 20 years (Judg 4:2-3).

Jabin's forces were superior because they had iron-fitted, horse-drawn chariots. These chariots were effective on level ground, but they proved less threatening in the hill country. Jabin's general Sisera was defeated by the Hebrew commander Barak and slain by Jael, the wife of an ally named Heber (Judg 4:21).

The Book of Judges shows clearly that Israel's troubles were the result of rejecting covenant law and adopting various forms of Canaanite idolatry. Canaanite religion was one of the most sensuous and morally depraved that the world has ever known; it contrasted dramatically with the holiness and moral purity demanded of the Israelites by the Sinai covenant.

Because of their persistent idolatry, the Hebrews were punished further by Midianite and Ammonite attacks. The most serious threat, however, came from the Philistines. These war-like people had migrated to Canaan in small numbers in the time of Abraham. But they came in a body about 1175 B.C. and settled on the southwestern Palestinian coast. The Philistines established a group of five cities-Gaza, Gath, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron-and began to push the Israelites into the hill country.

The Philistines were superior in military power because they monopolized the manufacture and sale of iron implements and weapons. Samson had delivered the Israelites periodically from Philistine oppression, but after his death (Judg 16:27-30) they were at the mercy of the enemy once more.

The United Kingdom Years.

The social chaos described in the closing chapters of the Book of Judges came to a head in the religious corruption in Israel at the time of Samuel's childhood (1 Sam 2:12-18,22). Although Samuel himself exercised a wholesome ministry, the Israelites were more intent on being ruled by a king than in living as a holy nation in covenant with their God (1 Sam 8:19-20). SAUL, son of Kish, was duly anointed by Samuel as a charismatic leader over the nation (1 Sam 10:1).

But Saul had an unbalanced personality, which soon showed signs of paranoia. He disobeyed God's commands (1 Sam 13:13), and a successor was chosen and anointed in the person of DAVID, son of Jesse. David gained popular favor by his defeat of the Philistine champion Goliath. Thereafter David was seen as Israel's savior, much to the dislike of Saul, who felt his own position threatened. Saul fought at intervals against both David and the Philistines, but was ultimately killed along with five sons at Mount Gilboa. The northern tribes then looked to Ishbosheth, the surviving son of Saul, who was made king at Mahanaim in Transjordan by Abner, his father's commander (2 Sam 2:8-10).

David settled in Hebron (2 Sam 2:11), and Abner tried to gain favor with him. But Abner was murdered by Joab, David's commander, at Hebron (2 Sam 3:27). When Ishbosheth was also murdered (2 Sam 4:5-6), the way was clear for David to assume sole rule of Israel and unify the kingdom. He established his capital at Jerusalem, which he captured from the Jebusites. He also brought the Ark of

the Covenant to the city, making it a religious as well as a political center.

For the remainder of his reign, David fought against the Ammonites and Syrians as well as the Philistines. His later years were clouded by family dissension and by a revolt among some of his subjects. In spite of his troubles, he behaved with great courage and managed to overcome all his enemies. Before his death, he proclaimed his son Solomon as his successor. Solomon was duly anointed at Gihon by Zadok the priest (1 Kings 1:39).

Solomon became renowned for his wisdom. He brought the kingdom of Israel to great prominence at a time when other Near Eastern nations were weak politically. He renewed the alliance that David had made with Hiram, king of Tyre, engaging Hiram's workmen to construct a TEMPLE complex in Jerusalem. Although the finished building had some of the characteristics of the wilderness tabernacle, it also included some pagan features. These included the freestanding columns found in Syrian shrines, while certain aspects of the internal decoration reflected Canaanite religious symbolism.

The cost of Solomon's ambitious building projects in and around Jerusalem was high. Much of the agricultural productivity of the land was sent to Phoenicia to pay for materials and workmen's wages. Although Solomon levied tolls on the caravan trade that passed through his kingdom, he could not meet the rising costs that an increasingly lavish way of life involved. He attempted to replenish his depleted resources by increasing productivity in the mining industry of the Arabah and by building a fleet of ships near Elath for trading purposes (1 Kings 9:26).

In desperation, Solomon finally began a program of forced labor which involved 30,000 men working by rotation (10,000 working every third month), laboring in the forests, mines, and cities under harsh conditions.

Rebellion of the Northern Tribes

As he grew older, Solomon entered into political marriages with non-Israelites. These women brought with them the gods of their native lands (1 Kings 11:7-8), adding to the problem of idolatry in Israel. Before Solomon died, he managed to antagonize almost all his subjects. When he was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, the ten northern tribes led by Jeroboam, a former head of the forced labor units, met with him and sought relief from the burdens of work and taxation.

Rehoboam followed bad advice and refused. The northern tribes declared independence and formed a separate kingdom with Jeroboam as head. They named their kingdom "Israel" (this sometimes causes confusion because the name is also used for the remnant of the Covenant People at a later time). The southern section of the divided kingdom was known as Judah. It soon attracted the attention of Shishak, pharaoh of Egypt (about 945-924 B.C.), who moved into Judah, robbed the Temple of its golden objects, and destroyed a number of Judah's fortresses. This event weakened still further an already vulnerable people.

Threat From Syria. Israel's troubles had also begun. The Arameans of Damascus were becoming powerful in Syria and were beginning to put pressure on Israel's northern borders. There was internal instability in the kingdom as well, indicated by the murder of King Nadab (about 908 B.C.), two years after his father Jeroboam's death. His murderer, Baasha, fortified a site close to Jerusalem (1 Kings 15:17). Asa, the king of Judah (about 911-870 B.C.), appealed to the Syrians for help against Baasha. Baasha's son Elah reigned for two years (about 886-884 B.C.); Elah was murdered by Zimri, who committed suicide after seven days and plunged the nation into civil war.

Four years later the army general Omri gained control of Israel and began his own dynasty. Omri moved Israel's capital from

Tirzah to Samaria, which he fortified strongly. He allied with Phoenicia, and arranged a marriage between his son Ahab and Jezebel, a princess of Tyre. When Ahab (about 874-853 B.C.) became king, he continued Omri's policy of resistance to Syria. But his support of pagan Tyrian religion in Israel drew strong criticism from the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 18:18). The nation was punished by famine, but this did little to halt the widespread spiritual and social corruption.

About 855 B.C. the Syrian Ben-Hadad attacked Samaria (1 Kings 20:1) but suffered heavy losses, as he also did the following year at Aphek. Israel was saved by the appearance of the powerful Assyrian forces who, under Shalmaneser III (about 859-824 B.C.), attacked allied Syrian and Israelite forces in 853 B.C. at Qarqar on the Orontes River. The Assyrians were defeated decisively, but the victorious allies soon quarreled, and Ahab died while trying to recover Ramoth Gilead from Syrian control. Meanwhile Mesha, king of Moab, had refused to pay further tribute to Israel; consequently, he was attacked by Ahaziah (about 853-852 B.C.), Ahab's successor.

Jehoram (about 852-841 B.C.) of Israel enlisted Jehoshaphat of Judah (about 873-848 B.C.) in the struggle against Moab, which proved successful (2 Kings 3) as Elisha the prophet had predicted. About 843 B.C. Ben-Hadad was murdered by Hazael (2 Kings 8:7-13); and two years later Jehu seized the throne of Israel, carrying out a vicious purge of Ahab's house and suppressing pagan religions.

At the same time, Athaliah, queen of Judah, exterminated the royal house except for Jehoash, who was proclaimed king six years later. Jehoash first banned idolatry, but then became attracted to it and subsequently killed the son of the high priest who had protected him earlier. In 841 B.C. Shalmaneser III again attacked a Syrian coalition. But Jehu wished to avoid fighting

the Assyrians, so he paid heavy tribute to this powerful nation instead.

Events leading up to the fall of Israel

For both Israel and Judah the eighth century B.C. was marked by a period of prosperity. Jeroboam II (about 782-752 B.C.) was able to develop agriculture, trade, and commerce because the westward advance of Assyria compelled the Syrian armies to defend their eastern territories. In Judah, Uzziah (790-740 B.C.) raised the prosperity of the country to levels unknown since the time of David. In both nations there was a sense that the true "golden age" had arrived.

Unfortunately, however, idolatry and the rejection of covenant spirituality were prominent, especially in Israel. Prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah spoke out against these abuses. They condemned the exploitation of the poor. They also rebuked the rich for accumulating land and wealth illegally, and for forsaking the simple Hebrew way of life for the luxurious living of pagan nations.

Fall of the Northern Kingdom

The end of all this for Israel occurred shortly after Jeroboam's death. The kingship was left to political opportunists. But they were dwarfed by the powerful Assyrian monarch Tiglath-Pileser III. About 745 B.C. he placed Menahem of Israel (752-741 B.C.) under tribute. But when Menahem died, Israel joined an alliance against Assyria. Ahaz of Judah, alarmed by this move, appealed to Tiglath-Pileser for help. Tiglath-Pileser overthrew Damascus in 732 B.C. (Isa 8:4; 17:1; Amos 1:4). He then carried people from the territory of Naphtali captive to Assyria (2 Kings 15:29). But he still had to reckon with the resistance from Samaria under Pekah, whose murderer, Hoshea, was later made an Assyrian vassal.

On Tiglath-Pileser's death (727 B.C.), Hoshea of Israel rebelled. This brought the Assyrians

to Samaria in a siege that ended three years later with the fall of Israel and the deportation of more northern tribesmen in 722 B.C. Isaiah's prediction that God would use Assyria as the rod of His anger upon Israel (Isa 10:5-6) had been fulfilled.

Fall of the Southern Kingdom

The Southern Kingdom under the godly Hezekiah (716-686 B.C.), son and successor of Jehoahaz I, prospered for a time. This was possible because Hezekiah took advantage of a developing power struggle between Assyria and Egypt to fortify Judah and build up its resources. Some 20 years after Samaria fell, Sennacherib, who succeeded Sargon, invaded Palestine and reduced the cities of Joppa, Ashkelon, Timnath, and Ekron in quick succession. An Egyptian army sent to relieve Ekron was defeated about 701 B.C., and the frontier fortress of Lachish came under heavy assault.

The Assyrians also threatened Jerusalem. To gain relief, Hezekiah offered to pay tribute to Sennacherib. In the end the Assyrians withdrew from Palestine, perhaps as the result of being devastated by a plague (2 Kings 19:35). Hezekiah's successor Manasseh (about 687-641 B.C.) encouraged idolatry and depravity in Judah, but he reformed toward the end of his life (2 Chron 33:10-17).

Manasseh's grandson Josiah reigned until 609 B.C. He finally died at Megiddo while trying to prevent the Egyptians from helping the tottering Assyrian Empire. Assyria collapsed with the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) and Haran (610 B.C.) to Babylonian and Median forces. Later the Babylonians turned against Jerusalem. In the days of the prophet Jeremiah, they devastated the city in three assaults between 597 and 581 B.C.

A scattering of the Jewish people among other nations

Throughout their history, the Hebrew people have experienced many dispersions—a term

which comes from a Greek word meaning "to scatter." Some of these dispersions have been voluntary, while others have been forced upon them.

Voluntary movements were sometimes made by the Jews to escape the threat of destruction, as with those Judeans who moved to Egypt in the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Others left the homeland on various occasions with the expectation of pursuing an easier and more profitable way of life, as with the brothers of Joseph. Some migrants were most probably traveling merchants who chose to settle in a new homeland for business reasons, whereas others found themselves on foreign territory in a military capacity (2 Sam 8:14).

While all Jews regarded the land promised to them by God through Abraham as their natural home, no Jew was ever compelled to live in it for his entire life. In periods of economic hardship or political upheaval many Jews took advantage of the opportunity to leave and begin life afresh in another country.

But forced dispersion was another matter. Periods of captivity for the Hebrews may have begun as early as the invasion of Palestine by Shishak of Egypt, about 918 B.C. (1 Kings 14:25-26). But most significant for Hebrew history were the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and the collapse of Judah before Babylonian and Chaldean attacks in 597-581 B.C. Already in 732 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser III had carried Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh captive to Mesopotamia when Damascus fell. A decade later the capture of Samaria resulted in the remaining Israelite tribes being carried away as captives to Assyria.

The end of national life in Judah began with the first attack on Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. The final attack in 581 B.C. marked the end completely. By the end of this period, a total of some 4,600 prominent persons had been deported from

Judah (Jer 52:28-30). This number probably did not include family members or servants. The total may well have been at least double the number recorded by Jeremiah. The dispersion actually began earlier in Judah, for early in his ministry Jeremiah reported that a significant number of Jewish emigrants lived in such Egyptian cities as Migdol, Tahpanhes, and Noph (Memphis). The prophet ministered to these people even before Jerusalem fell (Jer 43:8; 44:1).

But the settlement in Egypt was small compared to that in Assyria, Babylon, and Persia as a result of the deportation from Israel and Judah. Captives from the Northern Kingdom were apparently absorbed completely into their foreign surroundings. But a small group of Judeans ultimately returned from Persia to Judea as a result of the decree of Cyrus (538 B.C.). Those who remained behind in Babylonia formed the basis of the Dispersion that was well known in New Testament times (John 7:35).

This dispersed Jewish community in Mesopotamia flourished into the medieval Christian period, maintaining its distinctive religious practices. It was here that the Babylonian Talmud, a work which formed the basis for law and faith in the community, was compiled. The Dispersion was certainly supported by conditions in the Persian Empire and in the later Greek Empire, as the character of the crowd at Pentecost illustrates (Acts 2:9-11).

Interesting light has been shed on a fifth century B.C. Jewish colony in Egypt by the discovery of the Elephantine papyri. These documents disclosed the existence of a Jewish trading community near Aswan that had its own temple worship. This community was also an important center for commerce in southern Egypt. With the rise of the Greek Empire, further Jewish settlements occurred in Egypt, along with a significant increase in the use of the Greek language across the Near East. One result of this was the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek at

Alexandria, Egypt. This version (called the SEPTUAGINT) became so popular that the New Testament writers quoted the Old Testament from it instead of using the traditional Hebrew text.

By 139 B.C. Jews who had migrated to Italy and settled in Rome were being expelled from the capital city. Even so, they had gained a foothold in Italy. By the beginning of the Christian period, colonies of Jews were scattered across the Near East and southeastern Europe. Although they were often disliked and sometimes persecuted, they managed to survive and prosper. By the time of Philo Judaeus (30 B.C.-A.D. 45), a Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, an estimated one million Jews lived in Alexandria. An equal number had settled in both Persia and Asia Minor, and about 100,000 lived in Cyrenaica and Italy. The Jews who were dispersed throughout the world in this manner outnumbered the Jews who remained in their native land of Palestine. These colonies provided useful bases for evangelistic efforts by the apostle Paul and later Christian preachers. Eventually Christian communities were established in those cities that had a large Jewish population. Thus, the Dispersion helped to prepare the world for the reception and growth of the gospel.

The Captivity Years

With the removal of prisoners to Babylonia (Jer 52:28-30), the Southern Kingdom collapsed and the shock of captivity began for the Hebrew people. The prophets Ezekiel and Daniel ministered in various ways to the distraught captives. For almost seven decades the Jewish people were occupied in building the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 B.C.) and Nabonidus (556-539 B.C.). In this alien environment some Hebrew captives lost all hope for the future. But through a ministry of prayer, study of the law, memorial observances, worship, and personal testimony to God's power, Ezekiel was able to

promote trust in divine mercy. He kept alive the hope that some day a faithful remnant would return to the ancestral homeland.

Return from Captivity

Magnificent as the Babylonian Empire appeared, it was fundamentally weak. It collapsed under the attack of the Persian ruler Cyrus II. Babylon fell in 538 B.C., and the same year Cyrus proclaimed liberty to all captives in Babylonia. The Hebrew remnant that longed to return home was able to do so between 536 and 525 B.C.

The returnees, however, found a desolate land claimed by Arab tribes and the Samaritans. They had to be urged by Haggai and Zechariah to reconstruct the ruined Temple before they could expect divine blessing (Hag. 1:9-11). Even after this had been done, life was still insecure because Jerusalem lacked a defensive wall.

In 458 B.C. Ezra came from Persia as a royal commissioner to survey the situation and report to King Artaxerxes I (464-423 B.C.). Twelve years passed before action was taken, due to the initiative of Nehemiah, a high court official, who in 446 B.C. was appointed governor of Judea. As a preliminary step toward restoring regional security and prosperity, he supervised the reconstruction of Jerusalem's wall in the short period of 52 days, after which it was dedicated (Neh 12:27).

Then Ezra led a ceremony of national confession and commitment to covenant ideals. He also instituted religious reforms which made the law central in community life, as well as reviving tithe-offerings and stressing Sabbath worship. He expelled non-Israelites from the community, regulated the priesthood carefully, and in general laid the foundations of later Judaism.

The Period of Greek Dominance

The restoration of the national life of the Jewish people was achieved quickly because of the peaceful conditions in the Persian Empire. But this phase ended with revolts under Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.) and the defeat of Darius III in 331 B.C. by Alexander the Great of Greece. Thereafter Greek culture became firmly established in the ancient world, in spite of the premature death of Alexander in 323 B.C.

The small Judean community, which had faced extinction before because of Canaanite paganism, now reacted with fear lest it should become engulfed by the idolatry of Greek religion. The adoption of Greek traditions transformed the old Persian Empire. When Egypt became Hellenized, the culture of Greece was represented strongly in cities such as Alexandria.

The chief threat to the Jewish community was not so much military or political as religious. Greek religion was coarse and superstitious, and its sensuous nature encouraged a wide following. The philosophy of Stoicism attracted some adherents because of its fatalism and the view that God was in everything, while a less rigorous view of life was taught by Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). He stressed the values of friendship, advising his followers to avoid sensual excesses if they wished to enjoy true pleasure.

By contrast, emphasis upon the teachings of the Jewish law became the hallmark of the Scribes, who had replaced the wise men as guardians of Jewish religious tradition. About the second century B.C., they were aided by the rise of a separatist or Pharisee group, which taught scrupulous observance of the Mosaic Law, advocated synagogue worship, and professed belief in angels, demons, and the resurrection of the dead.

Another influential religious group during this period of Jewish history was the Sadducees, an aristocratic priestly minority that exercised close control over Temple ritual. The Sadducees accepted only the Law

as Scripture. They would not allow any doctrine that could not be proved directly from the Law. This brought them into conflict with the Pharisees.

Revolt of the Maccabees

The political conflict in Palestine became critical under the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 B.C.), who was determined to force Greek culture upon the Jewish community. This provoked such unrest that Antiochus deliberately polluted the Temple in 168 B.C. and forbade traditional Jewish worship. A Jewish family near Jerusalem rebelled against Greek authority. Its leader, Mattathias, began what is known as the Maccabean revolt. This continued under his son, Judas Maccabeus, who finally won concessions from the Syrian regent Lysias.

Even after the Maccabean war ended, Greek culture exerted a considerable influence in Judea. The province came under Roman rule after 64 B.C. with the rise of the Roman Empire, but this did little to stop the threat presented by Greek religion. In spite of all adversity, the faithful remnant of God's people, Israel, struggled on in hope, looking for the long-promised Messiah who would deliver them from their enemies and bring God's kingdom upon earth.

The Promised Messiah

More than 600 years after the prophet Micah had foretold the birthplace of the Messiah (Mic 5:2), the birth of a baby was announced by an angel to shepherds in Bethlehem. The child was Jesus, God's Messiah (Anointed One), who would ultimately die for the sin of the world on the Cross, buried and would rise from the dead!