A Historical Timeline for the Old Testament

Video Transcript

Have you ever heard someone tell a story but were unable to understand it because you lacked the background or context to know what was going on?

This is how it is for many people reading the Old Testament. As you read, you sense that there is an important and, you think, interesting story being told, but you simply lack the context of background to make sense of it all.

When we look at the Old Testament, we should do so within two different historical contexts. The first is the historical narrative provided by the Old Testament itself. The second, and equally important context is the broader historical landscape of the ancient Near East.

Let's review a quick timeline of events and important empires and peoples that frame the Old Testament narrative. The Sumerian, Egyptian, and Akkadian civilizations were some of the earliest in the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE. The Sumerians and Egyptians both developed forms of writing, and the Akkadians provided a common Semitic language for much of the Mesopotamian region.

The Israelites were a nomadic people living in Canaan who, in the second millennium BCE migrated to Egypt during the time of Jacob and Joseph. Between the 15th and 13th centuries BCE, the Israelites left Egypt and returned to Canaan. Not long after, an Aegean people called the Philistines moved into southern Canaan. As they expanded their settlements, they came into conflict with the Israelites and achieved significant victories due to their knowledge of iron smithing.

The threat of the Philistines prompted the Israelites to form a unified monarchy under David, and then Solomon, which led to expansion and prosperity. After the death of Solomon, Israel divided into two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Judah in the south and the Kingdom of Israel in
the north. In the 10th century BCE, Assyria emerged as the most powerful empire in Mesopotamia.

The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BCE, deporting thousands of its inhabitants into exile. In the 7th century BCE, the Assyrian Empire disintegrated and fell to the Babylonians. Under Nebuchadnezzar II, the Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and the Jews were taken into captivity. In the late 6th century BCE, the Persian leader Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians and ended the exile, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

Within this historical context, we can see that the Israelites were a smaller group that occupied a territory subject to incursions from larger empires. The people of Israel were affected, both politically and culturally, by the expansion of these surrounding empires in the north and south, as well as from seafaring peoples arriving from the east.

What effect do you think the conflict with other empires and cultures had on the Israelites and their religion?

About this transcript:

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