ILLUSTRATED EDITION

# The Story of Tanach

IN TWELVE SHORT CHAPTERS

*From Creation to the return from exile, told alongside the archaeology that confirms it*

MODERNTRIBE

# Before You Begin

This booklet tells the story of the Tanach, from Creation to the return from the Babylonian exile, and shows the archaeological discoveries that go with it. It is deliberately short. Each chapter compresses whole books of the Hebrew Bible into a few pages, so the full story can be read in one sitting.

Names printed in gold are real artifacts or excavated sites. Click an artifact, or any photograph, to open that find's page on ModernTribe, where you can see what was discovered, where it is kept today, and which passages it confirms. Most chapters end with a link to the other finds from the same period.

A note on dates. There are different opinions about when the Exodus took place. This booklet, like the rest of ModernTribe, places it at about 1446 BCE. For more on the dating, see **When Was the Exodus?**

We made this booklet because the evidence behind the Tanach is stronger than most people know. We hope you finish it knowing the story better and trusting it more. Enjoy the read.

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CHAPTER ONE

# In the Beginning

BEFORE RECORDED HISTORY

*Genesis 1–11*

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."*

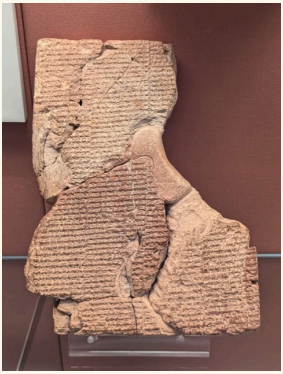
GENESIS 1:1

PICTURED: EPIC OF GILGAMESH (FLOOD TABLET)

The Tanach opens before any nation exists. God speaks, and the world comes into being across seven days: light is divided from darkness, sea from dry land, and at the summit humanity is made in the divine image. The seventh day is Shabbat. A second, closer telling shows God forming man from the dust, breathing life into him, planting a garden in Eden, and making woman from his side.

One prohibition was given, and it was broken. The serpent persuaded Eve, she ate from the Tree of Knowledge and gave its fruit to Adam, and the two hid from God. They were sent out of the garden into toil, pain, and death: "for dust you are, and to dust you shall return." Everything that follows is an answer to that rupture.

Generations later the earth was filled with corruption, and God resolved to cleanse it with a flood. Noah, the one righteous man of his generation, built an ark and brought aboard his family and the animals. When the waters receded the ark rested on the mountains of Ararat. Noah sent out a raven and then a dove, and when the dove returned with an olive branch he knew the land was dry. God made a covenant never again to destroy the earth by flood, and set the rainbow as its sign.



### Atrahasis Epic (Old Babylonian Flood Tablets)

17TH BCE

*The oldest well-preserved Mesopotamian flood narrative — copied around 1640 BCE — telling the whole sequence Genesis tells in chapters 1–9: humanity's creation from clay, its multiplying, divine judgment, a warned hero, a boat, a flood, and a sacrifice*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

Israel was not the only people who remembered. The **Atrahasis Epic**, copied in Mesopotamia around 1640 BCE, tells the same sequence Genesis tells: humanity made from clay, its multiplying, a divine judgment, a hero warned in advance, a boat, a flood, and a sacrifice when it was over. The **Flood Tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh** adds an ark loaded with animals, a dove sent out to find land, and a landing on a mountain. The **Sumerian King List** divides all of history in two, kings before the flood and kings after it, with reigns that shorten afterward just as the lifespans of Genesis do.

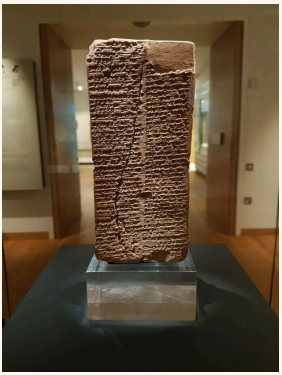
The oldest literature of the very region where Genesis sets these events carries the memory of the same

### Sumerian King List

19TH BCE

*An ancient Mesopotamian document listing kings before and after a great flood — with pre-flood rulers reigning for tens of thousands of years, then post-flood reigns shortening toward historical lengths, closely paralleling the Genesis 5 genealogy pattern*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →



catastrophe. Genesis then narrows its gaze. At Babel, in Mesopotamia, a united humanity built a tower toward heaven; God confused their language and scattered them across the earth. From those scattered families the story follows one line, the line of Shem, down to a man named Abram.

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CHAPTER TWO

# The Patriarchs

C. 2091–1876 BCE

*Genesis 12–36*

*“Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”*

GENESIS 12:1

PICTURED: GREAT ZIGGURAT OF UR

Abram's family came from Ur of the Chaldees and settled in Harran, and there God called him to leave everything for a land he had not seen. These are real places. The **Great Ziggurat of Ur** still rises over the city long identified as his ancestral home, and **Harran** is named both in Bronze Age archives and on royal stelae found in the city itself. The **Mari Tablets**, twenty thousand of them, name the cities of Nahor and Harran, the first bearing the very name of Abraham's brother and the second the city where his family settled.



Mari Tablets — 18TH BCE

*Cuneiform archive from Mari naming Nahor and Harran.*

Abram obeyed. He entered Canaan and built his first altar at **Shechem**. There God made a covenant with him, passing between the pieces of a divided sacrifice in the manner of an ancient treaty, and promised him the land, descendants beyond counting, and blessing for all the families of the earth through him. The covenant was sealed with circumcision, and Abram became Abraham.

The world the patriarchs move through is the world the tablets describe. The **Ebla Tablets** show a literate, organized civilization in Syria centuries before Abraham. The **Egyptian Execration Texts** list the city-states of Canaan and their rulers in the patriarchs' own era. The **Nuzi Tablets** record the customs Genesis takes for granted, from a wife providing a surrogate to bear an heir to the binding force of a father's spoken deathbed blessing.

Abraham's nephew Lot was pulled from **Sodom** before fire fell on the Cities of the Plain. Sarah, long barren, bore Isaac in her old age. Then came the supreme test: God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac on Mount Moriah. Abraham bound his son on the altar and raised the knife, and an angel stayed his hand; a ram was offered instead. The promise was reaffirmed more emphatically than ever.



Shechem (Tell Balata) 19TH BCE

*Where Abraham built his first altar and Jacob bought land.*

The covenant passed to Isaac and then to Jacob. Jacob fled to Harran, married there, and came home to buy land at Shechem, where the ruins of the ancient city still stand. God gave him a new name, Israel, and his twelve sons became the fathers of twelve tribes.

*7 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →

✦ ✦ ✦



CHAPTER THREE

# Into Egypt

C. 1876–1446 BCE

*Genesis 37 – Exodus 2*

*“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”*

EXODUS 1:8

PICTURED: BROOKLYN PAPYRUS SLAVE LIST

Jacob's favored son Joseph was sold by his jealous brothers to traders bound for Egypt. The price Genesis records matches the slave prices in the **Mari Tablets** of that age. Falsely imprisoned, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams of seven fat years and seven lean ones, and was raised to rule Egypt as Pharaoh's viceroy.

When famine reached Canaan his brothers came to buy grain. Joseph revealed himself, forgave them, and settled all seventy members of his father's household in Goshen. An Egyptian tomb painting at Beni Hasan shows **a Semitic clan arriving in Egypt** in this age, men, women and children with their donkeys, led by a chief named Abisha. Before he died he made his family swear to carry his bones home.

At Avaris, in the Goshen region, excavators uncovered the **palace and pyramid tomb of a high-ranking Semitic official**. A statue of a Semitic man stood there, and the tomb had been deliberately emptied. Genesis calls Joseph the *shalit*, the ruler, of the land, and a jar from Lachish shows **that same title** in use in Canaan in the Late Bronze Age. The name of Jacob himself appears on the **Yacob-Har scarabs**, twenty-seven seals found across Egypt and Canaan.



Excavations at Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a) 18TH BCE

*Palace and tomb of a high-ranking Semitic official in Egypt's Goshen.*

Joseph's family multiplied until the land was filled with them. At Avaris, the capital of Egypt's Semitic Hyksos rulers, excavators have found **a large Semitic population** living in the Delta for generations, and when native pharaohs ended Hyksos rule, much of it stayed on in Egypt. Then a new Pharaoh, who did not know Joseph, enslaved the Israelites and set them to making bricks. Egypt's own paperwork knows such people. The **Brooklyn Papyrus** lists ninety-five household slaves, more than forty of them with recognizable Hebrew names. **Papyrus Leiden 348** records Apiru laborers making bricks for Ramesses II, showing that Semitic forced labor in Egypt was a long and recurring practice. In the tomb of

a vizier of Thutmose III, **foreign brickmakers** work under Egyptian overseers, one of whom tells them, ‘The rod is in my hand; be not idle.’



## Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions (Serabit el-Khadim)

18TH BCE

*The earliest known alphabetic writing — short inscriptions carved by Semitic workers in Egyptian turquoise mines c. 1800–1500 BCE, using signs adapted from Egyptian hieroglyphs to write a Semitic language, giving birth to the alphabet that became Hebrew*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

In Egypt’s turquoise mines, Semitic workers scratched short inscriptions using signs adapted from hieroglyphs. These **Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions** are the earliest alphabetic writing known, the ancestor of the Hebrew script in which this entire story would be written down. Into that slavery a child named Moses was born.

*4 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →



CHAPTER FOUR

# Exodus and Sinai

C. 1446–1406 BCE

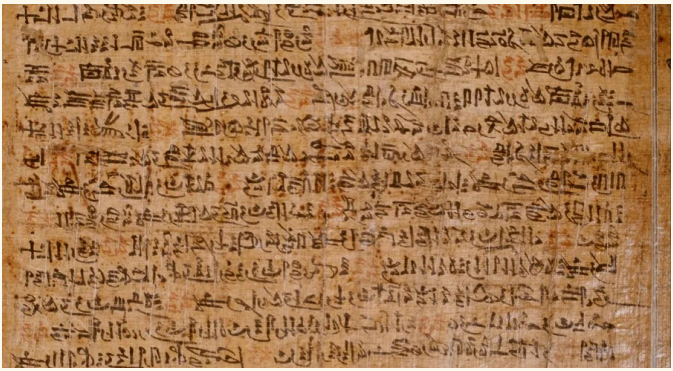
*Exodus – Deuteronomy*

*"I am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."*

EXODUS 20:2

PICTURED: SOLEB INSCRIPTION

God sent Moses to Pharaoh with a demand: let My people go. Pharaoh refused, and ten plagues fell on Egypt. The Nile turned to blood; frogs, lice, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, and locusts followed; then darkness; and at last the death of every Egyptian firstborn. That night Israel marked its doorposts with the blood of a lamb, and the destroyer passed over. It was the first Passover.



Ipuwer Papyrus 13TH BCE

*An Egyptian lament of plagues, darkness and death in every home.*

An Egyptian text, the **Ipuwer Papyrus**, laments a land in ruin: the river is blood, darkness covers the country, death is in every house, servants have overthrown their masters, and a foreign people has gone out.

Pharaoh drove Israel out in such haste that their dough had no time to rise. Then he changed his mind and pursued them with his chariots to the shore of the sea. God divided the waters, Israel crossed on dry ground, and the sea closed over the Egyptian army. On the far shore Moses and the people sang.

Fifty days later Israel stood at Mount Sinai. God descended in fire and thunder and spoke the Ten Commandments to the whole nation, and Moses went up the mountain for forty days to receive the Torah. Israel was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." While Moses was gone the people made a golden calf; he shattered the tablets, pleaded for them, and God renewed the covenant.

At the burning bush God had told Moses His name. An Egyptian temple inscription from the fourteenth century BCE, the **Soleb Inscription**, speaks of "the land of the Shasu of YHWH." It is the earliest appearance of that name outside the Tanach, centuries before Israel had a king.

Israel built the Tabernacle and marched toward Canaan, but when the spies brought back a fearful report the generation that left Egypt was sentenced to forty years



Deir Alla Inscription (Balaam Inscription) 9TH BCE

*Wall text naming Balaam son of Beor, the seer of Numbers 22.*

in the wilderness. On the plains of Moab a seer named Balaam son of Beor was hired to curse them and could only bless. A wall inscription found at **Deir Alla**, in the Jordan Valley, names Balaam son of Beor as a famous seer.

Moses restated the Torah to the new generation, set before them life and death, and climbed Mount Nebo. He saw the whole land and died there, and no one knows his burial place to this day.

*1 more find from this period*

SEE IT ON THE TIMELINE →



CHAPTER FIVE

# Conquest and Judges

C. 1406–1050 BCE

*Joshua · Judges · 1 Samuel 1–7*

*"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."*

JUDGES 21:25

PICTURED: JERICHO BRONZE AGE DESTRUCTION LAYER — 15TH C. BCE

Joshua led Israel across the Jordan, and the conquest began at Jericho, whose walls fell after seven days of marching and the blast of trumpets. The **destruction layer at Jericho** shows collapsed mud-brick walls and storage jars still full of grain: a city destroyed suddenly and never plundered, dated by its excavator John Garstang to about 1400 BCE. Ai fell next, and a fortress burned at the same time at **Khirbet el-Maqatir** has been proposed as that city.

In the north, Joshua notes, only Hazor, "the head of all those kingdoms," was put to the torch. **Hazor**, the largest city in Canaan, lies under a thick layer of ash from around 1400 BCE.

Canaan's own rulers described the upheaval. The **Amarna Letters**, written between Canaan's kings and Pharaoh, name Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, Lachish, and Shechem, and complain of people called the Habiru throwing the land into turmoil. Egypt had long prized these cities, as the **Megiddo annals of Thutmose III** show, and the **Ugaritic Texts** preserve the religion Israel was commanded to reject: Baal, El, Asherah, and Dagon.

The land was divided among the tribes, and at Shechem Joshua told them: choose this day whom you



Hazor Destruction Layer — 15th c. BCE

15TH BCE

*The burn layer of Canaan's largest city, destroyed around 1400 BCE.*



## Amarna Letters

14TH BCE

*382 cuneiform tablets of diplomatic correspondence between Egypt and Canaanite rulers — naming Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, Lachish, and Shechem, and describing 'Habiru' disrupting the land of Canaan.*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

will serve. After his death the cycle of the Judges began. Israel abandoned the covenant, fell to an oppressor, cried out, and was rescued by a deliverer. Deborah and Barak

broke the chariots of Jabin, king of Hazor, and Hazor's **second destruction** left statues of Canaanite gods and kings with their heads and hands struck off. Gideon routed Midian with three hundred men. Samson fought the Philistines, a people the Tanach says came from across the sea, and DNA from the **Philistine cemetery at Ashkelon** says the same.

### Merneptah Stele (Israel Stele)

13TH BCE

*Egyptian pharaoh's victory inscription — among the oldest known mentions of Israel outside the Bible, and the earliest certain one (a disputed Egyptian pedestal fragment may predate it by up to 200 years; see 'Berlin Pedestal')*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →



Egypt now knew Israel by name. On the **Merneptah Stele** a pharaoh boasts of defeating a people called Israel in Canaan, the earliest certain mention of Israel outside the Tanach, and the **Berlin Pedestal** may carry the name up to two centuries earlier. In the hill country an Israelite pupil practiced his letters on the **Izbet Sartah Ostracon**.

Through these centuries the Tabernacle stood at **Shiloh**. Then Israel carried the Ark into battle against the Philistines at Aphek and lost it. The priest Eli fell dead at the news and Shiloh was destroyed, as its ruins show. “The glory has departed from Israel.”

*10 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →

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CHAPTER SIX

# The House of David

C. 1050–970 BCE

*1 Samuel 8 – 2 Samuel · 1 Chronicles · Psalms*

*"Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."*

2 SAMUEL 7:16

PICTURED: STEPPED STONE STRUCTURE (MILLO)

After Aphek the people demanded a king “like all the nations.” The prophet Samuel warned them what a king would take, and they insisted. Saul of Benjamin was anointed and ruled from Gibeah, where an early Iron Age fortress crowns the hill of **Tell el-Ful**. He united the tribes in war, but he disobeyed the prophet’s word and God rejected him.

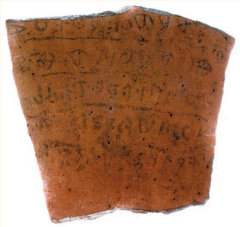
The one chosen in his place was David, a shepherd from Bethlehem. He killed Goliath of Gath, and inscriptions from **Gath itself** bear Philistine names of the same type as Goliath’s. On the Philistine border of that day stood the fortified city of Khirbet Qeiyafa, where a scribe wrote the **Qeiyafa Ostracon**, possibly the oldest Hebrew inscription known.

### Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon

10TH BCE

*Possibly the oldest Hebrew inscription ever found — a pottery sherd from a fortified city on the Philistine border at the time of David*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →



Hunted by Saul, David ruled the border town of Ziklag, which excavators place at **Khirbet al-Ra’i**. Saul died on Mount Gilboa, and David fought a long civil war

against Saul's son Ishbosheth, also called Eshbaal, a name found on a **jar from David's own generation**. Their men met at the pool of **Gibeon**, a city identified by its name stamped on jar handles found in its great rock-cut pool.

Then David took Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his capital, a city that belonged to no tribe. In the **City of David** the immense **Stepped Stone Structure** still climbs the eastern slope, and above it lies the **Large Stone Structure**, the strongest candidate yet for David's palace.

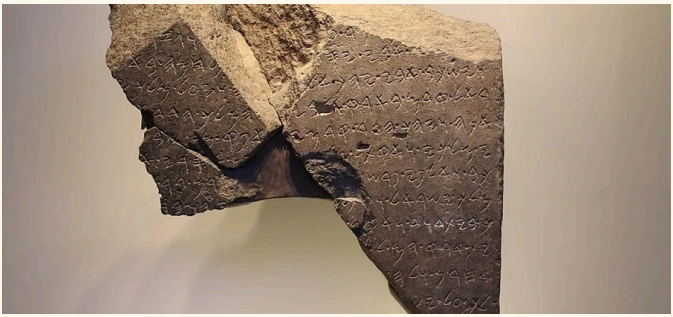


Large Stone Structure (King David's Palace) 10TH BCE

*The leading candidate for David's palace, in the City of David.*

David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, dancing before it, and God made a covenant with him: his dynasty would endure, and his son would build the Temple. He subdued

Edom, where the copper works at **Timna** and **Khirbat en-Nahas** were at full production in his century, and scribes of his era were already writing out the alphabet, as the **Tel Zayit Abecedary** shows.



Tel Dan Stele

9TH BCE

*The first text outside the Bible to name the "House of David".*

For generations skeptics compared David to King Arthur. Then, in 1993, the **Tel Dan Stele** came out of the ground. On it an enemy king, writing about 840 BCE, boasts of killing a king "of the House of David." Israel's neighbors knew David as the founder of a royal line.

*10 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →



CHAPTER SEVEN

# Solomon and the Kingdom Torn

C. 970–925 BCE

*1 Kings 1–14 · 2 Chronicles 1–12*

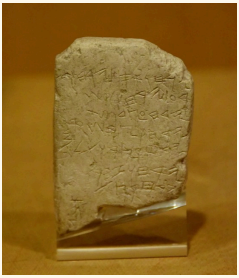
*"What share have we in David? To your tents, O Israel!"*

1 KINGS 12:16

PICTURED: SOLOMONIC GATE COMPLEX

Under David's son Solomon, Israel reached the height of its power. On Mount Moriah he built the Temple, finished in 967 BCE after seven years of work with Phoenician craftsmen and cedar from Lebanon. For four centuries it would stand at the center of Israel's life. Solomon taxed the caravans, launched a fleet on the Red Sea, and worked the copper of the Arabah. The Queen of Sheba came to test his wisdom.

The book of Kings names three cities he fortified in a single verse: Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. At all three, archaeologists found **the same six-chambered gate**, built to one plan. **Megiddo**, guarding the great trade road, has been excavated through twenty-six layers of occupation, and from Gezer comes the **Gezer Calendar**, a schoolboy's list of the farming year and one of the oldest Hebrew inscriptions ever found.



### Gezer Calendar

10TH BCE

*One of the oldest Hebrew inscriptions ever found — a schoolboy's agricultural calendar from the era of Solomon*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

Solomon's many foreign wives brought their gods into his court, and God told him the kingdom would be torn from his house. When his son Rehoboam answered the northern tribes with threats, ten of them broke away under Jeroboam. From then on there were two kingdoms: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south under the line of David.



Tel Dan High Place (Bamah) 9TH BCE

*The raised stone platform where Jeroboam set up a golden calf.*

To keep his people from the Temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam set up golden calves at Bethel and at Dan, with the words once spoken at Sinai: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." The **high place at Tel Dan**, a great raised stone

platform, stands exactly where Kings puts it.

In Rehoboam's fifth year Pharaoh Shishak marched against Jerusalem and carried off the Temple treasures. The pharaoh, Shoshenq I, carved his own record of the campaign on the wall of the **temple at Karnak**, listing more than 150 towns. A **fragment of his monument** was found at Megiddo, and a **scarab bearing his name** at a copper works south of the Dead Sea.



Shoshenq / Shishak Karnak Relief 10TH BCE

*Pharaoh Shoshenq I's victory list from his campaign in Canaan.*

*10 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →



CHAPTER EIGHT

# The Northern Kingdom

931–722 BCE

*1 Kings 15 – 2 Kings 17 · Amos · Hosea*

*"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him."*

1 KINGS 18:21

PICTURED: BLACK OBELISK OF SHALMANESER III

The northern kingdom found its strongest ruler in Omri. He abandoned his capital at **Tirzah**, where the buildings were left half finished, and raised a new city, Samaria, on a hill he had bought. Kings gives him eight verses, but Assyria called Israel "the house of Omri" for more than a century, and on the **Mesha Stele** the king of Moab complains that Omri, king of Israel, oppressed his land.

### Mesha Stele (Moabite Stone)

9TH BCE

*Moabite king Mesha's inscription naming Omri and Israel — and possibly the 'House of David'*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →



Omri's son Ahab married the Phoenician princess Jezebel, whose name is read on the **Jezebel Seal**, and built a palace whose **carved ivories** recall the "ivory house" of Kings. At **Jezreel** stood the royal compound beside Naboth's vineyard. Assyria's **Kurkh Monolith** records "Ahab the Israelite" fielding two thousand chariots at

the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE.

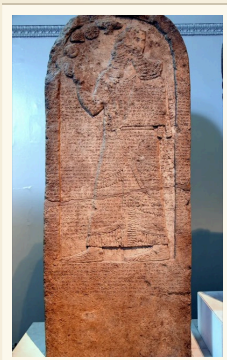


Samaria Ivories 9TH BCE

*Carved ivory panels from Ahab's palace, his "ivory house".*

Jezebel made Baal the god of the court and hunted down the prophets of God. Elijah answered her on Mount Carmel. Fire fell on his drenched altar, and the people cried, "The LORD, He is God." Yet worship stayed mixed, as inscriptions invoking "YHWH and his Asherah" at **Kuntillet Ajrud** and **Khirbet el-Qom** bear out. It was the very practice the prophets condemned.

In 841 BCE the commander Jehu, anointed at the word of Elisha, killed the kings of Israel and Judah in a single day and ended the house of Omri. He then bowed to Assyria, and the **Black Obelisk** shows him doing it, the



### Kurkh Monolith

9TH BCE

*Assyrian annals of Shalmaneser III naming 'Ahab the Israelite' and his 2,000 chariots at the Battle of Qarqar (853 BCE)*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

only surviving image of an Israelite king. The **Kurba'il Statue** lists his tribute. Hazael of Damascus, who the **Aššur Statue** says was "son of a nobody" when he seized the throne, ravaged Israel for a generation; **plunder inscribed with his name** survives, and his son Ben-Hadad appears on the **Zakkur Stele**.

Israel recovered. Jehoash is named on the **Tell al-Rimah Stele**, and under Jeroboam II the kingdom prospered. The **seal of his servant Shema** and the tax receipts of the **Samaria Ostraca** come from those years. The prophets Amos and Hosea warned that the prosperity was hollow.

In Judah the line of David went on. Kings records that local shrines stood there for generations, such as the

temples found at **Tel Moza** and **Tel Arad**. Two officials' seals name them as **servants of King Uzziah**, and the **Arad Ostraca** speak of "the House of YHWH."

### Sargon II Khorsabad Annals

8TH BCE

*Sargon II's own annals record the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE and deportation of 27,290 Israelites — directly confirming 2 Kings 17's account of the northern kingdom's destruction*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →



Then Assyria came west. Tiglath-Pileser III took tribute from Menahem of Israel and Ahaz of Judah, as his **annals** record, and his **Iran Stele** lists Menahem again. In 722 BCE, after a three-year siege, Samaria fell. **Sargon II's annals** count 27,290 Israelites carried into exile. The ten northern tribes were scattered, and only Judah remained.

*22 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →

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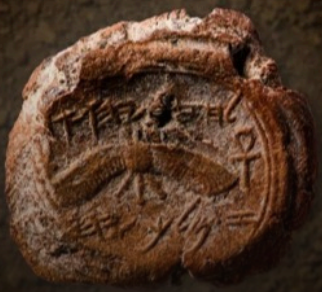


CHAPTER NINE

# Hezekiah and the Assyrian Siege

C. 730–640 BCE

*2 Kings 16–21 · Isaiah · Micah*

*"I will defend this city to save it, for My own sake and for the sake of My servant David."*

2 KINGS 19:34

PICTURED: HEZEKIAH BULLA

Judah watched the north fall. Its king, Hezekiah son of Ahaz, is known from his own seal: the **Hezekiah Bulla** reads "Belonging to Hezekiah son of Ahaz, king of Judah," and his father's seal survives in the **Ahaz Bulla**. A few meters from Hezekiah's seal lay another that may be the seal of **Isaiah the prophet**.

With Isaiah beside him, Hezekiah turned Judah back to the covenant. He tore down the high places and broke up their altars, and at Beersheba a **horned altar** was found dismantled, its stones built into a storehouse wall. Assyria was already close. Isaiah dates one prophecy to the year Sargon's commander took Ashdod, and pieces of **Sargon's victory stele** were dug up in that city.

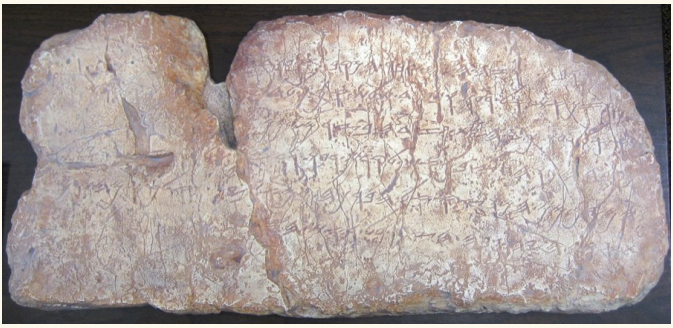
Hezekiah prepared for the worst. He stockpiled supplies in jars stamped **"belonging to the king,"** of which more than 2,100 handles survive. He threw the **Broad Wall**, seven meters thick, around Jerusalem's western hill. And he cut a tunnel 1,750 feet through bedrock to bring the Gihon Spring inside the city, where the **Siloam Inscription** describes the two teams of diggers meeting in the middle.

In 701 BCE Sennacherib invaded. He took **Azekah** and forty-five other fortified cities, and at **Lachish** his



Broad Wall (Jerusalem) 8TH BCE

*Hezekiah's defensive wall in Jerusalem, over 7 meters wide.*



Siloam Tunnel Inscription 8TH BCE

*Hebrew inscription describing the tunnelers meeting underground.*

siege ramp has been excavated, the oldest known in the world. Two **bullae of Eliakim** were sealed inside the

destruction. Sennacherib was so proud of Lachish that he lined a room of his palace with the **Lachish Relief**.



Lachish Relief (Nineveh) 8TH BCE

*Assyrian wall carving of the siege and sack of Lachish.*

His envoy stood before Jerusalem's walls and mocked the idea that God could save it. Kings says Taharqa of Kush marched out against Assyria, and the **Kawa Stela** shows he was of age to do so. Then, in a single night, the Assyrian army was struck down, and Sennacherib went home.

**Sennacherib's Prisms** give his side. He names Hezekiah, counts the forty-six cities, and boasts that he shut the king up in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage." He



### Sennacherib's Prisms

7TH BCE

*Sennacherib's own annals of his 701 BCE siege of Jerusalem — he names Hezekiah, boasts of trapping him 'like a bird in a cage,' but conspicuously never claims to have captured the city, matching 2 Kings 19 exactly.*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

never claims to have taken the city. Kings adds that he was later murdered by his own sons, and a **letter to his successor** names one of them as the ringleader.

Other finds fill in the Jerusalem of those years: the **tomb of the royal steward** whom Isaiah rebuked, a **bulla from Bethlehem**, the seal of the **governor of the city**, and from Philistia the **Ekron Inscription**. Hezekiah's son Manasseh reigned longer than any king of Judah, as Assyria's vassal. **Esarhaddon's Prism** and **Ashurbanipal's Annals** both list him.

*19 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →



CHAPTER TEN

# The Fall of Jerusalem

C. 640–586 BCE

*2 Kings 22–25 · Jeremiah · Lamentations*

*"How lonely sits the city that was full of people!"*

LAMENTATIONS 1:1

PICTURED: ISRAELITE TOWER (JERUSALEM)

Manasseh's grandson Josiah was the last great king of Judah. During repairs to the Temple the high priest Hilkiah found a scroll of the Torah. When it was read to him, Josiah tore his robes. He destroyed the high places, pulled down the altars of Jeroboam, and kept a Passover unlike any since the Judges.

### Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls

7TH BCE

*Oldest surviving biblical text — the Priestly Blessing from Numbers 6:24–26, over 400 years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →



The account of his reform names an official, Nathan-Melech, only once; the **seal of Nathan-Melech, servant of the king** was found in Jerusalem. Another bulla belongs to **Azariah son of Hilkiah**, the high priest's own son. The Torah itself was in the people's hands. A field worker at **Mesad Hashavyahu** petitioned for the return of his cloak as the law requires, and someone in Jerusalem wore the Priestly Blessing on the **Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls**, the oldest biblical text ever found.

Josiah fell at Megiddo in 609 BCE, and Judah went through four kings in twenty-three years. The **Babylonian Chronicles** record what happened around it: the fall of Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar's victory at Carchemish, and his first capture of Jerusalem, when King Jehoiachin was led away.



Babylonian Chronicles 6TH BCE

*Year-by-year Babylonian records, including the first siege of Jerusalem.*

Through it all the prophet Jeremiah warned that Jerusalem would fall. He dictated his words to the scribe **Baruch son of Neriah**, and the scroll was read aloud in the chamber of **Gemariah son of Shaphan**. King Jehoiakim burned it and sent **Jerahmeel the king's son** to seize them both. Later the officials **Jehucal and Gedaliah son of Pashhur** had the prophet thrown into a cistern.

The seals of every one of these men have survived.

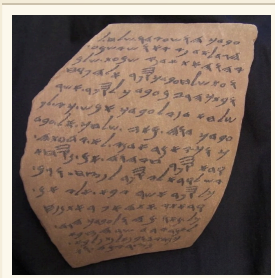


Baruch Bullae 6TH BCE

*Seal impressions of Baruch son of Neriah, Jeremiah's scribe.*

The last king, Zedekiah, rebelled, and Nebuchadnezzar returned for an eighteen-month siege. In the gatehouse at Lachish an officer wrote the **Lachish Letters**: we are watching for the fire signals of Lachish, for we cannot see Azekah. Jeremiah names those two cities as the last to hold out.

In 586 BCE the walls were breached, Solomon's Temple was burned, and the people were marched to Babylon. At the foot of the **Israelite Tower**, Babylonian and Judean arrowheads lie together in the ash. Jeremiah lists the Babylonian officers who took their seats in the gate, and Babylon's own records name them: the



### Lachish Letters

6TH BCE

*Hebrew military dispatches written in the final days before the Babylonian conquest*

VIEW THE ARTIFACT →

**Nebo-Sarsekim Tablet** and **Nebuchadnezzar's Prism**. On the wall of a burial cave in the Judean hills someone scratched the name of the God of Jerusalem, the **Khirbet Beit Lei inscription**.

Babylon appointed Gedaliah as governor, and the **Gedaliah Bulla** carries his name. Among his officers was Jaazaniah, owner of the **Jaazaniah Seal**. Gedaliah was murdered on the orders of Baalis, king of Ammon, a king attested on the **seal of his servant**. The land lay empty, and Lamentations mourned it.

*11 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →

✦ ✦ ✦



CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Exile and Return

586–C. 430 BCE

*Ezekiel · Daniel · Ezra · Nehemiah · Esther*

*"When God restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like dreamers."*

PSALM 126:1

PICTURED: CYRUS CYLINDER

The destruction of Jerusalem did not destroy the people. Settled along the canals near Nippur, the exiles followed Jeremiah's counsel: build houses, plant gardens, seek the peace of the city. Ezekiel saw a valley of dry bones rise and live again.



Jehoiachin Ration Tablets 6TH BCE

*Babylonian palace records listing rations for "Yaukin king of Judah".*

The captive king was not forgotten. Babylonian palace records, the **Jehoiachin Ration Tablets**, list rations issued to "Yaukin, king of Judah" and his sons. Generations later the **Murašû Archive** shows families with Hebrew names leasing land and doing business at Nippur.

Babylon fell in a night. Daniel says its king that night was Belshazzar. Critics long called that an error, since Babylon's king lists end with Nabonidus, until the

**Nabonidus Chronicle** showed that King Nabonidus had left his son Belshazzar to rule in his place.

In 539 BCE Cyrus of Persia took Babylon and let the exiled peoples go home to rebuild their temples. The **Cyrus Cylinder** states that policy in his own words. The first Judeans returned under Zerubbabel, heir of David, and laid the Temple's foundation, but the work stalled for sixteen years. When it resumed, the governor Tattenai demanded to know who had authorized it. He is named on the **Tattenai Tablet**, and the king he wrote to, Darius, carved his story on the cliff at **Behistun**.



Behistun Inscription — 6TH BCE

*Darius I's trilingual cliff inscription, the key to reading cuneiform.*

The Second Temple was finished in 516 BCE, seventy years after the first was burned. Judah was now the Persian

province of Yehud, the name on the **Yehud stamp impressions**, and a seal of that time bears the name **Shelomit**, the name of Zerubbabel's daughter.



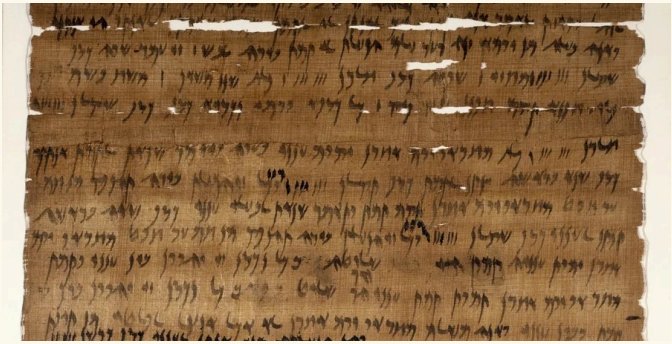
Palace of Susa (Apadana of Xerxes) 5TH BCE

*The excavated palace of Xerxes I, the setting of the book of Esther.*

Far to the east, in the **palace at Susa**, a Jewish queen named Esther risked her life before King Xerxes to stop Haman's decree against her people; the name of her cousin Mordecai matches the official called **Marduka** in Persian tablets. The Jews were saved, and the feast of Purim remembers it.

In 445 BCE Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem's walls in fifty-two days. His enemies are known too: Sanballat's family in the **Wadi Daliyeh Papyri**, and Tobiah's in the **Tobiah Inscription** cut into a cliff across the Jordan. In

Egypt, the Jewish garrison of the **Elephantine Papyri** kept Passover and corresponded with Jerusalem.



Elephantine Papyri 5TH BCE

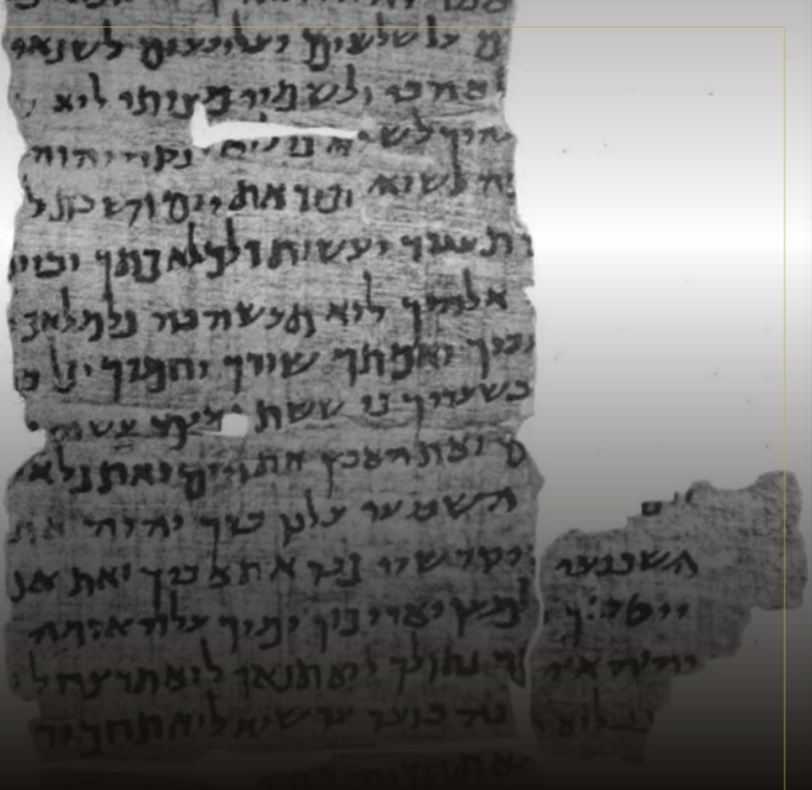
*Papyri from a Jewish colony in Egypt that mention the Temple.*

Then Ezra the scribe stood before the people and read the Torah aloud from dawn to midday. The covenant made with Abraham had outlived the kingdom.

*6 more finds from this period*

SEE THEM ON THE TIMELINE →

✦ ✦ ✦



CHAPTER TWELVE

# The Words Endure

AFTER THE RETURN

*The Tanach, copied and kept*

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever."*

ISAIAH 40:8

PICTURED: NASH PAPYRUS

With Ezra and Nehemiah the story told by the Tanach comes to its close. What remained was to keep it. Scribes copied the scrolls by hand, generation after generation, and the question any reader may fairly ask is whether the text we hold is the text they wrote.



Great Isaiah Scroll 2ND BCE

*The oldest complete biblical manuscript ever found.*

The ground has answered that as well. The **Nash Papyrus** preserves the Ten Commandments and the Shema on a single sheet from the second century BCE. The **Great Isaiah Scroll**, hidden in a cave above the Dead Sea, holds the whole book of Isaiah. It is a thousand years older than any copy known before it was found, and it matches the traditional text in all but minor details.

From the flood tablets of Mesopotamia to the seals of Jeremiah's enemies, the pages of this book have followed

one story through the evidence that survives it. The kings are named by their rivals. The cities lie where the text places them. The words themselves have been faithfully kept.

*"Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is one."*

DEUTERONOMY 6:4 · PRESERVED ON THE NASH PAPYRUS

*1 more find from this period*

SEE IT ON THE TIMELINE →

✦ ✦ ✦

THE EVIDENCE CONTINUES

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*ModernTribe documents every discovery in full, with its sources, its museum location, and the passages it bears on.*

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