

Hittites: Masters of Iron

The kingdom established by Hammurabi, known as the Old Babylonian Empire, did not last long after this great ruler's death in 1750 B.C. Within 150 years, the Babylonians were losing political power. They also faced invasion from a foreign race, the Kassites, who rode in from central Asia and brought with them a terrifying weapon—the light, horse-drawn, iron chariot.

These war machines were capable of great speed and maneuverability since their wheels were spoked, rather than constructed from heavy slabs of wood bolted together.

From 1650 to 1600 B.C., the Kassites fought the Babylonians. However, it would be another people—an Indo-European group known as the Hittites—who finally destroyed the last of the Old Babylonian empire in 1595 B.C.

Like the Kassites, the Hittites drove iron chariots. However, after destroying the Babylonians, they did not remain in Mesopotamia but returned to their homeland, Anatolia, known today as the nation of Turkey.

Until the 20th century, historians and archeologists knew little about the Hittites. In 1907, however,

the Hittite capital, Hattusas, (meaning “Hittite city,”) was unearthed by archeologists. After an archive of 20,000 clay tablets was uncovered, their language was deciphered by 1915.

Hattusas was a large city with long straight streets, grand palaces, huge defensive walls, and stone towers. Kings ruled over the Hittite state, often serving as high priests of the city.

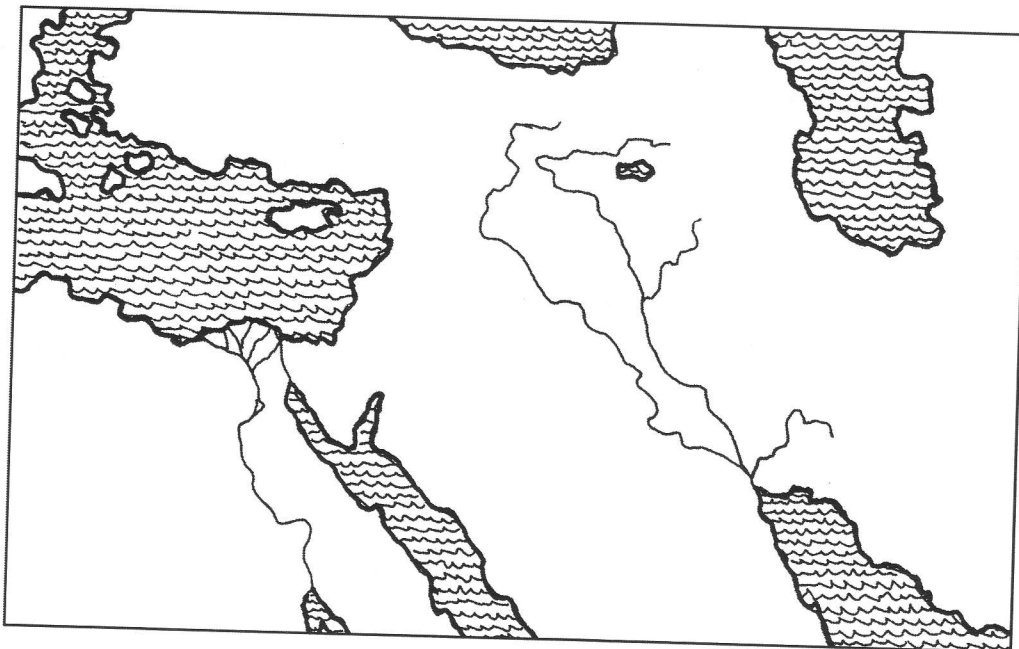
Great care was taken to keep the king-priest ritually pure. The Hittites were so fanatical about such things that when a hair was found in the king's drinking water, his water bearer was put to death.

Today the Hittites are known primarily as one of the first producers of iron, which they fashioned into spears and other weapons, as well as tools and iron plows.

Historians used to believe that the Hittites knew the secret of making iron long before other ancient Near Eastern people. However, this belief is no longer accepted. Many others developed iron-making skills at the same time. By 1100 B.C., nearly everyone in the ancient world was producing iron implements and weapons which helped to end the Bronze Age, a period which began as early as 3500 B.C.

Map Exercise

Using other sources, locate Anatolia, Hattusas, Egypt, the Nile River, Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon.



The Hebrews and Monotheism

In the centuries between 1200 and 1000 B.C., the Bronze Age gave way in the Near East to another metal of importance: iron.

The Iron Age had profound consequences in the ancient world. Iron weapons and tools were stronger, harder, and more useful over an extended period of time. Such objects were also cheaper to produce than bronze, allowing more people to afford weapons such as spears, shields, and daggers. As a result, smaller states—much smaller than Mesopotamia or Egypt—were able to create effective fighting armies.

Such smaller states became much more significant in the ancient world than in previous periods. One such people were the Hebrews—later called the Israelites—who came to live in the southwestern portion of the Fertile Crescent, the land occupied by the modern nation of Israel.

The best source we have today for the early history of the Hebrews is the Bible. According to the Old Testament, beginning around 1900 B.C., Hebrew nomads led by patriarchs, or fathers (the biblical Abraham is the most well known), wandered into ancient Canaan (known as Palestine by the Romans and as Israel today).

Some of these Hebrews migrated to Egypt where Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, had been sold into slavery by his brothers. (According to the Bible, Joseph worked his way into Egyptian society and became an important leader among the Egyptians.)

By the 13th century B.C., a Hebrew leader named Moses led his people out of Egypt, an important event in Jewish history known as the Exodus. Under his leadership, and that of a military leader named Joshua, the Hebrews migrated into ancient Canaan, taking the land by force.

After defeating their Canaanite neighbors in battles (including laying siege to the ancient city of Jericho), the Hebrews established themselves there, creating a kingdom around 1020 B.C.

The first three kings of the nation of Israel, the Hebrew name for Canaan, are the most famous: Saul, David, and David's son, Solomon. These men ruled from around 1020 to 922 B.C.

King Solomon's reign was the most spectacular. A great temple named after Solomon was built in the capital city, Jerusalem. Here the Hebrews worshiped one god, named YHWH. (The Hebrew alphabet does

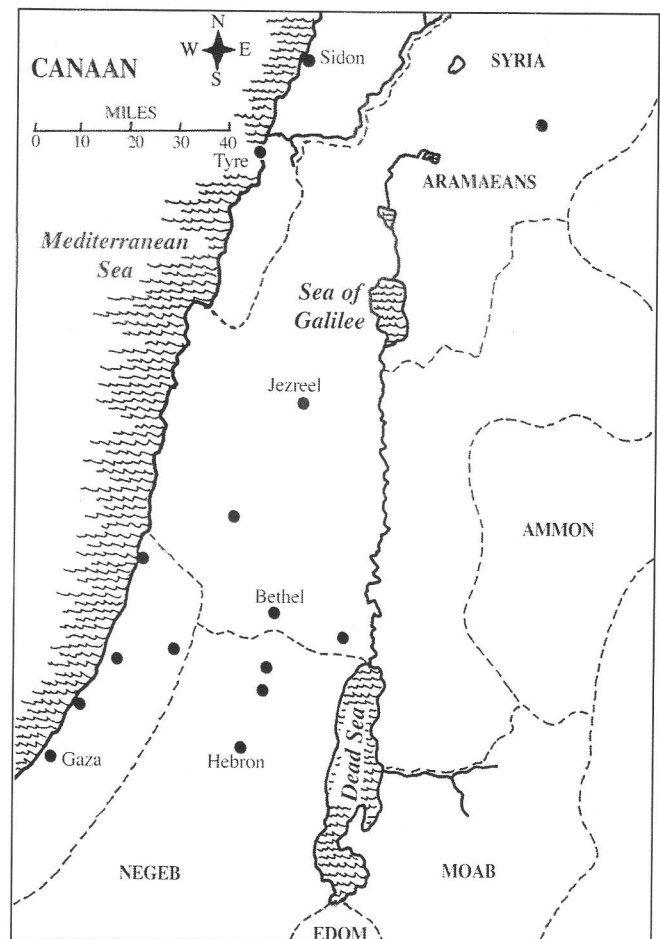
not include vowels. By convention, we write the name as Yahweh. In English, we use the name Jehovah.)

The acceptance of Yahweh as the single God of the Hebrews marks an important change in religious practices of the ancient world. The religion of Israel was monotheistic, meaning it recognized the existence of only one God.

Serving as the basis of the Jewish and Christian religions, monotheism is arguably the most important contribution the ancient Hebrews made to the advancement of Western civilization.

Map Exercise

Using other sources, identify Jericho, Jerusalem, Jordan River, Phoenicia, land of the Philistines, Kingdom of Israel, Kingdom of Judah, Damascus, Bethlehem, and Ekron.



The Canaanites

Prior to the coming of the Hebrews to Canaan and their taking of the land, the region of Palestine was home to various tribes of people known as the Canaanites.

Life in Canaan began early. The Canaanite city of Jericho, as we have seen, is considered one of the oldest cities in the world, dating from at least 8000 B.C.

The name Canaan may have come from a word meaning "land of purple." This referred to a purple dye which some of the coastal Canaanite people produced.

In the Mediterranean, Canaanite fishermen and seafarers caught shellfish, called murex, from the glands of which a deep red-purple color was extracted. Only a few drops could be harvested from each adult murex. (In fact, it required extractions from 60,000 murex to produce one pound of dye.)



Canaanite men and donkey, around 1900 B.C.

This dye was very expensive to produce and was highly prized among the Canaanites and others living outside the region, serving as one of the chief exports of coastal Canaanite people such as the Phoenicians.

By 1200 B.C., Canaanites lived in cities such as Jericho and Jerusalem. (Although Jerusalem later became the capital of the Israelite kingdom, it was originally the home of the Jebusites, who called their primary settlement Jebu Salem.)

Such cities were heavily fortified against invasion and attack. Jericho was noted for its thick walls. According to the Bible, the Hebrew people, led by Joshua, attacked the city and occupied it.

When the Hebrews entered Canaan, they found themselves neighbors of people who practiced a very different religion from their own. Each Canaanite community featured several holy shrines and altars where ritual sacrifices were made to their various gods.

The chief god of the Canaanites was named El, meaning "god." He was the head of a family of gods. However, the principal god worshiped by the Canaanites was named Baal, meaning "Lord." Baal was the son of El's brother, Dagon.

Baal represented to the Canaanites the god of fertility, one who could either bless or curse the annual harvest. He could also determine whether a Canaanite woman might conceive a child or be barren.

The Canaanites created images of Baal and other gods in stone, metals (including gold), and wood. While they might sacrifice grain, olive oil, or wine at their many shrines and temples, they also practiced human sacrifice.

Canaanite Baal worship was notorious among neighboring tribes. The Canaanites frequently sacrificed thousands of children to the god Baal, slicing their young victims' throats, then dropping them into a fire and burning their bodies until charred.

The Canaanites believed that spilling fresh blood made fertility in fields and in women's bodies a surer thing. As such sacrifices were made, parents watched without shedding tears. Such a death for one of their children was considered an honor, one reserved for only the noblest of families.

Research and Write

By the 1200s B.C., the ancient Canaanite people and the Hebrews lived side by side and practiced very different religions. After reading the previous page and this one, plus doing some extra research on your own, compare the religions of Baal worship and Yahweh worship. How were they different? How were they similar?

The Phoenicians: Traders in the Mediterranean

The Canaanites included many different tribal kingdoms prior to the invasion of the Hebrews in the 1200s B.C. Many of these tribes were Semitic people, meaning their language originated from the same sources. They shared other cultural traits, as well.

Among the Canaanite people were a group called the Philistines. These people lived in the southwestern portion of Canaan along the coast. The Philistines were a warrior nation. Men went into battle wearing short kilts and feathered headgear, carrying swords and round shields.

They lived in five allied cities known as Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. Until the days of the Hebrew king, David, the Philistines were the strongest military power in the land.

Another important Canaanite tribal group were the Phoenicians. They lived north of the traditional lands of the Philistines, hugging the coastline of the eastern Mediterranean.

The chief cities of the Phoenicians were Tyre, Sidon, Berytus (today known as Beirut, Lebanon), Aradus, and Byblos.

The city of Byblos was one of the centers of papyrus production in the ancient world. This reed material was pounded into scrolls for books. In fact, the Greeks in later years used the city name *Byblos* to refer to "book." It is the same source of the word *Bible* used today.

Historically, we think of the Phoenicians as excellent seafaring people. They were skilled ship-builders and woodcrafters. Phoenician wood workers provided some of the ornate carvings and panels used in the construction of the Hebrew temple of Solomon.

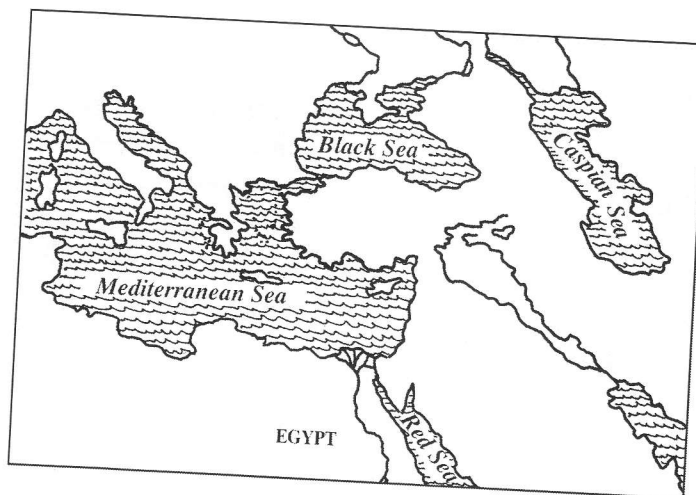
The Phoenicians became known as the chief traders in the Mediterranean. Their ships could be found throughout the vast sea region. They traded copper from the island of Cyprus, wool from Anatolia (Asia Minor), and papyrus from Egypt.

They were expert navigators who used the North Star to navigate their vessels through unknown waters at night. Phoenician sailors were probably the first to sail completely around the continent of Africa, making such a trip over a three-year period.

For hundreds of years, the Phoenicians expanded trade by shipping and by establishing colonies in the

Mediterranean. By 850 B.C. their trading colonies included the city of Carthage in North Africa.

The Phoenicians continued to dominate the Mediterranean until the 6th century B.C. when the New Babylonian ruler, King Nebuchadnezzar, succeeded in defeating the Phoenician city of Tyre after a siege of 13 years. While colonies situated far from Babylonian control such as Carthage continued to prosper, the Canaanite lands of the Phoenicians never regained power.



Map Exercise

Locate Phoenicia and Carthage on the map. Approximately how far apart were the two? Describe below the problems an ancient state might have had controlling a colony so far away.
