

History of Israel ¹

Israel is associated with the earliest stage in the history of humanity by the "Galilee Skull", while recent excavations in Jericho have produced the oldest evidence of organized city life.

The first known inhabitants of Israel in historic times were the Canaanites from whom the land long took its name. By c.3000-2500 BCE the inhabitants seem to have been largely Semitic speaking; they introduced the use of bronze and developed cities. The Bible mentions seven tribes which dominated the country. The long struggle for its control between the South (Egypt) and the North (Assyria), which - in varying political forms - was to dominate the local scene down to the 19th cent. had already begun at this time. The country was now divided into large numbers of warring city-states ruled over by petty "kings."

It first enters into Jewish history with the immigration of Abraham whose descendants continued to consider it their home. The Tel El Amarna letters throw much light on conditions in Canaan in the 15th cent. BCE and on the conquests of the Semitic "*Habiru*," perhaps denoting or comprising incursions by the Israelite tribes. The Israelite tribes gave the country (henceforth "the land of Israel") its unity and historic significance. Except during the brief Crusading interlude (1099-1187), the concept of "Palestine" has in fact existed only in relation to Israelite and Jewish history. The Israelites' invasion was a slow and difficult process: they first established themselves in the plains, and only gradually obtained control of the hill-country; the process was completed with the capture by King David of Jerusalem in c. 1000 BCE. Meanwhile, the disunited and sometimes warring Israelite tribes, ruled over by regional Judges, were the prey of other invaders from the north and east. The most dangerous were the Philistines, sea-invaders from the Aegean, near Greece, who obtained firm control of the Maritime Plain in the 12th cent. BCE and thence pushed inland.

For a time, it seemed probable that they would subdue the whole country. But the threat forged union on the Israelite tribes at last, largely through the spiritual dominance of the Prophet Samuel and the military genius of King Saul who established a monarchy embracing the entire country. His work was completed by his son-in-law King David who finally crushed the Philistine menace and extended the boundaries of the state in all directions. The latter's son King Solomon raised the kingdom to a great pitch of magnificence by his maritime enterprises, his lavish court, and his ambitious buildings, including the Temple at Jerusalem to serve as a religious center. The heavy taxation which all this necessitated resulted in widespread discontent, and after King Solomon's death, the northern tribes revolted.

Henceforth, the Land of Israel was divided for many years into two rival and sometimes warring states -- the smaller kingdom of Judah in the south [from which derives the word "Jew"], and the larger, more luxurious and more powerful kingdom of Israel (or Shamron-Samaria) to the north. The latter, weakened by internal dissensions between rival dynasties and recurrent wars with the kingdom of Syria (Damascus), succumbed in 721 to the Assyrians, its inhabitants being to a great extent deported and replaced by new settlers.

The kingdom of Judah, more secluded geographically and more staunch spiritually and politically, for the moment escaped but succumbed in 586 before the Babylonians (Iraq). Jerusalem was now destroyed, large numbers of the inhabitants deported, and the monarchy abolished. An attempt to renew organized political life in subordination to Babylonia under Gedaliah, a member of the old royal house, was ended by his assassination (582 BCE).

On the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire, the Persian (Iranian) king Cyrus permitted the children of the exiles, who had continued to cherish the recollection of their former land, to return and set up an autonomous center in the former territory (539).

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Reestablishment proved a long and painful process, and the center became, to some extent, firmly established only with the advent from the Persian court of the Prophet Ezra and Nehemiah. The mixed population of the northern part of the country (Samaritans) were excluded from participation in the southern colony, which, it was feared, they would contaminate or even dominate.

Henceforth, Judea (as the southern part was to be termed) was a semi-autonomous Persian (Iranian) vassal state, administered by the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple, while the Samaritans had their center on Mt. Gerizim. The invasions of Alexander the Great, which replaced Persian by Greek dominance, resulted in the establishment of Greek colonies along the coastal plain and around the Jordan valley and in giving the entire country a European rather than Asiatic orientation. The general political circumstances were, however, unchanged under the alternate control of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria.

This continued until in the 2nd cent. BCE the attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria to hellenize (adopt Greek culture) the country by force, religiously as well as culturally, led to the Hasmonean revolt (165), the miracle of Hannuka and the reestablishment for the first time since 586 of full independence under the Hasmonean house (142) which converted the rule of High Priests into a monarchy (104). Successive wars of conquest, particularly under John Hyrcanus (135-104), extended its rule over the whole of historic Land of Israel.

Henceforth, though the Greeks were strong on the coastal plain, etc. and the Samaritans in the central hill-country, almost all the Land of Israel was Jewish, Galilee in particular being now a center of patriotic sentiment. In 63 BCE, the expansion of the Romans in the Middle East brought the Land of Israel into their political orbit. For a period of many centuries, it was part of the Roman Empire, whether administered nominally by members of the Hasmonean dynasty, by the house of Herod, or directly by the Roman procurators and proconsuls.

There were interludes only in 55-49, when it was a vassal kingdom under Parthian control, and during the

two great Jewish revolts of 66-70 CE and 132-5. These resulted in the depopulation of great parts of the country, non-Jewish settlers being introduced and many districts, particularly in the south, losing their Jewish character.

Although the Romans ultimately regained political reign, "sacked the city [of Jerusalem] ... and expelled the bulk of the Jewish survivors from the country" the cost of victory was shattering -- "It is said that as many as 580,000 men were slain!" -- Romans as well as Jews. It was after the debacle that Hadrian changed the name of the city of Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina, ordered the building of a temple of Jupiter on the Jewish Temple site and "forbade any Jew, on pain of death, to appear within sight of the city." Jews began to migrate to the southern coast of Arabia and what is modern day Yemen. See "After the destruction of the Temple, the Jews fled to Arabia."

Nevertheless, a solid Jewish life continued to maintain itself (after 135, principally in Galilee) based as formerly on agriculture and increasingly controlled by the intellectual leaders and the "Patriarchs" (presidents of the Sanhedrin) whose authority was in due course recognized by the Roman government also. This was the period of the intense intellectual life reflected in the Mishnah, Palestinian Talmud, and Midrash. But increasing areas of the country now had a distinctly pagan aspect: for example the new administrative center on the coast, Caesarea, in which the Jews were a minority to Romans, was one of the hubs of Roman-Greek intellectual life, and some cities of the Decapolis in the North were centers of philosophical study.

The Christianization of the Roman Empire in the 4th cent., the moral pressure and waves of violence which succeeded it, and the anti-Jewish legislation henceforth adopted by the emperors resulted in the complete undermining of the position of Jews in Palestine, now a focus of Christian piety. The abolition of the Patriarchate in 425 reflected as well as stimulated this process. Although the Jewish element in the population remained strong and there was considerable intellectual activity (evidenced in the development of poetry, the Midrash, and the Masorah), Jews were now a minority in the country, henceforth in most respects indistinguishable from any other Roman (or in due course Byzantine) province.

The Jews assisted the Persian (Iranian) invaders in 614/28 and suffered when they were ejected. Under the Moslems, who conquered the country in 635/40, their role was unimportant, though an attempt was made to revive intellectual life by the establishment of a Gaonate, in imitation of that of Babylonian (Iraqi) Jewry. Under the Ummayyad caliphs, ruling from Damascus, the country prospered. Palestine was, however, neglected when the Abbasid dynasty transferred its capital to more distant Baghdad. Henceforth, once again it became the perennial bone of contention of the rival rulers of Egypt and Iraq, the consequent depopulation finally reducing the Jewish population to a minority.

The incursion of the Crusaders in 1099 was followed by the setting up of a western feudal state in the country which lasted, in a turmoil of war, only until 1187, and in 1291, the last Christian stronghold (at Acre) fell. The incursion of the Tatars in the 13th cent. added to the devastation. The country was now under Egyptian rule and without political importance.

In 1517, it was conquered (with Egypt) by Turkey for whom it was usually a remote and unimportant province regarded as little more than a source of revenue. This was the period of the renewal of the Jewish settlement on any scale-in part through the arrival after 1492 of Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal, in part through the emergence of Safed as the great kabbalistic center, and, to a minor extent, through the attempt of Joseph Nasi (and after him Solomon Ibn Yaish) to establish an autonomous center around Tiberias.

Connection between Israel and the Diaspora was maintained by the emissaries from the "Four Holy Cities" of Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias, and Hebron who traveled abroad to collect alms for the maintenance of the Jewish institutions. Local pashas were frequently corrupt and oppressive (e.g. Muhammad Ibn Farukh, Pasha of Jerusalem, who barbarously maltreated the Jews there in 1625). On the other hand, local rulers who established a firmer government (e.g. the Beduin sheikh Dahir al-Urmar, who rebuilt Tiberias in 1740 with Jewish participation led by R Hayyim Abulafia, or Ahmed al-Jazzar, governor of Acre 1775-1804) were unable to perpetuate it.

In the late 18th cent., the Jewish settlement was greatly reinforced by an Ashkenazi (European) Jewish refugees -- first of Hasidim (1777), followed by Mitnaggedim (Perushim) whose early settlements were mainly in Galilee.

Napoleon's campaign in 1799, in the course of which he called on the Jews to rally to his armies and help free the Holy Land from the Turks, proved only a momentary disturbance. The firm administration of Mehemet Ali of Egypt, which made a promising beginning in 1831, was ended by the Powers (England, Austria, Prussia, Russia) after only 9 years. The establishment of more peaceful conditions in the Mediterranean in the 19th cent., accompanied by a vast improvement in communications, opened up Palestine more and more to outside influence. Its importance in international politics was enhanced both by the cutting of the Suez Canal and by the southerly advance of Russia. Visitors to and settlers in the Land of Israel now became more common.

Religious institutions of all faiths were established in great profusion. The Jewish population rapidly increased. The restrictions on the settlement of Jews in Jerusalem were removed, that city attaining before long a Jewish majority. Sir Moses Montefiore and others began to attempt the founding of Jewish agricultural colonies. In 1882, the Bilu settlers initiated a new chapter in the history of colonization backed up by the resources of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, while the second wave of European refugees, sparked by Russian pogroms from 1904 onward placed Jewish rural life in Israel, supported by a Hebrew-speaking culture, on a firm social basis.

The British campaigns of 1917-8, in the course of World War I, led to the termination of Turkish rule. The administration was now entrusted by the League of Nations to Great Britain as the Mandatory Power with the object of implementing the Balfour Declaration for the creation of a Jewish National Home in what is now Israel and Jordan, Sir Herbert Samuel becoming the first High Commissioner (1920-5).

But in 1922, in an attempt to to appease Arab objections, and after obtaining the necessary assurances that peace would follow, an arrangement negotiated by Winston Churchill, then the British colonial secretary,

detached Transjordan from the historic Palestine, setting it up as a separate emirate in which Jewish settlement was forbidden. See History of Jordan, Jordan as Palestine

The British administration, at first enthusiastically hailed by the Jewish population, proved to be temporizing. Jewish political rights were restricted, Arab objections sometimes favored if not fostered, and immigration and expansion arbitrarily limited. See Britain's role in bringing in illegal Arabs and keeping out Jews, trying to create an artificial Arab majority in Palestine 1920-1948

Nevertheless, the labor of the Jewish immigrants and the influx of Jewish capital into the country after 1918 - sometimes restricted, sometimes lavish, but never ceasing - changed the face of the country. New settlements were founded, swamps drained, forests planted, and cities created or vastly expanded (e.g. Tel Aviv). The condition of the Arab population, especially in the towns, was also benefited enormously, though in the countryside effendi landowners rather than the hard-working peasant enjoyed the advantage. This attracted hundreds of thousands of Arab immigrants from Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Transjordan to Israel seeking better means of employment.

This economic expansion was given a powerful stimulus after the beginning of Nazi persecution in Europe in 1933 when, in spite of all obstacles, Jewish refugees, and the consequent investment of capital, increased still further.

In 1936, Arab intifada stimulated by the German and especially Italian Fascist governments, led by Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem anxious to embarrass England in the Middle East, developed into guerilla warfare which lasted sporadically for some three years, but the development of the country continued without interruption. Owing to the increasing restrictions imposed by the British authorities, "illegal immigration," of refugees carefully organized, assumed considerable proportions from 1940. By 1936, the total population of Palestine (Israel and Jordan) was 1,367,000 of whom (in Israel) 384,000 were Jews.

The British obstruction, even after the European tragedy of 1939-45, of the Jewish right of settlement in Israel guaranteed by the Balfour Declaration, led to an intensification of activity for the establishment of a fully autonomous Jewish state. From 1945 onward, there was increasing tension, mounting bloodshed, and the beginning of large-scale clashes with the British forces, used to prevent Jewish refugees, as well as with the Arab guerrillas.

Ultimately, the British government referred the problem to the United Nations which recommended the division of Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states (Nov. 1947). The British Mandate terminated on May 15, 1948. The previous day the state of Israel had been proclaimed. An Arab Invasion 1948 followed and a war against the Arab coalition resulted in the extension of the area of the state beyond the boundaries proposed by the United Nations. It comprised the whole of the coastal plain, Galilee, part of Samaria, and the Negev, together with the new parts of Jerusalem and a "corridor" leading up to it. The remainder of the country - including the Old City of Jerusalem and virtually the whole of Transjordan became the Kingdom of Jordan, and Egypt invaded the Gaza Strip.

The character of the country was changed by the flight of the majority of the Arab migrant workers and the arrival by 1958 of a million Jewish refugees, extensive soil conservation, the foundation of settlements, extension of irrigation schemes, establishment of industries, etc. In particular, great expanses of the Negev have been systematically developed and settled, resulting in the extension of the effective area of the Land of Israel for the first time in the modern period over much of the south, including an outlet to the Indian Ocean, via the Red Sea, at Elath