New Centers of Civilization

Nomadic peoples played an important role in the spread of civilization in western and central Asia. After about 1200 B.C., there was no dominant power in the region. The Phoenicians emerged as the most important trading kingdom in the Mediterranean area. The Israelites did not create an empire, but they left a world religion, Judaism, that influenced the later religions of Christianity and Islam.

Our story of civilization so far has focused on Mesopotamia and Egypt. Recent evidence suggests that another civilization flourished in central Asia (in what are now the republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) around 4,000 years ago. These people built mud-brick buildings, raised sheep and goats, had bronze tools, and used irrigation to grow wheat and barley. Recently discovered inscriptions show that these early people may have had writing.

On the fringes of these civilizations lived nomadic peoples who depended on hunting and gathering, herding, and sometimes farming for their survival. Most important were the pastoral nomads who on occasion overran settled communities and then created their own empires. Pastoral nomads domesticated animals for food and clothing. They followed regular migratory routes to provide food for their animals.

People who lived in settled communities often viewed nomads as hostile and barbaric. The groups did interact, however. Nomads traded animals and animal products for grains and vegetables they were unable to grow. Pastoral nomads also carried products between civilized centers. In this way nomads often passed on new technology, such as the use of bronze and iron, that helped strengthen civilizations. When overpopulation or drought disrupted the pastoral nomads’ normal patterns, however, they often attacked the civilized communities to obtain relief.

The Indo-Europeans were one of the most important nomadic peoples. The term Indo-European refers to a particular group of people who spoke a language derived from a single parent tongue. Indo-European languages include Greek, Latin, Persian, Sanskrit, and the Germanic languages. The original Indo-Europeans were
THE HITTITE EMPIRE, 1650–1200 B.C.

Based somewhere in the steppe region north of the Black Sea or in Southwest Asia. Around 2000 B.C. they began to move into Europe, India, and western Asia. One group moved into Asia Minor and Anatolia around 1750 B.C. With the native peoples, they formed the Hittite kingdom with its capital at Hattushash (Bogazköy in modern Turkey).

Between 1600 B.C. and 1200 B.C., the **Hittites** created an empire in western Asia and threatened the power of the Egyptians. The Hittites were the first Indo-Europeans to use iron. Iron made stronger weapons, which were also cheaper as iron ore was abundant. New invaders, the “Sea Peoples,” destroyed the Hittite Empire.

The end of the Hittite kingdom and the weakening of Egypt around 1200 B.C. temporarily left no dominant powers in western Asia. As a result, several small kingdoms and city-states emerged, notably around Syria and Palestine. The Phoenicians were one of these peoples.
The Phoenicians

**MAIN IDEA** The Phoenicians created an international trade empire and invented an alphabet.

**HISTORY & YOU** Why would using an alphabet make writing easier than using picture symbols? Learn about the Phoenician alphabet.

The Phoenicians lived in the area of Palestine along the Mediterranean coast on a narrow band of land 120 miles (193 km) long. After the downfall of the Hittites and the Egyptians, the newfound political independence of the Phoenicians helped them expand their trade. Trade had long been the basis of their prosperity. The chief cities of Phoenicia—Byblos, Tyre, and Sidon—were ports on the eastern Mediterranean. The Phoenicians produced a number of goods for foreign markets, including purple dye, glass, and lumber from the cedar forests of Lebanon.

The Phoenicians built ships and became great international sea traders. They eventually created a trade empire. The Phoenicians charted new routes not only in the Mediterranean but also in the Atlantic Ocean, where they reached Britain and sailed south along the west coast of Africa. They set up a number of colonies in the western Mediterranean. Carthage, on the North African coast, was their most famous colony.

Phoenician culture is best known for its alphabet. The Phoenicians, who spoke a Semitic language, simplified their writing by using 22 different signs to represent the sounds of their speech. These 22 characters, or letters, could be used to spell out all the words in the Phoenician language. Although the Phoenicians were not the only people to invent an alphabet, theirs was important because it was eventually passed on to the Greeks. From the Greek alphabet came the Roman alphabet that we still use today.

**Reading Check**

- **Identifying** What was the most significant cultural invention of the Phoenicians?

- **Making Inferences** Why is the Phoenician alphabet important to our society?

- **Explaining** Why would there have been ancient bilingual documents and markers?
The Israelites

The Israelites had lasting influence through their religious beliefs rather than from military power.

**HISTORY & YOU** How might religious beliefs affect the ways in which people interact? Read to learn about the interaction between religions in the eastern Mediterranean.

To the south of the Phoenicians lived another group of Semitic-speaking people known as the **Israelites**. They were a minor factor in the politics of the region. However, their religion—known today as Judaism—flourished and later influenced the religions of Christianity and Islam.

Much of the Israelites’ history and religious beliefs was eventually written down in the Hebrew Bible, which is known to Christians as the Old Testament. According to Israelite traditions, they are descendants of the patriarch Abraham. Their ancestors migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan. Their lifestyle was based on grazing animals rather than on farming. Then, because of drought, the Israelites moved to Egypt, where they were enslaved until Moses led them out of Egypt. They wandered for many years in the desert until they returned to Canaan.

Some interpretations of recent archaeological evidence contradict the details of the biblical account. It is generally agreed, however, that between 1200 B.C. and 1000 B.C., the Israelites organized in tribes and established a united kingdom known as Israel.

**The United Kingdom**

By the time of **King Solomon**, who ruled from about 970 B.C. to 930 B.C., the Israelites had established control over all the land that came to be called Israel and made **Jerusalem** into its capital. Solomon expanded the government and army of ancient Israel, and also encouraged trade. Solomon is best known for building a temple in the city of Jerusalem. The Israelites viewed the temple as the symbolic center of their religion and of the Israelite kingdom itself. Under King Solomon, ancient Israel reached the height of its power.

King Solomon was also known for his wisdom. Once, two women brought a child before him, each claiming that she was the child’s mother. Solomon ordered his servant to cut the child in half, giving one half to each woman. The first woman objected: “Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don’t kill him!” The second woman replied, “Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!” Then Solomon said: “Give the baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother.” According to the biblical account, “When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice.”

**The Divided Kingdom**

After Solomon’s death, tension among the tribes within Israel led to the creation of two separate kingdoms. The Kingdom of Israel was composed of the ten northern tribes and had its capital at Samaria. To the south, the Kingdom of Judah consisted of two tribes and had its capital at Jerusalem.

In 722 or 721 B.C., the Assyrians overran the Kingdom of Israel and sent many Israelites to other parts of the Assyrian Empire. Most of these scattered Israelites (the “ten lost tribes”) merged with neighboring peoples and gradually lost their identity.

The Kingdom of Judah managed to retain its independence for a while, but a new enemy soon appeared on the horizon. The Chaldeans (kal•DEE•uhnz) defeated Assyria, conquered the Kingdom of Judah, and completely destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Many people of Judah were sent as captives to Babylonia. Only the poorest remained. The words of Psalm 137 evoke the memory of their exile:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. . . . How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.”

—Psalms 137: 1, 4–6
The Babylonian captivity did not last. New conquerors, the Persians, allowed the people of Judah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their city and temple. The revived province of Judah was controlled by Persia until the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 300s B.C. The people of Judah survived, eventually becoming known as the Jews and giving their name to Judaism.

**Judaism**

The Jews were monotheistic; they believed in one God called Yahweh (YAH•way), the Creator of the world and everything in it. In the Jews’ view, God ruled the world; all peoples were his servants, whether they knew it or not. God had created nature but was not in nature. The sun, the wind, and other natural phenomena were not gods, but God’s creations to be admired but not worshiped.

This powerful creator was not removed from the life he had created. God was just and good, and he expected goodness from his people. If they did not obey his will, they would be punished. However, he was also “compassionate, slow to anger, and rich in love.” Each person could have a personal relationship with this being.

The covenant, law, and prophets were three aspects of the Jewish religious tradition. The Jews believed that during the exodus from Egypt, when Moses led his people out of bondage, God made a covenant, or contract, with them. Yahweh promised to guide them if they obeyed the laws of God as expressed most prominently in the Ten Commandments. According to the Bible, Yahweh gave these laws to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Jews believed God sent certain religious teachers, or prophets, to serve as his voice to his people.

When the Jews were forced by the Romans to leave Palestine in A.D. 70, they began nearly 1,900 years without a homeland.

As they settled throughout the world, many Jews assimilated into the cultures of their new communities by following local customs and speaking the local language. Still, they maintained their religious beliefs and customs, even though it often resulted in persecution. Eventually many Jews settled in the United States. Their impact, like many who have settled in America, has helped shape our national culture. Today more Jews live in the United States than in Israel.

- For nearly 2,000 years, Jews have maintained their customs despite being scattered across the world.
- The Jewish people retained their heritage through perseverance and rigorous study of ancient Hebrew texts.
The age of prophecy lasted from the 1000s B.C. to the 400s B.C., a time when the people were threatened or conquered by powerful neighbors. The prophets declared that faithlessness to God would bring catastrophe, but that turning from evil would bring God’s mercy. The prophets introduced concepts that enriched the Jewish tradition. Later prophets embraced a concern for all humanity. All nations would come to the God of Israel and find peace.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."
—Isaiah 2:4

The prophets also cried out against social injustice. They condemned the rich for causing the poor to suffer. They denounced luxuries, and they threatened Israel with prophecies of dire punishments for these sins. They said that God’s command was to live justly, share with others, and care for the poor and the unfortunate. These words became a source for ideals of social justice.

The following selection makes clear the prophets’ belief that unjust actions would bring God’s punishment.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: ‘It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?’ . . . Your men will fall by the sword, your warriors in battle. The gates of Zion will lament and mourn. . . .’"
—Isaiah 3:14–17, 24–26

The religion of Israel was unique among the religions of western Asia and Egypt. The biggest difference was its belief in only one God (monotheism). In other ancient religions, only priests (and some rulers) had access to the gods. In the Jewish tradition, God’s wishes, though communicated to the people through prophets, had been written down. No leader of Israel could claim that he alone knew God’s will. This knowledge was available to anyone who could read the Hebrew Bible.

Although the prophets developed a concern for all humanity, the demands of Judaism—the need to obey God—encouraged a separation between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. Unlike most other peoples of Southwest Asia, Jews would not accept the gods of their conquerors or neighbors and could consequently not be integrated into another community.