

# BACKGROUND to the BIBLE

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# BACKGROUND to the BIBLE

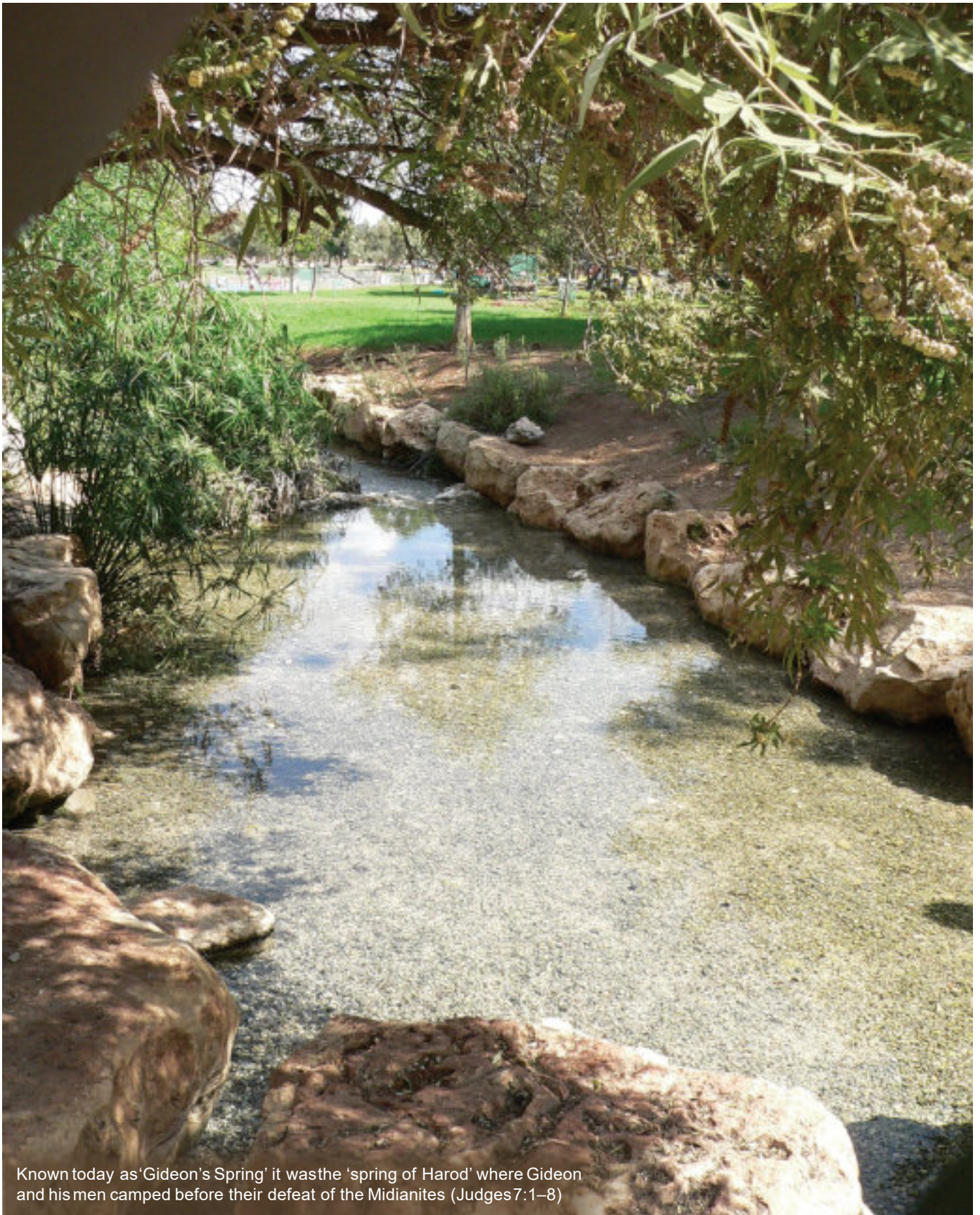
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Full timelines of Israel and Judah and the surrounding nations, throughout the Old and New Testaments, will be found in Evidence for the Bible pp. 220-231





Known today as 'Gideon's Spring' it was the 'spring of Harod' where Gideon and his men camped before their defeat of the Midianites (Judges 7:1-8)

# Background to the Bible

Archaeology is never a static science, and that is especially true for archaeology related to the Bible. Every year, and throughout the year, towns and items are unearthed that throw important light on the background and context of the Bible

**B**ackground to the Bible is intended as a companion to Evidence for the Bible. Since its first appearance in 2014, Evidence has proved very popular and has been reprinted many times; it is available for purchase in the British Museum and an American edition has also been published. However, there is always so much more testimony from the trowel to illustrate and authenticate the Bible's history, hence Background to the Bible.

Unlike most sourcebooks of world religions, the Bible is set in the orderly context of real history.

Below

Chris on a dig near the sea of Galilee and taking it easy on a discarded settee overlooking the Judean wilderness!

It contains not only 'stories', but the record of events that really happened from the beginning of creation to the close of the New Testament. This is what makes the Bible a living record of God's plan for restoring a broken world to his perfect fulfilment.

Historical records always have a context: who were the people and what was the age like in which they lived? Who lived around them and how did those people live? What customs and beliefs throw light on the expressions used in the Bible? All these, and much more, are not merely interesting details, but they frequently help us to understand and appreciate the Bible record more fully.

In this companion to Evidence for the Bible, we have avoided repetition in the text and only rarely are the same items illustrated. We have frequently referenced where additional information or pictures can be found in Evidence for the Bible. Full timelines of Israel and the surrounding empires will be found there also.

The two volumes will sit comfortably together on your coffee table for visitors to enjoy, or in your library as a familiar point of reference.

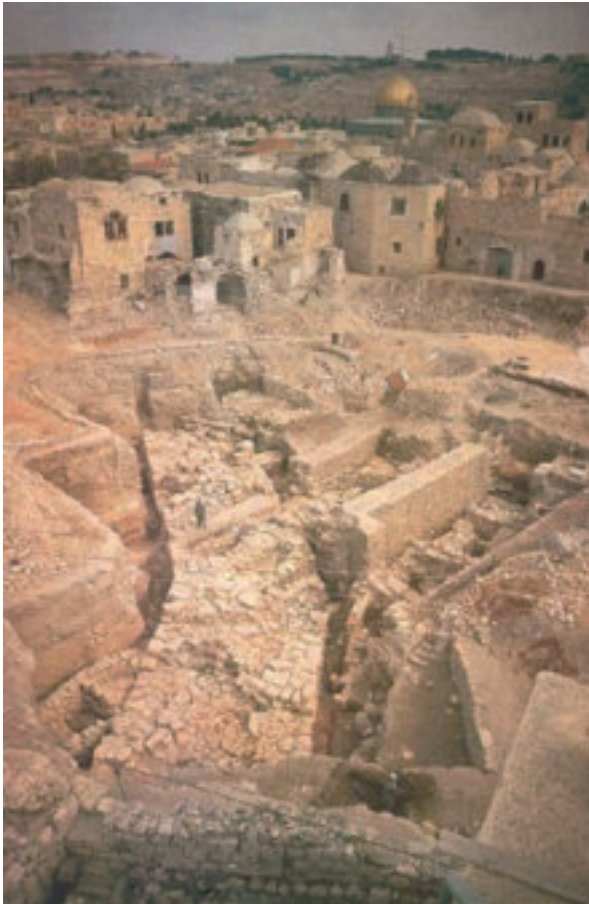
For serious study or for relaxed and interesting reading, Background to the Bible will prove invaluable to all who have an interest in understanding what lies behind and around the events recorded in the Bible.

3 .



# The miracle of Israel

Every great empire of the ancient world disappeared under the trash heap of history, only one seemingly insignificant people remarkably survived to the present day



Left

The 'Broad Wall'. The foundations of the city wall that defied Sennacherib in 701 BC

First, the Egyptians

When the grandsons of Abraham, the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel), settled in Egypt around 2,000 BC, they were under the protection of a powerful and wealthy nation. However, after four centuries their growing numbers drove them into slavery and finally an attempt was made to destroy them entirely (Exodus 1). The miracle of the Exodus saved them. Later, early in the 13th century, Pharaoh Merneptah left on record his attempt to destroy the people

known as Israel.<sup>1</sup> Slowly, Egyptian unity splintered and allowed the Assyrians to take control.

Second, the Assyrians

By the 8th century BC, the Assyrian empire stretched from Egypt to the Persian Gulf and as far north as modern Turkey.

In 722 BC Sargon of Assyria ended the northern territory of Israel (Samaria, 2 Kings 17).<sup>2</sup>

Two decades later Sargon's son, Sennacherib, set out to destroy Judah in the south. The Assyrian field commander taunted the Judaeanking Hezekiah in Jerusalem: 'Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?' (2 Kings 18:33). However, on Sennacherib's own admission, of all the nations he destroyed, Hezekiah was the only king that he never captured; his army was decimated by an unseen hand and he was assassinated in 681 BC.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the Babylonians

At the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC the power of Assyria was finally broken, and Babylon was the new superpower. In 587 BC, Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar and its people taken into exile (2 Kings 24:10–13). As a sovereign nation, Israel no longer existed. But the Jews maintained their faith and their unity as a people.<sup>4</sup>

When God promised to make the descendants of Abraham 'into a great nation' (Genesis 12:2), it set in train the most remarkable story of any people-group that has covered four millennia. Throughout this time, repeated attempts were made to destroy their very existence.

1. See The Merneptah Stela in Evidence for the Bible p. 32.

2. See Evidence for the Bible p. 60.

3. See Evidence for the Bible pp. 65–78.

4. See Evidence for the Bible pp. 78–93.

#### Fourth, the Persians

In 539 BC, the Persian army broke the power of Babylon and Cyrus allowed their captive people, including the Jews, to return home.<sup>5</sup> In spite of local opposition, both Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt. However, in the time of Xerxes there was a conspiracy in the Persian court to destroy all Jews throughout the empire (Esther 3–7); the courage of the Jewish queen saved them. The extent, power and wealth of the Persian empire exceeded all before them — until Alexander the Great defeated Persia at the Battle of Issus in 333 BC. Alexander's vision of one people, one nation, one language and one currency was almost achieved and the Jews had some respite.

#### Fifth, the Syrians

When Alexander died and his empire was broken up, Judah came under the control of Syria and the Seleucid dynasty. In 175 BC, Antiochus IV determined to replace the religion of the Jews by Greek culture and religion. He took the name 'Epiphanes' (God manifest) and claimed to be Zeus incarnate. Judaism was outlawed, the temple treasures plundered, an altar to Zeus was erected in the temple and pigs were sacrificed there. The guerrilla wars of the Maccabees erupted. Although the Maccabees failed to overthrow the Syrians, Antiochus died in 164 BC and the Seleucid kingdom slowly crumbled until defeated by Rome in 63 BC.

#### Sixth, the Romans

The Romans arrived in Jerusalem under general Pompey

in 63 BC and stayed for three hundred years. Although Israel had some degree of independence, most Jews hated the Roman occupation and rebellion finally led to the entire destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 and thousands of Jews were enslaved. The final humiliation was the financing of the Colosseum by the treasures plundered from the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Rome itself was destroyed by the Goths in the 5th century and its empire disintegrated.

#### Seventh, a scattered and stateless people

Across the world in the centuries that followed, the Jews held on to their religion, but with no home to call their own. They were variously tolerated, hated and persecuted; only the Allied victory in 1945 saved them from entire extermination. In 1948 the United Nations recognized the State of Israel.

One of the most intriguing phenomena of recorded history is

the survival of the Jews during their four thousand years from Abraham to the present day. Was it for their sake only, or for the sake of the whole world?

#### Bottom

'Methuselah', a date palm tree grown from a cluster of date stones discovered by Yigdal Yadin on Masada in the 1960s; Masada was the final stand against Rome of the Jewish Zealots destroyed in AD 73. 'Methuselah', is a symbol of the survival of the Jewish people

#### Below

A coin depicting Antiochus IV Epiphanes, minted between 172 and 164 BC. On the obverse he is shown wearing a diadem; on the reverse, an unnamed goddess is seated on a throne while holding Nike (Victory) in her right hand with the words *Basileus Antiochos* (King Antiochus)



5. See Evidence for the Bible pp. 96–107.

6. See Evidence for the Bible p. 178–180 and page 119 here.

# Israel — a strategic land bridge

The relatively small size of the land of Canaan should not distract us from its significance on the world stage in Bible times and beyond



## Left

The Fertile Crescent is formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the east and its western boundary is marked by the Mediterranean Sea. This great arc became known as the cradle of civilization

## Below

When General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem in 1917 after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, he was only the latest in a long line of military leaders to lay claim to this strategic region

stretching east to Persia after the conquests of Alexander the Great, bringing Greek language and culture to the land of Judah.

- Rome transformed Judah into its own province of Judea and eventually renamed it Palestine at the time of Emperor Hadrian in order to erase Jewish identity.
- In the Modern World nations have continued to fight for control of the land including Napoleon's attempt to conquer Palestine in 1799 and the British Empire taking control of it during the period of the British Mandate (1923–1948).

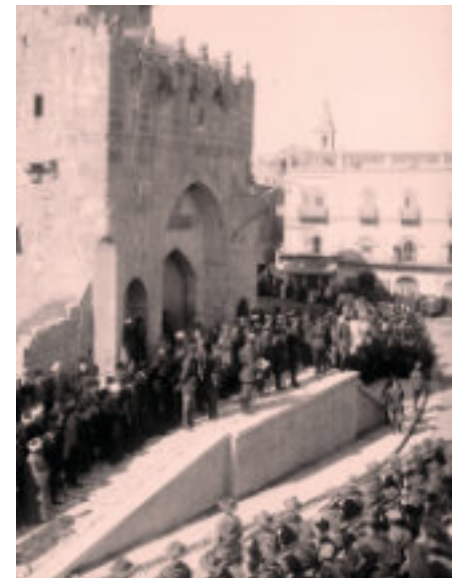
Significantly, as so many nations came to Judah, it was from here that Jesus commissioned his followers to take the Good News to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18–20).

- Egypt called the Way of the Sea the 'Way of Horus' and often led military campaigns into Canaan (1 Kings 14:25–26).
- The Philistines had come from the Mediterranean Sea and settled the western coastal plain. The Bible sometimes calls the Way of the Sea, the 'Way of the land of the Philistines' (Exodus 13:17).
- Assyria laid claim to the north of Canaan and eventually destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 15:29).
- Babylon rose to become the powerful empire that destroyed Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:10–16).
- Persia defeated Babylon and established the Achaemenid Empire in which Judah was a province (Ezra 1:1–4).
- Greece created an empire

6...

The land given to Israel stands at a pivotal site within the broader area of the Fertile Crescent, which includes Canaan and northern Egypt. Canaan was of enormous strategic value for the entire region. It sits on the meeting point of three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. Far from being an isolated backwater, it was the land bridge of the ancient world for movement between these continents. In the west and east, the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian desert were significant barriers, whereas an accessible road ran down the length of Canaan.

This 'Way of the Sea' (Isaiah 9:1) was a major trunk road that allowed armies and merchants to move between the empires. This is one reason why the land of the Bible was of strategic interest to so many:



# A Birthplace for archaeology

In Canaan, the development of civilization has left a wealth of material for modern science to uncover

The two great rivers of the Fertile Crescent were essential to the beginnings of civilization. Sumer and Egypt both developed the earliest civilizations. The biblical reference to Shinar (Genesis 10:10) is probably Sumer. Their innovations in agriculture (including the wheel), mathematics and literature would spread across the world. Bronze and Iron metalworking were both developed in the Fertile Crescent.<sup>1</sup>

Armies crossing the land constructed heavily fortified cities whose walls provided a stable platform for dwellings. When a city was destroyed by war or earthquake, it was rebuilt on top of the ruins; this preserved the artefacts of earlier civilizations and many such tells (ruin mounds) still remain. With so much history and covered civilizations, Bible lands were important for the development of biblical archaeology.

- Helena (248–330), her interest in the Christian faith, led the mother of Emperor Constantine identifying and excavating biblical sites.
- Charles Warren (1840–1927) extensively explored the tunnels and walls of Jerusalem to understand its historical development.
- Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) developed a more systematic

## Right

The ruins of Scythopolis from the time of Jesus, and in the background the Tel of Bethshan where the bodies of Saul and Jonathan were taken by the Philistines (1 Samuel 31:8–13). This tel covered thousands of years and fifteen civilizations

## Below

Excavations at Megiddo reveal twenty different cities built one on top of another, stretching back to the Bronze Age when the circular altar was in use



approach to excavation and honed his skills in Egypt along with many sites in Palestine.

- John Garstang (1876–1956) was a pioneer in developing archaeology as a science and keeping extensive photographic records of his excavations. Garstang excavated in Egypt and at Jericho and Ashkelon.
- William Albright (1891–1971) identified the Dead Sea Scrolls and developed what became known as 'Biblical Archaeology'. Without believing in the full trustworthiness of the Bible, he claimed archaeology demonstrated that Bible history was generally accurate.
- Kathleen Kenyon (1906–1978) became known as the 'mistress



of stratigraphy' for her emphasis on careful excavation of the horizontal layers of a site. She developed her skills at Jericho, Samaria and Jerusalem. While her conclusions remain controversial her techniques continue to be valued.<sup>2</sup>

1. Reference to Tubal-Cain (whose name may mean sharpener or hammerer) working in bronze and iron (Genesis 4:22) may refer to a skill later lost, or to the hammering and filing of surface deposits of copper and iron, rather than the later development of smelting.

2. See here pp. 138–148 for more on early archaeologists.