

III. THE FIRST CIVILIZATIONS – The Fertile Crescent: Mesopotamia & Near East

A. Mesopotamia – “The land between two rivers,” it forms the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

1. Sumerians (ca.3500-2300 B.C.) – In Lower Mesopotamia the Sumerians formed city-states which fought against each other constantly.

i. History

a. Settlement (ca. 4000 B.C.) – People from the mountains to the east moved into Mesopotamia and settled into farming villages. The people who settled in Mesopotamia are called Sumerians and their land is called Sumer.

b. Development – One of their first tasks was to drain the marsh areas near the Persian Gulf in order for greater cultivation. Next they built dikes to protect their fields and homes from floods. Finally they created elaborate irrigation systems which allowed for greater cultivation and settlement of dry areas.

c. City-states – Sumer was made up of a number city-states (urban centers surrounded by farmland). Each city-state was regarded as the property of a local god or goddess and was under the rule of a local priest-king.

1. Ziggurats – Sumerians built pyramid shaped temples to honor their gods. The temple was the center of religious and economic activity. The Sumerians were polytheists (they believed in more than one god).

d. Sargon (ca. 2360 B.C.) – For most of their history, the Sumerian city-states fought against one another. In ca. 2360 B.C. Sargon, a king from the north united Sumerian city-states under him. His rule lasted for 55 years, and soon after his death, the city-states fell to invaders from the north.

ii. Contributions to Civilization

a. Cuneiform – a system of writing containing more than 700 symbols that stood for objects, ideas, sounds or syllables

b. Numbering system – our system of measuring time (60 minutes in an hour) and the degrees in a circle (360)

c. Architecture – The Sumerians used sun-dried bricks to build their ziggurats. This material was lighter and more adaptable than heavy stones of the Egyptians; thus they were able to construct arches and domes 2,000 years or more before the Romans.

d. Literature – The best known Sumerian work, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dates back to ca. 3000 B.C. In this *epic*, the hero Gilgamesh travels in search of ever-lasting life. “Mere man – his days are numbered; whatever he may do, he is but wind.”

2. Babylonian Empire (2300-1000 B.C.) – Ca. 2300 B.C. neighboring tribes from the north conquered Sumer. They built a new capitol city named Babylon.
 - i. History
 - a. Babylonian rule – The Babylonians soon adopted Sumerian culture: laws, religion, cuneiform writing, etc. They spread commerce throughout the Middle East, possibly as far as India and China.
 - b. Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.) – The most famous Babylonian king during whose reign laws of the Sumerians and the Babylonians were *codified* (written down in a systematic way).
 - ii. Contributions to Civilization
 - a. Hammurabi’s Code – Hammurabi developed a written code of almost 282 laws. Although the code was a step forward in establishing justice for everyone, its punishments were harsh.
 1. Criminal justice – “eye for an eye”
 2. Civil codes – Code established class system of nobles and priests above commoners. Stronger punishments for commoners.
 3. Family codes – fair treatment for women who could own property, engage in business, and obtain divorce
 4. Economic codes – Laws established property rights, protection for contracts, limits on interest for loans, and set wages for workers
 - b. Astronomy – the study of stars and planets.
 1. Astrology – Babylonians also believed in astrology (the study of stars and planets for predicting future events).
 2. Lunar calendar – they created a calendar based on 12 cycles of the moon and 7 day weeks. 354 days – 11 were added at the end of the year.
3. Assyrian Empire (1000-612 B.C.) – They were a mountain people who were known for their cruelty.
 - i. History
 - a. Expansion – around 1000 B.C. the Assyrians, a nomadic tribe from northern Mesopotamia, began expanding aggressively as the Babylonian Empire declined. They set up Nineveh as their capitol.

- b. Advantages – From the Hittites, the Assyrians learned to ride horses and chariots and make iron weapons, including siege rams. By 800 B.C., they had conquered Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt.
 - c. Brutality – The Assyrians were barbarous: they flayed and butchered their victims, and they set up harsh governments that taxed heavily.
 - d. Decline – In the last years of Assurbanipal’s reign, Scythians (fierce nomads from the north) began to invade. With Assurbanipal’s death Chaldeans from Mesopotamia and Medes from Persia rose up to conquer Nineveh and end Assyrian rule.
- ii. Contribution to Civilization – they were not known for any creative developments, but they did a great deal to preserve Babylonian culture and knowledge.
 - a. Government – they developed a system of strong provincial administration that would become the basis of the Persian Empire.
 - b. Roads – they built roads that enabled greater trade, military and administrators to move quickly.
 - c. Library at Nineveh – Ashurbanipal brought together huge collections of Babylonian cuneiform tablets. Our knowledge of Gilgamesh was actually preserved in Assyrian form.
4. The New Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire (612-539 B.C.) – They would recapture Babylon from the Assyrians and rebuild it before falling to the Persians.
- i. History
 - a. Overthrow of the Assyrians – In 612 B.C. the Chaldeans of Mesopotamia Medes from Persia joined forces to revolt against the cruel Assyrian rule.
 - b. King Nebuchadnezzar (605-561 B.C.) – He rebuilt the city of Babylon, whose chief god was Marduk. His successor, Nabonidus, worshipped other gods and lost the support of the priests and nobles. They then urged Cyrus of Persia to invade and take over.
 - c. Decline – King Cyrus of Persia takes Babylon in 539 B.C. without struggle.
 - ii. Contributions to Civilization
 - a. Babylonian culture – Nebuchadnezzar revitalized Babylonian culture, commerce, astronomy.
 - b. Hanging Gardens – He built for his palace the largest ziggurat in Mesopotamia and planted trees and bushes on its terraces for his wife who

was homesick for her native home to the north. This became known as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

5. The Persian Empire (550-330 B.C.) – Persians and Medes had lived in the area of present-day Iran since ca. 3000 B.C. The Persians are the ancestors of the present-day people of Iran; they were ruled by the Medes until 550 B.C. Under Cyrus the Great, they would become the largest empire the world had ever known.
 - i. History
 - a. Cyrus the Great (580-529 B.C.) – Persian king, overthrows Median rule, captures Ecbatana in 550 B.C. and Babylon in 539 B.C.
 - b. Expansion – Cyrus had conquered Asia Minor and the Fertile Crescent by 539 B.C. His son, Cambyses, conquered Egypt. Under the reign of Darius I (521-486 B.C.) the Persian empire reached its greatest extent, expanding to control India and the Greek city-states of western Asia Minor.
 - c. Fall – Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 330 B.C.
 - ii. Contributions to Civilization
 - a. Government – provincial administration similar to the Assyrians, but they taxed lightly and respected customs, religions, languages of subject peoples.
 1. *satraps* – local governors controlled by Inspectors, “the Eyes and Ears of the Emperor”
 - b. Roads – well constructed roads connected the various sections of the empire. Royal Road ran 1,500 miles from Sardis to Susa.
 - c. Cultural Diffusion – East and West grow more connected as the Persians expand from Greece to India.
 - d. Zoroasterianism – Zoroaster, 7th century prophet:
 1. He taught that the existence of one supreme God, Ahura-Mazda creator of heaven, earth and man, god of light and goodness.
 2. There was a constant struggle between Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman, god of evil and darkness.
 3. Those supporting Ahura-Mazda lived virtuously and went to heaven; those Ahriman by living in sin went to hell.
 4. Ahura-Mazda will prevail (good over evil).

B. The Near East

6. Hittites (1650-1200 B.C.) – nomads from Central Asia who had moved into Asia Minor by 1900 B.C.

i. History

- a. Expansion – Ca. 1400 the Hittites crossed the Taurus Mountains and defeated the Mitanni of Northern Syria. In 1287 B.C. at the Battle of Kadesh, the Hittites defeated the Egyptians, but they were soon forced to seek an alliance with the Egyptians due to the growing threat of Assyria. In defeating the Mitanni, the Hittites had exposed themselves to the growing power of Assyria. Their treaty with Egypt divided Syria, creating a defensive alliance against the Assyrians.
- b. Advantages – Asia Minor was rich in mineral deposits. Hittites used iron tools and weapons and rode horses and chariots.
- c. Decline – sometime around 1200 B.C. the Hittites declined due in part to the Sea Peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas.

ii. Contributions to Civilization

- a. Iron manufacture – they kept this technology secret until their decline.
- b. Horses – they may have introduced the horse to Asia Minor
- c. System of law – based on payment for damages rather than harsh punishments of Hammurabi's code.
- d. Treaties – creating alliances allowed for expanding and securing territories with less warfare.

7. The Phoenicians (1200-800 B.C.) – From Canaan, they settled along the Mediterranean coast in present Lebanon. They were not empire builders. Instead, they lived in small city-states on the shore of the Mediterranean. They became so wealthy that they were able to pay other nations not to invade their territory.

i. History

- a. Expansion – by 1200 B.C. they were trading throughout Mediterranean from ports such as Tyre and Sidon. By 800 B.C. they had established trading colonies in N. Africa, Sicily, Sardinia and Spain. Their most famous city was Carthage.
- b. Decline – Ultimately they fell through rivalry with the Greeks and Romans.

ii. Contributions to Civilizations

- a. Trade – Phoenicians were famous for their purple cloth. They used shellfish to create a purple dye. Cloth was so rare that it was used for robes of kings. They traded for products from as far away as Britain (tin) that came down through Gaul on the Rhone River. They were skilled craftsmen in gold, copper, bronze and glass. They imported raw materials from distant lands and crafted the materials into goods for export.
- b. Alphabet – they needed a simple alphabet to keep track of trades. At some point (thought to originate around the Sinai Peninsula) they replaced their bulky cuneiform system of about 500 symbols with an alphabet system of 22 symbols, each standing for a distinct sound. They carried this with them wherever they went. It was adopted by the Greeks (*cultural diffusion*) who added vowels and then later by the Romans.

8. The Hebrews (1800-600 B.C.) Tribes of nomadic shepherders from Mesopotamia

i. History

- a. Abraham (ca. 1800 B.C.) – He led the Hebrews from Ur to Canaan, also called Israel. In Israel, the Hebrews organized themselves into 12 tribes.
- b. Famine (ca. 1700 B.C.) – some tribes moved south to the Sinai and Egypt, perhaps following the Hyksos invasion. If Joseph existed, he would have served a Hyksos pharaoh.
- c. Enslavement (ca. 1500 B.C.) – Egyptians expelled Hyksos and enslaved Hebrews.
- d. Exodus (ca. 1275 B.C.) – during reign of Ramses II, Moses led Hebrews out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments. After forty years in the desert, Hebrews came to their homeland, Canaan.
- e. King Saul (ca. 1020 B.C.) – unites the 12 tribes of Israel to fight against the Philistines (descendants of the Sea Peoples who had ended the Hittite Empire, they were well organized and possessed iron weapons). Saul killed in battle.
- f. King David (ca. 1000-961 B.C.) – son-in-law of Saul becomes king. Reputed to have slain Goliath, known for his bravery and his ability to command, he defeats the Philistines and captures Jerusalem from the Canaanites. He is believed to have authored many of the Psalms. In Jerusalem he established the Ark of the Covenant, a religious shrine to Yahweh. During David's reign the city of Jerusalem became the capital of Israel (City of David), and it prospered, but the people were overworked and overtaxed. David's favorite son, Absalom, revolts and is killed.
- g. King Solomon (ca. 961-922 B.C.) – Son of David and Bathsheba. He built a temple on the summit of Jerusalem to house the Ark. He surrounded himself with even more wealth and luxury. He was a shrewd administrator and diplomat who is (somehow) remembered for his wisdom.

- h. Rebellion – 10 Northern Tribes of Israel rebelled when Solomon’s successor tried to continue his policy. Southern tribes became Judah.
 - i. Destruction – In 721 B.C. the Assyrians conquered Israel and transplanted the tribes across the Euphrates (Ten Lost Tribes). In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem in punishment for revolt. Hebrews remained in exile for fifty years, forming their close-knit, ritualistic society. In 539 B.C. Cyrus restored the Hebrews to their native land and allowed them to rebuild their temple. Ca. 135 A.D. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews: *Diaspora*.
- ii. Contributions to Civilization
- a. Monotheism – The Hebrews were the first to accept one supreme Creator, Yahweh. At first he was a harsh God, God of only the Hebrews, a God who could punish the sinful or the innocent, a God who demanded sacrifice. Judaism would directly influence two of the world’s other main religions: Christianity and Islam.
 - b. The Ten Commandments – The laws of Moses
 1. “Thou shalt have no other God but me.”
 2. “Thou shalt not worship false idols.”
 3. “Thou shalt not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God.”
 4. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...”
 5. “Honor thy father and mother...”
 6. “Thou shalt not kill.”
 7. “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”
 8. “Thou shalt not steal.”
 9. “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”
 10. “Thou shalt not covet (desire)... anything that is your neighbors.”
 - c. Moral Law – In 8th and 7th c. Hebrew prophets began to preach reform. God was now the ruler of all people, Hebrew and pagan alike. It was not enough to simply follow the Ten Commandments. New laws commanded the Hebrews to be charitable to the poor, to set slaves free, etc. Judaism set standards for relationships among peoples, far advanced for people of ancient times and still applicable today.
 - d. Old Testament – Hebrew moral law or Mosaic law (the law of Moses) is found in the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah. Hebrews recorded their history, moral principles and beliefs. For centuries the stories of the Hebrews existed as oral history; during the Babylonian Captivity, Hebrew scribes and scholars wrote their history down in order to preserve it. It contained the history of the world as the Hebrews understood it, their own past, laws given by God.

