Hebrews and the Land of Milk and Honey

Since ancient times, empires have risen and fallen in the Middle East. Their rulers accumulated great wealth and power and built cities of striking beauty. But their power and palaces eventually fell into ruin. They were covered by thousands of years of sand and dust.

One small group outlived those great empires. They were the Hebrews, also known as Israelites and, later, Jews.

The Hebrews' early contribution to humankind was not wealth or technology. Rather, it was the revolutionary idea that there was only one god, a belief known as monotheism. This all-powerful Hebrew god was called Yahweh. This religion later influenced the founding of Christianity and Islam.

Abraham and the Torah

The history of the early Hebrews is known primarily from the Torah. This sacred text is included in the Old Testament of the Bible. According to the Torah, Abraham is the ancestral patriarch, or father, of the Hebrew people. Yahweh visited Abraham, it is said,
and instructed him to smash the idols of his father’s gods. Abraham was commanded to worship the one and only true god, Yahweh, and move his family to the land of Canaan. Yahweh promised Abraham that if he followed these commands, he would create a great nation in a land rich with "milk and honey." This land is roughly located in the same place as modern-day Israel.

However, the land that Abraham and his followers found was no paradise. The dry climate and rocky soil required great effort to survive in. Drought eventually forced Abraham and his family to relocate to Egypt.

**The Twelve Tribes**

The Torah tells how Abraham had a son, Isaac. Isaac’s son was Jacob, who in turn had 12 boys. These sons became the leaders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Jacob’s most beloved son, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Joseph, though, rose to become one of the top officials of the Egyptian pharaoh, or ruler.

When a severe drought struck Canaan, Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt for help. They begged him for grain. Forgiving their past mistreatment of him, Joseph supplied his brothers with food. He also convinced them to stay in Egypt.

There, the Hebrews prospered and became a great nation. However, a later pharaoh enslaved them.

**The Exodus to Canaan**

The Torah then tells the story of Moses. He was a legendary leader who freed the Hebrews from Egypt. This event is known as the Exodus. The Hebrews believed Yahweh punished Egypt and the pharaoh until he was forced to let them go. Moses then led his people to freedom.

The Hebrews wandered in the desert for 40 years, it is said. During this time, Yahweh delivered to Moses what later became known as the Ten Commandments. These laws were meant to guide people’s beliefs and actions. Moses also struggled to keep his people loyal to Yahweh. He died, though, before he could lead his people back to Canaan.

That task fell to Joshua. Under his leadership, the Hebrews settled among the Canaanites and the Philistines. The Old Testament tells of Joshua’s victorious battles against these people. Over time, the Hebrews began to learn the ways of the Canaanites. They settled down to a life of farming and herding.
Israel destroyed, Judea defeated

In 722 B.C., the Assyrians invaded and destroyed much of Israel, the northern half of Hebrew lands. The southern half, known as Judea, survived until around 597 B.C. Then the Babylonians defeated the Judeans. Most of them were brought back to Babylon as captives.

During their time in Babylon, Hebrew scribes recorded the history of their people and beliefs. After 539 B.C., the Persians under Cyrus II conquered Babylon. He allowed the Hebrews to return to their holy city of Jerusalem. However, other empires continued to occupy Hebrew lands. About 2,000 years ago, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and sent most of the Jews into exile. They would not return to their homeland as a united people until the 20th century A.D.