

LESSON OUTLINE

Download the HERITAGE DVD-ROM bookmarks for this lesson:

For Windows users

For Macintosh users

Introduction to the Course of Study

- V** Video: Show 1: Introduction, Introduction to the Series

The Birthplace of Civilization

- V** Video: Show 1: Mesopotamia, Archaeology and the Bible
- A** Atlas: Mediterranean: 2150 BCE
- M** Multimedia: Writing

Abraham and Mesopotamia

- D** Historical Document: "Abraham Migrates to Canaan"
- A** Atlas: Near East: 1750 BCE

The Land of Canaan

- M** Multimedia: Canaanite Civilization
- M** Multimedia: Canaanite Art Gallery
- A** Atlas: Near East: 1500 BCE

Descent to Egypt and Slavery

- A** Atlas: Near East: 1220 BCE
- M** Multimedia: Rameses II

Emancipation and Revelation

- V** Video: Show 1: Israel, Exodus
- V** Video: Show 1: Israel, Exodus
- A** Atlas: Near East: 1220 BCE

HERITAGE

Civilization and the Jews

§ A People Is Born §

Session 1

Episode 1 § Lesson 1 "In the Beginnings ..."

This initial lesson, after setting forth the programmatic concept of the course, explores the roots and formation of an Israelite people in the environments and cultures of the ancient Near East.

The course emphasizes not just Jewish history, but the *interactions* of the Jewish people with other societies throughout history. Interacting in its formative years with Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan – all richly developed societies – Israel absorbed elements of the surrounding cultures. And yet, many of the cultural, societal, and religious innovations of ancient Israel are based on transformations and rejections of the ancient world in which it developed.

Because of this combination of inheritance and transformation of ancient cultural norms, Israel served as both a mirror and a refractive lens on the world in which it developed.

This lesson also focuses on the key formative events that comprise the Jewish memory of Israel's beginnings: Abraham's journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan based on a divine promise of inheritance; the enslavement of Abraham's descendants in Egypt; the eventual emancipation from slavery; and the Sinaitic revelation and covenant.

Session 1 “In the Beginnings ...”

PART 1

Introduction to the Course of Study

The instructor may wish to introduce students briefly to the *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews Interactive DVD-ROM*, in order to clarify the architecture of the DVD-ROM material and to lessen potential distractions during its use.

(If students are intended to purchase the DVD-ROM for use in class assignments, a full additional session may be needed, preceding this one, to instruct them on the navigation and use of the DVD, including search techniques.)

This course is not purely an historical survey of the Jewish people, nor is it a substitute for an Introduction to Judaism class. It is an historically oriented *civilizational* study of the Jewish people, showing how the Jewish people evolved over centuries of interaction with other peoples and cultures. As such, students will learn much about the history and civilizations of many peoples, and comparatively little about issues like the Jewish life-cycle, religious ceremonies and customs, and classical Jewish texts, except insofar as these items reflect the civilizational development of the Jewish people in interaction with other cultures.

V Introduction to the Series

Video > A People Is Born >
Introduction > Introduction to
the Series

Video: Show 1: Introduction, Introduction to the Series

The narrator of the video segments we will be discussing is Abba Eban, the late former Foreign Minister of the State of Israel. In this brief video segment, Mr. Eban explains the concept behind the production of the original PBS video series, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* – a concept expanded and incorporated into all of the supplementary material on the DVD-ROM that will be studied in the coming weeks.

- ◆ Play the video segment until the phrase “...felt and thought and written and performed.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why are the Jews a particularly valuable “lens” through which to study the development of western civilization?
- Jews and surrounding cultures had a two-way diffusion of cultural influence. What are some examples of ways the Jewish people have influenced modern American culture? What are some examples of how American civilization has influenced the Jewish people?

PART 2

The Birthplace of Civilization

Civilization is able to develop when populations become sedentary due to the advent of agriculture. This makes permanent dwelling places – cities – possible. The relatively dependable source of food allows members of the society to focus on pursuits other than subsistence, such as architecture, technology, the arts, and financial and legal systems.

V Mesopotamia, Archaeology, and the Bible

Bookmark: “Eden and its World”

Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible

Video: Show 1: Mesopotamia, Archaeology, and the Bible

The Bible tells a story of creation that is centered around a place called Eden, summoning up ancient memories of the world’s first great permanent civilization that arose in the fertile plain between two rivers in modern Iraq, the Tigris and Euphrates.

- ◆ Play the video segment until the phrase “...starting point of civilization.” (Note that the segment to be played starts in the middle of the subchapter. Its bookmark is labeled “Eden and Its World.”)

Review and Discussion Questions

- What factors enabled the first civilizations to arise in Mesopotamia?
- Why do kingdoms and military empires tend to develop in civilized areas?

A Mediterranean: 2150 BCE

Atlas > 3100 BCE – 586 BCE > 2150 BCE > Mediterranean

Atlas: Mediterranean: 2150 BCE

It is worth looking at the geography of the development of civilization and cities in this area of Mesopotamia.

- ◆ Point out the locations of Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia on the map.
- ◆ Click the **Map Legend** button at the bottom to show the mileage scale of the map and explain the distances involved between these centers. Click the button again to make the Legend go away.
- ◆ Click on the **T** in the word “MESOPOTAMIA” to zoom In on that area.
- ◆ Point out the pair of rivers (Tigris to the northeast, Euphrates to the southwest), and key cities, especially those of Biblical relevance, e.g., Ur, Nineveh, and Assur on the Tigris, and

Susa (Shushan of Purim fame) east of the Tigris. If desired, point out areas of key archaeological interest, e.g., Ur, Nippur, Mari, and, further east, sites like Ebla and Ugarit.

- ◆ Click the **Modern View** button at the bottom to show the modern states in this area. Note that Nineveh is now the modern city of Mosul, Iraq. Click the button again to revert to Historic View.
- ◆ Use the red frame in the Thumbnail Map at the lower left to survey other areas of the region, as desired.

Review and Discussion Question

- Noting the location of Canaan between thriving and often imperial Asian Mesopotamia and African Egypt, what can be guessed about the economic and strategic value of that slender piece of land?

M Writing

Video > A People Is Born >
Mesopotamia > Writing >
Explore Topic > Play

Multimedia: Writing

A crucial development in human history took place in Mesopotamia: the development of writing. Writing was a necessary technology for civilizational, commercial, and agricultural development, permitting land-titles, bills of sales, marriage and inheritance records, and law codes. Of course, writing also enabled a more permanent and reliable record of a society's history.

- ◆ Click the **Play** button to play the multimedia segment.
- ◆ At the conclusion of the Autoplay, click the **Envelopes** button to discuss the development of this "privacy" technology. You may also choose to click the **International Writing** button to explain how the ancient writing system of cuneiform was deciphered in modern times.

Review and Discussion Question

- In what ways was the development of writing both a *need* of civilization and a *facilitator* of new developments and growth for civilization? What are some other "technology" developments that, in fulfilling a need, have given rise to entirely new aspects of society?

Session 1 “In the Beginnings ...”

PART 3

Abraham and Mesopotamia

Historians have established that, in the opening centuries of the second millennium BCE, many people migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan. The general cause of this migration is uncertain. According to the Bible, one of the émigrés was Abraham (then known as Abram).

The book of Genesis relates a variety of tales and legends about Abraham and the next three generations of his descendants, as they sojourned in Canaan.

D “Abraham Migrates to Canaan”

Video > A People Is Born > Canaan > Canaanite Civilization > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > Abraham Migrates to Canaan

A Near East: 1750 BCE

Atlas > 3100 BCE – 586 BCE > 1500 > Mediterranean

Historical Document: “Abraham Migrates to Canaan”

In the book of Genesis, the migration of Abram/Abraham’s family is described.

- ◆ Read the document with the class, noting the information in the sidebar to the document.

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why did Terah stop at Haran? Why did God want Abraham and his kin to continue beyond Haran to Canaan?
- Does it matter whether Abraham is an historical figure or a fabricated legendary ancestor?

Atlas: Near East: 1750 BCE

Many scholars question his starting point, Ur of the Chaldees, since the Chaldean people did not dominate the vicinity of Ur, in modern southern Iraq, until many centuries after the time of Abraham. These scholars believe that the crucial move by Abraham actually began in modern northern Syria at Haran, in what was then the land of the Hurrians. Many patriarchal tales in the Bible seem to reflect the culture and laws of the Hurrians.

- ◆ Point out the critical points in Abraham’s journey.
- ◆ Click on **Jerusalem** to zoom in to the map of Canaan, and point out the various sites pertinent to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs:
 - Shechem – Abram’s first stop in Canaan, and an important city in the Jacob narrative
 - Bethel – Abram’s next stop and also the site of Jacob’s dream of a stairway to heaven

- Hebron – one of Abram’s dwelling places
- Beersheva – another one of Abram’s places and Isaac’s main residence
- Sodom (and Gomorrah) – Lot’s hometown

Review and Discussion Questions

- Hurrian law demanded that primary inheritance rights pass on to the eldest son of the father. In what ways do the patriarchal stories acknowledge this legal custom, while at the same time repudiating it?
- How does Abraham’s commitment to one God, as opposed to the polytheism of his neighbors, make a difference in the Jewish world-view?

PART 4

The Land of Canaan

The land that was promised to Abraham was by no means an empty place awaiting a claimant. While our archaeological knowledge of Canaan depicts a place with polytheistic and often abhorrent religious practices, the Canaanites were a people with a high culture that reflected a blend of Mesopotamian and Egyptian influences.

M Canaanite Civilization

Video > A People Is Born > Canaan > Canaanite Civilization > Explore Topic > Play

M Canaanite Art Gallery

Video > A People Is Born > Canaan > Canaanite Civilization > Explore Topic > Canaanite Art Gallery

A Near East: 1500 BCE

Atlas > 3100 BCE – 586 BCE > 1500 > Mediterranean

Multimedia: Canaanite Civilization

Canaan was a place that provided the land bridge for trade – and unfortunately war – between Mesopotamia and Egypt. In addition, its location on the Mediterranean Sea made it a recipient of trade and cultural stimulation from the incipient seagoing civilizations of places as far away as Greece and Rome.

- ◆ Click the **Play** button to view the multimedia segment.

Multimedia: Canaanite Art Gallery

- ◆ Click the **Canaanite Art Gallery** button for a multimedia segment.
- ◆ Then, click through the images of Canaanite art to portray the cultural richness of these ancient peoples.

Review and Discussion Questions

- What factors account for the cultural diffusion of Mediterranean, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian influences in Canaanite society?
- What seem to be the dominant themes of Canaanite art as illustrated in the gallery?

Atlas: Near East: 1500 BCE

According to the Bible, Abraham and his descendents wandered the area of Canaan, with occasional brief forays back to modern Syria (called Aram in the Bible) and down to Egypt. All this was to change with Abraham’s great-grandsons – the sons of Jacob/Israel. The Book of Genesis ends with the tale of the entire family moving to the area of Goshen in Egypt.

- ◆ Point out the areas of Aram (near Aleppo) and the eastern Nile delta (northeast of Giza).

- ◆ Summarize the Patriarchal period that is covered in the Book of Genesis, up through the migration of Jacob's family to Egypt.

Review and Discussion Question

- The story of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers seems almost typical of the troubled family relationships in the Book of Genesis. Why did the Biblical author choose to emphasize these difficult stories, which hardly seem to aggrandize Jewish ancestors?

PART 5

Descent to Egypt and Slavery

In Egypt, the descendants of the Patriarch Jacob/Israel (the *B'nai Yisrael*) were to be subjected to a cruel slavery. They were forced to build storage cities and monumental structures for the Pharaoh. The recollection of the centuries in Egypt, both as free men and women, and later as slaves, was to have incalculable effects on the Israelites forever.

Initially, as free residents of Egypt, they would absorb elements of Egyptian culture. Later, as slaves, they would absorb a set of values concerning freedom and treatment of the vulnerable that became central to the Jewish ethos.

A Near East: 1220 BCE

[Atlas > 3100 BCE – 586 BCE > 1220 > Mediterranean](#)

M Rameses II

[Video > A People Is Born > Egypt > Ramses II > Explore Topic > Play](#)

Atlas: Near East: 1220 BCE

The Israelites' slave-labor building projects in Egypt included storage and fortress facilities at a location called Rameses, named for a major Pharaoh of the nineteenth Egyptian dynasty.

- ◆ Point out the location of Rameses (Raamses) on the map, and note its location relative to the Israelite residence on the eastern Nile delta.

Multimedia: Rameses II

None of the details of the Books of Genesis and Exodus have independent corroboration. Even the event of the Exodus from Egypt is viewed with some skepticism by many scholars. And yet, if there was a mass slave escape from Egypt, there is one Pharaoh who seems most likely to have been the deserving victim of this slave revolt.

- ◆ Click the Play button to view the multimedia segment.

Review and Discussion Questions

- How plausible is the thinking of scholars who nominate Rameses as the Pharaoh of the Exodus?
- Most of the surviving monumental architecture and inscriptions in Egypt (and in Mesopotamia) celebrate the victories of kings and armies. Why might there be no Egyptian records of a mass slave revolt and escape?

PART 6

Emancipation and Revelation

The enslavement and liberation in Egypt is a well-preserved tale in Jewish lore. It is mythic in the sense that, independent of its historicity, it forms a shared central and defining element of Jewish identity.

The events at Mt. Sinai, seven weeks later, in which Israel's God revealed the Torah to the emancipated Israelite slaves, preserves a similar status. These events would imbue Judaism with certain messages.

V Israel, Exodus

Bookmark: “Moses and Exodus”

Video > A People Is Born > Israel > Exodus > Play

Video: Show 1: Israel, Exodus

The enslaved Israelites, greatly increased in numbers, were led by a very reluctant Moses. According to the Bible, a series of plagues were unleashed by Israel's God upon the Egyptians. Ultimately, Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt were forced to acknowledge the greater power of the Israelite divinity, and to “let His people go.”

Scholars debate whether or not the exodus, as described in the Bible, actually happened. Most agree that the numbers are exaggerated (or misunderstood) and many note that the events depicted lack historical evidence of any sort.

- ◆ Play the video segment until the phrase “...only be a divine act.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Do you think that the historicity of the exodus is vital to the pertinence and messages of the story?
- Would the validity of Jewish belief in this master-story be affected if it were shown conclusively that there never was a mass exodus from Egypt?

V Israel, Exodus

Bookmark: “Sinai Revelation”

Video > A People Is Born > Israel > Covenant > Play

Video: Show 1: Israel, Exodus

The liberation from Egyptian slavery was, in Jewish lore, only a prelude to a far more momentous historical and religious moment. The God of Israel was to communicate a set of laws and ethics to the people at Sinai, solemnized by a covenant between the entire people and God.

- ◆ Play the video segment until “....a holy principle.”

A Near East: 1220 BCE

Atlas > 3100 BCE – 586 BCE >
1220 > Mediterranean

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why were the events of the liberation from slavery, the Sinai revelation, and the ratification of the covenant inextricably linked in the Biblical record?
- The ethics and legal codes given on Mount Sinai formed the basis of the covenant between God and Israel. This was unique in the history of all of the contemporary societies, in which rulers promulgated legal codes, and gods were largely concerned with climate and fertility. What are the implications of the Israelite relationship?

Atlas: Israel-Palestine: 1220 BCE

The Israelite people wandered for decades in the wilderness, and eventually conquered and settled in Canaan. The society they built was hardly the ideal one postulated in the Torah. Fragmented into tribal units, and constantly backsliding in their allegiance to the covenants of fealty to divine law and national unity, they were at continual risk of being displaced from their new homeland by other Semitic groups, and by maritime invaders from the Mediterranean Sea.

Their tenuous grasp on Canaan would continue until a central monarchy translated the idea of Israel into a true nation of Israel.

- ◆ Point out the tribal regions in settlement-Israel, and the surrounding peoples.
- ◆ Note the maroon arrows on the Mediterranean shore, indicating the arrival in Canaan of the Sea Peoples from the west at roughly the same time that Israel invaded Canaan from the east.
- ◆ Navigate with the red frame on the Thumbnail map at the lower left as needed to show the areas of Israelite settlement.

Pointers to the Next Session:

The Israelites emerged in the first millennium BCE as the controlling factor in the land of Canaan. But it would not be until the emergence of a strong central government, under the leadership of the charismatic King David, that Israel would be secure in its land.

In our next session, we will explore how Israel developed distinctive characteristics, as a people and a nation, which enabled its peoplehood to survive the catastrophic destruction of its nationhood.