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# Elements of Old Jewish History and Culture

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## Abstract

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the present study aims to present – briefly – some elements of Jewish history and cultural typology, circumscribed temporally to the period of the biblical patriarchs, to the Mosaic era, to the period of the judges and monarchy (first unique, then divided into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah), the Babylonian exile, and finally the post-exilic period; as sources, we have the books of the Old Testament and the results of the archeological investigations.

## Keywords

Old Testament, Holy Land, Israel, Semitic space, Jewish culture

## I. Introductory considerations

A very common question, which is still controversial in the observations of historians, is the beginning of the history of the people of Israel. Some believe that this begins with the exodus; others support the idea of the beginning of the history of the people of Israel at the time of their entry into the land of Canaan. But there are also theories that the historical beginnings of Israel have as their starting point the Davidic monarchy<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Luca MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele. Dalle origini al periodo romano*, Edizioni

J.A. Soggin states in his *History of Israel*, that the Jewish people begin to exist as a political and ethnic entity once it is established as a state<sup>2</sup>, while J.M. Miller and J.H. Hayes argue that the history of Israel can only be spoken of from the moment before the monarchy<sup>3</sup>.

The difficulty of establishing an exact starting point in the history of Israel is based, above all, on the lack of historical resources. With the exception of Old Testament writings, the archaeological sources that provide information about the early period of the Jewish people are relatively small. Although historians cannot speak in well-defined terms, chronologically, of a beginning of Israel as a people, the same cannot be said of the origin of Israel, Abraham being generally recognized as the father of the Jewish people.

## II. The period of the biblical patriarchs

*Genesis*, the first book of the Bible, depicts Abraham as a migrant from the city of Ur (southern Mesopotamia). It is located in history around the 18th century BC, the period of flourishing of the land of Canaan (Palestine), a region in which he and his tribe settled at God's command. Abraham is called "the Jew", a term that has given rise to many speculations about his origin. The term "Eber" translates as "region beyond (something)", considering that the name given to Abraham refers to his origin, namely "beyond the Euphrates". Much more argumentative is the theory of the origin of the term as coming from the Assyrian language (Ebirnâri), which means "the region beyond the river". Abraham is thought to have migrated from Harran to Palestine before the word "Aramaean" which came from a tribe from which he had his genealogical roots<sup>4</sup>.

Here takes place a first form of covenant between God and Abraham, a covenant that is rather a promise of God regarding the descent of the first biblical patriarch<sup>5</sup>. The population lived in the region between the mountains of Judea and the northern valleys, especially in the coastal

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Dehoniane Bologna, Ferrara, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. SOGGIN, *Storia D'Israele*, Editura Paideia, Brescia, 1984, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. MILLER, J. H. HAYES, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, London, 1986, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Emil G. H. KRAELING, *Aram and Israel*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1918, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Rolf RENDTORFF, *La „formula dell'alleanza“. Ricerca esegetica e teologica*, Editura Paideia, Brescia, 2001, p. 33.

area, which was very accessible and also fertile. Concentrated in small city-states, the Semitic tribes were under the rule of Egypt, which, along with the Assyro-Babylonians and Hittites, were the most powerful state organizations of the time. In fact, the only sources that provide information about this period, dating to the beginning of the second millennium BC, are represented by Egyptian texts inscribed on clay figures and “drawing” the picture of the conquest of the peoples under Egyptian rule<sup>6</sup>.

From the information available, the inhabitants of Canaan were constituted as a sedentary population, whose main occupation was agriculture, unlike the tribes of the biblical patriarchs who had a semi-nomadic character, without a stable home and who dealt mainly with pastoralism and animal raising. As semi-nomads, the biblical patriarchs, along with their families, lived on the edge of the inhabited land, moving from place to place according to the food needs of their flocks. The first piece of land that Patriarch Abraham acquired in Canaan was the cave of Macpela, which the biblical patriarch bought from Ephron the Hittite to Hebron, to form the tomb of his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23)<sup>7</sup>. Information about the Jewish patriarchs is found in the Old Testament, which describes them as semi-nomadic shepherds living in tents (Genesis 12: 8; 13: 3; 18: 1-18), raising sheep and goats (Genesis 30, 32-43), dug wells (Genesis 21, 30; 26, 15-22) and temporarily cultivated small areas of land (Genesis 26, 12). Biblical patriarchs observed the unwritten laws of the wilderness, the preservation of the purity of the blood (Genesis 24, 3-4), the laws of hospitality (Genesis 18, 1-8; 19, 28-32), and collective vengeance (Genesis 34, 25-31)<sup>8</sup>.

Religiously, Abraham and his family (his clan) are monotheists, the Jewish patriarch being not only the founder of the Jewish nation, but also the foundation of the special relationship that God establishes with him and his followers. The cult is shaped, in time, around the “God of the father”, which is preserved and transmitted from generation to generation within the family. Expressions such as “God of Abraham” (Genesis 26, 24; 31, 54) or “God of your father Abraham and your father Isaac” (Genesis 28, 13; 32, 9) attest to God’s presence in the religious life of the clan strengthening

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<sup>6</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D’Israele*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Paul JOHNSON, *O istorie a evreilor*, Editura Hasefer, București, 1999, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ion REȘCEANU, *Familia în Vechiul Testament*, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2014, pp. 158-159.

the belief that he is protected and led on his way by God Himself through the Father. The originality of his father's cult distinguishes Israel in Canaan, protecting it from the danger of assimilation by strengthening its awareness that it is not indigenous<sup>9</sup>. It is certain that the way of life of the biblical patriarchs has imposed and preserved a whole set of norms and customs that are at the core of the daily life of the biblical Jewish people in all the historical epochs they go through<sup>10</sup>.

The lack of conclusive information – from non-biblical sources – on the period of biblical patriarchs may be based on their relatively low importance in the ancient history of the Orient, which has given rise to assumptions about their actual existence. However, as Mircea Eliade pointed out, the period in which scientific criticism regarded biblical patriarchs as legendary figures has passed, and thanks to archaeological discoveries, some authors are increasingly inclined to accept, at least in part, the historicity of patriarchal traditions<sup>11</sup>. The presence of nomadic tribes, called *hapiru*<sup>12</sup>, mentioned in the Egyptian writings, leads to their identification with the biblical patriarchs during the migration period, but this remains only a hypothesis. Two very important studies on this assumption were published in 1954 and 1955 by Jean Bottero and Moshe Greenberg<sup>13</sup>. The Jews can also be located as the so-called shashu, nomadic tribes of Semitic origin, mentioned in Egypt around the 15th-13th centuries BC<sup>14</sup>.

The period following their establishment in Canaan is, in fact, a family history, in which the Bible tells us, over three centuries, the course of three generations: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a time when other migrations of the tribes led by them take place, such as the departure of Jacob (called Israel) to Harran, Mesopotamia, where he marries Laban's daughters, also called "Aramaic", and then moves with his flocks at Shechem<sup>15</sup>. This period ends when the descendants of the biblical patriarchs arrive in Egypt

<sup>9</sup> C. H. J. DE GEUS, *The Tribes of Israel*, Van Gorcum, Assen / Amsterdam, 1976, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> I. REȘCEANU, *Familia în Vechiul Testament*, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1981, p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> Rolland DE VAUX, *I patriarchi ebrei e la storia*, Editura Paideia, Brescia, 1967, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> William FOXWEL-ALBRIGHT, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, Editura Eisenbrauns, Indiana, 1968, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> E. G. H. KRAELING, *Aram and Israel*, p. 32.

through a succession of events related in the writings of the Old Testament. It is the period in which the economic crisis causes the Semitic tribes to migrate to Egypt, a territory that enjoys very fertile agricultural lands, existing on the banks of the Nile. On the other hand, the experience of the Jewish people in Egypt would decisively influence their formation as a state organization and, above all, their acquisition of the status of “God’s chosen people”<sup>16</sup>.

The names of the patriarchs fit perfectly into the historical context of their presence in Mesopotamia, and their etymology seems to have roots belonging to the Amorite population. The name “Abram” is mentioned in some Babylonian texts during the first dynasty, but also in the archaeological discoveries at Mari, while the name “Jacob” is mentioned in the eighteenth century BC. in northern Mesopotamia, as Ya’qub-el, a word found in the 17th century BC and in Egyptian texts.<sup>17</sup>

The Bible book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who is sold by his brothers as a slave in Egypt, an episode meant to make an introduction to the book of Exodus. The ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dream propels Joseph into a very high political position at his court, coinciding with the migration of Semitic tribes to Egypt due to the economic crisis that endangered their lives. However, the change of the Egyptian pharaonic dynasty marked the beginning of a period of persecution of the Jews, who were forced to work on the Egyptian projects, especially the construction of the cities of Pithom and Ramses<sup>18</sup> (probably the period of Pharaoh Ramses II: 1290-1124 BC).<sup>19</sup>

### III. The Mosaic Age

#### III.1. Moses and the Exodus from Egypt

Moses’ birth in Egypt took place at a time when the Jewish population growth was threatening Egyptian rule, for which reason Pharaoh had

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<sup>16</sup> Harry M. ORLINSKY, *Ancient Israel*, Cornell University, New York, 1960, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> John BRIGHT, *A history of Israel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville-Kentucky, 2000, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Iain William PROVAN, V. Philips LONG, Tremper LONGMAN, *A Biblical History of Israel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville-Kentucky, 2003, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D’Israele*, p. 24.

ordered the killing of male children born to Jewish families. The miracle by which Moses survived this persecution is one of the divine interventions that accompanied the existence of his predecessors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. With the appearance of Moses<sup>20</sup> in the historical context of the Old Testament, information about the Jewish people is much enriched and thoroughly presented.

It is the moment of revelation, in which the God of the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob makes a sacred covenant with the Jewish people, led by Moses from the bondage of Egypt to the Promised Land. There are authors who exclude the possibility of a covenant between God and the Jewish people during the exodus, but some theories claim that the idea of a covenant appears in the preceding stage of Deuteronomy, at Exodus, chapters 24 and 34. It can be considered that the mere intervention of God's favor for the people is a form of covenant, but theologically, the covenant between God (*Yahweh*) and the Jewish people seems to be taking place at the time presented at Deuteronomy 26, 17-19, where mutual involvement is evident of God (*Yahweh*) as well as of the Jewish people<sup>21</sup>.

The presence of Jews in Egypt during this period is attested by an inscription discovered on the tomb of Rekhmire, a high official of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC). The inscription is accompanied by an image depicting the workers of that tomb as workers from the prisoners of the war in Nubia and Syria-Palestine<sup>22</sup>.

The life of Moses and his encounter with God (*Yahweh*), who speaks to him from the "burning bush", represents the transition of the Jewish people from a patriarchal society to the status of God's "chosen people". The mission entrusted to Moses, to deliver the Jewish people from the bondage of Egypt, and especially the miraculous events that make this liberation possible, is the moment when the Jews become a theocratic state. The period from the exit of Egypt to the entry into the Promised Land represents for the Jewish people a stage in history, in which most of the secular or religious institutions preserved to this day were based.

If in the time of the patriarchs God was known as the "God of the Father" or "the God of Abraham", beginning with the existence of Moses,

<sup>20</sup> Petre SEMEN, "Personalitatea lui Moise și valoarea poruncilor date prin el", in: *Teologie și Viață*, 6 (72) (1996), no. 1-6, pp. 22-24.

<sup>21</sup> Filippo SERAFINI, *L'alleanza levitica. Studio della „berit” di Dio con i sacerdoti leviti nell'Antico Testamento*, Editura Cittadella, Assisi, 2006, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> I. W. PROVAN, V. P. LONG, T. LONGMAN, *A Biblical History of Israel*, p. 126.

God reveals himself to the Jewish people as “Yahweh” or “He who is”, and His worship is no more related to a certain place, but has a direct connection with Moses, as the leader of the Israelite group.

The oldest document attesting to the name “Yahweh” (*Yhwh*) is an inscription of Mesha, king of Moab, dated to the ninth century BC<sup>23</sup>. This inscription is unique in Palestinian epigraphy and can be considered an imitation of what was supposed to be an inscription of the kingdom of Israel, which ruled Moab for 40 years. The word *Yhwh* is also mentioned in an inscription on pottery in Kuntillet Ajrud, which seems to be an etymological influence from the kingdom of Samaria<sup>24</sup>.

During the journey through the Sinai desert, God-Yahweh reveals himself to Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai and concludes a covenant called the “Law of the Covenant”, consisting of the Decalogue and other precepts on worship (Exodus 19, 18-19). At a second theophany of Yahweh before Moses, also on Mount Sinai, he receives two tablets of the Law, written even by the “finger” of God.

Moses’ encounters with God on Mount Sinai take place repeatedly, and each time they came to fruition through new precepts received by Moses regarding the organization of the Jewish people as a “chosen people”. The first meeting is given at Exodus 19, 3, when Moses receives the “Ten Commandments”, mentioned at Exodus 20, 1-17. A second revelation of Moses occurs in Exodus 19, 20, where he is commanded to come with Aaron to the next meeting. The third revelation (Exodus 24, 9) takes place in the presence of Aaron and two of his sons, as well as 70 other elders of the people. God gives them prescriptions about the construction of the Ark of the Law, the temple, but also about observing the Sabbath. Finally, there are two other meetings of Moses with Yahweh, the first mentioned at Exodus 24, 13, and the other at Exodus 34, 4, the last one aimed at setting the rules regarding the observance of some prescriptions related to worship<sup>25</sup>.

God – Yahweh is quite different from the pagan gods of the day. Unlike

<sup>23</sup> J. A. DEARMAN (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*, Atlanta, 1989; N. NA’AMAN, “King Mesha and the Foundation of the Moabite Monarchy”, in: *Israel Exploration Journal*, 47 (1997), pp. 83-92; B. ROUTLEDGE, “The Politics of Mesha”, in: *JESHO* 43 (2000), pp. 221-256.

<sup>24</sup> Giovanni GARBINI, *Dio della terra, Dio del cielo: Dalle religioni semitiche al giudaismo e al cristianesimo*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia, 2011, p. 176.

<sup>25</sup> George E. MENDENHALL, *Ancient Israel’s Faith and History*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville-Kentucky, 2001, p. 71.

them, He cannot be identified with anything existing on earth or in heaven. It has the power to control the forces of nature, but it is not one of them. He rules over the celestial stars, but he cannot be within their limits. He is a faceless God who cannot be revealed to man in any form or image. Yahweh is “He who is” or “He who makes it exist”. His power directed all the forces of the universe in favor of the Jewish people on their way out of Egypt, as a prerogative of the covenant to be made between Him and Israel.

The pilgrimage of the people of Israel through the Sinai desert has been established for a period of 40 years, although it is quite difficult to argue exactly. However, throughout this period, the form of state organization of the Jews seems to have evolved progressively until their entry into Canaan<sup>26</sup>. There is no doubt that the religion of the people of Israel and their faith in Yahweh were revealed to him through Moses during his journey through the wilderness. The religious thinking of the people of Israel during this period was, for the history of the Ancient Orient, a unique conception of divinity<sup>27</sup>.

The idea of “alliance” or “covenant” (*berît*) can be analyzed from two perspectives: one that has a unilateral aspect and the other is viewed bilaterally. The first can be identified with a promise, while the second involves obligations on both sides. God’s covenant with man cannot be analyzed symmetrically, but it has as its starting point the manifestation of divine love for Abraham and his followers and then for love of all mankind. Although man, as the subject involved in this “contract”, has at his disposal the freedom of involvement, the consent to receive the divine gifts also makes him responsible in the relationship with his Donor<sup>28</sup>.

The choice of the Jewish people as God’s chosen people cannot set an exact moment in history. It is equally true that there have been more or less relevant moments in this regard. Moreover, the conception of the Jewish people has always been that they are a people chosen by God, even though the relations of this connection have progressively changed throughout history. However, his choice as a chosen people does not give

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<sup>26</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D’Israele*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> J. BRIGHT, *A history of Israel*, p. 148.

<sup>28</sup> F. SERAFINI, *L’alleanza levitica...*, p. 102; Andrei CORNEA, “A Question of Translation: The Greek for Covenant in the Septuagint”, in: *Annals of the „Sergiu Al. George” Institute*, 1 (1992), pp. 35-43; D. STAMATOIU, “Ideea de legământ în Vechiul Testament”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, 1986, no. 6, pp. 31-47.



him any merit, the selection belonging exclusively to God<sup>29</sup>. The divine commandments are carefully observed in the historical religious context of the Jewish people, very clearly regulating the relationship of the members of the chosen people with God (Yahweh) and their fellow men<sup>30</sup>. The death of Moses at the border of the entering of the chosen people into the Promised Land puts an end to a stage of overwhelming importance for the next period in the history of the Jewish people.

Moses' personality remained for the Jews as a prophetic, priestly, and leading model, and the repeated theophanies of his life established him as a unique figure in the Old Testament history of the Jewish people. The entry of the chosen people into Canaan (the Promised Land) under the leadership of Joshua, Moses' political successor, led to new changes in Israel's life, both in terms of state and religious organization, due to the interaction of the Jews.

### III.2. Israel in the Promised Land

The entry of the people of Israel into the land of Canaan<sup>31</sup>, after the death of Moses, is carried out under the leadership of Joshua, the events of the conquest of this region being related by the book that bears his name<sup>32</sup>. The Jewish people miraculously crossed the Jordan River and penetrated beyond the walls of the city of Jericho, the conquests mentioned in the Bible listing cities in both southern Palestine and the north, which led to the idea of the Jews conquering the entire Palestinian area. This success of the Jews gave rise to various theories about the method of achieving this goal. It is hard to believe that the Jews who came from the desert to the Palestinian border were a very large group. Their military strength must also have been weak compared to that of the peoples already existing in the Canaanite region. The closest hypothesis to reality is that of a peaceful

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<sup>29</sup> J. BRIGHT, *A history of Israel*, p. 149.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, trad. de Cezar Baltag, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2000, pp. 119-120.

<sup>31</sup> A. ALT, "The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine", in: *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, Oxford, 1966, pp. 135-169; G. E. MENDELHALL, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine", in: *Biblical Archaeologist*, 25 (1962), pp. 66-87.

<sup>32</sup> G. MITCHELL, *Togheter in the Land. A Regarding of the Book of Joshua*, Sheffield, 1993; G. U. COATS, "The Book of Joshua: Heroic Saga or Conquest Them?", in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 38 (1987), pp. 15-32.

penetration of the Jews into Canaan, at least at the beginning. And another aspect, which gives consistency to this theory, refers to the existence of Semitic tribes who joined the Jews in the process of conquering the entire Canaanite territory<sup>33</sup>.

After the entry of the Jewish people into the “Promised Land”, Joshua, its political leader, seems to be only a representative of God at the head of the people, the true leader being God himself – Yahweh, the deliverer of Israel from the land of Egypt<sup>34</sup>.

Although the dominion of the “promised land” by Israel took the form of an organized state, the region of Canaan was divided among the twelve Jewish tribes, which took their name from the twelve sons of Patriarch Jacob, two of the tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh) were the descendants of Joseph, the son of Jacob, sold in Egypt by his brothers. The twelve tribes continued to exist as one state, having in common the law given by God – Yahweh to Moses on Mount Sinai, legal norms to which all members of the chosen people referred<sup>35</sup>. The tribe of Levi, responsible for the religious service, did not take possession of a specific region, but was given 48 cities throughout Palestine, due to the fact that they had to be permanently at the disposal of the other tribes to fulfill their religious needs. Thus, the twelve tribes that now ruled the “Land of Promise” were placed from south to north: Simeon, Judah, Dan, Benjamin, Reuben, Ephraim, Gad, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, and Asher<sup>36</sup>.

#### IV. The Age of Judges

The biblical chronology of the Jewish people, as recorded in the Old Testament, continues with the history of the period immediately following their installation in Canaan. The book of Judges presents the time of Israel’s entry into Canaan and, later, its leadership by twelve judges<sup>37</sup>,

<sup>33</sup> J. BRIGHT, *A history of Israel*, p. 137.

<sup>34</sup> G. E. MENDENHALL, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> Mario LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia. Storia antica di Israele*, Editura Laterza, Bari, 2012, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Dumitru ABRUDAN, Emilian CORNÎTESCU, *Arheologia biblică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, pp. 84-85.

<sup>37</sup> A. MALAMAT, “Charismatic Leadership in the Book of Judges”, in: *Essays in Memory of G. E. Wright*, New York, 1976, pp. 152-168.

the most frequently mentioned being Gideon and Samson (Judges 6 and 8, respectively 13 and 16). However, the word “judge” should not be limited to a form of legal power, but should be understood in the sense of a responsibility of political and military leadership. However, the Hebrew term *sopet* refers, par excellence, to the one who distributes justice, who punishes the evildoer, and rehabilitates the righteous<sup>38</sup>. Although some judges are also called prophets, such as Deborah or Samuel, they are not to be confused with those whom the Old Testament scripture defines as *nabi*-prophet. Judges receive the word of God, being chosen to do the divine will. In this sense, the Spirit of God helps and inspires the judges to do all the deeds by which the theocratic interests of the people are preserved (Judges 6, 34; 11, 29; 13, 25; 14, 6; I Kings 16, 13)<sup>39</sup>. The characteristic feature of the theocracy is that the true leader of the people is God, who chooses the judges of his chosen people in order to lead them on the path of keeping the covenants and the divine law, thus preserving the religious and national unity of the people.

After the death of Joshua, who no longer had a single ruler, the twelve tribes of Israel were weakened by national and religious unity, which slipped into idolatry and was punished by God with the oppression of foreign nations. In this context, judges are sent by God to save the people from foreign domination, their rule not being hereditary and not involving legal rights, such as the right to legislate and set taxes. The exception seems to be Samuel, the last judge in Israel who, thanks to a strong personality, recognized at the level of the twelve tribes, concentrates in his person all the legislative, judicial and executive power<sup>40</sup>. However, the history of Israel in the time of the judges seems more like a history of the twelve tribes, viewed individually, than of a single united people.

The period of Judges stretches between 1200 and 1050 BC, after which the ruling structure of the Jews became monarchical, through kings Saul and David. In fact, the incipient form of the Jewish monarchy can be understood as an affront to God – Yahweh, given that, from now on, the people of Israel cease – to some extent – to be an exclusively theocratic state<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> G. T. MANLEY, D. J. WISEMAN, “Judecători”, in: *Dicționar biblic*, Editura Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 1995, p. 722.

<sup>39</sup> Athanase NEGOIȚĂ, *Teologia biblică a Vechiului Testament*, Editura Sofia, București, 2004, p. 103.

<sup>40</sup> D. ABRUDAN, E. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică*, p. 139.

<sup>41</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, p. 37.

## V. The period of the monarchy

At the time of the entry of the people of Israel into the land of Canaan, the populations present in this area (Ammonites, Edomites, and Moabites) were already in the form of kingdoms ruled by a king, and this form of state organization is rapidly gaining ground among the people of Israel. Under Saul, it becomes a monarchical state.

Regarding the election of Saul as the first king of Israel, the biblical tradition gives rise to some controversy. Chapter 9, 1-10 and 16 of the First Kings show Saul as chosen by God in the dignity of king of Israel, while chapters 8, 1-22 of the First Kings suggest the idea that the people were who requested this. However, a deeper understanding of Scripture reveals in these events a fulfillment of God's Providence, to which people have become partakers<sup>42</sup>.

Following the military victory over the Edomites, Saul is proclaimed king (*melek*), and Israel becomes like the Trans-Jordanian kingdoms, but Saul's reign over the twelve Jewish tribes is only an embryonic stage of the Israeli monarchical period<sup>43</sup>.

A new stage in the history of the people of Israel is the reign of King David. David's leadership is different from that of Saul. David initially appears as a mercenary, serving the Philistines and taking possession of the city of Ziklag. His consecration as king is not officiated by a prophet, but by the people of the tribe of Judah. In fact, a political rift was deepening between the tribe of Judah and the other tribes of Israel, caused by its independent territorial expansion, without the support of the other Jewish tribes<sup>44</sup>.

### V.1. The United monarchy – the kingdom of David and Solomon

The election of David as king by the representatives of the tribe of Judah and its organization as a kingdom separate from the rest of the Jewish tribes would not represent the supremacy of the Jews among the

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<sup>42</sup> J. A. SOGGIN, *Storia D'Israele*, pp. 85-87.

<sup>43</sup> J. A. SOGGIN, *Storia D'Israele*, pp. 88-90; K. VAN DER TOORN, "Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion", in: *Vetus Testamentum*, 43 (1993), pp. 519-542.

<sup>44</sup> Rolland DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento*, Editura Marietti, Genova, 2002, p. 102.

Jewish people. The presence of the Philistine danger to the Jewish tribes led to David's recognition as king over all the people of Israel, and thus Israel was absorbed into the kingdom of Judah. David's confirmation as king over Israel leads to his consecration by the elders of the people. In II Kings 5, 4-5 it is mentioned that David reigned over Judah for seven years and six months, and over the two kingdoms thirty-three years<sup>45</sup>.

Paul Johnson finds three reasons why David was considered a great king<sup>46</sup>. First of all, the fact that he combined his political-monarchical authority very well with the priestly one, David, a man with a deep religious feeling, quickly entering the consciousness of the Jewish people as a great king and prophet. Unlike Saul and his predecessors, David proved to be more aware of the nature of the religion and the Israelite community. Secondly, David proved to be a formidable military leader who not only completed the conquest of all the Canaanite enclave cities and defeated the Philistines decisively, but he succeeded in extending the borders of his kingdom beyond the Jordan in the East. Ammon, Moab and Edom and in the north conquering Aram – Zobar and even Aram – Damascus. His military successes are enshrined in diplomatic alliances and dynastic marriages, all of which give him the status of a dreaded regional leader in the Middle East of his time. Thirdly, David imposes himself in the consciousness of the Jewish people as a great leader and through another victory of his, initially considered personal, but then fully proving his strategic importance from a political, economic and spiritual point of view, namely the conquest of the city of Jerusalem and its transformation into a national and regional capital<sup>47</sup>.

The unified state of David and his successor Solomon would not be a purely national state. The conquest of the territories in the Transjordan area, as well as other small kingdoms liberated from Egyptian rule, would impose on Israel an empire-like structure. This territorial expansion marked a period of administrative and economic flourishing of Israel, a success completed by King Solomon in a manner similar to the Egyptian imperial model<sup>48</sup>.

Unlike David, Solomon seems to be much more profane, a man of the world, of his time, who soon became a typical monarch of the Middle

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<sup>45</sup> Gianni CAPPELLETTO, *In cammino con Israele. Introduzione all'Antico Testamento*, I, Edizioni Messaggero, Padova, 2009, p. 316.

<sup>46</sup> P. JOHNSON, *O istorie a evreilor*, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> P. JOHNSON, *O istorie a evreilor*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>48</sup> G. CAPPELLETTO, *In cammino con Israele*, pp. 317-318.

East<sup>49</sup>. Demonstrating his extraordinary ability, Solomon manages to establish himself both nationally as a recognized political leader by all tribal entities, especially those in the north, and internationally, with the state of Israel reaching its peak of political and economic prosperity during his reign. The conquests of his father, David, are maintained by Solomon through various diplomatic means and especially through a very efficient administrative policy, which aimed to centralize the state of Israel. The economic development of Solomon's time was due not only to the good exploitation of trade routes across Palestine, but also to the opening of new trade corridors to the Red Sea, which led to unprecedented economic expansion in Israel's history.

The greatest achievement of King Solomon, whose myth<sup>50</sup> was created around his wisdom, was to build the Temple of God. He is chosen at the expense of his father, David,<sup>51</sup> to build the holy place of worship of the Lord God of Israel in Jerusalem. King Solomon thus succeeded in giving the Mosaic cult its most important edifice, which will definitely mark the Jewish culture and spirituality of all time. Jerusalem thus became the spiritual center of the Jewish people, Solomon thus managing to concentrate the Jewish cult in the capital of his kingdom, thus minimizing the role that the holy places in the north (Shechem, Bethel or Mizpah) had played in the past<sup>52</sup>.

The reign of David and his successor Solomon represented a real organization of a united kingdom, but consisting of two political entities: Judah and Israel. Maintaining the independence of the two kingdoms is argued by the existence of different administrations, and the timing of a general census confirms this by formulating two different lists: one for Judah and one for Israel (II Kings 24, 1-9)<sup>53</sup>. Maintaining this distinction would be the foundation of the schism that later arose between the two kingdoms, a fracture that occurred in the existence of the Jewish state immediately after the death of King Solomon.

<sup>49</sup> P. JOHNSON, *O istorie a evreilor*, p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> G. J. WIGHTMAN, "The Myth of Solomon", in: *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, 277 (1990), pp. 5-22.

<sup>51</sup> P. B. DIRKSEN, "Why was David Disqualified as Templer Bilder? The Message of 1 Chronicles 22, 8", in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 70 (1996), pp. 51-65; B. E. KELLY, "David's Disqualification in 1 Chronicles 22, 8", in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 80 (1998), pp. 53-61.

<sup>52</sup> P. JOHNSON, *O istorie a evreilor*, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> Pietro A. KASWALDER, *La terra promessa. Elementi di geografia biblica*, Edizioni Terra Santa, Milano, 2010, pp. 153-154.

## V.2. The Kingdom of Israel

The biblical sources that tell the story of the Jewish people relate, after Solomon's death, the moment of a political separation between the twelve tribes of Israel and the formation of the two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. The rift between the two Jewish states comes at a time when Rehoboam, Solomon's successor to the throne, is not recognized as king by representatives of the northern kingdom at a meeting in Shechem. Following this secession, the kingdom of Israel names Jeroboam, a former Jerusalem official, king. With the exception of the tribe of Benjamin, all the other small Jewish states unite to form the kingdom of Israel or the northern kingdom, with the religious center at Bethel<sup>54</sup>.

Jeroboam's reign spanned nearly 20 years (930-910 BC),<sup>55</sup> and his successors were Nadab, Baasa, Ela, Zimri, and Tibni. In 885 BC. the kingdom of Israel comes to be ruled by King Omri. During this period of almost 50 years, from Solomon to Omri, the Northern Kingdom considerably expands its borders, including the plain of Megiddo and Galilee. If in the time of Jeroboam and Baasha, the political capital of Israel was in Tirsa, starting with the reign of Omri, the political and administrative center of the state of Israel becomes Samaria<sup>56</sup>.

During the reign of King Omri (885-874 BC)<sup>57</sup>, the city of Samaria experienced a development worthy of a true political center, the choice of this place being obviously influenced by the extremely favorable geographical position. Omri's successor, Ahab, also developed a policy of expansion, but his writings on his sons Oozia and Jehoram give little information, the latter often being involved in battles with the Trans-Jordanian states, especially Moab. The end of Omri's dynasty was sealed in a bloodbath by the usurping general Jehu, with the support of Damascus. Jehu's nationalist and Yahweh policy<sup>58</sup> led to the extermination of all worshipers of the god

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<sup>54</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, p. 119.

<sup>55</sup> A. ALT, *The Monarchy in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1966, pp. 239-259; W. I. TOEWS, *Monarchy and Religious Institutions in Israel under Jeroboam I*, Atlanta, 1993; J. BRIGHT, *A history of Israel*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>56</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> J. BRIGHT, *A history of Israel*, pp. 243-247.

<sup>58</sup> N. NA'AMAN, "Jehu Son of Omri: Legitimizing a Loyal Vasal by his Lord", in: *Israel Exploration Journal*, 48 (1998), pp. 236-238.

Baal, but despite his cruel struggle against pagan idolatry, Jehu remained faithful to the worship of the two golden calves in Bethel and Dan by his predecessor Jeroboam. The struggle of Yahweh against Baalism seems to have had a well-defined political purpose, as the kingdom of Israel was more interested in a merging with the Aramaic states than in an alliance with the Phoenicians on the shores of the Mediterranean. Jehu's dynasty continued with his son Jehoahaz (814-798 BC) and his grandchildren, Joash (798-783 BC) and Jeroboam II (783-743 BC), a century in which prosperity The kingdom of Israel was growing steadily, but it began to decline with the enthronement of Tiglathpileser III as king of Assyria<sup>59</sup>.

Recent archaeological findings support the theory that for a time the kingdom of Israel was under Aramaic hegemony. It is an Aramaic inscription attributed to royalty and discovered at Tel-Dan. The text, dated to the ninth century BC. and the beginning of the 8th century BC, tells the story of King Hazael of Damascus following the victory over the city of Dan. The inscription seems to be confirmed by the biblical account in IV Kings 8, 28-29, which commemorates the victory of King Hazael of Damascus against Jehoram, king of Israel. The episode does not seem to be an isolated one, and there is other historical evidence (commemorative stars and architectural influences), which confirms the vassalage of the kingdom of Israel to the Aramaic kingdom<sup>60</sup>.

From a religious point of view, religious pluralism was present in the kingdom of Israel, which later materialized in a confrontation between Yahweh, the traditional God of the Jewish people, and the foreign god Baal. The presence of the god Baal in the Canaanite area was a common occurrence, even though his worship among the people of Israel was attributed to the Phoenician queen Jezebel, Ahab's wife. The goddesses Asherah and Astarte were no strangers to these lands, and these deities were worshiped here long before the Jewish people settled in Canaan. Undoubtedly, in Israel there were shrines dedicated to both Yahweh and Baal, archeologically attested being the temples of Yahweh at Bethel, Dan and Shiloh, respectively the temple of Baal in Samaria. The period in which Yahweh became the only worshiped deity in the kingdom of Israel was that of the Jehu dynasty (850-800), which led the Baalist cleansing process in the northern Jewish kingdom. The onomastic data discovered in Samaria

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<sup>59</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, pp. 126-130.

<sup>60</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, p. 63.



on an *ostraka*<sup>61</sup> attest to the presence of nine Yahwist names compared to only six Baalists. Moreover, among the representatives of the royalty who succeeded to the throne, the superiority of the names of Yahweh origin is present since the Omri dynasty, which attests to the recognition of Yahweh as the national deity of the people of Israel, starting with the twentieth century IX BC<sup>62</sup>.

The conquest of the kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians led by King Tiglathpileser around 732 BC is only the first stage of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. In 721 BC. King Sargon II invades the capital Samaria<sup>63</sup>, and Israel now becomes Samaria, the name given by the Assyrians to the entire kingdom of Israel. An inscription of the Assyrian king mentions the number of 27,290 Jews deported to Assyria. The northern kingdom, now an Assyrian province, is inhabited by a new population with diverse religious traditions, but the worship of Yahweh does not completely disappear after the Assyrian conquest<sup>64</sup>.

### V.3. The kingdom of Judah

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Judah assimilated within its borders only the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. Judah's fighting with Israel continued during the reigns of kings Abijah and Asa, who were forced to enlist the support of Benhadad-led Damascus to conquer some of the northern kingdom's cities. The devastation of the cities of Dan and Naphtali by Benhadad does not completely unbalance the relationship between Judah and Israel, as evidenced by the help that Jehoshaphat (870-848 BC), the king of Judah, offers to Ahab in the battle to conquer Ramoth. King Jehoram (848-841 BC) also supports the king of Israel in the battle against Moab<sup>65</sup>.

The reign of David's dynasty in the kingdom of Judah ended after only a century of rule, when the usurper Joash<sup>66</sup> ascended the throne. Its kingship is short-lived, and Hazael of Damascus's military campaigns

<sup>61</sup> A. F. RAINEY, "Toward a Precise Date for the Samaria Ostraca", in: *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, 272 (1988), pp. 69-74.

<sup>62</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>63</sup> K. LAWSON YOUNGER, "The Fall of Samaria in Light of Recent Research", in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 61 (1999), pp. 461-482.

<sup>64</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Mario LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, p. 143.

<sup>66</sup> Mario LIBERANI, "L'histoire de Joas", in: *Vetus Testamentum*, 24 (1974), pp. 438-453.

against the Philistines are saved by Jerusalem, paying tribute to the Aramaeans. Ioas ends up being killed by his officials, and the royal seat is occupied by his son, Amasia, who manages to defeat the Edomites and defies the hegemony of the Northern Kingdom. The confrontation between Israel and Judah at Beth Shemesh ends with the defeat of Jerusalem, and King Amaziah, though continuing his reign, is killed in an internal revolt. The successor of Amaziah is chosen by the people in the person of his son, Uzziah or Azariah. He, living with leprosy, lives in a secluded place, and the one who actually rules the kingdom is his son, Jotham (752-736 BC). During Jotham's reign, Israel's influence over the kingdom of Judah began to grow. The texts discovered at Kuntillet 'Ajrud identify, in the Negev area, a patrol control fortress, where, in addition to pottery of Israeli and Phoenician origin, were found inscriptions mentioning two deities: Yahweh of Teman and Yahweh of Samaria. Towards the end of Jotham's reign, King Resin of Damascus and the King of Israel invade the kingdom of Judah, and in the time of Ahaz they conquer Jerusalem, and the king is forced to pay tribute again to obtain peace<sup>67</sup>.

The development of urban centers in the kingdom of Judah during the concomitant organization of the Transjordanian states led to an estimated 110,000 inhabitants within the borders of the kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem. Important archaeological finds attest to the flourishing period of the kingdom of Judah around the ninth century BC. They were found in the excavations of Lachiş, Kirbet Rabud, Tel Halif, Tell en-Nasbe, Tell Beit Mirsim, Tel Masos and Tell el-Fara<sup>68</sup>.

Biblical Testimonies About the Kingdom of Judah During the Nineteenth and Eighteenth Centuries BC they are extremely small, the only information being brought by the second book of Chronicles, where the mentions refer in general to the religious life of the people. Early ninth century BC is the period in which Yahweh becomes the national deity for the Jews of the southern kingdom, following the activity of the prophets Elijah and Elisha<sup>69</sup>, when idolatry is exterminated and the first royal name of Yahweh origin is that of King Jehoshaphat. It is the time when the

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<sup>67</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, pp. 145-148.

<sup>68</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, p. 152.

<sup>69</sup> R. P. CARROLL, "The Elijah-Elisha Sagas", in: *Vetus Testamentum*, 19 (1969), pp. 400-415.

prophets of the kingdom of Judah (the most important being Micah) are fighting to end the confrontation between Israel and Judah<sup>70</sup>.

The last years of the kingdom of Judah were marked by a state of crisis and confusion. After the death of Josiah, the religious reformer of the Jews<sup>71</sup>, Jehoahaz, his successor, claims to be subject to the Egyptian pharaoh Nekau, but he exiles him to Egypt and makes Eliakim king, changing his name to Jehoiakim. The conquest campaign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and the defeat of Nakau in 605 BC at Karkemish, near the Euphrates, was the time when Judah was threatened by Babylonian rule. In 598 BC. Jerusalem is besieged, and Jehoiakim dies, while his successor Joachim surrenders to Nebuchadnezzar and is exiled to Babylon. The last king over the independent kingdom of Judah is named Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, but his reign would be short-lived, for in 587 BC. Nebuchadnezzar returns to Judea to conquer Jerusalem once and for all. Testimony to these historical episodes are the inscriptions from Lachish, the last stronghold of the Jews, and the Bible book of Jeremiah, according to which, after a terrible famine, Jerusalem capitulates to the Babylonian force<sup>72</sup>.

## VI. The Babylonian exile

The conquest of the two Jewish kingdoms, Israel and Judah, by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, respectively, would decisively influence the historical course of the Jews. The destruction of the kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BC and the deportation of the ten Israelite tribes to Assyria<sup>73</sup> seems to be the last information that the historical testimonies provide in this regard. The biblical writings relate in more detail the fall of the kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians in 587 BC, “drawing” the sad picture of the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple of Solomon<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>71</sup> N. NA'AMAN, “The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah”, in: *Tel Aviv*, 18 (1991), pp. 3-71.

<sup>72</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>73</sup> N. NA'AMAN, „Population Changes in Palestine Following Assyrian Deportations”, in: *Tel Aviv*, 20 (1993), pp. 104-124.

<sup>74</sup> Michael WALZER, *All'ombra di Dio*, trad. di Franco Bassani, Editura Paideia, Brescia, 2013, p. 105.

The deportation of the Jews from the kingdom of Judah to Babylon did not constitute their disappearance as a people, and they soon adapted to their new reality<sup>75</sup>. The organization of the exiled Jewish community led to new forms of religious worship, resisting local religions and developing a new conception of theology and politics. The Babylonian exile allowed the writing of new versions of ancient theological books and the preservation of the writings of two of the most important prophets: Ezekiel and Isaiah. It is possible that the attitude of the Babylonians towards the exiled Jewish community was completely different from that of the Assyrians, an argument that supports the disappearance of the northern kingdom with the Assyrian exile<sup>76</sup>.

Biblical texts provide different figures for the number of deportees from the kingdom of Judah. The Book of Kings speaks of at least 10,000 people, while Jeremiah mentions about 4,600. The deportees were generally members of the nobility and specialists in metal and artifact processing, with the simple population still left in the Palestinian land for farming. Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians developed a policy of individualistic prosperity, pursuing economic and administrative growth in the central places of the empire, somewhat neglecting the conquered territories. This fact is argued by the massive decline of the population by almost 85%, but especially by the small number of archaeological sites dating from that period (from 116 in the seventh century BC to 41 in the sixth century B.C.). Also, royal palace constructions were completely missing at that time, and inscriptions of written texts are extremely rare. The only area saved from this disaster was occupied by the tribe of Benjamin, where a small government was formed around the cities of Tell el-Ful, Tell en-Nasabe, Beth-el and Gibeon<sup>77</sup>.

In contrast to the deportees of the northern kingdom, whose traces were lost in the land of Mesopotamia, the exiles of the kingdom of Judah retained not only their political community structure, but also their onomastic terminology. Exceptions are the king appointed by the Babylonians over the Jews, Jehoiakim, whose descendants took names of Chaldean origin,

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<sup>75</sup> M. COGAN, "Life in Diaspora", in: *Biblical Archaeologist*, 37 (1974), pp. 6-12; B. ODED, "Observations on the Israelite / Judaen Exiles in Mesopotamia", in: K. VAN LERBERGHE-A.SCHOORS (eds.), *Immigration and Emigration within the Ancient Near East*, Leuven, 1995, pp. 205-212.

<sup>76</sup> M. WALZER, *All'ombra di Dio*, p. 106.

<sup>77</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, pp. 215-216.

such as Salatiel and Senator, or his nephew Zerubbabel, who would be the leader of the post-exile community. The Jewish community deported to Babylon is easily rebuilding, adapting to the existing situation, with the population concentrated in the Nippur area, along the Chedar Canal, in places that needed to be recolonized, as their name reinforces this idea<sup>78</sup>. Also in the vicinity of Sippar, in the Babylonian texts, a small town called Judah was identified, where the population had a name of Jewish origin<sup>79</sup>.

An important aspect of the period of Babylonian rule over Palestine is the existence of groups of Jewish emigrants who took refuge in Egypt, specifically in its eastern Delta. In Elephantine, the Jewish community was very well organized, with its own government and even a temple dedicated to Yahweh. The testimonies in this regard are extremely numerous, generally of Aramaic origin (200 papyri and 50 ostraka), but also the letter of a Jew to the leadership of the temple in Elephantine<sup>80</sup>.

The experience of the Babylonian exile was a fundamental stage in the existence of the Jewish people. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the deportation and the national disaster could have meant the disappearance of Judaism. However, Josiah's reform had an overwhelming role in maintaining the religious and community spirit of the Jews in exile. Although they were constantly confronted with a different and diverse religious conception, specific to the historical context of the rule of the Babylonian Empire, the Jewish communities in exile were able to further strengthen the idea of Yahweh monotheism. However, there is an element that influenced the culture of the Jewish people in exile, namely the Aramaic language, which they adopted, given the fact that at that time, Aramaic was the international language of the time<sup>81</sup>.

The Babylonian exile of the Jews ends in 538 BC, when the Persian king Cyrus II the Great conquers Babylon and restores all deportees the freedom to return to their homeland. It is difficult to determine whether

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<sup>78</sup> Salo WITTMAYER BARON, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. I, Columbia University Press, New York and London, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, pp. 108-110; M. DAMDAMAEV, "The Diaspora" A. "Babylonia in Persian Age", in: *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 330-338. The term *Tel*, coming from Babilonian, *tilu*, is frequently used in the name of some cities to indicate a hill or a place on which there were the ruins of a settlement.

<sup>79</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, p. 238.

<sup>80</sup> M. LIVERANI, *Oltre la Bibbia*, p. 241.

<sup>81</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, pp. 94-95.

Cyrus' policy was humanitarian or tolerant; it is certain that, according to Isaiah, he is a God-sent savior to deliver the chosen people from Babylonian exile<sup>82</sup>.

## VII. The post-exile community

From the time of his return from the Babylonian exile (538 BC) to the Roman era, the Jewish people did not enjoy political independence. The Jewish community returning to Palestine was organized around the Temple in Jerusalem, which was rebuilt and became the religious capital of the Jews again. Through the two religious reformers Ezra and Nehemiah begins a new historical stage of the Jewish people, at which point post-exilic Judaism is referred to as "Judaism". It outlines a state that has as its landmark the Temple in Jerusalem, a theocratic society ruled by the priestly class and the "counsel of the elders", who transmitted the message of Yahweh to the people<sup>83</sup>.

In the post-exile Jewish community, a socio-religious nationalism is developing that forbids the penetration of paganism within it. The religious precepts written in the *Torah* represented the norms of community life of the Jews. The teachings of the *Torah* were passed on to the people in synagogue meetings<sup>84</sup>, but the highest form of fulfillment of Jewish religious duties was to attend religious ceremonies at the Temple in Jerusalem<sup>85</sup>.

Along with the members of the priestly class in Jerusalem, a caste of scribes developed, responsible for instructing the people in receiving the teachings of the *Torah*<sup>86</sup>, given that the official language of worship was Hebrew, while the language spoken by the people was Aramaic. Also during this period, the diaspora communities developed, especially those

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<sup>82</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, p. 96.

<sup>83</sup> G. CAPPELLETTO, *In camino con Israele*, pp. 377-378.

<sup>84</sup> *Torah* represents the collection of the books of the Pentateuch and was formulated between 450 and 350 BC.

<sup>85</sup> The synagogue, as a place of worship of the Jews, appeared during the Babylonian exile as a consequence of the impossibility of practicing the ritual cult. Thus, the religious meetings of the members of the Jewish communities from the exile were organized in places identified with the term "synagogue", a custom preserved in the Jewish diaspora after the end of the Babylonian exile. The term is of Greek origin and means "meeting".

<sup>86</sup> G. CAPPELLETTO, *In camino con Israele*, p. 378.

left in Babylon and those in Egypt (Elephantine). These communities would come into contact with the thriving Hellenistic culture, while the Jews of Palestine remained permanently faithful to the teachings of the *Torah*<sup>87</sup>.

It can be said that in the period following the Babylonian exile, the number of Jews in the diaspora was much higher than the stable population in Judea. With the death of the Persian king Artaxerxes in 358 BC, the Persian Empire went through a period of decline from which it would never recover, reaching 333 BC. to be just one of the many conquests of Alexander the Great, who, at Issus, defeats Darius III of the Persians. With the expansion of Hellenism in Palestine, the Jewish community faced a new hegemony, and while the other peoples who ruled Judea were neighbors of Palestinian territory, the traditions of Hellenism were completely different from those of the Jewish people. In addition to all these external transformations, some religious turmoil began to appear within the Jewish community through the emergence of groups with diverse eschatological conceptions such as the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees<sup>88</sup>.

### **Instead of conclusions**

These are just a few considerations that have tried to paint some elements of history and civilization specific to the ancient period of the “chosen people”, generated by the difficult attempt to find a relevant answer to the question: When did the history of the people of Israel begin?

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<sup>87</sup> G. CAPPELLETTO, *In camino con Israele*, p. 379.

<sup>88</sup> L. MAZZINGHI, *Storia D'Israele*, pp. 109-111.