

OT Civilizations – The Canaanites, Assyrians, and Babylonians – by Brett Judkins

The Canaanites

The first civilization is that of the Canaanites. This is a people often referred to in the Bible; however there was never a unified Canaanites civilization *per se*. Rather, the name Canaanite refers to the various political organizations which lived side by side in the land of Canaan. It is more of a territorial reference than anything else. The specific area which made up the land of Canaan is all of western Palestine from around Gaza in the south, up to Latakia and Hamath in the north. The heartland of Canaan was from Byblos to Carmel and into the Jezreel Valley. The exact history of these people is largely unknown. They are speculated to have settled there in sometime in the fourth millennium B.C. Early on they had close commercial and political contact with Egypt, so much so that they could be seen as kind of Egyptian colony. Their close ties meant that their culture rose and fell in prosperity with the Egyptians. Towards the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550-1200) there was a great development in trade and the Canaanites flourished at an unprecedented level. But, amongst the various cities there were many conflicts, and there was a great lack of unity between them. It was soon there after that the Hebrews fled Egypt in the Exodus and made their way through the desert to the promised land of Canaan, plagued at that time by this infighting. The Israelites sought to take over from the Canaanites the land which the Lord had promised them, the lack of unity made it much easier. Their main target in the conquest was Jericho because of its central location and cultural importance. The siege of Jericho has been immortalized in the story of how they Israelites walked around the town for seven days, and on the seventh, at the blast of trumpets, the walls crumbled, and they took the city. After Jericho fell the Israelites went on to conquer a majority of Canaan, and established the Kingdom. However, the Israelites failed to completely remove the native peoples from the Promised Land, and the Canaanites lived along side them. The Israelites were warned to stay free of contamination with the pagan Canaanites; however, at many times they disobeyed the Lord and would offer sacrifices and worship to the Canaanite gods, particularly the most prominent, Baal. The word Canaanite is found throughout the Old Testament, but it eventually became to be a common term applied to any of the gentile peoples who lived amongst the Israelites.

The Assyrians

The Assyrians are the next important civilization we will investigate. The Assyrians are a people who dwelt in modern day Iraq, the heart of which is the northern region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. They had several main cities including Asshur and Calah, with their capital at Nineveh. These were a Semitic people who spoke a dialect similar to that of their Babylonian neighbors to the south. They trace back their history through a line of kings that goes back to early nomads who founded a settlement in the area in ca. 2800 B.C. In the book of Genesis (10:11) we hear that these people are the descendents of Shem's son, Asshur. They began to build cities over the next millennium and by 1900 B.C. they had established trade with the surrounding civilizations. In the time following, known as the Middle Assyrian period, they developed into one of the most powerful states in the area. Under Tiglath-Pileser (1115-1077 B.C.), they settled local disputes and he led them on their first campaign all the way to the Mediterranean. He subjected most of the land of Syria under his rule, but did not invade any of Israel's land. In the 9th century the Assyrians, under their great king, Asshur-nasir-pal, first came into contact with the Israelites. The Hebrews fought against them for some years, however in the year 842 the king of Israel paid tribute to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser II. Yet, after a time they become discontent with Assyrian rule and under king Hoshea they revolted. The Assyrians, would not put up with the insurgency and King Shalmaneser V, around the year 721 B.C., defeated Israel and carried off nearly all of the people they found, bringing an end to the 10 Kingdoms of the North. The Assyrians, under King Sennacherib, attempted to invade the Southern Kingdoms as well, and it seemed as if they would succeed; however, as we hear in 2 Kings 19:35, the Lord sent an angel to turn them away, and they raised the siege, and abandoned their conquest of Judah. In the years following, the Assyrian empire grew even larger, conquering almost all of the surrounding nations, including Babylonia (c. 703). However, they could not sustain their dominance for too long, they slowly began to lose control, until 612 when Babylonians, under King Nabopolassar, and the Medes conquered Nineveh, effectively bringing to an end the great Assyrian empire.

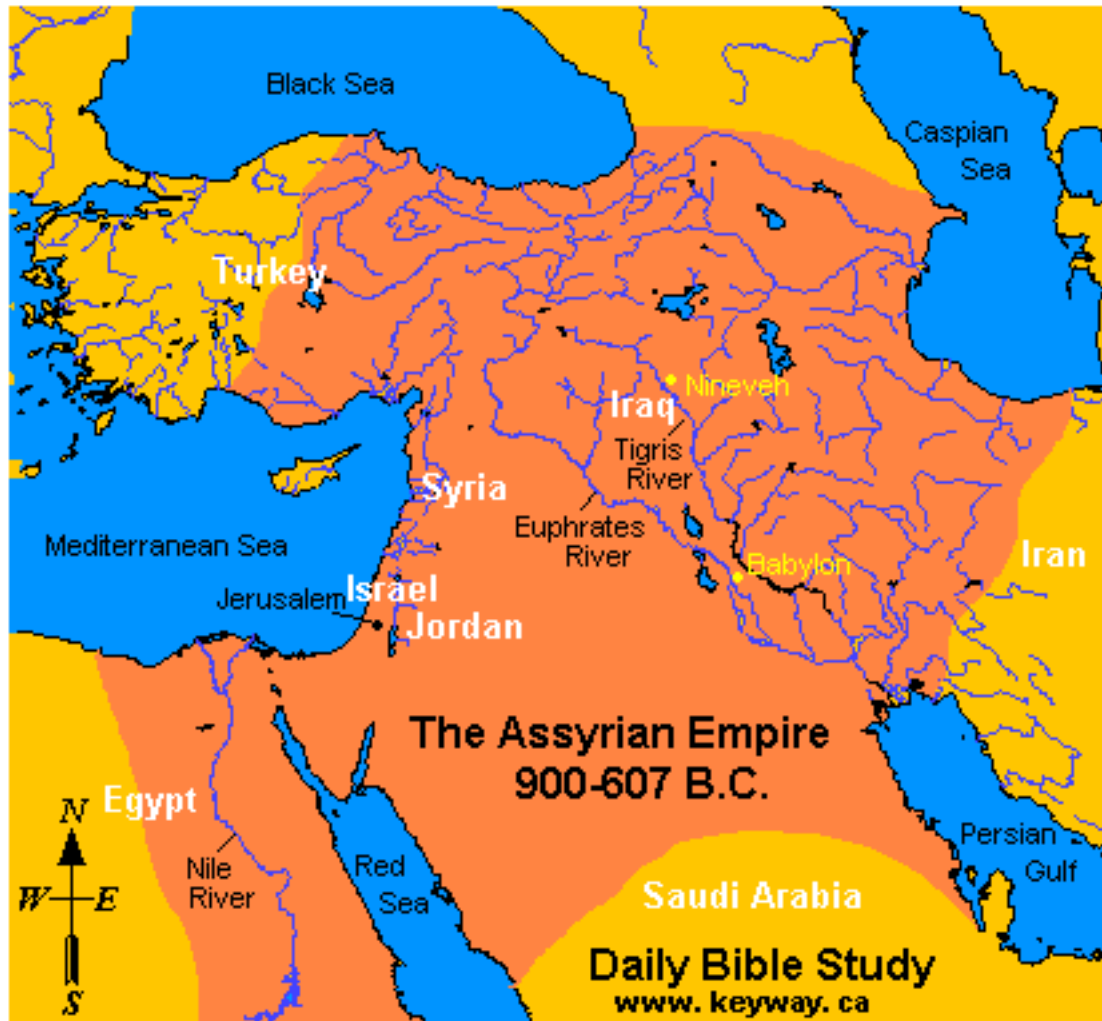
The Babylonians

The Babylonians are the next civilization covered in this study. They are the people who dwelled to the south east of the Assyrians in the Fertile Crescent watered by the Tigris and Euphrates, which roughly corresponds to that area from modern day Bagdad to Basra. The earliest civilizations in this region date back to the 3rd millennium B.C. when the Sumerian people developed city-states, which was well ahead the rest of the world, other than Egypt. The people distinctively known as the Babylonians made their first appearance in history in the early second millennium. Centered at the city of Babylon these people, under the reign of Hammurabi, brought all the other city states under his control, during the 18th century B.C. However, this dominance of the region waned after his fall, and in the time after they were in a constant battle for power in the region. They were conquered by the great Assyrian empire in the late 8th century. However, it was only a hundred years later, towards the end of the 7th century, that the Babylonians, under King Nabopolassar over threw the Assyrians to claim dominance in the region. The height of the Babylonian empire came under Nabopolassar, and his successor Nebuchadnezzar II. The great Babylonian Empire, ruling at its height from Egypt to the Persian Gulf, lasted only from 626-539. They were eventually conquered by the rising Persian Empire under Cyrus, and later by Alexander the Great. By the first century A.D. there were only a handful of families dwelling in Babylon, carrying on the traditions. The Babylonians had influences on Israel at several times during their history. The Patriarch Abraham is said to have come to Canaan from Ur, a city from this region. The famous Tower of Babel is rumored to have taken place in this area as well. The exact historicity of this story is unknown, but it is true that this area had a uniquely large diversity of tongue spoken, and most Babylonian cities had towers called ziggurats, which reached into heaven. So, while the exact facts are unknown, there is certainly historical information that helps to substantiate the biblical story. The most important connection between the Babylonians and the Israelites is when, after fall of the Assyrians, they conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah. King Nebuchadnezzar led an army to take the city of Jerusalem, after Jehoiakim rebelled and refused to pay tribute to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was unsuccessful in his first attempt in 587, however, he returned and on 9 July 586, breached the city's wall. They sacked the city, destroyed the temple, and sent the majority of the people into exile in Babylonia, leaving only a remnant behind.

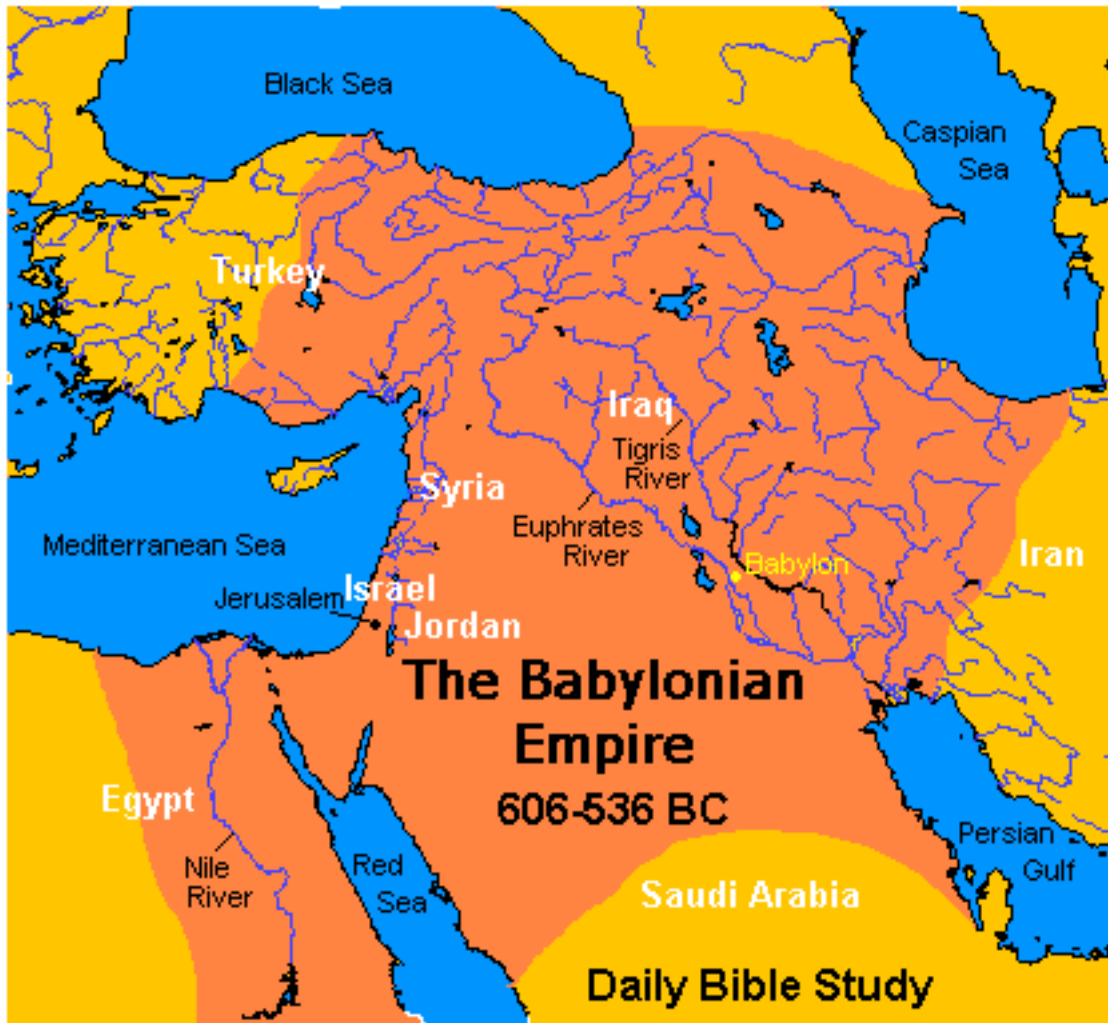
YouTube video of Assyrians & Babylonians:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idNRZjmS-uY>

Map of Assyrian Empire:



Map of Babylonian Empire:



www.keyway.ca

Drawing of Canaanites:



Wall relief of an ancient Canaanite:



Chief Canaanite god, El:

