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# The World of Biblical Israel

Course Guidebook

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Oberlin College of Arts and Sciences



**PUBLISHED BY:**

**THE GREAT COURSES**  
**Corporate Headquarters**  
**4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500**  
**Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299**  
**Phone: 1-800-832-2412**  
**Fax: 703-378-3819**  
**[www.thegreatcourses.com](http://www.thegreatcourses.com)**

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Cynthia R. Chapman is an Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Oberlin College of Arts and Sciences in Oberlin, Ohio, where she has taught for 11 years. She holds a B.A. from Kalamazoo College, an M.Div. from Vanderbilt Divinity School, and a Th.D. from

Harvard Divinity School. At Oberlin, she offers courses in both the Old and New Testaments. Among the courses she most enjoys teaching are *The Nature of Suffering: The Book of Job and Its History of Interpretation*; *The Bible in the Christian Communities of Asia, Africa and Latin America*; and *Biblical Women in Text and Tradition*.

Professor Chapman's research has focused on the historiography of the Bible considered within the larger ancient Near Eastern environment and on gender in ancient Israel. Her first book, entitled *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter*, explored the shared use of gendered literary tropes in the Bible and Assyrian royal texts as both Israel and Assyria claimed masculine victories for themselves while feminizing their enemies. Professor Chapman is currently completing her second book, entitled *The House of the Mother: The Social Function of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*. This book demonstrates that kinship bonds established through the mother served vital social and political functions for a son who aspired to inherit in his father's household. A chapter of this book that focuses on the kinship-forging properties of breast milk has been published in the online *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* as an article entitled "'Oh that you were like a brother to me, one who had nursed at my mother's breasts.' Breast Milk as a Kinship-Forging Substance" ([http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article\\_169.pdf](http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_169.pdf)). ■

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# The World of Biblical Israel

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## Scope:

This course traces the history of biblical Israel from its origins in the central highland villages just west of the Jordan River (1200 B.C.E.) to its emergence as a nation, and, then, a pair of kingdoms. It examines the impact of political and military domination by the successive empires of Assyria and Babylonia that resulted in the disappearance of the northern kingdom of Israel and the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylonia. Historically, the course concludes with the return of the Judean exiles from Babylonia to Judah during the time of the Persian Empire (6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.).

The lectures emphasize how the catastrophic experience of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the deportation of a large segment of the literate population of Judah to Babylonia served as the impetus for compiling, editing, and preserving scripture. As such, the Babylonian Exile informs our reading of the biblical text. Much of what we learn about life in biblical Israel is preserved in our Bible because it spoke to the needs and longings of a people who were living in exile. Because the Bible is written from a particular historical perspective, we will frequently turn to archaeological evidence to augment and often challenge the biblical picture of life in ancient Israel.

The course is divided into six historical units. The first unit introduces life in the Babylonian Exile, where conquered Judeans sought to maintain a sense of their national identity while living in a foreign land. It is within this exilic setting that Judeans sat together and told their children who were born in exile all the stories of life in their homeland in Israel. They told the family stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his twelve sons to communicate to their children the values and religious beliefs that they now considered central to their survival as a people. They also told their children the remarkable story of how their national deity had empowered an ancestor named Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, across a desert wilderness, to the gateway of the Promised Land. These memories

of an exiled people preserve authentic aspects of life in ancient Israel during its earliest periods while speaking to the needs of an exiled people who hoped they, too, would be delivered from bondage and led back to the Promised Land.

The second and third units cover the history of Israel from its origins as a nation in the land to its flourishing as two independent kingdoms: Israel and Judah (1200–745 B.C.E.). Within this historical framework, we examine the economic life of a rural highland family. We survey Israelite kinship structures and marriage practices and the development of political systems. We also explore the diversity that characterized ancient Israelite religious beliefs and practices, and finally, we consider what it meant to be rich and what it meant to be poor during the time of the monarchy.

In units four and five, we cover the life of Israelites and Judeans as they experienced imperial domination, conquest, and ultimately, exile under the Assyrians and Babylonians (745–538 B.C.E.). Within this time period, we examine the advanced military technology of Assyria and Babylonia, including the use of psychological warfare. We continue to trace developments within religious practices and beliefs that were clearly influenced by the encounters with powerful enemies from Mesopotamia. One of the most significant religious developments that emerged in the context of exile was the articulation of monotheism, the belief that the Israelite god was in fact the only living god, the creator of the cosmos. Finally, we study the role of literacy throughout Israel's history but with a specific emphasis on the period of the Babylonian Exile. It was during the exile that a group of literate scribes preserved a body of texts that ultimately preserved the people that gave the world the Bible.

Our final unit covers the period of Judah's resettlement in the land, where the people identify themselves as the "New Israel," restored to their homeland. The issues of life that became important during this period are those that involved preserving national identity. We will listen in on debates about intermarriage, national boundaries, and the importance of the family meal. Finally, we will close the course with two biblical stories of loss and restoration that encapsulate the history of life in biblical Israel while offering multiple interpretations of what that history means. These are the stories



of Abraham's near sacrifice and loss of his son Isaac, who is then restored to him by an angel's command to spare the child, and the story of Job's shattering loss of wealth, family, and personal health and, then, for reasons that are still debated today, his full restoration. Both of these stories spoke powerfully to a people who had lost land, family, temple, and seemingly, their god but found themselves miraculously restored to their homeland with a chance to rebuild. ■