

The Israelites' Cultural Life in the Bible

Passages: Genesis–Deuteronomy; Judges

Memory Verse

“So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 3:8a)

Knowledge of God's Will [God's Word]	Knowledge of God [God's Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
1. God always gives the best to His chosen people. 2. Receive God's promise by upholding our faith.	1. God is faithful. 2. God is holy.	1. Give time to God every day. 2. Redeem our time by using it wisely for God.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. The Promised Land
 - 1. The Many Names of the Promised Land
 - 2. Civilization and Trade in the Promised Land
- B. Culture, Politics, and Religion of the Israelite Nation
 - 1. Food
 - 2. Marriage
 - 3. Religion
 - 4. Political Institutions
- C. A Chosen People

Life Application

- 1. Give Time to God Every Day
- 2. Redeem Our Time

Memory Verse

Conclusion: As God's chosen, we have been promised the much greater inheritance of the heavenly kingdom. But with this inheritance comes the responsibility to remain separate from the world around us, and to constantly seek to do His will in our lives.

Introduction

It is difficult to imagine what the Israelites' lives were like in biblical times, so today we are going to study a little bit about the promised land, and learn a brief overview of the way God's people lived at the time.

A. The Promised Land

The promised land has a few prominent features. The center of the land contains a region of mountains, known as the Lebanon Mountains. The River Jordan flows between the western plateau and the eastern plains, and joins the Sea of Galilee in the north to the much larger Salt Sea in the south, also called the Dead Sea. A portion of this area is part of what is called the Fertile Crescent, a stretch of arable land that stretched north-west from the dead sea into Syria, then south-west towards Egypt. The Israelites often referred to the promised land "the land flowing with milk and honey" due to its ideal geographical location, fertile land, and abundant resources. (*Teachers: See Figure 1.*)

1. The Many Names of the Promised Land

The land came to accumulate many names, each reflecting its historical changes. When God first sent Abraham there, the land was called Canaan. It was also known as the land of the Philistines, due to the many Philistines living along the coast, an area known as the Gaza Strip today. Hundreds of generations later, when the land was finally taken by the Israelites, it became the land of Israel. Many years later, after spending time in exile, the majority of Israelites who returned were of the tribe of Judah, so it was also called the land of Judah. The names Jewish Land, or Jewish Province were derived from this fact.

In a religious context, because of God's promise, the Israelites referred to Canaan as the promised land (Deut 19:28). When the land came under Roman authority, it was placed under the judicial authority of the Syrian province, so some referred to the area as the land of Syria at the time (Lk 2:2). Many generations later, due to its close relation to the Jewish faith, and also because it was the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the land came to be known to Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the Holy Land.

2. Civilization and Trade in the Promised Land

In ancient times, most trading was done overland with many merchant caravans traveling from China, passing through the Silk Road to Mesopotamia, and continuing westward as far as Europe. As trade flourished, Phoenician merchant ships increased in number, bringing goods between the many sea ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Due to its location along the coast, Canaan served as an important crossroads for trade, linking China to Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean Sea.

Many cities were established across the land, including Jerusalem and Bethlehem, although most were located at the southern part of Israel. These cities were key locations in the New Testament, and the numerous trade routes established over many years became key paths in the spreading of the gospel beyond, into Mesopotamia and Europe.

Spiritual Teachings

The promised land was a home of hope for a rootless and enslaved nation. It was a vital place for the Israelites to grow in, both as a nation and as God's chosen people. However, it was still just a physical

place. Today, we are His spiritual children, foreigners in a world that belongs to sin. Like the Israelites traveling through the wilderness, this world is only our temporary home, a tent that we dwell in while we travel to our permanent home. And the home that God has promised for us is greater than any place on earth; it will be a heavenly home in His eternal kingdom.

B. Culture, Politics, and Religion of the Israelite Nation

1. Food

The staple foods of the Israelites consisted of sheep, cattle, barley, and wheat, while the fruits of the region consisted mainly of grapes, olives, figs, and date palms. The milk that their cattle and sheep produced was stored in bags made of sheep or goatskin, and was used either for drinking, or making cheeses and yogurts. Fresh meat was reserved for esteemed guests or special occasions (Gen 18:7–8). Even today, traditional Jews studiously avoid blood and unclean animals in accordance with Mosaic law.

When a Jew returned home, they would customarily wash their hands and feet (Mk 7:1–4). For the rich, this was a duty performed by the servants. When eating as a group, they situated themselves in a circle around the food, which was placed in the center of the room. Back then, common kitchenware was made of porcelain or pottery. Once the elders had given thanks, they used only their right hand, and a knife that was commonly carried for protection, to eat.

Spiritual Teachings

The laws that Moses set were a physical reflection of our spiritual needs; although we are no longer bound by such restrictions, we must still be aware of what we eat. Let's read Acts 15:28–29. When we eat food offered to idols, we are taking part with demons. Our God is a jealous God, and He desires that our hearts belong entirely to Him (1 Cor 10:19–22), so we must ensure that we avoid food that has been polluted by idols.

2. Marriage

When Nehemiah and Ezra revived the law of Moses among the returned exiles, they stressed the importance of cutting off any foreigners from their midst. They understood the significance of marrying within God's chosen nation (Deut 7:1–4), and realized that by straying, they had invited idolatry and a growing lack of faith into their lives.

By New Testament times, certain traditions had become established among the Jews. They discouraged marriage with Gentiles in accordance with God's command, and like in Isaac's time, the future husband gave betrothal presents to his fiancée's family when they became engaged. The wedding ceremony took place in the bride's home, and they traveled to the bridegroom's house to hold the wedding banquet with their friends, relatives, and neighbors (Jn 2:1–11).

Spiritual Teachings

God's command not to intermarry with Gentiles reflects His desire that we, His children, remain separate from the world around us. Paul teaches us, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price" (1 Cor 6:19–20). He also wrote, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?" (2 Cor 6:14).

It is easy for us to be influenced by the world, whether it be through our friends, social media, or

even our family. Satan can use many things to sway us from the truth. If we are already easily influenced by our friends and family, how much more can we be swayed by our marriage partner? With this in mind, we must be wary and keep ourselves separate from the sin of the world, so that we may remain the bride of Christ that is “holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27).

3. Religion

Over time the Jews established a remarkable culture of learning, not just in religion, but in all manner of subjects ranging from mathematics to philosophy, seen especially during the Middle Ages. However, religious studies were still their priority, and as God had commanded, it was the Levites who took charge of all religious tasks related to offerings, teaching and establishing the law, and communicating God’s will. Among the Levites, there were:

- a. **Priests:** Chosen from the descendants of Aaron, priests were separate from the people, in charge of holy tasks within the temple and other worship activities.
- b. **Scribes:** All Israelites had to learn the law (Deut 6:1–9), but most people were illiterate even until New Testament times. So, scribes read the Scriptures to the people and gave them oral instruction in the laws (Neh 8:1–8, 13). They also helped people to write contracts or letters.
- c. **Prophets and Seers:** Although not necessarily of the tribe of Levi, prophets and seers were still very important religious figures who served as the main line of communication between God and men (Lk 2:36–38). Prophets also took on judicial responsibilities, and their roles were large enough that schools of prophets were established (2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7).

There are many laws regarding the Israelites’ way of life, such as the keeping of Sabbath day. This key commandment was argued many times during Jesus’ ministry, because over time, many additional rules regarding how to keep this day were implemented. In addition they observed the seven festivals established in Moses’ time: Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkot, the three larger festivals, as well as the feast of Unleavened Bread, the feast of Firstfruits, the feast of Trumpets, and Yom Kippur (Lev 23; Ex 12; Num 29). Traditional Jews still observe these festivals today. *(Teachers: See Figure 2 for more a more detailed calendar, or Figure 3 for a simple calendar.)*

Spiritual Teachings

1 Peter 2:9 calls us “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Like the tribe of Levi, we have been chosen by God to be His priests, scribes, and prophets. We have been tasked with performing His holy tasks within the temple that is His church, and with the responsibility of teaching God’s word to those around us (Acts 26:18). God desires that we as His children become the main line of communication between God and mankind.

4. Political Institutions

The various ruling bodies of the Israelite nation can be divided into three different ages:

a. Age of the Patriarchs

As in Abraham’s time, the elder in a tribe was the patriarch, or chief. They took charge of all political, military, religious, and educational affairs in the tribes.

b. Age of the Judges

After Joshua died, the chosen people still relied on God, but their failure to remove all of the Canaanites eventually led them to stray from God, who in response allowed them to be conquered by their enemies. Whenever the Israelites repented, God chose someone to be a

judge, a military warrior who led the people to defeat their enemies under God's guidance.

c. Age of the Kingdoms

Like any other nation, the Israelites needed a ruling body. Unfortunately, they did not understand that God was to be their ruler, so they demanded a king instead, leading to the selection of Saul. His eventual lack of obedience to God was only the first in a long line of kings who were unable to lead the Israelites in accordance with God's will. However, his successor David was an example of a king who was able to establish a close relationship with God and, in turn, a nation that thrived under God's protection.

It was not until David entered Jerusalem that the Israelite kingdom began to form a relatively complete political institution. A general oversaw military concerns, and a high priest, religious affairs. With the Levites' help, patriarchs managed the affairs of the general population, and stewards took care of the palace. This left the king to oversee national administrative and political affairs, and sometimes to lead troops into battles as David did.

Spiritual Teachings

From studying the history of the Israelites, we can see that their leaders greatly affected the nation's faith – wherever they led, the people followed. Today, we tend to follow the decisions of our friends, family, or even the internet without much thought. But we must learn to do better; we must learn to make God our leader. What does it mean to make Him our leader?

Hebrews 12:28 tells us, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." When we serve God acceptably with reverence, He is the leader in our lives. Then, He will also be our patriarch as our Father in heaven who cares for our needs; our judge as our protector who defeats our enemies for us; and our king as our ruler on heaven and on earth.

C. A Chosen People

We can see that there are many complexities involved with the Israelites and their lives under God. Their day-to-day matters from food to marriage were all under God's command, and even their very homeland was chosen and given to them by God. These may seem restrictive to us, but when we examine them more closely, we can see that God set these commands for the Israelites' sake. His laws were a direct contrast from the idol-worshipping and often brutal culture of the Gentiles around them, and were based instead on love and humility. When we look at these arrangements, we can see God's greatness, power, and wisdom, as well as His loving-kindness towards His chosen people.

Today, God has taken the same amount of care in arranging a place for us in His heavenly kingdom. He has promised us a new home that is much better and greater than the promised land on earth. Our lives are physically very different from the Israelites', but to enter this new promised land, we must follow the same spirit of worship in keeping ourselves separate from the world.

Let's read 2 Corinthians 6:14–18. Like the Israelites in Canaan, we are also in danger of being influenced by the world around us. We must always remember that we are God's chosen people, His elect from every nation and His royal priesthood. We do not strive for the riches of the world, but for God's everlasting kingdom that He has promised to His children.

Check for Understanding

- 1. What is the difference between the land promised for the Israelites and what God has promised to us?** The land promised for the Israelites was just a physical place. God has promised us a better home, greater than any place on earth; it will be a heavenly home in His eternal kingdom.
- 2. Why did Ezra and Nehemiah stress the importance of cutting off foreigners from their midst?** They understood the significance of marrying within God's chosen nation (Deut 7:1–4), and realized that by straying, they had invited idolatry and a growing lack of faith into their lives.
- 3. What was the duty of the Levites? Name three roles that they took, and briefly explain each.** Levites took charge of all religious tasks related to offerings, teaching and establishing the law, and communicating God's will. Among the Levites, there were: priests – in charge of holy tasks within the temple; scribes – those who read the law and instructed people in it; and prophets and seers – not always Levites, but those who served as the main line of communication between God and men.
- 4. What does it mean to make God a ruler in our lives?** With the help of the Holy Spirit, our daily lives can be an acceptable service to God in our actions and decisions.
- 5. As God's chosen people, what makes us different from the world around us?** We do not strive for riches of the world, but for God's everlasting kingdom that He has promised to us.

Life Application

God is faithful (Deut 7:9). Despite the Israelites' constant disobedience, He fulfilled His promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit this land flowing with milk and honey (Gen 15:18–21). Today, He has promised us the "hope of His calling" and the "riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph 1:18). Having received this promise, how can we strive to enter into it?

1. Give Time to God Every Day

When we receive Jesus Christ into our hearts, He should be our Lord and King. This includes Him being King over our calendars and clocks! Any healthy relationship requires time and effort to grow. Just as with any other good friend, we need to spend quality time with God to develop our relationship with Him. This means talking openly, listening patiently, and learning about and understanding each other. How can we do these things with God?

Jesus says in Matthew 6:6, "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." James 1:25 also says, "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." These verses teach us that to develop a relationship with God, we need to set aside personal time for Him and actively seek to do His will. Those who do so will be rewarded.

When we spend time quality time with God, we will never leave empty-handed. In fact, we become filled with the Holy Spirit, and His presence goes with us. He will guide us wherever we go, and He will reward and bless us when we do His will and spend time with Him each day.

2. Redeem Our Time

Let's read Psalm 139:16. "Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them." The NLT version translates the second part of the verse as, "Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed."

During King David's time, he had advisors who were "the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chr 12:32), and during Queen Esther's time, King Ahasuerus inquired of the "wise men who understood the times" (Est 1:13). They both sought to understand the times that were approaching because they knew that their time on earth was limited, and therefore had to be spent wisely.

As God's chosen people, we know that every moment on this earth is already known by God, including every second of our lives. He already knows of every event, large or small, from the details of our lives to the wars and politics of the world. And if we want to understand what is coming, we do not need to inquire of wise men, but of the Bible.

If you study the Bible thoroughly, you'll be gripped by the knowledge that we are living in the end times. Rumors of wars, earthquakes, and the rise of the antichrist are all signs given to us by the Bible. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Eph 5:15–16). We do not know exactly when our Lord will return again, so we must be alert and aware of our responsibility to use our time wisely. This means understanding God's purpose for us on earth: to walk with Him, fulfill the mission that He has entrusted to us, and to serve Him. Our time in this world is limited, so we need to ask God to "teach us to number our days" (Ps 90:12), and strive for righteousness at all times (Ps 106:3) so that we may inherit the heavenly kingdom.

Memory Verse

"So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3:8a)

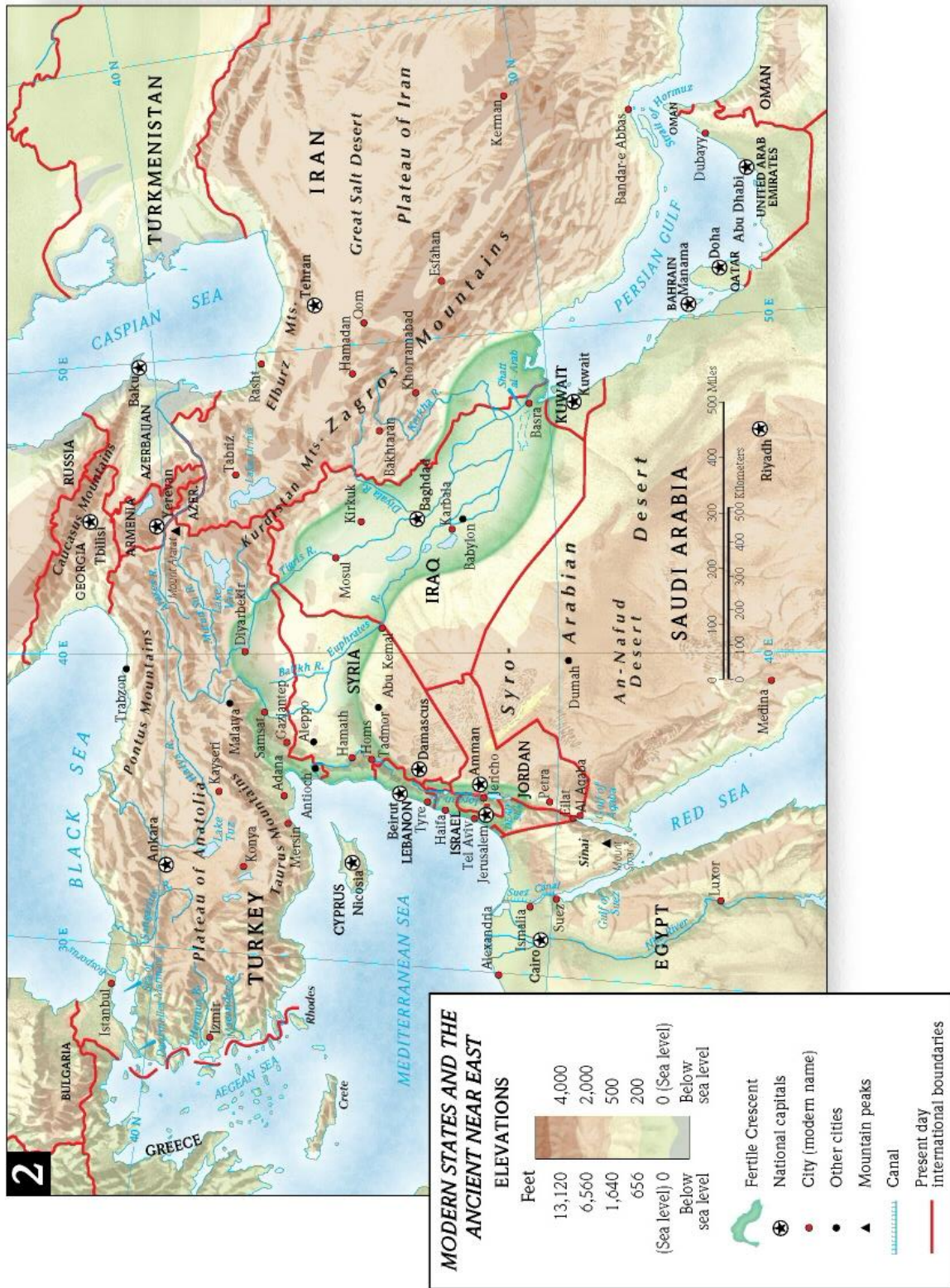
Meaning

1. While the Israelites were physically enslaved by the Egyptians, we have been spiritually enslaved by sin from the moment we were born. God has delivered us from slavery and sin, and has promised us a place in His heavenly kingdom. As His chosen people, He will continue to take care of us and guide us out of our tribulations.
2. God's blessings are beyond human comprehension, so we must inherit His promises with faith and obedience to His commands.

Conclusion

Our lives may be drastically different from that of the Israelites', but we are still nonetheless God's chosen people. But instead of inheriting the promised land that is Canaan, we have been promised a much greater inheritance: that of the heavenly kingdom. However, with this inheritance comes the responsibility to abide by God's word, and to remain separate from the world around us. We are God's children, and as His children, we must strive to keep a close relationship with our Father in heaven, and to constantly seek to make Him the ruler in our lives, so that we may one day enter into the promised heavenly kingdom.

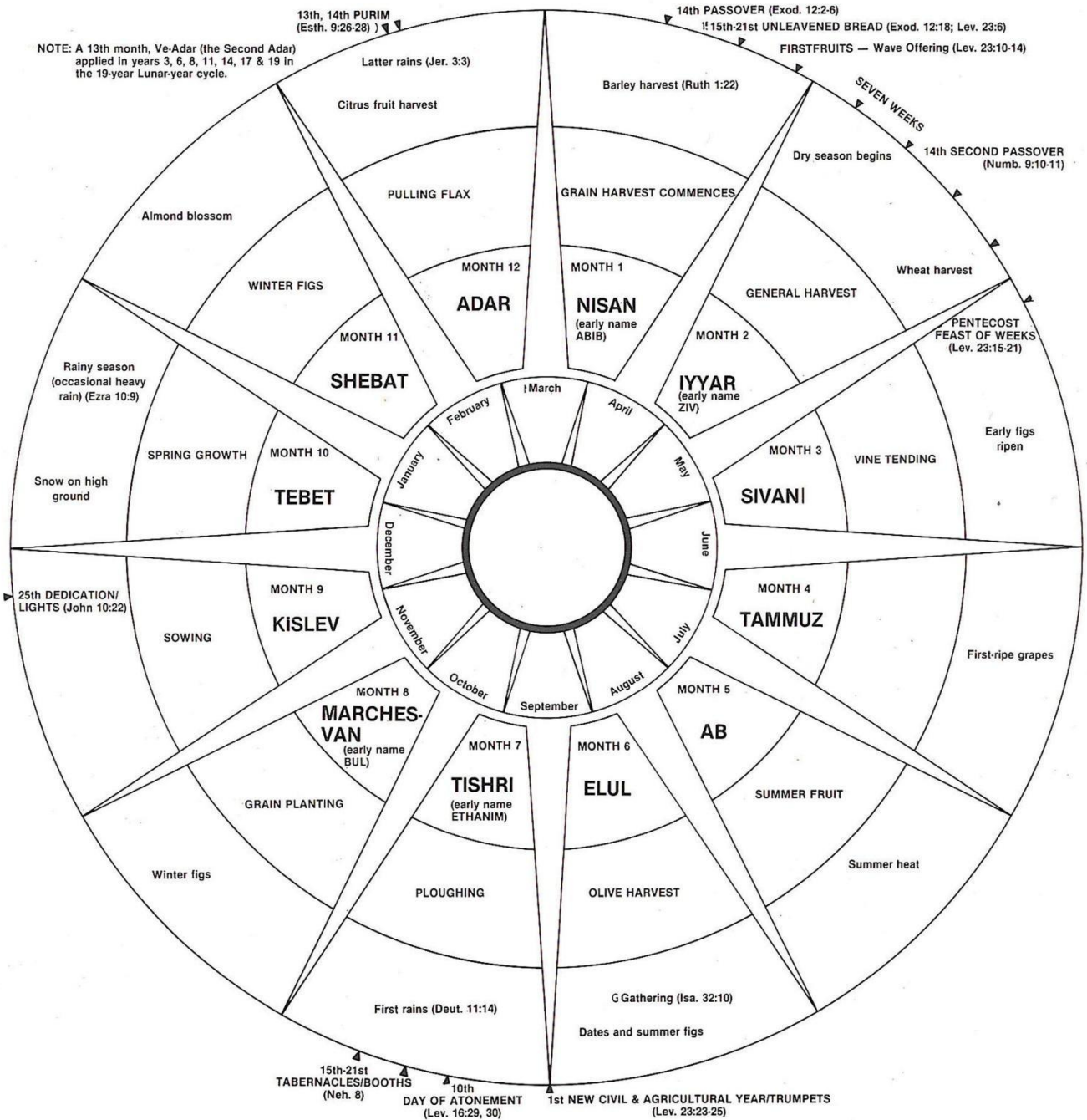
Figure 1. Map of the Ancient Near East¹



¹ Access Foundation, *Bible Atlas*, Chapter 1: "The Ancient Near East", <https://www.holyhome.nl/bible-atlas.pdf>

Figure 2. Detailed calendar of religious festivals observed in Ancient Israel.²

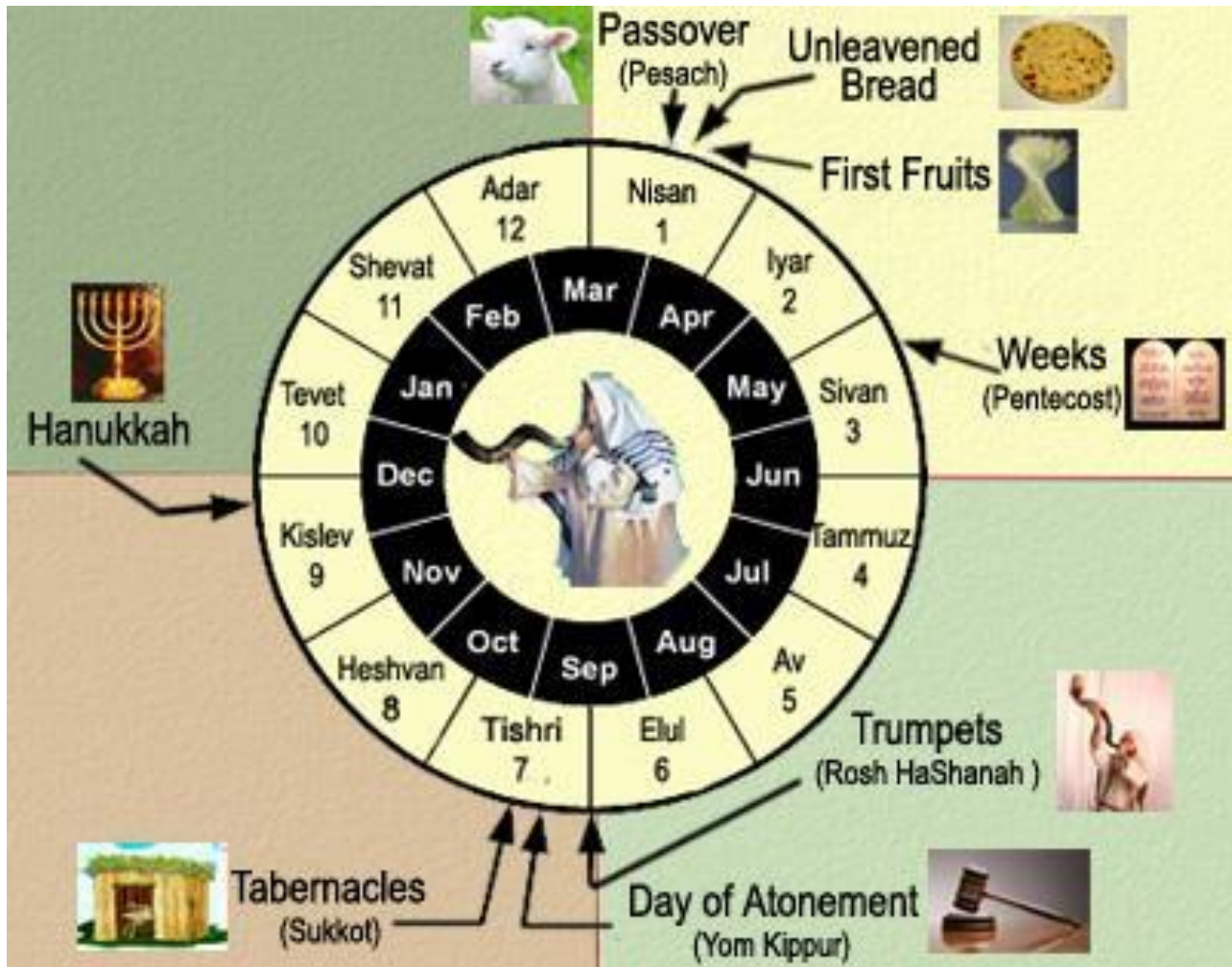
— THE CALENDAR IN ANCIENT ISRAEL —



²Christadelphian Vault, *The Calendar in Ancient Israel* (2010)

<http://www.christadelphianvault.net/index.php?action=view&filename=Calendar%20in%20Ancient%20Israel.jpg&directory=TIMELINES%20AND%20CHRONOLOGIES>.

Figure 3. Simple calendar of religious festivals observed by the Jews, past and present.³



³Alf and Julie Saunders, "The Fall Feasts of the Lord" (September 2013), <http://www.pray4zion.org/thelast3fallfeastsofthelord.html>.

Lesson 2 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. How do we inherit God's promises and blessings?
We must inherit His promises with faith and obedience to His commands.
2. What is the difference between the promised land of the Israelites and God's promise to us?
The land promised for the Israelites was just a physical place. God has promised us a better home, greater than any place on earth; it will be a heavenly home in His eternal kingdom.
3. Pick one of the four aspects about the Israelites' lives that we learned. What can we learn from it?
See Spiritual Teachings, Section B.
4. As God's chosen people, what makes us different from the world around us?
We do not strive for the riches of the world, but for God's everlasting kingdom that He has promised us.
5. What does it mean to "redeem our time" (Eph 5:16)?
It means to be alert and aware of our responsibility to use our time wisely, because we do not know exactly when our Lord will return again.
6. Do you give time to God every day? If yes, how? If not, pick a time of day that you can give to God every day this week.
Personal answers.