



JOSEPH IN THE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

The story of Joseph can be found in the Bible's Book of Genesis. The word Genesis means "origin." Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh) and the Christian Old Testament. Notably, the story of Joseph is also featured in the Qur'an. Genesis covers the history of the Hebrew people from the creation of the world, through the end of Jacob's (Joseph's father) life. The story of Joseph is central to the end of Genesis, as Joseph is the reason the Israelites settled in Egypt. After a wicked famine plagued Canaan, the homeland of Jacob and his sons, Joseph and Pharaoh invited the Israelites (Jacob's family) to live in Egypt where they would be safe. They were gifted an area of land known as Goshen, which was said to be fertile and plentiful. The Israelites settled there and had large families. After Joseph's death, a new Pharaoh became so fearful of the increasingly numerous Israelites that he enslaved them, thus beginning the Book of Exodus, most famous for the story of Moses.

JACOB AND THE ISRAELITES

Jacob is the grandson of Abraham, and the traditional ancestor of the people of Israel. Abraham (who himself was descended from Noah) grew up during an age of polytheism, meaning people believed in and worshipped many gods. However, Abraham answered the call of Yahweh (the god of Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and abandoned all other gods to worship Him. Out of this, the seeds of monotheism—the worship and belief in only one god—were born. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were old and childless. But because of Abraham's faith in Yahweh, He made Abraham a promise to make him "progenitor of nations," meaning Abraham would have so many descendants that they would create a whole nation of people. Soon, the couple was miraculously blessed with a son, Isaac. When Isaac grew up, he married the woman he loved, Rebekah, and had two healthy sons: Esau and Jacob. And as we know from "Jacob and Sons," Jacob grew up to have twelve sons and even more grandchildren and great grandchildren. The name "Israel" was given to Jacob by God, therefore the descendants of Jacob are called the Israelites. Even more importantly, Jacob's twelve sons create the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Tribes in ancient Israel were a collection of clans, all with their own territory and cultural identity. The existence of the Tribes also fulfills God's promise to Abraham to make him the grandfather of a nation.

THE LAND OF CANAAN

For thousands of years before the creation of Israel, the Fertile Crescent was the center of human habitation. The Fertile Crescent is a strip of land curving from the head of the Persian Gulf through countries including modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Egypt. If you look at a map, the Fertile Crescent creates a "C" shape, like a crescent moon! Around the year 3500 BCE, an ancient people called the Sumerians lived in Mesopotamia (located between the rivers the Tigris and the Euphrates). The Sumerians created complex irrigation systems which allowed them to build the world's first cities, such as Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, Joseph's great-grandfather. The Sumerians also created one of the earliest systems of writing, called cuneiform; they were responsible for the invention of the wheel, and also devised the earliest laws!

When we meet Joseph, he lives with his family in the land of Canaan. Canaan is a narrow strip of land located directly in between Mesopotamia and Egypt, right along the Mediterranean Sea where modern day Israel and Palestine are today. Because it was located in between two great civilizations, the area of Canaan during peace time was very important for trade. Of course, this also meant that the area was very valuable, and many people wanted to conquer it. Later, the area of Canaan became known as "The Promised Land," and even later "The Holy Land." It is now the religious center of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.