Ancient Israel's History

Collins gives you a brief overview of the course of Israel’s history (pp. 11-12), but too brief. I want to highlight some dates you should be familiar with because they will provide important hooks I’ll use throughout this course. The first is the round number of 1,000, the approximate date when David, Israel’s first real king, assumed the throne and captured Jerusalem, making it his royal city. He was succeeded by his son Solomon around 960 B.C.E. It was Solomon who built the first royal temple for the LORD in Jerusalem.

During the reigns of David and Solomon, a period known as the “United Monarchy” -- because it embraced both the northern part of Israel and the south -- Israel’s boarders reached their widest measure, and Israel became a power in the region. This was made possible, in part, because the surrounding large powers, Egypt and the Mesopotamian nations, were all enduring a period of weakness. It was also due to the ability of David to inspire the trust of the people in his rule, and Solomon’s ability to marshal the resources of the nation to fortify it and to conduct major building projects, including the temple in Jerusalem, along with a palace for himself. However, those projects had to be funded and a military requires men.

The tribes from the north came to feel that Solomon’s accomplishments drew unfairly on them for support. And so when Solomon died around 920 – another date you need to keep in mind – they appealed to his son and successor, Rheoboam, to lighten their tax burden. The young Rheoboam answered that he would be more demanding than his father had been.

The representatives of the northern tribes had heard all they needed to hear, and the north seceded from their union with the south, not without a battle of course, but they managed to disentangle themselves from the south and corinate their own king, who established a separate religious system, separate worship centers, and a separate calendar from what prevailed in the south. Thus begins the period of the Divided Monarchy, which lasted for the next two centuries.

For the most part the two kingdoms, the northern using the name Israel, and the south called “Judah” (after its largest tribe) coexisted peacefully, though with occasional skirmishes. The real crisis came in the 8th century, when the ancient Mesopotamian power of Assyria began to flex its muscle and extend its rule to the west – even, eventually, down into Egypt. By the middle of that century the northern kingdom was forced to start paying tribute to this eastern power, while slightly later the south (for reasons we’ll see when we study Isaiah) voluntarily began paying tribute. The north was the one to suffer more from Assyrian power, though, because it repeatedly rebelled, trying to regain its freedom. As a result, in 722 B.C.E. Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom, deporting anyone who was anybody to Assyria and importing peoples from elsewhere to mix with those who
remained, so as to dilute any remaining sense of nationalism.

Meanwhile, not long afterwards, in the southern kingdom of Judah, king Hezekiah came to the throne and carried out a series of what are often referred to as “reforms,” such as shutting down the high places – the outlying worship sites – and centralizing all worship in Jerusalem. He also made appeals to those left from the old northern kingdom of Israel to join the south. His fateful decision, however, came toward the end of the 8th century, when he decided to regain Judah’s freedom and withheld tribute from Assyria. The Assyrian’s swooped down, leveled the countryside and put Judah on a short leash.

Evidently having learned a lesson from his father’s political faux pas, when Manasseh took the throne in 687, he reinstated the high places and brought Canaanite religion back with a vigor. Manasseh is the villain in the eyes of the authors of 1 & 2 Kings. According to its authors, it was his reversal of his father’s policies that so incited the LORD against Jerusalem that its destruction a century later became inevitable.

Prior to that, however, a king named Josiah came to the throne and attempted to reinstate the changes instituted by Hezekiah. Unfortunately, however, in 609 B.C.E. Josiah met an untimely death in battle. Shortly afterwards Babylon arose as the new power in the region and by the close of the 7th century Judah was firmly in its grip, not that that meant Judah didn’t try to regain its freedom.

In fact, around 600 it made an attempt to do so, only to be shut down by the Babylonians and have many of those in power deported to Babylon in 597 B.C.E. The Babylonians placed on the throne a weak king who was susceptible to influence from the nationalist aspirations of his advisors. And so, only a decade after the Babylonians had first attacked, Judah again rebelled. As a consequence, by 587, Jerusalem lay in ruins and its most prominent citizens (who hadn’t been deported in 597) were carted into exile in Babylon.

That, of course, was not the sunset of Israel’s life, however. When the Persians came to power around 50 years later, they permitted those who had come to Babylon as exiles to return to Judah. By that time, however, many of the people considered Babylon their home and were not excited about rebuilding their homeland. So when exiles began returning in 538, they were not numerous by any stretch of the imagination. And those who did return found life back in Judah hard. Moreover, those who returned didn’t get right down to the task at hand, which became a point of contention for two of the prophets we’ll study, Haggai and Zechariah, who were finally able to get construction of the temple under way around 520 B.C.E. and to see it completed a few years later in 516.

These, then, are the crucial events and dates I expect you to bear in mind during the term, for I’ll frequently refer to them to help us get our bearings as we talk about the literature this society produced.