

Introduction to Comments on and Lessons from the Books of the Prophets of the Old Testament

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In general, the average reader of the Old Testament very often find it difficult to make sense of how the events that influenced the day to day lives of the Israelites, fit together. The what, who, when, where and why is often not as clear as one would like it to be. The lack of clear answers/explanations to these questions is one of the major reasons why readers of the Old Testament prophets do not understand what the prophetic messages of the prophets mean. Many modern day church leaders get around this problem by simply telling their flock that the Old Testament belongs to the past, that it is not relevant anymore and that they therefore need not to have to waste their time and effort by trying to do so. Yet the apostle Paul wrote, **“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”** (2Ti 3:16). He clearly referred to the Old Testament since the New Testament was not yet compiled.

In this introduction, how to understand the message of the Old Testament prophets I will present the reader with a concise summarized time-line of the history of Israel from Abraham's call to depart from Ur of the Chaldeans up to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This will help the reader of the Prophets to see where and when they fit into the history of Israel.

17th Century BCE Ancient Israel – The Patriarchs

The history of the Israelites begins with the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham believed in one God and it was this unseen Almighty only true God that made contact with Abraham. The Book of Genesis tells us how God summoned Abraham to move out of Haran and go to a land that God would show him.

In Genesis 11:31 it is recorded that Abraham's father, Terah, who lived in the region of Ur of the Chaldeans, took his whole family out of Ur, intending to settle in the land of Canaan, yet not reaching Canaan but settling about 1000 km NW of Ur instead, and called the place Haran after one of Abraham's brothers who had died before thy left Ur of the Chaldeans. It was here in Haran that God had spoken to Abraham having commissioned him to relocate.

Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: (Gen 12:1-2)(KJV)

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were both advanced in years but they had no children and it was then as though they would never have been blessed with offspring. However, it was then that God had made a covenant with Abraham, promising him also that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. They would also be given the land of Canaan as an inheritance until the end of times (Genesis15). Abraham thereafter moved to Shechem believing what God had promised him. And indeed He did! Sarah gave birth to a son, calling him Isaac.

Isaac's son, Jacob, became the father of twelve sons, the respective fathers of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel. The story of Genesis is then about the formation of a people who believed in one living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They indeed dwelt in Canaan until they were compelled by famine to migrate to Egypt and where they eventually also were reduced to forced labour.

However, in Egypt they were treated well under the reign of that Pharaoh who held Joseph in high esteem. But, unfortunately for the Israelites the good times came to an end when a new Pharaoh ascended the throne of Egypt and when they were forced into slavery. They were treated very harshly. According to Exodus 12:40 they were dwelling in Egypt for 430 years although they were treated as slaves for only a portion of this time. Exactly how many years they spent in slavery is not known.

13th Century BCE The Exodus

God heard the cry of His people in Egypt and He then raised Moses to lead them out of slavery. By this time many of the Israelites were worshipping idols although they also acknowledged the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God therefore had to work miracles and signs (ten plagues) through His servant Moses in order to move Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free. However, the miracles and wonders also served to establish Moses as their leader. As a result, a large number of Israelites willingly followed Moses in exodus out of Egypt. The exact number of its participants is not known as the Bible does not tell us but Exodus 12:37 gives an indication of about 600000 men, i.e. without counting the woman and children. In Numbers 1:19 – 46 the number of men above the age of twenty, i.e. Those fit to be warriors, totalled 603550. Throughout the ages scholars and laymen were adding the woman, the children and the old men who did not qualify as warriors, giving a total between two and two and a half million souls. However, the validity of this number is still a contentious issue. Sceptics rightly do point out that if they were marching ten persons abreast, they would indeed have formed a human train of between two hundred and two hundred and fifty kilometres long not yet not taking into account that they also took their personal household belongings as well as their cattle along with them. The point, however, is not the number that totalled the exodus but rather that God, in a miraculous way, had led His people out of Egypt!

But there is something to take note of. The journey from Egypt to the promised land should not have taken more than four to eight weeks but let's be reasonable giving them six months to have covered the relative short distance between Egypt and Canaan. Yet they were wandering for forty years in the desert before they were ready to enter the land God had promised their forefathers. Let's also say that the scholars have their figures right and that two and a half million did indeed cross the Sea of Reeds into the wilderness. Imagine the level of irritation this vast crowd must have experienced as they were subjected to this type of extreme discomfort. Remember that they were all but in a lush green, bountiful land! They were trapped in a desert, and one of the harshest on our planet. No wonder then that they wanted to kill Moses on several occasions. They were blaming him for everything that had gone wrong and yet they had only themselves to blame. Had they not been such a rebellious people they would have been in Canaan in no time.

But here in the desert God had to transform them from a wild disorderly people into an orderly flock. His very own congregation governed by His sophisticated laws and rules. God had to teach them everything! i.e. how to recognize and obey Him and to acquire a respectable, godly lifestyle. Up to this point in time, they had merely heard about the God of their fathers but they did not know Him yet. It was here in the desert that God had made Himself known to them as the only true God. The God who lives! The God who was protecting them and who was providing for them in all their daily needs. And especially the God who would heal their diseases. In short, He was to be a God for them as they had never known before. The Almighty everlasting God who made the heavens and the earth.

God also gave them the Torah (Law) which included the Ten Commandments giving form and content to their monotheistic faith.

Bible scholars have for ages tried to pin-point the exact route the Israelites had taken, i.e. from their departure from the land of Goshen and pertaining to their forty year wanderings in the desert. Many probable routes have thus far been proposed, also disputed, but this contentious issue has not been resolved yet.

13th - 12th Centuries BCE Israel enters the promised land

At the end of the forty year wandering in the desert Moses died and a new generation under the leadership of Joshua was ready to enter the promised land. One of the greatest miracles took place before the eyes of the Israelites when God had opened the waters of River Jordan so that the priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, could lead the people across – again on dry ground and just as the waters had parted previously at the Sea of Reeds. Under Joshua's leadership Israel fought several battles with the inhabitants of the land and one by one they conquered the nations and claimed the land for the tribes of Israel.

1025 BCE Jewish Monarchy Established

From the time that Joshua had conquered the land until the first king of Israel was inaugurated the tribes were loosely organized. At first they obeyed God but even in the days of Joshua the first signs of their innate disobedience came to the fore.

And the Angel of Jehovah came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you go up out of Egypt, and have brought you into the land which I swore to your fathers. And I said, I will never break My covenant with you. And you shall make no treaty with those who live in this land. You shall throw down their altars. But you have not obeyed My voice. What is this that you have done? Jdg 2:1 – 2. (MKJV)

Joshua died and a new generation arose who did not follow in the ways of the Lord.

And also all that generation were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know Jehovah, nor even the works which He had done for Israel. And the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of Jehovah, and served Baals. And they forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt. And they followed other gods of the gods of the people who were around them, and bowed themselves to them, and provoked Jehovah to anger. And they forsook Jehovah and served Baal and Ashtaroth. Jdg 2:10 – 13 (MKJV)

Israel's history was one of ups and downs. The times when they were serving the Lord were usually overshadowed by times when they again turned to idols. And time and again God had to punish them for their disobedience. Until the reign of their first king, Saul, they were on and off being led by faithful leaders such as Gideon who was commissioned to bring the Israelites back to the God of their fathers.

Samuel, in his old age, had made his two sons judges over Israel but they did not follow in the ways of their father, Samuel. The Bible says that they turned aside after ill-gain taking bribes and perverting judgment. The elders consequently rejected the sons of Samuel, commanding the prophet to appoint a king as a judge and ruler over Israel. Samuel took this as a personal rejection of his faithful leadership and judgment but God then comforted him saying:

Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you. For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. 1Sa 8:7 (MKJV)

1025 BCE Saul, First King of Ancient Israel

According to the Oxford Bible Atlas Saul, the first king over Israel, reigned from about 1025 to 1005 BCE. In the beginning of his reign Saul was doing a good job but he became wicked and was rejected by God.

1005 BCE David, the King Chosen by God

David, chosen by God to be king over Israel reigned from about 1005 to 965 BCE. During his reign he established Israel as a major power in the region by his successful military campaigns. This included the final defeat of the Philistines. He also constructed a network of friendly alliances with many other kingdoms. Round about 1000 BCE Jerusalem became the capital of David's Kingdom.

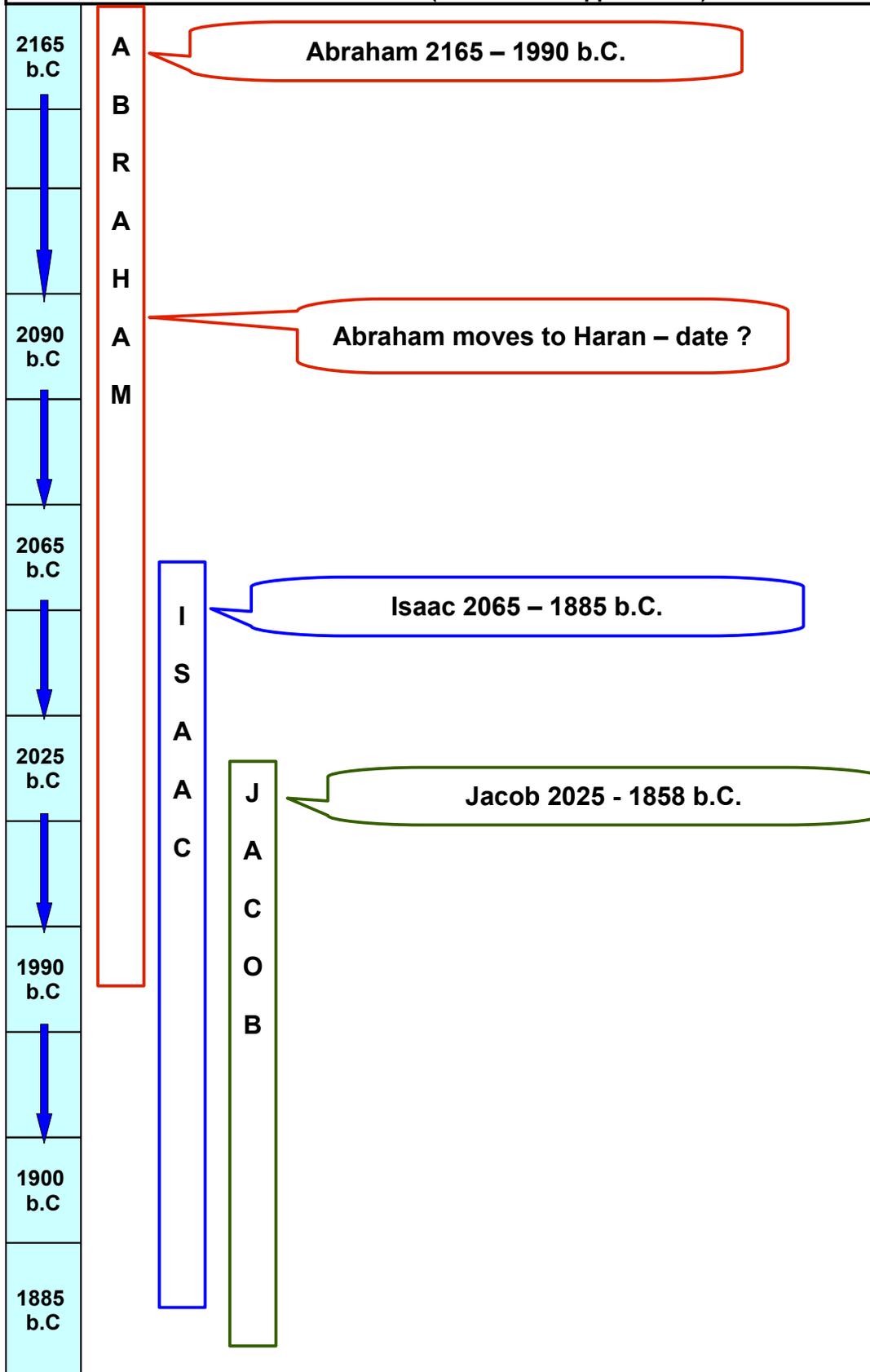
David's heart's desire was to build a house for the God of Israel but he was not allowed to commence with the task. God, however, allowed his son, Solomon, to build a temple.

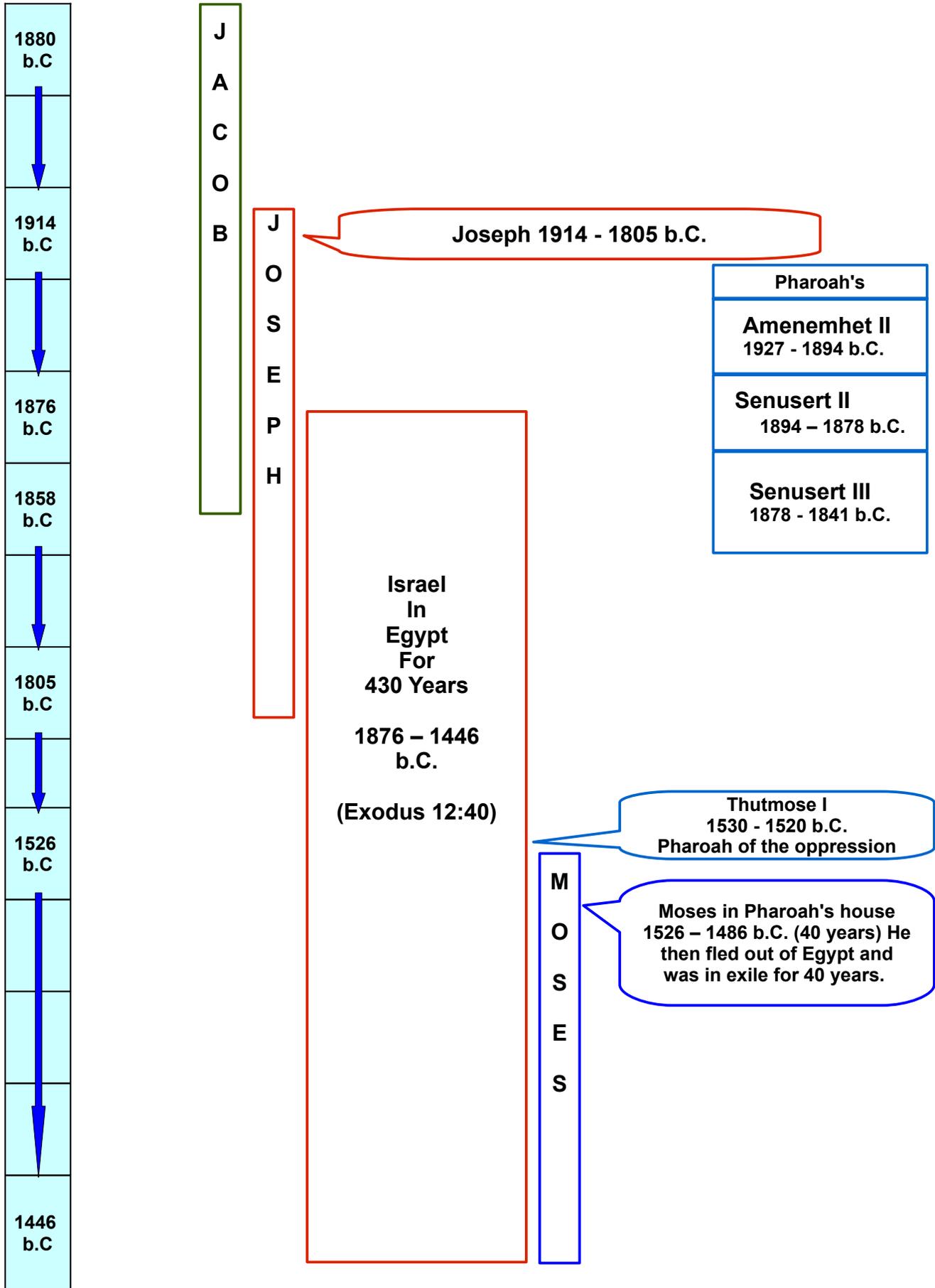
965 BCE Solomon, the Wise King

David's successor, Solomon, known for his wisdom, strengthened the Kingdom and for the most part of his reign Israel was at peace with her neighbors. His greatest achievement was perhaps the building of the Temple in Jerusalem round about 960 BCE, which became the center of the people's national and religious life.

Time line of the History of Israel From Abraham to the Book of Malachi

(All dates are approximate)





1050 b.C
1040 b.C
1030 b.C
1020 b.C
1010 b.C
1000 b.C
990 b.C
980 b.C
970 b.C
960 b.C
950 b.C
940 b.C
930 b.C

King Saul
1050 -1010 b.C.

Saul was the first king to reign over Israel. In the first years of his reign he did well but he became wicked and was rejected by God.

King David
1010 – 970 b.C.

David, chosen by God to be king, established Israel as a major power in the region by his successful military campaigns. This included the final defeat of the Philistines. He constructed a network of friendly alliances with many other kingdoms. He made Jerusalem the capital of the Kingdom. David was not allowed to build a house for the God of Israel, however, God allowed his son Solomon to build the temple.

King Solomon
970 – 931 b.C.

Solomon, known for his Wisdom, strengthened the Kingdom and for the most part of his reign Israel was at peace with her neighbours. His greatest achievement was perhaps the building of the Temple in Jerusalem round about 960 b.C. which became the centre of the people's national and religious life.

I & II SAMUEL

PSALMS

I & II CHRONICLES

ECCLESIASTES

PROVERBS

SONGS OF SOLOMON

The Kingdom broke up in two parts. The Northern Kingdom was made up of ten tribes now known as Israel. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, contained the tribes of Judah and Simeon. Simeon dwelt in the territory of Judah.

The Divided Kingdom

JUDAH

ISRAEL

Rehoboam (17 Years) (1 Kings 11:42 – 14:31)

Under the reign of **Rehoboam** the people of Judah sinned against the LORD. They built places of worship for false gods and put up stone pillars and symbols of Asherah on the hills. Judah's men and women served as prostitutes at those pagan places. In the fifth year of his reign Shishak, the king of Egypt, attacked Jerusalem and took away all the treasures of the temple including the gold shields Solomon had made. Rehoboam and Jeroboam were constantly at war with each other.

Abijah (3 Years) (1 Kings 14:31 – 15:8)

Abijah committed the same sins as his father. The war which had begun between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continued throughout Abijah's lifetime.

Asa (41 Years) (1 Kings 15:8 – 24)

Asa, the son of Abijah, did what pleased the LORD. He expelled from the country all the male and female prostitutes serving at the pagan places of worship, and he removed all the idols his predecessors had made. He removed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother, because she had made an obscene idol of the fertility goddess Asherah. Asa cut down the idol and burned it in Kidron Valley. Even though Asa did not destroy all the pagan places of worship, he remained faithful to the LORD all his life. Asa and Baasha of Israel were constantly at war with each other as long as they were in power.

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Jeroboam I (22 Years) (1 Kings 11:26 – 14:20)

Jeroboam was afraid that if his people should go to Jerusalem and offer sacrifices to the LORD in the Temple they would turn to Rehoboam and revolt against him. So he made two bull-calves and persuaded the people to worship them and offer their sacrifices to the gold bull-calves in Bethel and Dan. He also built places of worship on hilltops and appointed priests who were not from the house of Levi. The bull-calf worship is generally referred to as the wicked ways of Jeroboam.

Nadab (2 Years) (1 Kings 15:25-28)

Nadab like his father Jeroboam sinned against the LORD and led Israel deeper into sin. Baasha from the tribe of Issachar killed him along with his whole family.

Baasha (24 Years) (1 Kings 15:27 – 16:7)

Baasha became king of Israel but he did nothing to rectify the wrongdoings of his predecessors. Instead he followed in their footsteps, sinned against the LORD and led the people away from God. The prophet Jehu told him that because he followed in the wicked ways of Jeroboam God will do away with him and his family.

Elah (2 Years)

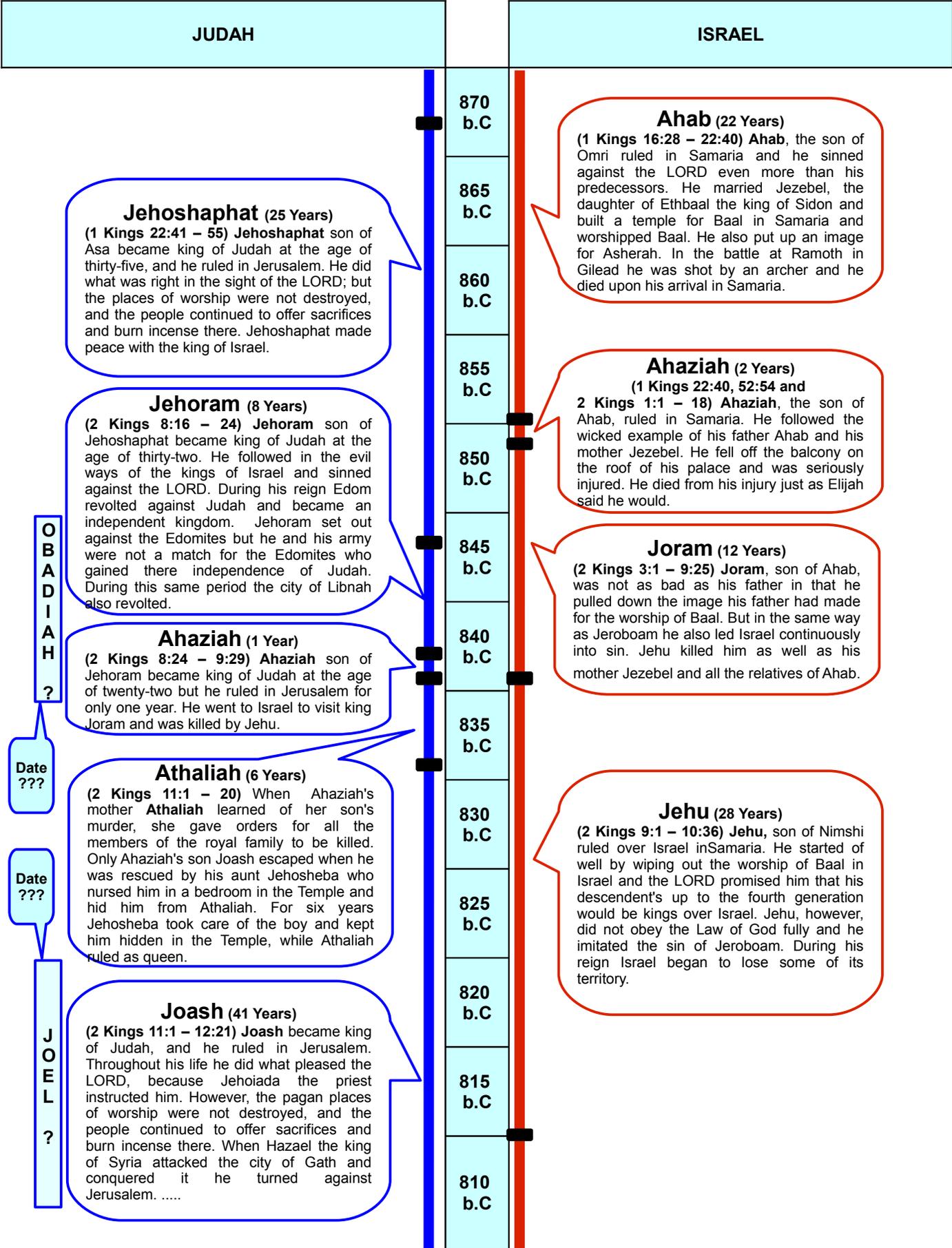
(1 Kings 16:8-9) Zimri, one of **Elah's** servants got him drunk in the house of Arza and killed him.

Zimri (7 Days)

(1 Kings 16:9-20) Zimri reigned for only 7 days. He killed everyone of the house of Baasha. The people of Israel revolted and made Omri, the commander of Israel's army, king. Zimri set fire to the king's house and died in the blaze.

Tibni/Omri (12 Years)

(1 Kings 16:23-28) The first four years **Tibni** and **Omri** both ruled over sections of Israel. After four years Omri became the sole ruler. Omri bought the hill of Samaria, fortified it and built a city named Samaria. Omri sinned even more against the LORD than his predecessors.

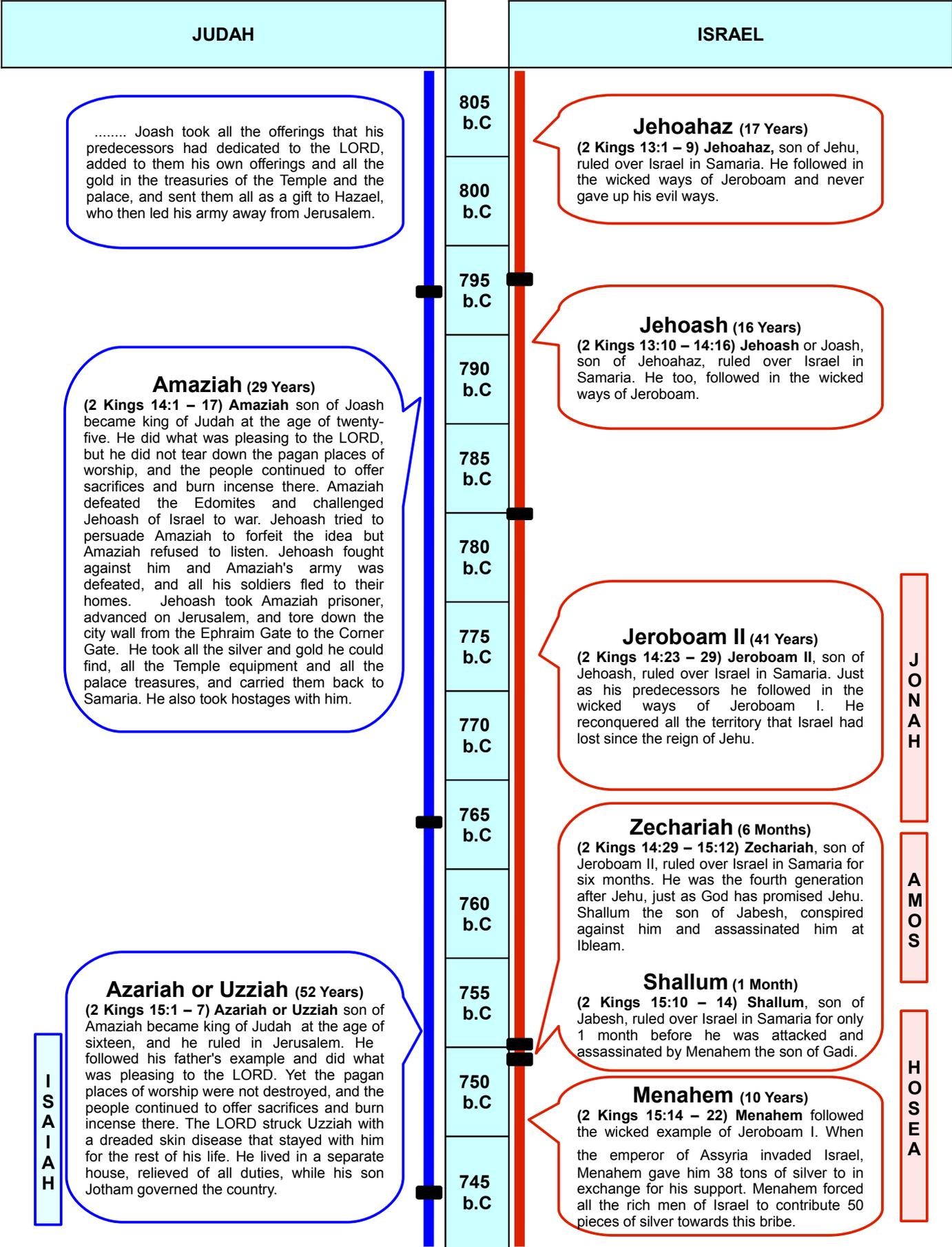


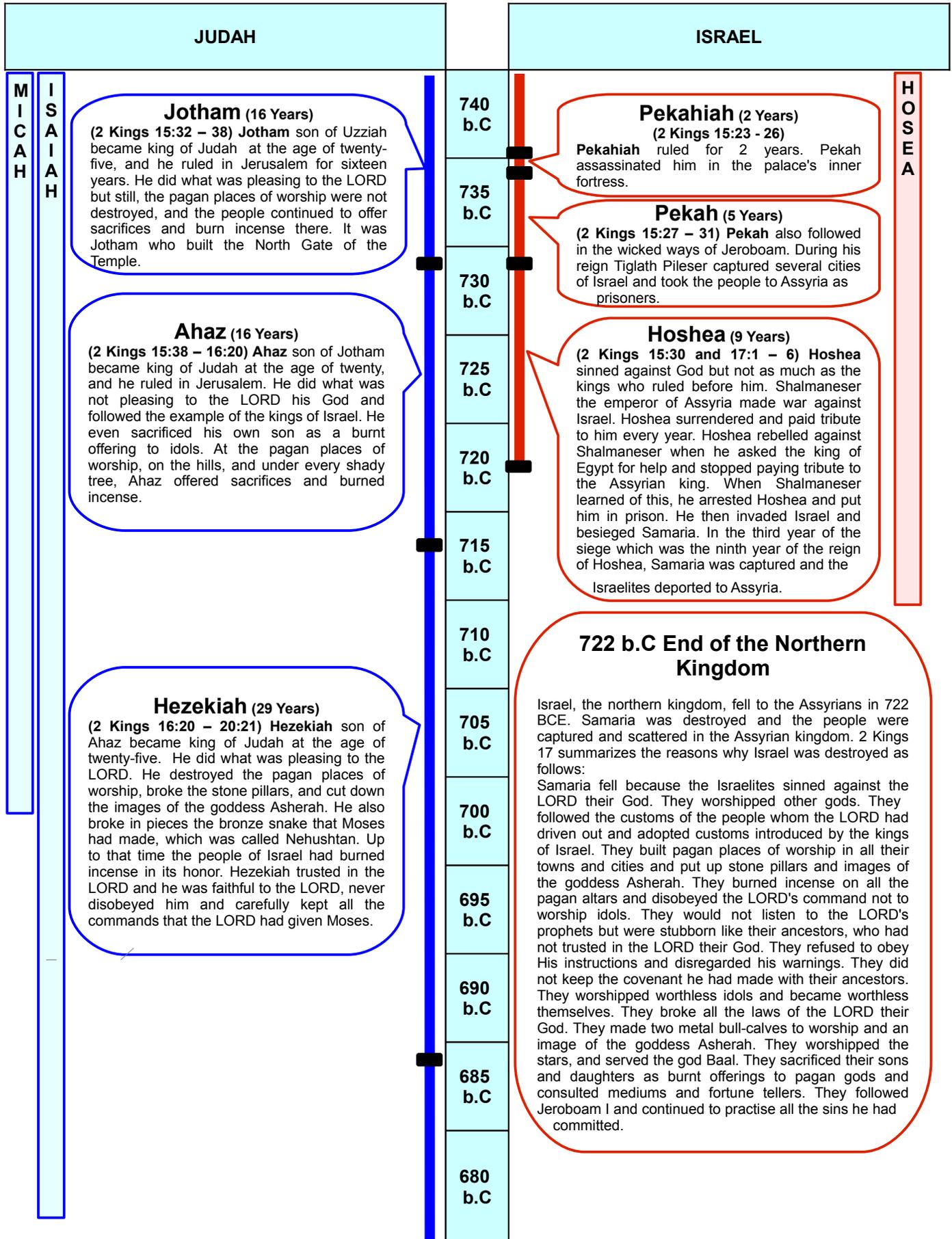
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Manasseh (55 Years)

(2 Kings 21:1 – 18) **Manasseh** was twelve years old when he became king of Judah. He sinned against the LORD more than any other king before him. He rebuilt the pagan places of worship that Hezekiah had destroyed. He built altars for the worship of Baal and made an image of the goddess Asherah. He worshiped the stars and built altars for their worship. He sacrificed his son as a burnt offering. He practiced divination and magic and consulted fortune tellers and mediums. He placed the symbol of the goddess Asherah in the Temple. The LORD said that Manasseh has done things far worse than what the Canaanites did. Manasseh killed so many innocent people that the streets of Jerusalem were flowing with blood.

Amon (2 Years)

(2 Kings 21:19 – 26) **Amon** was twenty-two years old when he became king of Judah. He sinned against the LORD by imitating his father's actions, and he worshiped the idols that his father had worshiped. Amon's officials plotted against him and assassinated him in the palace.

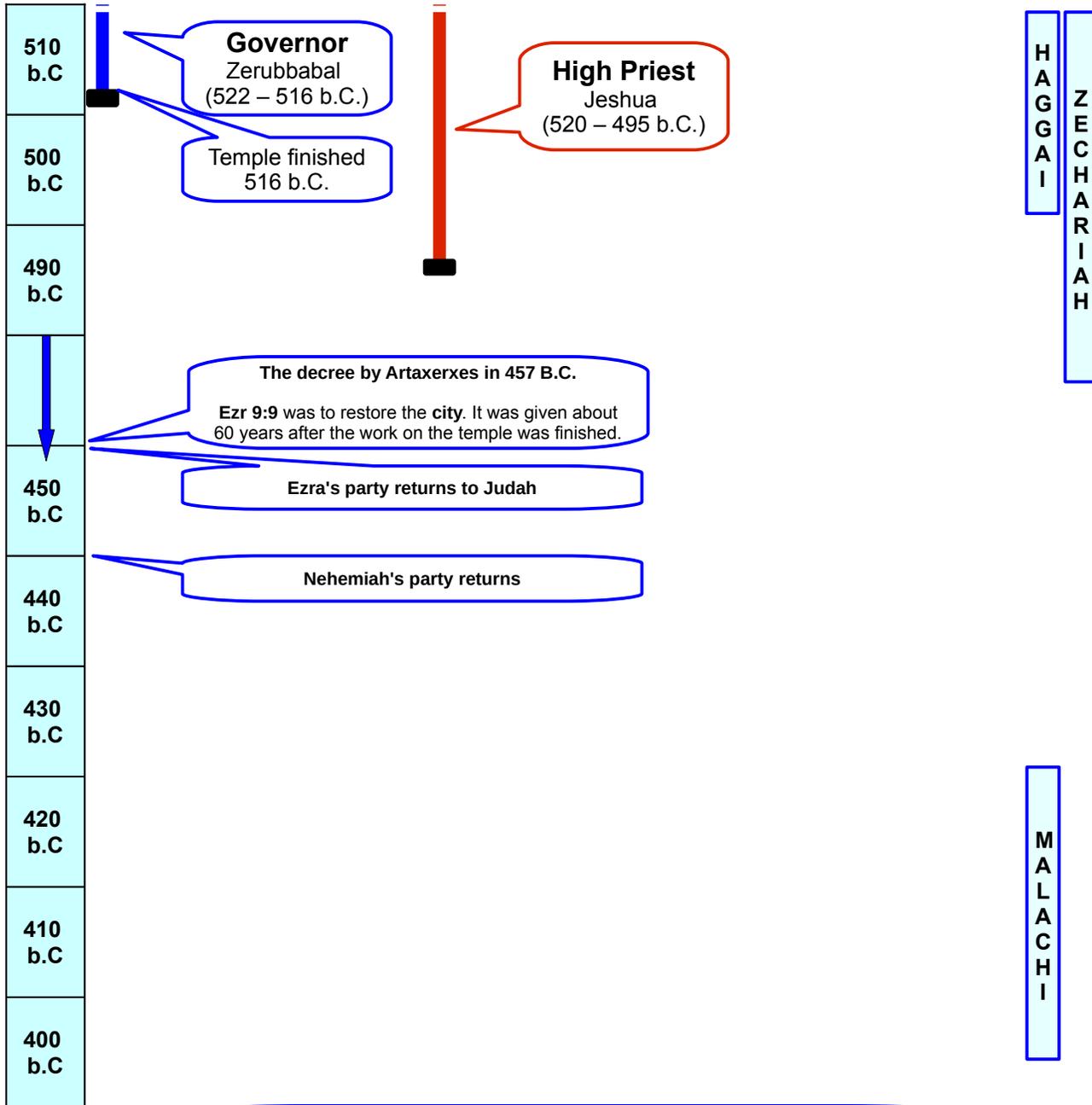
Josiah (31 Years)

(2 Kings 22:1 – 23:30) **Josiah** was eight years old when he became king of Judah. He did what was pleasing to the LORD. It was during his reign that the Book of the Law was found in the temple. Josiah took note of everything written in the Law and did his best to return the people to obedience of the Law. He removed from the Temple all the objects used in the worship of Baal, of the goddess Asherah, and of the stars. He removed from office the priests that the kings of Judah had ordained to offer sacrifices on the pagan altars. He destroyed the living quarters in the Temple occupied by the temple prostitutes. He tore down the altars dedicated to the goat demons and desecrated Topheth, the pagan place of worship in Hinnom Valley, so that no one could sacrifice his child as a burnt offering to the god Molech. He also removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the worship of the sun. Josiah desecrated the altars that Solomon had built east of Jerusalem for the worship of Astarte the goddess of Sidon, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Molech the god of Ammon. He tore down the place of worship in Bethel, which had been built by Jeroboam I. In every city of Israel he tore down all the pagan places of worship which had been built by the kings of Israel. He killed all the pagan priests on the altars where they served, and he burned human bones on every altar. Then he returned to Jerusalem. Josiah ordered the people to celebrate the Passover in honor of the LORD their God.

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End of the Old Testament

Written and Compiled by Arie Blomerus (November 2012)
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