

## Commentary

Set the context – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Israel, Rome.

Cairo, Mosul (Nineveh), Hillah (Babylon), Athens, Jerusalem, Rome

Mosul to Hillah (534 km), Wellington to Hamilton (516 km)

Where do we start? Perhaps with water – for water gives life. And the cradle of civilisation was nurtured by three great rivers – the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates.

As early as 6000BC there is evidence of settlement along these great rivers – and not simply living beside the rivers, but building canals to bring water to crops. At this point one of the oldest rivalries of humanity was begun – between farmers and herdsmen (as described in the story of Cain and Abel). The nomadic lifestyle of hunting and gathering was being transformed by settlement.

### EGYPT

We began to establish settlements and towns along the Nile Valley, a rich, fertile flood plain.

### ASSYRIA

We established the town of Nineveh on the Tigris River.

### BABYLON

We settled in Mesopotamia – the flood plain of the Tigris and Euphrates. We called ourselves Akkadians and Sumerians and established towns like Ur and Kish.

### EGYPT

We built the first ever boats which were used on the Nile River for fishing and transport.

One of the motivations of the early village chiefs was to mobilise the population to build the farming infrastructure – the beginning of labour capital. Another uniting factor was also arising.

### ASSYRIA

We built the town of Ashur and a glorious temple which would be the centre of our civilisation.

### EGYPT

We worked out how to make mud bricks and began to build houses from them. We learnt architecture and engineering.

I know it's not politically correct at the moment in our multi-this-and-that society, but the reality is that religion provided one of the uniting factors for civilisation. Religion became an expression of culture and identity, and as such helped to define a stronger "us" and a clearer understanding of "them." Of course, this was all good for us, but not so good for them in the course of history. I don't

believe that religion was the cause of all the wars in the world – but it certainly gave an indicator of who was friend or foe.

#### EGYPT

The gods of Egypt included Anubis (the god of embalming and the dead), Ra (the sun god) and Isis (the goddess of protection).

#### BABYLON

The gods of Babylon were led by Marduk, greatest of all.

#### ASSYRIA

The Assyrians worshipped Ashur, the god of the wind, among many others.

#### EGYPT

We built the Great Pyramid at Giza, along with the Sphinx and other pyramids. The Great Pyramid was the tallest structure in the world for 3000 years.

Agriculture, trade, religion – driving forces for civilisation. But with such treasures and resources came rivalry and then armies for defence and attack. Power was firstly held by families, and then by towns, and then cities and kingdoms. When the area grew bigger, and the armies bigger as well, the age of empires was begun. The years between 2000 and 1000 ... BC... set the scene.

#### EGYPT

In Egypt, the Old Kingdom began in 2650, the Middle Kingdom in 2074 and the New Kingdom dates from 1539.

#### BABYLON

In Babylon we date our Empire from 1984 BC, well before George Orwell's book.

#### ASSYRIA

Our Assyrian Empire began around 1307, centred on Ashur and Ninevah.

#### GREECE

Don't call us an empire – the Greeks were always a number of independent states. But we were developing a common language and education system.

#### ISRAEL

Don't forget about us – Jerusalem was probably founded around 2000 BC. A small village, but centrally located with a good water supply.

#### ROME

We're just sitting here quietly – we'll catch up in time – just you wait!

So around the fertile crescent civilisation was developing, along with politics, weaponry and blatant disregard for human life. Egypt, ruled by their Pharaohs, began to expand their empire. Assyrians fought with and then assimilated the neighbouring Arameans. The Babylonians inherited Sumerian culture and the city of Ur. And Jerusalem became a key stopover for traders travelling between the empires.

There were some pretty notable leaders as well – all of them with good stories to tell, but most of the stories overlook the countless other people that made them successful.

**BABYLON**  
Hammurabi (1795-1750 BC) was the first to enshrine a code of law that was written and followed by a society.

**ISRAEL**  
Abraham and Sarah are traditionally located around 1800 BC. A little later is Jacob and Rachel – the latter's tomb is near Bethlehem.

**EGYPT**  
Ramses (1303-1213) a great Pharaoh who ruled for over 60 years.

**EGYPT**  
Tutankhamen (1342-1323) is more famous for being an Egyptian mummy than for his short reign and untimely death.

**ISRAEL**  
And Moses – probably around 1300 BC. Unlike these other strange names, you know Moses.

**ASSYRIA**  
Tiglath-Pileser (1130-1076) was a great military tactician and lead the Assyrian army at its peak.

As we head into the first millennium BC I have to admit that while civilisation was creeping ahead, military might was growing rapidly. Around 1000 there was a mutual retrenchment of empire – just chance, I think – and that provided opportunity.

**ISRAEL**  
Saul, and then David, became kings of a small Hebrew kingdom. David's son, Solomon, then created a short-lived economic empire.

It's a story that we are familiar with. Central to this is that ancient rivalry that we talked about before. The area around Israel and Palestine was peppered with small city states – a fortified town

with a pompous king attached. These were Cain's people – farmers, cropping the land and staying put. David was one of Abel's lot – he was a shepherd, a nomadic Bedouin tribesman. David won the local battles with military skill and diplomacy, then Solomon developed a large nation with trade and commerce. Perhaps that was the downfall – it fostered other empires to grow. When Solomon died around 930 BC the edges of his kingdom were already closing in and then it split in two between Judah and Israel.

Further south, the days of the Pharaohs were over in Egypt.

#### EGYPT

We were invaded by the Nubians in 728. By the Assyrians in 656. By the Persians in 525. And by the Greeks in 332.

On the other end of the fertile crescent, the millennium began well for Assyria.

#### ASSYRIA

Around 934 Ashur-dan II reigned over an empire that stretched from Egypt to the Caspian Sea.

The Assyrians were innovative, from this empire came paved roads, a postal service, flush toilets, electric batteries, iron ware, chariots, aqueducts, libraries and musical notation. But in 612 the Medes, Scythians and Babylonians rose up against the empire and by 609 there was no Assyrian empire left.

Further south the Babylonians rose and fell with the tides of history.

#### BABYLON

Around 600 BC Nebuchadnessar ruled Babylon and increased the kingdom. He tried to conquer Egypt, but it was too far for the supply lines.

In the north, the various Greek villages were gaining an identity and working together. One way they did this was a special event.

#### GREECE

We held the first games at Olympia in 776 BC. It began to hone our athletic skills which would soon be seen on the battlefield.

#### ROME

And now it's us. Rome was founded in 753 BC – it had been a village before, but we claim this date for when the Roman Empire first began.

In Rome things were being done differently. A republic was formed – res publica, a thing of the people – with a senate elected to run things. Democracy was born. It didn't mean freedom for all (there were still slaves and plebs, workers for the upper classes), but it did mean improvements.

Around 340-320 BC things changed a lot and coincided with one political figure.

<p>GREECE</p> <p>Alexander the Great. Our Greek general who changed the world.</p>	<p>ASSYRIA</p> <p>He conquered the Persians in 330 BC (who happened to have conquered us a century before that.)</p>
<p>EGYPT</p> <p>He conquered Egypt in 332 and set up the Ptolemy rule.</p>	<p>BABYLON</p> <p>He conquered Babylon around 331 and planned to set up his capital there, but he died in 323 after a failed attempt to take over India.</p>

Alexander is perhaps one of the most influential men in history. He was taught by Aristotle, was a brilliant military tactician, and understood about empire building. His was not a campaign of fight and plunder, his was almost a migrant crusade where Greek settlers followed and established a Hellenistic culture across the globe. There were twenty cities founded that bear his name, the most famous being Alexandria in Egypt, where the great library was built.

Alexander died in 323 – his legacy, the Greek empire, faded (that is perhaps the best word) as it lost influence at the edges with a series of civil wars, rebellions and simple neglect. While the Greeks faded, a second Mediterranean culture came to have significant influence. The Romans.

<p>ROME</p> <p>The Roman Republic was coming to an end and we saw the rise of the Roman Empire and with that the domination of Emperors.</p>	<p>EGYPT</p> <p>Egypt had been self-governing under the rule of the Ptolemies, but Cleopatra was the last ruler of Egypt. She died in 30 BC.</p>
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Gaius Julius Caesar gained a reputation in the Roman army and greatly expanded the Empire – and then proceeded to become Emperor. His assassination in 44 BC was not the first or last betrayal of a Roman emperor. But despite an unstable leadership, the Roman Empire continued to expand.

In what western history calls year 0 – that time between BC and AD (or BCE) there was a sense of calm in many place – the Pax Romana.

#### EGYPT

The Romans controlled trade and politics in Egypt, but we remained true to our culture.

#### ASSYRIA

These were days of darkness for Assyria, we existed, but had no real identity.

#### BABYLON

The Babylonian empire was also a thing of the past. We kept our traditions and language, but we were never the masters.

#### ISRAEL

Herod the Great was the last King of Israel – he had been appointed King by the Roman senate after Pompey had defeated Jerusalem in 63 BC.

Herod was known as a brutal king, but also a builder. He built grand additions to the temple in Jerusalem and the great fortress at Masada. He died around 4 BC and his sons proved to be totally incompetent as rulers.

#### GREECE

Greece was divided up by the Romans into four separate states (divide and conquer), but our culture continued on.

#### ROME

The Roman Empire stretched from Britain to India, from Germany to Egypt.

But then, in a small village in Palestine a baby was born.

#### ISRAEL

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old, from ancient  
times."

#### ROME

Pilate was procurator at the time of the death of Jesus, but Pilate's actions did not represent the Roman Empire.

#### ISRAEL

The Sanhedrin at the time did not represent Judaism either, they were looking out for themselves.

The world was changed. A movement was begun. An earthquake had rattled the earth.

#### ASSYRIA

The Assyrians were the first nation to become Christian. Thomas, Thaddeus and Bartholomew brought light into the darkness.

#### ISRAEL

We rose up against Rome in rebellion in 60 AD and were defeated and Jews spread through the world.

#### GREECE

Greek cities like Corinth, Ephesus and Thessalonica heard the gospel and churches were founded.

#### BABYLON

The church also came to Babylon, and a bishop was installed in Babylon.

#### EGYPT

In Egypt the Coptic Church was begun by St Mark in Alexandria.

#### ROME

Even in Rome the church began to grow.

It was perhaps history itself that allowed history to be made – it was the presence of the Roman Empire that enabled Christianity to spread throughout the entire known world (apologies to indigenous cultures throughout the world who were not known by Europeans at the time). Their transport systems, communication methods and relative peace were the catalyst for the spread of the gospel.

#### ASSYRIA

In 200 the first New Testament was produced in the Assyrian language.

#### ROME

In 324 Emperor Constantine declared the Roman Empire to be Christian. The Council of Nicea, in 325, defined much of the doctrine of the church.

#### ASSYRIA

The first university (although some dispute this) was founded in Nisibis in Assyria in 358. It taught theology, philosophy and medicine.

Assyrian monks also began to translate ancient Greek texts into Latin and Arabic. The lights were about to be turned off – the Dark Ages are coming – but here history and academic insight was saved (and it was in Assyria).

In the 400's the first East-West schism of the church occurred over questions about the unity of Christ as human or divine (way too technical to explain here).

Muhammad was born around 570. We in the West would say that he was the founder of Islam, but many Muslims would say that he restored the faith of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Jesus – a monotheistic belief in God. Muhammad brought together the Arabic people – many of whom had not been under the influence of the Roman Empire because the Romans saw no value in the desert (no need for petrol in those days!)

**ROME**

From about 500 AD Rome looked more to the north and Europe than south to the Middle East.

**ASSYRIA**

The Assyrian's welcomed the Muslim leaders – they allowed us religious freedom and did not tax us to pay for their wars.

**EGYPT**

The Islamic conquest of Egypt happened in 641 AD and we became part of the Caliphate.

**ISRAEL**

The Muslim armies took Jerusalem and the area of Palestine around 641 AD.

**BABYLON**

Babylon was ruled by the Islamic Caliphate, being absorbed into Arabic culture.

The Great Schism happened in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church parted company.

**ISRAEL**

The Jews in Jerusalem joined with the Muslim leaders in the fight against the Crusaders in 1099.

The tides were turning in Europe – northern cultures began to rise and nation states developed in Germany, France, Austria, Spain, Portugal and the British Isles. In England, Richard the Lionheart felt called to lead a Crusade to recapture Jerusalem for the Christian Church. When Richard took

Jerusalem there was a slaughter of both Muslims and Jews. In 1187 Saladin, the great Muslim Sultan, defeated the Crusaders and controlled Jerusalem. After this time a number of Jews began to return to Jerusalem and Israel – with a freedom of religion given by the Islamic authorities.

From Constantinople in Turkey the Ottoman Empire arose to control north Africa, southern Europe and the Middle East. In 1453 the Ottomans conquered the Byzantine Empire (eastern Roman Empire) and in 1517 conquered Egypt.

#### ASSYRIA

Although we ceased to be a nation, we kept our Eastern Orthodox Christian faith and maintained our culture.

#### ROME

Although the Roman Empire had fallen, the church empire was continuing to grow, ruled from St Peter's in Rome.

#### ISRAEL

The Ottoman Empire became rulers of Jerusalem around 1516 – and held it until World War One.

#### GREECE

The Ottoman Empire controlled Greece from about 1500 – but the language and culture remained.

The Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century split the western church between Roman Catholics and Protestants – leading to political intrigue, wars, and horrendous atrocities. But that's not the area we are looking at.

#### GREECE

We Greeks rose up in a war of independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821 – and got to be independent by 1830.

#### EGYPT

In Egypt we accepted British rule in 1882 and were welcomed as another patch of pink on the world map.

#### ROME

Italy lived as independent city states for several centuries, often ruled by others, but achieving great things.

#### ISRAEL

Under the Ottoman Empire, Jews began to come to Jerusalem to flee the persecution they faced in Europe.

In Greece, the British, French and Russian Empires all supported the uprising and when they became a nation those powers installed Bavarian Prince Otto von Wittelsbach as monarch. The British took over Egypt in 1882 – it was of strategic importance for trade.

World War One – tensions had been rising in the old empires and change had come.

<p><b>ASSYRIA</b></p> <p>The ruling Ottomans massacred thousands of Assyrians in an act of ethnic cleansing.</p>	<p><b>EGYPT</b></p> <p>The Egyptians played their part – hosting many of the Allied troops in Cairo, but in 1919 there was a revolution and a new nation was formed, but still part of the British Empire.</p>
<p><b>BABYLON</b></p> <p>The Ottomans had ruled Babylon too, but in 1933 an independent Iraq was formed, freed from British rule.</p>	<p><b>ISRAEL</b></p> <p>In 1918 the Allies took over Palestine and in 1922 they were granted a Mandate to rule.</p>

The Greeks voted to become a republic in 1924 and the modern nation of Greece was formed, although its territory has often been fought over around the edges.

Italy became a kingdom in 1861 and agitated to gain more territory. It stood with the Allies in World War One and gained land to the kingdom at the end of the war. The Facist Party, led by Mussolini, arose in 1922 and that led Italy into alliance with Nazi Germany and then defeat in World War Two. It became a republic in 1949.

Israel came into existence in May 1948 at the end of the British Mandate for Palestine. It was proposed that Jerusalem would be governed as an international city – that never really happened.

Egypt gained full independence in 1954 as the Republic of Egypt. It had to fight Israel to maintain its control of the Sinai Peninsula and then settled into a peaceful time – until the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

Iraq consisted of the areas of both Assyria and Babylon. In 1963 in Iraq the Ba'ath Party came to power and a leading light in that group was Saddam Hussein. He came to power in 1979 and began to modernise Iraq – but he also chose to ally with Russia. In the midst of the Cold War, the United States backed Iran, the neighbouring country, and instigated the Iraq-Iran wars.

The Babylonians were celebrated as a culture in the days of Saddam – he rebuilt a number of the ancient cities and erected old and new monuments – the new ones often had “This was built by Saddam Hussein, son of Nebuchadnezzar, to glorify Iraq.”

The Assyrians have been a particularly hard hit group – firstly by Saddam, and now by Islamic State who have butchered the people there and virtually killed the culture that had existed in that area

since the dawn of civilisation. (Of interest, Saddam was from a shepherd family, the Assyrians were land farmers).