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# Israelite Origins

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HISTORIANS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS, AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARS continue to debate the topic of Israelite origins. The literature is so vast that one cannot possibly survey it all in the limited space afforded here. Suffice it to say that the two main positions are: (1) Israel originates as a desert or desert-fringe people, who came to settle in the central hill country of Canaan, a view that accords more or less with the picture portrayed in the Bible; and (2) the Israelites are indigenous Canaanites, who moved from the urban areas to smaller settlements in the hill country, where they created a somewhat distinctive culture.

The latter viewpoint has become more and more standard in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will argue for the former position, though to repeat, space allows for a mere sketch only. Much of what I include below is well known, or at least has been stated by others before, so that the value of this article, to my mind, is the accumulation of data created by the converging lines of evidence.

I trust that the subject of this article will find favor in the eyes of our honoree, since he himself has discussed much of this material in his two books, *Israel in Egypt* and *Ancient Israel in Sinai*.<sup>2</sup> In fact, one of the first articles written by our honoree, now more than forty years ago, concerns tents, a topic to which we will return below.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is a distinct pleasure to publish this essay in this well-deserved Festschrift for James Hoffmeier, a friend and colleague for almost four decades now.

### Yahweh of the Southland

The oldest biblical texts, consisting of archaic poetry, repeatedly connect Yahweh, the God of Israel, to the Southland, using a variety of geographical terms: Sinai, Se'ir, Edom, Paran, Teman, etc.<sup>4</sup>

- I. See, e.g., Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 97–122; and William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
- 2. James K. Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Hoffmeier, Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 3. James K. Hoffmeier, "Tents in Egypt and the Ancient Near East," *JSSEA* 7:3 (1977), 13–28. The findings of this article were incorporated into Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 196–98. See further below, §4.
  - 4. All translations are the author's.

# Deuteronomy 33:2

YHWH, from Sinai he came forth, And shined upon them from Se'ir. He appeared from Mount Paran, And approached from Rivevot-Qodesh.

## Judges 5:4

YHWH, when you came forth from Se'ir, When you marched forth from the highland of Edom.

# Habakkuk 3:3

God comes from Teman, And the Holy-one from Mount Paran.

### Psalm 68:8-9

- <sup>8</sup> O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wasteland, Selah.
- <sup>9</sup> The earth trembled, indeed, the sky poured, because of God, the one of Sinai; because of God, the God of Israel.

Were the Israelites indigenous Canaanites, it is hard to imagine that they would conceive of Yahweh as a deity associated with the Southland.

### Shasu

Earlier echoes of the aforecited references may be heard in the mentions of  $t3 \, s3sw$  ya-h-wa "the land of the Shasu of Yahweh" and  $t3 \, s3sw \, sa-r-r-ir$  "the land of the Shasu of Se'ir" in Egyptian topographical lists from Soleb and 'Amarah (both in Nubia), dated to the New Kingdom period. The term Shasu is the Egyptian designation for nomads, seminomads, denizens of the desert, dwellers on the desert-fringe, and so on, more or less equivalent to our word bedouin (derived from Arabic). The latter term, Se'ir, is one of the geographical designations that we saw above in the Bible, connected to Edom, to the south of Israel. The former term most likely refers to worshipers of Yahweh somewhere in the general region, perhaps to be identified as proto-Israelites.

A further resonance occurs in P. Anastasi VI 4:II-5:5, dated to the reign of Merenptah, in which the frontier official Enana wrote to his superior: "We have

<sup>5.</sup> Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 242–43; and Shmuel Aḥituv, "Nodedim ba-Negev bi-Mqorot Miṣrayim" (English title: "Nomads in the Desert in Egyptian Sources"), in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 21\*–27\*.

<sup>6.</sup> The relevant passages are Gen 32:4; 36:8-9, 21; Num 24:18; Judg 5:4 (cited above); Ezek 35:15.

finished admitting the Shasu tribes of Edom at the fortress of Merenptah Hotephirmaat, life, prosperity, health, which is in Tjeku, to the pools of Per-Atum of Merenptah Hotephirmaat, which are in Tjeku, to keep them alive and to keep their flocks alive." This episode is strikingly similar to the migration of the Israelites in the book of Genesis, from southern Canaan, across the Sinai, with their flocks. Upon reaching Egypt, the Shasu of Edom are admitted into the country, and indeed are settled in Per-Atum in the eastern delta = Hebrew בָּחֹם "Pithom" (Exod 1:11), the city where also the Israelites were settled.

It would be too sleight-of-hand to simply replace "Edom" in P. Anastasi VI with the word "Israel," but given the close relationship between the two groups (see §3, immediately below), one sees in this Egyptian text the same trajectory recounted in the Bible.

For more on the Israelites as Shasu, see further below, §10, "'Israel' in the Merenptah Stele and on the Karnak Temple Reliefs."

### Israel and Edom

The closeness of the two groups is reflected in manifold ways. First, as noted above, Egyptian topographical lists collocate "the land of the Shasu of Se'ir" and "the land of the Shasu of Yahweh." Second, as we learn from the Bible, the terms Se'ir and Edom are essentially synonymous: the former is used for the geographical region, while the latter is used for the people who inhabit the land (see the passages cited in n. 6 above). Third, the closeness of Edom and Israel is reflected in the foundation stories of the Bible through the twinness of the respective progenitors, Esau and Jacob. By contrast, other neighbors (such as Moab, Ammon, Aram, etc.) are more distantly related. Fourth, the closeness of the two groups is reflected by the incorporation into the book of Genesis of a sizable amount of genealogical detail (ch. 36), far unlike any information available for any other neighboring people (and see in particular 36:6–8, 31).

### **Tents**

As indicated above, one of Hoffmeier's earliest articles (published in 1977; see above, n. 3) dealt with the topic of tents. Unbeknownst to him at the time, two additional relevant studies would appear either that year or the following year. Moreover, they were written by individuals who would become close colleagues as the years passed, namely, Kenneth Kitchen and Donald Wiseman.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of all three of these studies was to overturn the rather bizarre suggestion of John Van Seters that references to tents in Genesis (12:8; 13:3; 13:5; etc.) signify a late date for the composition of the book, since, to his mind, tents did not become common in the land of Israel until the Arab migrations of the latter half of the

<sup>7.</sup> Kenneth A. Kitchen, The Bible in Its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 58-59; and Donald J. Wiseman, "They Lived in Tents," in Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford Lasor, ed. Gary Tuttle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 195-200.



first millennium BCE. Hoffmeier, Kitchen, and Wiseman demonstrated clearly that tents were part of ancient Levantine society during the second millennium BCE, with the evidence ranging from Sinuhe (Twelfth Dynasty) to Thutmose III (Eighteenth Dynasty) to the Great Harris Papyrus of Ramesses III (Twentieth Dynasty).<sup>8</sup>

The entire subject of tents and tent imagery now has been thoroughly analyzed in the fine monograph by Michael Homan, To Your Tents, O Israel (2002); and I direct the reader to his excellent treatment for detailed discussion. Here I would like to focus on one feature explored by Homan, but which to my mind did not receive sufficient emphasis and/or was interpreted differently.

I refer to the expression used in the title of the book and its various echoes in Samuel and Kings. As Homan observes, on numerous occasions the authors of the material dealing with monarchic Israel use the word "tents" with the connotation "home." During the time period of around 980 BCE through around 780 BCE (the approximate timeframe for these episodes), however, the Israelites were living in true houses, built of stone, as revealed in the archaeological record throughout Israel—and not in tents.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, the biblical text uses the following expressions:<sup>11</sup>

- I. 2 Sam 18:18: "and all Israel had fled, each-man to his tents"—with reference to Absalom's supporters.
- 2. 2 Sam 19:9: "now Israel had fled, each-man to his tents"—upon the conclusion of David's mourning for Absalom.
- 3. 2 Sam 20:1: "each-man to his tents, O Israel"—spoken by Sheba, in his attempt to have the people defect from David.
- 4. 2 Sam 20:22: "and they dispersed from the city, each-man to his tents"—upon the end of the siege of Abel-Beth-Maacah.
- 5. I Kgs 8:66 (~ 2 Chr 7:10): "and they [sc. 'the people'] went to their tents" upon the conclusion of Solomon's ceremony for the dedication of the temple.
- 6. I Kgs 12:16 (= 2 Chr 10:16): "to your tents, O Israel!"—spoken by the people of northern Israel, when they realize that there is no purpose in following Rehoboam.
- 7. I Kgs 12:16 (= 2 Chr 10:16): "and Israel went (each-man) to his tents"—the Israelites return to their homes, in light of the above.
- 8. 2 Kgs 14:12 (= 2 Chr 25:22): "and they fled, each-man to his tents"—with reference to the Judahites, routed by Israel, during the reign of Amaziah.
- 8. See the summary in Hoffmeier, Ancient Israel in Sinai, 196–98.
- 9. Michael M. Homan, To Your Tents, O Israel! The Terminology, Function, Form, and Symbolism of Tents in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East, CHANE 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
- 10. B. S. J. Isserlin, The Israelites (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 122-24; and Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, Life in Biblical Israel, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 21–23. For detailed information on more than two dozen sites, see Avraham Faust, The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 207–12, even if the data derive mainly from the eighth to seventh centuries BCE, due to the nature of the evidence.
- II. See Homan, To Your Tents, O Israel, 17-19. I omit from Homan's registry the three instances from the book of Judges (7:8; 19:9; 20:8) and the one instance in I Samuel from premonarchic Israel (4:10). By this point in Israel's history, the people most likely were living in stone houses (see below, §6, on the elliptical sites), but my main focus here is on monarchic Israel, with well-established cities evident throughout the land.



Now, as I indicated above, during the period under consideration here, from early or late in David's reign (thus, ca. 980 BCE) through the reign of Amaziah (ca. 780 BCE), the Israelites were living in stone houses within well-developed cities. And yet the language persists with the tent imagery, especially when used as a functional semantic equivalency for "go home" or "they went home" or "they fled home."

The persistence of this idiom bespeaks a people who once upon a time lived in tents. The best analogy that I can conjure is the repeated use of "horse" within English idioms, into the twenty-first century: "hold your horses"; "stop horsing around"; "get off your high horse"; "I could eat a horse"; "a one-horse town"; "a dark-horse candidate"; "a horse of a different color"; "don't beat a dead horse"; "straight from the horse's mouth"; "wild horses couldn't drag me away"; "don't look a gift horse in the mouth"; "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink"; and so on. 12 These expressions reveal a people (to wit, Britons and Americans) for whom the horse was once an essential part of their cultural repertoire. Such is no longer the case in the mechanized age of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and yet the word "horse" (mainly as a noun, though in one case above, also as a verb) continues to inform the contemporary English language. Such was the case, I submit, with the word "tent" in ancient Hebrew. During the tenth, ninth, and eighth centuries BCE, and of course beyond, the vast majority of Israelites no longer lived in portable dwellings suitable for desert and desert-fringe lifestyle, and yet the word "tent" persevered in the key idiom examined above.13

# **Linguistic Terminology (a): Tents**

Homan further observes that the Hebrew vocabulary is very rich in terms related to tents and to tent culture. 14 Items include: קבָה "tent" (Num 25:8); 15 "tent-curtain" (Isa 40:22); הַּפָּה "tent-canopy" (3×); שַׁפְרִיר "tent-canopy" (Jer 43:10); נָנָה "tent-abode"  $(15\times)$ ; "tent-encampment" (6×); "and קירה "tent-encampment" (6×). As indicated by the parenthetic comments, three of these lexemes are hapax legomena, while the others (except for נָוֶה) are infrequently attested. That said, as indicated in

- 12. Many of these expressions have a good English pedigree: http://mentalfloss.com/article/56850 /origins-12-horse-related-idioms. For more detailed analysis, see OED, s.v. "horse."
- 13. Homan, To Your Tents, O Israel, 22, speaks more generally of "the fluidity of residential terminology," though as I hope to have demonstrated, there is more at stake in the linguistic usage.
  - 14. Homan, To Your Tents, O Israel, 13-14.
  - See the Arabic cognate qubba.
- 16. It is not always easy to determine when the word means "tent-abode" and when the word means "pastureland." But of the thirty-one occurrences of the word, I count fifteen of them meaning "tent-abode" (Exod 15:13; 2 Sam 15:25; Isa 27:10; 32:18; 33:20; Jer 10:25; 31:23; 50:70; Ps 79:7; Prov 3:33; 21:20; 24:15; Job 5:3; 8:6; 18:15). In addition, I count only the singular form נָהָה here, and not the plural form גָּאוֹת, which may derive from a separate root, or in the very least would be formed irregularly from the singular. As to the second meaning, "pastureland," note the Mari Akkadian cognate nawû, used to refer to the land inhabited by the nonurban Amorites, along with the Safaitic cognate nwy "pastureland." The former is well known; while for the latter, see Ahmad Al-Jallad and Karolina Jaworska, A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions, Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 108.
  - 17. Especially for Ishmaelites (Gen 25:16), Midianites (Num 31:10), and Qedemites (Ezek 25:4).
- 18. Always in conjunction with the "tent-encampments" of Jair in Transjordan (Num 32:41, etc.). Note the Arabic cognate hiwā'.



the footnotes, (1) these terms often are used in conjunction with those who continued to live in the desert and desert-fringe (Qedemites, etc.); and (2) several find cognates in Arabic and Mari Akkadian, with reference to nonurban society.

One item not included in Homan's treatment is the verb צ-ע-ן, a hapax legomenon in Isa 33:20. In this passage, the prophet envisions Jerusalem as an אֹהֶל בַּל־יִצְעַן "a tent not to be transported." While various cognates have been proposed, once again Arabic provides the best etymon: za'ana "journey, depart, remove." <sup>19</sup>

# **Elliptical Sites**

In his early work, Israel Finkelstein reached the brilliant conclusion that the numerous elliptical sites that dominate the central hill country in Iron Age I, dating mainly to the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, reflect the sedentarization of former desert nomads.<sup>20</sup> The layout of these settlements replicates the layout of bedouin encampments, with the use of stone buildings replacing the former tent structures. In both the standard bedouin encampment and the elliptical sites, the residences are placed on the perimeter, leaving the central portion as the courtyard for the sheltering of flocks.<sup>21</sup>

Key statements by Finkelstein include the following: "The elliptical site plan, where a series of broadrooms encompassed a large central courtyard, was adapted from the nomadic tent camp" (p. 337); "Most of the people who settled in the hill country in the Iron I period came from a background of pastoralism, and not directly from the urban Canaanite polity of the Late Bronze period. These people, who tended flocks but apparently did not herd camels, did not originate deep in the desert, but had lived on the fringes of the settled areas, or perhaps even in the midst of the sedentary dwellers" (p. 338; emphasis original). With this last phrase, Finkelstein leaves open the possibility that the pastoralists were resident in the central hill country prior to their construction of the elliptical site, though the larger picture—including the biblical material, per what I have written above—suggests the desert fringe, that is, the large swath of land that wraps around the arable land in Canaan, from the southwest

- 19. For the various cognates, see the discussion in Frederick E. Greenspahn, Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of the Phenomenon and Its Treatment Since Antiquity with Special Reference to Verb Forms, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 74 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 154. For the Arabic, see Edward William Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 8 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863–1893) 5:1911–12. See also Old South Arabian z-'-n "move, shift, decamp," listed in A. F. L. Beeston et al., Sabaic Dictionary/Dictionnaire Sabéen (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), 171; and Safaitic z-'-n "seek herbage or water," listed in Al-Jallad and Jaworska, Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions, 143. The Akkadian, Ethiopic, and Aramaic cognates mean "load," clearly related, but semantically further afield. The Aramaic cognate ט-ע-ן passed into Hebrew with the meaning "load."
- 20. Israel Finkelstein, The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), 238-50, 336-38. The page references embedded in the next paragraph refer to this book. The English book, which received wide attention when it was published, was based on the earlier Hebrew version: Israel Finkelstein, Ha-'Arkhe'ologya šel Tequfat ha-Hitnahalut ve-ha-Šoftim (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986).
- 21. While Finkelstein's prose is illuminating, the clearest picture emerges from simply comparing the diagrams (both schematic plans and isometric reconstructions) of the archaeological findings and the photos and drawings of modern bedouin encampments; see the ample illustrations in Finkelstein, Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement, 239-49. The present writer continues to use these illustrations (along with his own photographs taken in the Negev from as early as 1975) in classroom teaching and public lecturing.



to the south to the southeast and even to the east, what I would call very generally "the Southland" (see above, §1, and see further below).

I must add here the following: If I understand his more recent work correctly, Finkelstein has moved away from his original conclusions regarding the significance of the elliptical sites.<sup>22</sup> While it is admirable for a scholar to alter his or her position in the light of new evidence, in the current case, I must say, the evidence endures, without change. The elliptical sites still bespeak the arrangement of the bedouin tent encampment, that fact remains.<sup>23</sup>

# **Linguistic Terminology (b): Desert**

In an oft-overlooked comment, E. Y. Kutscher observed that Biblical Hebrew is rich in terminology "to denote the deserts": מְדָבֵּר "steppe, wilderness" (passim); עַרָבַה "arid-land" (passim); יַשִׁימוֹן "wasteland" (13×); בר שֶׁמֶמָה "desolate wilderness" (Jer 12:10, Joel 2:3); אַיָּה "desert" (16×); אַהוּ "wasteland" (Deut 32:10; Ps 107:40; Job 6:18); מְלַחָה "barren-land" (lit. "salt-land") (Jer 17:6; Ps 107:34; Job 39:6); אָרֶץ גָּזֶרָה "cut-off land" (Lev 16:22); אָרֶץ מַּלְאָבוֹת "land of drought" (Hos 13:5); הַרַרִים "scorched-places" (Jer 17:6); דֹבֶר "steppe" (Isa 5:17; Mic 2:12); בָּחָה "desert-precipice" (Isa 5:6; 7:19).

Linguists continue to debate the observation made by the great Frank Boas in his pioneering linguistic-anthropological research concerning the many Inuit words for "snow." Some go so far as to call this the Great Eskimo Snow Hoax or the Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax, but recent research by Igor Krupnick (Smithsonian Institution) appears to uphold the notion that the languages used in northern climes, such as those spoken by the Inuit and the Sami, indeed do contain numerous words for "snow" in its various manifestations.<sup>27</sup> In similar fashion, the lexeis of the Sami, Tofa, and other reindeer herders across northern Eurasia contain numerous words for "reindeer"; while the Omani camel herders who speak either Arabic and/or Mehri have similarly rich vocabularies for all manner of "camel" (classified by age, sex, traits, etc.).<sup>28</sup> I include this information here for those who may wish to claim that the rich Hebrew

- 22. See above, n. 1.
- 23. See the treatment by Thomas E. Levy and Augustin F. C. Hull, "Migrations, Ethnogenesis, and Settlement Dynamics: Israelites in Iron Age Canaan and Shuwa-Arabs in the Chad Basin," Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 2I (2002): 83–II8, esp. pp. 9I–IOO (written by Levy).
- 24. E. Y. Kutscher, A History of the Hebrew Language (Jerusalem: Magnes; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 56, §82.
  - 25. Including the general area of David's hiding places, for which see I Sam 23:19, 24; 26:1, 3.
  - 26. For general introduction, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eskimo words for snow.
- 27. For a summary of the research see David Robson, "Are There Really 50 Eskimo Words for Snow?" The New Scientist, 18 December 2012; https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21628962-800-are-there -really-50-eskimo-words-for-snow.
- 28. For reindeer, see K. David Harrison, When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27–29. Harrison's paradigm example is Tofa chary "'5-year-old male castrated rideable reindeer' (the most useful kind for riding)" (p. 27). For camels, see Domenyk Eades, Janet C. E. Watson, and Mohammed Ahmad al-Mahri, "Camel Culture and Camel Terminology among the Omani Bedouin," Journal of Semitic Studies 58 (2013): 169–86. Good examples (see p. 178) are Mehri rġād "female camel in beginning of pregnancy" vs. madanay "female camel in later stages of pregnancy" (with a similar distinction in the Omani Arabic dialect spoken by the herders). I am grateful to Aaron Rubin (Pennsylvania State University) for both of these references.



vocabulary for "desert" (see also above, §5, regarding "tent") is inconsequential to the present discussion.

### Reuben and Simeon as the First Two Sons of Jacob

To the best of my knowledge, no one has noticed that the first two sons born to Jacob in the Genesis narrative, Reuben and Simeon, are the two southernmost, and thus most desert-like, of the tribes of Israel: the former in Transjordan, the latter in Cisjordan. Frank Moore Cross devoted a study to early Israelite traditions relevant to the territory of Reuben, and he came close to stating what I have just stated, though I am not sure if he ever makes the explicit comment.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he did not address the matter of Simeon in Cisjordan.

The last we hear of Reuben, within the grand narrative of Genesis through Kings, is in Judg 5:16, where, quite tellingly, the tribe is associated with its flocks (עַדַרִים) and sheepfolds (מִשֶׁפְתֵיִם).30

Simeon disappears even earlier, in Judg I (vv. 3, 17), though already in this episode the tribe's individual identity is waning, as its destiny is allied with that of Judah. In the book of Joshua, there is a unique statement about Simeon, which does much to reveal its character. While all the tribes gain "cities and their settlements," including Simeon, only about Simeon do we read an additional statement with the word "settlements": וְכַל־הַחֲצַרִּים אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹוּת and all the settlements that surround these (וְכָל־הַחֲצַרִּים אֲשֶׁר cities" (Josh 19:8). 31 This implies that the lifestyle of the Simeonites was more connected with unwalled, nonurban settlements (הַצֵּרִים) than that of other tribes.<sup>32</sup>

This is all rather obvious, of course, since the territories of Reuben and Simeon are on the desert fringe, without any large cities, and therefore the lifestyles of these two tribes was more connected to their flocks, sheepfolds, and unwalled settlements. And then the Bible loses track of Reuben and Simeon, not because they disappeared necessarily, but because the focus of the biblical material (prose, poetry, prophecy, etc.) becomes more and more focused on kingship, Jerusalem, temple, and such.<sup>33</sup>

But the Bible never lost track of the first-born and second-born status of Reuben and Simeon, respectively. These tribesmen retained their pastoral ways, even as most Israelites became more and more urbanized, and thus their eponymous ancestors are

<sup>33.</sup> And ditto for the Northern Kingdom, based on the literary remains thereof that are preserved in the Bible, though with the focus on Dan, Bethel, Shechem, and Samaria (and not Jerusalem, of course).



<sup>29.</sup> Frank Moore Cross, "Reuben, First-Born of Jacob," ZAW 100 (1988): 46-65; revised as "Reuben, The Firstborn of Jacob: Sacral Traditions and Early Israelite History," in From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 53-70. See also Avraham Faust, Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion, and Resistance (London: Equinox, 2006),

<sup>30.</sup> True, the same word מְשֶׁפְּתֵים "sheepfolds" occurs in Gen 49:14, with reference to Issachar, but the usage there is metaphorical, as the son/tribe is compared to a donkey.

<sup>31.</sup> The only potential parallel to Josh 19:8 regarding Simeon is Josh 16:9 with reference to Ephraim and Manasseh, but the effect there is slightly different.

<sup>32.</sup> Most translations render הַעַּרִים as "villages," though I prefer "settlements," with specific reference to unwalled settlements.

accorded first and second position in the Jacob cycle (and in later rehearsals thereof, including, e.g., 2 Chr 2:1-2).

# Some Lexical Features of Hebrew

Some years ago I commented to Anson Rainey that Hebrew shares some key lexemes with Transjordanian dialects and with Aramaic, in contrast to Phoenician. My examples included:

- ה-י-ה "be" (attested in Moabite and Aramaic; cf. Phoenician כ-ו-ן
- ע-ש"-ה" "do" (attested in Moabite; cf. Phoenician פ-ע-ל
- ק-ל-ך "go" (attested in Moabite; cf. Phoenician י-ל-ך)
- עיר "city" (attested in Moabite; cf. Phoenician קרת)
- זהב "gold" (attested in Aramaic; also Arabic dahab; cf. Phoenician הרץ)
- שוֹר "bull, ox" (attested in Aramaic; cf. Phoenician אלף)
- לא "no, not" (attested in Moabite, Ammonite, Aramaic; cf. Phoenician לא)

From this oral communication, Rainey developed an entire theory about Hebrew as a "Transjordanian language" (his term).<sup>34</sup>

Rainey's proposal was met by a harsh rejoinder from the pens of Jo Ann Hackett and Na'ama Pat-El, who argued strongly that, notwithstanding the evidence garnered by Rainey, Hebrew remains a Canaanite dialect. 35 There is no doubt that the coauthors are correct, as it would be too extreme to remove Hebrew (and Moabite) from this classification. 36 That said, the data remain, and some explanation is required. Rainey may have reached too far, but a more reasoned approach was presented many years ago by H. L. Ginsberg, in a brilliant essay cited neither by Rainey nor by Hackett and Pat-El.<sup>37</sup> In said article, Ginsberg proposed to divide Canaanite (which includes Ugaritic in his schema) to a Phoenic group along the coast and a Hebraic group inland.

- 34. Anson. F. Rainey, "Redefining Hebrew: A Transjordanian Language," Maarav 14 (2007): 67-81; and Rainey, "Whence Came the Israelites and Their Language," IEJ 57 (2007): 41-64.
- 35. Jo Ann A. Hackett and Na'ama Pat-El, "On Canaanite and Historical Linguistics: A Rejoinder to Anson Rainey," Maarav 17 (2010) 173-88. For a response, see Leonid Kogan, "Postscript: On J. A. Hackett and N. Pat-El's (2010) criticism of Rainey's (2007) 'Transjordanian' hypothesis," in his book Genealogical Classification of Semitic: The Lexical Isoglosses (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 369-75. I wrote almost the entirety of this section of my article before discovering Kogan's pages thereon, and I was very pleased to see considerable overlap, including his chart at the top of p. 372, with many of the same lexical items that I present above.
- 36. Though it is not clear that Rainey ever denied that Hebrew was a dialect of Canaanite, the claims of Hackett and Pat-El notwithstanding. For the record, nor did I ever suggest such, when I made the aboverecorded observation to Rainey.
- 37. H. L. Ginsberg, "The Northwest Semitic Languages," in The World History of the Jewish People, Vol. 2: The Patriarchs, ed. Benjamin Mazar (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970) 102-24, 293. As another indication of the overlap between my sketch here and Kogan's exceedingly comprehensive treatment, I note that he too refers to the Ginsberg essay throughout his book, indeed, with the same adjective that I use: "H. L. Ginsberg's brilliant summary description of NWS (1970)," for which see Kogan, Genealogical Classification of Semitic, 348.



To the former group are assigned Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Philistine; to the latter group are assigned Hebrew, Ammonite, Moabite, and Edomite.<sup>38</sup>

Remarkably Ginsberg wrote this article decades before the discovery of the Ekron dedicatory inscription, found at a major Philistine site, which indeed does share features with Phoenician.<sup>39</sup> I refer here specifically to the syntax in the opening phrase בת.בן.אכיש.בן,פדי "the temple (which) Ikaysu (~Achish) son of Padi built" (line 1), and to the use of the word אדתה "his lady" (line 3), both of which align with Phoenician, but not with Hebrew.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, Hebrew, as all who have investigated the matter realize, is most closely aligned with Moabite (e.g., by use of אשר for the relative pronoun). If we had more Edomite material at our disposal, presumably we would be able to enlarge the picture. In sum, while Rainey overreached, there can be no doubt that Hebrew is more closely related to the Transjordanian dialects of Canaanite than it is to the coastal dialects. This linguistic evidence bespeaks a people with ties and origins to that region, and not to the major Canaanite urban centers.

# 10. "Israel" in the Merenptah Stele and on the Karnak Temple Reliefs

As is well known, the earliest reference to Israel in the archaeological record appears in the Merenptah Stele, dated to around 1210 BCE. In a wonderful piece of detective work, Frank Yurco revealed that the reliefs on the outer western wall of the Cour de la Cachette of the Karnak Temple provide a pictorial representation of the words inscribed on the Merenptah Stele. 41 This great discovery notwithstanding, Yurco identified the wrong scene as representing the Israelites. As a corrective to Yurco's work, Rainey demonstrated that the Israelites on the wall reliefs are the ones portrayed as Shasu, a conclusion which coheres perfectly with the information presented above, in §§2-3.42

# 11. Sidebar: Possible Reading of "Israel" on Berlin AM 21687

In 2001 Manfred Görg proposed to read the name "Israel" on a fragmentary stone relief in the Neues Museum (Berlin) bearing the accession number ÄM 21687. 43 Several scholars, including our own honoree, found the reading to be forced, but more recently Wolfgang Zwickel and Pieter van der Veen have confirmed both Görg's reading and

- 38. Ginsberg, "Northwest Semitic Languages," 108–11.
- 39. Seymour Gitin, Trude Dothan, and Joseph Naveh, "A Royal Dedicatory Inscription from Ekron," IEJ 47 (1997): 1-16.
  - 40. Ibid, 12.
- 41. Frank J. Yurco, "Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign," JARCE 23 (1986): 189-215; and in a more popular version, Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt," BAR 16.5 (Sept.-Oct. 1990):
- 42. Anson F. Rainey, "Rainey's Challenge," BAR 17.6 (Nov.-Dec. 1991): 56-60, 93. A decade later the author returned to the subject within a longer treatment: Rainey, "Israel in Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs," IEJ 51 (2001): 57-75.
  - 43. Manfred Görg, "Israel in Hieroglyphen," BN 106 (2001): 21-27.



his interpretation.<sup>44</sup> This is not the place to enter into the debate, though I would note that the most recent treatment proposes a far more likely date for the inscription, to wit, the early thirteenth century BCE (as opposed to Görg's original suggestion of the Eighteenth Dynasty = fifteenth to fourteenth centuries BCE). Zwickel and van der Veen, moreover, situate the reference to Israel within the context of the nascent group's nomadic origins. To be perfectly honest, I do not follow their line of reasoning: which is to say, I do not see how, even if "Israel" is to be read in ÄM 21687, this bespeaks the people's nomadic origins. Naturally, I am happy to accept the authors' conclusion, as it coheres with my own analysis, though to repeat, I do not see the connection.

Regardless, this section, as its title above indicates, is only a sidebar comment, of no major consequence to the overall trajectory of the present article. My reason for mentioning ÄM 21687 here should be obvious: if the reading "Israel" is correct, clearly this datum demands attention in an article entitled "Israelite Origins."

# 12. The Mesopotamian Connection

The first ten sections of this article hopefully have demonstrated that Israel's origins are to be found in the orbit of desert-fringe seminomads who traversed the great Southland, which equals the area that today constitutes the Sinai of modern Egypt, the Negev of modern Israel, and the southern desert of modern Jordan. 45 Historical, linguistic, and archaeological lines of evidence converge to demonstrate the point.

The Bible, of course, speaks to this historical reconstruction, though there is also another origins story included in the corpus, to wit, the one associated with Mesopotamia. The historicity of the Genesis narrative aside, one must contend with the following elements, all of which must have meant something to the ancient Israelite consumers of the epic account: Abraham comes from the region of Ur and Harran; Jacob lives in Harran for twenty years; eleven of his sons, the progenitors of the tribes, are born in Harran; and so on.46

- 44. James K. Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus? A Response to Bryant Wood," JETS 50 (2007): 225-47, esp. pp. 241-42. Wolfgang Zwickel and Peter van der Veen, "The Earliest Reference to Israel and Its Possible Archaeological and Historical Background," VT 67 (2017): 129–40. See also Peter van der Veen, Christopher Theis, and Manfred Görg, "Israel in Canaan (Long) Before Pharaoh Merneptah? A Fresh Look at Berlin Statue Pedestal Relief 21687," JAEI 2.4 (2010): 15-25.
- 45. Naturally, there were no national borders in antiquity, so I am content to refer to this vast stretch of land as simply the Southland. Satellite photographs of the region are readily available on the internet, e.g., here: https://www.science.co.il/israel/images/satellite/f/Israel-STS094-728-10.jpg.
- 46. Ur, of course, equals modern-day Urfa, per local tradition, and not Ur in southern Mesopotamia, the famous city excavated by Leonard Woolley. See the series of articles published by Cyrus H. Gordon: "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," JNES 17 (1958): 28-31; Gordon, "Abraham of Ur," in Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver, ed. D. Winton Thomas and W. D. McHardy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 77-84; and Gordon, "Where Is Abraham's Ur?" BAR 3.2 (June 1977): 20-21, 52. This was common knowledge in the nineteenth century (see, e.g., George Bush, Notes Critical and Practical on the Book of Genesis [New York: Gould, Newman & Saxton, 1839], 189), until Woolley's excavations of the major Sumerian metropolis misdirected attention to the site in southern Iraq.

As an aside, note that the aforecited George Bush, the major American biblical scholar in the nineteenth century, is distantly related to the two scions of the presidential family bearing the same name. For a lively discourse on the scholar's life, see Shalom Goldman, God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American



We have far less material at our disposal either to confirm or deny the picture portrayed in the book of Genesis (with echoes in Josh 24:2-4 and Neh 9:7-8). The only potential evidence is the possibility of an ultimate connection between the tribe of Benjamin and the group called Banu-Yamina in the Mari archives dated to the eighteenth century BCE.<sup>47</sup> There is a more specific possible nexus between the city of Jericho in the territory of the former and the subgroup of the latter called Yarihu.<sup>48</sup> Obviously, there are both temporal and geographical problems with this identification, as one must traverse seven centuries and eight hundred kilometers for the relationship to work. The temporal issue is less of a problem, since one can trace groups in the Near East over even larger spans of time. 49 As to the geographical issue, in order for the association to work, one must posit the movement of the Banu-Yamina, or some segment thereof, from the region of the middle Euphrates to southern Canaan sometime in the Late Bronze Age, to emerge as the tribe of Benjamin known from the Bible.<sup>50</sup>

Naturally, if this connection should be sustained, there is an irony at play, since Benjamin is the only tribal progenitor born in the land of Canaan (Gen 35:16–20), as opposed to all his brothers who were born in the land of Aram, according to the biblical account (Gen 29:32–30:24).<sup>51</sup> I know of no solution to this conundrum, other than to suggest the following: perhaps the biblical author wished to deny the connection to the older Banu-Yamina group, and therefore he went out of his way to ensure that Benjamin, of all the eponymous tribal ancestors, was the one born in the land of Canaan.

### Conclusion

This last issue aside—and I do not mean to minimize its significance—the origins of core Israel are to be found among the Shasu or desert-fringe seminomads of the

<sup>51.</sup> Though see also the list in Gen 35:23-26, which implies that Benjamin was born in Paddan-Aram. In addition, note that Judg 20 may retain some vague memory of a time when Benjamin was not part of Israel.



Imagination (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 199-207, 314-15. For his relationship to the two US presidents, see the sources cited by Goldman, God's Sacred Tongue, 315 n. 24.

<sup>47.</sup> For Abraham Malamat, notwithstanding all the other Mari-Israel interconnections he posited, there is "no connection between the two entities beyond the similarity of name" (Malamat, Mari and the Early Israelite Experience, Schweich Lectures 1984 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 35); while for Daniel Fleming there is an ultimate connection between the two groups (Fleming, "Genesis in History and Tradition: The Syrian Background of Israel's Ancestors, Reprise," in The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan R. Millard [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 193-232, esp. pp. 219-20).

<sup>48.</sup> See Michael Astour, "Benê-Iamina et Jéricho," Semitica 9 (1959): 5-20; and the summary statement by Jack M. Sasson, Hebrew Origins: Historiography, History, Faith of Ancient Israel, Chuen King Lecture Series 4 (Hong Kong: Chung Chi College, 2002), 53.

<sup>49.</sup> See, e.g., Michael Astour, The Rabbeans: A Tribal Society on the Euphrates from Yahdun-Lim to Julius Caesar, Syro-Mesopotamian Studies 2/I (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1978).

<sup>50.</sup> For more general interconnections between Mari and the Bible, see the survey by Malamat, Mari and the Early Israelite Experience; and the programmatic essays by Jean-Marie Durand, "Réalités amorrites et traditions bibliques," RA 92 (1998): 3-39; and Jack M. Sasson, "About 'Mari and the Bible,'" RA 92 (1998): 97-123.

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Southland.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, other elements joined up with the core group in order to form historical Israel (Dan, Asher, etc.), but the essential component of Israel, the one that created the ethos and the fabric of the national entity, were former denizens of the desert-fringe who abandoned their former (semi)nomadic ways to settle in the land of Canaan.<sup>53</sup> Anthropologists know well the process of sedentarization, and we should imagine that process during the twelfth century BCE when a group called Israel came to settle in the relatively open spaces of highland central Canaan.<sup>54</sup>

Gary A. Rendsburg, "Israelite Origins," in Richard E. Averbeck and K. Lawson Younger, eds., "An Excellent Fortress for His Armies, A Refuge for the People": Egyptological, Archaeological, and Biblical Studies in Honor of James K. Hoffmeier (University Park, Penn.: Eisenbrauns / Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), pp. 327-339.

<sup>52.</sup> For a similar conclusion, see Shmuel Aḥituv, "The Origins of Ancient Israel—The Documentary Evidence," in *The Origin of Early Israel—Current Debate: Biblical, Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Shmuel Aḥituv and Eliezer Oren, Beer-Sheva 12 (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1998), 135–40.

<sup>53.</sup> For details about Dan and Asher in particular, see Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Early History of Israel," in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday*, ed. Gordon D. Young, Mark W. Chavalas, and Richard E. Averbeck (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1997), 433–53, esp. pp. 447–50. The (semi)nomadic background might explain echoes of bedouin culture present in the Bible, even at a distance of three thousand years, as postulated by Clinton Bailey, "How Desert Culture Helps Us Understand the Bible," *BRev* 7.4 (1991): 14–21, 38. See also Bailey, *Bedouin Culture in the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>54.</sup> On sedentarization, see Levy and Hull, "Migrations, Ethnogenesis, and Settlement Dynamics."