

The Early History of Israel

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In an article such as this, the topic of “The Early History of Israel” cannot be treated with all the necessary detail. Instead, this article represents an outline, incorporating ideas previously published by others and myself. It is, in short, a synthesis. Michael Astour has distinguished himself as a historian of the ancient Near East throughout his illustrious career. Researchers in the field have learned much from his many and varied studies. And although my own expertise is in language and literature, I offer this foray into history as a tribute to our honoree, with sincere wishes that he may enjoy many more years of good life and productive scholarship.

Anyone who approaches the early history of Israel must do so with all due caution. There are, of course, no Israelite records contemporary with the events and processes to be discussed herein. Instead, the historian must approach the topic with the realization that the main document, the Torah, (a) was composed at a later time, and (b) did not have as its main goal the presentation of history in the modern sense of the word. In my estimation, the date of this composition is the tenth century B.C.E., that is, the period of David and Solomon,¹ and the main goal was a combination of elements,

¹ Rendsburg (1986) 107-20, and Rendsburg (1996). These two works deal with Genesis only. There is less evidence in the remaining books of the Torah that points to a tenth-century B.C.E. composition, but still an occasional datum in Exodus through Deuteronomy confirms this view. See, for example, the reference to Agag in Num 24: 7,

including aesthetic literature, history text, theological treatise, and political propaganda.²

But the presence of additional factors in biblical narrative does not necessitate rejecting the historical evidence contained therein altogether. All it means is that the historian must be cautious in his or her evaluation of the material. The Old English poem *Beowulf* works well as an analogy. It is based on historical events that can be dated to the sixth century C.E., the poem itself was written in the eighth century C.E., and the earliest manuscript (in fact the only ancient manuscript) dates to the late tenth or early eleventh century C.E.³ My colleague Robert Farrell has written as follows:

Beowulf is a work of heroic history, i.e. a poem in which facts and chronology are subservient to the poet's interest in heroic deeds and their value in representing the ethics of an heroic civilization. A poet writing in this mode does not disregard absolute historical fact, history, that is, as we know it. He rather sees it as less important than other considerations... . His account will sometimes mesh reasonably well with history, as in the episode of Hygelac's raid on the Frisian shore. But more often, his work will be a freely-woven structure in which the characters and actions of the past will be part of an ethically satisfying narrative.⁴

The same words could apply to the Torah. The narrative is based on historical facts known to the author, but the author is more interested in presenting an "ethically satisfying narrative," which in the case of biblical narrative is one based on the theological thread that runs throughout (along with the other elements noted above). So while the author "does not disregard absolute historical fact, history, that is," these facts take a back seat to the main thrust of the story, the demonstration of Yahweh's role in that history. Furthermore, as with *Beowulf*, the composition of the Torah is to

and the law of the king in Deut 17: 14-17, which can only be a reaction to the excesses of Solomon. For the linguistic evidence on the date of the Torah, see Rendsburg (1980).

² See Rendsburg (1996).

³ For details, see Jack (1994) 1-12.

⁴ Farrell (1970-73) 229.

be dated to several centuries after the events themselves, and our earliest manuscripts come from a still later epoch.⁵

In short, the Torah and books such as Joshua and Judges cannot be taken at face value for the recovery of ancient Israelite history. But at the same time, especially when a variety of sources from the ancient Near East confirms elements of the biblical narrative, we are absolutely justified in using the Bible as a source for recovering the early history of Israel.

A good example of where the Torah cannot be taken at face value is the basic structure of the nation of Israel. Nations simply do not descend from the offspring of one man.⁶ Instead, as with most nations, Israel was comprised of peoples of diverse origins. We are able to identify some of these origins (on which see further below), though no doubt others are beyond our present ability to isolate. But one point seems clear: the people that gave Israel its ultimate identity must have been a group that wandered the desert regions south (and east) of the arable land of Canaan.

An assemblage of evidence supports this conclusion. First, the Bible states very plainly that the people of Israel entered the land from the outside, specifically from the desert. In fact, the desert ideal remained a part of Israel throughout its history.⁷ Furthermore, various peoples associated with the desert fringe in some biblical texts (Kaleb, Qenaz, Yerahme'el, etc.) appear in other biblical texts to be part and parcel of the tribes of Israel, in particular, the dominant southern tribe of Judah.⁸

⁵ Of course, in the case of the Torah, the distance from date of composition to earliest manuscripts, viz. the Dead Sea Scrolls, is considerably greater than the distance between composition of *Beowulf* and the earliest manuscript. But this is a factor of preservation. The discovery of the seventh-century B.C.E. Ketef Hinnom silver amulets containing the priestly benediction (Davies [1991] 72-73), though not verbatim what appears in Num 6: 24-26, is a tiny step towards the recovery of earlier Torah texts.

⁶ See Sarna (1966) 196.

⁷ Though he has a different opinion on the matter, a good survey may be found in Talmon (1966), reprinted in Talmon (1993) 216-54.

⁸ For discussion, see de Vaux (1978) 534-37.

Second, the national god of Israel, Yahweh, is a deity associated in a variety of biblical texts with the desert region: Seir, Edom, Sinai, Paran, Teman (Deut 33: 2, Judg 5: 4-5, Hab 3: 3, Ps 68: 8, etc.).

Third, Egyptian topographical lists from Soleb and 'Amarah (both in Nubia), dated to the New Kingdom period, refer to *t3 š3sw ya-h-wa* "the land of the Shasu of Yahweh," in conjunction with other Shasu locales, among them *t3 š3sw sa- 'r-ir* "Shasu of the land of Se'ir."⁹ However one is to explain Yahweh here, for it appears to be a place name in the Soleb and 'Amarah lists, the collocation of Yahweh and Seir in these lists conforms well with the biblical evidence associating the deity with Seir, Edom, etc.¹⁰ Furthermore, as we shall see below during our discussion of P. Anastasi VI, there is additional reason to associate the Israelites, or at least the desert people portion thereof, with the Shasu, the general Egyptian term for the nomads and semi-nomads of the desert.

Fourth, notwithstanding some difficult experiences with desert people such as Amaleq (Exod 17: 8-15, Deut 25: 17-19) and even Midian on occasion (e.g., Num 25: 16-18), generally the Israelites enjoyed close ties with desert folks such as Midian (Exod 2: 16-22, 18: 1-12, Num 10: 29-32), the Qenites (Judg 1: 16, 5: 24, 1 Sam 15: 6), and the Rekhabites (2 Kgs 10: 15-16, Jer 35, 1 Chr 2: 55).

Fifth, the excavations at Timna, in the southern Negev (30 kilometers north of Eilat), revealed a cultic center with features reminiscent of Israelite religious practices as described in the Bible. Most important are (a) the evidence of a tent sanctuary, akin to the biblical *mishkan*, or Tabernacle (described in Exodus 25-31, 35-40); and (b) the presence of a copper snake

⁹ For the primary data, see Givon (1971) 26-28, 74-77. I must respectfully disagree with Astour (1979), who argued that these toponyms are to be located in Syria, not in the desert regions south of Canaan. See the comments in Redford (1992) 272 n 67. I will cite Redford (1992) often in the notes below, for it is an excellent treatment incorporating a wealth of information. However, it must be used cautiously due to the bias that the author brings to the biblical material; see Rendsburg (1995). My transcription of the Egyptian syllabic orthography is based on the catalogue of signs in Hoch (1994) 505-12.

¹⁰ See Herrmann (1967).

mounted on a standard, so close to the description in Num 21: 4-9 that it may be considered a virtual depiction thereof.¹¹

Sixth, Herodotus (3: 8) describes the Arabs of his day as practicing a blood covenant ritual in which blood from the thumbs of the participants was smeared on the holy stones which stood before them. While not agreeing in every detail, this calls to mind the covenant ceremony conducted by Moses in Exod 24: 1-8 in which both twelve stone pillars and blood play a prominent role.¹²

The picture which emerges from these diverse points is that a significant portion of the nation of Israel that later would emerge in the land of Canaan had desert origins. These desert people, "semi-nomads" is the best term for them, wandered the desert fringe with their flocks of sheep and goats, engaged in some seasonal agriculture, and at times settled in the arable regions of the land of Canaan. This pattern can be seen still today among the Bedouin, and it is reflected in the Bible for certain non-Israelites. Note, for example, how the Qenites are associated with the desert in 1 Sam 15: 6, but how individual families from this group settle in the sown in Judg 1: 16, 4: 11.

At some point in time, semi-nomadic Israelites¹³ arrived in Egypt. The story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 focuses on the individual family members and thus is an example of "heroic history," but the overall picture is confirmed by Egyptian records. In the New Kingdom in particular, peoples from Asia arrived in the Delta in unprecedented numbers. Some came as captives, the prize of Egyptian military success in Western Asia under the

¹¹ See Rothenberg (1993) 1483.

¹² On this specific parallel and on the picture in general, see Weinfeld (1987) 483-86. For the mention of a blood ritual among Semites dwelling in Egypt, see Černý (1955).

¹³ An objection might be raised that "Israel" is specifically a name reserved for the nation after it emerged as a national entity in the land of Canaan, and that these semi-nomads of the desert should be called something else, such as "proto-Israelites." But I prefer to eschew such terms and to keep matters simple by using the term "Israel-(ites)" to refer to the semi-nomads as well. Moreover, the name "Israel" is attested already in the Merneptah Stele, on which see further below, so that the entity already existed in the late thirteenth century B.C.E.

conquering Pharaohs of the 18th and 19th Dynasties; some were sent to Egypt as slaves, either by Canaanite city-state kings loyal to the Pharaoh or even by their own kinfolk (as with Joseph!); while still others came freely, either as merchants seeking to ply their trade or as Bedouin seeking grazing land for their animals.¹⁴ It is this last group of individuals that interests us most, for the biblical account emphasizes the animal husbandry of the newly-arrived Israelites in Egypt (Gen 46: 31-47: 6).

There is, moreover, a striking parallel to the arrival of the Israelites in Egypt in an Egyptian document from the reign of Merneptah (1214–1205). The text, alluded to above, P. Anastasi VI 4: 11-5: 5, reads as follows:¹⁵

The scribe Enana greets his master, the treasury scribe Qa-ga[b] ... Life, prosperity, health! This is a dispatch of information for my master, to wit: I have carried out every commission placed upon me, in good shape and strong as metal. I have not been lax. Another communication to my master, to wit: We have finished admitting the Shasu tribes of Edom at the fortress of Merneptah Hotepirmaat, life, prosperity, health, which is in Tjeku, to the pools of Per-Atum of Merneptah Hotepirmaat, which are in Tjeku, to keep them alive and to keep their flocks alive, by the great Ka of Pharaoh, life, prosperity, health, the good sun of every land, in the year 8, day 5, of [the birth of] Seth. I have had sent a report to my master, with the other days specified when the fortress of Merneptah Hotepirmaat, life, prosperity, health, which is in Tjeku, may be passed.

The parallel between this text and the general picture portrayed in the Bible is obvious.¹⁶ In the former, a group of Shasu from Edom are allowed to pass the fortress that marked the Egyptian border with the Sinai desert and settle (at least temporarily), along with their flocks, in Per-Atum. In the biblical account, we read that the Israelites are given the same permission and that eventually they are resident in the city of Pithom (Exod 1: 11), no doubt

¹⁴ See Redford (1992) 214-29 for an overview.

¹⁵ For the text, see Gardiner (1937) 76-77. For translations and comments, see Caminos (1954) 293-96, Redford (1992) 228, and *ANET* 259.

¹⁶ The recent attempt by Goedicke (1987) to deny the similarity, to place these "Edomites" near Suez, and to assume that they were allowed to enter Egypt for only one day, is quite unsatisfactory.

the Hebrew equivalent of Per-Atum.¹⁷ When one keeps in mind that the aforementioned Egyptian topographical lists refer to Shasu of Yahweh and Shasu of Seir, and that Seir equals Edom in the Bible (Gen 32: 4, 36: 8-9, etc.), and that Yahweh is portrayed as shining or marching forth from both Seir and Edom (Deut 33: 2, Judg 5: 4), the parallel is even more striking (though one should resist the temptation to invoke the law of transitivity and to associate the Shasu of this frontier official's report with the Israelites of the Bible). Clearly, the two references, the one about the Edomites in P. Anastasi VI and the one about the Israelites in the Torah, are part of the same general movement of Shasu arriving in the eastern Delta to sustain both themselves and their animals. Here it is important to keep in mind the strong biblical tradition that Israel and Edom were closely related kindred nations, descended from twin brothers according to the epic tradition (Gen 25: 23-24, Num 20: 14). The Torah naturally focuses on Israel's experiences, but Edom's must have been very similar, as we learn from P. Anastasi VI.

Accordingly, we conclude that a group of Israelites, whom the Egyptians would have classified as Shasu along with other semi-nomads settled in Egypt sometime in the New Kingdom period. Exactly when in the New Kingdom period cannot be determined with certainty, but a suggestion can be made here. The Israelites must have arrived in Egypt sometime earlier than the reign of Rameses II, for this king is the leading candidate for the Pharaoh represented in Exodus 1 as the Pharaoh of the slavery (see next paragraph). If the statement in Exod 1: 8 is interpreted to mean immediate succession, then the Pharaoh during whose reign the Israelites arrived in Egypt must have been Seti I (1291–1279), father and immediate predecessor of Rameses II. The book of Genesis suggests this in several ways. First, the text implies that the Israelites' settlement in Goshen, that is, the eastern Delta in general or the Wadi Tumilat in particular, was near the pharaoh's residence (see Genesis 45 especially); and the 19th Dynasty monarchs ruled from this region.¹⁸ Second, the expression "land of Rameses" occurs in Gen

¹⁷ In Late Egyptian, final *r* was weakened, as reflected in the Hebrew *pîôm*. For the phonological process, see Loprieno (1995) 38.

¹⁸ The preceding 18th Dynasty monarchs ruled from Thebes in Upper Egypt. The

47: 11, and while this term could be an anachronism, it may be noted that the name Rameses already was in use by the founder of the 19th Dynasty, Rameses I (1292–1291), father of Seti I.

Within a relatively short period, the Israelites who had settled in the Delta, became slaves to the Egyptians.¹⁹ The Torah, of course, ascribes this change in status to a change in royal administration in Egypt (Exod 1: 8–11). We cannot place this next stage of Israelite history within known Egyptian history, but again we are able to cite Egyptian texts that corroborate the general picture. Exod 1: 11 informs us that the Israelites were put to work building the store cities of Pithom and Rameses. Based on the latter name, I (along with many other scholars) assume that the Pharaoh of Egypt at this time was Rameses II (1279–1214), the great builder whose major achievement in the Delta region was the construction of the city Per-Rameses.²⁰ From this king's reign comes a text, P. Leiden 348, a collection of letters (probably model letters) discussing building activities. Recto 6: 6 reads as follows: "Issue grain to the men of the army and to the 'Apiru who are drawing stone(?) for the great pylon of the [house?] of Rameses."²¹ Much has been written about a possible connection between the term "Apiru" in Egyptian texts (equals "Ḫabiru" in cuneiform texts) and the term "Hebrew" of the Bible. Simply stated: there are too many hurdles (philological, ethnic-social, and historical) to equate the two.²² Yet in an

earlier Hyksos also ruled from the eastern Delta, and thus many scholars consider this period as the most likely one for the Israelite arrival in Egypt (especially if there is any historicity to the figure of Joseph, a Semite elevated to high station in the Egyptian royal administration). But the Hyksos period is far too early for the origins of Israel, especially as it would place the Patriarchs (again, assuming any historicity for them) even earlier. Everything points to the Late Bronze Age, not the Middle Bronze Age, for the era of the Patriarchs (literary parallels from Ugarit, socio-legal parallels from Nuzi, etc.); see Gordon (1954).

¹⁹ I do not treat here the exact nature of that enslavement. Most likely it was a *corvée* system.

²⁰ See Bietak (1984).

²¹ See Wilson (1933) 276, and Greenberg (1955) 56. For the original text, see Leemans (1843) Plate 148.

²² See the summary discussion in Greenberg (1955) 91–96.

example such as the Egyptian text before us, with the specific reference to ‘Apiru building the city of (Per-)Rameses, I am inclined to see a more direct correlation in this instance. Also of interest is the fact that the biblical account utilizes the term “Hebrew” at times (Exod 1: 15, 16, 19; 2: 11, 13; 5: 3), though of course this is not unique to this narrative.²³

A second Egyptian text which is germane here is the Merneptah Stele. This victory stele of Merneptah is concerned mainly with his defeat of Libya to the west. But at the end of the inscription comes a short passage boasting of Merneptah’s victories over peoples in Canaan. The names of all of the defeated peoples in this portion of the text are accompanied by the determinative indicating “foreign land” (thus for large entities such as Hatti and Canaan, and for smaller entities such as Ashqelon, Gezer, and Yano‘am). The exception, as is well known, is Israel, which is determined by a group of signs indicating “people.” This peculiarity demonstrates that at the time of the inscription Israel was a people without a land.

Most scholars conclude that this refers to Israel during the wandering period, that is, after the Exodus from Egypt. But as I have argued elsewhere,²⁴ an alternative approach is possible. I prefer to interpret the mention of Israel in the Merneptah Stele as a reference to the slavery.²⁵ It is important to note that the “people” determinative following the phonetic writing of Israel includes the “woman” determinative. This unique usage points to the fact that the Israelites are not just another people defeated in battle (at the Reed Sea or in the desert, as most scholars would suggest), but are a people in the true sense of the word, that is, with women (and children), though without a land. While this would be true of Israel even during the wandering, that is, with women (and children) accompanying the men, other considerations, mostly chronological ones to be treated below, argue

²³ The term “Hebrew” is typical in contexts between Israelites and non-Israelites in the biblical corpus.

²⁴ Rendsburg (1992) especially 517-18.

²⁵ This interpretation was offered by some scholars already in the years immediately following W. M. F. Petrie’s discovery of the stele. For discussion, see Engel (1979) 396-97.

in favor of the Merneptah Stele as a reference to Israel enslaved in Egypt. The scribe of this inscription knew that the Israelites had associations with Canaan, and thus he mentioned them in the course of describing Merneptah's victories in Canaan. But he was careful to distinguish Israel as an enslaved people in Egypt from the locales mentioned in the rest of the passage.

Another piece of Egyptian evidence is relevant here. I refer to the battle scenes on the outer western wall of the Cour de la Cachette at Karnak depicting Merneptah's military victories. There is a debate between Frank Yurco and Anson Rainey as to which individual scene or scenes depicts the Israelites. Yurco argued that the fourth scene portrays Israelites, in which case they are an urban people, not distinguishable from other Canaanites.²⁶ Rainey, on the other hand, argued that the Israelites are to be found in the fifth through eighth scenes, which portray Shasu folk.²⁷ From what I have written above, it is clear that I agree with Rainey on this point. But even if Yurco's position is accepted, there is no major problem, because, as intimated above and as we shall discuss below in greater detail, Israel was of diverse origins and there is evidence that a portion thereof was settled in Canaan and never participated in Shasu culture or, as the Torah story tells it, in the sojourn in and exodus from Egypt.

After several generations as slaves in Egypt, the Israelites left Egypt upon gaining their freedom. The Torah describes these events as "heroic history" in the extreme, with Moses as Yahweh's prophet before Pharaoh. What actually occurred we cannot say with any certainty. But chronology is helpful in allowing us to speculate.²⁸ Recent archaeological work in Israel demonstrates clearly that the emergence of Israel in the land of Canaan occurred only in the mid-twelfth century B.C.E.,²⁹ and this would suggest that the Israelites did not leave Egypt until early in the twelfth century.

²⁶ Yurco (1990), and Stager (1985).

²⁷ Rainey (1991).

²⁸ For much of what follows in greater detail, see Rendsburg (1992).

²⁹ See most importantly Finkelstein (1988).

Genealogical material in the Bible supports that date. The lineage of David (Ruth 4: 18-22, 1 Chr 2: 5-15) informs us that he had a great-great-great-grandfather named Nahshon, and this individual in turn is mentioned in the Torah in two contexts: as the brother-in-law of Aaron (Exod 6: 23) and as the prince of Judah during the wandering period (Num 1: 7). Using 30 years as the average generation,³⁰ and dating David to c. 1000 B.C.E., we arrive at a date of c. 1150 B.C.E. for Nahshon.

A crucial passage in this discussion is Exod 13: 17: "God did not lead them the way of the land of the Philistines though it was near, for God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see the fighting and then return to Egypt'." The mention of the Philistines here is often thought to be an anachronism, but such need not be the case. Rather, the reference to Philistines, war, and the coastal route suggests that the Israelites left Egypt when the Philistines were attacking the Egyptians along the coast as part of the major Sea Peoples assault during the reign of Rameses III (1182–1250), specifically c. 1175 B.C.E. The records of this Pharaoh, both textual and pictorial, demonstrate clearly to what extent Egypt was involved in defending itself against this invasion.³¹ This would have been a propitious time for the Israelites to leave Egypt.

Another biblical passage that supports this reconstruction of history is Josh 13: 2, where the districts of the Philistines are reckoned among "the great amount of land remaining to be taken" (v. 1). This passage too is often seen as anachronistic, but I prefer to take the evidence at face value. The Philistines and their Sea Peoples allies were repelled by the Egyptians and made their way to the coast of Canaan c. 1175 B.C.E. Thus they were settled there before the Israelites arrived in the land, which, again based on the archaeological work, points to a time several decades or perhaps a half-century later.

The evidence thus points to an Israelite exodus from Egypt during the reign of Rameses III. It is this chronological argument that suggests the

³⁰ For this figure, see Rendsburg (1992) 522-24. On the reliability of the biblical genealogies, see Rendsburg (1990a).

³¹ See Edgerton and Wilson (1936) 35-58.

above interpretation of the Merneptah Stele: during the reign of Merneptah the Israelites were still slaves in Egypt.

Of some interest is another Egyptian document, P. Anastasi V 19: 2-20: 6 from the reign of Seti II (1205–1200). This text includes the report of another frontier official, also stationed at Tjeku. After the typical formalities at the beginning of the letter, we read as follows: ³²

Another matter, to wit: I was sent forth from the broad halls of the palace, life, prosperity, health, in the 3rd month of the 3rd season, day 9, at evening time, following after two slaves. Now when I reached the wall of Tjeku on the 3rd month of the 3rd season, day 10, they told me that to the south they were saying that they [i.e. the slaves] had passed by on the 3rd month of the 3rd season, day 10. When I reached the fortress, they told me that the scout (?) had come from the desert stating that they had passed the walled place north of Migdol of Seti Merneptah, life, prosperity, health, beloved like Seth. When my letter reaches you, write to me about all that has happened to them. Who found their tracks? Which watch found their tracks? What people are after them? Write to me about all that has happened to them and how many people you sent out after them.

Once more there are parallels between an Egyptian document and the biblical account. Regardless of the manner in which the Torah presents Israel's history, it is noteworthy that the account includes an Egyptian force sent to pursue escaped slaves (Exod 14: 5-9). The above document informs us that this was perfectly natural, in fact, when even only two slaves escaped. Moreover, the route of the two escaped slaves is significant. The two sites mentioned are Tjeku and Migdol. Though some scholars are still skeptical, there is no objection to equating Tjeku with biblical Sukkot,³³ the very site mentioned as the Israelites' point of departure (Exod 12: 37; 13: 20). Migdol, meanwhile, is also mentioned in the biblical account (Exod 14: 2). One gains the impression that the Israelites were utilizing a route well traveled by escaping slaves, a type of "underground railway."³⁴

³² For the text, see Gardiner (1937) 66-67. For translations and comments, see Caminos (1954) 254-58, and *ANET* 259.

³³ See Redford (1992) 203 for the equation.

³⁴ I owe this point to Manuel Gold of the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York City.

About the trek through the desert we can say little. The Torah remains our sole source for this period of Israel's history. But the general picture is reliable. The Israelites wander from place to place with their flocks, they engage in some seasonal agriculture, they have dealings with other peoples of the desert or desert fringe, they construct a portable tent shrine typical of desert folk, they eat manna (a substance still utilized by the Bedouin today), and so on. Eventually, this group of semi-nomads reaches the sown, first the less arable land east of the Jordan River, and then eventually the more arable land west of the Jordan. The biblical account, found mainly in the Book of Joshua, describes the emergence of Israel in Canaan as a military conquest. Archaeological work belies this view, however, and instead points to a different approach, what scholars call the peaceful settlement or peaceful infiltration model.³⁵ According to this view, as the archaeological surveys in Israel have shown, most of the central hill country which the Israelites occupied was open terrain, very sparsely settled before the arrival of the Israelites. The Israelites simply moved in from the desert and established themselves in the region. Again, as remarked earlier, this is a pattern known throughout history, even in the recent past, as Bedouin groups exchange their nomadic ways for a sedentary life-style (never, however, losing sight of their Bedouin origins, as is the case with many Bedouin groups in regions such as the Galilee today).

The earliest settlements in the central hill country were elliptical sites reminiscent of the Bedouin desert encampments. The Israelites shifted from tents to stone walls, but the "city planning" was the same, an outer circle of dwellings with a large open area inside for the protection of the flocks at nighttime. Only with the passage of time did Israel shift from these elliptical sites to more urban-type settlements, as the process of acculturation to a sedentary lifestyle took hold.

At the same time, however, it must be admitted that the conquest tradition in the Bible is a very strong one. It is hard to imagine that Israel did not have to fight at all upon its arrival in Canaan. Though the terrain was

³⁵ See Finkelstein (1988).

sparsely populated, we can assume that on occasion the Israelites needed to obtain territory by military conquest. Moreover, the lack of archaeological evidence to substantiate the biblical record is not a hindrance to accepting the basic outline preserved in the Bible. Comparative analysis reveals that in other instances well-documented historical conquests also cannot be substantiated by archaeological fieldwork.³⁶

Given the two methods of achieving territorial advantage, peaceful settlement and military conquest, it is only natural that Israelite authors would choose the latter to glorify in their poetic and prose compositions. This will explain why the national epic preserved in the Bible emphasizes the military approach, even if these battles represent less than the whole truth about the emergence of Israel in Canaan.³⁷

To return to the chronological discussion: it is noteworthy that never does the Bible refer to an encounter between the Israelites and the Egyptians in the land of Canaan. Egypt had ruled Canaan, with garrisons stationed there, for most of the 18th and 19th Dynasties. Had Israel arrived in Canaan at anytime prior to 1200 B.C.E., it is difficult to imagine that they would not have encountered the Egyptian military. The Bible's silence in this regard bolsters the view expressed above that the Israelites left Egypt under the reign of Rameses III, that is, during the 20th Dynasty, and arrived in Canaan c. 1150 B.C.E., after the glory years of the Egyptian Empire.³⁸ Again, there is reference to the presence of Philistines already, and this would assume a twelfth-century setting.

Actually, the Bible may refer to Egypt in Canaan, but in a most interesting and subtle way. Three biblical passages (Exod 23: 28, Deut 7: 20, Josh 24: 12) refer quite enigmatically to God's having sent forth the *šir'āh* "hornet" before the Israelites to drive out the population of Canaan. John Garstang was the first to suggest that *šir'āh* is a reference to Egypt,³⁹ and this

³⁶ See most importantly Isserlin (1983).

³⁷ Compare the American epic treatment of "How the West was won," even if, in some cases, open territory was peacefully settled.

³⁸ On the Egyptian rule over Canaan, see Weinstein (1981).

³⁹ Garstang (1931) 258-60.

interpretation has been revived by more recent scholars.⁴⁰ This view is based on the fact that the hieroglyph for the king of Lower Egypt was either a bee or a hornet (depending on one's view of the depicted insect), which the biblical authors then utilized as a symbol for the Pharaoh and for Egypt. The aforementioned presence of Egyptian troops in Canaan, with some mighty military campaigns during the New Kingdom period, would have weakened both the moral resolve and the fighting capabilities of the Canaanites. Under such circumstances, the entrance of the Israelites into Canaan was accomplished with greater ease.

An additional item of interest in this regard is the toponym *ma'yan mê neptôah*, literally "the spring of the waters of Nephtoah," but more accurately "the spring of Merneptah," mentioned in Josh 15: 9, 18: 15, as marking the border between Benjamin and Judah (modern-day Lifta, three miles west of Jerusalem).⁴¹ Here we have sure evidence that Merneptah campaigned not only in Canaan in general, but in the very area settled by the Israelites at an early stage.

The picture presented to this point represents only a part of the whole. We have followed the main biblical tradition and have commented on its various components with collateral evidence from Egyptian documents and archaeological fieldwork. But the picture is much more complicated. At the outset, I stated that Israel was comprised of peoples of diverse origins, though until now the nation has been treated as rather homogeneous. The evidence for diversity comes from different sources.

At the very time when we assume that the Israelites, that is, the desert or Shasu component thereof, were in Egypt, enslaved under Rameses II, there is evidence that the tribe of Asher was resident in Canaan. P. Anastasi I, dated by most authorities to the reign of Rameses II, is a satirical letter written by the master scribe Hori addressed to a second scribe named Amenemopet, in which the former chastises the latter for his ignorance regarding the topography of Canaan. In the course of his "tour" of the land,

⁴⁰ Yadin (1979) 67-68, and Borowski (1983).

⁴¹ See Rendsburg (1981).

Hori mentions Rehob and Megiddo and soon thereafter states: “Your name becomes like Qadjardy chief of Asher, when the hyena(?) found him in the *baka-tree*” (lines 23: 6-7).⁴² Not everyone agrees that the Egyptian writing *a₂-sa-ru₂* refers to Asher, but this is by far the most probable interpretation. First, the tribal allotment of Asher,⁴³ as described in Josh 19: 24-31 is in this very area and includes (apparently) two cities named Rehob (vv. 28, 30). Second, the tree written as *bi-ka-’i* recalls the biblical phrase in Ps 84: 7 *‘emeq habbākā* “valley of the *baka-tree*” (thus the traditional interpretation), a northern locale, perhaps to be associated with the city of Baka, located in the Galilee, mentioned by Josephus (*Jewish Wars* 3: 39).⁴⁴

Accordingly, if Asher was resident in northern Canaan during the time of Rameses II, it could not have participated in the events experienced by the desert component of the nation that would emerge as Israel. This is a crucial piece of information for us, and allows us to presume that other elements of the people of Israel were similarly resident in Canaan throughout this period. We can only speculate what must have transpired. The desert folk entered the land of Canaan, and in time elements within Canaan itself came to align themselves with the newly arrived people. What factors would have led to such an alignment we cannot determine. Most likely they were socio-economic, but one cannot rule out the religious factor. Possibly Israel’s unique worship of a single god who manifests himself in human history and who protects the underprivileged rung a resonant chord with others in the area.

At a later time we see the same process more clearly. The best example is Jerusalem, which was incorporated into Israel by King David c. 1000 B.C.E. The city was not destroyed, the population was not killed; rather, the residents simply became part of the nation of Israel. This fact would be remembered centuries later when the prophet Ezekiel would address the city with

⁴² For translation and original text, see Gardiner (1911) 25*, 70.

⁴³ For a survey of opinions, see Fischer-Elfert (1986) 199-200.

⁴⁴ On the Egyptian word, see Hoch (1994) 112-13. On Ps 84: 7 and the Josephus passage, see Goulder (1982) 40 and Rendsburg (1990b) 52-53.

the words, “Your origin and your birthplace is from the land of the Canaanites, your father was an Amorite and your mother was a Hittite” (Ezek 16: 3).

A second tribe of Israel whose origins can be traced is Dan. Here we return to the Sea Peoples invasion of Egypt. Among the allies of the Philistines who attacked Egypt during the reign of Rameses III was a group called the Danuna. Most scholars agree that this group is to be equated with the people known as Danaoi in Greek, Adanawana in Luwian, and *dnnyim* in Phoenician (the latter two from the Karatepe bilingual inscription). As noted above, when the Sea Peoples were repulsed by the Egyptians, they were forced to find a new home on the coast of Canaan. Thus, the Philistines settled on the southern coast, and the Egyptian tale of Wenamon (c. 1100 B.C.E.) informs us that the Tjekker (another member of the coalition) settled in Dor. The experience of the Danuna must have been similar, and there is good reason to identify them with the tribe of Dan known from the Bible.⁴⁵

Several lines of evidence converge to argue in favor of this position. First, the original territory ascribed to Dan in Josh 19: 40-46 is on the coast, adjacent to Philistine territory. Second, Judg 5: 17 “and Dan, why do you dwell in ships” connects the tribe to a maritime life. Third, the greatest of Danite heroes, Samson, has intimate relations with the Philistines (Judges 14-16). Fourth, Gen 49: 16 “Dan shall judge his people like one of the tribes of Israel” implies that until this point Dan is not a tribe of Israel and is in the process of joining the tribal league. Fifth, notwithstanding the allotment granted Dan in the Book of Joshua, Judg 18: 1 states that “the tribe of Dan was seeking for itself a land grant in which to dwell, because a land grant had not fallen to it until this day among the tribes of Israel.” Sixth, and finally, of all the tribes of Israel, Dan has the least developed genealogy. In fact, Gen 46: 23, Num 26: 42, and 1 Chr 7: 12 each record only one name (either Hushim or Shuham).

The conclusion to be drawn is that Dan originates with the Sea Peoples Danuna group that reached the land of Canaan by sea at approximately the same time (or slightly earlier [see the above discussion about the Philis-

⁴⁵ Suggested originally by Gordon (1963) 21, and developed by Yadin (1965).

tines]) that the main Israelite group reached Canaan by land. The experience of the Sea Peoples groups will be similar to some extent, but will be different once they settled on the Canaanite coast. For whereas the Philistines in time became the archenemy of the Israelites,⁴⁶ the Danites elected to join the Israelite coalition. Again, as with Asher above, we cannot determine for what reasons Dan chose this course. Though in this case it might have been the common enemy, the Philistines, that led Dan to join Israel. For while the Philistines and the Danuna may have been allies during the Sea Peoples attack against Egypt, such cordial relations may have ended once this common enterprise ceased.⁴⁷ From passages such as Gen 49: 16, Judg 18: 1, and the evidence of genealogies (or lack thereof), it would appear that Dan was the last of the tribes to join what eventually became the twelve tribes of Israel.

This ends the presentation of the evidence. If we had more information at our disposal, most likely we would be able to speak of the origins of still other Israelite tribes. But the picture that we have presented allows us to reconstruct the early history of Israel along the following lines. The main group of what would emerge as the nation of Israel was a desert group, classified by the Egyptians among the Shasu, who after experiences in the desert and a period of dwelling in Egypt itself, surrendered its desert life-style and settled in the relatively open central hill country of the land of Canaan. There they were joined by other groups to create the nation that the Bible portrays. Among these groups were some, like Asher, which always had lived in Canaan, and some, like Dan, which reached Canaan through other means (even by sea).

To unify these tribes of diverse origins, Israelite literati created a national epic that portrayed the entire nation as experiencing the same

⁴⁶ As long as the Philistines remained in the coastal plain and as long as the main body of Israelites dwelled in the hill country, the two groups could live without hostility. But when both groups began to expand and to contend over the foothills that separate the two concentrations, enmity was the result.

⁴⁷ How often this is true in the history of the modern Middle East! The most recent example: Jordan, one of the few Arab countries to side with Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, now allies itself with the United States and Israel.

history. The ancestry of all of Israel can be traced back to one man, Jacob/Israel. All of Israel was enslaved in Egypt. All of Israel experienced the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, the wandering through the desert, and the entrance into Canaan from the east. The exodus in particular became the great unifying event for these disparate groups, and Passover became the national holiday *par excellence*, the equivalent of American Thanksgiving (commemorating both a harvest and a new start) and Independence Day rolled into one. All Israelites, no matter of what origin, were to see themselves as having experienced these great events. As such, we can compare the Israelites and Passover with Americans and Thanksgiving. The American people was formed by an on-going series of migrations to this country,⁴⁸ yet the single migration central to the American epic tradition is the voyage of the Pilgrims in 1620. Accordingly, all Americans⁴⁹ celebrate Thanksgiving and reenact the first Thanksgiving as if their ancestors were on the Mayflower. Similarly, all Israelites were to celebrate Passover as if their ancestors exited Egypt.

I have not referred at all to the biblical tradition which places the homeland of the patriarchs to the far northeast, in Aram Naharaim, essentially modern-day northern Syria and southern Turkey, centered around the cities of Haran and Ur(fa). How this link is to be fit into our picture is beyond our treatment. Should we assume that other Israelite elements migrated to Canaan from Aram? Or that the desert group extended not only to the south and east of Canaan but also to the northeast, essentially following the line at which the Fertile Crescent adjoins the desert?⁵⁰ Can we thus explain the many typological parallels between Mari civilization and ancient Israel?⁵¹ Should we incorporate into this picture the fact that Yahweh is attested as a divine name among the Amorites of Syria in the Old

⁴⁸ This includes an element of native Americans as well, but since their history is unique and not related to the present context, I omit them from the discussion.

⁴⁹ I apologize for the slight exaggeration, but it remains true that Thanksgiving is the single most-widely celebrated holiday in the United States.

⁵⁰ See Astour (1979) for evidence of Shasu in Syria.

⁵¹ See Malamat (1989).

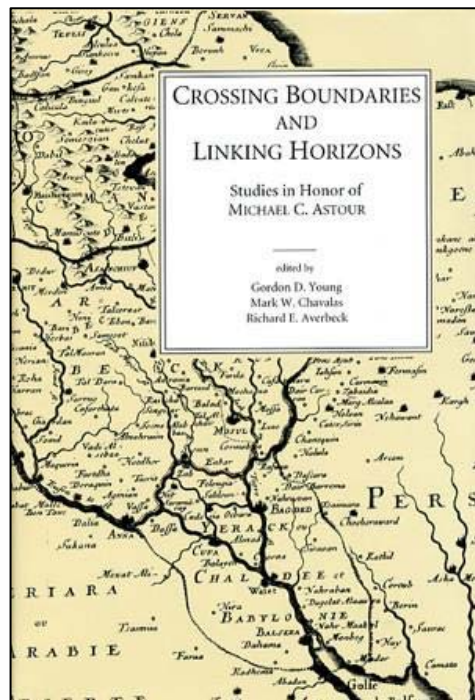
Babylonian period and at Hamath in the 1st millennium B.C.E.⁵² All of these are questions for another time.

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⁵² The former is widely discussed. On the latter see Dalley (1990).

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