

# Who Were the Israelites?

*"Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land which He swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as He had sworn to their fathers; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. . . ."*

Joshua 21: 43-44

## Neil Asher Silberman

The story of the Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land has long been an article of faith wherever the Bible is widely read and respected. For centuries familiar scenes of the Israelite tribes crossing the Jordan River and encircling the walls of Jericho with their blasting trumpets have been vividly described in fire-and-brimstone sermons and solemn hymns, and depicted in heroic paintings and other works of art. Yet a new generation of archaeologists working in Israel has come to challenge the scriptural account in a manner that might seem heretical to some. Their survey, excavation, and analysis of finds from hundreds of Early Iron Age settlements in the rugged hill country of the West Bank and Galilee have led them to conclude that the ancient Israelite confederacy did not arise in a divinely directed military conquest from the desert but through a remarkable socioeconomic change in the lives of a few thousand herders, farmers, and villagers in Canaan itself.

Today's archaeologists are certainly not the first to challenge the Book of Joshua—its historical reliability has been a matter of dispute for more than two centuries. At issue are the Book's first 12 chapters, which describe how,

after the death of Moses in the wilderness, Joshua, his chosen successor, led the Tribes of Israel across the Jordan River to conquer the powerful Canaanite cities of Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, Makedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, and Hazor in quick succession. By destroying these cities and exterminating or otherwise driving the pagan Canaanites from the land, the Israelite tribes fulfilled their God-given mission and each received a parcel of the conquered territory. These allotments became permanent territorial divisions in the later Israelite and Judean kingdoms, and the force of tradition is so strong that tribal names are still used for many administrative districts of modern Israel. Yet the precise identity of those conquering tribesmen—and the nature of their conquest—remains one of the most persistent riddles of biblical archaeology.

## MIRACLES AND METAPHORS

As far back as the eighteenth century, many European scholars, relying more on reason than reverence, began to question many of the miraculous details in the Exodus and Conquest narratives. Noting the implausibility of the sudden parting of a body of water as large as the Red Sea, the survival of

two million wandering Israelites in a scorching desert for 40 years subsisting on *mannna*, or the sudden stopping of the sun above the city of Gibeon so that the Israelites could complete their conquest in daylight, biblical scholars turned to naturalistic explanations. Unpredictable riptides, unusually nutritious tamarisk sap, and the gravitational effects of a passing comet were invoked to explain these biblical events. Even more important was the tendency to see the Israelite conquest as an instructive metaphor, phrased in the progressive vocabulary of the times. In 1829, the English historian H. H. Milman noted "the remarkable picture" that the story of the conquest of Canaan presented "of the gradual development of human society." With the arrival of the Israelites, Milman explained that "the Land of Milk and Honey began to yield its fruits to a simple, free, and pious race of husbandmen."

## INVADERS FROM THE DESERT

The nineteenth-century archaeological exploration of Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine moved the Israelite conquest from the realm of social metaphor to that of vivid historical fact. The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics provided substantiation for biblical ref-

ferences to the "store cities" of Pithom and Ramesses, where the Israelites reportedly labored in captivity. Even more telling was the discovery of the name "Israel" on a commemorative stele of the late thirteenth century B.C. On this monument, Pharaoh Merneptah boasted of his triumph over this hostile group. Ironically, the tools of prehistoric archaeology, used in Europe in the nineteenth century to attack the credibility of the Book of Genesis, were put to use in Palestine in the twentieth century to defend the Book of Joshua. Though no indisputable physical proof was ever found of the Israelites' exodus and wandering in the desert, European, American, and Israeli archaeological teams interpreted the thick destruction levels of charred beams, collapsed walls, and smashed pottery blanketing the Late Bronze Age levels at ancient Canaanite cities as evidence of concerted military attacks by the advancing Israelites. The discovery of poor squatters' hovels and silos built in the ruins of the once mighty Canaanite cities seemed additional proof of the triumph of primitive semi-nomads over the city folk. Earlier doubts about the historical reliability of the biblical narrative were therefore confidently brushed aside by scholars like William F. Albright of The Johns Hopkins University and Yigael Yadin of Hebrew University in Jerusalem who ascribed the violent destruction and subsequent occupation of the conquered Canaanite cities in the late thirteenth century B.C. to arriving Israelite warriors, perhaps even led by an historical figure named Joshua—just as the Bible said.

There were, however, differences between the archaeological evidence and details of the biblical story. At Jericho, for instance, repeated, intensive excavations uncovered no trace of a city wall or destruction level at the supposed date of the arrival of the Israelites. At Yarmuth, Arad, and Ai (cities all specifically mentioned as being conquered), surveys and excavations found no trace of thirteenth-century B.C. occupation. While supporters of the biblical narrative initially suggested that these inconsistencies were

minor, the discrepancies grew wider as the years went on. With the increasing precision of pottery dating, it became clear that the destruction of individual Canaanite cities occurred at various times over more than a century—far longer than even the longest concerted military campaign. Even more damaging was the realization that in many cases the ruined Canaanite cities lay desolate and abandoned for many decades before their occupation by new settlers. And in recognizing the relative slowness of the transition, a new theory of Israelite origins was born.

### PEACEFUL IMMIGRANTS

In the 1920s, two German scholars, Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth, suggested a radically different explanation for the Israelite "conquest." Relying on ancient Egyptian records rather than biblical tradition, they suggested that the Israelite settlement of Canaan was the result of gradual immigration, not a unified military campaign. In particular, they based their reconstruction on evidence from the fourteenth-century B.C. Tell el-Amarna Letters, a collection of diplomatic correspondence between an Egyptian pharaoh and various Canaanite princes. These cuneiform tablets, which were discovered by chance in Middle Egypt in 1887, were filled with vivid reports of the chaotic political situation in Late Bronze Age Canaan, and frequently mentioned the activities of a restive and rebellious group called *'apiru* on the frontiers of the settled land.

While Alt and Noth followed earlier scholars with their equation of *'apiru* with "Hebrews," they went much further in assessing the term's historical significance. On the evidence of the Amarna Letters, *'apiru*/Hebrews were already present in Canaan and hostile to the Canaanite rulers more than a century before the estimated date of the Israelite conquest. Alt and Noth theorized that the ancient Israelites, like the modern Bedouin settling down on the desert fringes of Palestine in the early twentieth century, must have been pastoral nomads who slowly filtered into

the settled land from the desert and, after a long period of uneasy coexistence with the population of Canaan, overran and destroyed the Canaanite city-states.

This "peaceful immigration" theory gained influential supporters, and for many years seemed the best explanation for the growing body of archaeological evidence. In the early 1950s, Israeli archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni believed that he found conclusive proof for the Alt-Noth theory in the Upper Galilee. There, he discovered a group of small, unfortified settlements in the traditional territory of the tribe of Naphtali that, he suggested, represented the arrival of an early wave of *'apiru* or "proto-Israelites." And after the 1967 war, throughout the West Bank—in the traditional tribal territories (and new Israeli administrative districts) of Manasseh, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Judah—the theory of peaceful immigration was seemingly bolstered as other archaeologists located the remains of approximately 250 more Early Iron Age herdsman's enclosures, hilltop hamlets, and unfortified villages whose architecture and artifacts were much simpler than those found in the Canaanite cities of the preceding Late Bronze Age.

In 1978, Adam Zertal of the University of Haifa began the most painstaking survey of sites connected with the Israelite settlement of Canaan, in his exploration of the 800-square-mile territory of the tribe of Manasseh in the northern West Bank. Carefully recording the locations and relative dates of 136 Early Iron Age sites in the region, Zertal also collected information on each site's topography, geology, available water sources, and soil quality. Never before had so much environmental information been correlated with remains of Early Israelite sites. When he listed the scattered sites in chronological order, Zertal detected evidence of a gradual population movement from the eastern desert fringe into the interior valleys and finally to the hills during the Early Iron Age, suggesting progressive ecological adaptation from herding to grain-growing to intensive terrace agriculture. Through

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this process of economic intensification, he contended, the ancient Israelites came in from the desert and, abandoning their wanderings, inherited their Promised Land.

#### PASTORALISTS AND FARMERS

The ecologically based picture of "peaceful immigration" had its problems—some would say even a fatal flaw. Like the more militant "unified conquest" theory, it presumed that in the thirteenth century B.C. a discrete ethnic group of semi-nomads had entered Canaan. This theory further suggested that the material culture of this group was far more primitive than that of the native Canaanites. The Israelite conquest of Canaan, whether by sudden military campaign or gradual infiltration, was therefore placed in the timeless, often violent conflict between Middle Eastern farmers and nomads—between "the Desert and the Sown."

This neat historical reconstruction, however, was based on some outdated ideas about Middle Eastern pastoralism. The first and most important of these was the nineteenth-century belief that throughout antiquity the Syrian and Arabian deserts contained vast numbers of turbulent nomads who periodically invaded and ravaged the settled land, a theory apparently spawned by romantic images of the Muslim Conquest with flashing scimitars and thundering camels. By the 1960s, however, there was a growing consensus among anthropologists that the great deserts had been unable to support more than a handful of pure nomads before the widespread domestication of the camel around 1100 B.C. Since this development took place *after* the Israelites were already presumably in Canaan, a "bedouin invasion" seemed an unlikely explanation for their arrival. Far more probable was that the Israelites were not pure nomads but rather primarily sheep- and goat-herders, pastoralists who roamed with their flocks—not in the midst of the desert but on the fringes of the heavily populated, settled land.

So if the Israelites' lonely desert origins were only a mirage, what of

their hostility to the peoples of Canaan whom they had supposedly driven from the land? When anthropologists working in Central Asia, the Middle Euphrates Valley, and North Africa began to study the economic links between pastoralists and farmers, they discovered how closely the two groups are bound together. Since the summer grain harvest throughout much of the Middle East coincides with the drying up of grazing lands on the deserts' edges, the natural movement of pastoralists and their flocks toward the well-watered agricultural regions brings them into contact with the settled population. There, the pastoralists may be hired as seasonal agricultural workers and their flocks may be allowed to graze in and fertilize the stubble of the harvested fields. In some cases, as with the modern Agedat people in the Middle Euphrates Valley, pastoralists and farmers may be members of a single community whose nomadic members wander off to the desert steppe in the winter, while the more sedentary members stay behind to prepare and plant the community's fields.

This pastoral/agricultural society was apparently common in the ancient Near East. In a study of the cuneiform archives of the Middle Bronze Age city of Mari, also on the Euphrates, John Luke of the University of Michigan convincingly demonstrated that the ancient records did not differentiate between populations of settled farmers and wandering pastoralists: the distinction was, instead, between those peasants who tended animals and peasants who tended crops. The situation in ancient Canaan was probably not much different. "Israelite" pastoralists and "Canaanite" peasants would have been members of the same Canaanite society.

#### PEASANT REBELS

Israelites from Canaan? The thought clashes with everything we've been taught to believe. Yet in the 1960s, based on this understanding, a fascinating new theory of the Israelite "conquest" of Canaan arose. George Mendenhall, a feisty biblical scholar

and one of John Luke's teachers at Michigan, rejected both the "immigration" and "conquest" theories of Israelite settlement. For years he had claimed that the rise of the Israelite religion and tribal confederacy could be explained solely on the basis of internal social developments in Canaan. As early as 1947 he had reviewed the evidence of the Amarna Letters and insisted that the 'apiru, long identified as invading Hebrews, were not an ethnic group at all but a well-defined social class.

Mendenhall argued that the Late Bronze Age city-states of Canaan were organized as highly stratified societies, with the king or governor at the top of the pyramid, with princes, court officials, and chariot warriors right below him, and the rural peasants at the base. The 'apiru were apparently outside this scheme of organization, and they seem to have threatened the social order in a number of ways. Besides being pastoralists on the fringes of the settled land, they sometimes also served as mercenaries for the highest bidder and, when that work was not forthcoming, some 'apiru actively encouraged the peasants to rebel. This social unrest, Mendenhall asserted, was not a conflict between nomads and a settled population but between the rural population and the rulers of the city-states. The Amarna Letters are filled with reports of famine and hardship and the increasingly onerous exactions by the kings. It was no wonder, noted Mendenhall, that the 'apiru had great success in stirring up the peasants and that many Canaanite royal cities were destroyed at that time. "There was no real conquest of Palestine in the sense that has usually been understood," he wrote in 1970. "What happened instead may be termed, from the point of view of the secular historian interested only in socio-political processes, a peasants' revolt against the network of interlocking Canaanite city-states."

At the heart of Mendenhall's "peasant-revolt" theory was a novel explanation of how the Israelite religion began. Mendenhall maintained that the 'apiru and their peasant supporters could never have united and overcome

Canaanite feudal domination without a compelling ideology to unify and inspire them. He believed that their worship of a single, transcendent god—Yahweh—was a brilliant response to the religion of the Canaanite kings. Instead of relying on a pantheon of divinities and elaborate fertility rituals that could be performed only by the king and his official priesthood, the new religious movement, Mendenhall believed, placed its faith in a single god who established egalitarian laws of social conduct and who communicated them *directly* to each member of the community. The hold of the kings over the people was therefore effectively broken by the spread of this new faith. And for Mendenhall the true Israelite conquest was accomplished—without invasion or immigration—when large numbers of Canaanite peasants overthrew their masters and became “Israelites.”

Mendenhall did not deal with the archaeological evidence directly, but biblical scholar Norman K. Gottwald, who accepted and expanded Mendenhall's theories, confronted it. While Mendenhall had merely dismissed all talk of semi-nomads in the hill country, Gottwald believed that the Early Iron Age sites discovered there were, in fact, Israelite. He theorized that the remote frontier and forest regions were naturally attractive to the members of an independence movement who had fled from the more heavily populated, and more closely controlled, cities of the coastal plain to establish a new way of life. Adherents of the “peaceful immigration” theory had explained that the simplicity of the artifacts in the Early Iron Age villages was due to the Israelites' primitive, semi-nomadic origins. Gottwald, however, countered by suggesting that the absence of luxury goods was evidence of the breakdown in the high-status trade that had been carried on exclusively by the Canaanite nobility.

The “peasant revolt” theory of Israelite origins had obvious rhetorical power in the 1970s, a time of modern national liberation movements and Third World insurgency. Yet it, too, had its shortcomings—chief of which

was that it simply did not fit the accumulating archaeological evidence. Through the 1980s Adam Zertal's explorations in the territory of Manasseh were complemented by major new surveys in the Galilee and in the territories of the tribes of Ephraim and Judah farther south. Unfortunately for the supporters of the peasant revolt theory, no evidence could be discerned for a major demographic shift from the coastal cities toward the hill country. The area of unoccupied hills immediately to the east of the coastal plain apparently experienced no intense wave of settlement during the Early Iron Age. Even more important, the pattern Zertal discovered in Manasseh seemed to apply to other parts of the hill country as well. The earliest of the new settlements were clustered far to the east, in the grazing lands of the desert fringe. And their characteristic sprawling layout of rustic structures surrounding a communal animal pen was dramatically different from what might have been expected from city-bred Canaanite peasants who headed out to establish independent farmsteads on the frontier.

### INVISIBLE ISRAELITES

Though rejecting the idea of a peasant revolt, the conquest story that has emerged in recent years may be the most revolutionary version of all. It is framed as an epic struggle—not between Israelites and Canaanites, pastoralists and settled populations, feudal lords and rebellious peasants, but between the human populations of Canaan and a changing economic environment. Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, who directed the survey of the territory of Ephraim, has gone far beyond the conventional chronological limits imposed by the biblical story in crafting a new reconstruction of events. Having traced settlement patterns and ecological adaptation in the hill country of Canaan over hundreds of years, Finkelstein is convinced that the demographic revolution of the Early Iron Age can no longer be seen in isolation. In fact, he believes that the

phenomenon of Israelite settlement is intimately connected to developments that began half a millennium before.

As recent archaeological surveys have indicated, the hill country of Canaan was thickly settled and dotted with fortified cities, towns, and hamlets in the period beginning around 1750 B.C. Yet the surveys also showed that around 1550 B.C., toward the end of what is called the Middle Bronze IIC period, the settled population in the hill country declined dramatically. During the succeeding Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.), while the large cities along the coast and in the major valleys continued to flourish, more than 90 percent of the permanent settlement sites in the hill country were abandoned and the few surviving sites became much smaller in size. But that is not to say that the hill country of Canaan was empty. Far from it. According to Finkelstein, the people who would later become Israelites were already there.

His basic argument, put simply, is that the model of pastoral nomads settling down and farming, long regarded as the main avenue of human progress, was always something of a two-way street. While Enlightenment thinkers and early-twentieth-century archaeologists pointed to the economic and social conditions that prompted pastoralists to become farmers, they neglected to think about the kinds of conditions that might encourage the reverse. Such was precisely what happened among the Canaanite population of the hill country, according to Finkelstein, at the end of the Middle Bronze Age. Population pressure, competition for scarce agricultural land in this rugged region, or perhaps even political change in the administration of the Canaanite city-states caused a shift in the balance between farmers and pastoralists. A large portion of the population of the hill country gradually abandoned their villages. While some may have gone to the coast to find work, toiling in the fields and orchards, others—perhaps the majority, according to Finkelstein—may have adopted a new, wandering way of life.

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ologists when compared to populations that built permanent houses) were able to establish a stable, alternative way of life on the desert fringe. For two or three centuries they lived in symbiosis with the settled populations of the large cities along the coasts and in the major valleys—presumably to trade milk, meat, wool, and leather for agricultural produce. It was only when the Canaanite city-state system finally broke down completely and its agricultural surplus evaporated in the great upheavals of the thirteenth century B.C. that the lifestyle of the hill-country Canaanites shifted again.

Sometime shortly after 1250 B.C., far to the west in the Aegean, a combination of political, climatic, and economic factors brought an end to the power of the Mycenaean kingdoms—and this dramatic collapse disturbed the delicate balance of economic and political power in the entire eastern Mediterranean world. In an era of social, political, and economic disaster, the elaborate rituals of diplomacy and exchange of luxury goods that had legitimized the rule of hundreds of Bronze Age princes, kings, priests, and warlords throughout the region simply could not be maintained. The economic life of the cities was disrupted. The scattered pastoralists in the hill country of Canaan could no longer depend on the periodic markets in the coastal and valley cities—where they had grown accustomed to trading their sheep and goats for grain. Those cities could now hardly support their own inhabitants; the pastoralists were left on their own. When the first clans of wandering herders began to choose unoccupied hilltops for permanent settlements—and started to clear nearby fields in preparation for planting—they became what archaeologist might call Early Israelites.

The finds from the hundreds of Early Iron Age settlements in the hill country can be seen as evidence of this social process: architectural forms, pottery vessels, and even a few cult objects reflect the slow crystallization of a new, settled culture on the fringes of

Canaanite society. No massive immigration from the outside is necessary to explain the sudden establishment of these Israelite settlements. New methods of estimating ancient population through studying site size and the economic carrying capacity of the land have also helped to place the Israelite settlement of Canaan in a more reasonable perspective. While the Book of Exodus relates that the Israelites fleeing Egypt numbered 600,000 warriors (bringing the incredible total to more than two million), recent archaeological assessments suggest that the Israelite population at the beginning of the Early Iron Age—which may indeed have included a small number of refugees from Egypt—probably did not exceed 20,000 souls.

Thus, the founding fathers of the Israelite nation can now be seen as scattered groups of pastoralists living in small family groups and grazing their flocks on hilltops and isolated valleys in the hill country of Canaan, reacting in their own way to the far-reaching social and economic changes that swept over the entire eastern Mediterranean world. Whether they possessed a unique, monotheistic religion—whether it was inspired and first articulated by refugees from Egypt—these are questions that are simply impossible to determine on the basis of current archaeological evidence. What seems almost certain, however, is that the story of the bloody conquest of the Land of Canaan as a unified military campaign led by a single, divinely directed leader was woven together centuries later—an anachronistic saga of triumph on the battlefield, crafted and compiled by loyal court poets anxious to flatter the later Israelite and Judean kings.

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This new understanding of Israelite origins as a socio-economic transformation is not really a religious challenge. It is a fulfillment of one of the most time-honored traditions of the West. For wherever the biblical faith

has spread across the globe, the image of the Tribes of Israel conquering their Promised Land has been a medium of self-reflection as well as an episode of sacred history. For the seventeenth-century English Puritans, Canaan was the rolling hills and forests of New England. For the Boer settlers of South Africa, the Promised Land was the rich farmland of the Transvaal, with its own indigenous Canaanites. And the self-affirming visions continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Western scholars formulated vivid images of manifest destiny, evolutionism, sociological analysis, and, now in the 1990s, hardheaded reflections on demographic pressure and economic change. Yet the historians of each age do not merely deceive themselves into believing that what is familiar is true. Generations of scholars are drawn to the problems of most immediate relevance to their society, viewing the ancient Israelites through an ever changing sequence of lenses. Each generation's reinterpretation of the biblical story has deepened historical understanding by addressing contemporary concerns.

"The crystallization of the People of Israel in their land," Finkelstein recently wrote, "was not a unique or miraculous event that occurred to a unique or peculiar people, but part of a wider, familiar phenomenon shared by many peoples appearing for the first time on the historical stage." In some earlier epochs, the suggestion that the Israelites, in their struggle to adapt and survive, were no different from hundreds of other groups throughout history would have earned its author a public stoning, or excommunication at the least. Yet one era's heresy is often another's article of faith. That's perhaps why in our own late-twentieth-century society—torn by economic stress, burdened with belated ecological awareness, and astounded by sweeping political changes—the new social explanation of Israelite origins can be seen as our generation's powerful and distinctive variation on a timeless biblical theme.