

## 2. The Peoples

There are three; none native to the Land. First, the Canaanites, or “Israel.”

### The Amarna Letters

From his capital Amarna, Pharaoh Akhenaten (01352-01336) dominated the towns of Canaan. In letters to Pharaoh, besides emphasizing their loyalty, the towns beg for chariots to protect them from the marauding Habiru or ‘Apiru.<sup>1</sup> That aid never comes. As long as they do not unite against him, Akhenaten does not care who rules any one of them. Here are some Amarna Letters:<sup>2</sup>

**Amarna #254.** Thus Lab’ayu, thy servant . . . they wickedly slander me, but let the king, my lord, not impute rebellion to me! Further, my crime is namely that I entered Gezer and said publicly, “Shall the king take my property, and not likewise the property of Milkilu?” I know the deeds which Milkilu has done against me. Further, the king wrote concerning my son. I did not know that my son associates with the ‘Apiru, and I have verily delivered him . . .

**Amarna #280.** To the king, my lord, my pantheon, my Sun-god, say . . . behold, Abdu-Heba is another Lab’ayu, and he (also) seizes our towns. So let the king take thought for his servant because of this deed! And I will not do anything until the king sends back a message to his servant.

**Amarna #287.** Behold, this deed is the deed of Milkilu and the deed of the sons of Lab’ayu, who have given the land of the king to the ‘Apiru.

**Amarna #288.** The land of the king is lost; in its entirety it is taken from me; there is war against me, as far as the lands of Seir and Gath-carmel . . . I have become like an ‘Apiru . . . for there is war against me . . . the ‘Apiru capture the cities of the king . . . Behold Zimreda, the townsmen of Lachish have smitten him, slaves who had become ‘Apiru.

**Amarna #289]** . . . Behold Milkilu and Tagu! . . . they have taken it, the town of Rubutu. And now as for Jerusalem – Behold this land belongs to the king, or why like the town of Gaza is it loyal to the king? Behold the land of the town of Gath-carmel . . . and the men of Gath have a garrison in Beth-Shan. Or shall we do like Lab’ayu, who gave the land of Shechem to the ‘Apiru?

Egyptian scope in this period included these towns (from north to south):

Tripoli	Byblos	Beirut	Sidon
Tyre	Hazor	Acco	Kenath
Ashtarot	Megiddo	Taanach	Shechem
Gezer	Rubutu	Jerusalem	Ashkelon
Keilah	Lachish	Gaza	Gath

“Israel” is not mentioned in the Amarna letters. Its time had not yet come, and we have here an upper limit, a terminus a quo, for the Bible story.

<sup>1</sup>Not “Hebrews;” the meaning is approximately “outcasts” or “bandits.”

<sup>2</sup>From ANET 483-490; translation by Albright and Mendenhall, with corrections from Moran. For a complete translation of all the letters, see Moran **Amarna**.

### Israel

A century later comes the stele of Pharaoh Merneptah (c01230). It records a campaign into Canaan. It ends with the first on-record mention of “Israel.”

The princes are prostrate, saying “Mercy!”<sup>3</sup>  
 Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.  
 Desolation is for Tehanu; Hatti is pacified;  
 Plundered is the Canaan with every evil;  
 Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer;  
 Yanoam is made as that which does not exist;  
 Israel is laid waste, his seed is not;  
 Hurru is become a widow for Egypt! . . .

Tehanu (Libya) was west of Egypt; Hatti (in far northern Anatolia) may be a fanciful addition, or it may refer to Hittite refugee communities in Canaan, who are often mentioned in other texts. Among the Canaanite peoples, only “Israel” is written with the scribal signfic for a people rather than a town; it was thus relatively new on the scene. “Israel” means “strong in El,” so El, like many other gods, had his military side. And in later years, sure enough, “Israel” would expand to dominate all of Canaan south of the Jezreel River.

### The Chaldeans

They came from Ur of the Chaldees, near the mouth of the Euphrates River. Their god, though never mentioned in the Bible, was Nanna, the god of the moon and of wisdom, who was worshiped as far north as Babylon, and also in the commercial city Haran. It is from Haran that the Chaldeans enter our story:

**Gen 12:1.** Now Yahweh said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee; [2] and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and be thou a blessing; [3] and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse, and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. [4] So Abram went as Yahweh had spoken unto him, and Lot went with him; and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. [5] And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls<sup>4</sup> that they had gotten in Haran, and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. [6] And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Shechem, unto the oak of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. [7] and Yahweh appeared unto Abram and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land, and there builded he an altar unto Yahweh, who appeared unto him.

That promise to Abram would become what we may call the Promise Narrative. It transferred the original promise from the Chaldeans to the Hebrews.

<sup>3</sup>Or “Peace;” the Canaanite word *shalam* is used here (ANET 378 n16).

<sup>4</sup>Servants. One servant (“Eliezer of Damascus”) evidently acquired during an earlier and profitable stay of Abram and party in that city) will be mentioned later (Gen 15:2). Such moments give us glimpses of a tribal history that has otherwise not survived.

## The Hebrews

Last came the pastoral Hebrews from the south, with their God Yahweh. The affinities of Yahweh are with the land of Midian,<sup>5</sup> with which area Moses is also associated.<sup>6</sup> The Chaldeans were pastoral too, but the Abramites lived at peace with the Canaanites and their god El, leading to a period of amicable joint worship. Not so the Hebrews: their god Yahweh demanded not only sole allegiance to himself, but the total destruction of all other peoples. Thus:

**Josh 10:36.** And Joshua went up from Eglon, and all Israel with him, unto Hebron, and they fought against it, [37] and they took it, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof, and all the cities thereof, and all the souls that were therein; he left none remaining, according to all that he had done to Eglon, but he utterly destroyed it, and all the souls that were therein.

Those who like may comfort themselves with the thought that the Conquest is imaginary.<sup>7</sup> Real or not, it asserts a fact, and offers that fact as an example.<sup>8</sup>

Joshua itself tells us that only *part* of the Land was gained by that conquest; the rest had to be allocated by lot, *in advance* of direct possession:

**Josh 13:1.** Now Joshua was old . . . and Yahweh said unto him, Thou art old and well stricken in years, and there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed. [2] This is the land that yet remaineth: all the regions of the Philistines, and all the Geshurites; [3] from the Sihor, which is before Egypt, even unto the border of Ekron northward, which is reckoned to the Canaanites; the five lords of the Philistines; the Gazites, and the Ashdodites, and the Ekronites; also the Avvim, [4] on the south; all the land of the Canaanites, and Mearah that belongeth to the Sidonians, unto Aphek, to the border of the Amorites; [5] and the land of the Geballites, and all Lebanon, from the sunrising, from Baal-gad under Mount Hermon . . .

And elsewhere in the Bible, it is admitted that the Conquest was incomplete. An interpolation in Exodus (italicized here; note the duplication of “send before thee”) even explains why a *more gradual* conquest was better:

**Exod 23:27.** I will send my terror before thee, and will discomfit all the people to whom thou shalt come, and I will make all thine enemies turn their backs unto thee. [28] *And I will send the hornet before thee, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before thee.* [29] *I will not drive them out from before thee in one year, lest the land become desolate, and the beasts of the field multiply against thee.* [30] *By little and little I will drive them out from before thee, until thou be increased, and inherit the land.*

A similar passage was later interpolated into Deut 7:20, but this one may serve.

<sup>5</sup>Miller **Yahweh** (2018).

<sup>6</sup>People cherish the Joshua picture, but either the entry was sudden or it was gradual. For the latter, see Hawkins and Ben-Schlomo (2018), and §39, “Khirbet el-Mastarah.”

<sup>7</sup>Alt “Settlement” (1925) = Essays (1967) 173-221.

<sup>8</sup>Laughlin **Reading** (2015) 223, “Maybe it is time to put Joshua on the shelf, and leave it there.”