

Who Were the Hebrews and Israelites? A Scholarly Perspective from Jordan

One has to admit that this topic raises more questions than answers, and scholars often come up with more opinions or theories than their number. It is probably one of the most difficult subjects to deal with in ancient Near Eastern studies, for the researcher must be acquainted with various disciplines on Near Eastern and Biblical studies and languages in addition to the voluminous secondary literature.¹ He also must be eclectic in his approach and cautious with his conclusions. The sources of the material that will be dealt with are somehow scarce, ambiguous and controversial.²

The most important though not totally accurate source of information about the Hebrews and the Israelites is the Old Testament. However, the development of Biblical studies including criticism, archaeological field excavations, and modern historical and linguistic scholarship made it possible to clarify the picture and shed some light on the issue of the Hebrews and Israelites.³

This paper as its title reads will deal briefly with the history and archaeology of the Hebrews and Israelites (including the Judahites), as an essential part the political and cultural history of Jordan and the whole region of geographic Syria/Syria-Palestine if not the whole world. The study covers the beginning of Hebrew/Israelite history (supposedly) from the Middle Bronze to the Iron II Ages (i.e. to the development and crystallization of both of the Samaritan and Jewish identities as purely religious identities from the Iron II onwards).⁴

I will try to present my own approach which hopefully will be as eclectic as possible benefiting from the various schools of thoughts, for I believe that there is a certain amount of truth in each of the approaches whether it was the fundamental, traditional, archaeological, historiographical or socio-economic. One has to be careful not to be

hasty nor become lured into being too critical, secular and scientific in contrast of becoming solely fundamental or traditional in his/her approach.⁵

The historical or pseudo-historical stages or phases of Hebrew/Israelite history goes back in time to the "patriarchal period" that started up in the second millennium BC (MB). Though this is not verified with external evidence archaeologically speaking, albeit (if possible) some texts that mentioned names of tribes or persons that were similar to the names of patriarchs or their tribes. In any case scholars as usual disagree on what those names (whether from Mari or elsewhere) signify with respect to the Hebrews/Israelites. In addition to some of the social customs of that time (such as the ones found in the Mari, Alalakh, Ugarit, and Nuzi, tablets) have some connections with the patriarchal narratives or traditions.⁶

The other two historical and archaeological facts from text of the second millennium (BC), that two possibly may have had some relation with Hebrews and Israelites were the movements of the pastoral (semi-) nomads most probably the nomadic segment of the Amorites (the proto-Arameans?) with their famous designations Shasu/Sutu. The other fact is about the Habiru/Khabiru (b/p), and Sa-Gas.⁷

Scholars as usual are divided up on this issue. In my opinion, I believe that material and data from both the pastoralists and then Habiru could be used for reconstruction of the history of the Hebrews/Israelites given that one should abide by some conditions such as time, place, and circumstance and correlate the data with the Old Testament (OT) material.⁸

The connection between Hebrews and the Israelites is very obvious in the OT books, though some distinctions are valid, as scholars would agree or disagree.⁹ However,

¹ Ahlstrom 1982: 133-8; 1986; Alt 1925/66; Thompson 1973.

² Meek 1960: 1-48; Albright 1963; Van Seters 1975; Miller and Hayes 1986.

³ Albright 1932; Soggin 1985: 139; Kenyon 1979; Cornfeld and Freedman 1976.

⁴ Miller and Hayes 1986; Meek 1973; Geus 1977; Albright 1946.

⁵ Soggin 1985; Jagersma 1981; Noth 1960; Bright 1980.

⁶ Wright 1979; Van Seters 1978; Sarna 1977: 5-9.

⁷ Bright 1980; Albright 1963; Wright 1979.

⁸ Miller 1976; Geus 1977; Burrows 1983.

⁹ Ahlstrom 1986; Miller / Hayes 1986; Noth 1960.

the bottom line is that the first stage of the history of the Hebrews/Israelites extended time and place from their movement or migration from northeast geographic Syria (across the upper Euphrates and the "northern" Ur) to its southwest (i.e. from northeastern Aram to southern Canaan.), then to Egypt.¹⁰ The second stage is their sojourn in Egypt that lasted for several centuries.¹¹

The writer accepts the notion that the Hebrews/Israelites traveled along as one of the Amorite movements from the Syrian steppe down to Egypt then they were driven out of Egypt after the Egyptian revolt against the Amorite/Hyksos from the mid-sixteenth century BC the transitional period from MB to LB.¹² They were probably expelled from Egypt as one of the western Semitic groups under the title of Hyksos (i.e. foreign rulers [or shepherds] of Egypt). That probably explains the designation in OT "mixed multitude". That must have taken place at successive times that were probably crowned by the last Exodus at the time of Moses in the thirteenth century BC. Historically valid in my opinion by the Egyptian names of some of the exodees in addition to the Egyptian texts from the second millennium including the Amarnah letters, plus the texts that mentioned the Habiru.¹³

The social structure of the Hebrews/Israelites was tribal and pastoral that mostly was common for the Semitic ethnic background (Amorite and/or Aramacan). That is to say that their origin was northwest Semitic to be specific. That is reflected by their names and language before they adapted the Canaanite language upon their return to (southern) Canaan. Their religion was monotheistic, Elohish as documented in the Old Testament books (even though they were redacted many times long after most of the historical stages of the Hebrews/Israelites).¹⁴

Upon their return to southwest of Amoru amid the havoc and chaos that swept through the entire region (geographic Syria including Transjordan and Palestine). The gradually occupied parts of the hill country in (southern) Canaan. Some of their settlement patterns including military activities were certainly not as narrated in the Old Testament from the book of Number 13 to Joshua 12, according to the results archaeological excavations. Nevertheless, the excavations have also showed the emergence of primitive settlements with certain characteristics and of a little destruction of towns that rarely matches up with the Old Testament narratives. That led to the fact that new elements of settlements and population emerged in the specified regions.¹⁵

Biblical scholars are also divided on the third stage of the history of the Hebrew/Israelites (i.e. their entrance into Canaan) whether it was a conquest, peaceful infiltration of semi-nomads, or peasant revolt aided by incoming exodees according to some.¹⁶

Most scholars believe that the emergence of Israel in Canaan is the most difficult issue in dealing with "biblical history". Again, in my opinion which is not in a full agreement with any of the theories or hypothesis of the three schools of thought regarding this issue. I believe that there was a kind of conquest (a dwarf conquest if you will), that involved some military activities and violence admittedly not as narrated in the OT books (from Number 13 to Joshua 12 which also contradict other narratives from Joshua and Judges regarding the settlement).¹⁷

One can deduce from the three schools mentioned above that they vary in their recognition of military activities and violence (i.e. conquest?), if one examines each of them thoroughly.¹⁸

During the second and the third stages of the Hebrew/Israelite history (i.e. exodus and conquest), I think that their social and ethnic composition was less homogenous and more heterogeneous in comparison with the first stage. Linguistically speaking they must have adopted the Canaanite language and (later) system of writing as mentioned in the OT narratives, as obvious in their late inscriptions, in addition to the language of most of OT books. Their social structure was still semi-nomadic, tribal, and less advanced in social economic, and political terms than their neighbors. Their religion was much influenced by the Midianites that became known to be the Yahwistic phase in contrast to the previous Elohish. Their territorial extent spread through out some of the hill country in Transjordan and Cisjordan documented not only by the OT narratives, but rather by texts from the area, such as the Merneptah stela (ca. 1220-30's) and the Mesha stone (ca. 840's BC).¹⁹

The latter stages of the history of the Hebrews and Israelites involve the periods of the Judges, the united kingdom, then the division of the united kingdom into two, until their consecutive destructions in 712/1 and 587/6 BC, by the Assyrian and Chaldeans/Neo-Babylonians respectively.²⁰

During the latter periods, their social status have changed from mostly pastoral to sedentary. Their ethnic composition became more mixed though it maintained its Semitic character, although some scholars have their

¹⁰ Gordan 1978: 20-52; Sarna 1977: 5-9; Van Seters 1974; 1978: 6-8; Meek 1973.

¹¹ Albright 1946; Alt 1925/66; Bright 1980; Soggin 1985.

¹² Noth 1960a; Moscati 1959; 1960; Jagersma 1981.

¹³ Exodus 12.38; Josh 8.33-35; see also Aharoni 1976: 55-76; Alt 1925/66; Mendenhall 1962; Bright 1980.

¹⁴ Miller and Hayes 1986; Noth 1960; Buccellati 1967; Bright 1980.

¹⁵ Ackerman 1975: 5-13; Aharoni 1976; Albright 1961; Mendenhall 1962: 66-87.

¹⁶ Same as above note.

¹⁷ Miller 1976; Soggin 1985; Burrows 1983.

¹⁸ See Soggin 1985 and above notes.

¹⁹ Bright 1980; Mendenhall 1962; Ahlstrom 1986; Albright 1963.

²⁰ Bright 1980; Buccellati 1976; Noth 1960.

doubts about ethnicity in the region during ancient times.²¹ Their language was Canaanite with heavy Aramaic influence (especially in the later periods). Their religion underwent some kind of transformation that resulted in the development and later crystallization of two factions and/or religions, the Samaritan and the Jewish. Politically speaking, they became more advanced during the time of the two kingdoms (Israel and Judah).²²

The significance of the ancient Hebrews and Israelites to Jordanian/Transjordanian history and culture (in my opinion) is inseparable from the rest of the geographic Syria especially its southern part Palestine. For the ancient Hebrews and Israelites constituted a part of Jordan's west Semitic population in ancient times, as shown in the previously mentioned Mesha stone (among other texts), in addition to the OT narratives. Moreover, the writer of this paper believes that the ancient Hebrews and Israelites from their early "historical" stages to the time of Moses (who died in Jordan), through the time of the monarchy and its division, and afterwards, make up an important cultural and historical development of the Levant region not excluding Jordan. For the ancient Hebrews and the Israelites considered by me as a part of local mostly native population of the region whose social, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural existence make up one of the most important highlights in the history of the region, the other two were the coming of Christianity and the emergence of Islam.

Finally the ancient Hebrews/Israelites were part of the indigenous population of Jordan. Their history, archaeological remains, and culture do greatly concern us in Jordan as they concern our western colleagues and scholars.

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²¹ Alt 1925/66; Buccellati 1967; see Thompson 1979: "Hidden Histories and the Problem of Ethnicity in Palestine", acquired per-

sonally.

²² See the above notes plus bibliographies.

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