



Religion, Identity and the Origins of Ancient Israel

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Abstract

According to the Bible, early Israel originated as a group of migrant slaves who escaped from Egypt, spent an extended time in the wilderness as pastoral nomads, and then fought their way into the highlands of Palestine. Because these events are not wholly confirmed by the archaeological and historical evidence, modern scholars are attempting to reconstruct Israel's early history on the basis of the archaeological evidence, ancient textual evidence, and a critical reading of the Bible. Scholars agree that the Israelites, or their ancestors, first appeared in the highlands of Palestine around 1200 BCE. The key question is where these early highland settlers came from. At present, the most popular theory among scholars is that the settlers migrated into the highlands from the Canaanite lowlands, so that the earliest Israelites were essentially Canaanites. But that theory is now being questioned vigorously by scholars who accentuate the role of nomadic pastoralists in the highland settlements. In important ways, our understanding of Israelite religion and identity hinges on these important debates.

I. Introduction

Like all aspects of human existence, religious and social identities develop and persist within particular historical circumstances. It is not a surprise, then, that present discussions of ancient Israel's social and religious identity are closely tied to scholarly debates about the history of Israel. Foremost among these debates is the question of Israel's origins: How did Israel come to be?

As a rule, modern scholars do not believe that the Bible's account of early Israel's history provides a wholly accurate portrait of Israel's origins. One reason for this is that the earliest part of Israel's history in Genesis is now regarded as something other than a work of modern history. Its primary author was at best an ancient historian (if a historian at all), who lived long after the events he narrated, and who drew freely from sources that were not historical (legends and theological stories); he was more concerned with theology than with the modern quest to learn 'what actually happened' (Van Seters 1992; Sparks 2002, pp. 37–71; Maidman 2003). As a result, the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are

better understood as windows into later Israelite history than as portraits of Israel's early history. Almost as problematic as an historical source is the book of Exodus. This book tells the story of Israel's long enslavement in Egypt and of its eventual emancipation; it also narrates the first stages of Israel's migration from Egypt toward Palestine. The trouble with this story, historically speaking, is that the Egyptians seem to have known nothing of these great events in which thousands of Israelite slaves were released from Egypt because of a series of natural (or supernatural) catastrophes – supposedly including even the death of every firstborn Egyptian man and beast (Soggin 1985, pp. 109–37; Frerichs & Lesko 1997; contra Hoffmeier 1997).

So, what of the next sequence in the biblical history of Israel, which extends from Exodus to the book of Joshua? Did the Israelites spend an extended time in the wilderness, and then invade Palestine and conquer the land, seizing it from its previous Canaanite inhabitants through a series of vigorous military operations? Modern scholars offer different answers to this question. A few decades ago, W. F. Albright and Y. Yadin argued that the archaeological evidence proved that the Israelites invaded Palestine and destroyed many of its cities around 1200 BCE (Albright 1939, 1971; Yadin 1975). Albright believed that he could identify the archaeological 'profile' of the early Israelites: their settlements were small, had 'four-room' pillared houses, and yielded a distinctive assemblage of pottery that featured large, collared-rim storage jars. And more importantly, these distinctive settlements appeared to arise directly after the destruction of several cities mentioned in Joshua's conquest story – Hazor supposedly being a good example.

Although Albright's archaeological profile of early Israel is still accepted to some extent, his 'conquest model' of Israel's origins has fallen into disfavor among scholars, in part because of the work of Albrecht Alt. Alt argued that far from proving such a conquest, the archaeological evidence suggested that the highlands of central Palestine – where the Israelites first settled – were sparsely inhabited during the Late Bronze era (*ca.* 1550–1200 BCE). Hence, according to Alt, the Israelite settlement at the end of the Late Bronze period is better described as a 'peaceful infiltration', in which pastoral nomads from the marginal areas in the East and South entered Palestine and settled in the sparsely populated hills. On this theory, the so-called 'conquest' is nothing more than an inflated memory of Israel's military skirmishes with Canaanites, who lived at a few sites in the highlands and on the lowland periphery of the highlands where the Israelites first settled. Alt's theory has received further confirmation as the archaeological evidence has trickled in. This evidence shows that some of the cities whose conquest loomed largest in the biblical narrative, such as Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon, were uninhabited at the time of the settlement (see Kenyon 1957; Pritchard 1962, Callaway 1968, 1987; respectively).

The 'conquest' and 'peaceful infiltration' theories are very different, but on one important point they quite agree: the Israelites were essentially outsiders who entered Canaan from without and brought with them their unique faith in the god Yahweh. And this was the standard way of looking at Israelite identity before the work of G. E. Mendenhall. In a counterintuitive move, Mendenhall suggested that Israel's antagonism towards the Canaanites was the result of an astonishing paradox: the earliest Israelites came from Canaan itself (Mendenhall 1962, 1973). Noting that the Israelite settlers were pastoralists and agriculturalists, Mendenhall theorized that the Israelites were originally 'peasants', who lived under the control of Canaanite city-states in the lowland regions of western Canaan. Pressures from Egypt, and from their Canaanite overlords, eventually drove these Canaanite peasants to rebel against the Canaanites and to seek refuge in the hills of Palestine, thus producing the explosion of highland settlements that we see around and after 1200 BCE. The chief deity of this new society, around which its religious and social identity formed, was the god Yahweh. Yahweh was not a native god, however. He arrived with a group of escaped slaves from Egypt whose traditions provided the core around which much later Israelite tradition formed. Another scholar, N. K. Gottwald, further refined this theory in his huge monograph *The Tribes of Yahweh* (1979). Like Mendenhall, Gottwald stressed the egalitarian spirit of the new Israelite society. He attributed this spirit to Israel's early experience as a refugee society, and also to the simple, tribal society that Israel founded, which was not as hierarchical as the earlier city-state society of Canaan. These new peoples were 'Israelites'; their god was Yahweh. Gottwald's most important departures from Mendenhall's thesis regarded the historical value of the biblical traditions and the duration of the lowland migration into the highlands. Gottwald no longer held that there was much of historical value behind the Exodus tradition, and he believed that the settlers' retreat from the lowlands did not take place in a short-term revolt but rather over a somewhat longer period of time.

To some extent, this theory of Israel's origins – let us call it the 'peasant revolt' or 'peasant retreat' hypothesis – was born largely from a Marxist ideology. According to this perspective, normative societies usually experience intense struggles between the proletariat underclass and the powerful bourgeoisie, leading eventually to an underclass revolution. While it is true that such revolutions do take place, Marxist ideologies are nowadays passé because social patterns are very complex and cannot be presumed to follow a Marxist script. Nevertheless, one important aspect of the Mendenhall–Gottwald approach has stuck: a majority of scholars would now embrace the theory that the earliest Israelite settlers came from the Canaanite lowlands because of a combination of pressures from Egypt, from the Sea Peoples, and from the general breakdown of the Canaanite city-state societies in the region (e.g., Chaney 1983; Callaway 1985; Coote & Whitelam 1987; Ahlström 1993; Lemche 1998; Dever 2003).

II. Canaanite Origins or Nomadic Origins?

In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars have advocated strongly for something closer to Alt's theory that Israel had nomadic origins. In order to understand this debate, it is important at the outset to understand the points of agreement between those who espouse the Canaanite origins theory and those who believe that Israel's forebears lived as nomadic or seminomadic pastoralists. All scholars agree that the hills of Palestine were sparsely populated during the Late Bronze Age (*ca.* 1550–1200 BCE), when Egypt controlled the region, especially the lowland areas. They also agree that during the subsequent Iron I period (*ca.* 1200–1000 BCE), many new settlements appeared in the highlands, both in Cisjordan (the western side of the Jordan River) and on the plateau of Transjordan (the eastern side). In Transjordan, settlements also appeared in southern areas that would later become the nations of Ammon, Moab, and Edom. With very few exceptions, most scholars would concede that these new settlers in Palestine were the direct ancestors of the Israelites. Whether we should refer to these early settlers as 'Israelites' or only 'proto-Israelites', as some scholars aver, is one important part of the ongoing debate. But the most important question is probably this: Where did the new settlers come from? Did they migrate to the highlands from the Canaanite lowlands, as many scholars believe, or did they come from the nomadic fringe? Let us consider the evidence for each position in more detail.

THE CANAANITE ORIGINS THEORY

The evidence for Israel's Canaanite origins is as follows. It is known that the Egyptians were heavy-handed and oppressive in extending their control into Palestine during the Late Bronze era. Because this control was far more systematic in the lowlands, it is assumed that some of the Canaanites living in these lowland areas migrated into the hill country to escape Egyptian tyranny – taking their Canaanite heritage with them. Israelite identity would have developed among these Canaanite refugees. The archaeological evidence purportedly lends support to this conclusion. The four-room houses and collared-rim pithoi, which are normally taken as evidence of the early Israelite presence, do not appear out of thin air in the Iron I period. These features have their archaeological predecessors in the Middle and Late Bronze Age and can no longer be interpreted as unique markers of Israelite ethnicity (Raban 2001; Dever 2003).

Another piece of evidence often cited in favor of Israel's Canaanite origins comes from the Amarna texts (see more below). These texts from Egypt describe conditions in Palestine during the middle of the Late Bronze Age, not too long before the highland settlements first began to appear. The texts refer to unruly outlaws, called *Hapiru*, who had withdrawn from the city-state societies of Canaan and were wreaking havoc

in the area. Given that name *Hapiru* seems very close to the name *Hebrew*, some scholars have cited this evidence to support their view that the early Israelites (Hebrews) originated as dropouts from Canaanite society (e.g., Mendenhall 1962, 1973; Gottwald 1979; Chaney 1983; Halligan 1983). Such a connection would exist, they say, even if there turns out to be no linguistic relationship between the terms *Hapiru* and *Hebrew* (Halligan 1983).

But for those who espouse the theory of Israel's Canaanite origins, it is perhaps the religious evidence that has become most important. Over the course of the last few decades, scholars have successfully demonstrated that the earliest Israelites shared many religious beliefs with the Canaanites (see especially Smith 1990, 2001). Using texts from the city-state of Ugarit (which are presumed to give us some idea about the religious beliefs in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age), scholars have noted that the gods and goddesses of Canaan – deities like El, Baal, and Asherah for instance – also appear in the earliest biblical and extra-biblical evidence, in the names of people like *Jerubbaal* and *Ishbaal* (see Judges 7:1; 2 Samuel 2:8) and in references to 'breasts and womb' (Genesis 49:26). Even the name of Israel itself (Isra-El) may reflect that high position of El in the Canaanite pantheon. This last possibility is attractive because of other evidence that reflects an early Israelite belief in the hierarchy of the Canaanite pantheon (see details below). So in terms of both the deities involved and the religious structures, there seem to be strong connections between the religion of early Israel and the standard religious beliefs in Canaan. Of course, the profound similarity between Canaanite and Israelite religion need not imply that the Israelites originated as Canaanites. M. S. Smith has made the strongest case for these similarities, yet, he has taken no strong position on the matter of Israel's origins (Smith 1990, 2001). But this much remains true: every similarity between the Israelites and Canaanites – in matters of religion and material culture – adds circumstantial weight to the argument that the forebears of Israel were really Canaanites.

THE THEORY OF ISRAEL'S NOMADIC ORIGINS

What contrary evidence can be adduced by those who espouse the theory of Israel's nomadic origins? Foremost is the evidence of tradition. Although the Bible associates the earliest Israelites with the desert and fringe regions to the south and east of Palestine, and also with regions to the North (in Syria), there appears to be no memory whatsoever that the Israelites originally hailed from the Canaanite lowlands. Could the Israelites have forgotten this important element in their origins so completely? Those who trace Israel's origins back to nomadism would say 'no'. Another piece of the evidence for Israel's nomadic origins regards the archaeology. When nomads settle, they usually borrow their technology from the settled peoples nearby. And this is exactly what we find when it

comes to early Israelite pottery. It is similar to Canaanite pottery, but the highland ceramics appear in a much smaller repertoire (fewer types of items) and in more abundance than found in the lowlands. Consequently, the similarities between Israel's material culture – its four-room houses and pottery – are adequately explained by the theory that the early Israelites borrowed these technologies from their settled Canaanite neighbors (Finkelstein 1988). This conclusion is supposedly reinforced by the arrangements of the early highland settlements. By abutting their four-room houses next to each other, the settlers created oval or circular shaped settlements with an open space in the center. According to scholars like I. Finkelstein, this circular pattern is precisely what we see when pastoral nomads set up their tents, thus forming a barrier of protection for the people and for their flocks in the center of the encampment.

Those who trace Israel's origins back to pastoral nomadism also believe that the religious evidence is on their side. The major deities worshipped by Israel, and by the new societies in Transjordan (Ammon, Moab, and Edom), seem to be other than standard Canaanite deities. Yahweh (Israel), Milkom (Ammon), Chemosh (Moab), and Qaus (Edom) either do not appear at all in the Canaanite evidence, or possibly appear as minor deities (in the case of Milkom). Moreover, there is some evidence (see below) that the gods Yahweh and Qaus should be associated with pastoral nomads living south of Palestine (the Egyptians called these nomads the *Shasu*). The appeal of this conclusion is heightened by the oldest poetry of the Bible itself, which locates the homeland of Yahweh in regions south of Palestine, in the neighborhood and/or direction of Edom (e.g., Deuteronomy 33:2; Judges 5:4–5; Habakkuk 3:3).

Also pregnant with significance for scholars who espouse the nomadic origins theory is the oldest textual reference to 'Israel', which appears in the late thirteenth century victory stela of Pharaoh Merneptah (see below). In this text, the Egyptian king claims to have defeated the 'seed of Israel', and the name 'Israel' bears a determinative (a nonphonetic indicator at the end of the word) that defines it as a 'foreign people' rather than a nation, city, or town. From this it may be deduced that as of Merneptah's reign, the Israelites had already developed a distinctive ethnic identity, but were still living as nomadic or seminomadic pastoralists. It may be countered, however, that Egyptian scribes were not always careful in their use of determinatives.

III. Elements in the Discussion: A Survey of Recent Developments

A. THE EGYPTIAN EVIDENCE: THE HYKSOS, AMARNA TABLETS, MERNEPTAH STELA, AND THE *SHASU*

The Merneptah Stela, and the Egyptian evidence in general, play a pivotal role in any discussion of Israelite origins. This is largely because the Hebrew Bible itself is the editorial product of an era long after Israel's

origins. Many scholars believe, of course, that the Hebrew Bible nonetheless contains some materials that are very ancient, but this is always a debatable matter of judgment. Less subjective is our dating of the Egyptian materials, as these come from the actual period in which the settlement took place.

Of crucial importance for the question of Israel's origins is the situation in Palestine prior to Merneptah, during the Late Bronze era (1550–1200 BCE). We know from Egyptian texts that at the beginning of this period, Asiatic groups who had ruled Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650–1550) were pushed out of Egypt by native dynasties. The Egyptians referred to these Asiatics as the Hyksos. This significant historical development comes as close as any known event to the biblical Exodus, which was supposedly a large-scale departure of Asiatics (Israel) from Egypt. The Jewish historian Josephus, living much later during the first century CE, actually identified the Israelites with the Hyksos. Some modern scholars also believe that a connection exists (Redford 1987), but others are less sanguine about this identification. If there is a relationship between the Hyksos and the Exodus tradition, it is certainly not straightforward (for discussions, see Redford 1992b; Oren 1997).

By far, the most important textual sources for our understanding of Late Bronze Palestine are the Amarna letters, which Egyptian vassals in Palestine sent to the Pharaohs then living in Amarna, Egypt (see Moran 1992). These texts were written in Akkadian (lingua franca of the day) and date to the fourteenth century BCE. Several straightforward observations follow from these texts. First, the city-state polities in the Late Bronze highlands were fewer and farther between than in the lowlands. While numerous city-states existed in the lowlands, the hill country was mainly under the influence of Shechem in the North and Jerusalem in the South. This development is roughly parallel to later developments in Iron Age Israel, where the North was ruled from Samaria and the South from Jerusalem. Second, it is clear that these two hill-country towns were unable to fully control their respective spheres of influence. The texts often mention roaming bands of outlaws, called *Hapiru*, who threatened villages and travellers, and, thus, promoted an atmosphere of unrest. For some time, it was assumed that these *Hapiru* could be identified with the Hebrews, thus providing us with an early window into the development of the Israelites. But the etymological connection between the two words is now a matter of debate. Nevertheless, it remains possible that these unruly populations contributed to the new settlements that later appeared in the highlands during the Late Bronze/Iron I transition (as maintained by Mendenhall 1973; Gottwald 1979; Chaney 1983; Halligan 1983; Na'aman 1986). The third and perhaps most significant observation is this: neither Israel nor any of its tribal groups are mentioned in the Amarna texts. Consequently, the ethnogenesis of Israel seems to have taken place sometime later, either just before the settlement or subsequent to it.

When it comes to Israelite origins, the most tantalizing Egyptian text is undoubtedly the Merneptah Stela (*ca.* 1208 BCE). The relevant portion of the text reads as follows (see Pritchard 1969, p. 378):

The princes are prostrate, saying, 'Peace!
 Not one is raising his head among the Nine Bows
 Now that Tehenu (Libya) has come to ruin
 Hatti is pacified
 Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe
 Ashkelon has been overcome
 Gezer has been captured
 Yano'am is made non-existent
Israel is laid waste and his seed is not
 Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt

Regarding this text, there is an ongoing debate about two interrelated items: How shall we properly read it, and to what extent does the text tell us about early Israel? Following clues from the poem's poetic structure and linguistic features, some scholars have optimistically deduced that Merneptah's Israel is none other than biblical Israel (Sparks 1998, pp. 94–124). Among other things, they have concluded that the following must be true of Israel in the days of Merneptah: (i) Israel lived in the highlands of Palestine; (ii) Israel was partially nomadic; and (iii) Israel embraced an identity that contrasted with the Canaanites, who are listed in the stela as 'Canaan' and as the city-states Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yano'am. All of this would more or less square with biblical memories of early Israel. Other scholars are less optimistic about the value of the text for our knowledge of early Israel (e.g., Ahlström & Edelman 1985). They point out that, in fact, the text offers us little more than the name 'Israel', and we have no strong reason to suppose that Merneptah's Israel was at all similar to biblical Israel, which would emerge several centuries later. But this pessimistic appraisal of the stela's evidential value is a minority view; most scholars would admit that more can be deduced from the text than merely the name 'Israel'.

Interpretation of the Merneptah Stela became even more interesting in 1986, when Frank Yurco demonstrated – to the satisfaction of many scholars – that there was link between the Karnak copy of the text and pictorial reliefs in the Karnak temple (see Yurco 1986, 1990). This meant that an artistic depiction of the Israelites might be on the walls of that temple. In Yurco's opinion, the Israelites appeared in one of the battle scenes, in the garb normally worn by Canaanites (thus modestly supporting the Canaanite origins theory). Not long after, however, A. F. Rainey made a different suggestion (see Rainey 2001; cf. Redford 1986). He agreed that the Israelites were depicted in the reliefs, but identified them instead with the nomadic pastoralists (the *Shasu*) who appeared there. This theory naturally dovetails with the biblical portrait of Israel's pastoralist origins in the South and East; moreover, other details known about the *Shasu* ostensibly provide added evidence for this identification.

According to Egyptian texts from the Late Bronze and Early Iron eras, the *Shasu* frequented regions south and east of Palestine in the Sinai, Negev, Edom, and Transjordan, as well as in Palestine proper (see Giveon 1971). As we have mentioned above, some of the place names in these *Shasu* regions seem to include the name Yahweh (Giveon 1971; Weippert 1971), and several *Shasu* tribal names appear to include the name Qaus, who was (or would become) the chief deity of Edom (Knauf 1984; Oded 1971). It is also noteworthy that the *Shasu* were circumcised (Giveon 1971, p. 202), which matches the Israelite practice precisely and supposedly contrasts with standard Canaanite practices (if the Bible has it right in Genesis 34; cf. Sparks 2005a, p. 203). Now this evidence regarding Israel's association with the *Shasu* is sketchy and at every point a matter of discussion, but for scholars like Rainey, Redford, and Weippert, the coincidental parallels between Israel and the *Shasu* are simply too numerous to overlook. Consequently, it is their opinion that the Israelite settlement was fuelled largely by sedentarizing nomads from the region – by those the Egyptians called *Shasu*.

B. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FROM PALESTINE

Respecting almost every site in and around Palestine, modern scholars are debating when and under what circumstances the transition took place between the Late Bronze and Iron I eras. The city of Hazor provides a good example. Biblical traditions provide two different accounts of the city's fall to Israel. In one of these the Israelites quickly conquered the city, totally destroying it in the process (Joshua 11:10–3); in the other account, the Israelites first settled in the surrounding areas and then overcame the city of Hazor more gradually (Judges 4:1–2, 23–4). According to the original excavator (Yadin), the archaeological evidence actually supports the first account in Joshua. Stratum XIII of Hazor was destroyed towards the end of the thirteenth century and was followed in Stratum XII with a twelfth century Israelite settlement, just as Joshua suggests (see also Ben-Tor 1998). On the other hand, Aharoni (1957) argued that early Israelite settlements near Hazor actually predated the destruction of Hazor, thus suiting the historical account in the book of Judges. In recent years, this debate has become yet more complicated, as Finkelstein has argued that the settlement lapse between Hazor XIII and XII is actually closer to 150 years (*ca.* 1250–1100 BCE; see Finkelstein 1988). This places a significant gap between the supposed 'conquest' of Hazor by Israel and the settlement of the site by the Israelites *ca.* 1100 BCE. Whether this assertion is correct is not the point; the main point is that, although scholars agree that Late Bronze Canaanite culture at Hazor was eventually followed by the Iron I society of Israel or proto-Israel, they differ in many respects on when and how this came about. Similar debates about other sites in Palestine are ongoing, and the conclusions drawn at each site inevitably

affect one's conclusions about the archaeology at other sites. This is because the ceramic typology used to date the various archaeological strata was not developed from one site alone but rather by closely comparing finds from many different sites.

Hazor and many other sites in Palestine are being studied through archaeological excavations. But equally important for our understanding of the Israelite settlement are the archaeological surveys. Unlike excavations, which use carefully controlled digs to identify and date the various strata at a given site, surveys focus on larger areas. Surface pottery is collected from all of the sites in an area, with the goal of understanding the periods in which each site was inhabited. This method is obviously less intense and dependable than an actual excavation, but it allows scholars to acquire more quickly a general picture of long-term settlement patterns over a large area. Unquestionably, the surveys have given us the clearest picture of the Israelite settlement as a whole. For a list of important excavations and surveys, along with publications, see the important article by Bloch-Smith & Nakhai (1999).

The steady stream of archaeological data from the excavations and surveys has spawned a number of new theories about Israel's origins. Most of these accentuate the role that nomadic and seminomadic pastoralists played in the highland settlements of Iron I and, hence, challenge the reigning paradigm of Canaanite origins. Some scholars have refined the nomadic infiltration theory. By focusing on particular aspects of the archaeological and linguistic evidence, these scholars believe that they can trace the settlers of Palestine back to pastoralists who originated in Transjordan (Zertal 1994; Rainey 2006). But the most discussed theory in recent years has undoubtedly been that I. Finkelstein's (1988, 1996, 1998; cf. Finkelstein & Silberman 2001). Finkelstein has determined that in antiquity, the population of highland Palestine fluctuated back and forth between nomadic and settled population modalities. The emergence of Israel was one of these fluctuations, in which nomads from the highlands of the Late Bronze period settled down during the Iron I period. Consequently, the proto-Israelites originated from nomads who already lived in Canaan; one could legitimately say that Finkelstein has almost succeeded in combining the Canaanite and nomadic theories of Israel's origins. Bunimovitz has offered a twist on this model (1994). He agrees that there were indeed long-term population fluctuations that included settlement, nomadism, and resettlement, but these transitions took place not *within* the highlands but rather *between* the highlands and lowlands. On this account of things, the proto-Israelites originated from villagers and nomads in the Middle Bronze highlands, who migrated to the lowlands during the Late Bronze Age and then back into the highlands during the Late Bronze/Iron I transition, largely because of pressure from the Egyptians. The particulars aside, what is important here is that pastoral nomads are granted a prominent role in recent theories of the settlement.

Archaeological discussions of the settlement in non-Israelite Transjordan suggest that this trend will continue. In his pioneering work on the Iron I settlement patterns, Alt recognized that there was a close relationship between the settlement in Cisjordan (Israel) and the contemporary settlements that appeared in Iron I Transjordan (Israel, Ammon, Moab, and Edom). Because of this, the settlement evidence from Transjordan has become an important element in the comparative matrix scholars use to reconstruct the settlement in Cisjordan. During the last few decades, the developing consensus is that nomadic and seminomadic pastoralists were largely responsible for settling the territories of Transjordan that eventually emerged as the nations of Ammon, Moab, and Edom (see Bartlett 1992; Bienkowski 1992; Dearman 1992; Herr 1992; Worschech 1993; Levy & Hall 2002; van der Steen 2004). Insofar as this conclusion is right, the theory of Israel's nomadic origins in Cisjordan obviously gains added support. One effect of this evidence is that more scholars are nowadays embracing the nomadic origins theory. Another effect is the emergence of new hybrid origin theories that identify the Israelite ancestors as a combination of lowland Canaanites, nomadic pastoralists, and other migrant populations (Gibson 2001; Bloch-Smith 2003; Killebrew 2005). These scholars tend to accentuate the complexity of the settlement, and often consider the Cananite and nomadic origin theories to be reductionistically simple.

Theoretical judgments about the origin of Israel inevitably involve judgments about the archaeological details. Chief among these details are various features that appear in the Iron I settlements and artifacts, such as the collared-rim pithoi, the pillared (four-room) houses, the agricultural terraces, the lime-plastered cisterns, and the faunal evidence. Let us consider each of these details in turn, beginning with the pithoi.

Pithos (pl., pithoi) is the technical term for a large storage jar that is too heavy to be carried around when full. Hundreds of these jars, with collared-rims and small handles, have been unearthed at Iron I sites throughout the highlands. Scholars have debated for some time why the highland settlements sported so many of these ceramic jars. Some scholars have speculated that they were used to store water (especially Zertal 1988), whereas most others have suggested wine or olive oil. There is undoubtedly some truth in all of these suggestions. More important, perhaps, is the debate about ethnicity: are the collared-rim storage jars 'Israelite' jars that we can use to identify settlements that belonged to the Israelites? For some time the answer to this question was assumed to be 'yes', but in recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized that these jars have prototypes in the Middle and Late Bronze Canaanite ceramics, and that the so-called 'Israelite' exemplars were sometimes produced and used by those living outside of the hill country (Finkelstein 1997; Cohen-Weinberger & Wolff 2001). It would seem, in fact, that the pithoi are such complex pieces of pottery, being large yet sporting very thin walls, that the rural

Israelites could not have had the expertise to produce them. Consequently, scholars have deduced that the jars were produced by itinerant potters or were transported to the various sites from specialized workshops. Recent petrographic analysis of the pottery seems to suggest that the specialized workshop scenario is more probable (see Cohen-Weinberger & Wolff 2001). Equally telling for our understanding of the pithoi is the fact that they seem to be extremely uniform in size and shape. Raban has suggested that such uniformity is not a coincidence but reflects instead an attempt to meet some standard of liquid measure, probably dictated by the Egyptian rulers of Palestine during the Late Bronze and Early Iron I era. The Israelites would have adopted the design and perhaps the unit of measure.

Although the data just adduced will at first seem to refute the ethnic significance of the collared-rim pithoi, it would be truer to say that it makes the question of their ethnic significance more complex. For whether the pithoi were produced and used in non-Israelite areas or not, it remains the case that widespread use of collared-rim jars, and of the simple ceramic repertoire associated with them, was limited to a well-defined region of highland settlements in Cisjordan and Transjordan (Killebrew 2001). Consequently, these pithoi are one important marker of the profound socioeconomic transformations that took place in the highlands during the Late Bronze/Iron I transition. Insofar as earliest Israel was a product of those transformations, the collared-rim pithoi become a potential indicator of the proto-Israelite or Israelite presence. This is particularly true when the pithoi appear in conjunction with other indicative features of the new highland way of life, such as the so-called 'four-room house'.

The debate about the four-room pillared house and its connection with Israelite ethnicity hinges in part on interpretations of the house itself. According to some scholars, the popularity of the house style stemmed from its functional utility for the agrarian and pastoral activities of the highland settlers (Stager 1985a; Holladay 1997). This approach makes it less likely that the houses had a particular ethnic association. Also pointing in this nonethnic direction is the ostensible use of the same house plan *outside* of the Israelite territories (Ahlström 1982; Finkelstein 1996), as well as the obvious similarities between the four-room houses and earlier Canaanite architecture from the Late Bronze Age (Callaway 1987; Givon 1999). Scholars who view the houses as ethnic markers see things differently. Some have suggested that the four-room houses were designed to mimic the nomadic tents used by the Israelites before the settlement (Fritz 1977; Herzog 1984), but this has not been widely accepted. More promising for the ethnic argument are those studies that combine attention to the structure and distribution of the houses with the social values that these imply. Faust & Bunimovitz (2003), in particular, have employed sociological resources to show that the four-room houses were very different from standard Canaanite houses. In their opinion, this reflects an egalitarian

Israelite society that contrasted with the hierarchical societies of Canaan. They further argue that the four-room houses rarely appear outside of the Israelite territories, and that exemplars in outside territories almost always deviate from the standard architectural features of the highland homes. Moreover, the four-room houses appeared during the Iron I period with the rise of the Israelite settlements in Cisjordan and Transjordan, predominated throughout the Iron II era, and then disappeared from the scene precisely when the southern kingdom fell in 586 BCE. In the opinions of Faust and Bunimovitz, this fact in itself implies an ethnic association between the four-room house and Israelite identity.

Like the collared-rim jars and pillared houses, the use of agricultural terraces on the highland slopes has long been interpreted as a sign of the early Israelite presence. This is not because the terraces have been securely dated, for in many cases this is not easily done; rather, it is mainly because scholars have assumed that terrace agriculture was necessary to support the population increases associated with the hill country settlers (see de Geus 1975; Marfoe 1979; Thompson 1979; Ahlström 1982; Borowski 1988; Dever 2003). But as with the other 'standard' archaeological indicators of the Israelite presence, the ethnic significance of the terraces is now being vigorously questioned. Foremost is the problem that the terraces, if needed by Iron I Israelites, would also have been needed by earlier Middle Bronze highlanders. And indeed, there is evidence that agricultural terraces were already being used to some extent in the Early Bronze Age (see Gibson 2001). Hence, the terraces cannot be uniquely Israelite, as was previously supposed. A few scholars have gone a step farther by questioning the importance of the terraces for early Israel's subsistence agriculture (Hopkins 1985), but this viewpoint has not been widely accepted. For while the terraces were not always necessary, in some cases they were absolutely necessary (Finkelstein 1988, p. 202). So the net of the matter is that the early Israelites probably did use terraces to some extent, if for no other reason than that these were needed to prevent extensive erosion (Gibson 2001). But at this point it is difficult to determine the extent to which the earliest Israelites used this technology, mainly because it is not easy to accurately date the terrace structures in the highlands (Finkelstein 1996).

Another technology that has figured prominently in discussions of the highland settlement is the lime-plastered cistern. Rainfall in the highlands was seasonal, falling almost exclusively from late autumn to early spring. This means that little or no rain appears during the long, hot summers. Given that water is essential for human survival, solving this problem was important for the highland settlers. In many cases the difficulty was alleviated by perennial springs, which spouted ground water throughout the dry season. In some other cases, the ground water was sufficiently close to the surface to be reached by well digging. Where neither springs nor wells sufficed, survival depended on the use of cisterns that stored a

sufficient amount of runoff rain water during the wet season to last through the long dry season. Because the cisterns were generally hewn from porous rock, the highlanders waterproofed their walls by applying lime plaster to them. Some scholars of the last generation suggested that this was one of the key innovations that permitted the highland settlement of Israel (Aharoni 1971, p. 58; Albright 1971, p. 113; Callaway 1984; 1985, p. 40), but it is now clear that the proto-Israelites/Israelites did not 'invent' lime plaster solutions; the technology was known long before the Late Bronze/Iron I era (see especially R. Miller 1980, as well as Dever 2003, pp. 115–7; Finkelstein 1988, p. 194). The debated issue at present is whether this technology was nonetheless an essential technology for the settlement. Dever (2003) continues to emphasize the technology's importance, but it seems to me that Finkelstein (1988, pp. 194–8) has it right: as a rule, most of the new highland settlements were not too far from stable water sources. It was only in the exceptional cases that the plastered cisterns would have been truly necessary for survival in the highlands. But indeed, in these instances, the cisterns, or large pithoi (cf. Zertal 1988), would have been essential for survival, just as the agricultural terraces were necessary in some settlement situations. Given that cistern and terrace technologies were widely known, and were necessary for settlement in certain highland areas, it is difficult to accept the thesis that these are unique markers of Israelite identity.

Perhaps the most promising indication of Israel's ethnic presence in Palestine comes from the faunal remains. In recent years, scholars have recognized that the Iron I highland settlers raised bovine and especially ovine species, but almost no pigs (see Hesse 1990; Hesse & Wapnish 1997; Prag 1998). Given that pigs were more common in the Canaanite lowlands and were considered unclean in the Hebrew Scriptures, some scholars have taken the absence of pig remains as evidence of the settlers' Israelite identity (including, cautiously, Finkelstein 1998). To be sure, some pig bones were found in the highlands, and we cannot know whether pig abstinence was in fact an ethnic index (i.e., a conscious marker of ethnic identity) for the ancient settlers. Nevertheless, the faunal remains may serve as indicators *to us* of a unique highland culture. Among other things, given that nomads did not raise pigs, this evidence could be taken to suggest that the highlanders originated as pastoralists, as so many recent theories (and the Bible) assert.

Scholars who use the combination of collared-rim jars, pillared houses, plastered cisterns, faunal remains, and other indicia to identify the early Israelites are employing what is technically known as the 'culture area' approach to ethnoarchaeology. This paradigm identifies ancient societies by a combination of archaeological traits that appear together in a delimited environmental zone. Is this a legitimate approach to the matter? It must be admitted that in the case of ancient Israel, none of archaeological traits that are normally used to identify Israel were exclusively Israelite

(Bloch-Smith 2003). In reality, then, the identification of Israel in the artifacts is not being made solely on the basis of the archaeology; it is made by integrating the archaeological evidence with the biblical suggestion that early Israel will be found in the Iron Age highlands. The persuasiveness of this approach would be more compelling, of course, if some of the biblical traditions that describe the Israelite settlement could be confidently dated to the Iron I period. It is to that biblical evidence that we now turn.

C. THE ANTIQUITY AND HISTORICITY OF THE BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

Modern scholars have raised many questions about the historical value of the Hebrew Bible, particularly when it comes to the earliest periods in Israel's history. The net result is that one can reasonably speak of 'maximalist', 'moderate', and 'minimalist' views of the Bible as a historical source. Each view produces a particular kind of Israelite history. Maximalists tend to do little more than paraphrase the Bible's storyline (e.g., Provan, Long & Longman 2003); by way of contrast, the minimalists tend to describe the Bible as a work of late fiction, which only enlightens our understanding of postexilic Jewish history (e.g., Davies 1992; Whitelam 1996; Lemche 1998; Thompson 1999). Within the landscape of modern scholarship, however, both of these perspectives are minority views. The most common historical posture is the so-called 'moderate' view, which stands between these extremes as it cautiously engages the Bible as a potential source of historically useful information about the history of Israel (e.g., Soggin 1985; Williamson 1998; Liverani 2005; Miller & Hayes 2006).

There are good reasons for taking the Bible seriously as a source of historical insight. Foremost among them is the story of Israel's first kings, Saul and David (see 1 and 2 Samuel). A politically sensitive reading of this material reveals (in the view of many scholars) that it originated as pro-Davidic propaganda, designed to discredit Saul and to defend David against the charge that he was a serial killer and a traitor, who fought against Israel as a Philistine mercenary (see Brettler 1996; McKenzie 2000; Halpern 2001; Sparks 2005b). This material therefore dates to the tenth century and is fairly extensive. If so much tradition comes down to us from early in the Iron II period, it should not be a surprise if Iron I traditions from the previous two centuries – including from the settlement period – are also preserved in the Hebrew Bible. And in fact, most of the core traditions in the book of Judges do not fit any later periods and are therefore best understood as products of the premonarchic (i.e., Iron I) period. The most obvious case in point is the archaic poetry in the Song of Deborah (Judges, Chapter 5). This is a relatively ancient poem, which recalls a military conflict between the Israelite tribes (without Judah!) and the Canaanite cities of Megiddo and Taanach. The date of the tradition can be deduced from several of its features. First, Megiddo fell to Israel

no later than tenth century BCE (Shiloh 1993). Given that the song is by no means an account of Megiddo's fall (it makes the lesser claim that the Canaanites seized no spoils from Israel), we should assume that it dates to Iron I, and almost certainly before the Philistines destroyed it *ca.* 1130 BCE (cf. Ussishkin 1995). Second, the poem locates the tribe of Dan in its original setting close to the Mediterranean coast. The tribe migrated to the North sometime during (or perhaps even before) the Iron I period, as described in the Bible and confirmed by archaeological evidence (see Biran 1989; Bloch-Smith & Nakhai 1999). So the tradition in the song would seem to date prior to this migration. A third piece of evidence regarding the song's date is the name of the Canaanite general, Sisera. The origin of this name has been a mystery for some time, but Redford (1992a, p. 257–8) has recently suggested that it is probably to be understood as *Ssy-r'*, which was a nickname of Pharaoh Ramses II (r. 1290–1224 BCE). This identification is contextually fitting, given that Megiddo was at the end of the Late Bronze era both a Canaanite city and an Egyptian stronghold. One implication of this conclusion is that the song probably includes fictional elements, for it is historically unlikely that a woman with a hammer and tent peg would manage to kill an enemy general, much less a king of Egypt (Judges 5:24–7). Taken together, this evidence suggests that the Song of Deborah can be comfortably placed into the Late Bronze/Iron I milieu. To be sure, dating the song's tradition this early is a scholarly judgment rather than a fool-proof conclusion. But it is a reasonable and sensible judgment, based on converging lines of evidence.

Isolating the Song of Deborah to an Iron I (or even Late Bronze) context is important because the song reflects several features of Israelite identity that, once contextualized, can provide a window into the social and religious world of early Israel. For instance, the song enumerates ten rather than 12 tribes, and even these do not cohere precisely with the tribes of later tradition. In particular, the southern tribes of Judah and Simeon are not included. This is early evidence of the fact that Hebrew speakers in the north and south of Palestine developed somewhat separate identities. The pan-Israelite perspective of the Bible, with its 12 tribes headed by a king from Judah, is therefore a later development in Israelite identity (see Sparks 2003). A further implication is that Israel originated as a coalition or league of separate tribes. This runs counter to the biblical account in the Pentateuch, which comes from a much later period and makes Israel the single people from which the various tribes emerged. The song also provides insight into the nature of early Israelite religion. Yahweh is regarded in the poem as the 'god of Israel' for whom the people should fight. This implies that common religious affection provided one important tie between the tribes. At the same time, a prominent theme in the song is that numerous tribes failed to join the battle (Judges 5:15–7). Simple geography shows that these tribes were those most distant from

the disputed territories in the Jezreel (Stager 1989). Consequently, we may reasonably infer that identity in early Israel was largely tribal, and that the religious links between the tribes were not enough to prompt common action when political and economic motivations were lacking. And continuing with the theme of religious identity, the song also implies something about the origins of Israelite Yahwism and, hence, of Israel itself. Yahweh is said to have entered Palestine from regions in the South, from the environs of Mount Seir and Edom (Judges 5:4–5). This suggests that not only Yahweh but also the people themselves (or at least some of the people) were migrants from the dry regions south of Palestine; this evidence naturally suits the modern scholarly theory, and the ancient biblical tradition, that the ancestors of the Israelites were pastoral nomads.

The Song of Deborah illustrates why a majority of scholars believe that the book of Judges provides a useful window into the social world of ancient Israel during the Iron I period. The book of Joshua is a different matter. Joshua's narrative shape is largely a product of Deuteronomistic theology, a revolutionary religious perspective that emerged after the discovery of the book of Deuteronomy during the seventh century reign of King Josiah of Judah (Van Seters 1983, pp. 322–53; Levinson 1997; Römer 1997; Sweeney 2001). Yet even in this case, there are reputable scholars who believe that a modicum of Early Iron Age history can be derived from the book's pages (e.g., Na'aman 1994).

To summarize: although the matter is still very much debated, many scholars believe that the book of Judges, and to some extent the book of Joshua, preserve memories of the early Israelite experience. When the biblical sources are approached with this kind of guarded optimism, the result is a portrait of early Israel that corresponds with the very meager evidence from the roughly contemporary Merneptah Stela. To be sure, the 'Israel' of Iron I was very different from the Israelite and Judean states that arose later. Nevertheless, it would appear that at least some of the Iron I populations in the highlands of Palestine knew that they participated in a social modality called 'Israel', and these same people, although they were certainly polytheists, apparently revered the god Yahweh in some unique way. So, although some scholars would demure, it seems a legitimate shorthand to refer to the Iron I settlers as 'Israelites'. And to judge from their absence in the Amarna Letters and presence in the Merneptah Stela, we may deduce that Israel's ethnogenesis took place during the latter half of the Late Bronze Age. To some extent, the religious evidence bears this conclusion out.

D. THE RELIGIOUS EVIDENCE AND ISRAELITE ORIGINS

The Israelites began their trek through history as monotheistic Yahwists. It was only because of outside influences, especially from the Canaanites and foreign peoples, that polytheism and pagan practices entered into their

religious bloodstream. This is, at least, how the Bible tells the story. But for quite a while, biblical scholars have viewed the development of Israelite religion differently. The first development in this direction was the so-called pan-Babylonian movement, which arose in Germany during the nineteenth century (Larsen 1995). At that point, it was first recognized that newly discovered Babylonian texts – like the creation epic (*Enuma Elish*) and flood story – were very similar to, and older than, the biblical creation and flood stories. The natural (but misguided) over-reaction was to assume that the Israelites borrowed much of their religious tradition and literature from Mesopotamia, and this is how things unfolded. But scholars eventually realized that this was a mistake, and that Israel's traditions were, on balance, more native to Canaan than Mesopotamia.

One reason for this development was the discovery of the Ugaritic texts during the 1930s and afterward. These texts provided our first direct glimpses into Canaanite religion during the Bronze Age (on the assumption that religion at Ugarit, along the coast of the northern Levant, was similar to the religious scene further south in Palestine). It was immediately recognized that the Hebrew language, and its poetry, were similar to Ugaritic; it was also recognized that the gods and goddesses of Ugarit – deities like El, Baal, Asherah, etc. – were the self-same as those mentioned in the Bible and in the epigraphic evidence from elsewhere in the Levant. It was not long after this that some scholars began to surmise that Israelite religion probably did not begin as pure monotheism. More likely is that it developed from the standard polytheism of Bronze and Iron Age Palestine (see recent Discussion in Smith 1990, 2001; cf. Noll 2007). Evidence for the polytheistic, Canaanite heritage of Israel's faith appears in numerous biblical texts. Deuteronomy (32:8–9) is a good example. A comparison of the Masoretic Hebrew of this text with the Greek translation reveals that our present Hebrew text has probably been altered. The original poetry would have read as follows:

When the Most High (Elyon) allotted peoples for inheritance;
 When he divided up humanity;
 He fixed the boundaries for the peoples; According to the number of the
 divine sons;
 For Yahweh's portion is his people;
 Jacob his own inheritance (translation from Smith 2001, p. 143).

This text reflects the old Canaanite view of things, in which El, as the highest deity in the pantheon, allotted to the lower deities (in this case Yahweh) their particular peoples and spheres of influence. The fact that our present Hebrew text obscures this (unlike the Greek Septuagint) shows that later monotheistic scribes not only noticed the problem but actually altered the text to resolve it. From this we may reasonably conclude that early Israelites not only worshipped deities besides Yahweh (such as El and Baal) but also accepted the pantheon structure of Canaanite religion,

which placed the god El in the top tier of the pantheon. Deities from lower in the Canaanite pantheon structure, such as Resheph and Deber, also appear in some old biblical poetry (see Habakkuk 3:5; cf. Smith 2001, p. 47). So in terms of both the deities involved and the religious structures, there are obvious connections between the religion of early Israel and the standard views of Canaanite religion. For many scholars, this is yet more evidence of Israel's Canaanite origins (e.g., Dever 1994, 2003, p. 125–8; Alpert-Nakhai 2001).

On the other hand, those who trace Israel's origins back to pastoral nomadism also believe that the religious evidence is on their side. The major deities worshipped by Israel, and by the new societies in Transjordan (Ammon, Moab, and Edom), seem to be other than standard Canaanite deities. Yahweh (Israel), Milkom (Ammon), Chemosh (Moab), and Qaus (Edom) either do not appear at all in the Canaanite evidence, or possibly appear as minor deities (in the case of Milkom). Moreover, pastoral nomads in the steppe and desert areas south of Palestine appear to have used the names Yahweh and Qaus in the names of places and/or tribal groups. This information, which dates to the Late Bronze era, is drawn from Egyptian descriptions of the *Shasu* peoples. *Shasu* is not an ethnic name; it is a generic label applied by the Egyptians to nomadic pastoralists, especially those who lived in and around Palestine. For this reason, some scholars are quite convinced that the early Israelites were essentially one and the same with the *Shasu*. The appeal of this conclusion is heightened by the Bible itself, which locates the homeland of Yahweh in regions south of Palestine that were frequented by the *Shasu*, in places like Seir, Edom, Teman, and Paran. This tradition must be very ancient, given that it appears in the oldest poems of the Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 33:2; Judges 5:4–5; Habakkuk 3:3); moreover, it is unlikely that later Israelites would have invented the idea that Yahweh came from Edom, a nation with which Israel had ongoing conflicts.

Another piece of the religious evidence, often cited by those who support the pastoralist theory of Israel's origins, is the onomastic evidence (the evidence from Israelite personal names). Semitic names were often created by joining verbal forms to the names of gods. The name 'Elijah' is translated as 'My God is Yahweh', for instance. In a landmark study, J. Tigay demonstrated from the epigraphic evidence (from the actual ancient texts) that ancient Israelite and Judean names were predominantly Yahwistic or Elohist; Pike did the same with the biblical names. If we assume along with Tigay that the 'El' names are generic references to Yahweh rather than to the god El (because the Israelites often referred to Yahweh as El or as Elohim), this would suggest that Yahweh was the most important deity in Israel for most of its history (see Tigay 1986; Pike 1990; Zevit 2001); in fact, this would seem to be true even if we set the assumption aside. Because Yahweh was not a Canaanite deity, this evidence raises obvious questions about the supposed Canaanite origins of early Israel. At the

same time, it should be noted that some of the most important names from Israel's early history – names like Jacob, Isaac, Moses, David, Solomon, Saul, Ishbaal, and Mephibaaal – are not Yahwistic at all and in some cases reflect the names of other gods. From this and from other evidence, we can reasonably conclude that earliest Israel was by no means wholly Yahwistic; but we can also reasonably conclude that Yahweh was already an important highland deity during the Iron I period.

In the end, when it comes to the religious evidence, it would seem that those from both theoretical 'camps' face data that need to be integrated into a full-orbed account of Israel's origins. Scholars who embrace the Canaanite origins theory must explain the prominence of gods like Yahweh, Chemosh, and Qaus among the new highland settlers, while scholars on the other side of the issue must explain why Israel's early nomadic faith appears, in many respects, to have been profoundly 'Canaanite'.

E. ISRAEL AND THE 'NOMADIC IDEAL'

For those who espouse the Canaanite origins theory, the biblical tradition of Israel's nomadic origins presents an obvious problem. The standard explanation for this disjunction is that the Israelites embraced a romantic view of the nomadic lifestyle and for this reason invented their tradition of nomadic origins (see Dever 1998). Now it is true that Israel had a romantic view of its own nomadic origins, as we see especially in the prophecies of Hosea (see Flight 1923; Humbert 1925). Yet, it is not at all clear that the Israelites thought well of actual nomads (Sparks 2007). The Amalekites and Midianites were marked for extermination (Exodus 17:14; Numbers 31), and the Ishmaelites were destined to 'live in hostility' with Israel (see Genesis 16:12). Only the Kenites enjoyed Israelite affections, but these nomads were probably not pastoralists so much as itinerant metal smiths. As in other cultures, the Israelites accepted the smiths because they valued their Kenite technology – not because the Kenites were pastoral nomads (McNutt 1991, 1994; Frick 1971). It therefore appears that Israelite attitudes toward the nomads essentially paralleled what we normally find among settled peoples: they did not much care for the nomads (Sparks 2007). Consequently, it is very likely that Israel's nomadic ideal stems from the actual nomadic experiences of some or most of the Iron I highland settlers.

Equally problematic for the Canaanite origins theory is that Israel entirely forgot its ostensible homeland in the lowlands of Palestine. Of course, if there were a lengthy gap between the Iron I period and the biblical traditions, this would perhaps not be too surprising. But the fact that the Bible apparently preserves memories of the early Israelite experience makes it more difficult to explain how Israel managed to forget its true origins so completely. That Israel had ancient memories of its nomadic origins, and no memory whatsoever of its Canaanite origins, seems to strongly

support the nomadic origins theory. Whether this evidence is finally convincing depends, to a great extent, upon what one thinks about the nature of tradition, and about its use as a source for historical reconstruction.

F. THE TRANSITION FROM LATE BRONZE TO IRON I, AND THE COMING OF THE ARAMEANS

The date of 1200 BCE roughly marks the point of transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron I period. In many respects, the reason for the transition was the arrival of the so-called Sea Peoples, who migrated by sea into the Levant from their homelands in the vicinity of the Aegean Sea. The effect was felt immediately from Hatti in the North to Libya in the South. The Hittite kingdom came to an end, and Egypt managed to defend itself at great cost, losing its southern Levantine empire – including Palestine – to the Sea Peoples and/or the locals. The most famous group of Sea Peoples is undoubtedly the Philistines, who figure so prominently in Israelite history, but there were other groups, such as the Tjeker, Shardanu, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh (see Dothan 1995; Knapp 1995).

No one knows precisely why the Sea Peoples decided to migrate from their Aegean homelands. There are many theories that emphasize climatic changes, socioeconomic developments, or both. But the important point is that the effect of their immigration was felt all across the Levant and even deep into Syria and Mesopotamia (see Na'aman 1994). On the basis of archaeological, textual, and onomastic evidence, modern scholars have determined that one of these effects was the immigration of peoples from the north of Palestine into Palestine itself. Most numerous among them were the Hurrian peoples, who lived in Southwest Anatolia and to the northwest of Mesopotamia (see Morrison 1992). Some scholars have concluded that the Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites, Gergashite, and Perizzites confronted by Israel in the Bible are best understood as Hurrians, or at least, as peoples of northern origin (Mendenhall 1973; Na'aman 1994; Ofer 2001). Even before the urban and social collapse at the end of the Late Bronze era, there is evidence of significant migrations from the North into Palestine. This can be surmised from the names of some Late Bronze Canaanites mentioned in the Amarna Letters, such as Abdi-Hepa of Jerusalem (Hepa being the name of a Hurrian goddess). Taken together, this evidence suggests that not only pastoralists and Canaanites, but also other migrant peoples, contributed to the settlement of the highlands during the Iron I period.

This conclusion is reinforced by another group of migrants who may have contributed to the settlement. Although their origins are obscure, textual evidence tells us that the Arameans were migrant pastoralists, who during the Iron Age began to forcefully expand from their core territories in the Upper Euphrates basin into other settled areas. Tiglath-pileser I of Assyria (*ca.* 1114–1076) claims to have crossed the Euphrates River 28 times in

pursuit of them. Their influence was felt from Mesopotamia in the East to Lebanon and Syria in the South and West. Numerous Aramean states emerged during the Iron I and Iron II periods, most notably the Aramean kingdom whose capital was Damascus. Also making their appearance were the small Aramean kingdoms of Maacah and Geshur, in the Bashan region of Transjordan, just North of where the Israelites (or proto-Israelites) first settled in Iron I Transjordan. Given this proximity to the early highland settlers, it seems very likely that some of these migrating Arameans contributed to the Israelite/proto-Israelite settlement in Transjordan, and perhaps in Cisjordan as well. That this was the case is perhaps implied by the Israelite Jacob story, which associates the patriarch with Aram (Genesis, Chapters 29–31; cf. Hosea 12:12); Jacob is also remembered in Deuteronomy as a ‘wandering Aramean’ (Deuteronomy 26:5).

G. THE LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

Little attention has been given to the Hebrew language and its implications for the origins of Israel. But as of this writing, there is an emerging debate about this linguistic evidence. Anson Rainey (2006, p. 112) is arguing that ancient Hebrew stands much closer to the languages of Transjordan (e.g., Moabite and southern Old Aramaic) than to the languages of Cisjordan as represented by coastal Canaanite and Phoenician. In his view, this is added evidence for the theory that Israel originated from pastoralists, who migrated into the Palestine from the East. Additional arguments for his thesis are forthcoming in journals (see *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 57, 2007) and in presentations at professional meetings. Whether Rainey’s theory will find traction in the Israelite origins debate is hard to say at this early juncture. But I should point out that his view of the linguistic evidence seems to contrast starkly with the monograph of W. R. Garr, who argues for a very close linguistic relationship between Hebrew, Moabite, and Phoenician (see Garr 2004).

IV. Conclusions

At this point, it is unclear how the debate about Israel’s origins will unfold. The Canaanite origins hypothesis is clearly more popular with scholars, but the nomadic origins theory is now gaining ground, particularly among archaeologists who specialize in the Iron I settlement of Cisjordan and Transjordan and in the question of Israelite origins. In my view, although all parties in the debate have something to contribute to our portrait of Israel’s origins, it seems likely that scholars will increasingly accept the role of nomads in the settlement as we move forward. The contribution of immigrants from the North to the settlement will also receive more attention. One question that requires some focused attention

in future research regards the actual potential of the settled Canaanite lowlands to supply the population growth of the new highland settlements. Stager (1985b) has asserted, for instance, that there were too few people living in the lowlands to account for the rapid population growth in the highlands. Is he right? If he is, then this would lend new support for the pastoralist origins theory. But at this point it would seem that no-full blown study has yet considered this matter in detail.

It remains to be seen whether a new consensus will emerge on the question of Israel's origins, and if so, whether that new consensus will feature hybrid theories (which identify Israel's predecessors as a combination of Canaanites, pastoralists, and northern immigrants), or in the form of full-blown nomadic origin theories, which maintain that most of the Iron I settlers were originally pastoralists. But one thing is certain: good theories of Israelite origins, and hence, of Israelite identity, will need to explain how the Israelites came to view themselves as invading Yahwistic pastoralists, who were the mortal enemies of the native Canaanites.

Short Biography

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Note

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