

The Palestine–Israel Conflict

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A Basic Introduction

Fourth Edition

Gregory Harms
with Todd M. Ferry



PlutoPress
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2005
Fourth edition published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 9927 0 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 9926 3 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0113 5 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0115 9 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0114 2 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Canaan–Palestine: Ancient History

Todd M. Ferry

THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF PALESTINE

Why begin a book like this so far back in time from the present? First, we need to dispel the common misconception that the Palestine–Israel conflict is a struggle that has lasted for hundreds of years, millennia, or even since the time of Abraham’s sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Second, it is important to show change over time. The history of the region goes back many thousands of years. Over that time, many peoples have populated the land of Palestine – not just Arabs and Jews – and they lived together, intermixed, intermarried, merged, and grew apart. Change is central to this story and so it will be constantly emphasized. Lastly, we need to be aware of the shared heritage of both peoples. Though Palestinians and Jews see themselves as different now, there is a remarkable congruence to their histories that should be remembered when considering the modern conflict and both people’s claims to the land of Palestine.

Before we begin we need to say a word about the Bible.¹ The first place people often turn to for the history of ancient Palestine is the Bible, and indeed it has been the single most influential source. No doubt it offers a rare glimpse into the history of Israel as well as Israel’s neighbors. But the Bible is religious literature written and compiled for reasons other than the purely historical. We know from critical study that

it is a composite text made up of several books, each of which has its own religious, cultural, political, and personal (the writer's) perspective. It has also been copied, translated, and redacted (edited) by people with their own understanding of its meaning. In brief it has its own "spin" on history that may or may not reflect actual events and certainly not every side to the story.

There are other sources at our disposal. If our concern is for a fuller, more complete understanding of the ancient history of Palestine then archaeology, non-biblical texts, geography, and other interdisciplinary forms of study, should all have a hand in historical reconstruction. In this very general overview of the history of ancient Palestine we will attempt to bring in as much of these other sources as we can, while also drawing on histories of others who try to do the same. It all sounds complicated at first, and though reconstructing the history of ancient Palestine is a very complex matter, this chapter will attempt to make it easily understandable.

CHRONOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

Before we begin, a quick chronological and geographical note. Over thousands of years the cultures of Palestine changed. Conventional approaches break down the ancient history of the region into periods following technological change (Bronze Age, Iron Age, etc.) or some other dominant feature (Hellenistic Age, Roman Empire, etc.). These will be noted in the section headings as we go. We will also be using BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) instead of the abbreviations AD (Anno Domini) and BC (Before Christ). The Common Era abbreviations are now the convention, in an attempt to avoid religious preferences.

Regarding geography, I have chosen to use "Palestine" as the most neutral and encompassing of modern names for the region (though this is certainly debatable).² For the ancient periods, I will start with the broad territorial term "Canaan," since it was one of the first recorded names for the region. Ancient Canaan covers an area slightly larger than the modern

land of Palestine (including Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank), to encompass Lebanon, southern Syria, the western half of Jordan, and the Sinai Peninsula. As the many specific kingdoms (Israel, Philistia, Moab, etc.), empires (Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, etc.), or provinces (Judaea, Samerina, etc.) are established in the region, I will refer to them by what they were called in antiquity and describe them as we go. Don't worry, it's pretty straightforward.

SETTING THE STAGE

Over the course of several hundred thousand years known as the Paleolithic period (Paleolithic, “the stone age”: 1.4 million years ago to 8500 BCE) human beings evolved, left Africa, and came to Palestine, developing their own unique cultures. During the following Neolithic period (“the new stone age”: 8500–4300 BCE) they settled in villages, learned to domesticate animals and plants, and discovered clay could be manipulated into shapes and baked to form pottery – huge achievements in an amazingly short period of time. In the Chalcolithic period (“the copper and stone age”: 4300–3300 BCE) their villages got larger, their homes more permanent, and they discovered how to make things for the first time with metal (copper). While all of this early pre-history is certainly important, it is really in the following periods that we know more about the ancient history of Palestine and when we begin to see one of the most important cultures in the region develop. Here we will begin with our more detailed survey – in the Bronze Age.

THE BRONZE AGE AND THE CANAANITES

(Early: 3300–2000 BCE, Middle: 2000–1550 BCE, Late: 1550–1150 BCE)

By the beginning of the Bronze Age people in Palestine were living in well-fortified, walled cities. Palestine was becoming urban, and urbanism changed the social structure of ancient society. As is true for most of the ancient Near East, people lived in tribal societies where everything was based on kinship relations. You were part of a tribe, the member of a family, and

the son of your father. Now with true urbanism, you could (though not everyone was) also be associated with a city or town. It is from the archaeological excavation of these cities (called “tells”) that we have been able to learn so much about the ancient peoples of Palestine – and one people in particular during this period.

By the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age a whole new and important culture, called Canaanite culture, took hold of the region. The majority of peoples in Canaan spoke the same Semitic language, made similar styles of pottery and weapons and art from bronze (for which the period is named), and shared the same religion of many gods, whose head god, famously, was El (mentioned in the Bible). Ancient people even referred to the population of the region as “Canaanite.” The term is used consistently throughout the Bible, and it is found in archives from Syria, Egypt, and Mesopotamia dating to the Middle Bronze Age and later.³ Remember the Canaanites because they remain important for much of the following.

Now, the Canaanites were not alone. Palestine has always been the crossroads of the Near East; people came and went, passing through from one region to the next. It was an especially busy place during the Bronze Age. The Amorites, from Syria, are one group that migrated in and may have had a particularly profound effect on the Canaanite way of life. Joining with the local population, they brought new types of architecture and new artistic traditions to Canaanite culture. Movement between Canaan and Egypt was also quite common during this period (indeed, throughout Palestine’s history), and for some unknown reason, perhaps because of famine or even pressure from the Amorite migration, some Canaanites moved south into Lower Egypt (the Delta region). Once in the Delta, they managed to take control of it and rule for over a hundred years as what would be called the Hyksos or “foreign” Dynasty.

The history of this period is very important for biblical historians. Many, including one of the most famous and influential archaeologists to study ancient Palestine, William F. Albright,⁴ attempted to place the stories of the biblical

“Semitic”

The term “Semitic” derives from the biblical table of nations where Noah’s son Shem is said to be the father of Arabs, Babylonians, Assyrians, Aramaeans, and Hebrews (Gen. 10). Historically it has been applied both as a linguistic and a cultural term. As a linguistic term it describes, very well, the similarities among a particular family of languages spoken in the Middle East. The Semitic languages are among a branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family, which includes such languages as (in historical order): Akkadian, Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Ethiopic, and Arabic, among many other lesser known and ancient languages, such as Ugaritic and Proto-Sinaitic. It might seem strange to think that Hebrew, Ethiopic, and Arabic are all related languages. There are many differences between them, but overall, the grammar, syntax, system of writing (for example right to left), the sounds, and even some roots and words are the same. As a linguistic term Semitic is useful, as a cultural term it is not. The problem with using Semitic to describe a culture is that the cultures referred to as Semitic are so diverse. Though they speak similar languages, the people are not at all the same. Sometimes the term is used to designate Jews singularly, but often in a derogatory way, making the term, again, not very useful to describe a people and culture. The best way to avoid all of this is to use Semitic only as a linguistic term and refer to each distinct group of people as they wish to be called.

patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, in the Middle Bronze Age period. Abraham and his family’s journey from Ur to Harran and then south to Canaan is often tied to the Amorite migration. At first it seems the journey of Abraham might fit that description very well – but unfortunately, it is not that easy. There is no proof that what we call the Middle Bronze Age is the period the biblical writers had in mind, and while it seems to make a suitable backdrop for Abraham’s life, other periods would work just as well. Neither do superficial similarities between Abraham and the Amorites prove that a historical Abraham existed. Most scholars suggest that he is more likely a mythical or literary figure of tradition to be remembered for his moral lessons and religious piety.

The story of the patriarch Joseph’s enslavement and later high position under Pharaoh is also often linked to Hyksos rule over Egypt. Here again, we are in the same situation as with the Abraham story. A historical Joseph may or may not have existed, and though the parallels are intriguing, as of yet, little more can be said. The same is true of the other patriarchal

figures. That is not to deny their religious significance; faith, of course, requires one to look beyond proof.

Early Indications of Israel

The Late Bronze Age began with a reversal of Canaanite/Hyksos fortunes in Egypt and, indeed, Canaan as well. Egypt chased the Hyksos dynasty out of the Delta, sending them running back to Canaan, but the Egyptians did not stop there. Surprisingly, they invaded bringing all of Canaan under Egyptian control. Pharaoh only loosely ruled the region, but governors were placed in the major cities along with small armies. We learn from letters (on clay tablets) sent from these governors of Canaan back to Egypt, however, that some native Canaanites would not bow down to their Egyptian masters. They turned their backs on Egyptian-controlled Canaanite society to become what the Egyptians called “bandits and marauders” or *Hapiru* in the language of the letters.

The similarity between this name and “Hebrew” has not gone unnoticed – and here we enter into the mystery of the first Israelites and where they came from. There is no archaeological or textual proof this early on for the people soon to be known as Israelites, but there are some fascinating hints as to its origins. These letters are the first major breakthrough. The two names Hapiru/Hebrew, it turns out, are not synonymous. The range and context of Hapiru in most letters suggests it was not used singularly for one ethnic group.⁵ But the possibility remains that the Israelites are somehow related to the Hapiru and that they might have been an offshoot or formed a unified group under similar circumstances.

The Late Bronze Age affords us other tantalizing indications of the Israelites’ origins. The *Shasu* who roamed the deserts of southeastern Canaan are another important group we know from Egyptian sources. Much like the Hapiru, they too were considered marauders and bandits and a general nuisance for Egypt’s routes north into Palestine. Most intriguing about the Shasu, however, is that they worshipped a god by the name of *YHW*, or Yahweh. Moreover, and equally intriguing, the Shasu land, later called Edom in the Bible, contains within its bounds

the traditional site of Mount Sinai.⁶ Can this be coincidence? Here may be found a source for later Israelite Yahwism, but how the god might have passed from Shasu to the Israelites remains uncertain. Some have suggested Edomite–Shasu clans migrated into Canaan bringing the deity Yahweh with them, and that this may have taken place during the Israelite Exodus from Egypt.

We need to touch on the Exodus for a moment since the Late Bronze Age is the period most often suggested for a historical setting to the story. It is probably the most famous story in the Bible and central to the development of Judaism. Moses leads the Hebrews out of slavery and through the desert to Canaan, the promised land of milk and honey. However, despite what some have tried to show, evidence for the Exodus has yet to be discovered. The extra-biblical sources are conspicuously silent. No proof has yet verified the events within Egypt, the forty years spent by the Hebrews wandering the desert, nor even the existence of the great lawgiver Moses.

The last clue for the early origins of the Israelites comes at the very end of the period and is the most significant. A Pharaoh of Egypt named Merneptah (r. 1237–1226 BCE) conducted a campaign into Canaan listing the cities he conquered on a stone tablet called a stele. Appearing among these many cities is the word “Israel” after which is the Egyptian symbol for a people or tribe. It is called the “Israel Stele,” and here is the first solid evidence for a people called Israel – but again, it is only so helpful. We have in it only the occurrence of the name and a general location, but it is the first inkling of a people we learn a great deal more about in the following periods.

EARLY IRON AGE AND ISRAEL **(Iron Age I: 1150–900 BCE)**

Egypt, suffering from political and economic problems, pulled out of Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze Age. With Egypt’s departure, what is often described as a “power vacuum” (lack of a political power structure) was left for the remaining peoples

to attempt to fill. It is at this juncture in history that the famous kingdoms of the Bible take shape and battle to control the region. Just to the east the kingdoms of Moab, Ammon, and Edom are forming; on the southern coast the Philistines appear; to the north are the Phoenicians, and in the highlands the Israelites emerge.

It is with this historical setting in mind that scholars have tried to answer the major question: Who were the Israelites and where did they come from? For the past several decades there have been three reigning models. They are significantly different, but each of them attempts to describe where the Israelites came from and how Israel became a kingdom.

The *Conquest Model* and the *Peaceful Infiltration Model* are both based on traditional biblical history.⁷ The *Conquest Model*, articulated most adamantly by Albright (again), suggests the Israelites existed as described in the Bible's patriarchal stories. They came to Canaan during the Exodus and invaded the region pretty much as recorded in the Book of Joshua. Albright's argument is detailed and originally made great strides in the study of biblical history by relying on archaeological evidence – not just the Bible. He studied the archaeological remains of sites known to be the biblical cities conquered in Joshua and showed a similar pattern of destruction for many of them dated to around the end of the Late Bronze Age. Archaeologists have since reassessed Albright's evidence and proven his interpretation of the data wrong. New evidence may arise to rekindle Albright's model, but until then, most scholars deny it any validity.

The *Peaceful Infiltration Model*, on the other hand, relies on the history of Judges and Samuel and goes into a little more detail. While rooted in biblical history, it also relies on social theory as well as ethnographic studies of nomadic desert tribes. In this model the Israelites were nomads from the surrounding regions who, over time, peacefully entered the highlands of Canaan and became settled there. As Egyptian power waned, the kingdoms of Palestine, including the burgeoning Israelites, began to assert themselves. The Philistines dominated Canaan

at the time and began to push into the highlands from the other direction. In reaction to the Philistine threat, the now-settled nomads formed a confederacy of twelve tribes, Israel, then a nation under a king, Saul. They defended their land and conquered the Philistines, whereupon the rest of central Canaan fell under their power.

The *Peasant Revolt Model* is significantly different.⁸ It applied Marxist social theory to Israel's origin. Typical of Marxist theory, the *Peasant Revolt Model* casts the Israelites as a subclass of Canaanite peoples united by their religious belief in the god Yahweh. They lived much like the Hapiru mentioned earlier, until they had enough. For either social or religious reasons they revolted (think early twentieth-century Bolshevik Revolution in Russia) and took over the Canaanite city-states, eventually uniting them as the kingdom of Israel.

The *Peasant Revolt Model* has been the most influential on modern scholarship because it claims a Canaanite origin for the Israelites. Biblical interpretation and more recent assessments of the archaeological evidence have now led scholars to view the first Israelites as indigenous to Canaan – they were Canaanites. They probably fit the description of the Hapiru, a conglomerate of Canaanite peoples from many different backgrounds, who reacted against the social structure of the Canaanite city-states. Most see this process culminating in a new group of people who regarded themselves as different from their Canaanite predecessors. They broke away from their native Canaanite heritage and gathered in the highlands of Canaan – the traditional land of Israel and the most likely place referred to in the Israel Stele – forming the early Israelite tribal population and later organizing to become the kingdom of Israel.

Canaanites and Israelites

Once we enter the period of Israelite history the continuing history of other Canaanite peoples is often overlooked by scholars. It should not be forgotten. Canaanite culture did not simply disappear with the rise of Israel and in actuality remained vibrant throughout the region. While the Israelite

kingdom ruled its slice of Canaan, and even thereafter, non-Israelite Canaanites still populated most of the land. They persisted alongside the Israelites – again originally Canaanites themselves – maintaining the old Canaanite religion and the old Canaanite culture. The Bible clearly portrays this in its numerous mentions of Canaanite gods worshipped over Yahweh and in prohibitions against Israelites mixing with Canaanites. The Canaanites also persisted in areas outside of Israel's control, forming their own kingdoms that were very much equal to Israel in size and strength, just as powerful and just as important. The Canaanite kingdoms were, very briefly: Aram, Phoenicia, Moab, Ammon, and Edom. With the

Canaanite Kingdoms

Aram: Aram was located to the north and controlled nearly all of modern-day Syria. Homeland of the Aramaeans, it was one of Israel's greatest foes until the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Aramaeans spoke a Semitic language called Aramaic, which became the major language of the Near East from the seventh century BCE until the Hellenistic Period (discussed later).

Phoenicia: Located on the northern coast, the Phoenicians were close friends of the early Israelite kingdom. According to the Bible, they even helped to build Solomon's temple. The Phoenicians traded all over the Near East, spreading merchant colonies across the Mediterranean region, even as far west as Spain. Legend has it they also spread alphabetic writing, a Semitic invention, to the Greeks – from which is descended the English alphabet.

Moab: Located east of the Jordan River, the Moabites were constantly at odds with the Israelite kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Moab controlled one of the largest fertile plains in ancient Canaan and much of the trade with kingdoms further east.

Edom: Located to the south and east of Judah, Edom was home to the Edomites and the Shasu people discussed previously. Edom shared a close relationship with Judah and was ruled by Judah until it revolted in the late ninth century BCE. It had a famous trading port on the Red Sea, now modern Eilat, and was known for its copper mines.

Ammon: Located east of the Jordan River near the modern city of Amman, the Ammonites were among the Israelites' earliest enemies in the Bible. This kingdom controlled a major portion of ancient Near Eastern trade across the great deserts. Nearly all the trade from Arabia and points east passed through its lands.

Philistia: The Philistines are the exception. They have no relation to Canaanite culture, but upon their arrival they were major players in Palestine's history. An Aegean people (from the region of the Aegean Sea), bringing with them their own Aegean culture, they arrived on the southern coast of Canaan sometime in the twelfth century BCE.