

THE BIBLE UNEARTHED

ARCHAEOLOGY'S NEW VISION
OF ANCIENT ISRAEL AND
THE ORIGIN OF ITS SACRED TEXTS



ISRAEL FINKELSTEIN AND
NEIL ASHER SILBERMAN



TOUCHSTONE
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2001 by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman

All rights reserved,
including the right of reproduction
in whole or in part in any form.

First Touchstone Edition 2002

For information regarding special discounts for bulk purchases,
please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-800-456-6798
or business@simonandschuster.com

TOUCHSTONE and colophon are trademarks
of Simon & Schuster Inc.

Designed by Charles B. Hames
Manufactured in the United States of America

13 15 17 19 20 18 16 14 12

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Free-Press edition as follows:

Finkelstein, Israel:

The Bible unearthed : archaeology's new vision of ancient Israel and the origin
of its sacred texts / by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Bible. O.T.—Antiquities. 2. Bible. O.T.—Evidences, authority, etc.

i. Silberman, Neil Asher ii. Title.

BS621.F56 2001

221.9'5—dc21 00-057311

ISBN-13: 978-0-684-86912-4

ISBN-10: 0-684-86912-8

ISBN-13: 978-0-684-86913-1 (Pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-684-86913-6 (Pbk)

Who Were the Israelites?

The Bible leaves little room for doubt or ambiguity about the unique origins of the people of Israel. As direct, lineal descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel are the biological offspring, over many generations, of the twelve sons of Jacob. Despite 430 years of bondage in Egypt, the Israelites are described as never having forgotten their roots in Canaan or their common heritage. Indeed the Bible stresses that Israel's strict maintenance of its distinctive way of life and special relationship with God would be the key to its future. In Deuteronomy, Moses had promised the Israelite nation that if they strictly observed the laws of the covenant, shunned intermarriage with their neighbors, and scrupulously avoided entanglement in the pagan ways of Canaan, they would be forever secure in their possession of the promised land. Once the great conquest of Canaan was completed, the book of Joshua related in great detail how the Israelite leader divided the land—now mostly cleared of the indigenous Canaanite population—among the victorious Israelite tribes as their eternal inheritances.

Yet within the book of Joshua and the following book of Judges are some serious contradictions to this picture of the tribes inheriting the entire land of Israel. Although the book of Joshua at one point declares that the Israelites had taken possession of all the land God promised and had de-

feated all their enemies (Joshua 21:43–44), other passages in the book of Joshua and in the book of Judges make it clear that many Canaanites and Philistines lived in close proximity to the Israelites. As in the case of Samson, intermarriage was not unheard of. And there were also problems within the family. In the book of Judges, the tribes of Israel combine to wage war on the tribe of Benjamin, vowing that they would never intermarry with them (Judges 19–21). Finally, it seems that the different tribes were left to solve their own local problems under the leadership of their own charismatic leaders. The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) even enumerates which particular tribes were faithful and heeded the call to rally for the cause of all Israel—and which tribes preferred to remain in their homes.

If, as archaeology suggests, the sagas of the patriarchs and the Exodus were legends, compiled in later periods, and if there is no convincing evidence of a unified invasion of Canaan under Joshua, what are we to make of the Israelites' claims for ancient nationhood? Who were these people who traced their traditions back to shared historical and cultic events? Once again archaeology can provide some surprising answers. Excavations of early Israelite villages, with their pottery, houses, and grain silos, can help us reconstruct their day-to-day life and cultural connections. And archaeology surprisingly reveals that the people who lived in those villages were indigenous inhabitants of Canaan who only gradually developed an ethnic identity that could be termed Israelite.

Inheriting the Promised Land

Once the great conquest of Canaan was over, the book of Joshua informs us, "the land had rest from war" (Joshua 11:23). All the Canaanites and other indigenous peoples of Canaan had been utterly destroyed. Joshua convened the tribes to divide the land. Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh received territories east of the Jordan River, while all the others received their portions to the west. Naphtali, Asher, Zebulun, and Issachar were to dwell in the highlands and valleys of Galilee. The other half of the tribe of Manasseh, and Ephraim and Benjamin, received the bulk of the central highlands, extending from the Jezreel valley in the north to Jerusalem in the south. Judah was allotted the southern highlands from Jerusalem to the Beersheba valley in the south. Simeon inherited the arid

zone of the Beersheba valley and the adjoining coastal plain. Although Dan initially received an inheritance on the coastal plain, the tribe shifted its home to an area in the north of the country. With that last migration, the map of the holy land was set.

Or was it? In a puzzling contradiction to the proclamations of total victory, the book of Joshua reports that large territories within Canaan, situated outside the tribal inheritances, remained to be conquered. They included "all the regions of the Philistines" along the southern coast of the country, the Phoenician coast farther north, and the area of the Beqa valley in the northeast (Joshua 13:1-6). The book of Judges goes even further, listing important unconquered Canaanite enclaves in the territory of over half of the tribes. The great Canaanite cities of the coastal plain and the northern valleys, such as Megiddo, Beth-shean, Dor, and Gezer, were listed in the book of Judges as uncaptured—even though their rulers were included in the book of Joshua in its list of defeated Canaanite kings. In addition, the Ammonites and Moabites dwelling across the Jordan River remained hostile. And the violent Midianites and Amalekite camel raiders from the desert were always a threat to the people of Israel. Thus the menace that faced the newly settled Israelites was both military and religious. External enemies threatened the Israelites' physical safety and the Canaanites remaining in the land posed the mortal danger of luring the Israelites into apostasy—and thereby shattering the power of Israel's solemn covenant with God.

The stage was set for many years of protracted struggle. Following the book of Joshua, the book of Judges presents an extraordinarily rich collection of thrilling war stories and tales of individual heroism in the battles between the Israelites and their neighbors. It contains some of the Bible's most colorful characters and most unforgettable images. Othniel, a Calebite, single-handedly beats back the forces of the mysterious foe. Cushan-rishathaim, "king of Mesopotamia" (Judges 3:7-11). Ehud the Benjaminite fearlessly assassinates Eglon, the powerful yet comically obese king of Moab, in his private apartment. (3:12-30). Shamgar slays six hundred Philistines with an ox goad (3:31). Deborah and Barak rouse the Israelite tribes against the threat of the remaining Canaanite kings in the north, and the heroic Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite, slays the Canaanite general Sisera by driving a stake into his head while he sleeps (4:1-5:31). Gideon the Manassite puri-

fies the land from idolatry and protects his people from the desert-raiding Midianites (6:1-8:28). And of course, there is the famous saga of Samson, the hero of Dan, betrayed and shorn by the Philistine temptress Delilah, who goes to his death in Gaza, blinded and humbled, by pulling down the pillars of the great Philistine temple of Dagon (13:1-16:31).

The theological meaning of this early period of settlement is made clear at the very beginning of the book of Judges, in its sobering calculus of apostasy and punishment. If the people of Israel remain apart from the indigenous population, they will be rewarded. Should they be tempted to assimilate, divine punishment will be swift and severe. But they do not listen. Only the intervention of divinely inspired righteous leaders, called "judges," saves the people of Israel at least temporarily from losing everything:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals; and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were round about them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. They forsook the LORD, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them; and he sold them into the power of their enemies round about, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them; and they were in sore straits. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them. And yet they did not listen to their judges; for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

(JUDGES 2:11-19)

Is the Bible relating a version of history as it really happened? Did the Israelites worship one God for centuries, but sometimes slip into the polytheism of their neighbors? More generally, how did they live? What was their culture like? Beyond the tales of ongoing struggle with idolatry, the Bible tells us very little of the day-to-day life of the Israelites. From the book of Joshua we learn mostly about the precise borders of the various tribal allotments. In Judges we read about the battles with Israel's enemies, but we hear very little about the kind of settlements the Israelites chose to establish and how they supported themselves. After centuries as immigrant laborers in Egypt and forty years' wandering in the desolate wilderness of Sinai, they could not have been well prepared to begin farming the narrow valleys and rugged upland fields of Canaan. How did they learn to become settled farmers and so quickly adapt to the routines and struggles of settled village life?

Immigrants from the Desert?

We know from the Merneptah stele that there was a people named Israel living in Canaan by 1207 BCE. Until very recently, despite doubts about the historical accuracy of the Exodus and the conquest stories, few biblical historians or archaeologists doubted that the Israelites were an immigrant people who entered Canaan from the outside.

The apparent difference between Canaanites and Israelites was clearest in the realm of material culture. Immediately above the destruction layers at the various Late Bronze Age Canaanite cities, archaeologists regularly found a scatter of haphazardly dug pits and coarse pottery—the apparent remains of what they interpreted as the temporary tent encampments of “seminomads.” Many scholars believed they recognized a familiar pattern in this archaeological situation, namely the mass movement of displaced desert dwellers who invaded the settled land, then started to settle down, and gradually adopted a sedentary way of life. Scholars familiar with bedouin raids on agricultural regions in the Middle East believed that there had always been a conflict between desert nomads and settled peasants—a constant struggle between the desert and the sown. Though the Israelites might not have marched into Canaan as a unified army, the signs of their arrival seemed to be clear. In comparison to the monumental buildings,

imported luxury items, and fine ceramic vessels uncovered in the levels of the preceding Canaanite cities, the rough encampments and implements of the arriving Israelites seemed to be on a far lower level of civilization than the remains of the population they replaced.

This comparison of lifestyles gave rise to what came to be called the “peaceful-infiltration” model, first put forward by the German biblical scholar Albrecht Alt in the 1920s. Alt suggested that the Israelites were pastoralists who wandered with their flocks in fixed seasonal migrations between the fringe of the desert and the settled lands. At some time near the end of the Late Bronze Age—for reasons that were not entirely clear to him—they started settling down in the sparsely settled highlands of Canaan.

According to Alt, the process was actually gradual and quite peaceful at the beginning. The arriving Israelite pastoralists cleared the forests and began to practice small-scale seasonal farming along with herding. In time, they adopted a more settled lifestyle, establishing permanent villages and concentrating more of their energy on agriculture. It was only in later days, when the new settlers’ numbers grew and their need of ever more land and water increased—so ran the theory—that the Israelites’ problems with the Canaanites began. Conflicts over land and water rights eventually led to local skirmishes that were the *real* background to the struggles between Israelites and their neighbors that the book of Judges so vividly conveys. (For a detailed description of the peaceful-infiltration theory, see Appendix C.)

It was thus assumed that the Israelites were scattered groups of arriving pastoralists rather than a unified army. The “Israel” stele of Merneptah offered no additional information about the exact location, size, or nature of this people. Yet other surviving Egyptian records—though providing only a small glimpse at what must have been a much fuller account—mention two groups of outsiders who chose to live or were pushed to live on the margins of the Canaanite urban society. Both are of particular interest in the search for the early Israelites.

The first are the Apiru, a group described in the Tell el-Amarna letters of the fourteenth century BCE (as well as other Bronze Age texts) in a variety of unflattering ways. Living outside mainstream Canaanite society, uprooted from their homes by war, famine, or heavy taxation, they are sometimes described as outlaws or brigands, sometimes as soldiers for hire. In

one case they are even reported to be present in Egypt itself as hired laborers working on government building projects. In short, they were refugees or rebellious runaways from the system, living on the social fringe of urban society. No one in power seemed to like them; the worst thing that a local petty king could say about a neighboring prince was that "he joined the Apiru." In the past, scholars have suggested that the word *Apiru* (and its alternative forms, *Hapiru* and *Habiru*) had a direct linguistic connection to the word *Ibri*, or Hebrew, and that therefore the Apiru in the Egyptian sources were the early Israelites. Today we know that this association is not so simple. The widespread use of the term over many centuries and throughout the entire Near East suggests that it had a socioeconomic meaning rather than signifying a specific ethnic group. Nonetheless, a connection cannot be completely dismissed. It is possible that the phenomenon of the Apiru may have been remembered in later centuries and thus incorporated into the biblical narratives.

The second group mentioned in the Egyptian texts were the Shosu. They were apparently pastoral nomads, herders of sheep and goats who lived mainly in the frontier regions of Canaan and Transjordan. An account of an Egyptian raid against rebels in southern Canaan in the days of Ramesses III, in the early twelfth century BCE, provides a good description of these people. The Egyptian writer describes the plunder of their "tent camps of people and possessions and their cattle likewise, their being without number." They were obviously a problematic and uncontrollable element with an especially large presence in the wilderness and the highland frontiers. They were also known to have occasionally migrated to the eastern delta of Egypt, as the thirteenth century papyrus reporting their movements through the Egyptian border fortresses testifies.

Could either of these have been the mysterious "Israel" simply called by another name?

Uprooted Peasants?

Alt's peaceful-infiltration theory came under fierce attack in the 1970s because of new and far more detailed ethnographic data and anthropological theories on the relationship between pastoral nomads and sedentary communities in the Middle East. The main criticism of the earlier ideas of the

struggle between the desert and the sown was that farmers and herders were much more integrated and less alien to each other. They were essentially components of a single society. And so, during the 1960s and 1970s, another unique theory of Israelite origins arose.

First put forward by the American biblical scholar George Mendenhall and later elaborated by the American biblical historian and sociologist Norman Gottwald, this theory suggested that the early Israelites were neither invading raiders nor infiltrating nomads, but peasant rebels who fled from the cities of Canaan to the empty highlands. Mendenhall and Gottwald argued, on the basis of the evidence contained in the Egyptian documents (mainly the Tell el-Amarna tablets), that Late Bronze Age Canaan was a highly stratified society with social tension and economic inequality on the rise. The urban elite controlled land, wealth, and commerce; the peasants in the villages were deprived of both wealth and rights. With the deteriorating situation in Canaan in the later phase of the Late Bronze Age, heavy taxation, mistreatment by landlords, and constant molestation by the authorities—both local and Egyptian—became unbearable.

Thus Mendenhall and Gottwald theorized that for many there was no other solution but to leave their homes and look for new frontiers. Some of them may have become *Apiru*, that is, people living on the fringe of the society, causing troubles to the authorities. Many resettled in the relatively empty forests of the highlands, far from Canaanite and Egyptian control. And in their new homeland these peasant rebels established a more equal society—less stratified and less rigid. In doing so, they became “Israelites.”

Gottwald further suggested that the new ideas of equality were imported into Canaan by a small group of people who came from Egypt and settled in the highlands. This group may have been influenced by unorthodox Egyptian ideas on religion, like those that stimulated the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten in the fourteenth century BCE. This new group would therefore have been the nucleus around which the new settlers in the highlands crystallized. The rise of early Israel was therefore a social revolution of the underprivileged against their feudal lords, energized by the arrival of a visionary new ideology.

Unfortunately, this theory has no archaeological evidence to support it—and indeed, much of the evidence flatly contradicts it. As we have seen, the material culture of the new villages was completely distinct from

the culture of the Canaanite lowlands; if the settlers had been refugees from the lowlands, we would expect to see at least more similarity in architecture and pottery styles. More important, it has become clear in recent archaeological studies of the Late Bronze Age cities that the rural sector of the Canaanite society had begun to be impoverished as early as the sixteenth century BCE. In fact, this weakened and less populous countryside—and the consequent drop in agricultural production—may have played a role in the collapse of the urban culture. But it surely could not have supplied the energy behind a vigorous new wave of settlement in the highlands. Finally, even after the end of the Late Bronze Age and the destruction of the Canaanite urban centers, most of the lowland villages—few as they were—managed to survive and continued their existence much as before. This is evident in the heartland of Canaanite culture: the Jezreel and Jordan valleys and the southern coastal plain of Philistia.

Hence we really do not see hordes of uprooted people leaving their villages in the lowlands in search of new life on the highland frontier. The answer to the question “Who were the Israelites?” had to come from somewhere else.

A Sudden Archaeological Breakthrough

The early identifications and wider sociological theories about the early Israelites were based on the decipherment of scattered, fragmentary inscriptions and on the subjective interpretation of the biblical narrative—*not* primarily on archaeology. The sad fact was that for decades, archaeologists had been looking in all the wrong places for clues to the origins of the Israelites. Because many of them took the Joshua narrative at face value, they concentrated nearly all their efforts digging the major tells of Canaanite cities—such as Jericho, Bethel, Lachish, and Hazor. Today we know that this strategy was mistaken, for while these major tells revealed a great deal about Late Bronze Age urban culture, they told us next to nothing about the Israelites.

These major Canaanite cities were located along the coastal plain and in the valleys—far from the wooded hill country regions where early Israel emerged. Before the late 1960s, only one comprehensive archaeological survey was ever undertaken to search for evidence of purely Israelite sites. It

was conducted by the Israeli archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni in a marginal region—at the very northern edge of the later area of Israelite control in the rugged and wooded mountains of upper Galilee. Aharoni discovered that the area was empty of Late Bronze sites and that it was settled on a score of small, poor Iron Age I (c. twelfth–eleventh centuries BCE) sites, which he identified with the early settlers of the tribes of Naphtali and Asher. Aharoni's fieldwork in upper Galilee seemed therefore to provide support for the peaceful-infiltration theory. The only problem was that his survey was far to the north of the heartland of Israelite settlement.

Surprising as it may seem, that Israelite heartland in the highlands of western Palestine between the Jezreel and the Beersheba valleys was virtually an archaeological terra incognita. The lack of archaeological exploration in the central hill country was not due to scholarly preferences alone. From the 1920s to 1967, war and political unrest in the Middle East discouraged thorough archaeological investigation in the heart of the hill country. But later, after the 1967 war, the archaeological landscape changed completely. A young generation of Israeli archaeologists, influenced by new trends in world archaeology, took to the field with a new method of investigation: their goal was to explore, map, and analyze the ancient landscape of the hill country—rather than only dig.

Beginning in the 1940s, archaeologists had recognized the importance of regional studies that examined settlement patterns over time. Excavations at single sites produce highly localized pictures of the material culture of ancient populations—uncovering the sequence of styles of pottery, jewelry, weapons, houses, and tombs of a particular community. But regional surveys, in which the ancient sites of a large area are mapped and dated by the characteristic pottery sherds collected on the surface, exchange depth for breadth. These surveys reveal where ancient people settled and the size of their settlements. The choice of certain topographic niches (such as hill-tops rather than valleys) and certain economic niches (such as grain growing rather than horticulture), and ease of access to main roads and water sources, reveals a great deal about the lifestyle and, ultimately, social identity of populations of large areas rather than individual communities. No less important, surveys in which sites from many different periods are mapped allow archaeologists to track changes in the demographic history of a given region over long periods of time.

In the years since 1967, the heartland of the Israelite settlement—the traditional territories of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh—have been covered by intensive surveys. Teams of archaeologists and students have combed virtually every valley, ridge, and slope, looking for traces of walls and scatters of pottery sherds. The work in the field was slow, with a day's work covering, on the average, about one square mile. Information on any signs of occupation from the Stone Age to the Ottoman period was recorded, in order to study the highlands' long-term settlement history. Statistical methods were used to estimate the size of each settlement in each of its periods of occupation. Environmental information on each site was collected and analyzed to reconstruct the natural landscape in various eras. In a few promising cases, excavations were undertaken as well.

These surveys revolutionized the study of early Israel. The discovery of the remains of a dense network of highland villages—all apparently established within the span of a few generations—indicated that a dramatic social transformation had taken place in the central hill country of Canaan around 1200 BCE. There was no sign of violent invasion or even the infiltration of a clearly defined ethnic group. Instead, it seemed to be a revolution in lifestyle. In the formerly sparsely populated highlands from the Judean hills in the south to the hills of Samaria in the north, far from the Canaanite cities that were in the process of collapse and disintegration, about two-hundred fifty hilltop communities suddenly sprang up. Here were the first Israelites.*

Life on the Highland Frontier

Excavations of some of the small Iron Age I sites discovered in the course of the surveys showed how surprisingly uniform the sudden wave of highland settlement was. The typical village was usually located on a hilltop or on a steep ridge, with a commanding view of the surrounding landscape. It was set in an open area surrounded by natural forests comprised mainly of oak and terebinth trees. In some cases, villages were founded on the edge of nar-

* Although there is no way to know if ethnic identities had been fully formed at this time, we identify these distinctive highland villages as "Israelite" since many of them were continuously occupied well into the period of the monarchies—an era from which we have abundant sources, both biblical and extrabiblical, testifying that their inhabitants consciously identified themselves as Israelites.

row valleys between the mountains—presumably for easier access to agricultural fields. In many cases they were built on the easternmost possible fertile land overlooking the desert, close to good pastureland. In every case, the villages seemed to be self-sufficient. Their inhabitants drew water from nearby springs or stored winter rainwater in rock-cut, plastered cisterns for use all year round. Most surprising of all was the tiny scale of these settlements. In most cases they were no more than a single acre in size and contained, according to estimates, about fifty adults and fifty children. Even

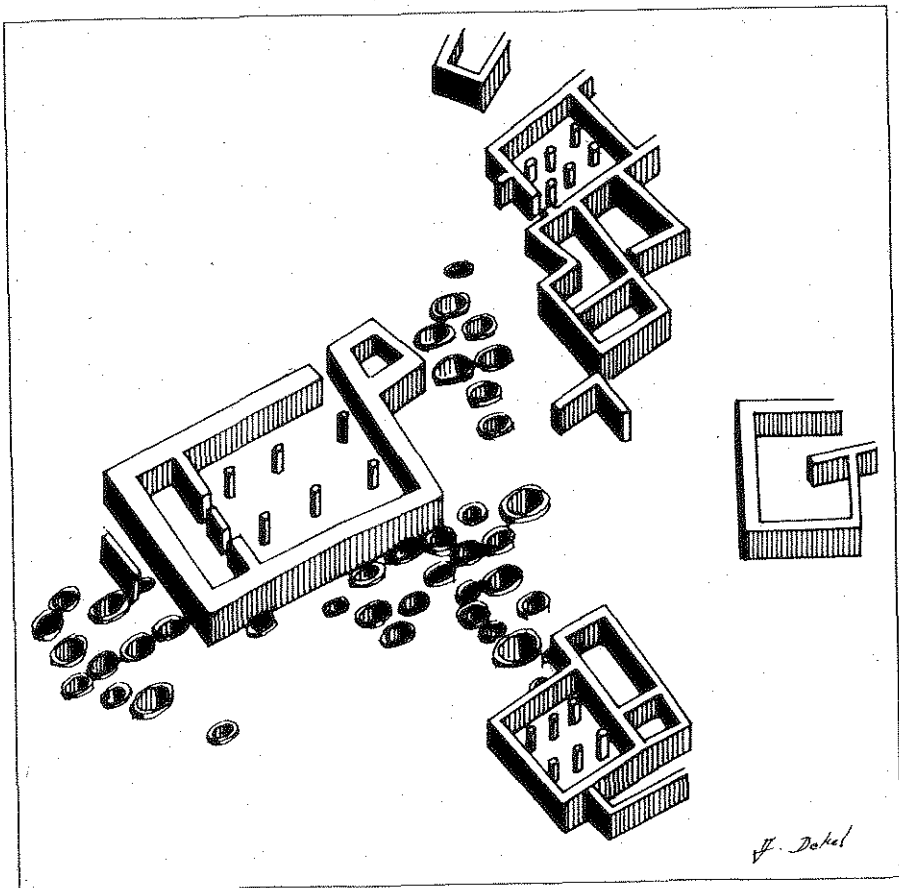


Figure 12: An excavated sector of Izbet Sartah, a Late Iron Age I village in the western foothills featuring pillared houses and grain silos.

the largest settlements in the highlands reached only three or four acres in size, with a population of a few hundred people. The entire population of these hill country villages at the peak of the settlement process, around 1000 BCE, could not have been much more than forty-five thousand.

In contrast to the culture of the Canaanite cities and villages in the lowlands, the highland villages contained no public buildings, palaces, storehouses, or temples. Signs of any sophisticated kind of record keeping, such as writing, seals, and seal impressions, are almost completely absent. There are almost no luxury items: no imported pottery and almost no jewelry. Indeed, the village houses were all quite similar in size, suggesting that wealth was distributed quite evenly among the families. The houses were built of unworked fieldstones, with rough stone pillars propped up to provide support for the roof or upper story. The average building, around six hundred square feet in size, presumably housed four to five people—the size of a nuclear family. In many cases, stone-lined pits for storage of grain were dug between the houses (Figure 12). These silos, and a large number of sickle blades and grinding stones found in every house, indicate that grain growing was one of the villagers' main concerns. Yet herding was still important; fenced courtyards near the houses were apparently used for keeping animals secure at night.

The amenities of life were simple. Pottery was rough and basic, with no fancy or highly decorated vessels. Houseware included mainly storage jars and cooking pots—the basic utensils for everyday life. The jars were apparently used to store water, oil, and wine. We know almost nothing about burial customs, apparently because graves were simple and the dead were interred without offerings. Likewise, there is almost no indication for cult. No shrines were found in the villages, so their specific religious beliefs are unknown. In one case, at a tiny hilltop site in the northern hill country excavated by Amihai Mazar of the Hebrew University, a bronze bull figurine was discovered, suggesting the worship of traditional Canaanite deities. At another site, on Mount Ebal, Adam Zertal, of Haifa University, discovered an unusual stone structure that he identified as an early Israelite altar, but the precise function of that site and its surrounding walled enclosures is disputed.

It is also noteworthy—in contrast to the Bible's accounts of almost continual warfare between the Israelites and their neighbors—that the villages

were not fortified. Either the inhabitants felt secure in their remote settlements and did not need to invest in defenses or they did not have the means or proper organization to undertake such work. No weapons, such as swords or lances, were uncovered—although such finds are typical of the cities in the lowlands. Nor were there signs of burning or sudden destruction that might indicate a violent attack.

One Iron Age I village—Izbet Sartah—located on the western margins of the highlands overlooking the coastal plain, was almost fully excavated and therefore provided enough information for a reliable reconstruction of its subsistence economy. A detailed analysis of the excavated data by Baruch Rosen, an Israeli specialist in ancient agricultural production and nutrition, suggested that the village (with an estimated population of about one hundred) was probably supported by about eight hundred acres of surrounding land, four-hundred fifty of which were cultivated and the rest used for pasture. Under the conditions of the Early Iron Age, those fields could have produced up to fifty-three tons of wheat and twenty-one tons of barley per year, with the help of about forty oxen for plowing. In addition, the inhabitants apparently maintained a herd of about three hundred sheep and goats. (It should be noted, though, that this village was located in a fertile area of the foothills. Most villages in the highlands were not as “rich.”)

All this shows that the main struggles of the early Israelites were not with other peoples but with the stony terrain, the dense forests of the highlands, and the harsh and sometimes unpredictable environment. Yet they seem to have lived relatively peacefully and were able to maintain a self-sufficient economy. They were quite isolated from regional trade routes and also seem to have been quite remote from one another; there is no indication that any trade goods were exchanged between the highland villages. It comes as no surprise therefore that there is no evidence of significant social stratification in these villages, no sign of administrative buildings for officials, large residences of dignitaries, or the specialized products of highly skilled artisans.

The early Israelites appeared around 1200 BCE, as herders and farmers in the hills. Their culture was a simple one of subsistence. This much we know. But where did they come from?

New Clues to Israelite Origins

As it turned out, the answer to the question of Israelite origins lay in the remains of their earliest settlements. Most of the villages excavated in the highlands offered evidence about Israelite life several decades or even a century after they were founded. Houses and courtyards had been expanded and remodeled over those years. In only a very few cases were the remains of the initial settlement preserved intact beneath the later buildings. One such case was at the site of Izbet Sartah, already mentioned.

The earliest phase at the site had a highly unusual plan, very different from the later cluster of rectangular, pillared houses that later arose on the site. The first settlement was built in the shape of an oval, with a row of rooms surrounding a large open courtyard (Figure 13). Those outer rooms were connected to one another in a way that formed a kind of continuous belt protecting the inner courtyard. The large, enclosed courtyard hints that the inhabitants had herds, probably flocks of sheep and goats. The discovery of a few silos, sickle blades, and grinding stones indicates that they practiced a bit of grain farming as well.

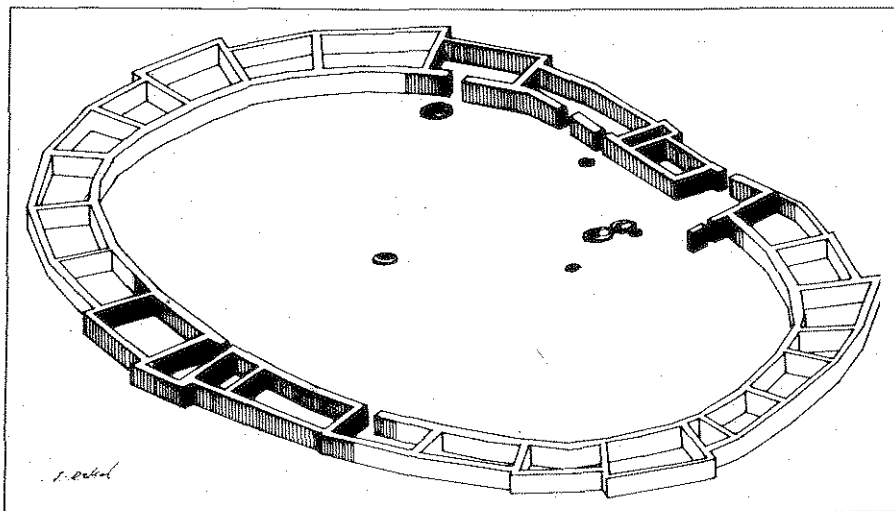


Figure 13: The Early Iron Age I phase at Izbet Sartah. The oval layout indicates the pastoral origins of the inhabitants.

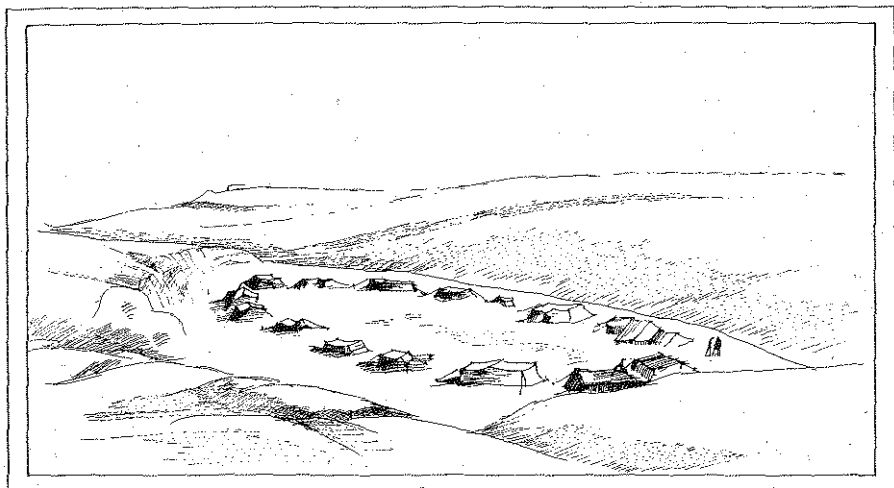


Figure 14: An oval bedouin encampment near Jericho as shown in a nineteenth century drawing.

Similar oval sites have been discovered in the central highlands and in the highlands of the Negev in the south. Comparable sites, which date to other periods, have been found in the Sinai, Jordan, and other areas of the Middle East. In general, this type of enclosure seems to be characteristic of settlements in the highlands and on desert frontiers. The plan of this very early Iron Age I village is similar not only to Bronze and Iron Age sites in the steppe lands, but also to bedouin tent encampments described and even photographed by travelers in the Judean desert, Transjordan, and the Sinai at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Figure 14). In this type of encampment, a row of tents encircled an open courtyard, where the flocks were kept at night. The Iron Age highlands and Negev sites are uncannily similar in shape, size, and number of units. Though in the ancient settlements stone walls replaced the portable tents, form clearly suggests function in both kinds of settlements. The people living in these sites—both past and present—were pastoralists primarily concerned with protecting their flocks. All this indicates that a large proportion of the first Israelites were once pastoral nomads.

But they were pastoral nomads undergoing a profound transformation. The presumed shift from the earlier tent encampments to villages of simi-

lar layout in stone construction, and, later, to more permanent, rectangular pillared houses indicates that they abandoned their migratory lifestyle, gave up most of their animals, and shifted to permanent agriculture. Transformations like this can still be seen in the Middle East. Bedouin in the process of settling down often replace their tents with similarly shaped stone or brick structures. They also tend to maintain the layout of the traditional tent encampment in the layout of their first permanent settlement. Later they gradually depart from this tradition and shift to regular sedentary villages. A very similar evolution is apparent in the remains of the Iron Age highland villages.

There is another clue that points in the same direction: the kinds of places the Iron I settlers chose for their first permanent settlements suggest a background in pastoral nomadism. Many of the settlements from the beginning of Iron Age activity in the highlands were located in the eastern part of the region, not far from the desert fringe. Establishing settlements in this area enabled the villagers to continue sheep and goat herding, while gradually shifting to farming as their main means of support. Only later did they begin to expand to the west, which is less hospitable to farming and herding and more fitted to the cultivation of olive groves and grapevines.

Many of the early Israelites were thus apparently nomads who gradually became farmers. Still, nomads have to come from somewhere. Here too, recently uncovered archaeological evidence has something to say.

Canaan's Hidden Cycles

The extensive highland surveys of recent decades have collected data on the nature of human occupation in this region over many millennia. One of the biggest surprises was that the dramatic wave of pastoralists settling down and becoming permanent farmers in the twelfth century BCE was not a unique event. In fact, the archaeological evidence indicated that before the twelfth century BCE there were two previous waves of similar highland settlement, both of which were followed by an eventual return of the inhabitants to a dispersed, pastoral way of life.

We now know that the first occupation of the highlands took place in the Early Bronze Age, beginning over two thousand years before the rise of

TABLE ONE
 WAVES OF SETTLEMENT IN THE HIGHLANDS

PERIOD	DATES	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Early Bronze Age	3500–2200 BCE	<i>First wave</i> of settlement; about 100 sites recorded
Intermediate Bronze Age	2200–2000 BCE	Settlement crisis; most of the sites deserted
Middle Bronze Age	2000–1550 BCE	<i>Second wave</i> of settlement; about 220 sites recorded
Late Bronze Age	1550–1150 BCE	Settlement crisis; only about 25 sites recorded
Iron Age I	1150–900 BCE	<i>Third wave</i> of settlement; about 250 sites recorded
Iron Age II	900–586 BCE	Settlement system develops and reaches over 500 sites (eighth century BCE)

early Israel, in around 3500 BCE. At the peak of this wave of settlement, there were almost a hundred villages and larger towns scattered throughout the central ridge. More than a thousand years later, around 2200 BCE, most of the highland settlements were abandoned and the highlands became a frontier area again. Yet a second wave of settlement, stronger than the first, began to gain momentum in the Middle Bronze Age, shortly after 2000 BCE. This wave began with the establishment of small, scattered villages that gradually grew into a complex network of about 220 settlements, ranging from villages to towns to fortified regional centers. The population of this second settlement wave has been estimated at about forty thousand. Many of the major, fortified centers of this period—Hebron, Jerusalem, Bethel, Shiloh, and Shechem—would become important centers at the time of the Israelites. Yet the second wave of highland settlement came to an end sometime in the sixteenth century BCE. And this time, the highlands would remain a sparsely populated frontier zone for four centuries.

Finally—as a third major wave—the early Israelite settlement began

around 1200 BCE (Figure 15). Like its predecessors, it commenced with mainly small, rural communities with an initial population of approximately 45,000 in 250 sites. It gradually developed into a mature system with large cities, medium-sized regional market centers, and small villages. By the highpoint of this settlement wave in the eighth century BCE, after the establishment of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, it encompassed over five hundred sites, with a population of about 160,000.

This dramatic population growth was made possible by the full utilization of the region's agricultural potential. The highlands offer excellent terrain for olive and vine growing—the most profitable sectors of the traditional Middle Eastern economy. In all three periods of extensive highland settlement, surplus wine and olive oil seem to have been sent to the lowlands and even exported beyond the borders of Canaan, especially to Egypt. Early Bronze Age storage vessels found in Egypt have been analyzed and found to have been made from clay from the Canaanite highlands. In one extraordinary case, a jar from Canaan still contained remains of grape seeds.

The similarities between the settlement patterns of the three major waves are thus clear. In many cases particular sites were occupied in all three periods. No less important, the overall settlement patterns in all the waves shared certain characteristics. First, it seems that the southern part of the highlands was always less populated than the northern part, which, as we will see, was the result of their very different natural environments. Second, it appears that each wave of demographic growth started in the east and gradually expanded to the west. Finally, each of the three waves is characterized by a roughly similar material culture—pottery, architecture, and village plan—that was probably a result of similar environmental and economic conditions.

In the periods between the peaks of highland settlement, when the cities, towns, and even most of the villages were abandoned, the highlands were far from deserted. Important evidence for this comes from an unexpected source—not inscriptions or excavated buildings, but a close analysis of excavated animal bones. Bones collected at sites that flourished during periods of intense settlement in the highlands contain a relatively large proportion of cattle—which generally indicates extensive field farming and the use of the plow. Indeed, these proportions are similar to what we see in traditional village farming communities in the Middle East today.

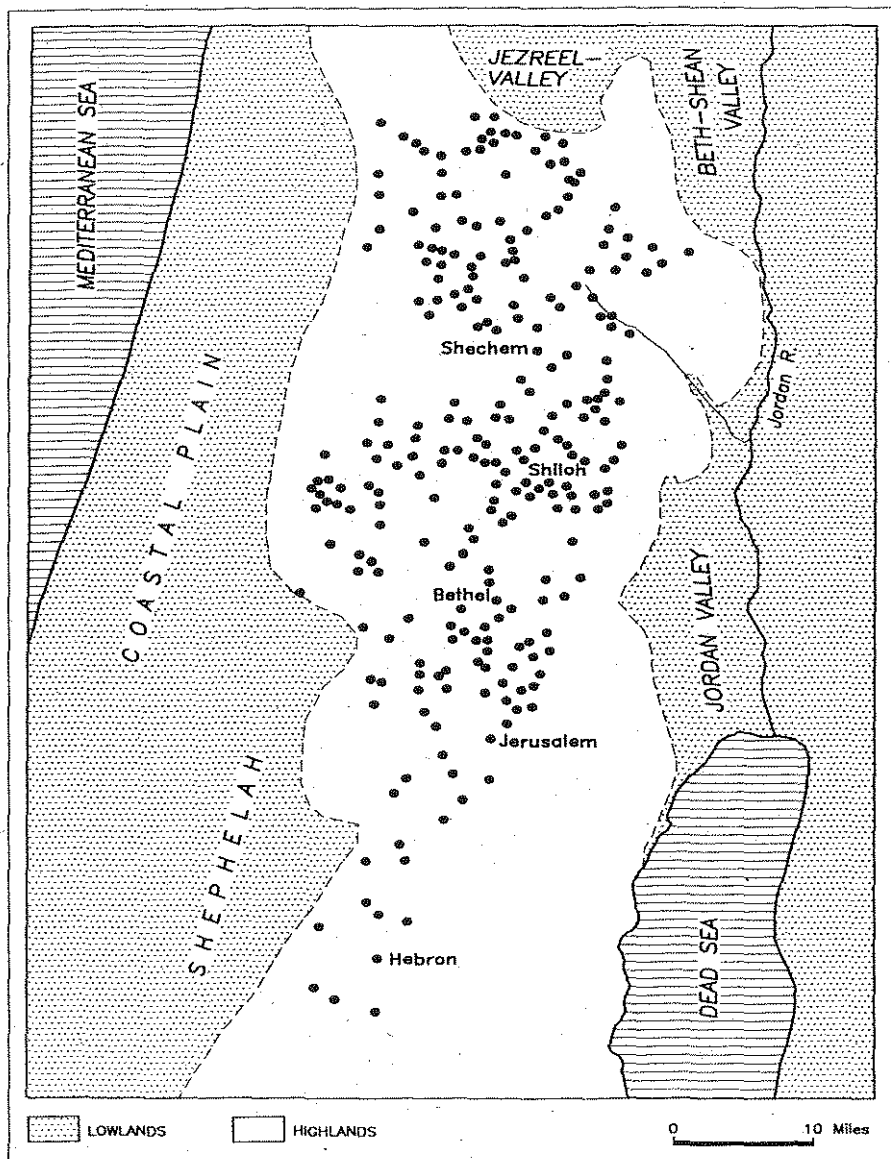


Figure 15: Iron Age I sites in the central highlands

However, a dramatic difference can be seen in the bones collected at the few sites in the highlands that continued to be occupied in the periods *between* the major settlement waves. The number of cattle is minimal, but there is an exceptionally large proportion of sheep and goats. This is similar to the composition of herds among bedouin groups. For pastoralists who engage in only marginal seasonal agriculture and spend much of the year seeking fresh pastureland, heavy, slow-moving cattle are a burden. They cannot move as fast and as far as sheep and goats. Thus in the periods of intense highland settlement, more people were engaged in farming; in the crisis years, people practiced sheep and goat herding.

Are such dramatic fluctuations common? In the Middle East, people have always had the know-how to rapidly change from village life to animal husbandry—or back from pastoralism to settled agriculture—according to evolving political, economic, or even climatic conditions. Many groups throughout the region have been able to shift their lifestyle according to the best interest of the moment, and the avenue connecting village life and pastoral nomadism has always been a two-way street. Anthropological studies of settlement history in Jordan, southwestern Syria, and the middle Euphrates valley in the nineteenth and early twentieth century show just that. Increasingly heavy taxation and the threat of conscription into the Ottoman army were among the factors that drove countless village families to abandon their houses in the agricultural regions and disappear into the desert. There they engaged in animal husbandry, which has always been a more resilient, if less comfortable, way of life.

An opposite process operates in times when security and economic conditions improve. Sedentary communities are founded or joined by former nomads, who take on a specialized role in a two-part, or dimorphic, society. One segment of this society specializes in agriculture while the other continues the traditional herding of sheep and goats.

This pattern has special meaning for the question, who were the first Israelites? That is because the two components of Middle Eastern society—farmers and pastoral nomads—have always maintained an interdependent economic relationship, even if there was sometimes tension between the two groups. Nomads need the marketplaces of settled villages in order to obtain grain and other agricultural products, while farmers are dependent on the nomads for a regular supply of meat, dairy products, and hides.

However, the two sides of the exchange are not entirely equal: villagers can rely on their own produce for survival, while pastoral nomads cannot exist entirely on the products of their herds. They need grain to supplement and balance their high-fat diet of meat and milk. As long as there are villagers to trade with, the nomads can continue to concentrate on animal husbandry. But when grain cannot be obtained in exchange for animal products, the pastoral nomads are forced to produce it for themselves.

And that is apparently what caused the sudden wave of highland settlement. In Late Bronze Age Canaan, in particular, the existence of large populations of pastoral nomads in the highlands and desert fringes was possible only as long as the Canaanite city-states and villages could produce an adequate grain surplus to trade. This was the situation during three centuries of Egyptian rule over Canaan. But when that political system collapsed in the twelfth century BCE, its economic networks ceased functioning. It is reasonable to assume that the villagers of Canaan were forced to concentrate on local subsistence and no longer produced a significant surplus of grain over and above what they needed for themselves. Thus the highland and desert-fringe pastoralists had to adapt to the new conditions and produce their own grain. Soon, the requirements of farming would cause a reduction in the range of seasonal migrations. Flocks would then have to be reduced as the period of migrations grew shorter, and with more and more effort invested in agriculture, a permanent shift to sedentarization occurred.

The process that we describe here is, in fact, the opposite of what we have in the Bible: the emergence of early Israel was an outcome of the collapse of the Canaanite culture, not its cause. And most of the Israelites did not come from outside Canaan—they emerged from within it. There was no mass Exodus from Egypt. There was no violent conquest of Canaan. Most of the people who formed early Israel were local people—the same people whom we see in the highlands throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. The early Israelites were—irony of ironies—themselves originally Canaanites!

In What Sense Was Ancient Israel Unique?

In the more fertile areas of the highlands east of the Jordan, we see the same ups and downs in sedentary activity, the same crisis in the Late Bronze Age,

and exactly the same wave of settlement in the Iron Age I. Archaeological surveys carried out in Jordan have revealed that the settlement history of the territories of Ammon, Moab, and Edom was broadly similar to those of early Israel. We could take our archaeological description of a typical Iron Age I Israelite village in the highlands west of the Jordan and use it as a description of an early Moabite village with almost no change. These people lived in the same kind of villages, in similar houses, used similar pottery, and led an almost identical way of life. Yet from the Bible and other historical sources, we know that the people who lived in the villages of the Iron Age I east of the Jordan did not become Israelites; instead, they later formed the kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom. So, is there anything specific in the villages of the people who formed early Israel that distinguished them from their neighbors? Can we say how their ethnicity and nationality crystallized?

Today, as in the past, people demonstrate their ethnicity in many different ways: in language, religion, customs of dress, burial practices, and elaborate dietary taboos. The simple material culture left by the highland herders and farmers who became the first Israelites offers no clear indication of their dialect, religious rituals, costume, or burial practices. But one very interesting detail about their dietary habits has been discovered. Bones recovered from the excavations of the small early Israelite villages in the highlands differ from settlements in other parts of the country in one significant respect: there are no pigs. Bone assemblages from earlier highlands settlements *did* contain the remains of pigs and the same is true for later (post-Iron Age) settlements there. But throughout the Iron Age—the era of the Israelite monarchies—pigs were not cooked and eaten, or even raised in the highlands. Comparative data from the coastal Philistine settlements of the same period—the Iron Age I—show a surprisingly large number of pigs represented among the recovered animal bones. Though the early Israelites did not eat pork, the Philistines clearly did, as did (as best we can tell from the sketchier data) the Ammonites and Moabites east of the Jordan.

A ban on pork cannot be explained by environmental or economic reasons alone. It may, in fact, be the only clue that we have of a specific, shared identity among the highland villagers west of the Jordan. Perhaps the proto-Israelites stopped eating pork merely because the surrounding peo-

ples—their adversaries—did eat it, and they had begun to see themselves as different. Distinctive culinary practices and dietary customs are two of the ways in which ethnic boundaries are formed. Monotheism and the traditions of Exodus and covenant apparently came much later. Half a millennium before the composition of the biblical text, with its detailed laws and dietary regulations, the Israelites chose—for reasons that are not entirely clear—not to eat pork. When modern Jews do the same, they are continuing the oldest archaeologically attested cultural practice of the people of Israel.

The Book of Judges and Judah in the Seventh Century

We will never know to what extent the stories in the book of Judges are based on authentic memories of local heroes and village conflicts preserved over the centuries in the form of epic poems or popular folktales. Yet the historical reliability of the book of Judges cannot be assessed by the possible inclusion of heroic tales from earlier eras. Its most significant feature is an overall literary pattern that describes Israel's history in the period after the conquest as a repeating cycle of sin, divine retribution, and salvation (2:11–19). Only in the last verse (21:25) is there a hint that the cycle can be broken—with the establishment of a monarchy.

It is clear that this theological interpretation of the tales in the book of Judges was developed centuries after the events it purportedly describes. Though the individual stories of Israelite conflict against the Philistines, Moabites, Midianites, and Ammonites feature many different settings and characters, they are all used to illustrate an uneasy relationship between God and his people. YHWH is depicted as an angry, disappointed deity, who had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and had given them the promised land as an eternal inheritance, only to find them to be a sinful, ungrateful people. Time and again they betrayed YHWH by running after foreign gods. Thus YHWH punished them by giving them to the hands of their enemies so that they might feel the pain of violence and suffering—and cry to YHWH for help. Accepting their repentance, YHWH would then save them by commissioning a righteous leader among them to lead them to triumph against their adversaries. Theology, not history, is central. Covenant, promise, apostasy, repentance, and redemption consti-

tute the cyclical sequence that runs throughout the book of Judges. And so it must have seemed to the people of Judah in the seventh century BCE that the same cyclical sequence applied to them.

Biblical scholars have long recognized that the book of Judges is part of the Deuteronomistic History, which, as we have argued, is the great expression of Israelite hopes and political aspirations compiled in Judah in the time of King Josiah, in the seventh century BCE. The stories of early Israelite settlement in the highlands offered a lesson to the people, with direct relevance to contemporary affairs. As Josiah and his supporters looked northward with visions of uniting the land of Israel, they stressed that conquest alone was worthless without a continuous and exclusive obedience to YHWH. The Deuteronomistic movement saw the pagan population within the land of Israel and in all the neighboring kingdoms as a mortal danger. Deuteronomy's law-codes and the historical lessons of the Deuteronomistic history made it clear that the people of Israel had to resist the temptation of idolatry, lest they suffer new calamities.

The chapter that opens the book of Judges makes a clear connection between past and present. Though many scholars have regarded it as a later addition, the biblical historian Baruch Halpern assigns it to the original Deuteronomistic History. This chapter tells us how the tribes that made up the core of the Southern Kingdom—Judah and Simeon—perfectly fulfilled their sacred mission in conquering all the Canaanite cities in their territories. The kingdom of Judah was therefore protected from the immediate danger of idolatry in its midst. But this was not the case with the tribes that later composed the core of the northern kingdom of Israel. All of them are reported to have failed in their quest to eliminate the Canaanites, and the Canaanite enclaves that persisted in each one of their tribal territories are listed in detail (Judges 1:21, 27–35). No wonder then, that pious Judah survived and apostate Israel was vanquished. Indeed, most of the tales of the book of Judges deal with the sin and punishment of the northern tribes. Not a single story explicitly accuses Judah of idolatry.

But the book of Judges implicitly offers a way out of the endless cycle of sin and divine retribution. It hints that the cycle had already been broken once before. Again and again, like a mantra, it repeats the sentence "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). This is a reminder that soon after the period of

the judges came a great king to rule over all the tribes of Israel—the pious David, who established an eternal covenant with God. This king would banish the influence of foreign gods from the hearts and daily practices of the Israelites. He would establish a single capital in Jerusalem and designate a permanent place for the Ark of the Covenant. One God, worshipped in one Temple, located in the one and only capital, under one king of the Davidic dynasty were the keys to the salvation of Israel—both in David's time and in the time of the new David, King Josiah. By eradicating every trace of the worship of the same foreign gods that led Israel to sin in the past, Josiah would put an end to the seemingly endless cycle of apostasy and disaster and would lead Judah into a new Golden Age of prosperity and hope.

As we now know, however, the Bible's stirring picture of righteous Israelite judges—however powerful and compelling—has very little to do with what *really* happened in the hill country of Canaan in the Early Iron Age. Archaeology has revealed that complex social transformations among the pastoral people of the Canaanite highlands were—far more than the later biblical concepts of sin and redemption—the most formative forces in the birth of Israel.