

Israelites

The **Israelites** (/ˈɪzrəlaɪts/; Hebrew: בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל *Bnei Yisra'el*)^[1] were a confederation of Iron Age Semitic-speaking tribes of the ancient Near East, who inhabited a part of Canaan during the tribal and monarchic periods.^{[2][3][4][5][6]} According to the religious narrative of the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites' origin is traced back to the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs Abraham and his wife Sarah, through their son Isaac and his wife Rebecca, and their son Jacob who was later called Israel, whence they derive their name, with his wives Leah and Rachel and the handmaids Zilpa and Bilhah.

Modern archaeology has largely shown that determining the historicity of the religious narrative is impossible,^[7] with many scholars viewing the stories as inspiring national myth narratives with little historical value. The Israelites and their culture, according to the modern archaeological account, did not overtake the region by force, but instead branched out of the indigenous Canaanite peoples that long inhabited the Southern Levant, Syria, ancient Israel, and the Transjordan region^{[8][9][10]} through the development of a distinct monolatristic—later cementing as monotheistic—religion centered on Yahweh. The outgrowth of Yahweh-centric belief, along with a number of cultic practices, gradually gave rise to a distinct Israelite ethnic group, setting them apart from other Canaanites.^{[11][12][13]}

In the Hebrew Bible the term *Israelites* is used interchangeably with the term *Twelve Tribes of Israel*. Although related, the terms Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews are not interchangeable in all instances. "Israelites" (*Yisraelim*) refers to the people that the Hebrew Bible describes specifically as the direct descendants of any of the sons of the patriarch Jacob (later called Israel), and his descendants as a people are also collectively called "Israel", including converts to their faith in worship of the god of Israel, Yahweh. "Hebrews" (*Ivrim*), on the contrary, is used to denote the Israelites' immediate forebears who dwelt in the land of Canaan, the Israelites themselves, and the Israelites' ancient and modern descendants (including Jews and Samaritans). "Jews" (*Yehudim*) is used to denote the descendants of the Israelites who coalesced when the Tribe of Judah absorbed the remnants of various other Israelite tribes.

During the period of the divided monarchy "Israelites" was only used to refer to the inhabitants of the northern Kingdom of Israel, and it is only extended to cover the people of the southern Kingdom of Judah in post-exilic usage.^[14]

The Israelites are the ethnic stock from which modern Jews and Samaritans originally trace their ancestry.^{[15][16][17][18][19][20]} Modern Jews are named after and also descended from the southern Israelite Kingdom of Judah,^{[8][21][22][23][24][25][26][27][28][29][30]} particularly the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Simeon and partially Levi. Many Israelites took refuge in the Kingdom of Judah following the collapse of the Kingdom of Israel.^[31]

Finally, in Judaism, the term "Israelite" is, broadly speaking, used to refer to a lay member of the Jewish ethnoreligious group, as opposed to the priestly orders of Kohanim and Levites. In texts of Jewish law such as the Mishnah and Gemara, the term יהודי (*Yehudi*), meaning Jew, is rarely used, and instead the ethnonym יִשְׂרָאֵלִי (*Yisraeli*), or Israelite, is widely used to refer to Jews. Samaritans commonly refer to themselves and to Jews collectively as Israelites, and they describe themselves as the Israelite Samaritans.^{[32][33]}



Mid-20th century mosaic of the 12 Tribes of Israel, from the Etz Yosef synagogue wall in Givat Mordechai, Jerusalem

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Etymology

The term *Israelite* is the English name for the descendants of the biblical patriarch Jacob in ancient times, which is derived from the Greek Ἰσραηλῖται,^[34] which was used to translate the Biblical Hebrew term *b'nei yisrael*, בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל as either "sons of Israel" or "children of Israel".^[35]

The name *Israel* first appears in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 32:29 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0132.htm#29>). It refers to the renaming of Jacob, who, according to the Bible, wrestled with an angel, who gave him a blessing and renamed him *Israel* because he had "striven with God and with men, and have prevailed". The Hebrew Bible etymologizes the name as from *yisra* "to prevail over" or "to struggle/wrestle with", and *El* (God).^{[36][37]} However, modern scholarship interprets *El* as the subject, "El rules/struggles".^{[38][39][40]}

The name *Israel* first appears in non-biblical sources c. 1209 BCE, in an inscription of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah. The inscription is very brief and says simply: "Israel is laid waste and his seed is not" (see below). The inscription refers to a people, not to an individual or a nation-state.^[41]

Terminology

In modern Hebrew, *b'nei yisrael* ("children of Israel") can denote the Jewish people at any time in history; it is typically used to emphasize Jewish ethnic identity. From the period of the Mishna (but probably used before that period) the term *Yisrael* ("an Israel") acquired an additional narrower meaning of Jews of legitimate birth other than Levites and Aaronite priests (*kohanim*). In modern Hebrew this contrasts with the term *Yisraeli* (English "Israeli"), a citizen of the modern State of Israel, regardless of religion or ethnicity.

The term *Hebrew* has Eber as an eponymous ancestor. It is used synonymously with "Israelites", or as an ethnolinguistic term for historical speakers of the Hebrew language in general.

The Greek term *Ioudaioi* (Jews) was an exonym originally referring to members of the Tribe of Judah, which formed the nucleus of the kingdom of Judah, and was later adopted as a self-designation by people in the diaspora who identified themselves as loyal to the God of Israel and the Temple in Jerusalem.^{[42][43][44][45]}

The Samaritans, who claim descent from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (plus Levi through Aaron for kohens), are named after the Israelite Kingdom of Samaria, but until modern times many Jewish authorities contested their claimed lineage, deeming them to have been conquered foreigners who were settled in the Land of Israel by the Assyrians, as was the typical Assyrian policy to obliterate national identities. Today, Jews and Samaritans both recognize each other as communities with an authentic Israelite origin.^[46]

The terms "Jews" and "Samaritans" largely replaced the title "Children of Israel"^[47] as the commonly used ethnonym for each respective community.



The Merneptah stele. While alternative translations exist, the majority of biblical archaeologists translate a set of hieroglyphs as *Israel*, representing the first instance of the name Israel in the historical record.

Historical Israelites

Origins

Several theories exist proposing the origins of the Israelites in raiding groups, infiltrating nomads or emerging from indigenous Canaanites driven from the wealthier urban areas by poverty to seek their fortunes in the highland.^[48] Various, ethnically distinct groups of itinerant nomads such as the Habiru and Shasu recorded in Egyptian texts as active in Edom and Canaan could have been related to the later Israelites, which does not exclude the possibility that the majority may have had their origins in Canaan proper. The name Yahweh, the god of the later Israelites, may indicate connections with the region of Mount Seir in Edom.^[49]

The prevailing academic opinion today is that the Israelites were a mixture of peoples predominantly indigenous to Canaan, although an Egyptian matrix of peoples may also have played a role in their ethnogenesis,^{[53][54][55]} with an ethnic composition similar to that in Ammon, Edom and Moab,^[54] and including Habiru and Šośu.^[56] The defining feature which marked them off from the surrounding societies was a staunch egalitarian organisation focused on the worship of Yahweh, rather than mere kinship.^[54]



Ramesses III prisoner tiles depicting precursors of the Israelites in Canaan: Canaanites from city-states and a Shasu leader.^{[50][51][52]}

Language

The language of the Canaanites may perhaps be best described as an "archaic form of Hebrew, standing in much the same relationship to the Hebrew of the Old Testament as does the language of Chaucer to modern English." The Canaanites were also the first people, as far as is known, to have used an alphabet, as early as the 12th century BCE^[57]

The name "Israel"

The name Israel first appears c. 1209 BCE, at the end of the Late Bronze Age and the very beginning of the period archaeologists and historians call Iron Age I, on the Merneptah Stele raised by the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah. The inscription is very brief:

Plundered is Canaan with every evil,
Carried off is Ashkelon,
Seized upon is Gezer,
Yeno^cam is made as that which does not exist
Israel lies fallow, it has no seed;
Ḫurru has become a widow because of Egypt.^[49]

As distinct from the cities named (Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam) which are written with a toponymic marker, Israel is written hieroglyphically with a demonymic determinative indicating that the reference is to a human group, variously located in central Palestine^[49] or the highlands of Samaria.^[58]

Pre-state (Iron Age I) and monarchies (Iron Age II)

Over the next two hundred years (the period of Iron Age I) the number of highland villages increased from 25 to over 300^[9] and the settled population doubled to 40,000.^[59] By the 10th century BCE a rudimentary state had emerged in the north-central highlands,^[60] and in the 9th century this became a kingdom.^[61] Settlement in the southern highlands was minimal from the 12th through the 10th centuries BCE, but a state began to emerge there in the 9th century,^[62] and from 850 BCE onwards a series of inscriptions are evidence of a kingdom which its neighbours refer to as the "House of David."^[63]

From the downfall of the two kingdoms to Bar Kochba

After the destruction of the Israelite kingdoms of Samaria and Judah in 720 and 586 BCE respectively,^{[64][65]} the concepts of Jew and Samaritan gradually replaced Judahite and Israelite. When the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity, the Hasmonean kingdom was established in present-day Israel, consisting of three regions which were Judea, Samaria, and the Galilee. In the pre-exilic First Temple Period the political power of Judea was concentrated within the tribe of Judah, Samaria was dominated by the tribe of Ephraim and the House of Joseph, while the Galilee was associated with the tribe of Naphtali, the most eminent tribe of northern Israel.^{[66][67]} At the time of the Kingdom of Samaria, the Galilee was populated by northern tribes of Israel, but following the Babylonian exile the region became Jewish. During the Second Temple period relations between the Jews and Samaritans remained tense. In 120 BCE the Hasmonean king Yohanan Hyrcanos I destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, due to the resentment between the two groups over a disagreement of whether Mount Moriah in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim in Shechem was the actual site of the Aqedah, and the chosen place for the Holy Temple, a source of contention that had been growing since the two houses of the former united monarchy first split asunder in 930 BCE and which had finally exploded into warfare.^{[68][69]} 190 years after the destruction of the Samaritan Temple and the surrounding area of Shechem, the Roman general and future emperor Vespasian launched a military campaign to crush the Jewish revolt of 66 CE, which resulted in the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by his son Titus, and the subsequent exile of Jews from Judea and the Galilee in 135 CE following the Bar Kochba revolt.^{[70][71]}

Biblical Israelites

The Israelite story begins with some of the culture heroes of the Jewish people, the Patriarchs. The Torah traces the Israelites to the patriarch Jacob, grandson of Abraham, who was renamed Israel after a mysterious incident in which he wrestles all night with God or an angel. Jacob's twelve sons (in order of birth), Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin, become the ancestors of twelve tribes, with the exception of Joseph, whose two sons Mannasseh and Ephraim, who were adopted by Jacob, become tribal eponyms (Genesis 48 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0148.htm#1>)).^[73]

The mothers of Jacob's sons are:

- Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun
- Rachel: Joseph (Ephraim and Menasseh), Benjamin
- Bilhah (Rachel's maid): Dan, Naphtali
- Zilpah (Leah's maid): Gad, Asher (Genesis 35:22–26 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0135.htm#22>))^[73]

Jacob and his sons are forced by famine to go down into Egypt, although Joseph was already there, as he had been sold into slavery while young. When they arrive they and their families are 70 in number, but within four generations they have increased to 600,000 men of fighting age, and the Pharaoh of Egypt, alarmed, first enslaves them and then orders the death of all male Hebrew children. A woman from the tribe of Levi hides her child, places him in a woven basket, and sends him down the Nile river. He is named Mosheh, or Moses, by the Egyptians who find him. Being a Hebrew baby, they award a Hebrew woman the task of raising him, the mother of Moses volunteers, and the child and his mother are reunited.^{[74][75]}

At the age of forty Moses kills an Egyptian, after he sees him beating a Hebrew to death, and escapes as a fugitive into the Sinai desert, where he is taken in by the Midianites and marries Zipporah, the daughter of the Midianite priest Jethro. When he is eighty years old, Moses is tending a herd of sheep in solitude on Mount Sinai when he sees a desert shrub that is burning but is not consumed. The God of Israel calls to Moses from the fire and reveals his name, Yahweh, and tells Moses that he is being sent to Pharaoh to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt.^[76]



Map of the Holy Land, Pietro Vesconte, 1321, showing the allotments of the tribes of Israel. Described by Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld as "the first non-Ptolemaic map of a definite country"^[72]



Model of the Mishkan constructed under the auspices of Moses, in Timna Park, Israel

Yahweh tells Moses that if Pharaoh refuses to let the Hebrews go to say to Pharaoh "Thus says Yahweh: Israel is my son, my first-born and I have said to you: Let my son go, that he may serve me, and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your first-born". Moses returns to Egypt and tells Pharaoh that he must let the Hebrew slaves go free. Pharaoh refuses and Yahweh strikes the Egyptians with a series of horrific plagues, wonders, and catastrophes, after which Pharaoh relents and banishes the Hebrews from Egypt. Moses leads the Israelites out of bondage^[77] toward the Red Sea, but Pharaoh changes his mind and arises to massacre the fleeing Hebrews. Pharaoh finds them by the sea shore and attempts to drive them into the ocean with his chariots and drown them.^[78]

Moses ascends biblical Mount Sinai and fasts for forty days while he writes down the Torah as Yahweh dictates, beginning with Bereshith and the creation of the universe and earth.^{[80][81]} He is shown the design of the Mishkan and the Ark of the Covenant, which Bezalel is given the task of building. Moses descends from the mountain forty days later with the Sefer Torah he wrote, and with two rectangular lapis lazuli^[82] tablets, into which Yahweh had carved the Ten Commandments in Paleo-Hebrew. In his absence, Aaron has constructed an image of Yahweh,^[83] depicting him as a young Golden Calf, and has presented it to the Israelites, declaring "Behold O Israel, this is your god who brought you out of the land of Egypt". Moses smashes the two tablets and grinds the golden calf into dust, then throws the dust into a stream of water flowing out of Mount Sinai, and forces the Israelites to drink from it.^[84]

Moses descends Mount Sinai and the Israelites agree to be the chosen people of Yahweh and follow all the laws of the Torah. Moses prophesies if they forsake the Torah, Yahweh will exile them for the total number of years they did not observe the shmita.^[87] Bezael constructs the Ark of the Covenant and the Mishkan, where the presence of Yahweh dwells on earth in the Holy of Holies, above the Ark of the Covenant, which houses the Ten Commandments. Moses sends spies to scout out the Land of Canaan, and the Israelites are commanded to go up and conquer the land, but they refuse, due to their fear of warfare and violence. In response, Yahweh condemns the entire generation, including Moses, who is condemned for striking the rock at Meribah, to exile and death in the Sinai desert.^[88]



Forty years after the Exodus, following the death of the generation of Moses, a new generation, led by Joshua, enters Canaan and takes possession of the land in accordance with the promise made to Abraham by Yahweh. Land is allocated to the tribes by lottery. Eventually the Israelites ask for a king, and Yahweh gives them Saul. David, the youngest (divinely favored) son of Jesse of Bethlehem would succeed Saul. Under David the Israelites establish the united monarchy, and under David's son Solomon they construct the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, using the 400-year-old materials of the Mishkan, where Yahweh continues to tabernacle himself among them. On the death of Solomon and reign of his son, Rehoboam, the kingdom is divided in two.^[91]

The kings of the northern Kingdom of Samaria are uniformly bad, permitting the worship of other gods and failing to enforce the worship of Yahweh alone, and so Yahweh eventually allows them to be conquered and dispersed among the peoples of the earth; and strangers rule over their remnant in the northern land. In Judah some kings are good and enforce the worship of Yahweh alone, but many are bad and permit other gods, even in the Holy Temple itself, and at length Yahweh allows Judah to fall to her enemies, the people taken into captivity in Babylon, the land left empty and desolate, and the Holy Temple itself destroyed.^{[73][92]}

Yet despite these events Yahweh does not forget his people, but sends Cyrus, king of Persia to deliver them from bondage. The Israelites are allowed to return to Judah and Benjamin, the Holy Temple is rebuilt, the priestly orders restored, and the service of sacrifice resumed. Through the offices of the sage Ezra, Israel is constituted as a holy nation, bound by the Torah and holding itself apart from all other peoples.^{[73][93]}

Genetics

In 2000, M. Hammer, et al. conducted a study on 1371 men and definitively established that part of the paternal gene pool of Jewish communities in Europe, North Africa and Middle East came from a common Middle East ancestral population.^[94] Another study (Nebel et al. 2001) noted; "In comparison with data available from other relevant populations in the region, Jews were found to be more closely related to groups in the north of the Fertile Crescent (Kurds, Turks, and Armenians) than to their Arab neighbors. The authors found that, "Palestinian Arabs and Bedouin differed from the other Middle Eastern populations studied, mainly in specific high-frequency Eu 10 haplotypes not found in the non-Arab groups." and suggested that some of this difference might be due to migration and admixture from the Arabian peninsula during the last two millennia.^[95] A 2004 study (by Shen et al.) comparing Samaritans to several Jewish populations (including Ashkenazi Jews, Iraqi Jews, Libyan Jews, Moroccan Jews, and Yemenite Jews, as well as Israeli Druze and Palestinians) found that "the principal components analysis suggested a common ancestry of Samaritan and Jewish patrilineages. Most of the former may be traced back to a common ancestor in what is today identified as the paternally inherited Israelite high priesthood (Cohanim) with a common ancestor projected to the time of the Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel."^[18]

See also

- Biblical archaeology
- Groups claiming affiliation with Israelites
- Lachish relief
- Masoretic Text
- Samaritan Pentateuch
- Tribal allotments of Israel
- Who is a Jew?
- Twelve Tribes of Israel
- Yom HaAliyah

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