

Palestine in Biblical Times

Palestine has been inhabited since the dawn of human history. Neandantherals first settled the land in the Old Stone Age, and ever since that time the land of Palestine has been continuously inhabited.

The first major civilization to inhabit Palestine, Canaan, emerged in the Bronze Age. Canaan was composed of several different indigenous societies, including the Edomite, Moabite, and Ammonite peoples. Rather than being governed under one central authority, there existed several independent city-states that exerted political influence over each other. The most distinctive features about these peoples were their urban culture and the sociocultural divide between those of the coast and those of the more mountainous interior.

The next major civilization to emerge was that of the Israelites; their first archaeological reference is on an Egyptian stele dating back to the thirteenth century BC.¹ Their exact origins are unclear and controversial; there exist two main theories as to how the Israelites entered Palestine. The traditional, biblical narrative is that the Israelites moved out of Egypt after Moses

¹ Toorn, Karel Van der. *Family Religion in Babylonia, Ugarit and Israel: Continuity and Changes in the Forms of Religious Life*, p. 184. The inscription reads as follows:

*Canaan is plundered with every evil;
Ashkelon is conquered;
Gezer is seized;
Yanoam is made non-existent;
Israel is laid waste, his seed is no more;
Kharu has become a widow because of Egypt!
All lands together are at peace;
Any who roamed have been subdued.*

Note that in the original engraving, “Israel” is marked with the hieroglyph for a group of people, whereas the other names mentioned are marked with the hieroglyph for a settled land or city-state. Thus, Israel here does not refer to a state, but rather to a collection of unsettled people.

parted the Red Sea, wandered the desert of the Sinai for 40 years, and moved into Canaan as God's chosen people. Yet, according to the archaeological narrative, the Israelites may have slowly evolved from an intermixing of several indigenous ethnicities, and thus emerged as a distinct ethnic group over time.² In this theory, the Israelites may or may not be connected to the Habiru of the Fertile Crescent (note the etymological similarity to Hebrew), a social class of nomadic raiders, outlaws, mercenaries, and other low-class individuals. They may also be related to the Shasu of the Southern Levant, a group of pastoralist nomads.³ Regardless of which narrative is true, it is unlikely that Israelite settlement was as straightforward as the Bible depicts it. The Israelites would not have a strong, organized political presence in Canaan until the beginning of the twelfth century BC.

Next to enter were the Philistines, a sect of the Aegean "Sea Peoples" who, through various methods, established several settlements in the land that would later come to be known as Palestine. Although they were latecomers to the region, the Philistines quickly settled the land - "Philistia", a loose confederation of Philistine city-states in the southern coastal regions, existed from roughly 1175 BC to 604 BC; it stretched, at its height, from modern-day Gaza to Jaffa. It is likely that the Philistines also constituted a minority population along the northern coast of the Levant as well.⁴ Philistines on the fertile plains of the Southern Levant, in tandem with the Canaanites and the Israelites, thrived culturally and economically. The Philistines helped to spread the Phoenecian alphabet throughout the Middle East and Europe, an effort which has left a notable influence on the linguistic character of those regions that can still be felt today.⁵ Yet,

² Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 8

³ Ibid. 4

⁴ Avner Raban, "The Philistines in the Western Jezreel Valley", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 284 (November 1991), pp. 17–27, The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The American Schools of Oriental Research.

⁵ Ibid. 2

their most lasting and well-known contribution to history is that of a single name: the modern label of “Palestine”, which is first referenced as “the part of Syria called Palestine” described in Herodotus’s *Histories* (written in 430 BC).⁶

The specific details surrounding the existence of Hebrew kingdoms in this era are contested and controversial; the fact that only limited archaeological evidence exists from that time period further complicates the issue. The traditional narrative (heavily referencing the Bible) is that an Israelite polity, founded by Saul and continued by David and Solomon, did exist and was founded around 1040 BC.⁷ This “United Monarchy” (the existence of which is open to question) was an Israelite polity that was essential to the development of Jewish history. The traditional label for this polity among scholars who believe it existed is that of a “kingdom”, but many scholars dispute the degree of centralization that this label implies, instead believing it to have been a loose tribal confederation in which “kings” may have simply been tribal chieftains.⁸

There were several factors that would have pushed the Israelites to organize and centralize, such as the distinctive requirements of their religion (Yahwism, centered around the worship of the supreme god Yahweh) and the need to defend against hostile Canaanite polities. In the traditional narrative, shortly after founding the kingdom, Saul died and was succeeded by David, who expanded the kingdom’s borders greatly and subdued several neighboring tribes and city-states. After David’s death, Solomon ascended to the throne; he was notable for the economic prosperity of the kingdom under his reign, and for the building of royal works such as the First Temple. His spending eventually plunged the kingdom into debt, however, which in turn

⁶ Herodotus., and Alfred D. Godley. *Herodotus: In Four Volumes: Books I and II*. Rev. and reprint. ed., p. 137

⁷ Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 6

⁸ Finkelstein, Israel, and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. See also the works of Ze’ev Herzog.

may have forced many Israelites into conscripted labor gangs. During this time, the borders of the United Monarchy ebbed and flowed greatly due to conflicts with Philistines and Canaanite populations.

The United Monarchy was short-lived. After approximately seventy years, the northern half of the kingdom revolted, likely due to the socioeconomic consequences of the debt Solomon had acquired. The polity was split into the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (again, the label of “kingdom” is disputed), which were constantly at war with each other. Their infighting weakened both considerably, and in the middle of the eighth century BC, the Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians from Mesopotamia. The Assyrians deported many Israelites and brought in foreigners, which led to the evolution of a new ethnocultural group: the Samaritans, who still survive today. The destruction of Israel and the emergence of the Samaritans meant that those of Judah became the last remnant of the United Monarchy.

In the same wave of invasions, Philistia and Judah were overcome by the Assyrians from Mesopotamia. However, neither polity was subject to mass deportation and both managed to maintain their cultural distinctness (with limited autonomy) under Assyrian rule. At various times both polities would attempt rebellions against the Assyrians, but all revolutionary activities would come to fail. In this time, the city-states of Philistia became increasingly independent, and their pseudo-confederation steadily weakened.

What came after Assyrian rule would be disastrous for all the inhabitants of Canaan. In the late seventh century BC, the Assyrian Empire fell to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and in the early sixth century the Babylonians began to invade Judah. This invasion would lead to the final destruction of the Philistines⁹ and would produce the Babylonian Captivity, an event so central to Jewish history that its significance can hardly be understated. Nebuchadnezzar II, the king of the

⁹ Meyers, Eric M. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, p. 313

Neo Babylonian Empire, invaded the Kingdom of Judah and sacked Jerusalem, destroying the First Temple of Solomon and deporting most of the population to Babylon. This Babylon Captivity irrevocably changed the culture of the Israelites who were deported; the modern Hebrew alphabet began to develop in captivity¹⁰, Yahweh began to be worshiped exclusively¹¹, and the Israelites slowly began to call themselves Jews (etymologically deriving from the name Judah).¹² It is in the Babylonian captivity that Judaism truly evolved from Yahwism and the Jewish nation from the Israelites.

In 539 BC, the Persian Achaemenids defeated the Neo-Babylonians under the leadership of Cyrus the Great, who allowed the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the First Temple. Those who stayed behind in Babylon constituted the first Jewish diaspora, although most chose to emigrate back to Judah. The Jews were able to re-establish a majority population in what used to be their kingdom, but outside of that former territory, Jews constituted a minority population.¹³

Other peoples who lived in the land of Palestine at this time include Phoenicians, foreigners from the Mediterranean, the descendants of Philistines and Canaanites, and various other populations. It is likely that there would have been a small population of Arabs living in Palestine at the time, due to the proximity of the Arab Nabataeans of the Southern Levant.¹⁴ Petra, the famed ancient city of the Nabataeans, would eventually become the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom in the second century BC, forming an Arabic polity that would encompass northwestern Arabia and parts of southern Palestine.

¹⁰ Sáenz-Badillos, Angel, and John Elwolde. *A History of the Hebrew Language*.

¹¹ Freedman, D.N, and Allen C. Myers. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*.

¹² Krämer, Gudrun, and Graham Harman. *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel*. 3rd ed., Princeton, Princeton UP, 2011, p. 11

¹³ Ibid. 12

¹⁴ Taylor, Jane. *Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataens*.

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