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The History and Archaeology of the Bible

Transcript Book

Jean-Pierre Isbouts, DLitt
National Geographic Historian

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The History and Archaeology of the Bible

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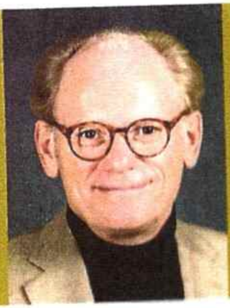
LESSONS 1–24



Jean-Pierre Isbouts is a National Geographic Historian and a member of the Doctoral Faculty in the School of Leadership Studies at Fielding Graduate University. In 2014, he evaluated a recently discovered canvas in Geneva, Switzerland, which he believes is Leonardo da Vinci's first version of the *Mona Lisa*, and in 2017, he discovered that da Vinci and his workshop produced a second version of his famous *Last Supper* fresco. He is an award-winning filmmaker and best-selling author who gained worldwide renown with his book *The Biblical World*.

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Corporate Headquarters
4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500
Chantilly, VA 20151-2299
USA
Phone: 1-800-832-2412
www.thegreatcourses.com

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THE SETTLEMENT IN THE PROMISED LAND

LESSON 7

The Torah, or the Five Books of Moses, is not so much interested in writing history as in making the argument for the theological foundation of Israel's prehistory. But things change in the second division of the Hebrew Bible, known as Nevi'im, or the Prophets. Unlike the Torah, the principal purpose of this division is indeed to tell a historical saga: the rise of the kingdoms of Israel and their eventual fall to Assyrian and Babylonian aggression.

The stories of Joshua, Samuel, and Kings can increasingly be illustrated by what archaeologists have been able to excavate not only in Israel but in the territory of ancient empires such as Assyria and Neo-Babylonia. These excavations have yielded a rich harvest of data that can help put the biblical stories in a historical context.

But of course, that doesn't take away the incredible power and drama of the story, and what it tells us about the awesome might of Yahweh. In the end, no one can either prove or disprove the story of Exodus. But there is one block of stone, which today stands in the archaeological museum of Cairo, that offers a tantalizing piece of evidence. It is called the Stela of King Merneptah, the successor of Ramses the Second, and it is dated to 1207 BC. Among its dense hieroglyphs is the first reference ever to an entity called "Israel." So, whatever we may think of the Exodus, it does seem that near the end of the 13th century, a community known as Israel had indeed begun to exist.

Jewish Law

- The first collection of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, includes five books: In addition to Genesis and Exodus, there is also Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These three books spell out the Jewish Law in detail. Together, the five books are also called the Laws of Moses, because according to the biblical tradition, these books were dictated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments, the fundamental principles of the Law, were also engraved on stone tablets, and these were placed in a sacred container known as the Ark of the Covenant.

- From this point on, this Law will define the practice of ancient Judaism, including its rites of sacrifice and its code of justice. It's certainly true, as some scholars have claimed, that there are similarities between the Jewish Law and the Babylonian tradition of social justice that had produced the Code of Hammurabi and other legal works. There are also parallels between the Ten Commandments and Egyptian law, with which the Hebrews in Goshen were certainly familiar.

- But the Mosaic Laws are unique because they go far beyond the purely judicial code of a centralized state. They spell out a form of conduct by which humanity will prosper, not only as a family and a community but also as nation under the benevolent guidance of God. While it's true that much of the Mosaic Law, and particularly Leviticus, is concerned with sacrificial rites and the rules of ritual purity, it's the concern for social justice makes the Torah stand out among all the other codes of ancient prehistory.

Jericho

- At the beginning of the book of Joshua, the Israelite refugees are poised to enter the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River near the city of Jericho. Unfortunately, Moses does not live to see that day. On the eve of the crossing, the great leader journeys up Mount Nebo, where God shows him the hills of the Promised Land. He dies there and is buried in an unmarked grave.

- By that time, a young warrior named Joshua has been designated as the commander to lead the Hebrews into Canaan. Moses had been impressed with the way Joshua distinguished himself in the battle against the Amalekites at Rephidim. He had also formed part of the secret reconnaissance team that had been sent to explore the Promised Land ahead of the main body. What they discovered is that the rich valleys of Canaan, and particularly the Jezreel Valley, were protected by a ring of fortresses.

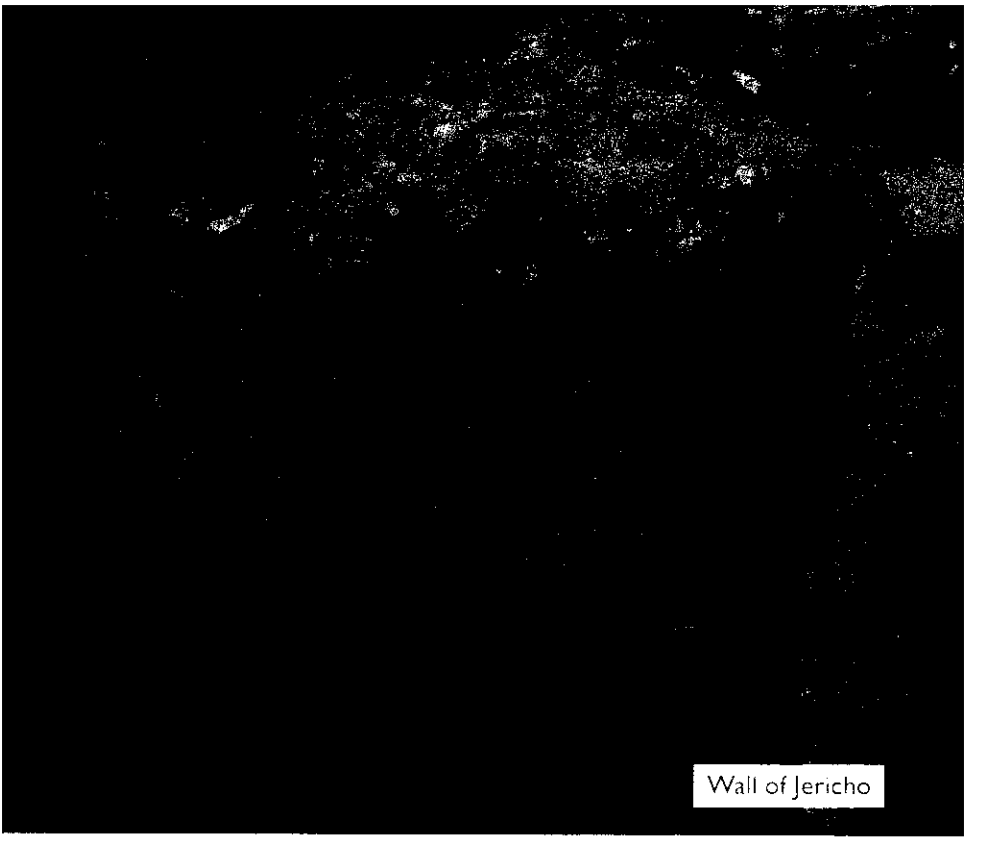
- Jericho is the first major city in their path. At that time, Jericho was one of the oldest cities on earth, and archaeologists today have found the layers of no fewer than 21 successive settlements going back to 9000 BCE. Jericho is obviously a difficult nut to crack, but Joshua has no choice. The city sat on the main path between the Transjordan and his ultimate objective: the spine of the high country, running across the length of Canaan.

- Joshua and his troops march around the walls of the city seven times. They carry the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments, while seven priests blast away on their trumpets. On the seventh day, when the soldiers finish their seventh turn, the people let out a mighty war cry. Finally, the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

Evidence of Joshua's Campaign

- The idea of flattening the walls with shock waves of sound rather than military hardware is a magnificent story, but the excavation of Jericho has shown that the city was destroyed many centuries earlier, around 1500 BCE. And while archaeologists did find evidence of massive walls, these appear to have been demolished even earlier, probably as a result of an earthquake. By the time the Israelites appeared at its doorstep in the late 13th century BCE, the city only had walls of packed mud—not much of a defense against an enemy.

- Harvard archaeologist Lawrence Stager, who made a study of Joshua's campaign, showed that of the 31 cities said to be taken by Joshua and the Israelites, 20 have been positively identified by excavation teams.



Wall of Jericho

Of these, the vast majority show no evidence of violent destruction in the late 13th or early 12th century BCE. What the Bible portrays as a victorious march by a conquering army was probably more of a gradual infiltration in areas that were unlikely to get the locals upset, such as the highlands, where the topsoil is dry and agriculture is difficult.

- This approach makes sense because any migrating groups from Egypt, after a long trek through the desert, would not have the heavy weapons needed to subdue the Canaanites. At this time, as the Bible admits, many Canaanite cities had equipped themselves with cutting-edge Iron Age technology, such as the composite bow and chariots drawn by fast horses. But there is one exception to this theory, and that is the city of Hazor.

- At the time, Hazor was one of the most powerful cities of Canaan, with a population of some 15,000 people. In 1955, the Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin set out to discover Hazor's fate during this time and concluded that Hazor had indeed been razed to the ground by the Israelites around 1230 BCE. In the years since, however, Yadin's findings have come under heavy attack, and some historians believe the royal palace was destroyed by the Egyptians or perhaps the Philistines.

The Philistines

- The Philistines were a potent and battle-hardened military force that had already left a trail of destruction through much of the Near East before they landed in Canaan. One of the great mysteries today is where these people came from and why they decided to go on a murderous rampage through much of the Mediterranean world, but many historians agree that the source of this violent migration can be found in Greece.

- In the center of the Peloponnese peninsula was a city-state called Mycenae. For some reason, just as the Israelites were entering Canaan, Mycenae quite rapidly came to ruin. Nobody quite knows why, but it was clear that a shadow of death was stealing across the Mediterranean, either in the form of a pandemic or a prolonged famine. A group that historians refer to as the Sea Peoples, which included the Philistines, propelled large groups of people to move in search of safer havens. The Sea Peoples moved swiftly on land as well as the sea, and they were deadly. By 1175 BCE, they had conquered most of the coastal regions of today's Syria and Lebanon.

- The threat of the Philistines served to distract the Canaanites as well as the Egyptian military just as the Israelites tried to settle in the land. It is this distraction that gave the Hebrews the necessary breathing room to consolidate their settlements in the highlands. The bad news is that once they were evicted from Egypt, the Philistines pointed their ships back east and sailed to the southern coast of Canaan. One scenario suggests that Ramses III actually gave them this strip of land—which technically was still inside the Egyptian sphere of influence—as part of the negotiations to keep them out of Egypt. Much of this coastal region was rolled up in short order and turned into a Philistine confederacy that became known as Philistia.

- In other words, by the middle of the 12th century BCE, there were three groups of people competing for the limited water and land resources of Canaan: the Israelites, the Philistines, and the Canaanites themselves. This was bound to lead to conflict. Sure enough, it is this conflict that runs through the next set of books in the Bible.

Readings

Cline, *1177 BC.*

Collon, *Ancient Near Eastern Art.*

THE SETTLEMENT IN THE PROMISED LAND

LESSON 7 TRANSCRIPT

Up to this point, our journey through the archaeology of the Bible has been largely based on hypothesis, informed by circumstantial evidence. That's because the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses, is not so much interested in writing history as in making the argument for the theological foundation of Israel's prehistory. In doing so, it wants to impress on its audience the conditions under which a nation of Israel will prosper, provided it honors its covenantal relationship with God.

But things change when we now turn to the second division of the Hebrew Bible, known as Nevi'im, or The Prophets. This collection includes the books of the so-called former prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—and the latter prophets, which include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 Minor Prophets. And unlike the Torah, the principal purpose of this division is indeed to tell a historical saga: the rise of the kingdoms of Israel, and their eventual fall to Assyrian and Babylonian aggression.

What that means for us is that the stories of Joshua, Samuel and Kings can increasingly be illustrated by what archaeologists have been able to excavate, not only in Israel but also in the territory of ancient empires such as Assyria and Neo-Babylonia. These excavations, which of course are still ongoing, have yielded a rich harvest of data that can help us to put the biblical stories in a historical context, though this doesn't always produce the results we might expect.

Now, remember that the first collection of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, includes five books: in addition to Genesis and Exodus, there is also Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These three books spell out the Jewish Law, in detail. Together, the five books are also called the Laws of Moses, because according to the biblical tradition, these books were dictated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments, the fundamental principles of the Law, were also engraved on stone tablets, and these were placed in a very sacred container, known as the Ark of the Covenant.

So, from this point on, this Law will define the practice of ancient Judaism, including its rites of sacrifice and its code of justice. It's certainly true, as some scholars have argued, that there are similarities between the Jewish Law and the Babylonian tradition of social justice that had produced the Code of Hammurabi and other legal works.

There are also parallels between, for example, the Ten Commandments and Egyptian law, with which the Hebrews in Goshen were certainly familiar. In the *Book of the Dead*, for example, each Egyptian must prepare to defend his actions before a panel of judges in the underworld by pledging things like: "I have not killed. I have not caused pain. I have not caused tears. I have not deprived cattle of their pasture." And so on.

Having said that, in all other aspects, the Mosaic Laws are unique, because they go far beyond the purely judicial code of a centralized state. They spell out a form of conduct by which humanity will prosper, not only as a family and a community, but also as nation under the benevolent guidance of God.

While it's true that much of the Mosaic Law, and particularly Leviticus, is concerned with sacrificial rites and the rules of ritual purity, it's the concern for social justice that makes the Torah stand out among all the other codes of ancient prehistory. For example—"You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard," warns Leviticus. "[You] shall leave them for the poor and the alien."

Deuteronomy tells merchants and traders to be fair: "You shall have only a full and honest measure." And judges and high officials are warned not to "distort justice; you must show no partiality." Never forget, says the book, that once "you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Those are very powerful words.

And so, let's pick up the thread of the story with the first Book of the Prophets, the book of Joshua: the story of the Israelite settlement in the Promised Land. These stories actually coincide with some very important changes at the dawn of the 12th century. Historians call this new era the Iron Age, and it's certainly true that the growing use of metal tools was a key feature of this period.

But even more important was the emergence of linear alphabets instead of the pictographic or the cuneiform writing of the Bronze Age. The first was the Phoenician alphabet, which emerged somewhere around the 11th century BC. A century later came the Hebrew alphabet, with several variations in Aramaic. And finally, because of Phoenicia's trade throughout the Mediterranean world, there came the Greek alphabet, which is the basis for our modern style of writing.

Politically, however, this period was also a time of great instability and turmoil, largely because of the wholesale migration of different peoples throughout the Near East. So, in that sense, the movement of Hebrew refugees from Egypt to Canaan was really part of a much greater pattern. Eventually, the most destructive of these migrations, the so-called Sea Peoples, would wash up on the shores of Israel, in the form of the Philistines. But of course, now I am getting ahead of myself.

At the beginning of the book of Joshua, the Israelite refugees are poised to enter the Promised Land by crossing the River Jordan near the city of Jericho. Unfortunately, Moses did not live to see that day. On the eve of the crossing, the great leader went up Mount Nebo, where God showed him the hills of the Promised Land. And there he died and was buried in an unmarked grave.

But, by that time, a young warrior named Joshua had been designated as the commander to lead the Hebrews into Canaan. Moses was impressed with the way Joshua had distinguished himself in the battle against the Amalekites at Rephidim. He had also formed part of the secret reconnaissance team that had been sent to explore the Promised Land ahead of the main body. What they discovered was that the rich valleys of Canaan, and particularly the Jezreel Valley, were protected by a ring of fortresses that included Megiddo and Beth Shean, as we saw before, as well as Hazor.

So, Joshua's promotion clearly shows that Moses thought that they now needed a bold and imaginative commander, rather than a spiritual guide or a prophet. In other words, the Israelites were fairly sure that they would have a lot of opposition in their effort to settle in Canaan, and they needed to be ready to defend themselves, if it came to that.

The first test of that plan came when they approached Jericho, the first major city in their path. At that time, Jericho was already one of the oldest cities on earth, and it's stayed that way even in our modern times. Archaeologists have found the layers of no fewer than 21 successive settlements, going back to 9000 BC during the Neolithic or New Stone Age period. In the 1950s, the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon discovered a number of ancient settlements, built with mud brick. She also found a mysterious tower, 30 feet in diameter, that may be have been used for observation, for sacrifice, or some other type of religious rite.

Jericho was obviously a difficult nut to crack, but Joshua had no choice. The city sat on the main path between the Transjordan and his ultimate objective: the spine of the high country, running across the length of Canaan. It was also protected by high walls, according to the Bible.

So, for six days, Joshua and his troops marched around the walls of the city seven times. As they did so, they carried the Ark of the Covenant containing the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments, while seven priests blasted away on their trumpets. On the seventh day, when the soldiers finished their seventh turn, with the priests blowing the rams' horns, the people let out a mighty war cry. And then, finally, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

Everyone knows this magnificent story, of course, this idea of flattening the walls with the shock waves of sound, rather than military hardware. But the excavation of Jericho has shown that the city was actually destroyed many centuries earlier, around 1500 before the Common Era. And while Kathleen Kenyon did find evidence of massive walls, these appeared to have been demolished even earlier, during the 6th millennium BC, probably as a result of an earthquake. By the time the Israelites appeared at its doorstep, in the late 13th century BC, the city only had walls of packed mud—not much of a defense against an enemy.

Of course, I know, no one likes to cast doubt on the heroic saga of Joshua's conquests. But Harvard archaeologist Lawrence Stager, who made a study of Joshua's campaign, has found that of the 31 cities said to be taken by Joshua and the Israelites, 20 have now been positively identified by excavation teams. But of those, the vast majority show no evidence of violent destruction in the late-13th or early-12th century BC.

In other words, what the Bible portrays as a victorious march by a conquering army was probably more of a gradual infiltration in areas that were unlikely to get the locals upset—such as, for example, the highlands, where the topsoil was dry and where agriculture is difficult. And that makes sense when you remember that any migrating groups from Egypt, after a long trek through the desert, would not have the heavy weapons needed to subdue the Canaanites. At this time, as the Bible admits, many Canaanite cities had equipped themselves with cutting-edge Iron Age technology, such as the composite bow, and chariots drawn by fast horses. But there is one exception, and that is the city of Hazor, as we will now see.

The fortified city of Hazor appears throughout the stories of the Bible. Jacob traveled through Hazor on his way to Harran to find a bride among his kin. It then became a major conduit for trade between Greece, Syria and Egypt. But now it was destined a play a major role in the drama of the Israelite settlement in the Promised Land.

At the time, Hazor was one of the most powerful cities of Upper Canaan, with a population of some 15,000 people. From its commanding position just north of the Sea of Galilee, Hazor controlled the principal trading routes from Mesopotamia and Syria to the Mediterranean coast, and on to Egypt. The city was crowned with a royal acropolis, the scene of a highly sophisticated court around the figure of King Jabin. The Book of Judges even calls him the king of "all Canaan."

In 1955, the Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin excavated the northwest corner of a large building, arguably the king's palace. The plaster near the walls of the throne room still carried traces of soot. Yadin concluded that Hazor had, indeed, been razed to the ground by the Israelites around 1230 BC, confirming the biblical account.

But, in the years since, Yadin's findings have come under heavy attack. Some critics point out that later, in the Book of Judges, King Jabin (or his successor by that name) is very much alive and is, in fact, taking large numbers of Israelites captive. So, in response, some historians believe the royal palace was destroyed by either the Egyptians or perhaps the Philistines. But no one has found any evidence to support that theory. And so, I think that Yadin was right, and that Hazor is perhaps the only place where we can see evidence of a military conflict between Canaanites and Israelites.

Then again, if anyone had asked a Canaanite farmer at the beginning of the 12th century, "Tell me, what do you think is the greatest threat to your family?" his answer would not have been "The Israelites." He probably would have said, "The Philistines."

The Philistines, or Peleset as the Egyptians called them, were warriors of a very different order. They were a potent, battle-hardened military force that had already left a trail of destruction through much of the Near East before they landed into Canaan. One of the great mysteries today is where these people came from, and why they decided to go on a murderous rampage through much of the Mediterranean world. I agree with many historians that the source of this violent migration can be found in Greece.

In the center of the large peninsula, known as the Peloponnese, was a city-state called Mycenae. Its capital was surrounded by a wall of huge stones, with the famous Lion Gate at its center. Among others, here stood the palace of King Agamemnon, the legendary ruler of Homer's poem the *Iliad*, which describes a prolonged conflict between Mycenae and Troy. For a long time, Mycenae had a strong rival in the culture of the Minoans, on the island of Crete. But around 1500 BC, a massive volcanic eruption on the Greek island of Thira, also known as Santorini, destroyed many Minoan cities. When the dust had settled, Mycenae emerged as the leading culture in the Mediterranean basin.

We know that, because Mycenaean pottery has been found throughout Egypt, Canaan and even as far as Mesopotamia. These beautiful vessels probably contained all sorts of commodities from the international trade of the time, such as olive oil, wine, wheat, wool, and tin, a metal that is needed to turn copper into bronze. But for some reason, just as Israelites groups were entering Canaan, Mycenae quite rapidly came to ruin. Nobody quite knows why, but it was clear that a shadow of death was stealing across the Mediterranean, either in the form of a pandemic (a threat that is well known to us) or a prolonged famine, or both.

What we do know is that it propelled large groups of people to move in search of safer havens, by the sword. Apparently, the principal agents of this migration were a group that historians refer to as the Sea Peoples, or *Les peuples de la mer* as the French archaeologist Emmanuel de Rougé phrased it. Texts from Ugarit, the ancient port city on the Syrian coast, describe them as the *Shi-qalaya*, "They who live on boats." Assyrian records call them *Ah-lamu*, "The Wanderers." That's all true; they moved swiftly on land as well as the sea. And they were deadly. By 1175 BC, the Sea Peoples had conquered most of the coastal regions of today's Syria and Lebanon. They then turned their attention to the last great power in the region: the kingdom of Egypt, with its temples full of treasures.

Fortunately, at the time, Egypt was ruled by Ramses the Third, who was not only a very able king but also a very experienced military commander. We have a wonderful visual record of what happened next, in the form of a series of reliefs on the king's funerary temple in Medinet Habu.

First, Ramses rallied his troops to meet the Peleset infantry on Egypt's eastern border. The Philistines, according to these reliefs, were ferocious-looking in their strange horned hats and short skirts. The result was a bloody

clash, with Ramses moving from one place to the next, rallying his troops whenever the enemy threatened to break through. At last, the Philistines withdrew, but not for long.

The battle now shifted to the Nile Delta, where Egypt's defenses were weakest. It's quite possible that the enemy knew that Egypt had never fought a naval battle in home waters. Its forces were strong on land, not the sea. And so, they came again, in their fast-moving vessels, but Ramses was ready. As soon as the Philistine ships came within range, clouds of Egyptian arrows rained down upon them, and at long last, the Philistines withdrew.

Now, the story of the Sea Peoples is important for two reasons, both good and bad. On the one hand, the threat of the Philistines served to distract the Canaanites as well as the Egyptian military, just when the Israelites tried to settle in the land. Remember, Egypt still considered Canaan a vassal territory, and under any other circumstances, they may have tried to disrupt the Israelite settlement. It is this distraction that gave the Hebrews the necessary breathing room to consolidate their settlements in the highlands. That's the good news.

The bad news is that once they were evicted from Egypt, the Philistines pointed their ships back east and sailed to the southern coast of Canaan. One scenario even suggests that Ramesses the Third actually gave them this strip of land—which technically was still inside the Egyptian sphere of influence—as part of the negotiations to keep them out of Egypt. Here were cities such as Ashkelon, Ekron, Ashdod, and Gaza. These places had been successful in rebuffing the Israelites, but they were no match for the Philistines. And so, much of this coastal region was rolled up in short order and turned into a Philistine confederacy that became known as Philistia.

That word Philistia would later, in Assyrian records, be translated as *Pa-la-áš-tu*, and then become the root of the word Palestine. Among others, the Philistines brought a unique funerary culture: they buried their dead in clay coffins shaped in the form of a human beings. Some scholars believe that they adopted this form based on the model of the Egyptian sarcophagus, but made of clay, rather than wood or stone.

And so, by the middle of the 12th century BC, there were not two but three groups of people competing for the limited water and land resources of Canaan: the Israelites, the Philistines, and the Canaanites themselves. That was bound to lead to conflict. And sure enough, it is this conflict that runs through the next book in the Bible, the Book of Judges.

But before we end the story of the Israelite settlement, it's important to emphasize one thing. Even though there is no military evidence of the so-called conquest by Joshua, there are certainly other indications that by the 12th century, the highlands of Canaan were being populated by a people with a distinct culture that many of us would associate with Hebrews.

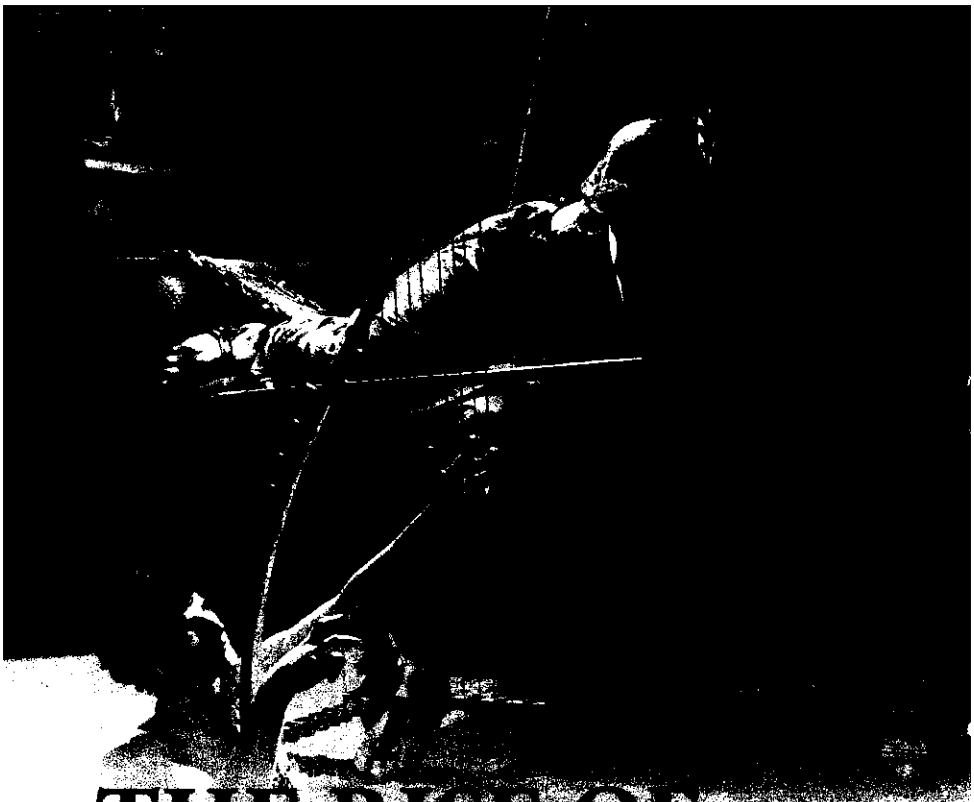
First off, the highlands of Canaan show a substantial population increase during the period we call Iron Age I, roughly between 1200 and 1000 BC—which, we think, is the presumed time span of the Book of Judges. According to Lawrence Stager, the population increased from 27 to 211 populated sites: that's an almost eightfold increase. What's more, in these places, there is a clear absence of pig bones, which may point to the emergence of the kosher diet.

These settlers then turn to terracing. Now, terracing is the creation of flat plots carved into the hillside, in order to make it suitable for agriculture. The Song of Deborah calls it the *meromei sadeh*, the "heights of the field." You couldn't necessarily grow wheat there, but you could do very well with grapes and olive trees. That type of terraced cultivation is still practiced today in the West Bank.

And finally, it is here that around 1100 BC, we see the first evidence of ancient (or Old) Hebrew. That is perhaps the most convincing evidence that Hebrew culture has sunk roots. One of the first examples is a bronze arrowhead, inscribed with a dedication: "Arrowhead of Ada son of Ba'la." Arrowhead is written as *hes*—similar to the word of *arrowhead* in Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Another example is a small tablet from Gezer, dated around 925 BC. It's a calendar of agricultural seasons, which is a very important thing for the topsoil farmers in the highlands. What's interesting is that this writing doesn't use the cuneiform script from Mesopotamia, or the Egyptian hieroglyphic or cursive systems. Instead, it uses the first truly alphabetic script, known as the Phoenician alphabet.

So, the Israelites had arrived at last. But would they be able to remain now that they faced not one but two enemy forces, each equipped with far superior weaponry? It is this nail-biting cliffhanger that is described the next set of books in the Bible: the books of Samuel.



THE RISE OF THE ISRAELITE MONARCHY

LESSON 8

The book of Joshua gives detailed information about the settlement in Canaan—which tribe goes where and who gets which part of the country—and the distribution of the various tribes suggests that, at least in the view of the Bible, the Hebrews spread far and wide. The Bible now turns to the gradual transformation of the various Israelite tribes into an alliance and, finally, into the beginning of a nation.