

# THE JEWS

## *A History*

Second Edition



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Steven Weitzman  
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**SECOND EDITION**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014, 2009 by Pearson Education, Inc.

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Cover Designer: Suzanne Duda

ISBN-13: 9780205858262 (pbk)

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Efron, John M.

The Jews: a history/John Efron, University of California, Berkeley, Steven Weitzman, Indiana University, Matthias Lehmann, Indiana University—Second edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-205-85826-2 (alk. paper)

1. Jews—History. 2. Judaism—History. I. Weitzman, Steven, 1965-  
II. Lehmann, Matthias B., 1970- III. Title.

DS117.E33 2014

909.04924—dc23

2013027381

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# PREFACE

WHILE MUCH has happened to the Jewish people since the first edition of *The Jews: A History* appeared in 2009, those events are not the occasion for the appearance of the book's second edition. To take account of this period would veer away from the writing of history and into the field of journalism, which is neither our aim nor our forte. Instead, our motive for undertaking this second edition of *The Jews: A History* derives from the interaction we have had with readers, teachers, and students who have found the volume helpful and have offered suggestions for how to improve it.

When we started writing, we came to the task with significant experience as teachers, but none of us had written anything like a comprehensive history of the Jews before or even fully understood the challenges involved. That the work has now actually been used in many classes has led to valuable feedback from colleagues and readers.

Our original goal in the first edition was to make our account of Jewish history both broad and nuanced at the same time. Our aim was to present Jewish history, thought, and culture in a way that was clear but that did not disguise or gloss over the real methodological challenges of understanding past lives. We endeavored to keep our focus on Jews—on real-life people in real-life situations—and worked hard to encompass the diversity, complexity, and richness of their experience into a coherent and readable narrative. While we feel that the first edition reflects those goals, we saw it at the time as a work in progress and have looked forward to the second edition as an opportunity to move even closer to our original ambitions.

Something else that we are proud of about the first edition is its global character. Among our original team of coauthors, two were from the United States but another was from Germany and yet another from Australia. Each of us brought not just a different dialect of English to the project but a different sensibility based on our personal experience, training, and cultural orientation. As the production of the book advanced, we also found ourselves working in tandem with production people in various locations, including unexpected places like India, and drawing on images and other resources from archives and collections throughout the world. All this reflects the world in which

we live, but we also believe that it helped us to globalize the narrative that we produced, making it truer to the globalized nature of Jewish experience.

## NEW TO THIS EDITION

- More discussion of the larger context in which Jewish culture originated, including more attention to archaeology.
- A better organized and richer account of medieval Jewish life.
- More space devoted to first person narratives to add a more direct and personal dimension to history.
- New boxes that address curious or unexpected aspects of Jewish history.
- New images to help readers better visualize the past.
- Enhanced supplementary material to help readers go deeper, including new study questions and expanded bibliography.

How then does the second edition differ from the first?

To begin with, we have worked hard on the never-ending project of absorbing new scholarly developments and new discoveries. Jewish Studies is a very dynamic field, drawing history together with archaeology, art history, literary studies, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and other fields in ways that are continuously renewed by developments in the broader humanities and social sciences. It is impossible for any one individual to keep up with all the developments and debates, which is why this project had to be collaborative, a combined effort of scholars grounded in different subfields. We have used the second edition to incorporate more of the latest findings and to broaden our perspective beyond what we were able to achieve in the first edition.

To cite some examples: Archaeology offers the best opportunity to expand our understanding of ancient Israelite culture beyond what the Bible reveals, and early chapters thus draw in more archaeology into their discussion of topics like the development of religious belief and practice. Recommitting ourselves to our original goal of conveying the breadth of Jewish experience, we have done



more to convey the lived experience of Jews—for example, the ways in which rabbinic literature mirrors the sexual attitudes of the larger cultural contexts in which it developed.

Moving from antiquity to the Middle Ages, the chapters exploring the medieval period have been more or less completely rewritten. The new version of these chapters puts greater emphasis on the richness of Jewish life under both Islam and Christianity, exploring issues from day-to-day life to topics in cultural and intellectual history like the development of medieval Jewish philosophy or the rise of Kabbalah. Moments of anti-Jewish persecution—for example during the Crusades or the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century—are not glossed over, of course, but we feel that they are now better integrated into a broader view of Jewish life in the medieval period, which evolved in constant interaction with the Islamic and Christian environments in which Jews lived.

We know most about the modern period, and thus the challenges of keeping up with the scholarship are greatest. The history of modern Jewish politics is a robust field of scholarly inquiry, and in the modern section, we have, for example, drawn upon that work, especially to help us better understand Zionism not as a singular manifestation of Jewish nationalism but merely as one option out of an array of Jewish nationalist possibilities. Greater space has been devoted to first-person narratives, eyewitness accounts that help breathe life into the text and serve to remind us that a history of a collective such as the Jewish people cannot be separated from the decisions taken and the interpretations made by individual human beings.

Beyond scholarly revisions of substance and emphasis, we have also made a number of improvements to make the book even more useful to those trying to learn about Jewish history. We have modified or added new boxes and other supplementary material to complement the narrative in more helpful or engaging ways; we have expanded

the bibliographies that appear at the end of each chapter; we have composed new study questions to help students to draw their own conclusions about the material covered in the chapter; and we have added new images and sought to better integrate them into the narrative. As was true of the first edition, the second edition is designed to be useable in different learning contexts. We have labored to make the narrative continuous and stylistically consistent so that an individual reader can read it as a book detached from any classroom experience, but we continue to divide our narrative into 15 manageable chapters so that the book also fits well into a college-level survey course of one or two semesters in length.

One final difference between this edition and its predecessor is that we wrote it while being very conscious of the role of Wikipedia and other online resources used by our readers for their understanding of the past. We make no attempt to discourage our readers from doing so, having long come to accept that our students and even our peers now rely on such resources as convenient and accessible sources of information. However, even today, there are ways of knowing—and things worth knowing—not to be found on the internet. The knowledge that comes from online sources is fragmented, uneven in quality, and shapeless. What this book aims to provide that the internet still cannot right now is an integrated and coherent account of Jewish history—one that is incomplete, that can be challenged and revised, but that nonetheless allows the reader to draw links between various facts that are far less meaningful when viewed in isolation rather than within the context of a larger collective experience. We remain committed to the belief in narrative as a powerful tool for the teaching of history and to treating the experience of individual Jews as part of a larger story.

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# NOTE ON SPELLINGS AND TRANSLITERATION

**T**HE SPELLINGS of many place names that appear in the history of the Jews have multiple variants, reflecting the different languages spoken by the people who inhabited them. In cases such as Vilna/Wilno/Vilnius (the modern-day capital of Lithuania), we have chosen the name used by the place's Jewish inhabitants. Wherever possible, the authors have transliterated Hebrew terms using those forms most familiar to them and to lay readers. These forms may

occasionally vary from chapter to chapter because they originate with different authors. Yiddish words typically follow the YIVO system of transliteration. Hebrew expressions less familiar to nonspecialists are transliterated to ensure accurate pronunciation of the words. We have followed a similar procedure for terms drawn from other languages, such as Greek and Arabic.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**John Efron** is the Koret Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is a specialist in the cultural and social history of German Jewry. His publications include *Medicine and the German Jews: A History* (Yale University Press, 2001); and *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Yale University Press, 1994). He also co-edited the volume *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (University Press of New England, 1998). His most recent work is *Sephardic Beauty and the Ashkenazic Imagination: German Jews in the Age of Emancipation* (Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

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**Steven Weitzman** is the Daniel E. Koshland Professor of Jewish Culture and Religion at Stanford University and director of its Taube Center for Jewish Studies. A scholar of biblical and early Jewish literature, his publications include *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 2005); *Religion and the Self in Antiquity* (with David Brakke and Michael Satlow; Indiana University Press, 2005); and *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom* (Yale University Press, 2011).

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## CHAPTER I

# ANCIENT ISRAEL AND OTHER ANCESTORS

**B**EFORE WE CAN begin recounting the history of the Jewish people, we must decide when exactly to begin it, and it is not easy to commit oneself to a particular starting point. Jews themselves have long believed their history begins with the Patriarchs of Genesis and the Exodus from Egypt in the age described by the Bible. The people described in much of the Bible do not call themselves Jews, however, but Israelites, or the “sons of Israel” to be more precise, and their culture and religion differ from that of later Jews in many ways. For this reason, many modern scholars place the beginnings of Jewish history at the end of the period described by the Hebrew Bible, in the wake of the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. Some place it even later, after the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, and some still later, in the age of Roman rule that produced Christianity. In other words, “Jewish” history can span 4,000 or 3,000 or even fewer than 2,000 years, and the difference comes down to a decision about beginnings, to *when* one places the emergence of the Jews and their culture.

One reason that it is difficult to fix a clear starting point for Jewish history is that it is not clear what *Jewish* means exactly and how it relates to or differs from overlapping terms used in the Bible, such as *Israelite* and *Hebrew*. The term *Jew* derives from the name “Judah” or *Yehuda*, but even in the Hebrew Bible that term has several possible meanings, referring to an Israelite tribe, to a territory in the southern part of Canaan, and also to the kingdom based in this territory and ruled by David and his descendants. After the end of the biblical period, the terms translated as *Judean* and *Jewish* acquired still other connotations, signifying a particular way of life or adherence to particular beliefs. The term’s ambiguity continues to this day, with *Jewish* signifying a religion for some, for others a cultural or ethnic identity that may not be religious in orientation, and for still others a national identity such as French, Turkish, or American. To fix a single starting point for “Jewish” history would commit us to a specific definition of Jewishness at the expense of other definitions that also have merit.

Still, we must begin somewhere, and this book has opted to begin where Jews themselves have long looked to understand their origins—with “history” as described in the Hebrew Bible. We put the word *history* in quotes here because it is not clear that the biblical account corresponds to what counts as history for a historian, the past as it actually



happened. Modern scholarship has expressed doubts about the Hebrew Bible's value as a historical document, questioning whether the people described in the Bible, such as Abraham and Moses, really existed and whether key events, such as the Exodus and the revelation at Mount Sinai, really occurred. The skepticism of scholars has alienated some Jews and Christians who believe in the Bible as an accurate account of how reality works, but the reasons for this skepticism cannot be dismissed out of hand and is something we must reckon with in our pursuit of the Jewish people's origins. Mindful of what modern scholarship has concluded about the Bible, one of our goals in this chapter is to open the question of what really happened, to ask whether the biblical account of Israel's history—its stories of Abraham and his family, the Exodus from Egypt, Joshua's conquest of the land of Canaan, the rule of King David—corresponds to the past as reconstructed by historians and archaeologists.

Even as we question the biblical account, however, we will also try to provide a sense of how it tells the story of ancient Israel because, whether or not that story corresponds to what actually happened, it is crucial for understanding the development of Jewish culture. For one thing, Jewish culture did not suddenly appear one day; it evolved out of an earlier Israelite culture from which it inherited beliefs, practices, language(s), texts, and patterns of social organization. Why do Jews worship a God who they believe created the world? Why are Canaan and **Jerusalem** so central in Jewish culture? What are the origins of Jewish religious practices such as circumcision, resting on the Sabbath, and keeping kosher? Why is Hebrew such an important language in Jewish culture? These questions cannot be answered without referring to pre-Jewish Israelite culture, and biblical literature is our richest source for understanding that culture.

A second reason for beginning with the Bible is that the *perception* of the Bible as the starting point for Jewish history is a historical fact in its own right, and an important one for understanding Jewish identity. For the last 2,000 years at least, Jews have looked to the Hebrew Bible to understand who they are and how they are to behave. To this day, in fact, many Jews trace their lineage back to Patriarchs such as Abraham and Jacob; during **Passover**, they recount the Exodus as if in Egypt themselves, and many look forward to the coming of a **messiah** from the line of King David. We are speaking here of religious Jews but even secularized Jews—Jews who are not animated by faith in God and do not see their identity as a religious one—can look to the Bible to understand themselves or draw on it as a source for poetry, art, and other forms of cultural expression. Even if the Bible had no value whatsoever as a historical source (and we will see that it actually has great value as such a source), it is important to know what it says about the past

if only to understand how Jews throughout the centuries have seen themselves.

Keeping these points in mind, we have settled on not one but two starting points for Jewish history. The first is ancient Israelite history prior to the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. Where did the Israelites come from, and what is the historical connection between them and later Jews? The present chapter will attempt to answer these questions by drawing on the Hebrew Bible, but its testimony will not be sufficient by itself since according to modern scholarship, its account is questionable, concealing the true origins of the ancient Israelites. What this chapter introduces, therefore, is ancient Israelite history as *reconstructed* by biblical scholars, their best attempt to explain the genesis of the ancient Israelites within the context of what is known about history from other ancient Near Eastern sources and archaeological excavation.

Our second starting point, and the focus of Chapter 2, is the emergence of the Hebrew Bible itself: where does biblical literature come from, and how did it become so important to Jewish culture? It is no easier to answer these questions than it is to reconstruct ancient Israelite history, for there remains much uncertainty about who wrote the texts included in the Hebrew Bible, and when and why they were written. It is also unclear when these texts acquired the resonance and authority they would enjoy in later Jewish culture. Despite the many gaps in our knowledge, however, there is evidence to suggest that the emergence of the Bible marks a watershed moment in the transition from Israelite to Jewish culture; indeed, we will argue that the formation of Jewishness and the formation of the Hebrew Bible are inextricably intertwined.

## SEARCHING FOR ISRAEL'S ORIGINS

For modern scholars who approach the Bible as a text composed by humans, nothing is sacred about the history it tells. Consider a story that may already be familiar to you: the Bible's account of how David defeated the Philistine Goliath:

A warrior came out of the Philistines' camp, Goliath by name, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand bronze shekels. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron . . .

As the Philistine drew near to David, David rushed toward the battle line toward the Philistine. David put

his hand in his bag, took from there a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone. (1 Samuel 17:4–7, 48–50)

For thousands of years people have accepted this story as true, but is it true in a historical sense? Did David really fight such a battle? Did he win in the way that this episode suggests? Underdogs do occasionally prevail in real life, so the improbability of David's victory isn't enough reason to reject the story. There is, however, at least one specific reason for skepticism: another reference to the defeat of Goliath tucked away elsewhere in the Bible that attributes the giant's defeat to someone else:

There was another battle with the Philistines at Gob; and Elhanan son of Jaareoregim, the Bethlehemite, struck Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam. (2 Samuel 21:19)

Goliath is still the enemy here, described the same way as in the more famous version of the story (cf. 1 Samuel 17:7, "the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam"). The hero who slays Goliath is not the young shepherd David, however, but an otherwise obscure warrior named Elhanan. Interpreters have long recognized this problem and tried to reconcile the discrepancy by suggesting that Elhanan was another name for David, but this solution ignores the Bible's claim that David and Elhanan were two different people, a king and his servant. Yet a third reference to this battle in the Bible—this time in a narrative called Chronicles—tries to solve the problem by claiming that David killed Goliath while Elhanan killed Goliath's brother (1 Chronicles 20:5), but Chronicles was written much later than 1–2 Samuel by an author trying to resolve the contradictions that he found in these earlier sources, and his solution too is rather contrived. Scholars have therefore proposed another possibility. Perhaps there is no way to reconcile the discrepancy. One or the other of the two accounts is simply wrong, and it seems more likely, given how the biographies of important political figures often become embellished over time, that it is 2 Samuel 21 that records the name of the real slayer of Goliath, not David but the long forgotten Elhanan, and that the more famous version of the story in 1 Samuel 17 is a later development, an attempt to boost King David's heroic image by giving him the credit for another man's victory. In other words, the battle of David and Goliath, while a great story, probably isn't history, an event that took place, but a fiction that masks what really happened.

Modern scholars raise such possibilities, not because they want to undermine people's religious beliefs, but because they are committed to a particular way of knowing

reality that bases itself not on tradition—on what people have believed in the past—but on empirical evidence, unfettered questioning, and reasoned explanation. Like judges in a trial, the modern scholar wants to hear from multiple witnesses and to cross-examine them about how they know what they claim to know, before rendering a judgment about what happened. This is how scholars approach history in general, and applying the same basic approach to the Bible has led scholars to challenge much of what the Bible says about history, and not just particular episodes like David's victory over Goliath but sometimes even more basic claims, that David did any of the things attributed to him in 1–2 Samuel, for instance, or even that there was a King David.

From this perspective, what the Hebrew Bible says about reality becomes much more credible when other witnesses can back up its testimony, when other independent sources provide corroboration. Since we are not talking about witnesses in a literal sense, what we mean here is corroboration provided by (1) written testimony composed independently of the Bible and/or (2) the discipline of archaeology, the retrieval and interpretation of physical evidence generated by the activities of earlier humans. The written testimony at our disposal includes inscriptions from Israel itself and texts from other ancient Near Eastern cultures that refer to Israel. The archaeological evidence consists of pottery, the remnants of buildings, tools, weapons, jewelry, and so forth. The written evidence can tell us what people thought, how they expressed themselves, and sometimes responds to specific historical events. The archaeological evidence can shed light on what people did—the food they ate, the work they did, the battles they fought, the dead they buried. Sometimes all this evidence confirms what the Bible says about history, and it certainly links it to the geography, language, and culture of the broader ancient Near East, but more frequently it challenges our sense of what really happened, or speaks to aspects of Israel's history simply not reflected in biblical literature.

Partly because people have such strong feelings about the Bible for and against, partly because we have learned so much in the last century from other sources like archaeology, biblical scholarship today is marked by a lively and unresolved debate about what really happened in Israelite history. Some argue that there is much that can be learned from the Bible about ancient Israel, but others have proposed alternative accounts of Israelite history that diverge from or even contradict the biblical account. These alternative reconstructions are invariably hypothetical, and you may not find them persuasive, but the most productive response in that instance is to study the evidence oneself, honestly wrestle with the problems and questions that

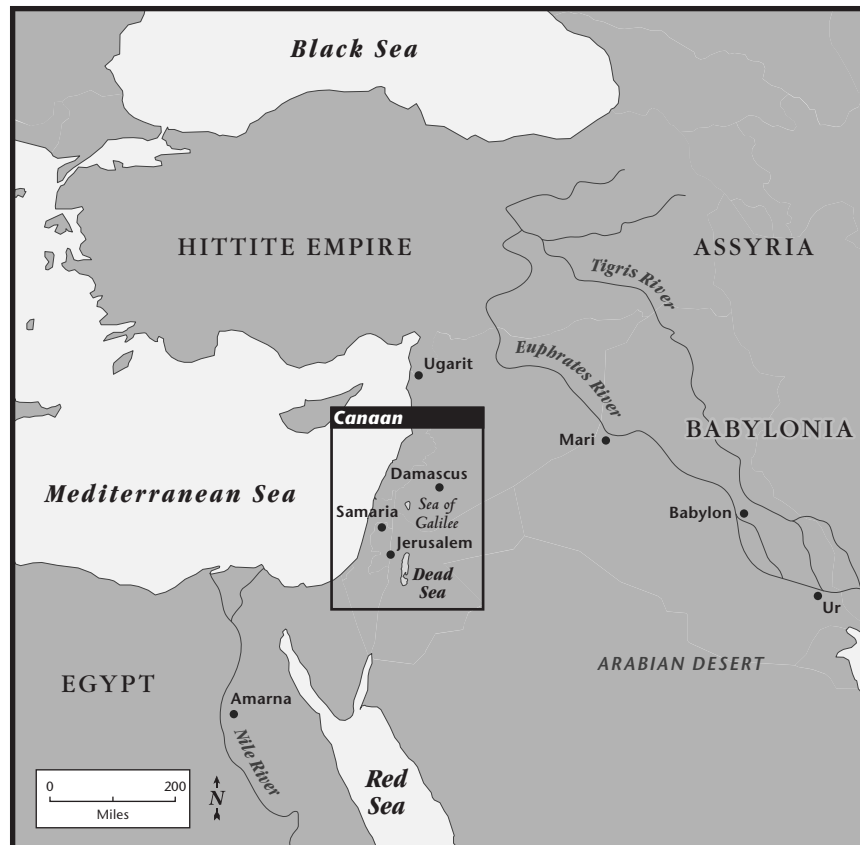
it raises, and try to develop a more persuasive understanding of what really happened.

Let us begin this particular reconstruction with the question of *where* Israelite history begins. The Hebrew Bible acknowledges that people were living in **Canaan** well before the Israelites arrived there, and their existence has been confirmed by both literary and archaeological evidence. The region that would come to be known as Canaan, a name that is known in pre-biblical sources and whose original meaning is unclear, has been continuously inhabited by humans since pre-historic times, and is the site of some of the earliest known settlements, including the site of the later city of Jericho which was settled as early as 9000 BCE. The cultures of the peoples living in Canaan, including the Israelites, has always been tied to the area's diverse topography and ecology, a coastal region in the west; fertile valleys and rugged hill country in the interior; desert to the east and south. In the period just before the emergence of the Israelites, a period known now as the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BCE), Canaan was dominated by various city-states in places like Hazor, Megiddo, and even Jerusalem, cities ruled by kings who controlled not just the city itself but the surrounding territory and its villages, while the lower classes consisted of farmers, craftspeople,

and some nomads and brigands on the margins of society. There were conflicts among these kings, but they were also connected in various ways, and all mutually beholden to the king of Egypt, who ruled the region as part of its empire. (See Map 1-1.)

This was the geographical context in which Israelite culture would develop, and its culture continues earlier Canaanite cultural tradition in many ways. From the Bible's perspective, these earlier pre-Israelite peoples, the Canaanites, had lost their claim on the land when God transferred its ownership to the Israelites. When did the Israelites themselves emerge? Did they come to inhabit the land in the way the Bible claims? What is their relationship to the earlier peoples and cultures known to have existed in Canaan prior to their arrival?

In our effort to answer these questions, we can latch on to at least one fairly solid fact: we can be virtually certain that the early Israelites were present in Canaan as early as the thirteenth century BCE. Why? The Bible depicts the Israelites as conquering the Canaanites, but it doesn't tell us when exactly this conquest happened. We can be confident that Israel existed by this point because, in addition to the Hebrew Bible's testimony, a people known as Israel is mentioned in another source that we can date to a specific



Map 1-1 Canaan in the context of the Ancient Near East.

## THE ORIGINS AND MEANING(S) OF THE NAME *ISRAEL*

The Merneptah Stele suggests that the name *Israel* existed as early as the thirteenth century BCE, but it does not tell us how the name originated. Our only explanations from an Israelite source come from the Bible, from the book of Genesis, which claims that *Israel* was an alternative name for Jacob, the ancestor from whom the Israelites descended. Genesis actually contains two accounts of how Jacob acquired this name. In Genesis 32, God bestows it on him after wrestling with Jacob in a struggle where Jacob actually gets the better of God. Unable to defeat Jacob, God declares: “You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven (*sarita* in Hebrew) with God (*Elohim*) and men have won.” Elsewhere, Genesis suggests another explanation for the name, in Genesis 35 where God names Jacob Israel at a place later known as Bethel. This time there is no reference to a struggle. Apparently, there was more than one understanding of the name *Israel* within Israel itself.

Does Genesis reveal the true origins of Israel’s name? Personal names constructed from a mini-sentence about a deity were common in the Near East of this period, so it is possible that Israel was once the name of an individual like Jacob. We also know of cases where a ruler renames a subject or vassal in order to signal he is changing their status,

and that seems analogous to what God is doing here, reasserting power over Jacob by renaming him. While the Bible’s explanations are culturally plausible, however, it seems likely that it records later understandings of a name whose original meaning had been forgotten by that point, and scholars have suggested other explanations rather different from those in Genesis. In pre-Israelite Canaan, El could signify not God but a Canaanite god named El, and it is possible that the name *Israel* originated as a description of that deity’s activities, the subject rather than the object of the verb: “El prevailed” or “El fought” or “El protected.” This is just an educated guess, but we will see other evidence that Israel inherited some of its culture from earlier Canaanite culture, including traditions connected to the god El.

Whatever its origins, the name *Israel*, though after the Bible always associated with Jacob, eventually acquired other meanings. After the first century CE, for example, there were Jews who believed that it meant “the man (*ish*) who saw (*raah*) God (*El*),” taking it as a reference to Jacob and his descendants’ special status as people to whom God had revealed himself. Much more recently, *Israel* has taken on nonreligious significance as the name for the modern state of Israel.

time, a victory hymn from the reign of the Egyptian king Merneptah (ca. 1213–1203 BCE) inscribed on a stele or stone slab. The relevant part of the inscription reads as follows:

Plundered is the Canaan with every evil;  
Carried off is Ashkelon;  
Seized upon is Gezer;  
Yanoam is made as that which does not exist;  
*Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.*

The peoples listed here are various enemies defeated by Merneptah in the land of Canaan, including a people known as Israel, allegedly annihilated by the king (thankfully, that claim was exaggerated or else this book would have been a very short one). Beyond confirming that Israel lived in Canaan in the time of Merneptah, the inscription may also contain a clue about Israel’s social organization at this stage in the development. The Egyptians used special signs to indicate what kind of thing a word was, and the names “Ashkelon,” “Gezer,” and “Yanoam” in the inscription are all written with a sign that indicates they were city-states, whereas “Israel” is written with a sign used to signal a people or an ethnic group. The difference in signs may indicate that the early Israelites were not like the urban-based peoples who dominated Canaan in this period, but a rural or nomadic people without the connection to a specific

city, which is consistent with how the Bible describes the Israelites in the earliest stages of their history (see box, The Origins and Meaning(s) of the Name *Israel*).

Who is this Israel, and from where did it come? No written sources exist for Israel’s history after the Merneptah Stele until the ninth century BCE, leaving a documentary gap of more than two centuries in precisely the period when Israelite society was taking shape in the land of Canaan, and scholars debate the degree to which we can rely on the biblical account of that period. As the Bible depicts events, the Israelites did not begin as Canaanites but originated as outsiders to the land who migrated to Canaan from abroad. Genesis traces the Israelites’ ancestry back to a single person named **Abraham** who is said to have traveled with his wife **Sarah** to Canaan at God’s behest from a region between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers referred to by later Greek authors as **Mesopotamia** (from the Greek for “between the rivers”), a region located in present-day Iraq and Syria. Abraham and his family retain their sense of connection to Mesopotamia even after they settle in Canaan. When it comes time to find a wife for his son **Isaac**, for example, Abraham shuns the Canaanites and sends his servant back to Mesopotamia where the servant meets Rebecca, the woman who will marry Isaac. That is also where Abraham’s grandson **Jacob**, or **Israel** as he would come to be known after God changes his name, finds

## THE BIBLICAL WORLD IN BRIEF

To better understand the history of ancient Israel, it is extremely helpful to know something about the political, social, and cultural context in which it emerged, including the various peoples with whom it interacted. The following is a brief introduction to some of those peoples and their relationship to the Israelites.

**Mesopotamia** is a plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers where the first civilization emerged. The rivers flooded in the summer and receded in autumn leaving behind sediment for growing crops in the winter, to be harvested in spring. The earliest known Mesopotamian civilization is Sumerian. Advanced irrigation systems formed larger settlements, and as the local farm economy grew to include trade, towns emerged, one of the earliest of which is known as Uruk. Towns that grew powerful became city-states with dynastic rulers. Eventually one ruler called Sargon founded the first empire in history. According to legend, Sargon, like Moses, was sent down the river in a basket, found and raised by a royal gardener or water-drawer, and grew up in the royal house where he eventually rose to the position of king.

Sometime in the same period as the rise of Mesopotamian civilization, another civilization arose on the Nile River in **Egypt**. Unlike the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile flooded regularly and predictably and there were relatively fewer migrations and invasions into the region as well, and thus Egypt achieved a greater degree of political stability than Mesopotamia did, though it too underwent periods of fragmentation. From the beginning of the third millennium

until Alexander the Great, ancient Egyptian history is divided into Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, with three “intermediate periods” when Egypt experienced political division and economic decentralization. Israel emerged at the end of the New Kingdom (at its height under Ramses II who reigned between 1279 and 1212 BCE) as it gave way to the Third Intermediate Period.

In contrast to the relative stability of Egyptian history, Mesopotamia was dominated by a number of different peoples. Toward the end of the third millennium, the Sumerians were overtaken by the Akkadians, based in the city of Akkad—this was where Sargon was from—and they replaced the Sumerian language with a Semitic language now known as Akkadian. From the remnants of that empire developed two major cultural variants of Mesopotamian civilization, a culture based in northern Mesopotamia (what is now northern Iraq) known as **Assyria** and a southern Mesopotamian culture based in **Babylon** in what is now southern Iraq. Empires from Assyria and Babylon, known as the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires respectively, appear prominently in the history described in the Bible as major threats to ancient Israel. The Assyrians exiled ten of Israel’s twelve tribes, the famous ten lost tribes, while the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, and the population that it exiled to Babylonia were the ancestors of the people later known as Jews.

Other peoples also play an important role in the history of ancient Israel.

The **Philistines** appear to have been part of a larger movement of seafaring raiders known as the Sea Peoples

his two wives, **Leah** and **Rachel**. According to the Bible, in other words, the Israelites did not originate from Canaan itself; they are immigrants from Mesopotamia who retain a sense of connection to their homeland long after they leave it (for more on Mesopotamia, *see box*, The Biblical World in Brief).

Whether or not figures like Abraham existed, the Bible does register an understanding of ancient Near Eastern geography consistent in many ways with what has been learned from other sources. Mesopotamia was host to a succession of civilizations, including the Sumerians, one of the earliest civilizations in the world, and the Assyrians and Babylonians, who play a major role in later biblical history. Mesopotamia was home to some of the earliest cities of the Near East, such as Ur, which was probably the very city mentioned in Genesis 12 as the birthplace of Abraham, and Babylon, the ill-fated Babel described in Genesis 11. Whoever composed this latter story seems to have known something about Babylon. The story’s mention of a large

tower constructed in the city of Babel, a tower “with its top in the heavens,” seems a reference to a large, towering temple that was built in Babylon in honor of its chief god, though the fact that this temple was built much later than Abraham would have lived suggests that the story of the Tower of Babel was composed at a relatively late date.

Is there evidence to support a Mesopotamian origin for ancient Israel? Scholars have tried to establish the historical plausibility of Abraham and his family by connecting them to a Mesopotamian people known in ancient Near Eastern sources as the **Amurru**, the same name used in the Bible to describe a Canaanite people known as the **Amorites** though its meaning is different. The Amurru are mentioned in various Mesopotamian sources as a people associated with the West (the word means “western” in fact)—that is, the region of Syria, Phoenicia, and Canaan, which are Western from a Mesopotamian perspective. They seem to have originated as a nomadic or migrant people, growing particularly prominent in the period between 2000 and

who originated somewhere in the Aegean world, from a culture similar to that described in the poetry of Homer, and overcame the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the second millennium BCE. Some of these people threatened Egypt in the age of Ramses II and Merneptah, and the Philistines seem to have emerged from among this people, settling in the southern coast of Canaan in the twelfth century BCE in the area that bordered what would become the kingdom of Judah. The Philistines would eventually establish five major city-states on the coast: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath, and their name is the origin of the word *Palestine*, used by later Greeks and Romans in reference to the area.

The **Phoenicians** were also settled on the coast of Canaan in what is now northern Israel and Lebanon, but unlike the Philistines, they were a Canaanite people with a culture that resembled that of the Israelites themselves. At least as known to us from inscriptional and literary sources, they were an urbanized peoples, based in cities like Byblos and Tyre. They were known as traders and seafarers in antiquity, establishing colonies throughout the Mediterranean, including Carthage, in present-day Tunisia, which for a time rivaled the Romans for control over the Mediterranean.

The **Arameans**, based in Syria, appear to have originated as seminomadic peoples but by the time of ancient Israel's political consolidation were developing into various kingdoms in the region between the Assyrian and the neo-Hittite kingdoms that developed in the wake of the Hittite Empire's collapse in the twelfth century BCE. The Arameans were

an occasional threat to the Israelites, but were themselves subdued by the Assyrians. The language of the Arameans, Aramaic, would eventually emerge as an international language in the ancient Near East, used for administration and other purposes by many non-Arameans, including Jews.

Along the eastern side of the Jordan River, Israel was neighbored by various peoples that included the **Ammonites**, **Moabites**, and **Edomites** living in what is now Jordan and southern Israel. The culture of these peoples seems to have been very similar to that of the Israelites, and they are depicted in the book of Genesis as having a close genealogical connection to Israel (the Ammonites and Moabites are traced back to Lot, Abraham's nephew, and the Edomites are traced back to Esau, Jacob's brother), but they are also depicted as hostile rivals. Each developed a kingdom during the period that the Israelites were also developing a monarchy. The ultimate fate of the Moabites and Ammonites is unclear but at least the Edomites survived into the first century BCE when their descendants were known as Idumeans. Finally, there are the **Canaanites**, which as described in the Bible means the Canaanite inhabitants of the land inhabited by the Israelites, the territory west of the Jordan River. According to the Five Books of Moses, the Canaanites were supposed to have been driven from the land and their name blotted from memory, but other biblical sources suggest that they persisted as slaves under Israel's rule. These included peoples like the **Jebusites**, the inhabitants of Jerusalem before David took over the city who may have continued there as serfs even after his conquest.

1600 BCE which is roughly the period in which one might place Abraham if one starts with, say, a date of 1000 BCE for King David and then tries to count backwards using the chronological information that the Bible provides (David's son **Solomon** built the Temple 480 years after the Israelites left Egypt; the Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years, etc.). As depicted in the Bible, Abraham and his descendants travel from Mesopotamia to Canaan and back, wandering from camp to camp, never settling in a single place. Their lifestyle fits well with the alleged nomadism of the Amorites, suggesting to some scholars that the Israelites might have been the descendants of the ancient Amurru, with a memory of this experience preserved in the book of Genesis. This effort to frame Abraham's migration as part of the larger Amurru migration came to be known as the Amorite hypothesis.

There is no way to prove such a hypothesis. Searching for a specific individual like Abraham in the scant textual and archaeological remnants that survive from the distant

past—a sheep and goat herder who lived in tents and moved from place to place—is much harder than looking for a needle in a haystack since one at least knows in the latter instance which haystack to look in, whereas for Abraham, it is not clear in what historical period one should look or what one should expect to find. There is thus no way to confirm his existence, much less connect him to a known historical people like the Amurru (in the West Bank city of Hebron, there is a site venerated by religious Jews today as the tomb of Abraham, the Cave of Machpeleh, a site that has become embroiled in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, but that identification, developing among Jews and Christians in antiquity, isn't based on any actual evidence that it is really Abraham and his descendants buried there). But on the other hand, one cannot prove that Abraham didn't exist, and scholars looking for something historical in Genesis have pointed to circumstantial evidence. Names resembling Abram (Abraham's name before God changed it) and Jacob (Abraham's grandson) appear

in Mesopotamian sources from the early or mid second millennium BCE, and the description in Genesis of the Patriarchs' family life—Abraham's adoption of a servant as his heir, the details of how marriages are arranged, the importance of deathbed blessings—also seemed at first to fit the culture of this period as known from texts discovered at Mesopotamian sites such as the city of Nuzi. When these parallels came to light, they were seen as evidence that Genesis preserves to some degree a memory of Israel's emergence from an earlier nomadic people with links to Mesopotamia.

But this is little more than educated guesswork, and it has been challenged by more recent scholarship less interested in proving that Abraham really existed. No specific event in Genesis can be corroborated, and even the effort to connect Abraham to the Amorites has proven unpersuasive in the end. Maybe there was an Abraham but such a figure could have as easily lived a thousand years after the Amurru since his name and the nomadic lifestyle he led have parallels as well from later periods of Near Eastern history. In fact, indications can be found within Genesis itself that it was composed at a later time. According to Genesis 11, Abraham's family migrated from a place called "Ur of the Chaldeans." As we have noted, Ur is a well-known city in Mesopotamia, but the Chaldeans, a people from south Mesopotamia who are known only from sources dating to the ninth century BCE and later, could not have been living in Ur at the time of Abraham if he came from the period between 2000 and 1600 BCE. Other details in Genesis—its reference to the Philistines, for example—also reflect realities that only emerge in Canaan after about 1200 BCE, complicating attempts to place a historical Abraham in the early centuries of the second millennium BCE. While it is conceivable that Genesis preserves memories of real people and events, it seems those memories have been framed within a narrative from a later age that projects the circumstances of the author's day—sometime after 1200 BCE—onto Israel's past. To date, there is no agreed-upon way to distinguish between genuine historical experience and later invention in the book of Genesis, and the majority of scholars are skeptical of what can be learned about the Israelites' origins from the narrative.

What of the other historical experience that plays such an important role in the Bible's account of Israel's origins: the Exodus from Egypt? In the days of Abraham's grandson Jacob, Genesis relates, Jacob's son Joseph was brought down into Egypt as a slave. Thanks to his skills as a dream interpreter, he eventually arose to a position of power in Egypt, second only to the Egyptian king, and was reunited with his eleven brothers and father who joined him in Egypt during a famine in Canaan. Their descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel, thrived in Egypt for some time, but

at a certain point a new king came to power who did not remember **Joseph** and became fearful of the Israelites as they grew more populous, enslaving and oppressing them. It was during this period that Moses, an Israelite but one who grew up in the house of the Egyptian king's daughter, emerged to rescue his people from their plight. Wielding divine power, he inflicted ten plagues on the Egyptians that compelled their king to release the Israelites, and they left for the land of Canaan, though not before crossing the Red Sea which God parted to allow their passage and then closed in order to drown their Egyptian pursuers. Their escape from Egypt has come to be known in English as the Exodus, from the Greek word meaning "going out" that was used by Christians as a title for the biblical book that tells this story. Can any of the biblical Exodus be confirmed as an actually occurring historical event? Is there evidence that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt? That there was a Moses who liberated them? That the Israelites had to trek across the Sinai wilderness before settling in the land of Canaan?

Egypt itself was real enough. Like Mesopotamia, Egyptian civilization was a river culture, forming on the banks of the Nile River. Its development is roughly parallel to that of Mesopotamia: a pictographic writing system (hieroglyphics, or their cursive equivalent *hieratic*) developed there sometime in the fourth millennium BCE, as did the institution of the kingship, temples, and other attributes of early Near Eastern civilization. From an early period, even before the invention of writing, Egypt was in contact with Canaan. Egyptians came to Canaan as travelers, soldiers, traders, and—in periods when Egypt controlled Canaan—as administrators, while Canaanites traveled to Egypt as migrants, slaves, and traders (in fact, the word *Canaan* might originate from the word for "trader"). The Bible's description of the Israelites as wandering back and forth between Canaan and Egypt, serving as agents of the Egyptian government or becoming its slaves, is certainly historically plausible in a general sense, but establishing that as a possibility is not the same as proving that the Exodus really happened, and the silence of sources outside the Bible lead some to conclude that it did not. While the Merneptah Stele refers to Israel, as we have noted, it is our *only* reference to Israel in ancient Egyptian literature from this early period, and the people to whom the hymn is referring already live in Canaan: there is no hint that they are former slaves, not to mention the ten plagues or the parting of the Red Sea. It is impossible even to determine the period of time to which the Bible refers. Some place the Exodus in the fifteenth century BCE, but others date it to the thirteenth century, and there is no way to decide the matter because what chronological information the Bible supplies fails to match up clearly or consistently with what we know from other sources.

Another reason for doubting that the Exodus actually happened is that the biblical account seems to reflect the influence of ancient Near Eastern storytelling tradition. One of the Exodus story's best-known episodes tells of how Moses' mother saved her son from Pharaoh's lethal decree by putting the baby in a basket and sending him down the Nile River, where he was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter (see Exodus 2). The story is suspiciously similar to a legend told of other ancient Near Eastern leaders, such as Sargon I, founder of the first great Mesopotamian Empire around 2300 BCE. Here is how an inscription describes Sargon's birth:

Sargon, the mighty king, king of Agade, am I... My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, in secret she bore me. She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river which rose not [over] me. The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water lifted me out as he dipped his e[w]er. Akki, the drawer of water, appointed me as his gardener.

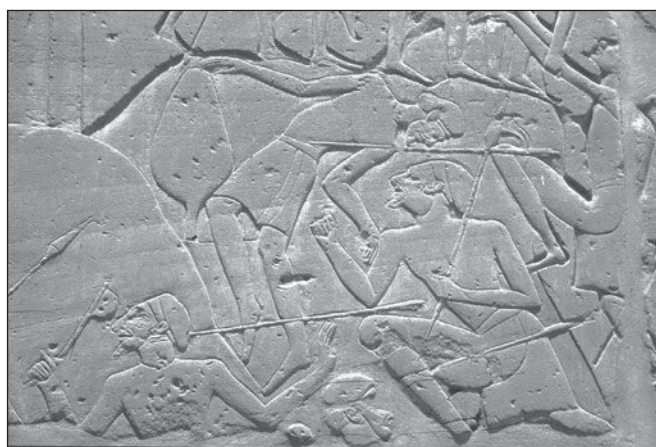
Just as the portrait of David may have been filled out with material once associated with other heroes, so too Moses' image reflects a similar kind of fictional expansion. This does not rule out the possibility of a real Moses, but where to draw the line between fact and fiction in the Bible's account is unclear.

There is one event known from Egyptian history that does bear an intriguing resemblance to the Exodus and may conceivably represent the historical kernel of the story that it tells: the expulsion from Egypt of a group known as the **Hyksos**. The Hyksos (a Greek transliteration of the Egyptian *heqaw khasut*, "rulers of foreign lands") were a line of Asiatic rulers, quite possibly from Canaan itself, who gained control over part of Egypt in the seventeenth century BCE. Some see Hyksos rule as the background for Joseph's rise to power in Genesis 37–50, for in this period it would be especially plausible for Joseph, a non-Egyptian from Canaan, to rise to a position of power in Egypt. Hyksos rule came to an end in the sixteenth century BCE, when the native Egyptians rebelled against their rule and chased them from Egypt, and their expulsion calls to mind the events described in the book of Exodus: the rise of a new king in Egypt who does not remember Joseph and fears the Israelites as enemies, followed by Israel's flight from Egypt. A connection between the Exodus and the Hyksos had already occurred to Manetho, an Egyptian historian who conflates the two stories, more than 2,000 years ago.

As tempting as it is to accept this connection, however, the Hyksos period was not the only time in Egyptian history when people from Canaan settled in Egypt. As we have noted, two-way traffic was frequent between Canaan and Egypt—including slaves imported to Egypt and people

fleeing from Egypt into Canaan—all of which makes the idea of Israel's sojourn in Egypt and subsequent exodus plausible in a general sense but also gives one pause about connecting the Exodus to any specific event, such as the Hyksos expulsion. Egyptian texts from the period between 1500 and 1100 BCE also speak of another troublesome people moving back and forth in this region: tribes of seminomads referred to as the **Shasu** from the area of Palestine—and they also constitute a possible candidate for the role of proto-Israelite. Several such groups seem to have been in the area during the Late Bronze Age, unruly peoples on the fringes of Canaan's urban society, who created problems for the authorities (we will be meeting another such people a bit later, the Habiru). While the Israelites may have originated as one of those groups, we lack the evidence to clinch an identification. Indeed, it is possible that the Hebrew Bible absorbs the memories of several such groups—the Amorites, the Hyksos, *and* the Shasu.

Unable to verify the biblical account of Israel's origins, many recent scholars have embraced an alternative understanding of Israel's origins that goes beyond, and is even at odds with, how the Bible depicts its past: *the ancient Israelites did not originate as outsiders to the land of Canaan*. They did not migrate there from Mesopotamia or escape there from Egypt. Instead, Israelite culture originated from within Canaan itself as an offshoot of the indigenous culture that had existed there in preceding centuries. According to this hypothesis, the Bible's effort to differentiate Israel from the Canaanites, to assign the Israelites an identity rooted somewhere else, is historically misleading, concealing the true Canaanite origins of Israelite culture.



An image of the ancient Israelites? The scene here, carved into the wall of an Egyptian temple at Karnak and dated to the fourteenth century BCE, shows a group of people known as the Shasu after their defeat by Egyptian forces. The Shasu were a nomadic people that the Egyptians encountered in southern Canaan and elsewhere, and some scholars have identified them as the early Israelites or the people from whom the Israelites descended.