

1. The Land of Canaan

Palestine is a land of limited rain, but its central part can sustain agriculture. In Biblical times, we have the settled Canaanites, in contrast to their neighbors, the various pastoral peoples. But the Canaanites were not *always* settled. Our first report is a c01230 inscription listing the conquests of Pharaoh Merneptah.¹ Except for Tehanu (Libyans), they are from Canaan: Hatti, Ashkelon, Gezer, Yanoam, Israel, and Hurru. All these names except “Israel” are written with the scribal determinative for settled towns. Then “Israel” itself, at that point, was a newcomer, a wanderer in the land, and had not established a fixed residence. The word “Israel” refers to that people’s god; it means “We are Strong in El.”

In especially dry times, a pastoral people might take up temporary shelter in some nearby agricultural area: maybe the delta of Egypt (the Nile, being fed from upstream, does not depend on local rainfall), or more northerly Canaan.

And so it was that two pastoral peoples came to Canaan from the outside. These came to stay. The first were from Haran in the north, led by Abram and entering from Deir Alla, opposite Shechem. They had their own god, but came to accept the Canaanite god, El. The second were from Midian in the south, bringing their god Yahweh, and first taking up residence at a site near Jericho.

The Promise

The Bible story *joins these separate traditions as one*. It tells how Yahweh *gave* the Land to the northerner Abram, how that claim was renewed for his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob.² In a time of famine, Jacob went to Egypt. His descendants, led by Moses, left Egypt. Being in effect southerners themselves, they proceeded to conquer the Land under the leadership of Joshua.

So goes the claim. It does not hold. The Conquest under Joshua is *invented*: Alt’s opinion³ – that the entry of the southern people with their god Yahweh was not sudden but gradual – has been confirmed by archaeology.⁴

In untangling such traditions and their texts, as historians do, it helps to know what ancient texts in general are like; how they add material over time, often creating inconsistencies. For some specifics of text growth, with examples from Greece, India, China, and the Two Testaments, see the next chapter.

¹ANET 376-378.

²Gen 13:14-18 (Abram), 26:24-25 (Isaac), and 35:14-15 (Jacob).

³Alt **Settlement** (1925); and in confirmation, Weippert **Settlement** (1967).

⁴For one early site, see Ben-Shlomo and Hawkins **Khirbet el-Masterah** (2018).