

CHAPTER TWELVE

Israel from the 13th to the 9th century

Israel in Canaan

The final years of the Bronze Age (thirteenth century BC) was a time of great turmoil in the Ancient Near East. Perhaps the most significant factor in this was the collapse of the Hittite Empire in central Anatolia (today's Turkey) and Syria. Unattached groups roamed the area seizing power where they could. Canaan was significantly affected. Bands of 'Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gergashites, Hivites, and Jebusites' (Joshua 24:11) took control of the cities and reduced the locals to serfdom. Some of the locals fled to the hill country where they were less able to be controlled, and where they struggled to eke out an existence.

The collapse of the Mycenaean Empire in Greece led to the same kind of uncontrolled marauding at sea as was happening on land. The 'Sea Peoples', as they are known from ancient sources, attacked Egypt. They also attacked along the east coast of the Mediterranean, including Canaan. One of these groups was the Philistines.

In *The Bible Unearthed: archaeology's new vision of ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts* Finkelstein, an Israeli archaeologist, and Silberman, an Israeli historian, write:

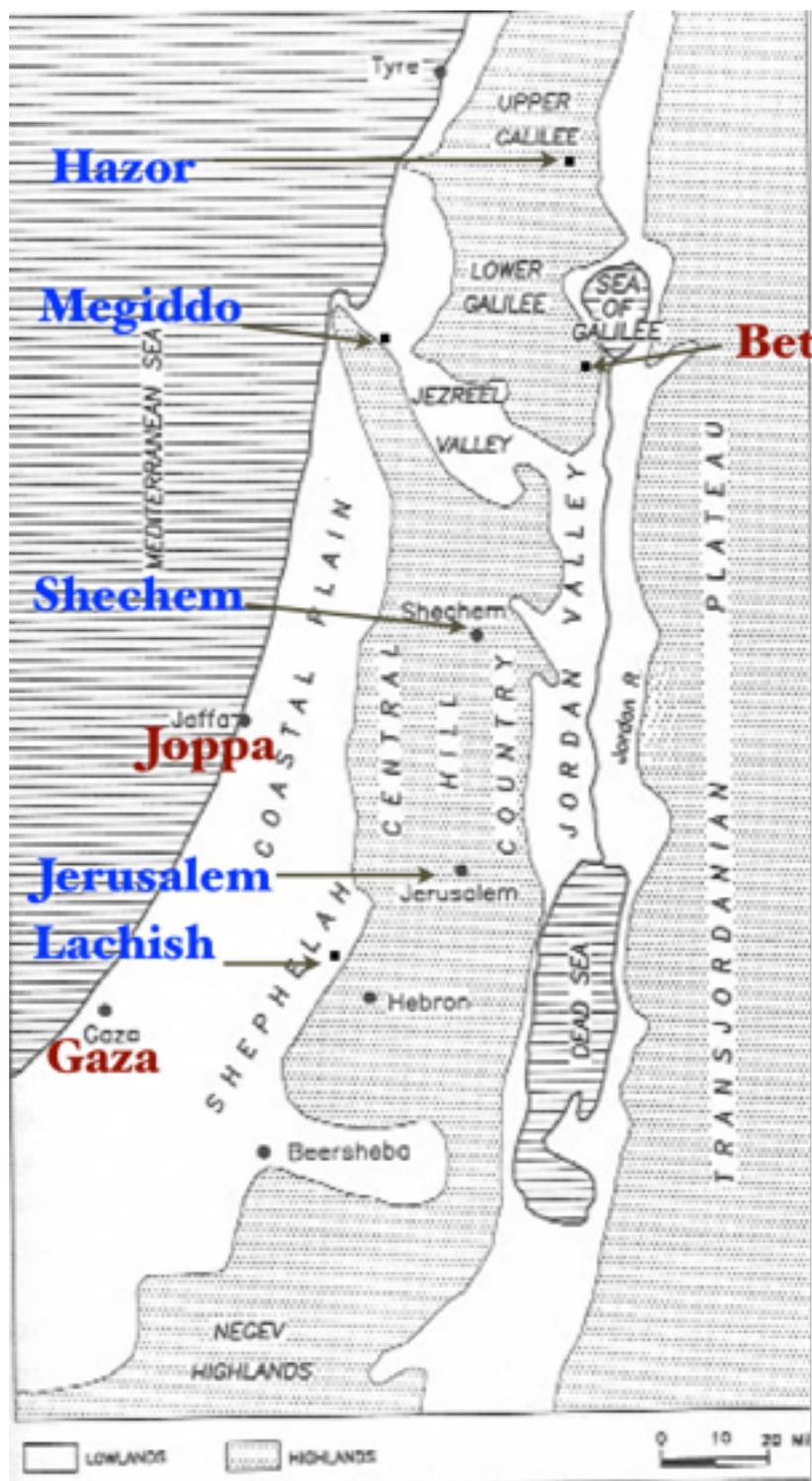
The Ugaritic and Egyptian records of the early twelfth century BCE mention these marauders. A text found in the ruins of the port city of Ugarit provides dramatic testimony for the situation around 1185 BCE. Sent by Ammurapi, the last king of Ugarit, to the king of Alashiya (Cyprus), it frantically describes how "enemy boats have arrived, the enemy has set fire to the cities and wrought havoc. My troops are in Hittite country, my boats in Lycia, and the country has been left to its own devices". Likewise, a letter from the same period from the great king of Hatti to the prefect of Ugarit expresses his anxiety about the presence of a group of Sea People called Shiqalaya, "who live on boats". Ten years later, in 1175 BCE, it was all over in the north. Hatti, Alashiya, and Ugarit lay in ruins. But Egypt was still a formidable power, determined to make a desperate defence. The monumental inscriptions of Ramses III at the temple of Medinet Habu in Upper Egypt recount the Sea Peoples' purported conspiracy to ravage the settled lands of the eastern Mediterranean.

– page 87

Our earliest glimpse into Canaan comes from the Amarna tablets (fourteenth century BC), which consist in correspondence between Egypt and cities in Canaan, notably Jerusalem, Shechem, Megiddo, Hazor and Lachish. The tablets reveal that the cities were quite weak, and were paying heavy tribute to their Egyptian overlord. They had no city walls and consisted of little more than a palace, a temple compound and a few public buildings. The Egyptian provincial capital was at Gaza and there were Egyptian garrisons in Joppa and Beth-shan.

Israel Finkelstein in his *The Archaeology of the Israelite settlement* (Israel Exploration Society 1988) notes evidence of an increase in settlement in the highlands of Canaan in the thirteenth century BC, and writes (page 348):

The vast majority of the people who settled in the hill country and in the Transjordan during the Iron I period must have been indigenous.



It is these settlers who were to become 'Israel'. They did not come from outside and occupy the land by an invasion. Their settlements were not fortified. They lived a simple lifestyle and their settling in the hill country was peaceful. Archaeology reveals earlier similar settlements in the highlands of Canaan, the first being about 3,500BC (100 sites), and the second about 2,000BC (220 sites). The people called 'Israel' represent the third such attempt at subsistence farming there.

The oldest extant record of the existence of a people called 'Israel' is an Egyptian stone inscription from the time of Merneptah (1207BC), son of pharaoh Ramses II.

The tribes of Israel were held together by an understanding of God that was new, and very different from that of any of their neighbours. For this people, God was not a God of the controlling elite, nor was he a God identified with a specific geographical area. He was the God of creation and the Lord of history, a God who liberated from slavery, a God whose concern was for the poor. They believed that it was this God, YHWH, who chose Israel as his special people, and gave them Canaan as their land. For them, the cult was not there to provide mythical support for a ruler. It was a way to come together to celebrate the freedom that God had given them, to remember and to express their worship, their gratitude and their obedience to YHWH, who they believed had entered into a special covenant with them: He would be their God and they would be his people..

The Book of Joshua (see Chapter Nine) tells us that this new way of looking on God was introduced to the people of the hill country by a group that entered Canaan at this time, a group that had escaped Egyptian slavery. It is a story of the spread of this idea and of the forming of a people committed to YHWH. It tells of the early years of what was to become the nation of Israel. If we are going to speak of a hero, YHWH is the hero of the book of Joshua as he is of the Moses-literature. It is YHWH who liberates these people and who defends them against the powerful enemies of the city-states of Canaan. It is YHWH who inspires other subject groups to join them and to identify as a people with a common commitment to YHWH.

It is clear that the account given in the Book of Joshua is not historical: Egyptian control of Canaan would not have allowed the Canaanite city states to be overrun; Jericho (Joshua 6) had no walls at the time. Ai (Joshua 8) was already an uninhabited ruin.

A number of cities in Canaan were destroyed in the late thirteenth century including Debir [tell Beit Mirsim], Bethel [Beitin], Lachish [Tell Ed-Duweir] and Hazor. This destruction could have been the result of clashes between Israel and these city states. It could also have resulted from the clash between Egypt and the Hittites, or the result of struggles between the city states themselves as trade was disrupted due to the ravages brought about at this time by the 'Sea Peoples', including the Philistines. It is likely that the Sea Peoples themselves were the main cause of the destruction of the small city states and so of the need for the herders to escape the disorder of the plains and settle the highlands – the settlers we know as 'Israel'.

After 1967 archeologists focused their attention on the central highlands. c.1200BC 250 small hilltop subsistence villages sprang up. By 1,000BC it is estimated the total population of the central highlands was c.45,000.

**TRIBES OF ISRAEL
BEFORE THE MONARCHY**



The emergence of early Israel was an outcome of the collapse of the Canaanite culture, not its cause. And most of the Israelites did not come from outside Canaan – they emerged from within it.

‘There was no mass exodus from Egypt. There was no violent conquest of Canaan. Most of the people who formed early Israel were local people.’(F&S page 118).

The Book of Joshua is a ‘complex collection of legends, hero tales and local myths from various parts of the country, that had been composed over centuries’(F&S page 91).

It is a literary saga, probably put together during the reign of King Josiah (639-609) to help create a pan-Israelite identity. Joshua’s victories in the Judah and Benjamin areas encouraged Josiah’s immediate goals. The victories in the north are a projection of Josiah’s long-range ambitions.

It is interesting that the list of towns in Judah (Joshua 15:21-62) exactly correspond with the borders of Judah during the reign of King Josiah.

The thorough and extensive archaeological surveys carried out since 1967 reveal a culture in the highlands that differed from that of the city states and agricultural lands of the coastal plain and lowlands. The groups that were to become Israel were herders who had turned to farming when the collapse of law and order in the lowlands meant that they could no longer rely on traditional barter. They had to provide their own grain (eastern highlands) as well as vines and olives (western highlands).

Moses and the Exodus

The key historical question is: When did the highland tribes (‘Israel’) hear about and embrace the worship of YHWH? The answer given in the Bible tells of a group of slaves who escaped from Egypt, and, after journeying in the Sinai desert, crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan from the East. The books of the Bible that tell this story (The Books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) form the heart of the Older Testament. In them we have ‘story’ rather than ‘history’ as we would use the term, but the stories and legends draw on a long oral tradition, and express the essential identity of Israel.

As the story goes, this group originated in Canaan (see the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in Genesis 12-50), but had been enslaved in Egypt. There was an age-old rhythm of migration of people to Egypt from Canaan. Egypt was watered by the Nile, whereas Canaan depended on rainfall for its crops. When the rains failed, they sought help from their neighbour, Egypt. In the thirteenth century there were Canaanites in Egypt for purposes of trade and as prisoners of war (Finkelstein and Silberman page 54).

Furthermore, in an attempt to ward off the incursions of the Sea Peoples, Pharaoh Ramses II (1279-1213) was building fortified cities in the land of Goshen in the eastern delta of the Nile and using the forced labour of refugees, sometimes called ‘Habiru’(whence the word Hebrew) because they were stateless and so without any protection against the mercenary armies pillaging their way through the Near East and profiting from the ready market for slaves.

It is to a group of these stateless and nondescript Habiru (Exodus 11:4; 12:38) that we are to look for the historical core of the epic that has such a central place in the later literature of the Israelites, who saw themselves as descended from the Habiru who escaped under the leadership of a man called Moses. They were formed into a people during their years in the Sinai desert, and had a unique understanding of God as being the God of the oppressed.

Pharaoh Ramses II fortified and closely controlled the border with Canaan. As Finkelstein and Silberman say:

The escape of more than a tiny group from Egyptian control at the time of Ramses II seems highly unlikely, as is the crossing of the desert and the entrance into Canaan ... Except for the Egyptian forts along the northern coast, not a single campsite or sign of occupation from the time of Ramses II and his immediate predecessors and successors has ever been identified in Sinai ... not even a single sherd.

– page 60, 62-63

Signs of habitation in the Sinai peninsula from the third millennium have been found, but not from the thirteenth century. If the escaping slaves were at Kadesh-barnea, they left no trace. There are no traces at Ezion-geber. In the thirteenth century BC Arad was deserted. Heshbon, the city of Sihon, did not exist at this time, and Edom and Ammon were sparsely populated by nomadic tribes.

Like the Patriarchal Narrative, the Exodus story supported the ambitious policies of King Josiah. It is likely that work was done to gather the traditions into a document during his reign.

‘New layers would be added to the Exodus story in subsequent centuries - during the exile in Babylon and beyond. But we can now see how the astonishing composition came together under the pressure of a growing conflict with Egypt in the seventh century BCE. The saga of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt is neither historical truth nor literary fiction. It is a powerful expression of memory and hope born in a world in the midst of change. The confrontation between Moses and pharaoh mirrored the momentous confrontation between the young King Josiah and the newly crowned Pharaoh Necho’ (Finkelstein and Silberman page 70).

The biblical text is liturgical, exhortatory and dramatic. The lack of corroboration from outside the Bible is no reason to doubt that there was a historical kernel that is the source of the Moses narratives that are central to the Torah. It was perhaps a small group of the enslaved Habiru led by Moses who made their escape into the Sinai peninsula at this time. Not being strong enough to force their way north they spent a generation wandering the desert lands till they were able to enter Canaan from the east across the Jordan. During this long desert experience they formed into a religious community, bound together not by race or geography, but by their commitment to each other and to God under the name of YHWH, the liberator God whom they believed was responsible for their miraculous escape. It was they who introduced the cult of YHWH to the highland tribes.

One can imagine the story of the exodus holding a special power for the tribes of the hill country of Canaan that espoused the religion of YHWH. Did they learn from a group of escaped slaves that came in from the wilderness to express their relationship with God in terms of a covenant?

In his *The Hebrew Bible: a Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, page 225) Norman Gottwald lists the key experiences of this confederacy and why it was that the exodus functioned as an ‘umbrella metaphor’ for them.

They, too, were a people oppressed by kings, and they came together to escape from physical and mental bondage to the oppressor; they, too, were a people freed from an imposed social order, and they came together to create an inter-tribal community of mutually supported equals; they, too, were a people whose leaders had been imposed and who now struggled to create a new kind of leadership in the absence of coercive state power; they, too, were a people in a very precarious economic situation.

The tribes of ‘Israel’ committed themselves to organise their communities on the principles of justice that followed from worshipping a God who ‘hears the cry of the poor’. Decisions were supposed to be made not by custom, for custom benefited the status quo and proved ineffectual as an instrument of justice; not by authoritarian law enacted by the powerful; not by ‘wisdom’ which, as practised, was a form of self-interested know-how for the benefit of those who were influential; not by necromancy, fate, chance or random superstition; but by remembering the deeds of YHWH and by listening to YHWH’s voice. Success was to be measured, not by the achievement of personal kudos, but by what gave glory to YHWH; that is to say, by what attracted people to praise YHWH and his action in favour of his people. The land belonged to YHWH and so could be used only so long as the occupants were faithful to YHWH.

When the tribes met at the covenant-shrine at Shechem, the various tribal ancestral legends were shared, and the story of the Exodus was told and re-told. Writing was a rare phenomenon in a peasant community where trade was mostly by exchange. Traditions were handed on in oral form. Religious traditions found expression especially in liturgical forms that were committed to memory by usage. It is these traditions which were later written down and which we now read in the Bible. Knowledge of the oral origins of the material warns us against reading the biblical narratives outside such a context. We can be confident that we are reading material that puts us in touch with truth, so long as we recognise that it is the truth of religious experience expressed in the ritual language of cult.

In an article '*The influence of oral tradition upon exegesis and the senses of Scripture*' in CBQ 1958, pages 299-326, Carol Stuhlmueller writes:

In the life of the Hebrew nation oral tradition is seen as the normal means of transmitting religious thought ... The explanation of oral tradition as the recital under religious auspices of God's redemptive acts sinks the roots of biblical religion into the saving events of the past, but at the same time keeps the past alive in an ever-changing present ... One of the most characteristic qualities of oral transmission was its propensity to actualise older texts and bring them up to date by means of a continuous redaction ... When a later inspired author cites a pre-existing sacred text, he does not confine himself to the original meaning of the earlier author. He will be inclined to adapt the text to the theological development of his own day. He will manifest his devotion to God's Word, by expressing his own thoughts, which are also God's, in the sacrosanct language of the past. He will use the sacred words to express his own consciously intended sense.

We are invited to see the continuing activity of God in each new present by recalling those events in the past that have proven themselves to be of revelatory power. This is expressed well in a speech placed on the lips of Moses by the writers of Deuteronomy 5:3:

YHWH our God made a covenant with us at Horeb; not with our fathers did he make this covenant, but with us, all of us, who are alive here this day.

Our main sources for the beginnings of the religion of Israel and the story of the exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt are the Books of Deuteronomy, Exodus and Numbers. As suggested in Chapter Nine, the Book of Deuteronomy appears to have had its beginnings in the northern kingdom of Israel during the second half of the 8th century BC. It is not easy to trace the beginnings of the Book of Exodus, but the bulk of the writing appears to have happened in Babylon in the 6th century BC. Both Deuteronomy and Exodus found their final form in post-exilic Judah and the bulk of Numbers appears to have been composed in fifth century Judah.

The faith of Israel is a historical faith, essentially related to ways in which God has been experienced in their history. However, it is rare that the Bible gives us what we would recognise today as history. The literary genre that they mostly employ is story (see Chapter Seven). From the Bible itself it is impossible to establish a date for the exodus. 1 Kings 6:1 places it as 480 years prior to the fourth year of Solomon's reign. This would place the Exodus c.1436BC. Such a date poses too many problems. When it is recognised that 480 is 12 by 40, we have every reason to suspect that the number is symbolic, not chronological. A more likely historical background for the exodus story is the late 13th century BC. We know that Pharaoh Ramesses II of Egypt (1304-1237BC) had a massive building programme in the delta of the Nile, partly as a defence against the 'Sea Peoples'. He used slave labour. It was at the end of his long reign that the small Canaanite states sustained by Egyptian power collapsed, which entailed the 'liberation' of some local populations from the 'slavery' of Egyptian rule.

It was during the reign of his successor in Egypt, Pharaoh Merneptah, that we have the first record of the presence of 'Israel' in Canaan (see the victory stele of c. 1230BC). The exodus could have happened in the closing decades of the 13th century BC. The account of the Exodus found in the Torah, however, is better described as legend.

We cannot accept as historical fact that the Israelites in Egypt were 'more numerous and more powerful' than the Egyptians (Exodus 1:9), when we can find not one single reference in Egyptian literature to Israelites even existing in Egypt. Though we have no evidence of a significant group of slaves escaping from Egypt, there is nothing to contradict that such escapes happened. But 'six hundred thousand men' (Exodus 12:37)! Add the women and children, think of the supplies needed, and factor in that archaeology has found not one trace of their presence in the Sinai. Kadesh, for example, shows no sign of Israelite occupation prior to the time of Solomon. Surely two million people over forty years would have to leave some trace! It is worth recalling that modern census figures give the population of the whole of the Sinai peninsula as 40,000 Bedouin. It has been suggested that the word translated 'thousand' ('elep) in Exodus 12:37 originally meant a family or clan (see Judges 6:15; 1Samuel 10:19). This would reduce the numbers. But should we be trying to rationalise the text to make it more plausible as presenting historically accurate data, or should we allow the text to say what it says as 'story'?

Similarly with the plagues of Egypt. The imagery for the first nine plagues is drawn from natural phenomena. Isn't this all we need to know? As a story it would have spoken powerfully to people who experienced such 'plagues'. In the first plague the god of the Nile is conquered. In the ninth plague it is the god of the sun. Surely we are dealing with symbolic stories, and powerful ones at that!

One final example. Exodus describes the crossing of the Red Sea (*yam sūp*). It is true that the word *sūp* can mean 'reed'. It is used this way in Exodus 2:3,5 and Isaiah 19:6. Do we need to try to make the story more plausible as history by translating the text as 'Reed Sea', and imagining that the authors of Exodus are describing a crossing that took place in a marshy area somewhere between the western arm of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, or can we leave 'Red Sea' (as in 1Kings 9:26) and let the drama of the story carry its full weight of amazement as a story? As we shall see, it is quite possible that one of the sources used in Exodus portrays the crossing of marshland, but there seems no doubt that the Priestly Source has the 'Sea' in mind. There are allusions to the creation and flood narratives, which give the 'Sea' an almost mythical character. God is once again conquering chaos. Do we have to believe, as an historical fact, that 'the waters formed a wall for the Israelites on their right and on their left' (Exodus 14:22), but that they 'returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained' (Exodus 14:28), especially when such an extraordinary 'event', and one which would have had repercussions on the whole of the area of Egyptian hegemony, is not recorded anywhere else? Can't we let it speak to us as 'story'?

The focus of the Books of Deuteronomy, Exodus and Numbers is on the wonderful way in which God acts in the life of his people, Israel. The narrative is not the source or basis of Israel's faith. It is the vehicle for giving it expression. The aim of the authors is to fix attention on God and on God's continuing relationship with Israel. They look to the past through the stories handed down over many generations, stories based on real experiences, the exact details of which have long been lost. They shape and re-tell the stories in order to keep Israel's faith alive so that the people of Israel will be faithful to their past in the way they live their present. Did the authors of Deuteronomy, Exodus and Numbers, and those who read them and listened to them, think they were enjoying a dramatic story, or did they think they were recalling past events. In a sense the answer is both one and the other, so long as we remember that they were not asking the question as we would ask it. The fine (and important) distinctions we make did not enter their consciousness. The picture presented of their past is a true one. It is true that YHWH redeemed them from slavery – a number of times. It is true that they as a people have a special place in YHWH's heart. It is true that their forebears have been drawn into divine communion through their cult, and saw themselves as obeying God in their religious observances, legal practices and cultic institutions. The authors want their contemporaries in post-exilic Judah to be faithful to the 'faith of their mothers and fathers'. It is this faith that is expressed powerfully, memorably, and truly in the 'story' presented in these books.

Though stories about the Exodus, the wilderness journey and the entry of the escaped slaves with their special understanding of God would have been told and retold over the generations, it was all far too long ago for the authors of the Torah to attempt to establish the historical facts. Their interest is in their contemporaries and they tell the story of their distant ancestors in such a way as to present them as facing situations like the situations the people were facing at the time of writing.

The question to be asked as we read these stories is not: 'Can we be confident that we are reading historically accurate accounts of past events? It is rather: 'Is God really the way he is presented here? And are we to respond to God in the way this account states?' In light of the fact that so many good people are responsible for the writing, and that the stories have been reflected on, treasured, preserved and handed on by faithful people for centuries, we should surely trust that the inspired insights will guide us well, allowing, of course, for the necessary imperfections of people and language. As disciples of Jesus we have the wonderful advantage of being able to check these stories against the full revelation that we see in him, so that we can discern the imperfections and benefit from the truths these stories contain.

Israel's struggle for survival

The Book of Judges (see Chapter Nine) is a compilation of epic stories of people who were significant in one or other of the tribal areas during the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC, from the death of Joshua to the emergence of the monarchy (see Chapter Nine). The emergence of Israel in Canaan was, indeed, revolutionary. It included a social and political experiment that was incomprehensible to the traditional power groups in Canaan, or to the enterprising Philistines who settled along the Mediterranean coast shortly after Israel emerged in the hill country. It is no surprise that the Israelite movement met constant resistance.

As is clear from the Book of Joshua, it was restricted to the highlands and the Negeb, and its survival even there was precarious.

As noted earlier, the Philistines came into Palestine during the late thirteenth century BC as part of the general invasion of the 'Sea Peoples'. They entered from the Mediterranean at about the same time that the escaped Egyptian slaves crossed the Jordan. The Philistines could make iron, which gave them a decided advantage in war, especially on level terrain. For two centuries they controlled the coastal area and the Plain of Esdraelon, but the Israelites in the hill country managed to fend off the chariots of the Philistines, and even managed some important victories in battle. However towards the end of the eleventh century BC, the Philistines pushed their way right up to the central shrine of Shiloh (see Jeremiah 7), and captured the Ark of the Covenant, YHWH's mobile throne.

The Monarchy

The need for defence against the Philistines led to the development of centralised government in the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). Some later writers saw the decision to have a king as YHWH's answer to the people's cry. Others saw it as a failure to trust in YHWH. Both views find expression in the Bible.

The prophet Samuel was exercising his prophetic ministry at the time of the emergence of the monarchy. Material concerning him is included in the prophetic scrolls named after him, composed by the same writing school that produced the Book of Deuteronomy (see Chapter Nine). Though we sometimes speak of these books as 'history', it is important to note that in the Tanak they are considered to belong among the prophet scrolls.

All the archeological evidence points to there being two distinct kingdoms in the central highlands, one ruled from Shechem and the other from Jerusalem. They did not grow out of an earlier political unity, ruled from Jerusalem by David and Solomon. Judah was always the poorer of the two and began to achieve importance only with the destruction of Israel in 721BC.

The Biblical romance enables the writers from Judah to speak of an unconditional covenant made to David. The 'division' is portrayed as a temporary punishment because of Solomon's infidelity. With the end of the kingdom of Israel, the king of Judah inherited the promise made to David.

The Kingdom of David & Solomon (c. 1005-931BC)

According to the idealised biblical account, the second king, David (c. 1005-970BC), was a brilliant military general from Judah. He captured Jerusalem, the Jebusite city that stood between Judah and Ephraim, and set it up as the new capital of the united kingdom. His military campaigns brought under Israelite control the whole of the land corridor between the Arabian desert and the Mediterranean. This meant control of the lucrative trade between Egypt and Arabia to the south and the whole of Europe and Asia to the north, including the two main caravan routes: the Way of the Sea and the King's Highway. The newly conquered agricultural land of the plain, plus the taxes from trade, brought wealth and prosperity as well as peace to this new kingdom. This, at last, was the Promised Land for which they had long hoped.

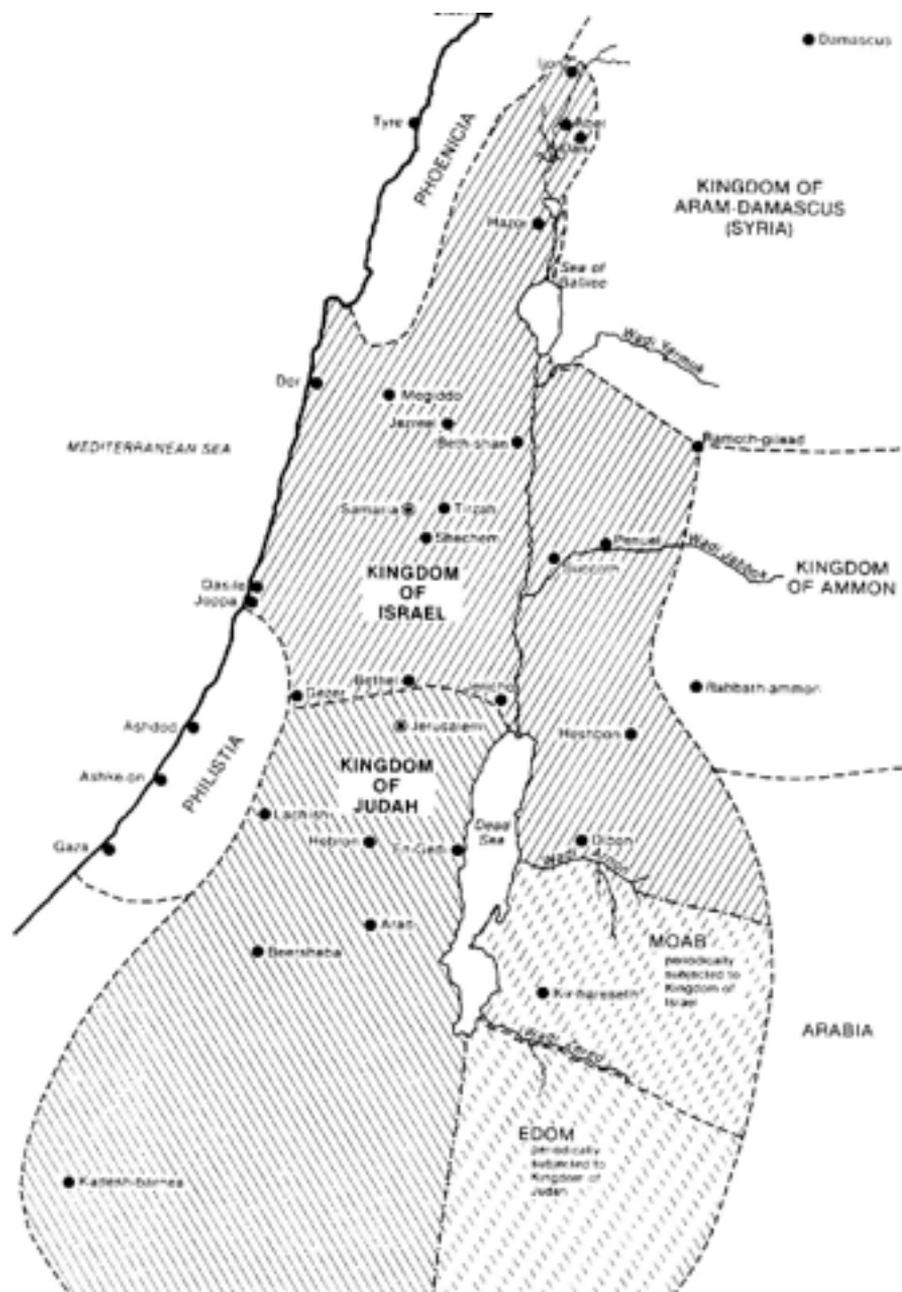
According to the same idealised biblical account, Solomon, David's son (c. 970–931BC), inherited this prosperity and used it in an attempt to set up a royal court around himself to vie with those of the powerful neighbouring kingdoms, especially that of Egypt. He built a palace in Jerusalem and attached a temple to it in which he attempted to centralise the cult. To do this and to develop other ambitious projects he broke across tribal barriers and set up administrative districts to gather taxes and to recruit forced labour.

The findings of archaeology require a drastic modification of the idealised picture of the Davidic kingdom given in the Bible. Archaeological excavation has concluded that at the time of David there were about five hundred locations of habitation in the mountainous area occupied by the Israelites, and the population is estimated as only about forty-five thousand. Jerusalem, 'the city of David', was quite small in the tenth century. Judah itself comprised only about twenty small villages and only a few thousand inhabitants (Finkelstein and Silberman page 133). It is significant that neither David nor Solomon is mentioned in any Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts. Our earliest mention of the 'House of David' is an inscription discovered in Tel Dan in 1993 that seems to date from the campaign of Hazael of Damascus in 835BC (Finkelstein and Silberman page 129). There is no evidence of a conquest of Canaan by king David or of an extensive empire ruled by him.

Improved carbon 14 dating indicates that the monumental gates and palaces of Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer that were once thought to have been built by Solomon come from the following century.

The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (931-721BC)

For two centuries after the death of Solomon, Judah remained an isolated backwater. It was the northern highlands that formed the first effective kingdom recognised by other powers in the region. Comprising as it did a number of different tribal groups, it lacked the dynastic stability of Judah. Leadership depended on military power and the story of the northern kingdom is the story of frequent military coups. Unified ethnic consciousness coalesced slowly and though YHWH was worshipped as the chief god in the north, during this period like the south it remained polytheistic.



The biblical account of the break up of David's kingdom was composed by the School that was responsible for the Book of Deuteronomy. The authors portray the break as YHWH's punishment for Solomon's infidelity (1Kings 11). They also present the constant trouble in the north and its eventual collapse as punishment for the apostasy of its first king, Jeroboam. Successes are portrayed as YHWH giving further chances, and failures as YHWH's punishment for infidelity. As noted earlier, this is 'history' seen from a particular point of view, and with a view to encouraging religious fidelity as understood by a reformist group who saw king Josiah as the one called by YHWH to undo these evils and to re-unite Israel as the faithful people of YHWH.

Jeroboam set up his capital first at Shechem, then at Penuel (see 1Kings 12:25) and then at Tirzah (see 1Kings 14:17). Throughout the rest of the tenth century and into the ninth century skirmishes were regularly breaking out between Judah and Israel. A major difference was that kingship of Judah was hereditary. This was not the case in the northern kingdom where military coups followed each other regularly. It was Omri who moved the capital to Samaria (see 1Kings 16:24). Earlier capitals faced east towards the Jordan. Samaria faced westwards to the Mediterranean. Omri was also responsible for the massive constructions at Megiddo, Hazor, Jezreel and Gezer.

The Deuteronomists name two sources upon which they are drawing for the list of the kings of Judah and Israel: '*The Annals of the Kings of Judah*', and '*The Annals of the Kings of Israel*'. There is no reason to suspect the accuracy of their record. When it comes to their judgment of the various kings, they make no attempt at offering an unbiased picture. Their judgment is clearly ideological. For example, we have to go outside the Bible to discover the significance of the northern kingdom especially during the Omride dynasty. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman in their book *The Bible Unearthed: archaeology's new vision of ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts* (The Free Press, Simon & Schuster, New York 2001) devote a chapter to the Omride dynasty, entitled '*Israel's Forgotten First Kingdom*' (pages 169-185).

After detailing the achievements of this dynasty, including the massive building projects, the size of the standing army, and the sophistication of its administration, as well as the extent of the kingdom of Israel (implied by 2Kings 10:32-33), they conclude:

Omri and his successors earned the hatred of the Bible precisely because they were so strong, precisely because they succeeded in transforming the northern kingdom into an important regional power that completely overshadowed the poor, marginal, rural-pastoral kingdom of Judah to the south. The possibility that the Israelite kings who consorted with the nations, married foreign women, and built Canaanite-type shrines and palaces would prosper was both unbearable and unthinkable.

Moreover, from the perspective of late monarchic Judah, the internationalism and openness of the Omrides was sinful. To become entangled with the ways of the neighbouring peoples was, according to the seventh century Deuteronomistic ideology, a direct violation of divine command. But a lesson could still be learned from that experience. By the time of the compilation of the books of Kings, history's verdict had already been returned. The Omrides had been overthrown and the kingdom of Israel was no more.

Yet with the help of archeological evidence and the testimony of outside sources, we can now see how the vivid scriptural portraits that doomed Omri, Ahab, and Jezebel to ridicule and scorn over the centuries skilfully concealed the real character of the first true kingdom of Israel.

– pages 194-195

At the end of Ahab's reign (853BC) Israel had the largest army in the Middle East (see Finkelstein, page 178). However, in 835BC Hazael of Damascus caused violent destruction in Israel and built defensive forts in Hazor, Bethsaida and Dan. The collapse of Syria made possible Israel's recovery under Jeroboam II (see Chapter Thirteen).

The Deuteronomists are drawing on the records kept in the *Annals of the Kings of Israel*. The logic of their judgment of this dynasty is straightforward. They are composing their commentary after the fall of Samaria. The kingdom of Israel was destroyed, and by YHWH. Since YHWH is just, the only explanation is that the destruction was divine punishment for sin. This sin began with Jeroboam. Its worst offenders were the kings of the Omride dynasty, influenced especially by Ahab's queen, Jezebel of Phoenicia. The killing of King Jehoram marked the end of the Omride dynasty, which began with an army coup in 885 and ended the same way in 841. The Deuteronomist account reads like a Greek tragedy. Omri, Ahab, and Ahab's two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, are portrayed as carrying on the betrayal of Yahwism initiated by the founder of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam. The Deuteronomists have nothing good to say about these kings. From the beginning it is clear that YHWH is determined to destroy them for their infidelity. Judah remained a backwater throughout this period.

The following is a list of the kings of Israel and Judah in the tenth and ninth centuries BC.

Kings of Israel

Kings of Judah

Jeroboam (931-910) 1Kings 12:20 - 14:20	Rehoboam (931-915) 1Kings 11:43 - 14:31
	Abijam (915-913) 1Kings 14:31 - 15:2
Nadab (910-909) 1Kings 14:20 - 15:31	Asa (912-871) 1Kings 15:8-24
Baasha (909-886) 1Kings 15:16 – 16:6	
Elah (886-885) 1Kings 16:6-14	
Zimri (885) 1Kings 16:9-20	
Omri (885-874) 1Kings 16:16-28	
Ahab (874-853) 1Kings 16:28 – 22:40	Jehoshaphat (870-846) 1Kings 15:24 - 22:50
Ahaziah (853-852) 1Kings 22:40 – 2Kings 1:17	
Jehoram (852-841) 2Kings 1:17 - 3:1	Jehoram (848-841) 1Kings 22:50 - 2Kings 9:24
Jehu (841-814) 2Kings 9:13 - 10:36	Ahaziah (841) 2Kings 8:25-29
	Athaliah (841-835) 2Kings 11:3-20
Jehoahaz (813-797) 2Kings 13:1	Joash (835-796) 2Kings 11:21 – 13:13

It is important to keep remembering that the Books of Samuel and Kings are listed in the Tanak among 'The Former Prophets'. Their focus is on the kings, only to judge them in the light of their response to YHWH. Their interest is in the presence and action of YHWH. The two most significant of the prophets of the ninth century BC are Elijah (1Kings 17:1 – 2Kings 2:11) and Elisha (1Kings 19:16 – 2Kings 13:20). As we read the legends attached to these prophets we are to see God acting through them.