

# THE CONTEXT OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

IN A WEEKEND

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# APERTURE

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND SEMINAR



# INTRODUCTION

## ***THERE IS NO COMPLETE MAP***

*All history is reductionist by definition,  
and we should always be aware of this.*

The author Lewis Carroll is best known for *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, but here I offer an episode from one of his lesser known works, *Sylvie & Bruno*. In the book, two children encounter all sorts of people as they wander the streets of London. At a party, they meet an old professor from a distant country that sounds a lot like a Germany in the 19th century. The professor (who insists they call him 'Mein Herr') observes the children's map of the city, and he proceeds to explain how his people made the perfect map, with a scale of one mile to one mile. Of course, he says, it has never been unfolded. The farmers keep resisting it because it will block out the sun. But that is not a problem, because "we now use the country itself as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."



The story illustrates the fallacy of believing you can write history that encompasses the past completely. The German word for such a "total science" is *Wissenschaft*. Maps are not *Wissenschaft*. They are scale models, balancing usefulness with detail. In the same way, history presents a scale model of the past. It must have omissions and foci. History is not the past. All history has a point of view. History tells the

story of the past *in the present*. Lists of facts about the past are not history. History provides a connection or contrast between the audience's present and the events which occurred in the past. The challenge of reading the Bible as history is that the authors' present is our own distant past. The temptation is to argue that if the biblical texts do not conform to *our* perception of the past they describe, then the biblical texts must not be history, and it should be relegated to myth or fable. This is narrow-minded and fallacious.

Biblical authors were every bit as intelligent and rational as we are. They did, however, have a different view of history. For example, our modern definitions of history *require* that you not consider any supernatural events as historical because they do not occur today (or at least that's what critics think). The biblical authors, however, had a holistic view of the events of their world. They saw no division between the physical and spiritual; and they also saw it as completely normal for God to be present and active. Therefore, we should describe the biblical texts as **theological history**.

At the same time, the biblical authors had an *intention* or a focus in their writing. The biblical texts are, almost without exception, polemical in nature. This means they frame the truth and reality of their God YHWH in opposition and correction of the views held by other people who rejected him or were ignorant of him. They often employ the vehicles of their contemporary world to demonstrate the superiority of their God. We must therefore also say that they are **polemical history**.

Finally, the biblical texts are great works of creative skill. They include poetry and rhetoric. They employ figurative language and intertextual borrowing. There are allusions and hyperboles and cunning plays on words. In short, the biblical texts are **literary history**. They are not written to be dry and boring. (Although our English translations sometimes render them that way.)

*Thank you* for joining me on this journey through the biblical world, to see the context of these theological, polemical, and literary masterpieces that are the biblical texts.

-Erik DiVietro.

𐎠𐎢𐎡𐎠 𐎠𐎢𐎡𐎠 𐎠𐎢𐎡𐎠

**dāma rigmu 'itu layya wa 'argumakki huwātu wa 'atniyakki rigmu**  
"I have something to tell you. A matter to recount to you."

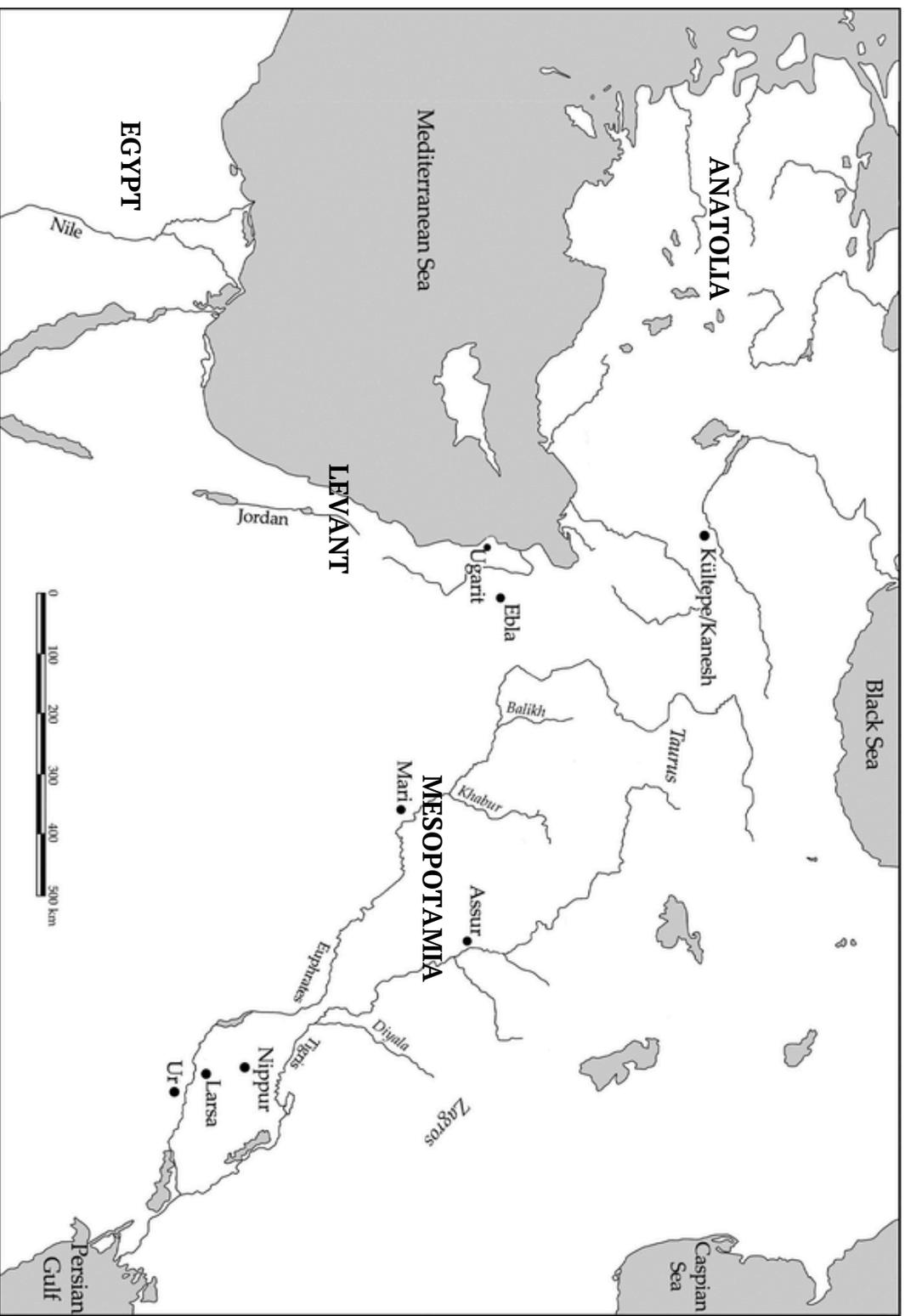


# KEY

## REGIONS

The best way to define a region is as a *sphere of influence*. The types of influence varied, ebbing and flowing with time.

- Geography
- Religion
- Language
- Trade
- Diplomacy
- Security



SCAN CODE  
for an interactive map

# EGYPT

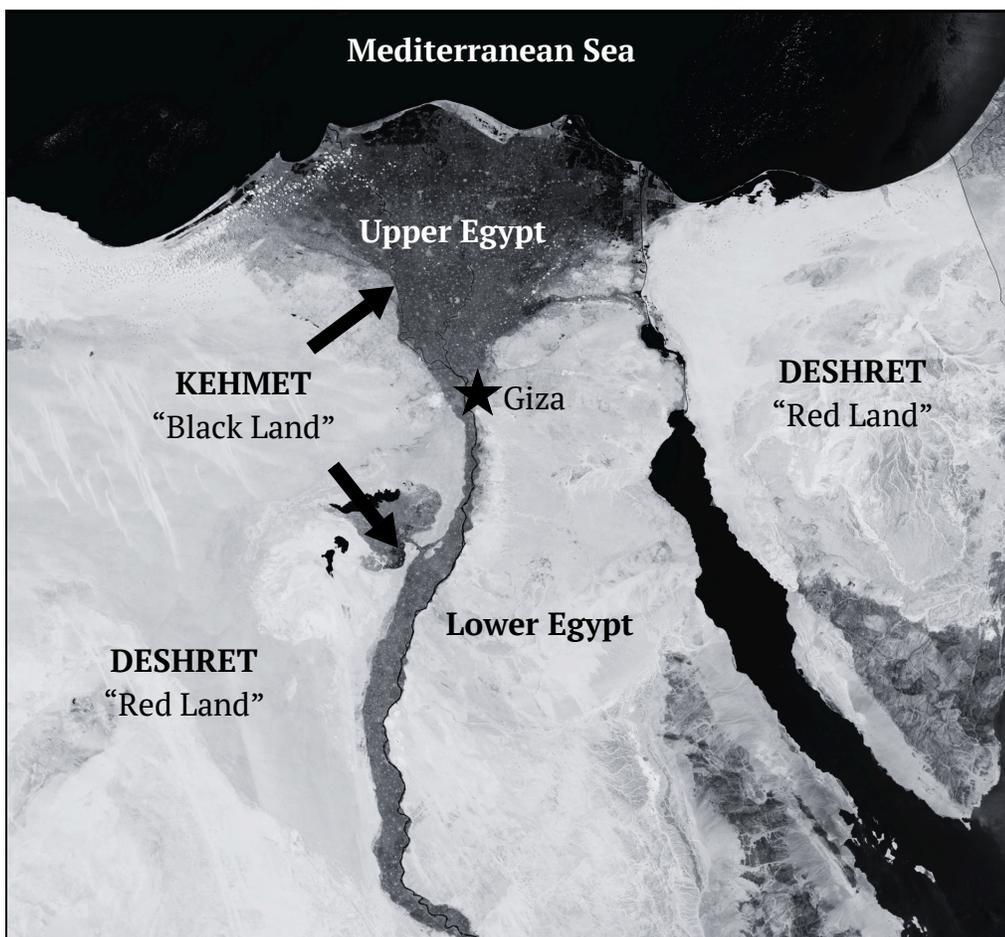
## TA-OUI (THE TWO LANDS)

The Hebrew name for Egypt is **MIZRAIM**, literally “the two boundaries.” This is a reflection of how the Egyptians viewed the world from the security of the Nile River Valley.

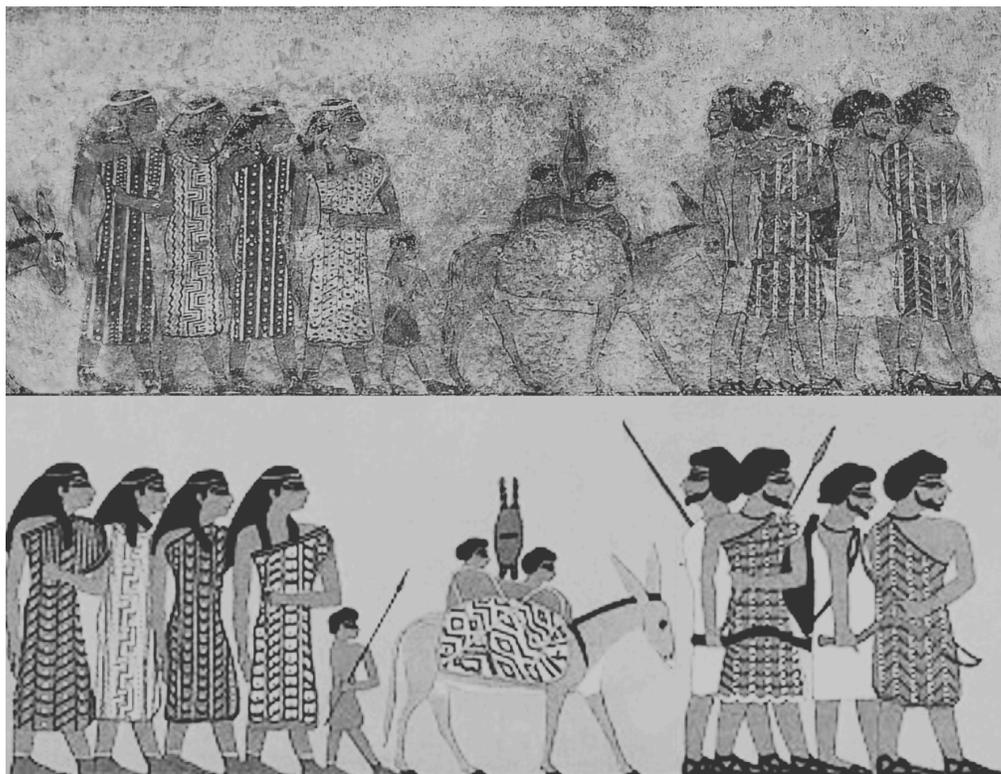
### Important Concepts in Egypt

- **Continuity:** the world cycle does not change; 3 seasons
- **Ma’at:** the world is balance, not good and evil

The Nile River as Seen from Space



## The AAMU from the Tomb of Khnumhotep II (ca 1800 BC)

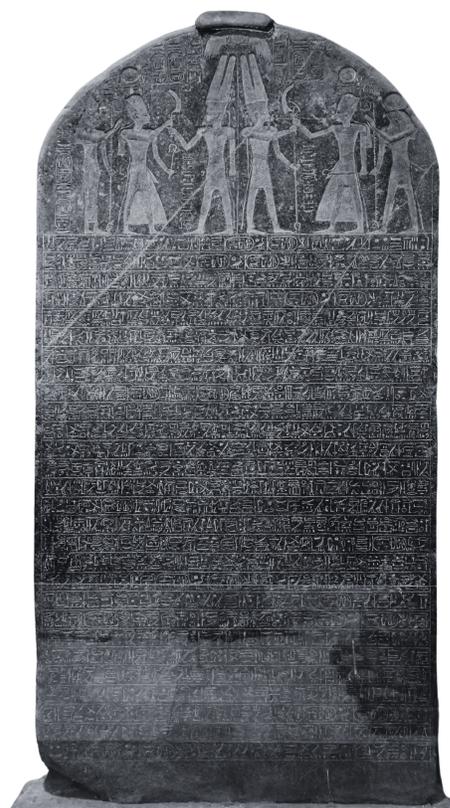


## THE HYKSOS

The appearance of a group the Egyptians called *HEKA KHASUT* or “rulers from the hills” began moving into Lower Egypt and eventually set up a rival kingdom. Their arrival marked the end of the Middle Kingdom.

*“Israel is laid waste.  
His seed is no more.”*

**Victory Stela of Merenptah  
(1205 BC)**



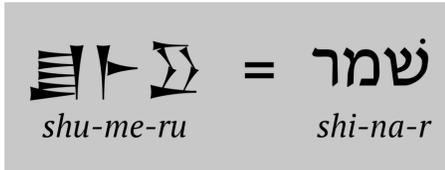
# MESOPOTAMIA

## *BETWEEN THE RIVERS*

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow over 1,000 miles from the Caucasus Mountains to the Persian Gulf. There are three primary regions in the plain between the two rivers that gave rise to distinct cultures.

### BABYLON

The southernmost region, where the rivers come close, was the home of civilizations dating to prehistory. The people called their land **KENGIR**, “the land of the noble people.”



Their neighbors called the region **SHUMERU**, or “the natives’ land.” They appear to have been the original, non-Semitic inhabitants.

After the Sumerians were absorbed into the broader culture, especially the people of Akkadian, and the region became known as **Babylon**, the land of the city of Babel.

### Sumerian Cuneiform Tablet (ca. 2500 BC)



### ASSYRIA

To the northwest of Babylonia, at the confluence of the Tigris and the Grand Zeb Rivers, a triangle of land provided the homeland for the “people of Asshur,” who took their name from their favored god.

*Assyrian kings saw themselves as representatives of their god, and not rulers in their own right.*

**“My father was a wandering Aramean.”**

Genesis 11:28

Joshua 24:3

Deuteronomy 26:5

# ANATOLIA

## THE LAND OF HATTI

The Hebrew word **Hittite** is used to refer to any group of people living in the central region of what is today Turkey. The earliest people—the Hattians—spoke a language unrelated to later people. Around 1650 BC, an Indo-European people appeared and took over everything about the Hittian society, including their cities and religion.

**An iron sword, possibly Hittite (ca. 1200 BC)**



*Ironworking was a proprietary, superior technology (1 Samuel 13:22).  
Iron was a precious metal in early Israel (Josh 6:19; 22:8).*

**A Stela with  
Luwian  
Hieroglyphics  
(ca. 900 BC)**



### **The Hand of Nergal**

In the 14th century BC, a plague swept through the Hittite kingdoms, significantly weakening them and causing them to withdraw from the Levant. Kings and peasants died alike.

*Behold, the Hand of Nergal is now in my country.  
It has slain all the men of my country,  
and there is not a (single) copper-worker.*

This plague, which had also struck Egypt around the same time. These lines were written by the king of Cyprus, a client of the Egyptian pharaoh, concerning this disease's arrival in his island. The presence of this plague may have contributed to the Israelites' ability to move into the Promised Land.

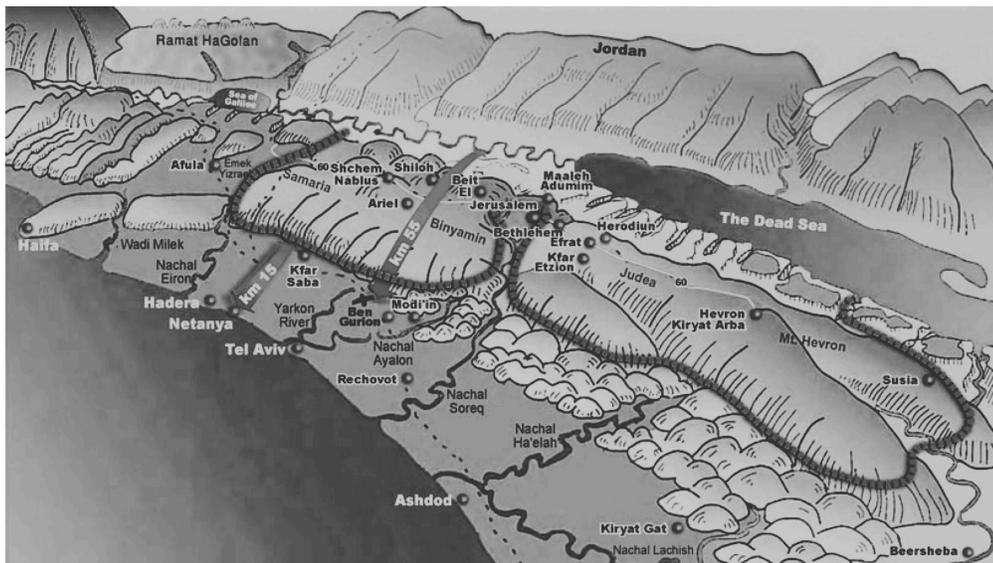
### **Luwian-Aramean Revival**

In the Iron Age, the Luwians formed a confederacy with Aramean tribes to build smaller kingdoms, including one based at Hattusa. Uniquely, the Luwians used two scripts for their language: a cuneiform syllabary and their own unique hieroglyphic system.

# THE LEVANT

## CANAANITES AND THE PROMISED LAND

The term **Levant** comes from the French meaning, “the rising sun” or east. It is less politically charged than other terms like **Palestine**.



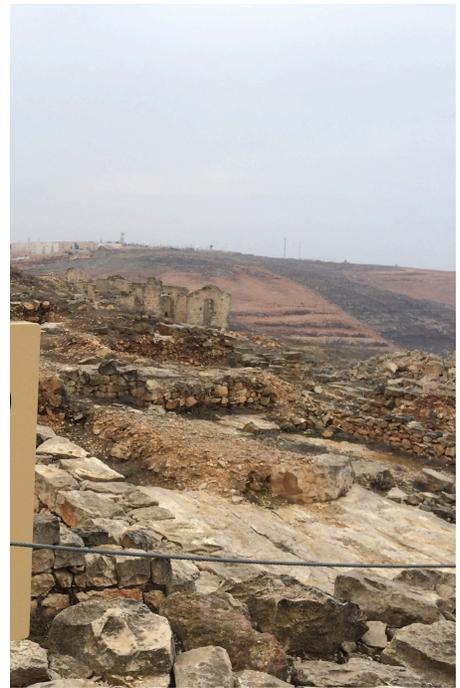
**Deuteronomy 1:7** describes the extent of the Levant

- Amorite Mountains
- The Arabah (Judean Wilderness)
- Highlands (Manasseh/Ephraim & Judah)
- Shefelah (foothills)
- Negeb (desert)
- Coastland (Canaanites land and Lebanon)
- As far as the great river, the river Euphrates.

*It is common to use the terms **Cisjordan** (“this side” of the Jordan River) and **Transjordan** (“across the Jordan,” east) to describe locations.*



SCAN CODE  
for Google Earth project



# ALPHABET

## THE TECHNOLOGY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD



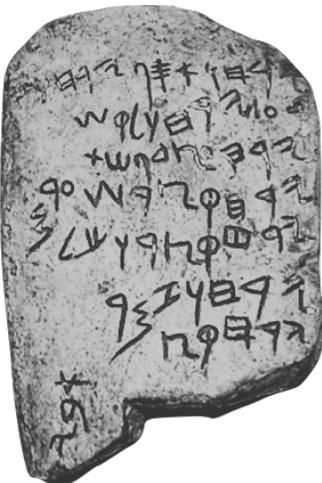
**Hieroglyph-Semitic Graffiti in the Desert (Late Middle Kingdom?)**

The image above may not look like much, but it is one of the *earliest example* of a Semitic language written in an alphabetic script. The problem is that *its jibberish* unless you read it backwards!

PICTOGRAPHS > LOGOGRAPHS > SYLLABLES > SOUNDS

## 'R VWLS THT 'MPRTNT?

**Gezer Calendar**  
(ca. 1000 BC)



כ	ג	י	א	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	ך
A	B	G	D	H	W/V	Z	H	T	Y K

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Any Word \_\_\_\_\_

SEFER \_\_\_\_\_

JACOB \_\_\_\_\_

MITZRAYIM \_\_\_\_\_

ל	מ	נ	ס	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת
L	M	N	S	P/F	TZ	Q	R	SH	TH

# Why Does It Matter?

## The Form

Before the alphabet, writing was the work of professional scribes who devoted their entire lives to mastering the systems.

- Egyptian hieroglyphic writing has over 1,000 symbols which had to be combined in specific ways to create complex logograms.
- Akkadian cuneiform was inscribed in clay or stone, and there were over 70 syllabic symbols and another 50 or so determiners borrowed from Sumerian. Also, symbols could be pronounced in many ways, depending on context.

The alphabet is *simple*, especially without vowels. It can be mastered in a couple weeks of practice.

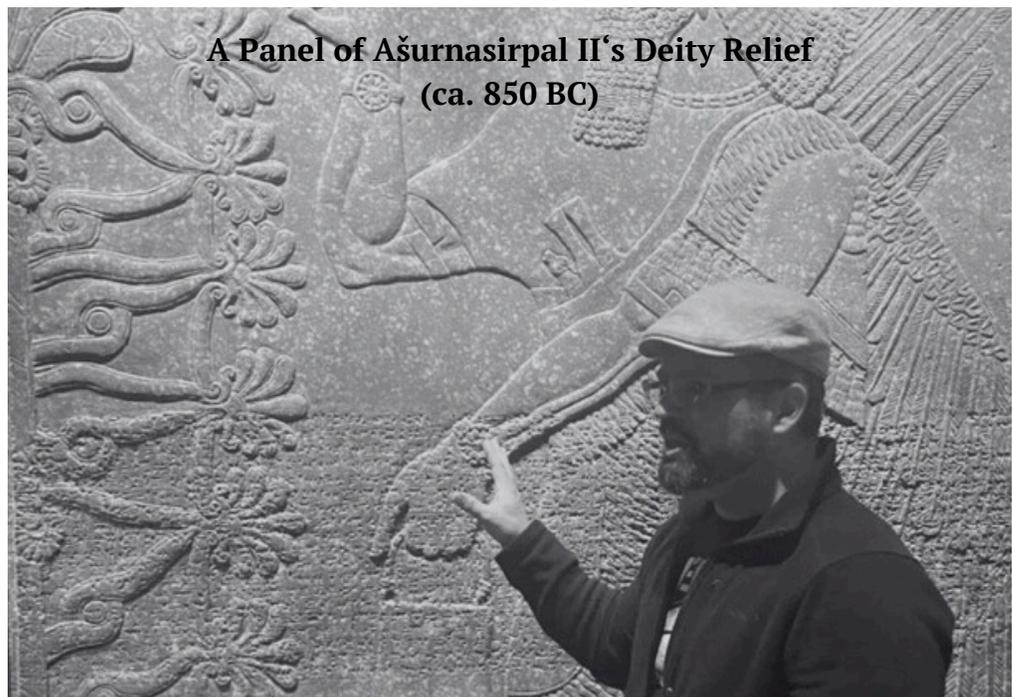
## The Media

Critics argue there are *no archives* of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, no evidence of their composition (as is the case with Sumerian and Babylonian records).

Unlike hieroglyphics or cuneiform, the alphabetic system could be written on *any* surface (and it was). Organic materials and inks were convenient and cheap. *BUT they had to be replaced when they wore out.*

***Where is the archive of the ancient Hebrew records?***

*(Closer than you think!)*



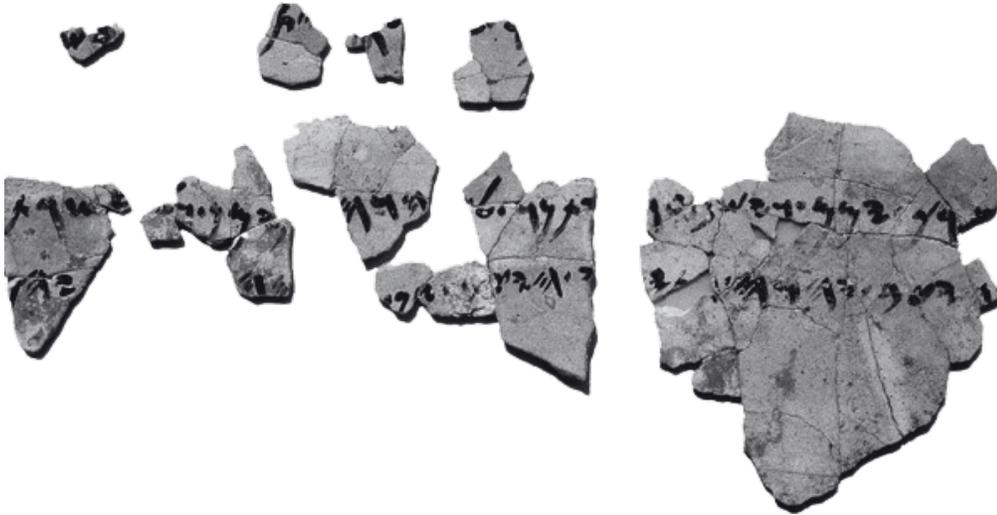
**A Panel of Ašurnasirpal II's Deity Relief  
(ca. 850 BC)**



**CUNEIFORM**  
The British Museum

# The Alphabet & The Bible

## The Kuntillet Ajrud Plaster Inscription (ca. 750 BC)



Most of what we see in the Hebrew Scriptures was born in a culture making the transition from primarily oral transmission to textual. There are four criteria for mass literacy.

1 - Technical Innovations that Make Written Works Available

2 - The Availability of Scribes to Produce Literary Works

3 - An Economic Necessity for Training

4 - An Ideological Motivation for Disseminating Materials

The question is: *when did Israel meet these criteria and could begin producing literary works such as those found in the Scriptures?*

# JUDGES 5

## THE SONG OF DEBORAH AND ISRAELITE CULTURE

The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) is one of the few passages of the HB that is still in its **Archaic Hebrew** form, and in its original iteration, it fits the Late Bronze Age or early Iron Age. The poetic presentation of victory over the forces of a Canaanite king named Jabin (cf. Joshua 11) gives us clues about Israelite culture *before* the advent of written literature in Hebrew.

2a	That the leaders took the lead in Israel, That the people offered themselves willingly—
2b–3	<i>Bless YHWH!</i>  Hear, O kings; Give ear, O princes! To YHWH I will sing; I will make melody to YHWH, Israel's Elohim.
4–5	YHWH, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped! Yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before YHWH, even Sinai before YHWH, Israel's Elohim.
6–7	In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned, and travelers kept to the byways. The villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased to be until I arose; I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.
8–9	When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel? My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people.  <i>Bless YHWH!</i>

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Tell of it!      You who ride on white donkeys,  
                         You who sit on rich carpets and  
                         You who walk by the way.

10–11

To the sound of musicians at the watering places,  
there they repeat  
    the righteous triumphs YHWH,  
    the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel.

---

Then down to the gates *marched the people of YHWH.*

11–13

“Awake, awake, Deborah!  
    “Awake, awake, break out in a song!  
    “Arise, Barak!  
“Lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam.”

Then down marched the remnant of the noble!  
*The people of YHWH marched down for me*  
                         against the mighty.

---

From **Ephraim** their root

14–18

    they marched down into the valley,  
following you, **Benjamin**,  
    with your kinsmen from **Machir** marched down the commanders,  
    and from **Zebulun** those who bear the lieutenant’s staff.  
The princes of **Issachar** came with Deborah,  
    and Issachar faithful to Barak;  
    into the valley they rushed at his heels.

*Among the clans of Reuben*  
    *there were great searchings of heart.*

Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds,  
    to hear the whistling for the flocks?

*Among the clans of Reuben*  
    *there were great searchings of heart.*

**Gilead** stayed beyond the Jordan;  
    and **Dan**, why did he stay with the ships?  
**Asher** sat still at the coast of the sea,  
    staying by his landings.

**Zebulun** is a people  
    who risked their lives to the death;  
**Naphtali**, too, on the heights of the field.

---

The kings came, they fought!

19–21

    Then fought the kings of Canaan.  
At Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo,  
    they got no spoils of silver.

From heaven the stars fought!  
    From their courses they fought against Sisera.  
The torrent Kishon swept them away—  
    the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.

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## The Land Allocations of Israel's Tribes



Source: [www.bible-history.com](http://www.bible-history.com)

21-22

March on, my soul, with might!

Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping,  
galloping of his steeds.

23

"Curse Meroz!" says YHWH's messenger.

"Curse its inhabitants thoroughly,  
because they did not come  
to aid YHWH's [people]  
to aid YHWH's [people] against the mighty."

“Most blessed of women be Jael,  
the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.”

24–27

He asked for water and she gave him milk;  
she brought him curds in a noble’s bowl.  
She sent her hand to the tent peg  
and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet.  
She struck Sisera!  
She crushed his head!  
She shattered and pierced his temple.

Between her feet he sank.  
He fell, he lay still.  
Between her feet he sank,  
He fell. There he sank, there he fell—dead!



Out of the window she peered,  
the mother of Sisera wailed through the lattice:

28–30

“Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?”

Her wisest princesses answer,  
—indeed, she answers herself—  
“Have they not found and divided the spoil?  
A womb or two for every man?  
“Spoil of dyed materials for Sisera?  
Spoil of dyed materials embroidered?  
“Two pieces of dyed work embroidered for the neck as spoil?”

So may all your enemies perish, YHWH!  
But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.

31

## Unfamiliar Names

*Shamgar* (Judg 5:13): one of the early judges, which helps set the time of this poem.

*Machir* (Gen 40:23; Num 26:29); part of the tribe of Manasseh.

*Gilead* (Num 32:29; Josh 13:31); the region in Transjordan occupied by Manasseh.

*Kenite* (Gen 15:19; Num 24:21; Judg 1:15; 1 Sam 15:6): Semitic people living in the wilderness; they may have been Midianite smiths.

*Meroz*: although not mentioned elsewhere, likely a town on the road from Galilee.

## Hazor 18

A fragment of a law code  
from the Middle Bronze Age



## The Excavations at Hazor



# KINGDOM(S)

## ISRAEL'S SECONDARY STATES

**The Bronze Age Collapse (1077 BC)** caused a crisis for the Levant. Without larger kingdoms around them, the people living there (1) lost vital trade and access to technology, and (2) lost the security of association with a larger state. They began coalescing into kingdoms built around single cities and the outlying lands.

### Characteristics of a Secondary State

1 - A Central Palace Complex

2 - A Ruling Class to Run the Bureaucracy

3 - External Threats to Force Overcoming Internal Biases/Barriers

### Arameans

In the north, the Arameans and Luwians organized a number of states which expanded southward. The city of Damascus was the most successful, lasting until around 730 BC when it was conquered by Assyria (2 Kgs 16:1–9).

### Phoenicians

Canaanites on the coast, near Mount Carmel, organized city-states at Tyre and Sidon. They began traded out into the Mediterranean and built colonies as far away as Spain and northern Africa. They were also close allies of the early Israelite kingdoms.

### Philistines

As early as the 14th century, Aegean invaders from the sea were causing problems for Egypt and the Levant. Ramesses III (r. 1186–1155) made a treating with a group of them, and they settled in five cities on the coast between Sinai and Canaan.

# ISRAEL

## TIMELINE

It is difficult to know *what* to call the people of Israel over their long history. This timeline breaks their history into four major phases and assigns a common name to each. It is intended only as a broad frame of reference.

Phase	Date Range	Description
<b>Hebrews</b> <i>Nomads</i>  <i>Proto-Canaanite</i>	2000–1200 BC	Semi-nomadic pastoralists leave NW Mesopotamia and migrate to the Levant. They are called the “sons of Eber” (Gen 11:17). Local chieftains like Abraham establish mobile “houses” that move with the seasons. Famine and pressure from other groups lead them to Egypt, where they are known as the AAMU, a term tied to their language, which we call Northwest Semitic (NWS).
<b>Proto-Israel</b> <i>Settled Tribes</i>  <i>Archaic Hebrew</i>	1200–1000 BC	Changes in Egypt drive the NWS-speaking people back to the Levant. Israel is a loose confederacy living mostly in the hill country, expanding northward and encountering resistance from the Amorites—a broad name for the people they interact with. The Israelite tribes remain technologically behind others in the region.
<b>ISRAEL</b> <i>Kingdoms</i>  <i>Classical Hebrew</i>	1000–600 BC	The Bronze Age Collapse (1077 BC) leaves a power vacuum, and groups begin to coalesce into secondary states. The Philistines, settled on the coast by the Egyptians, and the Aramean kingdoms to the north exert pressure on the Israelites, so they form kingdoms in the north and south. Powerful states re-emerge in Egypt and Mesopotamia, bringing the Israelites into their spheres of influence and eventually conquering them and destroying both kingdoms.
<b>Jews</b> <i>Exiles</i>  <i>Late Hebrew</i>	600 BC–70 AD	Returning from exile, the Jews rebuild their former kingdom as a Persian province. The “diaspora” in Egypt, Babylon and eventually the entire Mediterranean develop a variety of Judaisms, which thrive outside of the Levant. Eventually, the Romans destroy Jerusalem and Judaism shifts into a portable religion.

# Israel Inscribed

## Tel Dan Stela

(ca. 800–750 BC)

*Andre Lemaire's translation*

*[I killed two power[ful] kin[gs],  
who harnessed two thou[sand cha-]riots  
and two thousand horsemen.  
[I killed Jo]ram son of [Ahab] king of Israel,  
and I killed [Achaz]yahu son of [Joram king]  
of the House of David.*

2 Kings 9:21–29



## Kurkh Monolith

(ca. 835 BC)

*Ahab named “King of Israel”*



## Mesha Stela

(ca. 810 BC)

And the house [of Da]vid dwelt in Horonèn  
[.....] and Kamosh said to me:  
“Go down! Fight against Horonen.”  
And I went down,  
and [I fought against the town,  
and I took it;  
and] Kamosh [resto]red it in my days.

2 Kings 3:3–8



## The Siloam Tunnel Inscription

(ca. 725 BC)

2 Kings 20:20



# ISRAELITE KINGDOMS

David (1010–970)	
Solomon (970–930)	
Rehoboam (931–914)	Jeroboam (931–909)
Abijah (914–911)	Elah (909)
Asa (911–870)	Baasha (908–885)
	Zimri (885)
	Tibni (884–880)      ▲ Omri (884–873)
Jehoshaphat (870–840)	Ahab (873–852)
Joram (851–843)	Ahaziah (852)
▲ Jehoash (842–801)	Joram (851–842)
	Joram (842)
	Jehu (842–815)
	Jehoahaz (819–804)
	Joash (805–790)
Uzziah (788–735)	Jeroboam II (790–750)
Jothan (758–742)	Pekah (750–731)
	Menahem
	Zechariah (750)
	Shallum (749)
Ahaz (742–726)	Pekahiah (738)
	Hoshea (731–722)
Hezekiah (726–696)	
Manasseh (696–641)	
Amon (641/640)	
Josiah (640–609)	
Jehoahaz (609)	Jehoiakim (609–598)
Jehoiachin (598)	Zedekiah (597–586)

▲ Retroactive

----- Usurper/Coup

..... Co-Regent

*This chronology is adapted from Gershon Galil's Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah (1996).*

*The scale is compressed at points due to the restrictions of space.*

# THE PROPHET

## HOW GOD SPOKE TO ISRAEL

Diviner (Mesopotamia)	Prophet (Israel)
Akk. <i>āpiltu(m)/āpilu(m)</i> “One who answers questions”	Heb. <i>nevī</i> (נביא) “Representative (of God)”

### Before the Prophets

In early texts, the word *prophet* is used in the literal sense of being a representative.

- Genesis 20:7
- Exodus 7:1; 15:20
- Numbers 11:29

### The Royal “Vision Seer”

In Samuel-Kings, there are *seers* (Heb. *rō’eh*) who received visions (Heb. *mar’āh*) from God. This was similar to the Mesopotamian seers (Akk. *amāru, bārû, naṭalu*) and would have been familiar to most readers. Samuel is the only person designated by this word.

- 1 Samuel 3:1–21; 9:6–10

David had an advisor named Gad, who received a unique title (Heb. *hōzeh*) which appears to be connected to visions (Heb. *hazōn*). It is difficult to determine what these people did.

- 2 Samuel 24:11
- Isaiah 29:10
- 1 Chronicles 29:29
- Amos 7:12

## Clay Model of a Sheep's Lung

(ca. 700 BC)



Models like this were used to teach Mesopotamian *diviners* how to read the organs of slaughtered animals and provide answers for royal questions, usually concerning state affairs.

Image copied from M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and Its Remains*, 1:274.

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### The Office of Israelite Prophet

Prophets *appear* to have started in the northern kingdom of Israel as a foil for the diviners and priests of Ba'al cult (1 Kgs 18:17–19). While there were many prophets in the northern kingdom (both true and false), there were *no* prophets in the southern kingdom of Judah from Solomon's succession until *after* Israel fell (722 BC), during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19:2).

Elijah is the *template* for later prophets, and there are some eery hints as to the nature of the prophets of Ba'al in the biblical text. Read **1 Kings 18:28** and compare the narrator's description of the prophets of Ba'al there with this passage.

*aḥḥūa kīma maḥ-ḥe-e damišunu ramku*

“my brothers are drenched in their own blood like ecstatic seers.”

(CAD 10:90)

The defeat of the prophets of Ba'al at Mount Carmel seems to have been the beginning of a prophetic school—“the sons of the prophets” who appear in 2 Kings 2–6.

## The Prophetic Tests

Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Deuteronomy 18:15–22

Jeremiah 27:12–22; Lamentations 2:14; Ezekiel 13:1–16

## The Prophetic Writing Tradition

1. Prophecy was archived.
2. The alphabetic script and new writing technology
3. The universal message of the Word of YHWH

*The end result is a core of Scriptures that are viewed as inspired **and** are portable, as Judaism spreads.*

<b>Torah</b> ( <i>Law, Instruction</i> )				
<i>Genesis</i>	<i>Exodus</i>	<i>Leviticus</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Deuteronomy</i>
<b>Nevi'im</b> ( <i>Prophets</i> )				
<i>Early Prophets</i>		<i>Later Prophets</i>		
Joshua, Judges, Samuel-Kings		Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve		
<b>Ketuvim</b> ( <i>Writings</i> )				
<i>Books of Truth</i>		<i>Five Scrolls</i>		<i>Other Works</i>
Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes		Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther,		Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles