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Whose Land Is It?

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The struggle for the land known as “Palestine” and “Israel” has been long. This one small piece of rocky soil the size of New Hampshire has been the basis of countless wars, revolutions, coups, and skirmishes throughout the ages. The following pages will look into the history of the region, attempting to clarify the claims of ownership of the two groups currently contesting it, paying special attention to the claims of the Arabs in relation to it, and attempting to reach some preliminary answers to the question, “Whose land is it?” A sampling of the pertinent literature on this subject, both primary and secondary sources, will be examined and critiqued, and an overview of some objections to the claims of the Arabs on historical issues will be accomplished.

A few notes must be made from the outset of this work about terminology. The name conferred upon an object can have a large impact on not only the emotions used to describe that object but also on the emotions elicited from the readers of the description of that object. Since the terminology used in describing the land in dispute is actually a determining factor in the conclusions attained by many people, one must know the origins of the terms used and be ready to employ the most reasonable one.

The Romans coined the name “Palestine” after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 CE and the second Jewish revolt in 135. It is derived from the name of the Philistines, a group of Aegean invaders who settled in the area currently referred to as the Gaza Strip. The Philistines did not have control over the entire region in question for any amount of time, and the Romans used this renaming as a propagandistic way to remove all vestiges of Jewish identity, thus dealing a strong blow to Jewish nationalism in the area at that time.¹ The term “Palestine” has

¹ Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 138-139.

been used in the realm of Biblical studies for many years, however, only recently has the name become a politically charged term, making its use as a geographic term worthless.

The land originally had many names. The Akkadians called it Amurru, their name for the Amorites mentioned in the Bible, and the Hurrites referred to it as Arrapha. The Egyptians of different dynasties had different names for the land; in the Middle Kingdom it was called Retennu, and in the Eighteenth Dynasty it was classified geographically as Kharu (land of the Hurrites) and politically, with the land of Syria included, as Canaan (after the Canaanites). Canaan was also the name given to the land by the Hebrews when they came to it from captivity in Egypt.² Due to the uncontested nature of the name, the land will be referred to as “Canaan” for the purposes of this paper.

Closely related to this issue of denomination is the issue of Biblical studies. The Bible has always been the basis of the study of Canaan. In the past, most Biblical scholars were maximalists—they held the consensus that the Bible is a reliable guide to the history of ancient Israel, that the stories written within the Bible are true to the greatest extent possible, and that the Biblical record takes precedence over archaeological data being produced if that data seems to stand in opposition. These scholars were experts in Near Eastern history and culture (not just in Biblical studies), and their works were the foundation of Biblical studies for many years.

Within about the last thirty years, there has been a distinct change in the approach of some scholars to the text of the Bible. Some scholars, for example Keith Whitlam, have rejected the historicity of the Biblical stories, even going so far as to claim that Israel did not exist as a nation in the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE. By contrast, these new scholars are not experts in Near Eastern studies, and, for the most part, have an underlying political urge to present a history devoid of Jewish understandings for the purpose of combating the ideas of

modern Zionism, not for obtaining an historical picture of the land.³ These scholars do not unilaterally apply this politically based construct to other cultures. As is the case with Whitelam, it is used as a stepping-stone for spouting off political rhetoric against one group of people without applying the construct to the opposing group. The concepts expressed by these authors are detrimental to the area of Biblical studies because they deny this primary historical text its viability as a resource for study, thus relegating it to the realm of refuse. “Through the teachings of other religious authorities, the Hebrew highly exaggerated stories became factual accounts of the larger masses of mankind.” This quote is not from one of the aforementioned scholars, but from a booklet by Khalid Kishtainy called *Palestine in Perspective*.⁴ That this propaganda booklet, published by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), portrays the same anti-Biblical ideas as the scholars mentioned above is proof that these tactics are not built on good scholarship, but are a politically biased construct that should be surrendered for a more balanced view.

The history of Canaan, as with the histories of other areas of the world, is intricate. Literate civilization, according to most sources, had its beginnings in the area known as the Fertile Crescent. This strip of land, encompassing many modern day states in the Middle East, teemed with cultures, peoples and ethnic groups. The earliest of empires appeared in Sumeria, being led by men such as Sargon and Hammurabi. The Egyptian Empire (under the Old Kingdom) began as far back as 3500 BCE, and other cultures and empires grew at the same time, gaining dominance in their regions by conquering the peoples around them.⁵ The Amurru were

² Emmanuel Anati, *Palestine Before the Hebrews* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1962), 412.

³ Gary A. Rendsburg, *Down with History, Up with Reading: The Current State of Biblical Studies* (lecture, accessed 11 April, 2001); available from <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/jewish/30yrs/rendersburg>; Internet.

⁴ Khalid Kishtainy, *Palestine in Perspective: On the Image and reality of Palestine throughout the Ages* (Beirut, Lebanon: PLO Research Center, 1971), 10.

⁵ Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage, The Story of Civilization*, vol. 1 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1935), 113.

the dominant language-group in Sumeria and Canaan in this time, and they continued to endure through the great upheavals that were common. Both the Akkadians (the first great empire in Sumeria, started by Sargon) and the Assyrians associated Canaan with the Amurru.⁶ This group of people (who are referred to as the Amorites in the Bible) was one of many groups that settled down in Canaan and the surrounding areas, gaining a foothold culturally that was not suppressed for many centuries.

In this area and in this time period (Middle Bronze to Early Iron Ages), great takeovers were common, and there were great migrations of peoples within Canaan due to these takeovers. One example of this conquering is found in the Hyksos. The Hyksos were a group of nomads from Asia that invaded Egypt in the eighteenth century BCE. The important issue for this study in looking at the Hyksos is the fact of their conquest. Though scholars do not know exactly where the Hyksos originated, the cultural remains they left behind give some indications as to possibilities. The war chariot was a distinctive of the Hyksos culture, as was the spiral or sun design used on pottery and in other forms of art, and the tracing of these distinctive traits lead most scholars to the conclusion that the Hyksos originated somewhere in the Eurasian or Asian plains.

The first flow of the Hyksos, or a closely related people, into Canaan was gradual, with a slow assimilation into the other groups of settlers and an infusion of the land with their culture; however, the second group of Hyksos invaders who came in the eighteenth century BCE were definitely a single body, a unified whole, coming to conquer and control the land they desired.⁷ Their conquest moved into Egypt, where they assumed the throne and assimilated into the Egyptian culture to become rulers of the empire. The Hyksos ruled Egypt and Canaan for almost

⁶ Anati., 363-366.

⁷ Anati, 392-401.

two hundred years, finally being chased out by the Egyptians in an empire-wide uprising. It was at this time that the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, having been placed under the rule of a new pharaoh, “who did not know about Joseph.”⁸

During the Eighteenth Dynasty that followed, the Egyptians maintained their control over Canaan, holding the population of the city-states to strict laws and demanding tribute to be paid to the throne. In the mid-to-late fourteenth century BCE, the peoples in Canaan and the surrounding areas revolted, using their strength to break from Egyptian control, and breaking up into city-states of common peoples, such as the Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites, Moabites, Edomites, and Amorites. This break was possible due to an interregnum, or intermediate, period between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Egyptian Dynasties.⁹

At this point, it is important to discuss the claims of those who call themselves “Palestinians” to be the successors of the indigenous population of Canaan. The “Palestinians” claim is clearly expressed in Dr. Nasir’s *A Day of Justice*. “Its Arab population were the descendants of the indigenous inhabitants, who have been in the country since the earliest recorded time and were there when the Jews entered it in Biblical times...”¹⁰ “The Palestinians’ claim is predicated on the right of ownership evidenced by uninterrupted possession and occupation since the dawn of recorded history. They lived in the country when the Hebrews... came and lived there... [and] are largely the descendants of the Canaanites, the Edomites, and the Philistines who lived in Palestine when it was invaded by the Hebrews...”¹¹

There are two issues brought up in this claim that must be addressed. First, the idea that the Arabs presently living in Canaan are descendants of the “indigenous inhabitants” of the land

⁸ Exodus 1:8.

⁹ Durant, 113.

¹⁰ Jamal Nasir, *A Day of Justice: The Truth about the Arab Case in Palestine* (Jordan, 1956), 3.

is unsound. There were never “indigenous inhabitants” in Canaan. The great migrations and conquests mentioned above were not only the normal affairs in the times before the conquest by the Hebrews; they have been the normal affairs for almost five millennia. For example, the conquests by the Assyrians and by the Babylonians, in 722 and 586 BCE respectively, were characterized by the replacement of *all* of the local population with people from other areas. These dispersions affected not only the Jewish inhabitants of the land, but also the other inhabitants, making it virtually impossible to assume an “uninterrupted occupation” by any group, much less an “uninterrupted possession.” In addition, the current borders of the nation of Israel are recent creations, however the “Palestinians” claim that they are of one stock emanating from the land specified within these borders, however, in the beginning this view was not the norm. In his 1956 pamphlet called *A Day of Justice*, Dr. Jamal Nasir says that the lands of Canaan, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan are inhabited by a group of Arabs “who share the same language and culture and live under a common economic and social system.”¹² This contrasts vividly with the idea expressed currently, and calls into question the validity of the more recent claim.

The second issue of the claim to being indigenous to be discussed is that of Arab origins. The people-group known as the Arabs, as with most other people-groups, is actually a language-group. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* places the beginnings of the Arabic language in the 4th century CE, and its roots in the Aramaic language are wound through “the Nabataean and neo-Sinaitic alphabets.” Since the Arab people-group is bound through their language, it could not have come into a unified existence until the time of its language’s evolution. It is also important to note that the languages of the Moabites, Canaanites, and Phoenicians, those peoples from

¹¹ Frank Sakran, *Palestine, Still a Dilemma* (Washington, D.C.: America Council on the Middle East, 1976), 104-105.

which the “Palestinian” Arabs claim descent, have no relation to Arabic. Canaanite is actually an archaic form of Hebrew, Moabite is closely related to Hebrew, and Phoenician is the ancient language upon which most Western languages today are based.¹³ Thus, the close examination of the conquests of Canaan and the origins of the Arabic language brings the claim of “uninterrupted possession and occupation” into dangerous waters.

Whitelam falls into these dangerous waters in his recent work on the history of Canaan, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*. Whitelam’s political bias against the idea of a modern Jewish state has caused him to replace good scholarship and even balanced judgment with a propagandistic structure of analysis. Throughout his book, Whitelam scourges other authors for attempting to look at the land in a purely historical way, or, when referring to the land with the term “Palestine” used in a general geographical sense, for not referring to the non-Hebrew inhabitants of the land, in any epoch, as “Palestinians.” Whitelam’s assertion that the land should be called “Palestine” despite the political ramifications of that name is based in his views of the indigenous population.¹⁴ Until the rise in Arab nationalism in the mid-1960s, Jews and foreigners used the term “Palestinian” when referring to *all* inhabitants of the land, but the term was rarely, if ever, used by the Arabs to describe themselves.¹⁵ Based on the historical usage of the term, even Whitelam’s strident claims of the right of the “Palestinians” to an “un-silenced” history have no foundation upon which to stand.

With the multiple groups who migrated around the Fertile Crescent during the Middle Bronze to Early Iron Ages arrived a group of people called the Hebrews. Much is debated about the origins of the Hebrews, and a large amount of ink and blood have been spilled in the search

¹² Nasir, 1.

¹³ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Internet ed., available from <http://www.britannica.com>.

¹⁴ Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 39-51.

for those origins. The scholarship of the maximalists in the last generation based the historical record of the Hebrews on the outline made within the Hebrew Scriptures. This maximalist position of the Bible as worthy of historical merit contrasted with the newer positions of the Bible as a mismatched group of propagandistic analogies have led historians to differing conclusions on both the origins of the Hebrews and on their conquest of Canaan. Two of the views of the Hebrew origins are N. P. Lemche's "evolutionary Israel" theory, and Keith Whitelam and R. B. Coote's "shift in land-use" theory.

Lemche's "evolutionary Israel" theory claims that from the middle of the fourteenth century BCE the *habiru*, a group mentioned in the Egyptian Amarna letters from the fifteenth century BCE, lived in the hill country between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Lemche argues that these people were "a para-social element...[consisting of] runaway former non-free peasants or copyholders from the small city-states in the plains and valleys of Palestine."¹⁶ Based on the archaeological remains of many Early Iron Age settlements in the hill country that were not around in the Late Bronze Age,¹⁷ Lemche's hypothesis states that these *habiru* were a Canaanite people that settled down in the hill country and "sedentarized", creating the group later known as the Hebrews.

Whitelam and Coote's theory assumes basically the same structure with one exception. They claim that it was not a specific group of "para-social" people who inhabited the hill country during this time period, but that it was merely a shift in the use of land and in settlement patterns of the inhabitants of the various city-states in the area. These and other theories have been explained and critiqued, revisited and revised by the historical community for almost fifteen

¹⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

¹⁶ Quoted in John J. Brimson, "Merneptah's Israel and Recent Theories of Israelite Origins," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991): 15.

¹⁷ Brimson, 4.

years; however, in the light of some archaeological discoveries, such as the Merneptah stela, they begin to break apart.

The Merneptah stela is a record of the conquests of the pharaoh Merneptah in Canaan, and within the closing hymn of its narrative lays the earliest mention of “Israel” as a collective entity.¹⁸

The princes are prostrate, saying “Peace!”
 Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.
 Lying broken is Tehenu;
 Hatti is pacified;
 Plundered is 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;
 Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt!
 All lands together are pacified;
 Everyone who was restless has been bound.¹⁹

The most interesting aspect of this stela is that fact that it was written during the first few years of Merneptah’s reign, sometime around the year 1210 BCE, placing it almost two hundred years before the unification of the Israelites into the Kingdom of Israel under Saul, David, and Solomon.²⁰ Most scholars agree that the *Israel* mentioned in the stela refers to the Israel in the Bible in some way, though some scholars, such as Whitelam, deny this claim and attempt, with little real argument, to disprove it. The hieroglyphics of the text have been translated and retranslated in an attempt to place the reference to *Israel* in its original context, and the discussion continues as to what type of people-group the term *Israel* really refers.

¹⁸ Michael G. Hasel, “Israel in the Merneptah Stela,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 296 (1994): 46.

¹⁹ Brimson, 21.

²⁰ Brimson, 13.

One of the best hypotheses arrived at to-date was published in 1994 by Michael Hasel. Hasel makes a strong case for *Israel* referring to a “socioethnic entity within the region of Canaan the same way in which the three city-states [mentioned before *Israel* in the hymn] are sociopolitical entities in the same geographical region.”²¹ (A point of interest to make here is that though both are written in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the word used in the Merneptah stela is actually *Israel*, not *habiru*, the word used in the Amarna letters. This bespeaks a difference between the *habiru* and the inhabitants of the hill country being called *Israel*.)

Hasel speaks at length on the determinative used before the words for the city-states and before the word *Israel*. Determinatives are hieroglyphic symbols that give a word the meaning that the scribe wants it to have, a symbol that produces the desired connection between the word and its context. The determinative used before the names of the city-states is that of a city-state, land, or region, thus putting those names in context with the sociopolitical entities that they were—cities that controlled the lands around them. The determinative used before *Israel* is the one used to describe a socioethnic entity.²² Gosta Ahlstrom, Diana Edelman,²³ and Whitelam²⁴ dismiss this determinative as insignificant and inconclusive, saying that it is most likely a scribal error; however, Hasel makes a great point in defense of his theory. “The overall consistency in the use of determinatives [within the rest of the stela] with this one exception argues for the original intention of meaning for the respective determinatives.”²⁵

The Merneptah stela provides much evidence to refute the origination theories of Lemche, Whitelam, and Coote, placing the socioethnic entity called *Israel* in connection with the city-states mentioned as a valid and powerful force in the area, powerful enough to be mentioned

²¹ Hasel, 51.

²² Hasel, 51.

²³ Gosta Ahlstrom and Diana Edelman, “Merneptah’s Israel” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 61.

²⁴ Whitelam, 228.

on a stela of a pharaoh in the great empire of Egypt. This significant force could not have been a result of either of the origination theories' inhabitants of the hill country because the appearance of the new settlements upon which these theories are based is dated later than the Merneptah stela. This means that the *Israel* in the Merneptah stela cannot be the result of the resedentarization of groups of Canaanites, as the theories claim, but that *Israel* already existed before those new settlements were founded.²⁶

The Merneptah stela corroborates the events of the conquest of Canaan as laid out by the Book of Judges which "preserves a tradition that the land of Canaan was possessed over a long period of time in operations that involved individual tribes or groups of related tribes acting independently."²⁷ As was mentioned above, great wars and migrations occurred in the Fertile Crescent during the changeover of power between empires. Every time the Egyptian Empire changed dynasties or had an interregnum period, their hegemony over the land of Canaan dwindled. This permitted the growth of independent city-states and the group *Israel* before the reign of Merneptah, and it also allowed the growth of the Kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon.

Many authors, such as Kishtainy, have contended that this conquest of Canaan by the Israelites was a detriment of the region, even going so far as to say that the Hebrews did not accomplish anything of value in the land, making it a worse place than it was before they came. While this may have some validity in the realm of material accomplishments (i.e. building great cities or leaving behind great forms of art), what is amazing is that Kishtainy extends this idea of deficiencies to say that the religion of the Hebrews, and by implication the Judaism of today, was

²⁵ Hasel, 52.

²⁶ Brimson, 19.

based on a “guilt neurosis” that led to “the compulsive drive, that can only come from the suffering of a tormented soul.”²⁸

Despite the bleak scene painted by the propagandists of the present day, the Hebrew conquest of Canaan was probably one of the greatest events that could have happened in the history of the region. Dr. Sally Vaughn, a history professor at the University of Houston, says that the conquests of areas by outside forces is one of the greatest ways of affecting the cultures of the world. The dissemination of information, technology, philosophies, and, as is important in the case of the Hebrews, moral-religious values has been achieved best in history through the conquest of an area by a group of people. The dissemination of Greek culture by the Romans is a prime example of this. The world is a melting pot of peoples and cultures, and the interaction of those cultures is what brings progress.

The goal of this study has been to clarify the claims of ownership over the land of Canaan and to reach a preliminary conclusion to the question “Whose land is it?” Historically, the land has changed hands many times and no people-group has an indigenous claim to it. Tragically, ownership of this one small piece of land has been the product of countless wars, and the claims of ownership will continue to persist until something is done to settle the dispute. Historically, disputes of ownership have been settled in three arenas: the courts, the battlefields, and the history books. The courts of the world are split on this decision, the battlefield has thus far decided that Israel is the owner, and the history books have not had the time to make a balanced decision. The question remains as to which one of these will have the final say in the ownership of Canaan. It is my hope that the archaeological evidence found within the region and expressed

²⁷ Joseph Callaway, “The Settlement in Canaan: The Period of the Judges,” in *Ancient Israel: A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1988), 54.

²⁸ Kishtainy, 31.

in this paper will not be not overlooked, but that the claims of the “Palestinians” to the land will be put to the historical test. Historical scholarship untainted by political bias should become the cornerstone of our search for the suitable resolution of this issue. Whose land is it? We will have to wait and see.