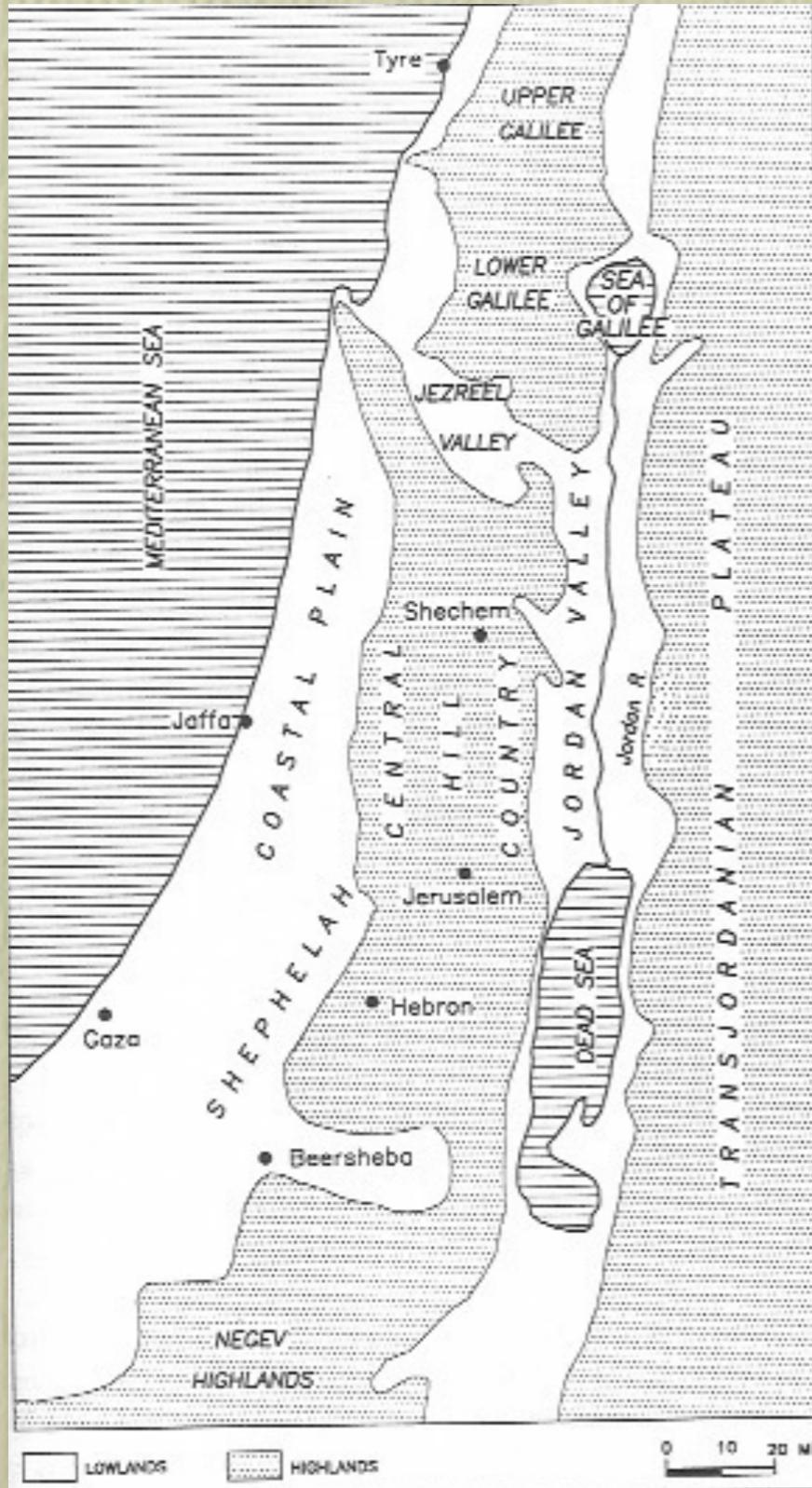
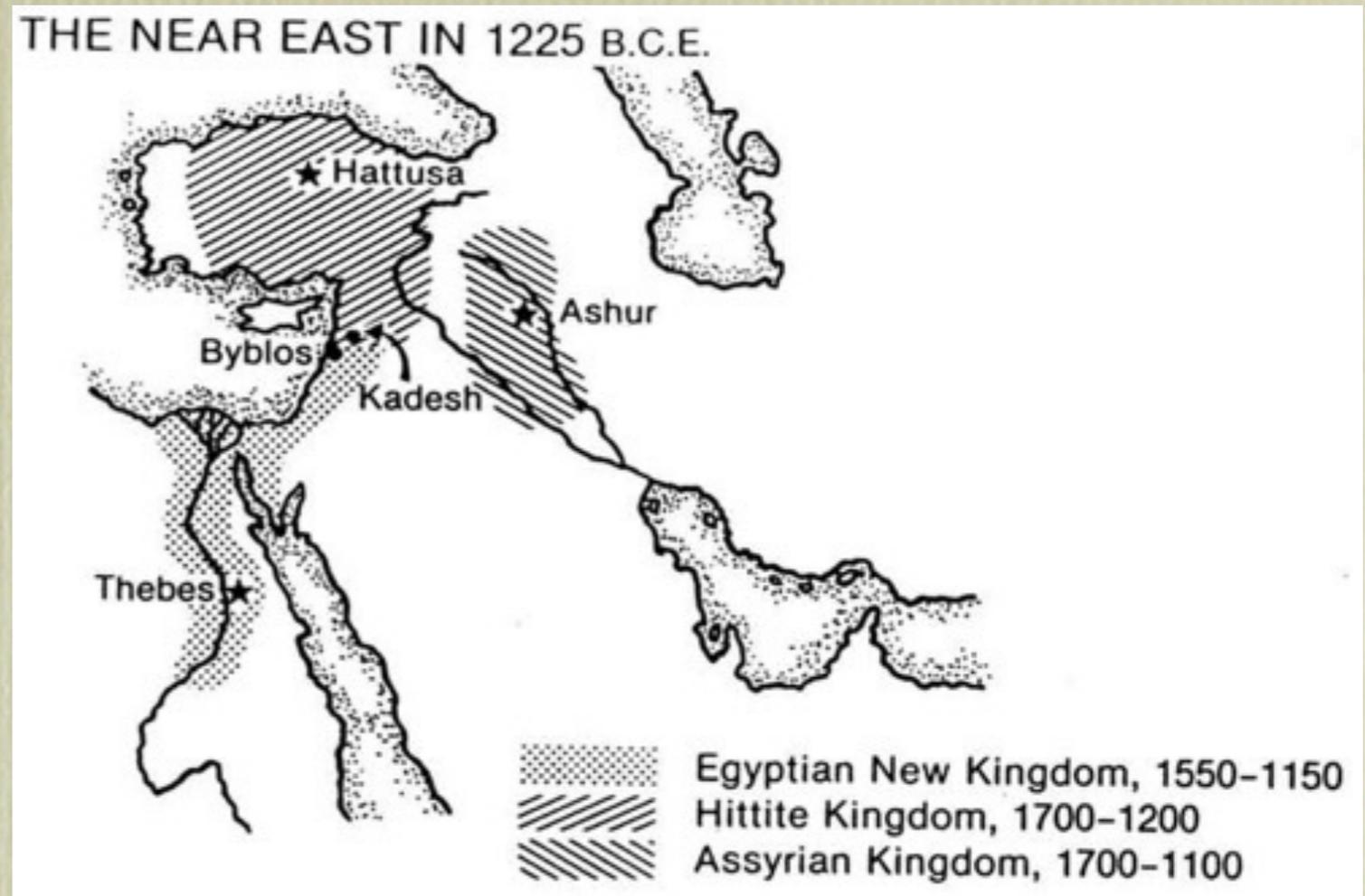


## II. Israel from the 13th to the 9th century



## Israel in Canaan

The end of the Bronze Age 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.

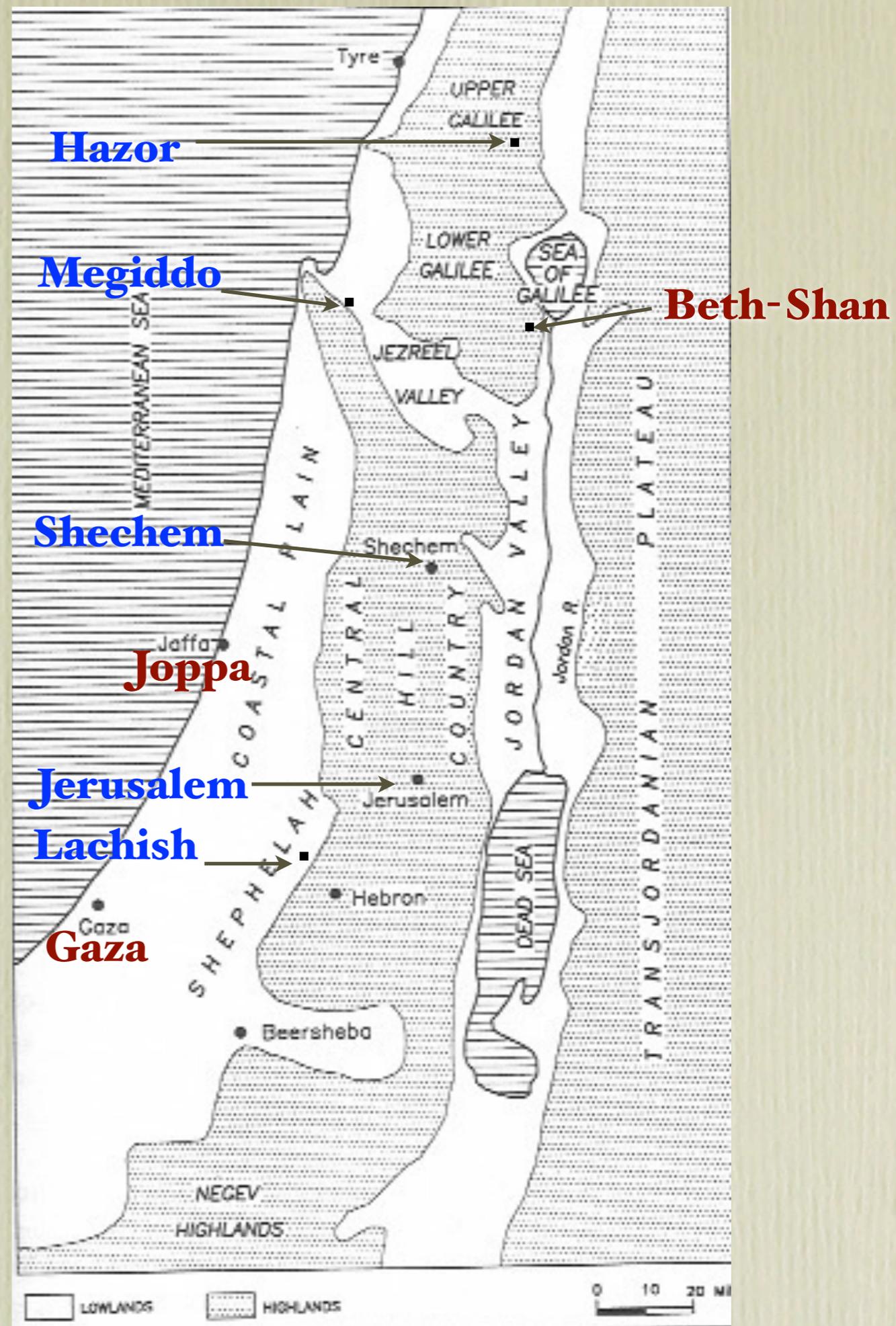


Unattached groups roamed the area seizing power where they could. Canaan was significantly affected. Bands of 'Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites' (Joshua 24:11) took control of the cities and reduced the locals to serfdom. Some of the locals fled to the hill country where they were less able to be controlled, and where they struggled to eke out an existence.

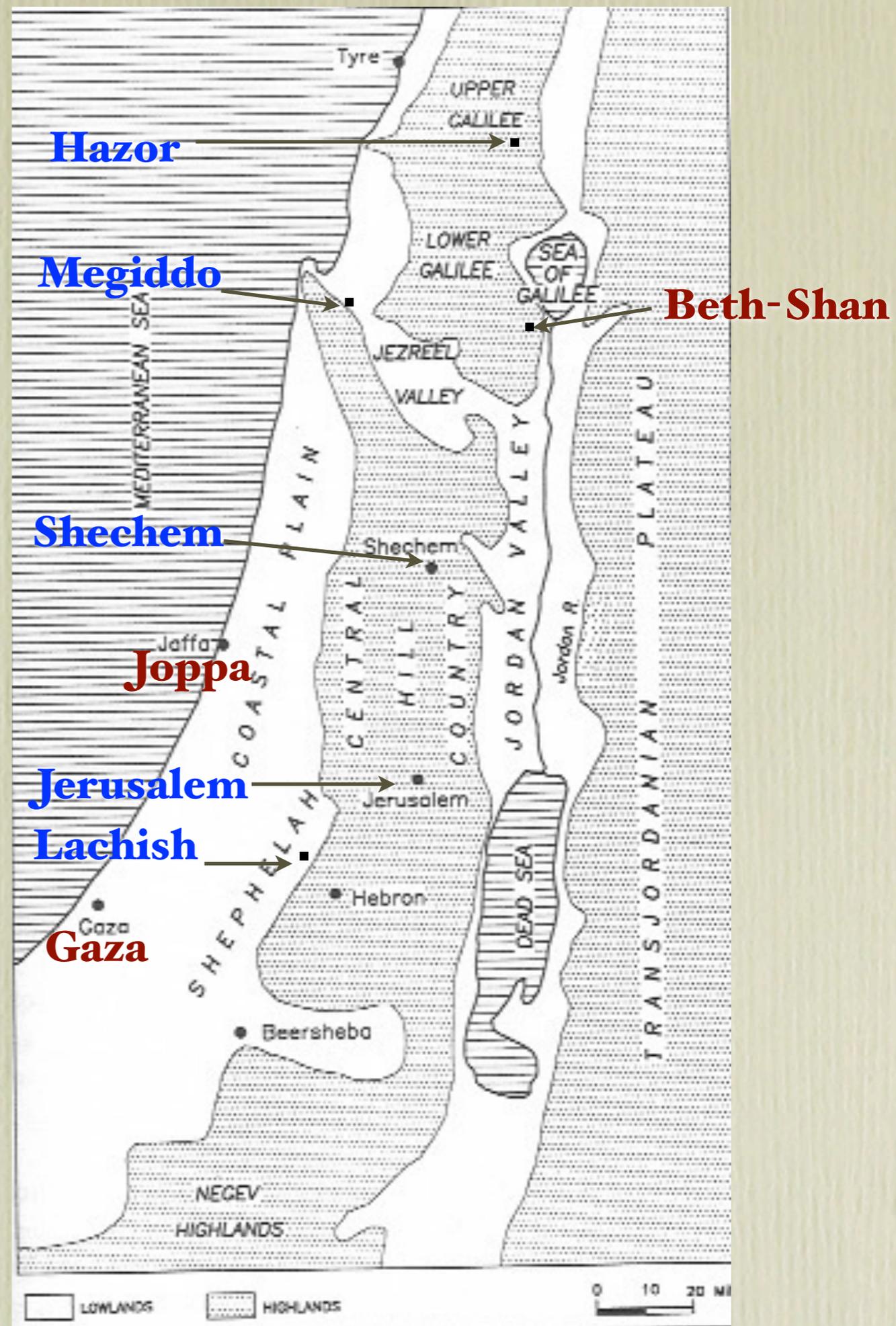
The collapse of the Mycenaean Empire in Greece led to the same kind of uncontrolled marauding at sea as was happening on land. The 'Sea Peoples', as they are known from ancient sources, attacked Egypt. They also attacked along the east coast of the Mediterranean, including Canaan. One of these groups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



To get some idea of the early history of Israel we turn to the discoveries of archaeology. 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 Egyptian provincial capital was at **Gaza** and there were Egyptian garrisons in **Joppa** and **Beth-Shan**.



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.



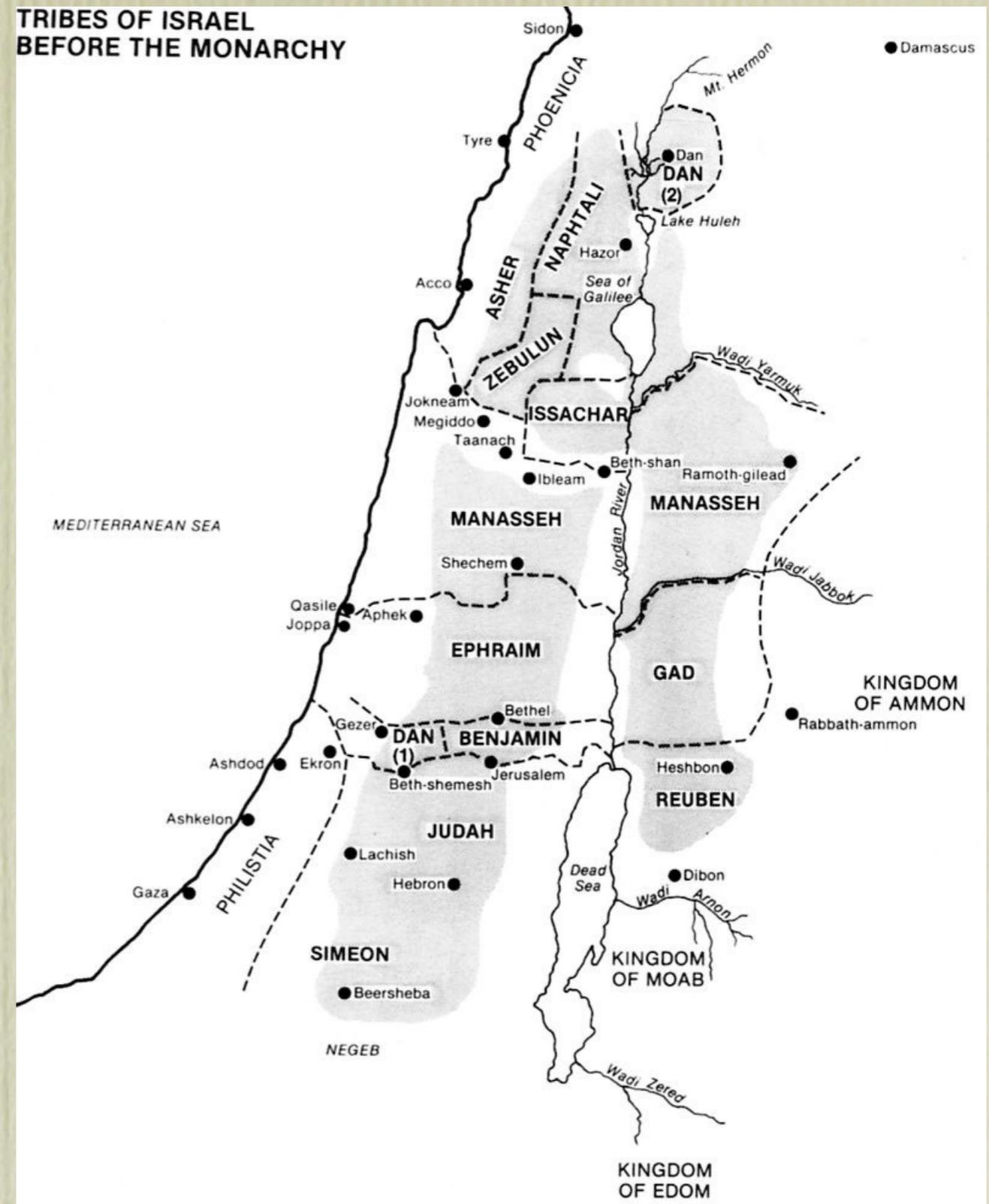
It was in the hill country of Canaan at this time that a new grouping of tribes emerged – Israel. The oldest extant record of the existence of a people called ‘**Israel**’ is an Egyptian stone inscription from the time of Merneptah (1207BC), son of pharaoh Ramses II.



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: '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'(page 348).



In other words, 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 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.

TRIBES OF ISRAEL  
BEFORE THE MONARCHY



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

The Book of Joshua 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.

1. Egyptian control of Canaan would not have allowed the Canaanite city states to be overrun.
2. Jericho (Joshua 6) had no walls at the time.
3. 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 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.

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.

These tribes inhabited the mountainous region of Canaan, and the thorough and extensive archaeological surveys carried out since 1967 reveal a culture different from that of the city states and agricultural lands of the coastal plain and lowlands. The Israelites 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, facing the Jordan) as well as vines and olives (western highlands, facing the Mediterranean).

The key historical question is: Where 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, Leviticus, 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.

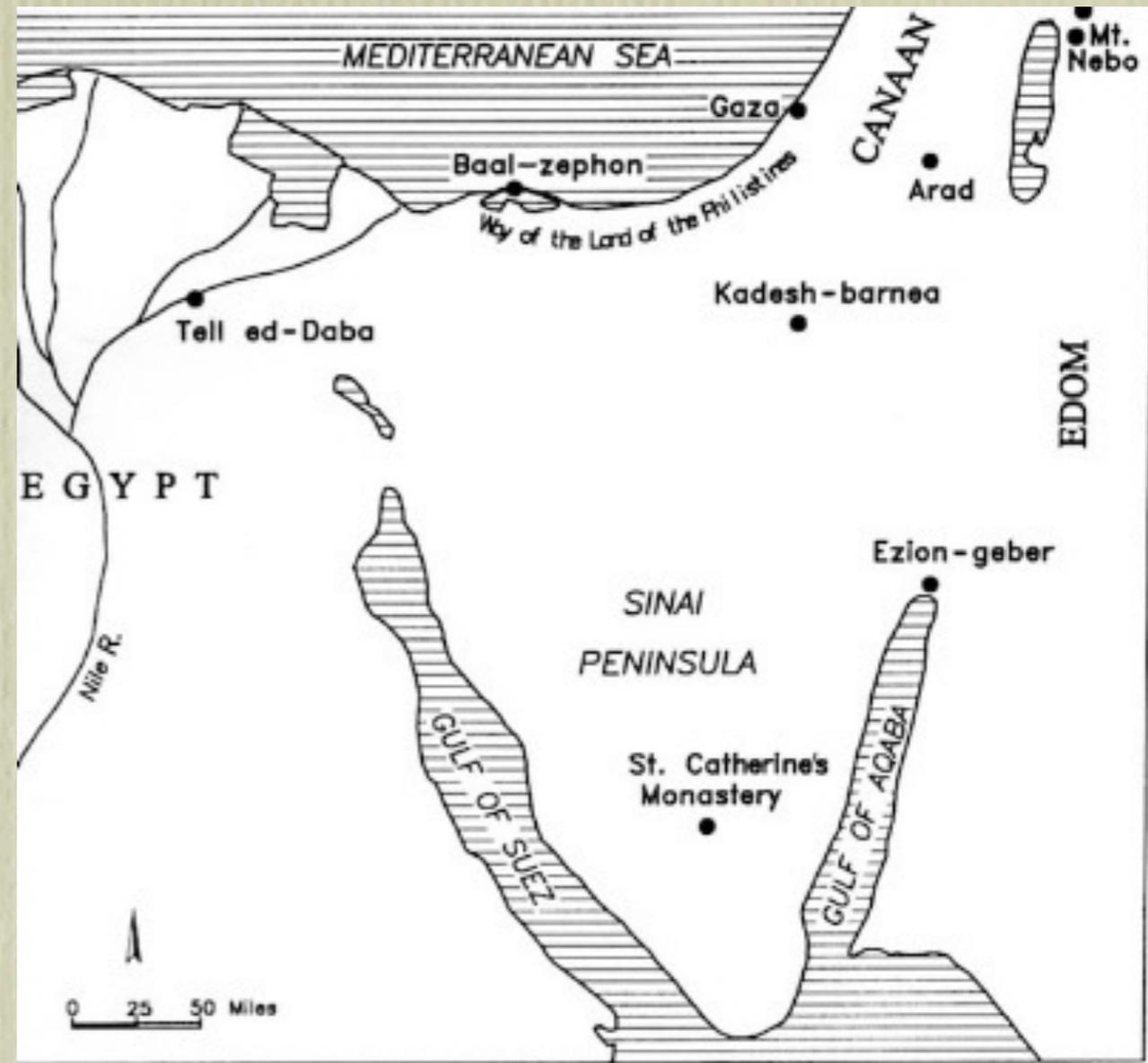
As the story goes, this group originated in Canaan (see the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in Genesis 12-50), but had been enslaved in Egypt, and had escaped under the leadership of a man called Moses. They were formed into a people during their years in the Sinai desert, and had a unique understanding of God as being the god of the oppressed.

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.

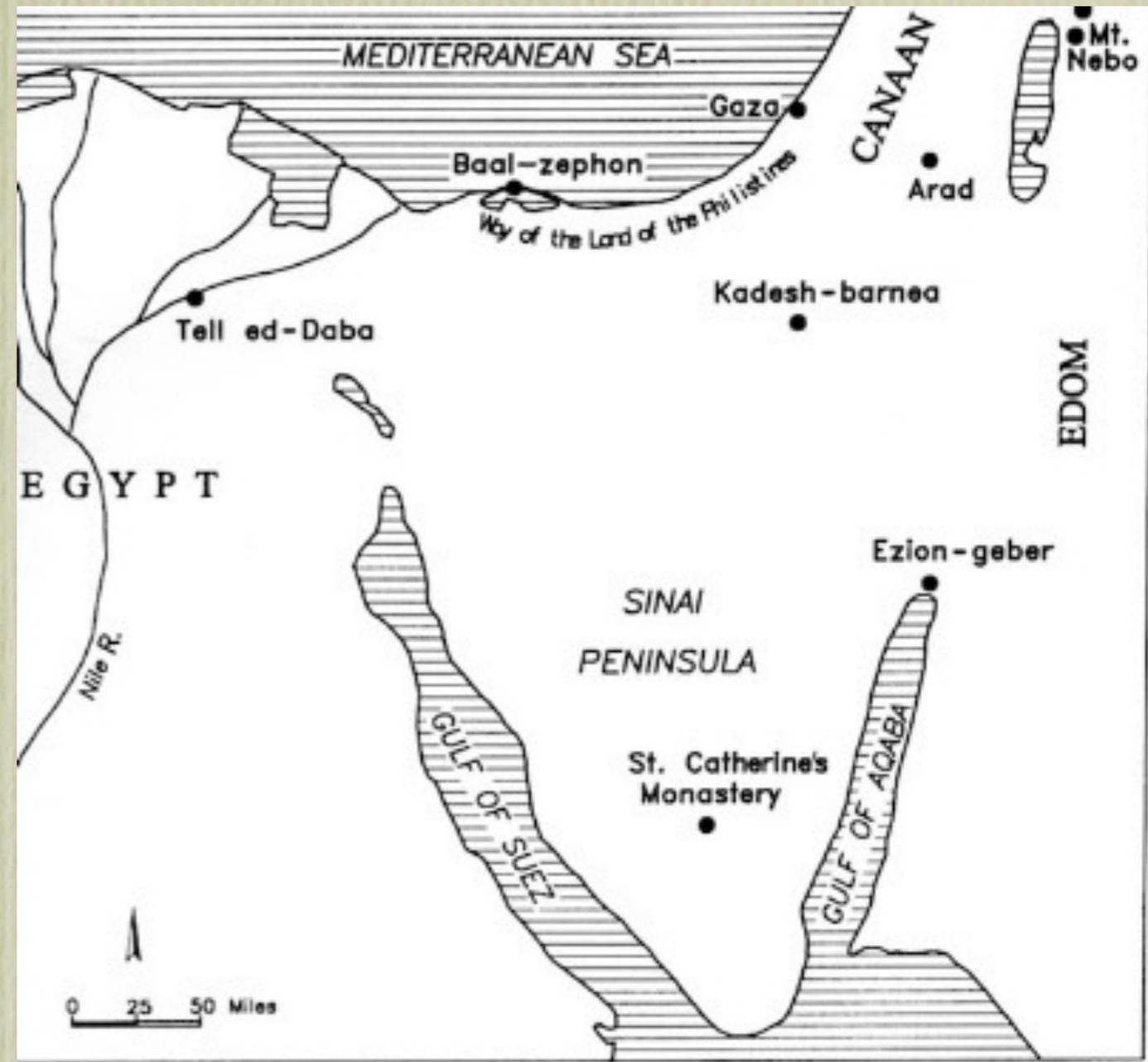


It is to a group of these stateless and nondescript Habiru (Exodus 11:4; 12:38) that we are to look for the historical core of the epic that has such a central place in the later literature of the Israelites.

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 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 it 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 enjoyed only so long as the occupants were faithful to YHWH.

When the northern 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 which 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.

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 the Book of Deuteronomy:

‘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’(Deuteronomy 5:3).



## The Book of Judges

The Book of Judges 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. 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.

The Philistines came into Palestine during the twelfth 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.



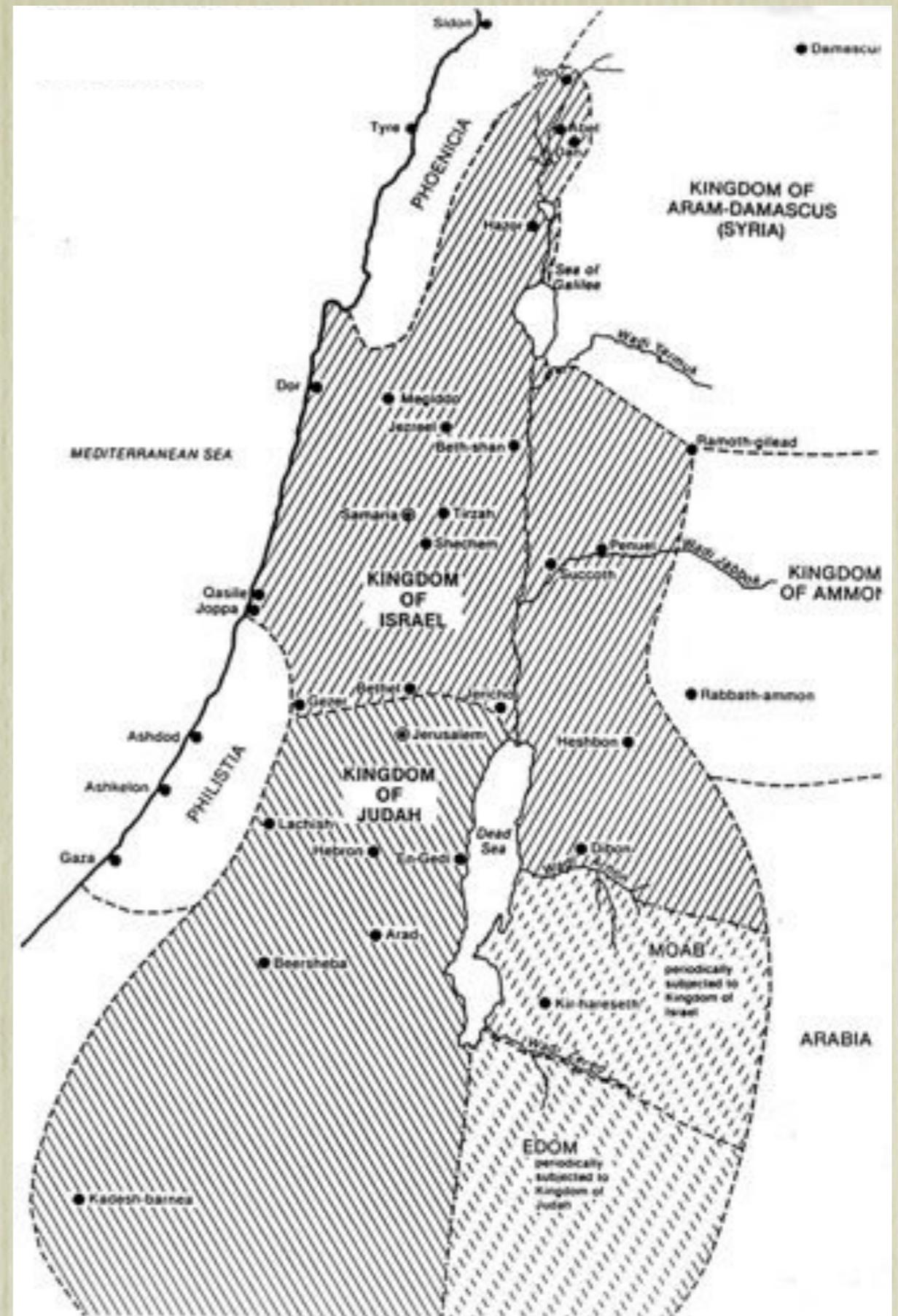
However towards the end of the eleventh century BC, the Philistines pushed their way right up to the central shrine of **Shiloh** (see Jeremiah 7), and captured the Ark of the Covenant, YHWH's mobile throne.



## 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. 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 scrolls of the prophets.

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 picture 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 Biblical Account of the Davidic dynasty in Judah

According to the idealised biblical account **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 (5,000?) inhabitants (Finkelstein and Silberman page 133).

Picton has a population of about 5,000!

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 biblical narrative of a Golden Age under David when the northern highlands of Israel and the kingdom of Judah in the south were united under the one rule is of the nature of an historical novel, expressing the seventh century ambitions of Josiah and presenting these ambitions as divinely promised claims.

‘Judah remained relatively empty of permanent population, quite isolated and very marginal right up to and past the presumed time of David and Solomon with no major urban centres and with no pronounced hierarchy of hamlets, villages and towns’(Finkelstein and Silberman page 132).

The devastation of the cities of the plain by the invasion of Pharaoh Sheshonq in 926BC (see 1Kings 14:25-26) opened the way for the expansion of the kingdom of Israel. 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 it remained, like the kingdom of Judah, polytheistic.

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 Israel*' (see 1Kings 14:19), and '*The Annals of the Kings of Judah*' (see 1Kings 14:29). 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.

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.

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 remember that the Deuteronomists want the reader to be watching what God is doing (from a Judah perspective!).