



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 Ramesses 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 13th 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).



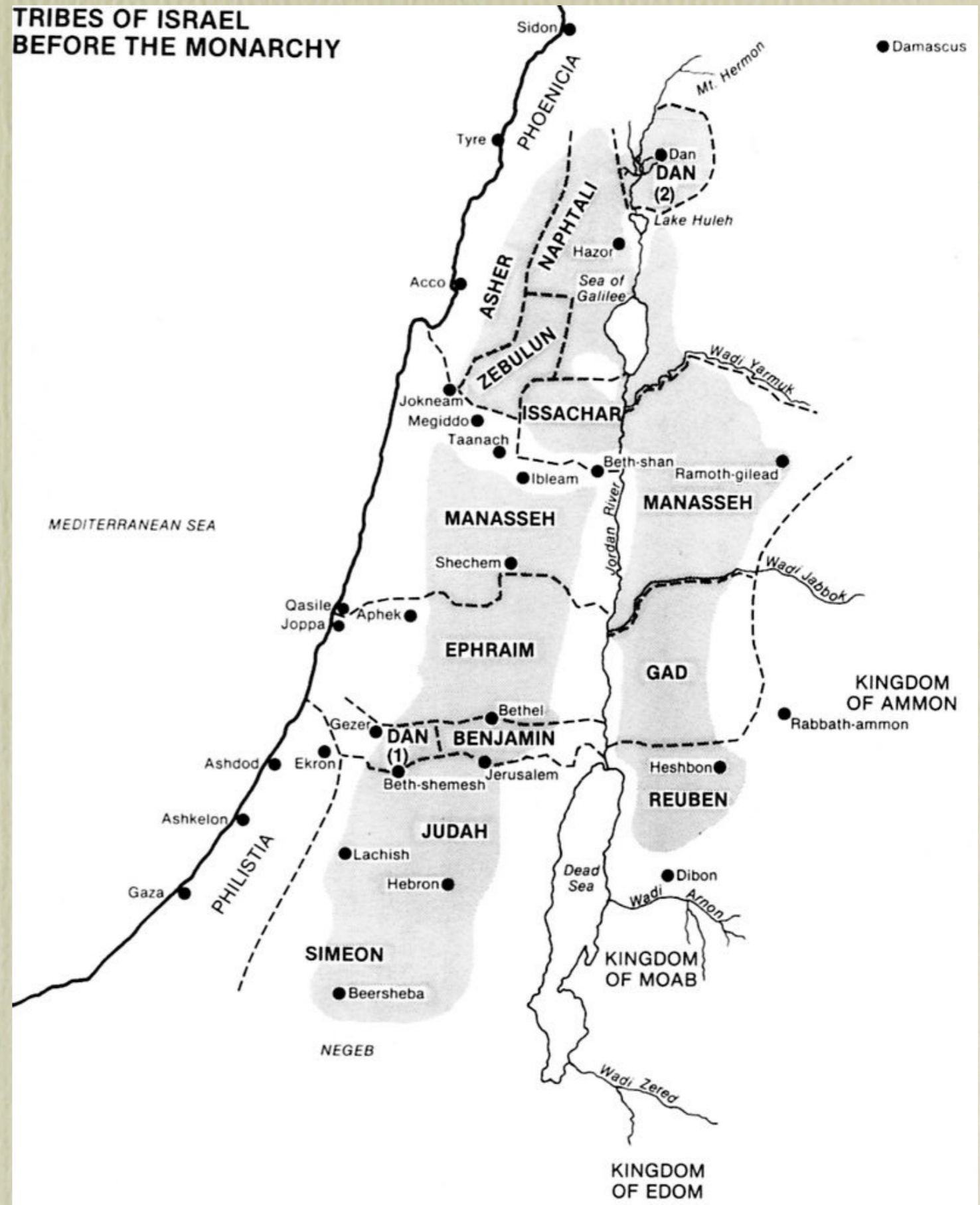
Their settlements were not fortified. They lived a simple lifestyle and their settling in the hill country was peaceful. Archaeology reveals earlier similar settlements in the highlands of Canaan, the first being about 3,500BC (100 sites), and the second about 2,000BC (220 sites). The people called 'Israel' represent the third such attempt at subsistence farming there.



These settlers belonged to a number of different tribes. The largest tribe was that of Joseph (so large it was divided into Ephraim and Manasseh). With the small tribe of Benjamin, the Joseph tribes occupied the central hill country west of the Jordan (Manasseh spilled over to the east side of the Jordan as well). The tribe of Judah occupied the southern highlands. The tribes of Reuben and Gad occupied the mountain region east of the Jordan. The smaller tribes of Simeon and Dan occupied the areas at the edge of Judah.



Under pressure from the Philistines, the tribe of Dan later moved to the extreme north. North of the valley of Esdraelon in the highlands of Galilee were the tribes of Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali and Asher.



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) as well as vines and olives (western highlands).



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, 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.

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.

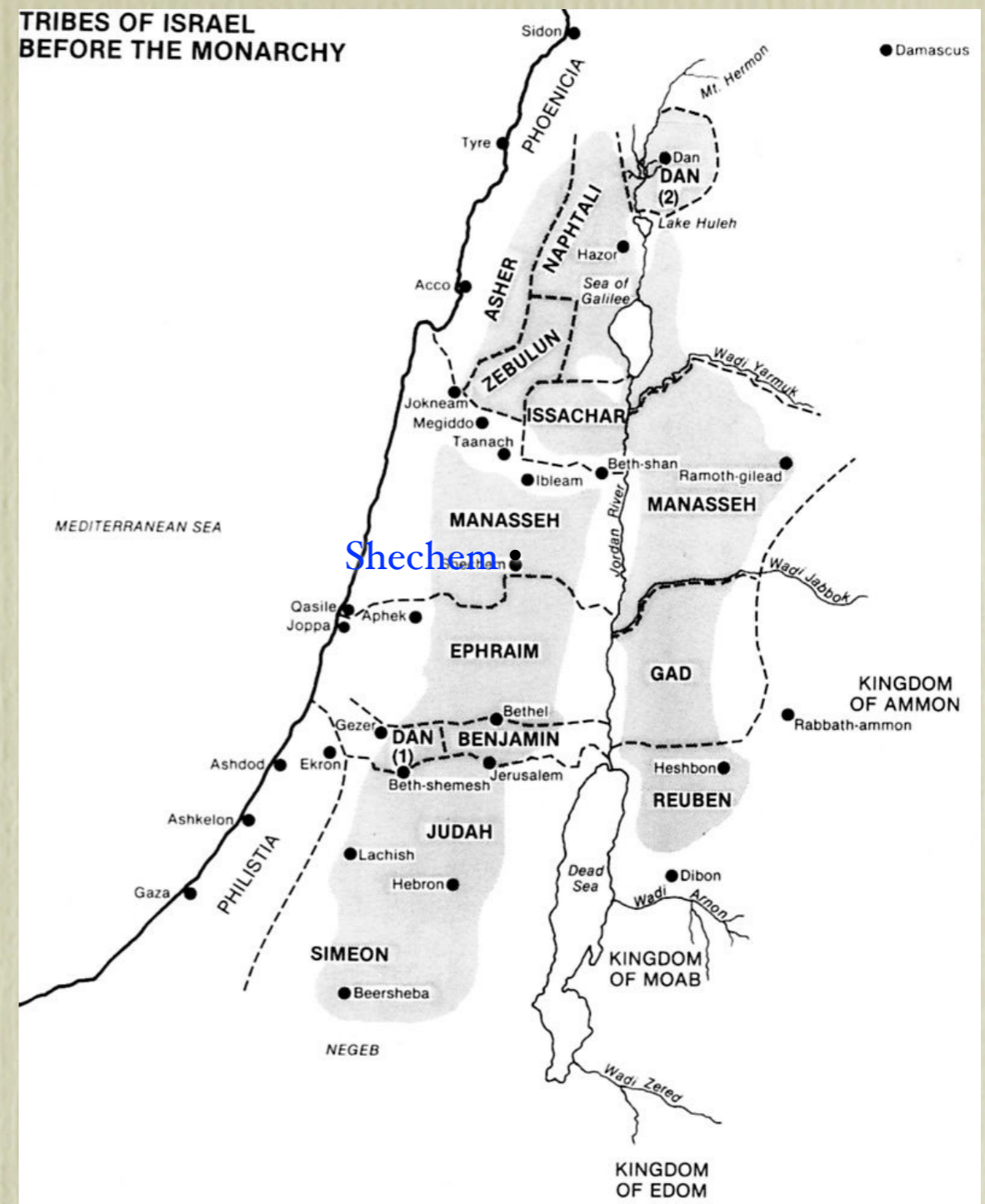
Not being strong enough to force their way north they spent a generation wandering the desert lands till they were able to enter Canaan from the east across the Jordan. During this long desert experience they formed into a religious community, bound together not by race or geography, but by their commitment 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.

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 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 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.

- ‘Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God’ (Joshua 24:1).
- Joshua 24 recalls the story of the patriarchs and continues:



Joshua 24:4-7

‘Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to YHWH, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time.’

Gottwald (*The Hebrew Bible*) suggests that the Exodus story functioned as an 'umbrella metaphor' for Tribal 'Israel'.

A people oppressed by kings unites to escape from physical and mental bondage to the oppressor.

A people freed from an imposed social order unites and experiments to create a tribal/ inter-tribal community.

A people whose leaders had been imposed now struggles to create necessary leadership in the absence of coercive state power

A people threatened by disease and plague struggles to reproduce and preserve itself by adequate hygienic measures.

- The Exodus story would have encouraged the northern kingdom in the struggle against Assyrian power. The prophets certainly used it in their critique of the abuses of government and life which they opposed in the name of YHWH (see Amos 2:10; 3:1-2 and Hosea 11:1-5; 12:14).
- Some parts of the story may have been written prior to the destruction of Samaria (721BC)

- ‘You shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but YHWH brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. YHWH displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors’(Deuteronomy 6:21-23).
- The Exodus story supported Josiah’s movement to re-conquer and liberate the Promised Land.

The Exodus story inspired those living in exile in Babylon. It inspired them to return to the 'Promised Land'.

It inspired the post-exilic community, attempting to form a renewed Israel, and recalling the experiences of their beginnings, determined to be faithful to the covenant with God made in their name by their ancestors, a covenant which defines them as a people.

Judah: mid-5th century: Ezra & Nehemiah

Nehemiah 9:6-21

Ezra proclaimed: YHWH, you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses.

For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them ... You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves ... you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

- Besides narrative, Exodus is a handbook for religious festivals and a law code. This material is mainly contributed by the Priestly School [**P**]. It is important that we read these laws as expressions of practices that have come down through the tradition, a tradition which they understood to be guided by their God, YHWH.
- These laws express ways in which their ancestors, and they themselves, have solved various problems that have emerged in the community, as well as ways of organising personal and communal life in ways that are consistent with their religious insights.

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).