

MIDDLE GROUND: THE CANAANITE AND NON-CANAANITE ORIGINS OF
ANCIENT ISRAEL AS EVIDENCED BY THE GODS AND GODDESS
THEY WORSHIPPED

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

As historians and scholars have studied the Bible, one unanswerable question has continued to puzzle them: Where did Ancient Israel come from? Many scholars have presented theories attempting to provide some possible answers to this question based on the Bible (and/or other ancient texts) or archaeological data or both. However, while each theory has valid arguments based on textual or archaeological data, these theories leave several questions unanswered and none fully agree with all the data available. There are data that support both a Canaanite and a non-Canaanite origin for Ancient Israel, yet these major theories focus on either the Canaanite origins of Ancient Israel or the non-Canaanite origins for Ancient Israel and never both. Thus, new theories that incorporate both sources for the origins of Ancient Israel must be formulated to get us closer to answering the question of from where Ancient Israel came.

This thesis uses the data from ancient texts, including the Bible, and archaeology to present a new theory about the origins of Ancient Israel. In order to discover both the Canaanite and non-Canaanite origins of Ancient Israel one must look to the gods and goddess worshipped by the early Israelites. When one discovers the origins of the main deities venerated by Ancient Israel, namely, Yahweh, El/Elohim and Asherah, the origins of early Israel then becomes clearer. Yahweh was a non-Canaanite deity, El and Asherah Canaanite deities and all three were worshipped to some degree by Ancient Israel. When Israel first emerged as a distinct population group in the Ancient Near East around 1200

BCE a new, distinctive religion emerged as well. This religion integrated several Canaanite religious practices and rituals with a non-Canaanite deity, Yahweh, with some of the unique religious features of a non-Canaanite origin, to form a new, hybrid religion. The merging of these numerous separate and different religious features argues for the existence of two sources of influence, one Canaanite and one non-Canaanite. Thus, based on these combined religious elements the origins of Ancient Israel must be from both these sources and not one or the other as the major theories suggest.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith Yahweh God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.
Exodus 5:1

Statement of the Problem

The study of the Bible has been a central part of Western individual endeavor for centuries, even millennia. The main purpose of this type of study is and has been of a religious nature. People study the Bible to find God and to understand how God works, to get insight into their own lives, and to discover the meaning of life. For some, the Bible is more than just a religious book; it is a historical document describing the accounts and tales of ancient people who worshipped the same god they worship today. These people consider the biblical figures of Moses and David to be real historical individuals and that the tales in the Bible about them actually happened. In a way, this belief in the reality of these figures adds to the significance of the religious aspects of the biblical text, for if the biblical stories are true, then one can begin to understand how God deals with real human beings and how God would deal with the one studying the Bible today. It makes the Bible applicable to real life in the present day.

Over the last two centuries scholars, historians and even theologians have begun to take a more critical look at the Bible, the stories surrounding biblical figures and the

evidence from nonbiblical sources in an attempt to discover what is historically true and what is not in the biblical text. One of the main questions they have struggled to answer is where Ancient Israel came from. In the Hebrew Bible,¹ the episode recognized as ‘the Exodus’ tells the story of how the people of Israel escaped from Egypt, traveled through the Sinai desert and entered the Promised Land known as Canaan.² For those who believe in the literal Bible, this story represents the origins of Ancient Israel and it teaches how and from where the Israelites arrived in the land of Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500-1200 Before the Common Era or BCE) and the beginning of the Iron Age I (ca. 1200-1000 BCE). In the last two centuries, however, scholars and others have questioned the Exodus account and many other aspects of the biblical text. Prior to the nineteenth century of the Common Era (CE), the historical truthfulness of the Hebrew Bible was not questioned.

Today, however, scholars are reviewing and analyzing the biblical text in an attempt to see beyond the traditional stories. By studying the clues left by the biblical writers, these researchers hope to discover the historicity of these events and what really happened to the Ancient Israelites. One great aid in the quest to understand the

¹ The Hebrew Bible is a term to refer to the biblical text that was written and/or compiled by Ancient Israel in Hebrew. In Christianity it is also known as the Old Testament.

² Canaan is a term to refer to the land of Israel or Palestine in ancient times. The borders of its geographical location are debatable. Some argue that it stretches as far south as Sinai and as far north as Northern Syria and for this thesis these geographical parameters will be referred to as ‘greater Canaan.’ For the present study when the land Canaan is mentioned it is to be understood to be the land west of the Jordan River to the coast of the Mediterranean and from the desert region of the Negev north to about the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee. This may be referred to as ‘Ancient Palestine’ as well and it constitutes the main lands settled and controlled by Ancient Israel from about 1200 BCE onward with variations that will be discussed in the body of this thesis. For more information on the use of the term Canaan in ancient texts see J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 38.

compositions of the Hebrew Bible and the origins of Israel is the field of Biblical Archaeology, a discipline formed to some degree in an attempt to prove (or disprove in some cases) events and stories of the Bible. Archaeology in general has helped significantly in bringing forth historical evidence that can be used to refute or substantiate the claims made by those who argue over theories about the origins of Ancient Israel and the history that may or may not be contained in the Bible.

One problem with current scholarship on the subject is that archaeologists and those who study ancient texts, two separate fields of study, seem to be at odds with each other and cannot seem to work together. Archaeology and ancient texts both yield valuable information and data that can help piece together the puzzle of Ancient Israel and its origins, yet the two different fields, in many cases, decline to work together.

David Noel Freedman states,

The combination of the Bible and archaeology is somewhat artificial; the two have not really matched up very well. On rare but important occasions, there is significant contact, and both disciplines gain from the exchange of data and ideas. Often, however, there is no point of contact and nothing significant happens.³

It is apparent that the way to more fully understand early Israel or any historical event is to use all the data available. Thus, archaeology and archaeologists cannot discard the ancient texts, including the Bible, when attempting to describe historical events based on archaeological findings and/or theorizing about history based on such findings.

Furthermore, those who study ancient texts, most particularly biblical scholars, must

³ William G. Dever, T. L. Thompson, G. W. Ahlström, and Philip R. Davies, ““Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?” Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 297 (Feb., 1995): 63.

include archaeological findings in their interpretations of history based on these ancient texts. When both fields of study are included in an interpretation of historical events our knowledge of these events is greatly enhanced. While these two fields seem to have had a difficult time working together and have lacked a cohesive approach with regard to the origins of Ancient Israel, great strides have been made in the last ten to fifteen years by members of both fields and the recent collaboration of both archaeologists and those who study ancient texts has provided us with much needed information and innovative hypotheses on the subject of Ancient Israel's origins.

There is much debate in current scholarship over the possible explanations of Ancient Israel's emergence in the Ancient Near East at the end of the Late Bronze Age. There are several different theories with regard to who these Ancient Israelites were and where they came from. Each different theory highlights or emphasizes specific aspects of the origins of Ancient Israel that are corroborated with the textual and/or archaeological evidence available. Certainly, these several theories also have weaknesses, for there is evidence for the origins of Ancient Israel that is left unexplained in each of the major theories. Therein lies the problem; there is no definitive solution to the problem of the origins of Ancient Israel because none of the major theories can account for all aspects of the textual and archaeological data. The archaeology and the ancient texts of the Ancient Near East both provide proof that the formation of Ancient Israel as a distinct population group involved Canaanites and non-Canaanites united together in a tribal alliance. Therefore, it is necessary, in my opinion, to look for an additional hypothesis and a new method that can adequately explain the origins of Ancient Israel incorporating the

evidence for the Israelites' Canaanite and non-Canaanite background as evidenced in the archaeological record and in ancient texts including the Bible.

The Yahweh/El Theory

Due to the evidence of Canaanite and non-Canaanite heritage for early Israel, this thesis will attempt to look anew at the question of the origins of Ancient Israel and suggest a different hypothesis that adds to the existing theories of the field, what I have termed the Yahweh/El Theory. To do this, I intend to examine the origins of Ancient Israel through the lens of the gods and goddess that they worshipped and how the archaeology and ancient texts that deal with the deities worshipped by Ancient Israel provide evidence for their Canaanite and non-Canaanite origins. The Hebrew Bible and the religions that base their tradition on the Bible (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are well known to be monotheistic. However, at several times in the biblical storyline the Israelites (or groups of Israelites) showed devotion to other gods and goddesses other than their main god, Yahweh. The role these other gods and goddesses played in early Israel is one clue to an understanding of the origins of Ancient Israel because these deities were Canaanite deities. Thus, the religious practices of and the deities venerated by early Israel had connections with contemporary Canaanite religion and deities.

Alternatively, Yahweh, the main god of the Hebrew Bible and of Ancient Israel, was not a Canaanite god. Yahweh worship in Canaan does not begin until some of the first Israelites 'bring' him into the land to be worshipped. Eventually, Yahweh becomes a god of the land of Canaan due to the presence of Ancient Israel there, but originally he is a non-Canaanite god. Based on the religion and deity devotion of Ancient Israel, I

propose that there is evidence that the origins of Israel lie both within Canaan and without. This hypothesis is supported by both the archaeological record and the ancient texts which provide proof that Ancient Israel emerged from within the indigenous Canaanite population and from a non-Canaanite population group. Therefore, in my judgment, if one studies the gods and goddess that the Ancient Israelites worshipped early on in their existence then we can confirm to a greater degree what the archaeology and ancient texts suggest concerning Ancient Israel's origins and we can come closer to definitively discovering the origins of Israel. I intend to prove that this approach will help answer some of the questions surrounding the origins of Ancient Israel throughout the body of this thesis.

The God of the Land

An important aspect of this theory and something that is prevalent in the ancient world is that gods and goddesses of the Ancient Near East were connected to a particular group of people and to a specific geographical location. Mark S. Smith states, "In the world order there were many nations, and each had its own patron god."⁴ Moreover, Alexander H. Joffe declares, "Each might espouse a different version, but the core elements of peoplehood connected to God and the land were likely shared."⁵ In the Ancient Near East when population and/or ethnic groups moved or were displaced from one area to another they took with them not only their culture and society but also their

⁴ Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 49.

⁵ Alexander H. Joffe, "The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Part 1, 2002): 455.

religion and the deities they had previously worshipped from the land or lands from which they were displaced. This is only natural since they were familiar with their religion and deities and through past experiences believed in the benefit of venerating these gods.

An example of this can be seen with the ancient group well known from the Bible, the Philistines. They first arrived in the land of Canaan around the same time as the emergence of the first Ancient Israelites as a remnant of a group called the Sea Peoples.⁶ The Sea Peoples were a group of pirates/brigands from the Aegean Sea area that had wreaked havoc upon the Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age.⁷ The Philistines made up a part of this group and would later proceed to settle in the southern coastal plains of Canaan.⁸ The Philistines brought their gods and goddesses of Aegean origin with them to the land of Canaan as evidenced in their material remains uncovered by archaeologists and they continued to worship them while in their new homeland.⁹

⁶ For more information on the Sea Peoples see Carol A. Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 85-86, Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90-92, 113-128, Amihai Mazar, "Iron Age I," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor, trans. R. Greenberg (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; The Open University of Israel, 1992), 262-281.

⁷ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 85-86, Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 90-92, 113-122.

⁸ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 85-86, Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 92, 113-122.

⁹ Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126, Larry G. Herr, "Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Sept., 1997): 131, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 275.

Another instance of this phenomenon is that when empires such as Assyria and Egypt began to conquer parts of the Ancient Near East outside their 'borders' they established shrines and temples for religious worship and veneration even though the statue, and therefore the presence of the deity, were not there. This was for the benefit of those of their own population groups that had settled in these new non-Assyrian or non-Egyptian areas, such as governors or military garrisons, so that they could continue to be connected to their own religious tradition. These shrines and temples were not established in an attempt to convert the non-Assyrian or non-Egyptian populations to their form of worship because these people already had their own gods connected to them as distinct population groups. Although these people may have had to pay tribute, monetary or otherwise, to such foreign deities, they were not expected to become their adherents.

It appears that in the Ancient Near East there was an understanding among all Ancient Near Eastern groups such as the Assyrians, Egyptians, Philistines and Israelites that each people had their own distinct god or gods and goddesses that they worshipped and that each land (normally associated as well with a specific group of people) had its own distinct local god or gods. These groups did not force it upon others to worship their own deities; they left them to themselves to either worship the gods of the land where they had settled or been deported to, or to worship the gods of their own cultural background. Yet the fact remains that each Ancient Near Eastern geographical region had a distinct 'god of the land' and that each different population group had a distinct god or pantheon of gods that they uniquely venerated.

When population groups did move to or settle in a new land there is evidence that they would also begin to worship the gods and goddesses of that land, incorporating the god of the land into their religion that they had already brought with them or assimilating completely both culturally and religiously to the new land they were in and discarding their previous religious beliefs in order to assimilate. In each region of the Ancient Near East there was a god (or goddess) that watched over that land and there was an expectation that the people of that land were to pay devotion to him (or her) in order for the people to receive blessings or avoid curses from the god. The Bible provides us with several examples of this phenomenon and demonstrates the importance of the ‘god of the land.’

Examples of such include Exodus 5:1 which maintains that Moses and Aaron wanted to take Israel out into ‘the wilderness’ to worship their god, Yahweh, presumably because that was where he was to be worshipped, in his land that was referred to as ‘the wilderness,’ and not in Egypt. Moreover, when the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Sargon II of Assyria in the late eighth century BCE, the local population was deported to other portions of the Assyrian Empire.¹⁰ The Assyrians deported other groups from their empire to resettle Samaria, the northern kingdom’s former capital.¹¹

¹⁰ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 338, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 221.

¹¹ Mordechai Cogan, “Into Exile: From the Assyrian Conquest of Israel to the Fall of Babylon,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 256, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 338, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 220, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 155, Gabriel Barkay, “Iron Age II-III,” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor, trans. R. Greenberg (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; The Open University of Israel, 1992), 328.

These groups brought their former religious systems and deities with them,¹² but the Bible states in 2 Kings 17: 24-41 that these new population groups wanted to learn how to worship Yahweh. It specifically states that these new population groups ‘know not the manner of the God of the land’ (v. 26), who is understood to be Yahweh, and according to the Bible a priest of Yahweh was brought to the land to teach these foreigners proper Yahwism. Psalm 137, believed to be written during the Babylonian Exile (sixth century BCE), asks in verse four how the Israelites, Yahweh worshippers, were supposed to “sing the song of Yahweh in a foreign land,” for apparently it was not possible to sing the song of Yahweh in a land other than his own, Canaan or Israel. While these last two examples occur historically much later in the Bible than the time period to be examined for the origins of Ancient Israel, they do show evidence that this phenomenon was a major facet of Ancient Near Eastern religious culture. From the examples given above we can say that throughout the Ancient Near East there was an understanding that specific deities were connected with certain geographical locations and/or distinct population groups and if one wanted to prosper in that land one best appeal to the god or gods of that land to seek his or her blessing.

The earlier case of the Philistines proves to be a good example here as well. Not only did the Philistines continue their veneration of their own gods they brought with them from the Aegean when they settled in the southern coastal plains of Canaan, they began to pay devotion to Dagan or Dagon, a Canaanite god of grain and grain

¹² Barkay, “Iron Age II-III,” 328, Cogan, “Into Exile: From the Assyrian Conquest of Israel to the Fall of Babylon,” 257, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 339, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 155.

production.¹³ Thus the Philistines recognized that in order to protect their harvests and ensure the fertility of the land they needed to appease the god of the land or the god that would watch over their grain and this was not a god from the Aegean area, he was a god known in the Ancient Canaanite world. It was to Dagan that they turned in order to make certain such benefits. There was an overlap of veneration of the gods from their original heritage and the worship of the deities of the new land in which they had settled, demonstrating a form of acculturation or assimilation.¹⁴ Thus, the Philistines proved both cases to be correct: specific gods are connected with particular groups of people and with a distinct geographical region. If this was the case in the Ancient Near East, then an attempt to discover where the origins of the gods and goddess worshipped by the early Israelites came from should demonstrate the religious origins of Ancient Israel. With all this in mind, I believe there is evidence to suggest that Ancient Israel's religious practices descended from both Canaanites and non-Canaanite origins and this can be seen in the nature of their veneration of their gods, more specifically the gods Yahweh and El and therefore, Ancient Israel as a whole descended from both Canaanite and non-Canaanite sources.

In order to demonstrate this, I will look specifically at three Israelite deities in the archaeological record and the ancient texts throughout this thesis: Yahweh or Jehovah, El/Elohim and to a lesser degree the goddess Asherah. Yahweh is considered by most

¹³ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic; Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2007), 102, Herr, "Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations," 131.

¹⁴ For an overview of Philistine archaeology and their settlement of the southwestern Levantine coast see Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 113-116.

scholars to be the chief god of Israel in the Biblical text and therefore it is important to determine when and where the Ancient Israelites began to worship this deity alone. In Canaanite religion El is the head god, but his name, or at least some form of his name,¹⁵ appears in the Bible and he eventually becomes synonymous with Yahweh to the Israelites, thus showing Israel's ties to Canaan and Canaanite religion. Asherah is an interesting case, for this female deity and wife of El in the Canaanite pantheon could tie the two gods Yahweh and El together, for she is also possibly the wife and consort of the deity Yahweh.

This thesis will discuss the origins of the deities themselves, where they were initially worshipped and by what groups, if they were indeed worshipped or venerated by the Ancient Israelites, why they appear in the Bible together and how that tells us anything about the beginning of Israel in general. It is my contention that the discovery of the origins of these gods through archaeology and ancient texts will give us a new perspective on Ancient Israel, one that shows that Israel came from at least two separate population groups, one from Canaan and one from outside of Canaan, which must have then formed some type of tribal alliance.¹⁶ These two different groups that came together

¹⁵ El, Elohim, El Elyon, El Shaddai, El Berit, and many other 'El epithets' occur in the biblical text. To see more examples and read arguments for and against the idea that all these names represent differing gods not one similar god see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 5, 42-43, 49, Wayne T. Pitard, "Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 148-149, 174, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 140-142.

¹⁶ It must be clearly noted at this juncture that I am arguing that in the early stages of the development of early Israel that this consisted of at least two different and distinct population groups, one from Canaan and the other non-Canaanite, which joined together and would eventually become 'Israel.' As will be shown, much of the archaeological evidence suggests that Ancient Israel descended from or were in fact Canaanites. This leaves the possibility that a group or groups of Canaanites separated themselves from the

to form 'Israel' can be identified as such based on the gods they worshipped, the El/Elohim group from Canaan and the Yahweh group from outside of Canaan, most likely from the land of Midian (where the Sinai and Arabian peninsulas meet).

Methodology

As noted earlier in this thesis, there are two ways to examine ancient history, through ancient texts and archaeology. Chapter II of this thesis will focus on the ancient texts available to us in an attempt to make clear the textual examples of Yahweh, El and Asherah worship in Ancient Israel and what other clues to the origins of Ancient Israel these texts reveal. The Bible is the most significant source discussed in this chapter, despite the problems associated with using the biblical record as a historical source, which will be discussed. By analyzing the text and stripping away information that has been misrepresented or written later than the events described we can then use the Bible as a source for historical research. Another ancient text that will be discussed is the collection of religious texts from the thirteenth century BCE found at Ugarit, modern Ras Shamra, in northern Syria.¹⁷ These texts describe the escapades of the Canaanite gods and goddesses including El, Asherah, Baal, Anat and others. They are of major

other Canaanites and began to call themselves 'Israel' and began to worship/venerate a non-Canaanite deity. They would have had to learn about this deity from somewhere outside of Ancient Canaan and the possibility remains that they could have learned it through cultural influence and/or connections with non-Canaanite Yahweh followers. While this does remain a possibility, in my opinion, it is less likely to have occurred in the Ancient Near East than what I argue here in this paper. I argue it is the uniting of at least two different population groups that forms Ancient Israel and not a formation based on influence, i.e., Canaanites latching on to a religious idea such as Yahwism and Yahweh worship and making it their own. I believe throughout the course of this thesis I will show why I make the argument in this manner.

¹⁷ J. Andrew Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 41.

importance because they help us understand Canaanite religion just before Ancient Israel's emergence in the land of Canaan. There are several other texts from Egypt, Assyria and other Ancient Near Eastern lands that will be briefly discussed in this chapter as well.

The third chapter will focus on archaeology and what material remains tell us about early Israel. The focal point of this chapter will be Ancient Israelite religion and what archaeology illustrates in regard to the gods Yahweh, El and the goddess Asherah and more importantly how the religion of Ancient Israel based on the archaeology tells us about its origins. Additionally, we will look at the archaeology of Ancient Israel that is relevant to Israel's origins in a more general sense so as not to exclude evidence about its origins that is nonreligious in nature. Here we must rely on the archaeologists and their interpretations of the archaeological data. Several different opinions will be discussed, including those of William Dever and Israel Finkelstein, and an attempt will be made to discuss all differing or opposing points of view.

The archaeology and the textual sources, especially the Bible, when examined together present a clearer picture of the history of Ancient Israel. Larry G. Herr claims, "Without the Bible, our understanding of Iron II archaeology would be monochromatic; and without archaeology our understanding of the world of the Bible would be just as lackluster."¹⁸ Thus, it is apparent that both the archaeology and the ancient texts, most importantly the Bible, are necessary for any study of Ancient Israel and its origins. Moreover, while much of the current scholarship lacks an approach that does not

¹⁸ Herr, "Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations," 116.

combine ancient texts and archaeology together, a number of archaeologists and biblical scholars in the last two decades or so have begun to work together and present a more cohesive view of Ancient Israel.

Using these two fields of study, this thesis plans to draw attention to the aspects of the origins of Israel that are more plausible than others and to make clear why they are more plausible. In my opinion, numerous characteristics of the Israelites' origins, such as the god Yahweh's non-Canaanite origin, are not sufficiently emphasized in the current theories on the subject. For this reason, I intend to put forward an alternative theory concerning the Ancient Israelites and their emergence in the ancient Near East around 1200 BCE, the Yahweh/El Theory. This theory is based on evidence from ancient texts and archaeology that will be discussed in this thesis and that incorporates a number of aspects from the prevailing theories on this subject. This middle ground point of view on the origins of Ancient Israel has not been significantly emphasized in modern scholarship.

In my opinion, it appears that scholars are reluctant to take a middle of the road type of approach, that is Ancient Israel came from both Canaanite and non-Canaanite sources and not one or the other, and I may be criticized for taking such a path, because it may be seen as opting out of making a clear stance or as avoiding choosing one or the other side in the debate. The reality is none of the present theories definitively answers the questions about Israel's origins. They all claim that Ancient Israel was made up of either Canaanites only who emerged from within Ancient Canaan or non-Canaanites who immigrated to Canaan, yet none of the present theories argue that Ancient Israel could

have come from both sources which, in my opinion, the textual and archaeological evidence suggests. Therefore, it is imperative to keep studying, reviewing and searching for solutions to the problems surrounding the origins of Ancient Israel and to make use of the evidence from ancient texts and archaeology that reveals its Canaanite and non-Canaanite heritage. For this purpose, I will present evidence that a middle ground between all the theories is the best approach to solve the questions about the origins of Ancient Israel.

Review of the Current Theories on the Origins of Ancient Israel

To begin, one must understand the established theories that exist concerning Ancient Israel's origins in order to perceive that a new approach is needed. According to the Bible, the Ancient Israelites lived as slaves in Egypt for a number of years, escaped or departed under Moses' leadership during what is known as the Exodus and finally arrived in Canaan where they began the conquest and subjection of all the inhabitants of the land under Moses' successor, Joshua. Due to the lack of evidence for both the Exodus and the Conquest many scholars today question the historicity of these biblical events. If the stories of the Exodus and Conquest found in the Bible are not true, then who are the Israelites and where did they come from? This question has led to a number of theories about ancient Israel and its origins at the end of the Late Bronze Age. All of these separate and diverse theories have valid points and can make legitimate arguments for their cause, yet not one of them is believed to be the definitive answer on the origins of Israel.

Around 1200 BCE the political, economic and social systems of the Late Bronze Age in the Ancient Near East and the Ancient Mediterranean collapsed so completely that it caused great commotion and upheaval among all the inhabitants of these lands.¹⁹ This collapse brought about a number of mass population movements throughout the Ancient Near East at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Moreover, the end of the Late Bronze Age also saw the establishment of new political entities. Most scholars agree that around this time (1200 BCE) a distinct material culture group emerged in the central highlands of Canaan and that this group was Ancient Israel or would later become Israel.²⁰ Additionally, there is evidence that in the central highland region of Ancient Canaan there was a population increase²¹ during the period following the Late Bronze Age collapse.²² Thus, each of the following theories argues that these new inhabitants arrived in the land, settled in the central highlands region of ancient Canaan and became Israel.

Pastoral Nomads

One of the first and most common theories states that Israel emerged from a pastoral nomadic background. Within this theory there are two variations: one that states

¹⁹ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 85-87, Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 90-92, 113-115, 117-122.

²⁰ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 212-213.

²¹ This would be a visible population increase, that is people became more sedentary and less mobile and therefore more archaeological visible.

²² Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 28-29, Eveline J. van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 302 (May, 1996): 66.

that Israel came from pastoral nomads living in the desert steppes east of the Jordan River and the other that it came from pastoralists already living within Canaanite society.²³ In either case (whether they were Canaanite or non-Canaanite pastoralists), the theory states that around 1200 BCE these pastoralists became sedentary and began to engage in agriculture in the central highlands of Ancient Canaan. This theory hinges on the fact that there is evidence that during the collapse of the Late Bronze Age system there was an overall ruralization that took place in Ancient Canaan as well as throughout the whole eastern Mediterranean, that is to say a number of Canaanite cities show decline in size between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, while the number of village settlements throughout Ancient Canaan greatly increased.²⁴ Under an economically difficult time such as the collapse of the Late Bronze Age nomadic pastoralists would “have found it advantageous to shift toward different subsistence strategies, such as farming with some stock-raising.”²⁵ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman believe that the oval shape of the villages found in the central highlands associated with early Israel and the locations of such villages prove that the villagers who had lived there were mainly concerned with caring for their flocks and thus a “large proportion of the first Israelites were once

²³ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 211-212, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 102, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 28.

²⁴ Joffe, “The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant,” 431, Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 104, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 213.

²⁵ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 105. See also Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 213.

pastoral nomads.”²⁶ Another reason for the pastoral nomad theory is the number of accounts of pastoralists that are contained in the ancestral stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel. Many argue that the stories about the ancestors, who were mostly pastoralists, preserved not only the roots of Ancient Israel but reflected the truth about who early Israel was when they became Israel, that is, they were pastoralists.²⁷

While it is possible and likely that early Israel contained elements and groups of pastoralists, it is difficult to believe that in the increase of population in the central highlands during Iron Age I was solely caused by pastoral nomads becoming sedentary (see Chapter III). As will be explained later, the population increase in the central highlands from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age could not have only come from pastoral Canaanites and/or non-Canaanites who became sedentary because there were not enough of them in the Late Bronze Age to produce the increase found in the Iron Age. Hence, there must have been incoming settlers from outside Canaan to generate the great increase we find in the archaeological record.²⁸ The variation of the theory which states that Ancient Israel came from Canaanite pastoralists ignores all the “evidence for cultural influence from outside of Canaan.”²⁹ Whether or not these pastoralists were Canaanite or came from elsewhere is also difficult to determine, because nomadic groups are virtually

²⁶ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 111-113. See also van der Steen, “The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages,” 66, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 287-288.

²⁷ van der Steen, “The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages,” 54.

²⁸ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 213, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83.

²⁹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 212.

invisible in the archaeological record and leave little to no material culture for us to examine. Once they become sedentary then their archaeological remains can be evaluated, but to trace the pastoral origins of such groups is very difficult if not impossible through archaeological means. Nonetheless, a part of early Israel was most likely of pastoral origins, but certainly not the majority. The questions of the extent to which Ancient Israel was made up of pastoralists who became farmers and what role these pastoral nomads played in early Israel are debatable.

Peasants' Revolt

There are two forms to the Peasants' Revolt hypothesis, although both versions make the claim that early Israel came from within Ancient Canaan. The basic premise of the Peasants' Revolt theory is that Ancient Israel consisted of oppressed Canaanite peasants who rebelled against their Canaanite masters in the urban lowlands of Canaan and withdrew to the highlands to be beyond their control.³⁰ This of course would explain the increase of settlements in the central highlands in Iron Age I. Some of those who have proposed this theory also see early Israel as similar or equivalent to an Ancient Near Eastern group called the Apiru or Habiru.³¹ These Apiru/Habiru did not own land and were dependent on a lord, but they could band together during difficult economic times (the end of the Late Bronze Age would have been considered a difficult economic time

³⁰ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 104, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 34.

³¹ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 103, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 66, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 102-103.

for most population groups) and they could have joined with Canaanite peasants in attacking the Canaanite urban elite.³²

The first version of this theory views the new faith of Yahwism instituted in Ancient Canaan under early Israel as the cause for the oppressed Canaanite peasants to seek a better life in the highlands away from the urban elite.³³ The second version sees Yahwism as a result of the peasants' revolt, thus, the peasants rebelled first and then in rallying together to start a new existence in the highlands developed a new faith as an outcome of their social movement.³⁴ In either case, the Peasants' Revolt theory claims that Canaanite peasants fled lowland Canaan in search for a new home and they formed communal and egalitarian societies in the central highlands.³⁵ In Norman Gottwald's version of this theory, he believes that an 'Exodus group' from Egypt arrived in the highlands, taught these peasant rebels equal and communal living and most likely brought Yahwism to them.³⁶ Yet, even in Gottwald's version of this theory, Ancient Israel mainly came from the rebellious peasants and only a small group of outsiders played a role in the early formation of Israel.

³² Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 103, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 102-103, Rivka Gonen, "The Late Bronze Age," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor, trans. R. Greenberg (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; The Open University of Israel, 1992), 214.

³³ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 104.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁵ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 70.

³⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 70, 211, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 104.

There are several problems with this theory that cannot be overcome very easily. An initial setback is that equating the early Israelites with the Apiru/Habiru groups mentioned in Ancient Near Eastern texts such as the Amarna Letters is “an oversimplification of the evidence” and has been discarded by most scholars.³⁷ The second problem is that there are examples of “egalitarian” villages, villages that are supposed to represent early Israel, outside the boundaries normally prescribed for Ancient Israel in Iron Age I³⁸ and if early Israel came from rebellious Canaanite peasants then we would expect to see a similar material culture in their remains, which many scholars believe we do not (see Chapter III).³⁹ Moreover, the first version of this theory (Yahwism as the cause for the social movement) does not adequately explain how a non-Canaanite god, Yahweh, was adopted as the god of the new faith of the rebellious peasants and why a Canaanite god, El or Baal, was not chosen instead. Presumably, Yahwism and the Canaanite religions of the time shared common religious elements, but the fact remains that Yahweh was not a Canaanite deity. Thus, these peasants either learned the new religion of Yahwism from some non-Canaanite group, as Gottwald’s version allows, or they created it themselves using their known Canaanite religion as a model. However, one must question if ‘peasants’ of Canaan in Iron Age I would have had enough education and learning to produce a new religious system based on a foreign

³⁷ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 67, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 103.

³⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 104.

³⁹ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 104-105.

deity. Because of these issues, the Peasants' Revolt theory does not answer all the questions relating to early Israel's origins.

Exodus and Conquest

The most familiar theory of the origins of Ancient Israel comes from the biblical account of the Exodus and Conquest. However, there is a major problem of dating the Exodus and Conquest accounts historically. According to 1 Kings 6:1 the Exodus occurred 480 years before Solomon's fourth year. While the exact dates of Solomon's reign are debatable, it can be said that if one follows the biblical chronology, that would place the Exodus somewhere in the mid-fifteenth century BCE. A date this early for the origins of Israel, however, does not correspond well with the archaeology or historical data of the time period.⁴⁰ The Amarna Letters (mid-fourteenth century BCE) demonstrate that in Ancient Canaan in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE there were several city-state kingdoms ruled by vassals of Egypt who competed for Egyptian favor and aid.⁴¹ A situation such as this does not illustrate the kind of world the Bible describes when the Israelites arrived in Canaan.

Furthermore, if Ancient Israel had arrived in Canaan and 'conquered' most of it as the Bible suggests, then we should expect to find the Israelites in the Amarna letters as major participants in the politics of that land, but they are not mentioned at all.

⁴⁰ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 78.

⁴¹ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 77-78, Robert D. Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 92, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 28, Gonen, "The Late Bronze Age," 214-215.

Moreover, there is no archaeological evidence for Israel in Canaan until at least 1200 BCE. Thus, this date for the Exodus must be wrong, for it would make the period of the Judges (the time between Israel's entering Canaan to the establishment of the Monarchy under King Saul and later King David) much too long and there is no archaeological or historical evidence to substantiate these biblical claims.

Therefore, for a number of reasons most scholars argue that if the Exodus and the subsequent conquest of Canaan occurred, they had to have taken place in the mid to late thirteenth century BCE. First, this date fits better with archeological data showing an increase of settlement in what is believed to be Israelite territory in this time period.⁴² Second, this date better reflects the situation of Ancient Canaan "shortly after the Israelite settlement but prior to the development of the Israelite state."⁴³ Lastly, this date better fits the evidence of the Merneptah Stele (which will be discussed fully later, see Chapter III) which places Israel in Ancient Canaan around 1200 BCE.⁴⁴ Carol A. Redmount states, "Archaeologically, socially, politically, economically, and militarily, the twelfth century makes the most sense as the context of the conquest/settlement and of the judges, even if the historical and archaeological records do not match the biblical exactly."⁴⁵ On these grounds, most estimate that the Exodus and Conquest occurred during the mid- to late thirteenth century BCE, if they happened at all.

⁴² Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 79, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 57.

⁴³ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 79.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 87.

The Exodus and Conquest theory is clearly the best known explanation for the emergence of Israel because it is the theory presented by the Bible itself. The account in Exodus can be summarized as such: Israel having been enslaved in Egypt for generations was finally freed through Moses' leadership. They wandered in the desert (Sinai) for forty years and then Yahweh permitted them to enter the Promised Land, Canaan. In order to secure the land Yahweh had given them, they were to conquer and kill all the Canaanites they encountered when they crossed the Jordan River. While certain biblical passages claim they did wipe out all the Canaanites, other passages suggest something less definitive (Compare Joshua 11:15-23 with Joshua 13:1, and the rest of chapter 13, and Judges 1:27-28). Nonetheless, according to the Bible, Ancient Israel entered Canaan, destroyed its cities and killed most of the indigenous inhabitants.

The evidence for the Exodus and Conquest theory as presented by the Bible is not supported by the archaeological data. Most archaeologists have abandoned this theory solely because there are relatively few destruction layers in the Canaanite cities of the period when the Bible claims that Ancient Israel destroyed them.⁴⁶ Only a handful of cities show destruction layers around the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age (Hazor, Lachish, Bethel) suggesting that the 'conquest' of Canaan did not take place.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Lawrence E. Stager proposes that if the mass migration of

⁴⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 210-211, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 107, see also Mazar, "Iron Age I," 281-285.

⁴⁷ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 210-211. However, Hess notes that Joshua 11:13 states that Israel did not burn any of the cities they conquered except for Hazor, which does show destruction layers in this time period. Thus, if archaeologists were looking for layers of burning and destruction that would suggest conquering, they would not find them if the Israelites did not 'conquer' in this manner as it seems to have been preserved by the biblical writers/editors. See also Finkelstein and

Ancient Israel did transpire than it must meet three specific criteria in the archaeology for it to be considered a historical occurrence.⁴⁸ First, the new culture of the immigrating group must be distinguishable from the culture of the indigenous inhabitants and in the case of Israel we should be able to see destruction levels of cities conquered by the immigrating/invading Israelites.⁴⁹ Second, the origins of the migrating group should be identifiable from its cultural remains.⁵⁰ Third, the route of the migration “should be traceable and examined for its archaeological, historical, and geographical plausibility.”⁵¹ Ancient Israel’s Exodus and Conquest fails to meet the last criteria and it is debatable whether or not it meets the first two. Evidence for the Exodus and Conquest will be more fully examined in Chapter III. Because the Exodus and Conquest theory does not hold up well against the archaeological record, many scholars began to form a peaceful form of migration/immigration hypothesis of Israel’s emergence in Canaan around 1200 BCE.

Peaceful Settlement

Because of the lack of destruction levels in the archaeology of Ancient Canaanite cities at the beginning of the Iron Age it has been proposed that the Exodus and Conquest should be viewed more like an Exodus and Peaceful Settlement. This theory proposes that either pastoral nomadic clans east of Ancient Canaan entered the land peacefully or

Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 81-83, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 283-284.

⁴⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 94.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

that the biblical account of the Exodus is more or less correct and that the authors/editors of the Bible at a later date, once Israel was firmly entrenched in Canaan, chose to exaggerate the circumstances of its arrival.⁵² The Peaceful Settlement theory suggests that the wandering Israelites, wherever they came from, entered Canaan and were ‘allowed’ to live among the Canaanites and settled in the more inhospitable environments that were mostly uninhabited, namely in the central highlands.⁵³ Eventually the Israelites would ‘infiltrate’ into Canaanite society, while remaining a distinct population group, and gradually gained more control over the area as their numbers increased. This would explain why there is very few destruction levels found in Iron Age I Canaanite cities, for according to this theory the Ancient Israelites peacefully entered into the land and did not conquer it in the way the biblical account suggests.

The Peaceful Settlement theory has many of the same flaws as the Exodus and Conquest theory, the only difference being that this theory explains away the Conquest by saying it was fabricated and thus not a true historical event. Moreover, this theory does not account for the destruction layers at Hazor, Lachish and Bethel or the warfare attested to by these destruction layers and noted in the Bible and in the Merneptah Stele (see Chapter III) as well.⁵⁴ Additionally, the Peaceful Settlement theory still does not overcome the challenges of proving the Exodus to be a real event and still does not trace

⁵² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 211.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the origins of the Ancient Israelites through archaeological means or provide evidence of where the pastoral nomads or the Exodus group came from.

Midianite/Kenite

A further intriguing hypothesis is the theory that the Israelites came from the land of Midian. Midian consists of the desert mountains and plateaus just east of the Gulf of Aqaba in the northwestern tip of the Arabia Peninsula. The Bible states that when Moses first fled Egypt he went to the land of Midian. During his time there he learned about the god Yahweh through personal experience (the burning bush) and from the Midianites, including his father-in-law Jethro (called Reuel and Hobab in other passages). There is reason to believe that early Israel adopted some form of Yahwism either learned or borrowed from the Midianites, and that the details surrounding Moses' time spent among the Midianites are authentic and early.⁵⁵ If the biblical account is correct then it is very plausible that on their way to Canaan, early Israel, or at least the group taking part in the Exodus journey that would later be part of Ancient Israel, interacted with Midianites who were Yahweh worshippers.

The reason why this theory is plausible is the fact there is no “evidence of Yahweh as a member of a pantheon elsewhere in the Ancient Near East”⁵⁶ and that the

⁵⁵ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 105. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 22, Karel van der Toorn, “Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion,” *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 43, Fasc. 4 (Oct., 1993): 539.

⁵⁶ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 38. See also van der Toorn, “Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion,” 537.

origin of Yahwism has been traced to a subgroup of the Midianites called Kenites.⁵⁷ If the origins of Yahwism truly come from the Kenites then it is reasonable to suggest that Ancient Israel comes from Midian, has ties with the Midianites, is influenced by them or that it learned this religion from them. Moreover, Judges 5:24 suggests that while the Kenites were from an area south of Canaan they may have had a presence and influence in the central highlands.⁵⁸ If the biblical accounts are correct then several elements combine here to form enough circumstantial evidence to propose that the Midianite and/or Kenites had a role in the early formation of 'Israelite Yahwism' and perhaps in the formation and development of Israel as a distinct population group. Thus, within the Midianite/Kenite theory there are two possibilities: that the god Yahweh originated in Midian and either through direct contact with an Exodus group or through Midianite immigrants settling in Canaan this deity ended up in the land of Canaan as the god of a new tribe called Israel.

This theory certainly clarifies how the god Yahweh became the god of Ancient Israel and advocates early Israel's origins outside Canaan, but it does not explain how Canaanite religious features and practices appear in the biblical text as part of 'Israelite Yahwism.' For if Ancient Israel consisted exclusively of a group of Midianites who immigrated to Canaan or an Exodus group who learned Yahwism from the Midianites, then we would expect little or no Canaanite traces in the Israelite form of Yahwism

⁵⁷ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 105. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 22, van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 55.

⁵⁸ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 145.

preserved in the biblical text. Because very little is known about Midianite religion it difficult to prove that 'Israelite Yahwism' draws anything from the original source of Yahwism in Midian. At the same time, however, that Yahweh apparently comes from somewhere south of Canaan (see Chapter II), that the Bible claims Moses learned about Yahweh from his time in Midian and Yahwism's origins has been traced to the same land all make this theory very intriguing. Nevertheless, this theory does not account for the Canaanite elements found in Ancient Israelite religion and it thus becomes obvious that in order to be more convincing the facts and the evidence presented in this theory must be used in connection with a theory about Ancient Israel's Canaanite origins.

Middle Ground

One major challenge with the main theories presented above is that they only focus on one facet of population movement rather than the whole range of possibilities. The scholars present their hypothesis as if there was only one possible way Ancient Israel could have made it to the central highlands region of Canaan leaving little room for other possible answers that are surely a part of ancient population movements. This approach does not give sufficient answers to the questions surrounding the origins of Ancient Israel and more attention needs to be paid to the entire spectrum of possibilities. Richard S. Hess states:

Thus to accept all the models to at least some degree is not simply to opt for a middle-of-the-road position but to affirm the diversity of human motivations and social actions involved in the process of becoming a people. For example, Zevit suggests a combination of settlement by

infiltration and settlement by conquest. This probably explains the majority of settlements in Iron Age I.⁵⁹

J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes conclude:

It is our impression...that the early clans and tribes that formed the basis of the later kingdoms of Israel and Judah derived from diverse backgrounds and origins. Again, there probably is no single explanation to be given for the origins of Israel and Judah; there are many explanations.⁶⁰

It is apparent that there is more to ancient population movements and the emergence of early Israel than the aspects highlighted by the major theories above and thus a middle ground approach is the most effective method to answer the questions surrounding the origins of Ancient Israel.

Therefore, in my opinion, the major theories that attempt to explain the origins of Ancient Israel lack a diversified approach and we must look beyond them and form new hypotheses on the subject. They concentrate too heavily on explanations that focus on a single source for early Israel when in reality Ancient Israel was most likely derived from several different and diverse sources and thus the evidence from each theory is part of the story of its origins. Hess states, “Despite various strengths and weaknesses, there is no reason at present to reject outright any of these models. Aspects of each of them may well have been true.”⁶¹ Stager adds:

It is unlikely that all these newly founded early Iron I settlements (which are believed to be Ancient Israel) derived from a single source – whether of Late Bronze Age sheep-goat pastoralists settling down, or from

⁵⁹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 215.

⁶⁰ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 78-79. See also Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 295.

⁶¹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 214.

disintegrating city-state systems no longer able to control peasants bent on taking over lowland agricultural regimes for themselves or pioneering new, 'free' lands in the highlands. When one considers the widespread phenomenon of small agricultural communities in Iron Age I, it becomes more difficult to explain it all by any hypothesis that would limit it to 'Israelites' alone....Now that archaeologists have collected the kinds of settlement data that provide a more comprehensive pattern, the focus must be widened to include a more comprehensive explanation than the regnant hypotheses allow – whether they relate to an Israelite 'conquest,' a 'peasants' revolution,' or 'nomads settling down.'⁶²

J. Andrew Dearman declares "It must be admitted that no single historical model adequately explains the origins of Israel in the land of Canaan...."⁶³ Why has there not been more of an attempt by modern scholars, archaeologists and historians to produce theories that explain the origins of Ancient Israel that take a middle path stating that early Israel came from several different backgrounds?

In my opinion, modern scholarship has avoided a middle ground approach, but I do not understand why. Perhaps taking such an approach is looked down upon as a way of opting out of taking a real stance or offering a definite opinion.⁶⁴ If that is the case then scholars need to break free from adherence to such a system of scholarship in order to see that there are benefits to viewing both sides of an argument and taking all models, theories and evidence into consideration to unlock the questions surrounding history. In the case of the origins of Ancient Israel, there is a need for new theories that integrate the evidence for the Canaanite and non-Canaanite origins of Ancient Israel as found in the archaeology and ancient texts. The reason for this is that previous theories and

⁶² Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 104.

⁶³ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 28.

⁶⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 215.

hypotheses while immensely beneficial to our understanding of Ancient Israel, do not provide definitive answers to the questions surrounding the emergence of early Israel in Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze Age.

CHAPTER II

ANCIENT TEXTS

Yahweh, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchest out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water. The mountains melted from before Yahweh, even that Sinai from before Yahweh God of Israel.

Judges 5:4-5

The Bible

Before any integrated theory can be formulated about the origins of Ancient Israel we must review the evidence offered by ancient textual sources and archaeological findings in order to reveal what proof is available to work with. The search for clues about Ancient Israel's origins begins with the Hebrew Bible. It is here where we will commence to analyze the information that provides evidence for the origins of the gods Yahweh and El and thus the origins of Ancient Israel. The use of the Hebrew Bible in understanding ancient history and people can be very complicated. The Hebrew Bible in its present form has passed through several stages of being written down in pieces, edited, copied, and compiled into one book, among other things. In a way, we have to sift through all these different layers to discover, if possible, if these biblical accounts have any historical truth to them. Herr states, "We must also remember that, like an archaeological site, the Bible has its own stratigraphy of oral traditions, written sources,

editing processes, and scribal transmission which we need to take into consideration when we use it.”⁶⁵

Many scholars and historians believe we can use the Bible as a historical document, as a text that preserved the memory of historical events that occurred years before they were recorded in a written form.⁶⁶ While we do not have actual texts from the period of the United Monarchy under King David (ca. 1050-1000 BCE) or earlier, the Bible preserves the remembrance of these time periods and of the figure of King David and others. Perhaps some of the stories surrounding individuals such as David are untrue, but there is also the possibility that they are myths and legends that have some basis in history. Finkelstein and Silberman state, “The biblical narratives, even if compiled at a relatively late date such as the period of the United Monarchy, preserved at least the main outlines of an authentic, ancient historical reality.”⁶⁷ Thus, one of the main purposes of the field of biblical studies is to separate history from theology as contained in the biblical text. Moreover, without the Hebrew Bible our knowledge of the archaeology of Ancient Israel/Palestine would be greatly diminished. As noted earlier, the two fields work together in order to increase our understanding of ancient history. Therefore, it is

⁶⁵ Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 116.

⁶⁶ Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 14, Jo Ann Hackett, “‘There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 134, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 75 and 91, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 15.

⁶⁷ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 34.

imperative for this study that the Hebrew Bible be used as a source when attempting to discover the origins of the population group it describes, Ancient Israel.

Documentary Hypothesis

One potential stumbling block in employing the Hebrew Bible to study history is the problem of sources, since it was not written as one document with a single storyline. Certain sections of the biblical text are older than others and there is ample evidence to suggest that there are several different authors of the text. Separating these different sources within the text of the Bible is a very difficult process. Redmount summarizes how this was done and what the result of such an analysis was by stating:

Literary or source criticism has pursued underlying sources (of the Bible), arranged these in historical order, and identified points where different sources were redacted, or edited together, to form larger units. This method of analysis produced the 'Documentary Hypothesis'⁶⁸ that, with variations, remains widely followed today. The Documentary Hypothesis posits for the Pentateuch⁶⁹ four primary literary sources (J, E, P, and D), dated to different periods in the first half of the first millennium BCE, which were woven together by a series of mid-first-millennium redactors.⁷⁰

This hypothesis or some variation of this hypothesis states that there are four main sources that were used to compile the Hebrew Bible together similar to the form we have today.

⁶⁸ For a full overview of the Documentary Hypothesis see Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987), or for a more concise summary see Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 46-59.

⁶⁹ The first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

⁷⁰ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 61.

According to the Documentary Hypothesis, these main sources include: J, for Jehovah or Yahweh, supposedly written anywhere between the tenth and the eighth century BCE in the southern kingdom of Judah at the royal court; E, for Elohim, apparently written in the mid-eighth century BCE in the northern kingdom of Israel possibly in response to the J document; P, for Priest, written by a priest of the kingdom of Judah anywhere between 722 and 609 BCE, and D; for Deuteronomist, writer of Deuteronomy and written perhaps by the prophet Jeremiah around 622 BCE or some time after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE.⁷¹ The texts can be identified as such, J uses the name Yahweh (Jehovah in German, hence the J) for the god of Israel; E uses Elohim, P is concerned with priestly rights and ritual, hence the P; and D is concerned with the law (the law as contained in Deuteronomy). Because of this hypothesis a few scholars have come to the conclusion that many of the biblical accounts, including the story of the Exodus, are literary inventions for theological purposes.⁷² These scholars represent a minority view within the field of biblical studies. The Documentary Hypothesis and its variations have come under criticism in recent years,⁷³ “but most scholars still subscribe to some variation of the Documentary Hypothesis, and

⁷¹ There is not a consensus for the dates of when these documents were composed. For the dating of each of the four sources see Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 87, 101, and 210, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 46-48

⁷² Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 61.

⁷³ Richard Hess lists a number of problems with the Documentary Hypothesis and states, “I do not feel that one can with any sort of ‘scientific’ certainty identify the time when the texts that comprise the Pentateuch as we now have them were written.” See Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 49-59, 141. See also Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, xxiii.

support the basic historicity of the biblical narrative.”⁷⁴ While there are issues and problems with the biblical text due to contradictory sources and differing authors/editors, this does not detract from the fact that the biblical text reported on and recorded actual, historical events.

While the biblical authors and compilers attempted to tell the story of Israel from the point of view of each of their respective biases, they also preserved stories and historical events that appear to be true. Thus, when utilizing the Hebrew Bible for the study of history one must be very careful and skeptical of the biblical text. Pitard states:

Accurate historical documentation was thus not a defining element in the development and transmission of these stories. Any attempt to make use of this material in reconstructing the prehistory of Israel requires great caution. There are, however, fascinating hints that suggest that genuine memories from the pre- and proto-Israelite periods survive in these stories.⁷⁵

Pitard continues on giving three examples of these ‘genuine memories’ of the period of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) that the biblical writers preserved in the text. First, the names of the ancestral figures such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appear to be ancient names or reflect a time period earlier than Israel of the twelfth to the sixth centuries BCE. Second, the legal and social traditions of the ancestral time period are not typical of later periods of Israel’s way of life. Third, the religion of the ancestors differs considerably from later Israelite Yahwism even though the biblical writers/editors assumed the ancestors’ religion was the same as the religion they practiced themselves

⁷⁴ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 61. See also Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, xxiii.

⁷⁵ Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” 28.

during later Israel's existence.⁷⁶ Therefore, the Hebrew Bible does provide the historian with some amount of historical data and the text can be used for historical research despite the problems within the text as presented by the Documentary Hypothesis. However, the actual amount of historical data available is not great and one must remain skeptical of the text and intent of the authors of the text. It is under these conditions that we attempt to study what the Hebrew Bible can tell us about the gods Yahweh and El, the goddess Asherah, their origins and how (and when) they were worshipped by the Ancient Israelites.

The Exodus Account

When searching for early Israel and its origins in the Bible it is often most appropriate to start with Israel in Egypt and the Exodus story. Most agree that the Exodus account is a narrative of several literary constructions composed and edited in order to "achieve historical and theological coherence."⁷⁷ Frank Moore Cross states, "In Israel, myth and history always stood in strong tension, myth serving primarily to give a cosmic dimension and transcendent meaning to the historical, rarely functioning to dissolve history."⁷⁸ Thus, the Exodus combines both historical and nonhistorical elements to present a story that is based in history yet also demonstrates the power of the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 28-29.

⁷⁷ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 62, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 1986: 78, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, "'Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?' Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I," 64.

⁷⁸ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 90.

god Yahweh, the god of the Israelites.⁷⁹ The biblical writers were not concerned with compiling ‘real’ history as a modern historian would do today, they were more interested in using historical events, such as the Exodus for example, as grounds for emphasizing the role ‘providence’ played in the history of their people. Nevertheless, most scholars still hold the belief that the Exodus story as contained in the Hebrew Bible was not purely a literary creation.⁸⁰ They believe that a story that was significant and powerful to the Ancient Israelites has some basis in true historical events.⁸¹ In fact, the Exodus account is so unique it “represents a distinctive contribution of Israel’s faith not found elsewhere in Ancient Near Eastern religious traditions.”⁸² The question then becomes whether there is any physical or textual evidence for Israel in Egypt and the Exodus account as a whole and it is to this question that we turn next.

The Hebrew Bible does not contain any historical data from the Exodus that can be confirmed by archaeology or by other ancient documents of the same time period. For example, the Egyptian pharaohs that the Israelites interact with throughout the course of the narrative are never named, so that we cannot match them with pharaohs known from

⁷⁹ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 63, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 78, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, “‘Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?’ Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 64.

⁸⁰ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 154, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 70, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, “‘Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?’ Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 64, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 14.

⁸¹ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 87, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 154, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 68.

⁸² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 155.

the Egyptian texts and archaeology with any certainty.⁸³ Most place names and the geography of Egypt offered in the biblical text have never been identified with any certainty by archaeologists and very few have been identified positively.⁸⁴ There is also no way to verify the route the Israelites took through Egypt and the Sinai nor has the famous Mt. Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments been located with any assurance.⁸⁵ Theories and possibilities abound about the names of the pharaohs, the potential archaeological sites that may be cities mentioned in the Bible and the possible Mt. Sinai, but there are no definitive answers as to whether or not Israel was ever in Egypt because up to the present there is no direct evidence. Moreover, there is nothing in the biblical account of Israel in Egypt and the Exodus story that can positively be verified by Egyptian or any other Ancient Near Eastern source. Redmount states, “The biblical account makes an exceptionally poor primary historical source for the Exodus events.”⁸⁶ Only indirect evidence is available to make the case for early Israel and the time it spent in the land of Egypt.

Recent research on the conquest of Canaan as contained in the book of Joshua may propose that while there is a lack of archaeological evidence for the Conquest there is evidence to suggest the Conquest to be based on true historical fact. Researchers have found that the themes, forms and structures contained in Joshua 9-12 are identical to

⁸³ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 64.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-67, 69.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

Hittite, Assyrian and Egyptian conquest accounts.⁸⁷ Thus, it can be said that there is reason to believe “that these writers/editors utilized a genuine memory of Israel’s past and understood it as the power of the divine in their favor during battles and wars waged with the Ancient Canaanites.”⁸⁸ Such ideology had been applied to a number of other Ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, perhaps illustrating that while the archaeology of the Conquest is still lacking, the historical notion and memory of the conquest at its most basic level may be a true account.

The Song of Deborah

There are a few elements of text within the Hebrew Bible that are considered to be of earlier creation than the rest of the text that was compiled later and by different sources (see section on Documentary Hypothesis). One example of this is the Song of Deborah in Judges Chapter 5. The Song of Deborah is a victory ode describing the events surrounding a military victory of Israel over the Canaanites at Taanach. Most scholars believe this poem was composed in the late twelfth century or early eleventh century BCE, thus making it one of the most ancient Hebrew texts that survived in the Bible.⁸⁹ The main importance of this text is that it is significantly earlier than most of the biblical text, hence giving us a more accurate view of Israel just after its formation.

⁸⁷ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 214.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁸⁹ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 92, Hackett, ““There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” 149, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 100.

The Song of Deborah provides three clues for our understanding of Ancient Israel's origins. First, the poem demonstrates that early Israel may not have been as unified as the biblical text implies and that it may have consisted of several different tribes that do not figure into later biblical stories and traditions. Thus, the evidence from this poem makes the conquest of Canaan by a unified twelve tribes of Israel unlikely or at least difficult to believe. The poem lists the names of the tribes that came to aid in the battle at Taanach (the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir, Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali) and names of those that did not (Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher). That some tribes came to the aid of the other Israelite tribes when called upon while others did not implies that while there was some agreement of mutual defense in early Israel there were apparently times when tribes could choose not to come to the aid of the others. This suggests that early Israel's tribal alliance was perhaps not as unified as we once believed.

Interestingly, in the Song of Deborah only ten tribal names appear and not the commonly mentioned twelve tribes from whom later Israel claims to be descended.⁹⁰ Moreover, of the ten tribes named in the Song of Deborah some tribes are not part of the later, more common twelve tribes of Israel, such as Machir (Judges 5:14) and Gilead (Judges 5:17). Later biblical writers seemed to have written the history of Israel as a tribal alliance among twelve tribes, all twelve of which descended from a common ancestry, the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel line, in a way creating an

⁹⁰ The more common and traditional twelve tribes included the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph (which was often split into two tribes itself, Ephraim and Manasseh), Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. See Genesis 35:22-26, 46:8-26, 49:3-28 and Ezekiel Chapter 48.

oversimplification of early Israel's origins.⁹¹ Early Israel may have been more diverse and divided than the Israel presented in the Bible by later authors/editors. Stager states:

The tribes of premonarchic Israel (1200-1000 BCE) continued to exist in various forms and permutations throughout the monarchy and even thereafter. One reason for this is that by the early Iron Age I (ca. 1000 BCE), they were territorial entities with boundaries and rights established in part by the nature of their tribalism.⁹²

As we might expect, the Bible shows conflict among the early tribes of Israel, such as in Judges 17-21 where the tribe of Dan is at odds with the tribe of Micah (chap. 18), Gibeah with Levi (chap. 19), and all of Israel with the tribe of Benjamin (chap. 20).⁹³ Further, of the four known earliest poems of the Hebrew Bible (The Song of Deborah being one of the four) three list the names of tribes of early Israel and each list is different from the other in the number and names of the different tribes of Israel.⁹⁴ Dearman declares, "Analogies derived from sociology and anthropology suggest a loose type of pan-tribal identity for (Ancient) Israel, with individual clans and tribes moving in and out of active participation in any confederation."⁹⁵ In consequence, there must be more to Ancient Israel's tribal alliance than indicated by the idea of twelve unified tribes that entered and conquered Canaan as the biblical story would have it.

⁹¹ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 90, 92.

⁹² Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 111.

⁹³ Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 136.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁹⁵ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 35. See also 34. See also Joffe, "The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant," 446.

The second feature of the Song of Deborah that aids our examination of the origins of Ancient Israel is that it portrays the Israelite tribes as different groups of people, not just a group of wandering pastoralists that was extremely unified as indicated in the biblical text. The poem suggests that the ten tribes of Israel that participated or did not participate in the battle against the Canaanites were engaged in a wide variety of professions.⁹⁶ Some of these included agriculture in the central highlands (Zebulun and Naphtali), sheep and goat herding (Reuben and Gad) and in some cases seafaring (Dan and Asher). Moreover, the poem acknowledges the fact that these ten tribes dwelled on both sides of the Jordan River (thus some west of the river in Canaan and some east of the river on the Transjordanian plateau) and most likely stretched to the Mediterranean Sea if the tribes of Dan and Asher were seafarers.⁹⁷ Although the biblical allotment of land to each different tribe once the Israelites conquered Canaan matches well with these data, it is apparent that Ancient Israel's origins cannot be explained by a single theory nor can it be seen as the history of only one specific population group or tribe. The evidence here suggests that Israel was made up of a diverse group of tribes that were engaged in several different forms of subsistence, that it was unified at times and not at others, and that it is not especially likely that they were descendants of a common ancestor.

This evidence does not help the case made by later biblical writers/editors who represent Israel as a unified 'super tribe' made up of twelve smaller tribal units. The ancestral stories portray the tribe of Israel as descending from a common ancestor,

⁹⁶ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 92.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Abraham and later the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel, and give emphasis to the unity of this group.⁹⁸ Although this may not be historically true and later writers/editors may have intentionally written such a fact into the Israelite narratives, they also may not have known whether or not that was true. It may have been a story preserved in oral history passed down through the generations of Israelites. Cross states this about how some view Ancient Israel's formation, early cult, and pattern of their origins and traditions as contained in the Bible:

(There were) Exodus traditions stemming from one place, those of the covenant making at Sinai from another, Conquest traditions from a third cult or shrine tribe...It is true that all elements of later twelve-tribe Israel did not engage in these epic events but came to share them as historical memories through the 'actualizing' of them in the covenantal cultus.⁹⁹

Thus, while the basic premise of the ancestral and origin stories in the Bible is true, it is more doubtful that each tribe participated in such events. Moreover, the evidence from the Song of Deborah advocates that early Israel melded itself together through some sort of tribal alliance of different tribes, and decided later to write down its history to be one of a unified Israelite people from Abraham to the time of the United Monarchy. While these first two aspects of the Song of Deborah help greatly in clarifying the origins of Ancient Israel, I believe there is one last vital aspect of the poem that greatly enhances our knowledge and understanding of the subject.

⁹⁸ Pitard, "Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age," 56.

⁹⁹ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 88.

Yahweh of the South

The third, and in my opinion the most important, feature of the Song of Deborah that informs us about Ancient Israel's origins is the idea that Yahweh, the god of Israel, does not come from Canaan or what is later known as Israel, but from a land south of there. Judges 5:4-5 makes reference to the god Yahweh coming forth from three separate places, Seir, Edom and Sinai, to battle in behalf of Israel against the Canaanites at Taanach.¹⁰⁰ In ancient times, Sinai and Edom¹⁰¹ were well-known regions south of Ancient Canaan and while Seir's location is unknown its combination with the other two place names suggests that it too is located somewhere south of Canaan.¹⁰² Thus, one of the earliest known texts in the Hebrew Bible implies that Yahweh is not a god of Canaan and that his origins lie somewhere south of the land that would become Israel.

Additionally, there are a number of other examples in the biblical text that refer to the origins of Yahweh south of Ancient Canaan. The "Blessing of Moses" contained in Deuteronomy Chapter 33 refers to three places where Yahweh came from: Sinai, Seir and Mount Paran.¹⁰³ More southern place names used to show Yahweh's origins in the south

¹⁰⁰ Judges 5:4-5: "Yahweh, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchest out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water. The mountains melted from before Yahweh, even that Sinai from before Yahweh god of Israel."

¹⁰¹ Ancient or biblical maps will locate Edom south of the Dead Sea running south-southeast toward the Arabian Peninsula and the land normally associated with Midian.

¹⁰² Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 100-101, 164, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 140 and 145, van der Toorn, "Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion," 538.

¹⁰³ Deuteronomy 33:2: "And he said, Yahweh came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Mount Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints: from his right hand went a fiery law for them."

include Teman, Mount Paran, Cushan and Midian from Habakkuk Chapter 3.¹⁰⁴ These texts, whether of more ancient origin or of a later date (Habakkuk), all refer to specific places whence Yahweh went forth to do battle and these places are non-Canaanite. In fact, it can be argued that these places, Edom, Seir, Teman, Paran, Midian, Cushan, were located in the northern Arabian Peninsula rather than in the Sinai Peninsula and that in effect Yahweh's origins and Mount Sinai itself lie in Northern Arabia and not the Sinai.¹⁰⁵ Karel van der Toorn states:

The majority of the Israelites were firmly rooted in Palestine; they were not a "foreign" element there. It is more plausible to suppose, therefore, that the Israelites were introduced to the worship of Yahweh within Israel. Among the settlers in the central hill country at the beginning of the Iron Age, there must have been elements from the south. They need not be reduced to just one group. Perhaps we should reckon with the presences of small groups of Edomites, Midianites and Kenites simultaneously finding their way into Palestine. They may well have formed the enclaves from which the cult of Yahweh spread over the land.¹⁰⁶

This would make the idea that early Israel came from a group of Midianite immigrants or an Exodus group that learned Yahwism from the Midianites not only very plausible but more than likely.¹⁰⁷

The fact that Yahweh's origin lies somewhere south of Canaan has major implications for the major theories of Ancient Israel's origins presented earlier. If

¹⁰⁴ Habakkuk 3:3, 7: "God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise...I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction: and the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble."

¹⁰⁵ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 107, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 140 and 145, van der Toorn, "Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion," 538.

¹⁰⁶ van der Toorn, "Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion," 539-540.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 539.

Yahweh was originally a god who was worshipped south of Ancient Canaan, how did he become the god of the land of Canaan once Israel controlled the area more fully around 1000 BCE? The answer to this question seems to be that either the Israelites brought him in when they entered the area themselves, or that his influence spread from the south of Canaan into Canaan through groups of Yahweh worshippers who were either settling there or passing through. Some of these groups perhaps became known as the Israelites. If the Ancient Israelites were originally Canaanites, as many of the theories argue, then how did they learn about Yahweh? Certainly some non-Canaanite influence from the south could have spread Yahwism from the south into Canaan, but in my opinion, it is less likely that indigenous Canaanites would begin to venerate a foreign deity only because they were influenced by and were partial to Yahwistic ideas. Thus, in my opinion, the most likely case is that a group of Shasu (see below) or Midianites or even a group of Canaanites fleeing Egypt who had learned Yahwism in the Sinai or Midian (the Exodus theory) brought their god Yahweh into the land of Canaan, thus having direct contact with the Canaanites, and that this group eventually merged with other Canaanite groups to form Israel.

The fact that the god Yahweh became the dominant god of the land during Israel's settlement of Canaan suggests to me that this group of non-Canaanites that allied themselves with the Canaanites of the central highlands were very influential within the early tribal alliance. For why else would indigenous Canaanites accept a new, foreign

god when there were at least two other Canaanite deities, El and Baal, similar enough to take the place of Yahweh worship?¹⁰⁸ Van der Toorn summarizes this thought by stating:

There is no proof of the ethnic unity of the inhabitants of the hill country in Iron Age I; nor is there evidence of religious unity among them. On the contrary, they were mixed in ethnicity and diverse in religion. The archaeological research of recent years suggests that the greater part of the population had come from a Canaanite background. If so, one would expect them to bring their sacrifices to such gods as Baal, Dagan and El, rather than to an – in terms of Canaanite concepts – obscure deity from the desert.¹⁰⁹

The fact that Yahweh already existed as a deity in Midian/Sinai before early Israel emerged in Canaan around 1200 BCE suggests to me that the indigenous Canaanites who moved to the central highlands (which according to archaeologists made up the majority of Ancient Israel) could not have ‘invented’ or ‘created’ a new god or a new religion because Yahweh and Yahwism already existed. Thus, these Ancient Canaanites were adopting an existing religion and god and then with the help of the immigrating Midianite Yahwists formed a unique blend of Canaanite and Midianite Yahwistic religion into ‘Israelite Yahwism.’ They would have had to have learned about the non-Canaanite deity Yahweh from somewhere and the best case scenario is from outside of Canaan. In my opinion, there is little evidence that the Canaanites that moved to the central highlands of Ancient Canaan could have learned about the god Yahweh except from an outside, non-Canaanite source.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 536.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 536-537.

Israel as Outsiders

When studying the Bible and the storyline of the Ancient Israelites it becomes apparent that the Ancient Israelites believed that their origins came from somewhere outside of Canaan. After discussing the apparent Canaanite religious and cultic rituals performed by some of the ancestors (see below) recorded in the Bible, Dearman notes that:

Surprisingly, the ancestral accounts are strongly colored by the theme that Israel's origins are outside the land of Canaan. This identity has quite significant implications for the shape of Israel's religion, regardless of the historical truth or falsity of the theme; that Israel originated outside Canaan is a primary symbol of the Old Testament... This 'outsider' status of the ancestors remained a key symbol of later Israel's sense of identity.¹¹⁰

That this theme was included in the biblical text is surprising only because of the vast amount of evidence to suggest that Ancient Israel was of Canaanite origin. While this theme of being an 'outsider' may have been added later by the biblical authors/editors, the fact that the Bible records this at all suggests that later Israel may have known that at least part of its origins were somewhere outside the land of Canaan. If this were true then the Bible has recorded the evidence that part of Israel was a non-Canaanite people and not Canaanite in origin. Here again we may be dealing with the idea that while the details of the stories of the Bible may be exaggerated or embellished the basic premise of the traditions, in this case Israel being partly non-Canaanite, may be trustworthy.

¹¹⁰ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 18-19.

Yahweh of the Bible

The god Yahweh as portrayed by the Hebrew Bible shared a number of common characteristics with deities of the Ancient Near East and of Ancient Canaan. Yahweh is described as a “storm-god” who provided the fertility of the land and as a “divine warrior,” both being typical of deities found in other Ancient Near Eastern myths, religions and cults.¹¹¹ Both these images are applied to the Canaanite god Baal¹¹² whom the Israelites worshipped off and on throughout their existence in the Iron Age (1200-586 BCE) and who was Yahweh’s chief rival according to the Bible and other Ancient Near Eastern texts.¹¹³ The Bible also depicts Yahweh as a father figure much like the god El, the head god of the Canaanite pantheon.¹¹⁴

Two things that did separate Yahweh from other Ancient Near Eastern gods were the covenant he had with the people of Israel and the prohibition against making any form or image to represent him. The covenant states that while other nations have their gods, Yahweh is the god of the people of Israel and in turn, they are his people (see Deuteronomy 32:8-9). Thus, Yahweh was not only to be first among deities venerated/acknowledged by the Israelites, he alone was the only god worthy of their devotion.¹¹⁵ Part of this covenantal relationship prohibits Israel from worshipping other

¹¹¹ Hackett, ““There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” 158-159, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 76, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 147, 162-163, 169.

¹¹² Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 147.

¹¹³ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 44.

¹¹⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 97.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

gods and from making images of any god including Yahweh himself (see Exodus 20:3-6; Duet. 5:7-10), a covenantal association of a kind not found in any other Ancient Near Eastern religion¹¹⁶ and the prohibition against making images of the god to be worshipped “is unusual in comparison with other Ancient Near Eastern deities.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, such a distinguishing feature of the god Yahweh separated him from the other Canaanite deities and “has no precedent in Canaanite religion.”¹¹⁸

The fact that Ancient Israel may not have been as unified under the god Yahweh as previously thought gives rise to the notion that the religion of the early Israelites may have been more diverse than we once thought. For the most part, the Bible presents early Israel as monotheists, followers of the single god Yahweh, but a close reading of the text suggests that it is not that simple. Monotheism, in the modern sense, means the belief in one deity and denying the existence of other deities. Most scholars believe the religion of Ancient Israel does not fall under this definition, but the classification of monolatry, the devotion to one deity without denying the existence of other gods and goddesses, appears

¹¹⁶ Hackett, “‘There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” 158.

¹¹⁷ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 160. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 32.

¹¹⁸ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 155. The only comparable antecedent to Ancient Israel’s unique covenant with their god Yahweh and the eventual monotheism that comes forth from Ancient Israelite religion comes from Egypt during the Amarna Period. In the mid-fourteenth century BCE Pharaoh Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten revolutionized Egyptian religion by setting up the Aten as the only god to be worshipped, called Atenism, and for all intents and purposes created the first monotheistic faith. His revolutionary ideas and religion lasted only for a few years and after his death Egypt returned to its previous forms of polytheistic worship. While this is very comparable to Ancient Israel’s form of monotheism, there are no connections or evidence that Ancient Israel learned monotheism from Akhenaten or in Egypt or took from Atenism monotheistic and/or covenantal forms of religion. To learn more about the comparisons see Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 164-165, but in my opinion there is no evidence that Ancient Israelite and Atenism have any connections other than the fact that they are comparable.

a better fit for the religion of early Israel.¹¹⁹ In discussing the early forms of Ancient Israelite religion Miller and Hayes have stated that “there appears to have been nothing like a uniform religious faith which demanded the allegiance of all the tribes to the exclusion of other forms of faith and worship.”¹²⁰

Moreover, several prophets and biblical leaders warn the Israelites of the danger of following and worshipping other gods. If they were supposed to be strictly Yahwists then why would the prophets and others make such warnings unless they were indeed worshipping other gods.¹²¹ The fact that the prophets constantly had to warn the Israelites against following deities other than Yahweh suggests that the Ancient Israelites were clearly struggling to do so. Furthermore, the Bible records several personal and place names from Iron Age I that were known throughout Canaan to refer to a Canaanite deity with their names including Baal, Astarte, Shemesh (a sun god), Yerah (a moon god) and Anat.¹²² This may suggest that Yahweh was not the only deity available for worship in Ancient Canaan and that perhaps some of early Israelites venerated these other deities, especially if some or all of early Israel came from Canaanite stock. If Ancient Israel was

¹¹⁹ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 36. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 153 and 156, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2, 13.

¹²⁰ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 109. See also Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 8-9, 13.

¹²¹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 255, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 47 and 155, Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence,” in *Ancient Israel Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, eds. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., Paul D. Hanson and S. Dean McBride, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 157, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 161, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 8-9.

¹²² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 242-244.

comprised of indigenous Canaanites it would have been more than normal for them to continue worshipping these Canaanite deities alongside Yahweh, especially in the very early stages of Ancient Israel's unification of the tribes. This leaves room for deities such as Baal and Asherah to have a place among early Israel's religious origins.

Asherah in the Bible

The goddess Asherah appears in the Bible less frequently than the Canaanite gods El and Baal, but her importance cannot be understated. If the Ancient Israelites did in fact worship the Canaanite goddess Asherah or if Asherah was the consort of the Israelite deity Yahweh, as many scholars believe,¹²³ then it could be argued that Ancient Israel's origins are from within Canaan. Asherah was the wife of El in Canaanite myth and was the mother of the gods in the Canaanite pantheon.¹²⁴ Smith says, "It has been argued that Asherah became the consort of Yahweh as a result of his identification with El."¹²⁵ However, as can be gathered from the biblical text, her role in Israelite religion is still very difficult to determine.

In some cases, the Bible refers to the goddess Asherah and it is clear the text is referring to the female deity Asherah; in other cases, her name appears not to refer to the goddess, but to a wooden pillar or pole, or simply a tree called an *asherah* that was the

¹²³ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 47, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 103.

¹²⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 98.

¹²⁵ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 142.

cultic symbol of the goddess.¹²⁶ An *asherah* was not a representation of the goddess but rather her symbol,¹²⁷ much like the cross in modern Christianity where the cross is the symbol of Jesus, his life and what he did, but it is not an image or representation of Jesus and is not to be worshipped as such. This tree or wooden pillar was apparently placed next to or at cultic sites and used by the Israelites in their religious ceremonies. Some argue that the Ancient Israelites used the *asherah* as part of their religious veneration of the god Yahweh despite the fact that the *asherah* perhaps represented the goddess Asherah.¹²⁸ Asherah is often mentioned as the consort of Baal in the Bible and not El as is the known case from the Canaanite texts from Ugarit.¹²⁹ The biblical writers either got it wrong by connecting Asherah with Baal rather than El, or they purposefully made the mistake to distance Asherah from El/Elohim of the Bible and Yahweh, who were acceptable deities in Ancient Israelite worship, and made Asherah a goddess not to be worshipped as Baal was not to be worshipped.¹³⁰ Due to the lack of information in the Bible, it is difficult to establish with any certainty what Asherah and her symbol, the *asherah*, represented to early Israel.

An analysis of the biblical text suggests that there are two reasons to believe the goddess Asherah was part of early Israelite religious practice and veneration and that

¹²⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 76, 287, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 47 and 74.

¹²⁹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 98.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 76, 98.

perhaps she was an original part of Yahwism. The first reason, and the strongest case for her as an Israelite deity, is that there are no direct polemic writings in the Bible against her.¹³¹ Polemics were negative writings meant to demean and slander other deities, such as Baal and the gods of other nations (Chemosh, Milcom, etc.), and polemics against other deities, especially Baal, exist in the Bible.¹³² The fact that the Bible is not critical of Asherah may imply that later editors/writers of the Bible did not know what to do with Asherah, perhaps because it was well known to them that she was the consort of Yahweh.

The second reason to believe that Asherah was a deity of the Ancient Israelites comes from 2 Kings Chapters 9-10. In these chapters, King Jehu (ca. 841-813 BCE) attempted to eradicate the cult of Baal that had been established by the previous king, Ahab; however, Jehu left the *asherah* that Ahab had set up.¹³³ This suggests that not only was Asherah not to be associated with Baal and/or Baalism, but also that Asherah or at least her symbol, the *asherah*, were acceptable in Yahwism.¹³⁴ Moreover, there are a number of scholars who believe “that the cult of ‘Baal, Asherah and the host of heaven’ was supported within the Jerusalem temple in the late seventh century (see 2 Kings 23:4

¹³¹ There are general polemics against all gods and goddesses other than Yahweh, thus no specific deity is named, but there are none that directly name Asherah as a deity that is not to be worshipped.

¹³² Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 36. See also Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 8-9.

¹³³ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 250, 287. The biblical text actually does not specify whether the *asherah* was destroyed or not during Jehu’s reforms. Either way, it is not mentioned in the list of things that were destroyed and many use the absence of such information to suggest Jehu left the *asherah* while he destroyed all images and things associated with Baal.

¹³⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 250. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 47.

and 21:3).”¹³⁵ While the Bible does not provide a clear description of Asherah worship in Ancient Israel, these two clues help us understand what her role might have been in early Israel. Nevertheless, in the case of the example of King Jehu leaving an *asherah* this occurred almost four hundred years after Yahwism began in Israel and while we can say that early Israel around 850-800 BCE may have believed Asherah to be the consort of Yahweh, the Bible does not give us any evidence to suggest Yahweh’s and Asherah’s connection as any earlier than that.

Ugarit

Archaeologists uncovered a collection of texts at the site of Ugarit in the mid-twentieth century CE that contained epic poems and mythical stories about El, Baal and other Canaanite deities. The site of Ugarit contained two main temples, one dedicated to Baal and the other probably to Dagan, although many debate that hypothesis and Dagan plays no significant role in the texts.¹³⁶ The texts focus on the storm and fertility god Baal, the patron deity of Ugarit. However, they also describe El, the chief god or ‘father of the gods’ in the Ugaritic pantheon, Asherah, the mother of the gods and the wife of El, and Anat, the war goddess and sister of Baal.¹³⁷ The texts from the ancient city of Ugarit opened up a wealth of knowledge to the modern historian concerning Ancient Canaanite

¹³⁵ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 73.

¹³⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 96.

¹³⁷ Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” 50-51, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 98, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 109-110, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 13, 15, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 41, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 54-58.

religion, its pantheon of gods and goddesses, and the mythology surrounding these deities that was then used to analyze the biblical text with regard to Ancient Canaan's religion. Moreover, these texts are helpful in exploring Ancient Israel's background and origins from within Canaanite society through the study of their religion and their devotion to the Canaanite god El. For it is out of this Canaanite background that the religion of Ancient Israel developed.

Nevertheless, one must be cautious not to draw too many links between Ancient Israel and Ugarit. We cannot assume that the Ugaritic culture and pantheon described in these texts to be identical to the Canaanite versions found among the groups of people in the lowland plains and central highlands of whose stock Ancient Israel may have come from.¹³⁸ Pitard states, "Although a cultural connection existed between Ugarit, Palestinian Canaan, and Israel, each was in many ways distinctive."¹³⁹ Thus, while the mythical stories and roles of each of the deities of the Canaanite pantheon at Ugarit may have been similar to the Canaanite versions found in Palestinian Canaan, one must be careful not to fully equate the two with each other.

That being said, the Ugaritic texts are the only Ancient Canaanite texts about the Canaanite pantheon that we have to use to make such comparisons with early Israel. According to Cross, an analysis of the Bible and Canaanite myth suggests that "Israel's religion in its beginning stood in a clear line of continuity with the mythopoeic patterns

¹³⁸ Pitard, "Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age," 53, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 42.

¹³⁹ Pitard, "Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age," 53.

of West Semitic, especially Canaanite, myth.”¹⁴⁰ Moreover, “there remains a common West Semitic heritage to Ugarit and the Bible”¹⁴¹ and thus while one cannot equate Ugarit with Canaanite culture and religion they are similar enough that we can use Ugarit as an example when attempting to understand Ancient Israelite and Ancient Canaanite religion. While the distances between the two areas were vast, in the context of the ancient world, the Ugarit texts provide us with the best example of what the Canaanite culture and religious beliefs would have been just before early Israel emerged in the twelfth century BCE.

El in the Ugarit texts, the God of the Ancestors and Yahweh

One connection with Ancient Israel’s deity Yahweh that is evident from the Ugarit texts is the descriptions of the king of the Canaanite gods, El. According to the E and P documents of the Bible, the god worshipped by the ancestors or Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) was the same god whom later Israel venerated, but to the ancestors he was known by a different name, not by the name Yahweh.¹⁴² In the ‘burning bush’ experience of Moses, in Exodus 6:3, God states: “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai,¹⁴³ but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.” This verse provides evidence that the god whom the ancestors worshipped was El

¹⁴⁰ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 143. See also 169.

¹⁴¹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 96.

¹⁴² Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 16, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 141.

¹⁴³ For a treatment on the name El Shaddai, its possible origins, meanings and implications for the biblical text see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 52-60.

and furthermore, other forms of the name El appear within the biblical text (such as El Elyon, El Olam, El Bethel, and El Berit) and in connection with the ancestral god.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, some scholars believe that the biblical text makes it clear that the Israelites viewed El as the god of the Exodus and not Yahweh.¹⁴⁵ While the ancestral religion as contained in Genesis 12-50 is different from the later Yahwism of Iron Age Israel,¹⁴⁶ this god venerated by the ancestors, as well as the god Yahweh in the Bible (who may or may not be the same as the god of the ancestors), shared common characteristics and imagery with the god El in the Ugaritic texts.

For example, both texts describe Yahweh/El as the ‘king’ and the ‘bull’, having wisdom and compassion, being old and having a beard, living in a tent rather than in a temple, living on a mountain, dwelling at a river source, being the judge in the divine council and the lawgiver, providing children for those who are childless, appearing to humans in dreams and visions and being the creator of the world or having creative powers.¹⁴⁷ Cross states:

It comes as no surprise that the functions of Canaanite El and his modes of manifestation are virtually the same as those of the god of the Israelite Patriarchs. It is perhaps more surprising that Yahweh in Israelite Epic

¹⁴⁴ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 5, 42-43, 49, Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” 54, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 148-149, 174, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 140.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 146-148.

¹⁴⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 149-150.

¹⁴⁷ Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” 54, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 97, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 72, 185-186, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 55, 135-137, 141-142.

tradition of the tenth and ninth centuries appears chiefly in the same roles, except in the Sinai periscope and in the archaic hymns cited in the Epic sources.¹⁴⁸

Thus, the evidence from Ugarit suggests that the god worshipped by the ancestors of Ancient Israel was either El or something relatively close to the god El well known throughout Canaan as the father of the gods and the head god in the Canaanite pantheon that the Ancient Israelites later equated with Yahweh. Smith believes that early poems in the biblical text (Psalm 82, Deut. 32, Judges 5, and Numbers 23 and 24) indicate that early Israel had a tiered system of deities where El was the chief god and that other gods were secondary but that eventually the tiered system collapsed and all other deities were demoted and Yahweh then became associated with El.¹⁴⁹ No matter what the connection is between the Canaanite deity El and the Israelite deity Yahweh among the early Israelites and their forefathers, it is apparent that these two deities shared common characteristics and such commonalities as can be seen with the help of the Ugarit texts and the Bible.

Analysis of the use of the names of god in the Hebrew Bible illustrates that by the time the biblical writers/editors began to piece the Bible together, the name El was another name for the god Yahweh and did not represent an entirely different deity to the Israelites. Cross notes that “El is rarely used in the Bible as the proper name of a non-Israelite, Canaanite deity in the full consciousness of a distinction between El and

¹⁴⁸ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 183. See also p. 177.

¹⁴⁹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 103. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 36, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 48-49, 143-144.

Yahweh, god of Israel.”¹⁵⁰ He goes on to say that “how early these types of deity could merge in the cult of one god we do not know. At all events, these two had coalesced in the figure of Yahweh in the earliest stratum of Israelite tradition.”¹⁵¹ With regard to the formation of Ancient Israel, Albrecht Alt (1883-1956) concluded “that a number of tribes, each with its own deity named after an ancestor, and a number of geographical centers in Canaan, each with its own distinct El-god, were merged into the worship of the single deity Yahweh.”¹⁵²

Thus, Yahweh began to supplant El as the history of Israel progressed throughout the Iron Age and he began to take upon himself the characteristics of other deities (El, Baal and others) that surrounded early Israel. Smith calls this process ‘convergence.’¹⁵³ Throughout Iron Age I (1200-1000 BCE) the characteristics of other Canaanite gods began to be associated with the Israelites’ main god, Yahweh, such as the storm god imagery from Baal, the compassionate and merciful fatherly imagery from El and even

¹⁵⁰ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 44. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 48.

¹⁵¹ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 89. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 48, 141, and 143.

¹⁵² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 60. See also Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 49, 71-72, and 75. Cross believes Yahweh to have been one of the many El figures found throughout Ancient Canaan that Israel then chose to make their own national deity. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 16-17, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 144.

¹⁵³ Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 7-8, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 75-76. See also Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 49, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 36, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 141.

some of the female imagery associated with Asherah and Anat.¹⁵⁴ Such convergence occurred throughout Ancient Israel's history, so that by the ninth or eighth century BCE El and Yahweh were the same god to an Ancient Israelite of that time period.

While the association of El with Yahweh (and vice versa) became commonplace in Iron Age Israel, John Day and Karel van der Toorn have demonstrated convincingly that Yahweh's origins are different from the origins of the Ugaritic god El, who is similar to if not the same as the Canaanite El.¹⁵⁵ Dearman notes the possibility that "Yahweh is the name of a deity brought into Canaan from the outside who quickly absorbed not only the characteristics of the high god El but even his name."¹⁵⁶ Therefore, there must have been a number of tribes in early Israel that venerated El and some that venerated Yahweh who then formed a tribal alliance that incorporated religion as well as military defense. During the development of the relations among the various tribes and the development of their 'shared' religion the deities El and Yahweh must have merged into one deity. In a sense, the gods were so alike in the way the two separate groups described them, as a father of the gods, as living in a tent and/or on a mountain, as the lawgiver and as providing children for the childless, that they naturally came to view them as the same deity. The association of Yahweh with El "helped Israel account for the fact that they

¹⁵⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 151, 230. See also Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 49, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 36, 44, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 8-9.

¹⁵⁵ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 75, 159 n51.

¹⁵⁶ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 20.

were outsiders, yet that they were culturally Canaanite.”¹⁵⁷ As a result, both El and Yahweh make their way into the biblical text as a representation of one deity, although the name Yahweh clearly represented the more popular name choice among later biblical writers/editors.

Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts

The Bible reports that the land of Midian is where Moses first fled to when he left Egypt after having killed an Egyptian taskmaster (Exodus 2:11-15). It is here among the Midianites that Moses learned about the god Yahweh. From his experiences and time in Midian, Moses brought the religion of Yahwism with him to the Ancient Israelites in bondage in Egypt. Later, when the Israelites arrived in the land of Canaan they brought their new god and new religion with them. Although the Bible implies that the Israelites under Moses worshipped the same god as the ancestors, and that it would not be a new religion, in historical terms, Yahwism is something new for the land of Canaan and may have been a new religion for the early Israel we find in the archaeological record in the central highlands around 1200 BCE. Yahweh is not a Canaanite god; he is not mentioned in the texts from Ugarit, which are a representation of the Canaanite pantheon, and there is no evidence that suggests he was worshipped in the land of Canaan before Israel. If the biblical story is not true (if Moses and the Exodus are not real) then how did Ancient Israel of the central highlands learn Yahwism? The answer to this question may come from an obscure population group of the Ancient Near East made known to us through a number of Egyptian texts, the Shasu.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 21

Some Egyptian texts refer to a group called the Shasu that, in my opinion, may have played a major role in the origins of Ancient Israel. These texts from Egypt refer to the Shasu as a group of people not tied to a homeland or a geographical region who caused disorder in the Ancient Near East in between 1500 to 1150 BCE.¹⁵⁸ Shasu was the term that the Egyptians applied to nomadic and seminomadic groups (“tent dwellers”¹⁵⁹) found east of Egypt in Midian or northern Arabia, southern Edom (the area south-southeast of the Dead Sea) and the other Canaanite frontier regions that specialized in sheep and goat herding.¹⁶⁰ They were Semitic in origin, were organized in clans and they were ruled by what the Egyptians termed as ‘big men.’¹⁶¹ What makes them important to Ancient Israel is a reference to the land they come from and/or the god they venerated.

Lists from the reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BCE) mention that among the tribal territories controlled by the Shasu was the “land of the Shasu: S‘rr,” which most scholars believe to be Seir, one of the south of Canaan place names in the Bible associated with Yahweh’s origins.¹⁶² Another territory mentioned in the lists is the

¹⁵⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102, Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 86, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 103.

¹⁵⁹ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 108, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 103.

¹⁶⁰ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 159, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 103, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 22.

¹⁶¹ Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 95.

¹⁶² van der Toorn, “Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion,” 539, Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 108, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 159.

“Shasu-land of Yahweh.”¹⁶³ It is unclear whether this meant there was a physical location called ‘Yahweh’ from which the Shasu came or if it meant there was a physical location known as the ‘Shasu-land’ that was related to the god Yahweh and his geographical sphere of influence, i.e., the land of the Shasu belonged to the god Yahweh. This is difficult to determine without a knowledge of the actual Egyptian text or a background in Egyptology, both of which I lack. Nonetheless, this is the first historical reference to the name Yahweh, either the place or the god, in any Ancient Near Eastern text, including the Bible. This is of great significance for the examination of the origins of Ancient Israel.

Scholars who argue the theory that pastoral nomads settled the central highland regions of Ancient Canaan and became Israel often equate these pastoralists with the Shasu.¹⁶⁴ In their opinions, the Shasu of the steppe lands east of the Jordan River decided to cross the river and settle in the highlands of Canaan in Iron Age I, and this group became Israel. One problem with this notion is that the Egyptians continued to refer to the Shasu as Shasu even after they began to name Israel as ‘Israel’; if the early Israelites were just Shasu we would have expected the Egyptians to continue to refer to them as such and not change their name.¹⁶⁵ Another problem with this idea is Ancient Israel’s origins cannot be explained solely by the sedentarization of pastoralists. The population

¹⁶³ van der Toorn, “Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion,” 539, Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 140, 159, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 21-22.

¹⁶⁴ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 95.

¹⁶⁵ Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 95-96.

increase in Iron Age Canaan and specifically the central highlands has to be due to more than just the settlement of pastoralists in agricultural regions (see Chapter III). However, the possibility remains that early Israel's makeup mostly likely contained a diverse array of tribal and cultural groups, of which a certain percentage was most definitely pastoralists who were becoming more sedentary.

If this is correct then it is also possible that some groups of sedentary Shasu could be members of the early Israelite tribal alliance, and if they were then we can hypothesize that they may have brought the god Yahweh and Yahwism to the land of Canaan in Iron Age I. If the Exodus did not happen, some other group had to have brought Yahwism into Canaan. If the biblical account of the Exodus story is based in historical truth, as many scholars believe, then the group that experienced the Exodus, no matter how big or small it was, was either a Yahweh-worshipping group to begin with or learned Yahwism from Yahwists as they passed through Midian on their way to Canaan. I argue that it was either a group of Yahweh-worshipping Shasu that immigrated into Canaan or an Exodus group that learned Yahwism from a group of Shasu in or around Midian that explains how the non-Canaanite god Yahweh arrived in Canaan in Iron Age I. The fact that the Shasu may have been connected with the deity Yahweh in the land of Midian before Israel made it to Canaan, that they were in the 'right place' to be able to teach an Exodus group about Yahweh, and that according to the earliest writings in the Bible Yahweh's origins seem to be placed near this same location, may all suggest that Israel's origins is to some degree from the Shasu or at least the Yahweh worshipping Shasu in the

Egyptians texts most likely played a role in the development of early Israel's Yahwistic beliefs.

Under these conditions, the Shasu, or whichever group brought the god Yahweh into Canaan, would have played an important role in the origins of Israel and Ancient Israelite religion. As early Israel formed itself as a tribal alliance among many different elements of society, including pastoralists, lowland Canaanites and other groups, it formed itself under the banner of a new religion and god. There were existing gods of Canaan that would have sufficed for early Israel; El and Baal are similar to the descriptions of Yahweh in the Bible, but in the end Yahweh won out and Yahweh became the god of Israel. We can only speculate on the several possible reasons why early Israel would have chosen Yahweh over El or Baal or any other deity; nevertheless the god Yahweh became the god of the people of Israel, a group made up of Canaanites and non-Canaanites.

Canaanite Religious Practices/Elements in Early Israelite Religion

While Yahweh, a non-Canaanite deity, became the god of Israel, there were a number of religious rites, rituals and practices from Canaan that were incorporated into Israelite religion found in the Bible. This is to be expected if some or all of early Israel came from the indigenous Canaanite population.¹⁶⁶ The biblical descriptions of the sacrificial rites and rituals are very similar to religious practices known throughout the

¹⁶⁶ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 109. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 17, van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 55.

West-Semitic world.¹⁶⁷ The Bible contains references to cultic rituals from premonarchic Israel (before approximately 1050 BCE), such as “the erecting of a standing stone or pillar and its anointing with oil (see Genesis 28:10-19, 35:6-15),”¹⁶⁸ that were not consistent with later Israelite Yahwism but are believed to be more related to Canaanite culture and cultic practice.¹⁶⁹ Cross believes that several aspects of the Tabernacle described in the Bible “all reflect Canaanite models.”¹⁷⁰ Dever agrees with Cross’ position, “We now have direct Bronze and Iron Age parallels for every single feature of the ‘Solomonic temple’ as described in the Hebrew Bible; and the best parallels come from, and only from, the Canaanite-Phoenician world of the fifteenth – ninth centuries.”¹⁷¹ Thus, while the deity worshipped in the temple was foreign to the land of Canaan, the structure built for him was Canaanite in style and feature.

The texts from eighteenth-century-BCE Mari (located in modern northeastern Syria) and thirteenth-century-BCE Emar (located in modern northern Syria) describe ‘prophets’ much like the prophets found in the Bible.¹⁷² In fact, they are so similar, exhibit the same types of behavior in the stories and deliver comparable messages/writings that an analysis of Mari/Emar prophets and Biblical prophets shows

¹⁶⁷ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 46.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷⁰ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 72.

¹⁷¹ William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know & When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 145.

¹⁷² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 89.

that their only difference is the god that they served.¹⁷³ While Emar and Mari are outside Canaan they are close enough for the writings or deeds of the prophets to have been familiar to the early Israelites, especially if those early Israelites had been in Canaan for some time. Emar and Mari give us the best examples of what types of religious structure, practices, rituals and beliefs could be found in Ancient Canaan at the time of the emergence of Ancient Israel.

The Emar texts demonstrate “a closer connection in terms of purpose and content to cultic texts that are found in the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible)” than the Ugarit texts that merely describe mythology and say little about religious practice.¹⁷⁴ For example, the only two instances in the ancient world where a priest or priestess was anointed with oil at his/her installation into their respective positions come from Leviticus 8 and the texts of Emar (specifically Emar 369).¹⁷⁵ Moreover, the *zukru* festival from Emar and Mari compares closely with the Passover and Unleavened Bread festivals celebrated in the Bible.¹⁷⁶ In fact, the *zukru* festival as well as the biblical festivals all compare with ritual festivals found throughout the Ancient Western Semitic religious culture of the second millennium BCE (2000-1000 BCE).¹⁷⁷ Another example is the Emar ritual calendar that compares with the biblical ritual calendar as set forth in

¹⁷³ Ibid., 89 n23.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 112.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 114-118.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 114, 116.

Leviticus 23.¹⁷⁸ Yet another example comes from the Mari and Ugarit texts where descriptions of religious ‘tent’ shrines similar to the biblical tabernacle are presented.¹⁷⁹

The fact that these Canaanite religious elements are found in early Israel’s religion suggests that at least part of early Israel descended from a Western Semitic and Canaanite heritage. The texts from Mari and Emar show that the religious practices found in the Bible that are believed to be unique to early Israel and Yahwism may have been more common throughout Canaan and the Western Semitic world in ancient times.

As Hess notes with respect to the Emar texts:

Unlike the Ugaritic ritual texts that often focus on the variety of deities and the specifics of the offerings to each one, those at Emar are concerned more about the performance of the human participants to achieve a goal....These distinctives at Emar indicate a much closer comparison of form and content with the ritual texts of the Bible, especially Leviticus. Not only does the cumulative weight of comparative evidence link these two traditions – and they are after all the only two possessing many similarities of genre – it also casts doubt on assumptions about the relatively late dating of these biblical texts. Whenever their final form may have appeared, it is clear that many of the religious practices contained therein possess a demonstrable tradition that reaches back before the formation of Israel and into the Bronze Age.¹⁸⁰

Thus, it is clear that the Mari and Emar texts that focus on religious practice and ritual compare closely with the religion of early Israel and this would argue for Ancient Israel’s origins to have come from Ancient Canaan and/or at least some group of Western Semitic stock.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 118-122.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 204-205. However, in Hess’ analysis of these ‘antecedents to the biblical tabernacle,’ he notes that one could argue that the Egyptian war tent may be comparable to the tabernacle as well. Thus, there may have been influence from Ancient Canaan and Egypt, at least in the case for the biblical tabernacle.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 122.

Certainly, the religion of Ancient Israel shows traces of Canaanite religion and this is to be expected if early Israel was a loosely based tribal alliance that consisted of Canaanites and non-Canaanites. In the early stages of early Israel's alliance it must have come to some agreement upon the religion that would unify the tribes even more closely than a political alliance. I view the religion of Ancient Israel as a compromise between Canaanite (erection of standing stones and anointing them with oil, priests/priestesses anointed with oil, Western Semitic festivals, and prophets) and non-Canaanite elements (Yahweh as god, no pigs [see Chapter III]). However, the Yahweh groups seem to have had more influence or power, in my opinion, because their god, Yahweh, won out in the end. Moreover, all of Ancient Israel, even the indigenous Canaanites included in this group, became Yahwists and worshipped a non-Canaanite, foreign deity.

CHAPTER III

ARCHAEOLOGY

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.
Judges 17:6

Ancient Near Eastern Yahweh Worship and Yahweh's Origins

There is an overall lack of material culture remains which might illuminate the religion of early Israel, and this hinders our knowledge of Ancient Israelite worship.¹⁸¹ Archaeology tells us very little about Yahweh worship in Ancient Canaan in Iron Age I when Ancient Israel began to clearly separate itself group from the Canaanites as a distinct population. This is because among possible early Israelite settlements there is an absence of religious figurines, temples, altars and shrines that normally designate the form of religious worship of a group of people.¹⁸² Despite the overall lack of archaeological evidence for Yahweh worship in Ancient Israel archaeologists have pieced together what is available to attempt to capture Ancient Israel's earliest forms of worship.

¹⁸¹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 79, 235, Gonen, "The Late Bronze Age," 222-223, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 292.

¹⁸² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 235. For examples of the objects and sites of a religious nature that have been found and what they tell us about the religion of Ancient Israel see Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 235-238. However, because there is a lack of evidence to help us understand the religion of early Israel in these examples I have chosen not to include an analysis of them here. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 30, 32, Gonen, "The Late Bronze Age," 222-223.

While Ancient Israel's veneration of Yahweh most likely began early in its existence around 1200 BCE, and perhaps played a major role in bringing different tribes together to form a tribal alliance, archaeology demonstrates that the religion of early Israel was diverse and included several deities. The idea that the religion of Yahwism was the main factor in Ancient Israel's formation, as in the Peasants' Revolt theory, cannot be substantiated by the archaeological findings. Moreover, Miller and Hayes remind us that that early Israel's acceptance of Yahweh as the national god was most likely a gradual rather than a sudden process.¹⁸³ Ancient Israel behaved more like a tribal society, where kinship was of utmost importance, as elsewhere in the Ancient Near East, rather than a league of tribes bound together by religion.¹⁸⁴ According to the archaeology, early Israel of the period of the Judges, i.e. Iron Age I, shows no signs of religious centralization under a single specific cultic site or center as later Israel did with the Temple at Jerusalem¹⁸⁵ nor was Yahweh exclusively worshipped by the early Israelites as the Bible may suggest.¹⁸⁶ Additionally, the small village shrines found at various sites show evidence that religious worship among such villagers was simple and lacked any centralized uniformity.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 112.

¹⁸⁴ Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 145.

¹⁸⁵ Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 145, Gonen, "The Late Bronze Age," 222-223.

¹⁸⁶ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 110.

¹⁸⁷ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 314.

One of the earliest possible Yahweh shrines/temples may have been at the ancient site of Shiloh. Finkelstein's excavations at Shiloh confirmed earlier excavations of the site that suggest that the temple at Shiloh was a center of annual pilgrimage for early Israel in the first half of the eleventh century BCE.¹⁸⁸ Philistine invaders destroyed the sanctuary around 1050 BCE.¹⁸⁹ It is uncertain if this temple was a temple dedicated to Yahweh or another deity. The biblical record suggests that Shiloh was the place where the Ark of the Covenant, over which the god Yahweh was enthroned, was located during most of the period of the Judges (See Judges 18:31 and 1 Samuel 1:3). However, archaeological findings do not show any evidence that this was distinctly or solely a Yahwistic sanctuary.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, Finkelstein's argument that Shiloh had a temple that was used by early Israel is based on references from the Bible that portray Shiloh as a cult center and his claim that this excavation produced a cultic structure/temple has been challenged by several scholars.¹⁹¹ Thus, according to the archaeology, it is difficult to say with certainty that Shiloh did have a temple and it is even less certain that this proposed temple was a sacred site dedicated to the god Yahweh.

Of the other religious shrines from Ancient Israelite sites unearthed by archaeologists it is difficult if not impossible to state that they were Yahwistic sites, nor

¹⁸⁸ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 127, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 221, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 33, van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 58.

¹⁸⁹ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 127.

¹⁹⁰ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 221-222, van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 58, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 292.

¹⁹¹ van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 58, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 292.

can it be determined with any degree of certainty which god was being venerated or to which god the temple or sanctuary was dedicated. For example, many archaeologists believe that the thirteenth- and twelfth-century-BCE remains, a number of animal bones, ash and a single altar (perhaps implying a single deity), at Mount Ebal in Samaria show that this site/shrine was used for religious sacrifices, but there is no clear indication as to which deity the ancient inhabitants of the site were sacrificing.¹⁹² Ziony Zevit reviewed various cult sites of Ancient Israel in the Iron Age and discovered that there were a number of sites where two or perhaps three deities were worshipped, but he also found several cult sites that involved worship of a single deity.¹⁹³ This suggests that Ancient Israel's tribal alliance among the ten, twelve or however many tribes in its early stages was not necessarily unified under the religion of Yahwism. Furthermore, the evidence of eight place names with the use of the name of the god Baal in their names suggests that Baal worship may have had a stronger following than the Bible portrays.¹⁹⁴ Eventually, Yahweh won out as the god of Israel, but initially he may have had to vie for supremacy with the other gods of early Israel, gods that were Canaanite in origin, Baal and El. This argues the case for both Canaanite and non-Canaanite origins for Ancient Israel.

¹⁹² Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 217-220. This judgment that this site was used for religious sacrifices is based on the amount of animal bones (just by way of note, no pig bones here) and ash found at the site. Others believe the absence of cultic paraphernalia typically found at religious/sacred shrine sites, such as figurines, votive offerings and standing stones, proves that this site is not religious or cult site. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 32-33.

¹⁹³ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 77-78. See also p. 313 and Gonen, "The Late Bronze Age," 222-223, 227-229, 232.

¹⁹⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 274.

There is archaeological evidence that Yahwism could have been brought into the land of Canaan through cultural influences and/or trade rather than through a specific, immigrating group. The archaeology of Canaan demonstrates that there is proof that there was long-distance trade throughout Canaan during Iron Age I.¹⁹⁵ Smith offers the possibility that it was due to this long-distance trade that the Canaanites learned of the god Yahweh and later accepted him as their national deity.¹⁹⁶ If this is the case then Ancient Israel could have been of Canaanite descent, fled the lowlands of Canaan for the central highlands and essentially replaced their Canaanite gods for a new, foreign deity that they had heard and learned about from cultural and trade exchanges with Yahwists. This would be radically different from the formation of any other Ancient Near Eastern religion.

In the Ancient Near East, there is no record that tells of the formation of religion through the rejecting of the indigenous gods of the land and the acceptance of a foreign deity that was not a god of that land. Of course, when population groups moved they could have begun to worship the gods of their new land, but they also could have continued the veneration of gods from their own cultural and religious background (see the Philistine example in Chapter I). Nevertheless, groups did not just accept a foreign deity as their national god at all, which is implied in the hypothesis that Ancient Israel learned Yahwism through trade contacts. It would be like the Egyptians accepting Ashur, the god of the Ancient Assyrians, as their national god, or the Philistines accepting

¹⁹⁵ Hackett, ““There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” 153.

¹⁹⁶ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 145.

Marduk, the god of the Ancient Babylonians, as their national god while they were settling the southern Levantine coast. There definitely were periods of influence, cultural exchange and acculturation and assimilation, but groups did not recognize a god foreign to their own background and foreign to the land they were settling as their own national god. Thus, while early Israel's patterns of worship may have been diverse, as a population group it must have consisted of a group or groups of people that were foreigners to the land of Canaan who brought their god Yahweh with them into the land, for as Dearman admits, "it is still historically plausible that some of Israel's ancestors and the origins of Yahwism come from outside Canaan."¹⁹⁷

Hebrew Personal Names in Iron Age Canaan

One source of evidence, personal names from Iron Age Canaan, could be used to argue for an overwhelming majority of early Israel to have been Yahweh followers from early on. In the Ancient Near East it was very common to find personal names that contained a theophoric element, a part of the name of a god, within the personal name. For example, the chief god of the Assyrians was Ashur and several of the Assyrian kings' personal names contained the name Ashur (Ashurbanipal, Ashurnasirpal) and the Bible as well records several of these examples, Isaiah, Obadiah ('iah' is a form of the name of the god Yahweh), Ezekiel, Daniel and Michael ('el' deriving from the name of the Canaanite god El which was later equivalent to Yahweh in Ancient Israel). When a theophoric element is present in a personal name it can be assumed that that person is also a follower

¹⁹⁷ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 24.

of that deity and thus we can use the information from personal names to deduce certain details about religious practices and beliefs in the ancient world.¹⁹⁸

Jeffrey H. Tigay analyzed all the known Hebrew personal names from inscriptions of the Iron Age (1200-586 BCE) and found that of the names that contained a possible theophoric element of any deity an overwhelming majority, over 90 percent, contained an element of the name of the god Yahweh within the personal names.¹⁹⁹ Such an overwhelming majority of one god in personal names of one language or cultural group is rare and differs from data gathered and analyzed throughout the rest of the Ancient Near East. Hess states:

There is a difference in the percentages of Yahwistic personal names versus other theophoric names among Israelites and the relative percentages of names from neighboring countries that use their national deity when compared with those theophoric names that explicitly mention other deities. Thus while every count of Yahwistic names in Israel results in a number and percentage that far exceeds all other personal names with explicit divine names as an element, the ratios in (neighboring) Ammon and surrounding countries are the reverse.²⁰⁰

Thus, in neighboring cultures while the theophoric element of the national deity was more common among personal names of that culture there were a number of other cases where another deity was used.²⁰¹ For example, only 17 percent of names from fifteenth-

¹⁹⁸ See Tigay, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," 159-160.

¹⁹⁹ Tigay, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," 162-163, 194. See also Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 269-270, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 4.

²⁰⁰ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 78.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 271-272. In fact, Hess notes that in Ammon, a neighboring people of Israel, the personal names containing elements of other deities exceed those containing the name of Milcom, the national god of Ammon.

and fourteenth-century-BCE Ashur used the name of the chief deity, Ashur, in their names.²⁰² What is more, none of the personal names analyzed by Tigay contained the name of the goddess Asherah, or any other goddess for that matter,²⁰³ suggesting that the notion that Asherah was Yahweh's consort and worshipped alongside him in Ancient Israel must be incorrect. For Iron Age Israel, the percentage of personal names containing Yahwistic elements is so high it is almost as if there were no other deities present, except perhaps for Baal.²⁰⁴

The evidence from the analysis of Hebrew personal names of the Iron Age not only suggests Yahweh's singular place among Ancient Israel, it also shows that such particular belief in one deity was uncommon and unique in the ancient world. Could this evidence suggest that monotheism, or the belief in Yahweh as the only god, may have begun earlier than previously thought?²⁰⁵ No other archaeological sources, as well as the evidence from the Bible, support this hypothesis, for they all argue for a much later date for the origins of monotheism (700-600 BCE or even later, perhaps after the Babylonian Exile).²⁰⁶ Moreover, Tigay's analysis only proves that Yahweh was the most popular god in Ancient Israel, not that he was the only deity of Ancient Israel.²⁰⁷ Additionally,

²⁰² Tigay, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," 170.

²⁰³ Ibid., 163.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 178.

²⁰⁶ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 153, Tigay, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," 157-162.

²⁰⁷ Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 4.

according to the Ugarit texts, Asherah was venerated at Ancient Ugarit although there are very few instances in the texts where a personal name contained a theophoric element of the name of the goddess Asherah despite the fact that she was a major deity of Ugarit.²⁰⁸

Thus, Tigay's findings of the overwhelming popularity of Yahweh in the Hebrew personal names of the Iron Age when combined with the other evidence does not prove that Yahweh was the only deity of worship among the early Israelites.

While the evidence from Tigay's analysis of Hebrew personal names of Iron Age Canaan may not reflect the complete picture of the religion of early Israel and the deities they did and did not worship, his data cannot be ignored. Moreover, the evidence here suggests that the spread of Yahwism came before King David and the United Monarchy (ca. 1050 BCE) because we have Yahwistic names from the time of the United Monarchy onward and thus we can deduce that the early Israelites that show up in the archaeological record in the central highlands of Ancient Canaan were most likely Yahwists.²⁰⁹ In Tigay's own words he states:

In every respect the inscriptions suggest an overwhelmingly Yahwistic society in the heartland of Israelite settlement....If we had only the inscriptional evidence, I doubt that we would ever imagine that there existed a significant amount of polytheistic practice in Israel during the period in question.²¹⁰

The fact remains from the evidence of personal names that there was an overwhelming belief in Yahweh among Israelites, a distinctive and singular belief that is not found in

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁰⁹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 271, Tigay, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," 180. See also van der Toorn, "Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion," 533.

²¹⁰ Tigay, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," 177-178.

any other Ancient Near Eastern population group and this distinctive belief in Yahweh had begun very early in Ancient Israel's existence.

El Worship in Ancient Canaan

As noted in the earlier chapter on ancient texts, there is good evidence from the Ugarit texts that El was the head god in the Canaanite pantheon. The Ugarit texts describe El, his characteristics and his fatherly personality. We now turn to the archaeological evidence that El was worshipped as a deity by Ancient Canaanites and Israelites. First of all, many argue that because the name of the alliance of tribes called 'Israel' contained a theophoric element of the deity El within its name that this demonstrates that early Israel, or perhaps the ancestors of early Israel, most likely consisted of El worshippers.²¹¹ For if Yahweh was the original god of the Ancient Israelites we would expect to find this deity's within the name of the tribe and not the name of El, a Canaanite deity. Certainly, the majority of early Israel could have come from Canaanite roots and thus were more inclined to be named after a Canaanite deity. If this were indeed the case we would expect El to continue as the main god of Israel throughout its existence, but what actually happened was that Yahweh eventually superseded El as the head of the Israelite pantheon, or at least he became equated with El and thus the names began to be used interchangeably. As noted above, early Israel began to recognize El and Yahweh as the same deity at some point in the Iron Age, but at Israel's first inception it appears that El might have had a more prominent position in

²¹¹ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 109. See also Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 49, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 142-143.

Ancient Israelite religion than he did later, because the tribal alliance that called itself 'Israel' chose the deity El to be a part of its name and not Yahweh.

According to the Ugarit texts, El was the head of the Canaanite pantheon suggesting that El would have been the most important deity of Ancient Canaan, but few other archaeological finds support this. There are a few inscriptions from the fifteenth century BCE written in a proto-Canaanite script by Canaanite miners in the Sinai that refers to El as "The Ancient One."²¹² According to Cross, it is well-known that El's cult was very popular in southern Canaan during the second millennium BCE,²¹³ as this inscription may indicate. There is an inscription found near Gaza (southwest Palestine) that dates to around 1200 BCE where a personal name contains the divine name El.²¹⁴ However, the Amarna texts and other inscriptions suggest that Baal may have been a more important deity to the Ancient Canaanites, or at the very least, outsiders looking in on Ancient Canaan saw Baal as its chief deity.²¹⁵

Thus, there are many more archaeological finds that imply Baal was more popular than El during Iron Age I and even the Ugarit texts focus on Baal rather than El. Furthermore, there is no evidence for an El cult within the boundaries of Ancient Israel, nor does the Bible allude to any specific El cult among the Ancient Israelites other than

²¹² Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 18-19.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

²¹⁴ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 93.

²¹⁵ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 93, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 43.

his association with the god Yahweh.²¹⁶ For these reasons and because of the lack of archaeological evidence, it is difficult to say with any certainty that El was worshipped by the early Israelites as a deity separate and distinct from Yahweh. Yet the existence of Canaanite religious rituals and practices found in Ancient Israelite religion suggests that at least part of early Israel came from a Canaanite background and that they could have paid devotion to the god El to some degree.

The Case for an Israelite Goddess

The Ancient Canaanite goddess Asherah has been the subject of several recent studies focused on archaeology, most of which make the claim that Asherah was an Ancient Israelite deity. The focus of these studies centers on the fact that a number of female figurines have been found throughout Ancient Canaan, although it is still unclear who these figurines represent and what they were used for.²¹⁷ That these female figurines existed, that they were part of Ancient Canaanite and/or Ancient Israelite religion and that they were most likely representative of a female deity suggests that our view of Ancient Israelite religion as presented primarily through the Bible is quite incomplete. These female figurines which probably represent the goddess Asherah might substantiate the claim that the Ancient Israelites may have worshipped or included her in their religious beliefs and practices. Dever believes that these figurines were indeed Asherah and were used as part of popular folk religion, more specifically religion of Israelite

²¹⁶ Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 141.

²¹⁷ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 73-74, 316, Herr, "Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations," 128.

women, that “was ignored or misunderstood by male biblical writers.”²¹⁸ While Dever’s theories may be speculative, there seems to be a growing consensus that these figurines represent the Canaanite goddess Asherah and because of this we need to reevaluate Ancient Israel’s religious beliefs and practices in order to understand where this goddess fits into Israelite Yahwism.

The one drawback of using these figurines to prove Asherah was a part of early Israelite Yahwism is the dates assigned to them by archaeologists. They are generally placed in the Iron Age II period (ca. 1050-722 BCE) which would be a little later than is commonly accepted for Ancient Israel’s emergence in Ancient Canaan.²¹⁹ Thus, if these figurines suggest that early Israel worshipped Asherah as a consort of Yahweh, this phenomenon developed later in Ancient Israel and was not a part of the original Yahwism followed by the first Israelites. To state that the original Ancient Israelites worshipped and paid devotion to the goddess Asherah can not be substantiated by what we currently know about these Iron Age Canaanite female figurines.

Recent evidence from two inscriptions found at the sites of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom suggest that Asherah may have been the consort of the god Yahweh and this would strengthen the case for Ancient Israel’s origins from within Ancient Canaan. ‘Ajrud was a Judean outpost in the northern Sinai during the eighth century BCE and a drawing on a doorjamb there with its accompanying inscriptions may portray Yahweh

²¹⁸ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 74. See also Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 128.

²¹⁹ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 316.

and Asherah.²²⁰ The text asks for a blessing from or by “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah/*asherah*.”²²¹ The drawing associated with the inscription may be an attempt by the writer of the text to depict both Yahweh and Asherah as referred to in the inscription.²²² Qom is a site eight miles west of Hebron in southern Judah and also contains an inscription similar to that of ‘Ajrud and from around the same time period (although it does not contain a drawing accompanying the inscription like at ‘Ajrud).²²³ These two inscriptions have caused several to believe that these references to Yahweh and Asherah together prove that Yahweh had a female deity consort and that goddess was Asherah.

One major problem with the interpretation of these two inscriptions that “Yahweh and his Asherah/*asherah*” is a reference to the fact that Ancient Israel had a female goddess is the fact the Hebrew grammar does not allow such a construction of this phrase with a personal name like Asherah. Semitic languages, including Hebrew, do not allow a possessive suffix, such as the ‘his’ in these inscriptions, to attach to a name such as Asherah or any personal name and there are no examples of this type of construction in

²²⁰ Ibid., 283-284, 319-321. There is much debate over whether or not the inscription with the accompanying drawing have anything to do with each other. Some have suggested that of the three figures in the drawing one must be Yahweh and one of the other two must be Asherah based on the fact that the inscription mentions these two gods. Others believe the drawing and inscriptions have nothing to do with each other. For an analysis see Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 319-321.

²²¹ Edward F. Campbell, Jr., “A Land Divided: Judah and Israel from the Death of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 233, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 145.

²²² Campbell, Jr., “A Land Divided: Judah and Israel from the Death of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria,” 233.

²²³ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 289, Tigay, “Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence,” 173-175.

any Classical Hebrew texts.²²⁴ Thus, the interpretation that these blessing formulas are referring to both Yahweh and ‘his Asherah,’ Asherah being the female goddess, is not possible in Ancient Hebrew. In light of this grammatical problem, others have suggested that ‘his *asherah*’ refers to the wooden pole/pillar or tree that represented the deity Asherah and was a symbol of the deity but was not the goddess herself. Using this interpretation of the phrase one could make the argument that at the least Asherah or the symbol representing her was part of and/or acceptable within Ancient Israelite religious belief.

However, others propose that by the time that these inscriptions were written (ca. 800 BCE) the development of Israelite Yahwism utilized the *asherah*, the tree or wooden pole, as a part of Yahwistic religious practice or ritual and did not represent anything to do with the goddess Asherah.²²⁵ In this case, that the *asherah* was a symbol for the goddess had either been lost, forgotten or intentionally ignored. Therefore, the *asherah* became an object representing Yahweh, his power and his godliness, rather than the goddess Asherah.²²⁶ As a result, according to this interpretation, when the inscriptions refer to ‘his (Yahweh’s) *asherah*’ the writers made reference to the god Yahweh and the cultic object known as the *asherah* that was a symbol of Yahweh during this time period. This interpretation has been challenged by several scholars²²⁷ debunking the idea to some

²²⁴ Campbell, Jr., “A Land Divided: Judah and Israel from the Death of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria,” 234, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 288. See also Tigay, “Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence,” 175.

²²⁵ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 287.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid., 287-289.

degree that the *asherah* was somehow used in Yahwism. It can thus be said that none of the interpretations of the renderings “Yahweh and his Asherah/*asherah*” are clear enough for us to come to a distinct conclusion about what this phrase means about the religion of early Israel.

There are other problems with these archaeological findings which include the dates at which these drawings and inscriptions were produced and the locations at which they were found. The date for these inscriptions, ca. 800 BCE, is much too late a date to use this as evidence that Ancient Israel worshipped the goddess Asherah, and that she was the consort of Yahweh and early Israel had believed this way since its formation around 1200 BCE. Certainly at times, and perhaps around 800 BCE, pockets of Israelites worshipped her and/or other Ancient Near Eastern and Ancient Canaanite gods and goddess, but the overall picture of what could be considered the main portion of Ancient Israelite society was the exclusive veneration of Yahweh with very little room for the worship of other deities. We have no way of knowing the nature of Yahweh’s and Asherah’s relationship in the beginning of Ancient Israel’s early tribal alliance through these inscriptions.

Furthermore, the locations of these inscriptions do not significantly add weight to the argument for an Israelite goddess. The ‘Ajrud example comes from northern Sinai and the Qom example from the southern border of Judah, two areas hardly within the ‘heartland’ of Ancient Israel. The two sites were most likely outposts controlled by Israelites around 800 BCE and were on the fringes of Israelite cultural and religious influence. For these and other reasons, some scholars have rejected the evidence from

these inscriptions that Asherah was a goddess in Ancient Israel.²²⁸ Thus, to use these examples to claim that Asherah was an Ancient Israelite deity is very unconvincing because there is no way to know if those that wrote the inscriptions truly understood ‘mainstream’ Israelite Yahwism or if this religious outlook could be applied to all the Ancient Israelite religious belief systems. Therefore, we must conclude that while the inscriptions from ‘Ajrud and Qom certainly open up the possibility of Asherah worship among the Ancient Israelites, more information is needed before we can prove that that really was the case.

At the same time, however, the fact remains that there is evidence to suggest that some form of Asherah worship did exist in Ancient Israel. The field of biblical studies has generally accepted the belief that these inscriptions, despite the apparent problems associated with them already discussed, along with the biblical texts indicate that Asherah was a goddess of Ancient Israel.²²⁹ As noted in Chapter II, the evidence from the Bible shows that Israelite prophets condemned such forms of worship of gods other than Yahweh suggesting that such worship was going on at times during Ancient Israel’s history. There is evidence from additional archaeological finds such as the Taanach Cult Stand, a number of other cultic stands, and a collection of cultic stone bowls that may attest to the fact that Asherah had a role in Ancient Israel’s society and religion.²³⁰

²²⁸ Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, xxxii, see also xxxvi, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 74.

²²⁹ Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, xxxii, see also p. xxxvi, Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, 73.

²³⁰ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 321-326, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 128.

Additionally, Asherah worship may have been more a part of localized, rural religion rather than what was considered the national religion of Ancient Israel at that time. Dever believes that among the rural and less affluent segments of Israelite society there was a place for Asherah worship and veneration that went along with or was part of Yahwism.²³¹ His argument is that Asherah worship in Ancient Israel was mostly a part of folk religion rather than part of the national religion of Yahwism that was more monotheistic, backed by the monarchy and became the form of religion that later biblical writers/editors chose to highlight as the religion of Ancient Israel.²³² The biblical writers/editors wanted future generations to believe the Israelites only worshipped Yahweh and chose to exclude much of the evidence that Asherah was a goddess of Ancient Israel. If that is the case the two inscriptions from 'Ajrud and Qom could testify to the existence of an Asherah cult in early Israel.

The Archaeology of the Origins of Ancient Israel

At the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200 BCE) there was a major collapse of the Late Bronze Age political systems and the culture connected with these systems that affected the entire Ancient Near East. Major cities were destroyed, several of the main Ancient Near Eastern polities such as Hatti, the New Kingdom in Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia declined or disappeared, and massive population migration movements all took place during this great Late Bronze Age collapse. The cause of the Late Bronze Age

²³¹ Herr, "Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations," 129.

²³² Ibid.

collapse remains uncertain, but the effects of the collapse were felt throughout the Ancient Near East and the Ancient Mediterranean and it was amid this collapse that Israel emerged.²³³

In fact, Israel was not the only group to emerge out of the collapse of the Late Bronze Age that formed “small nation-states grounded in ethnic affiliation” in and around Ancient Canaan.²³⁴ Philistia, Edom, Moab and Ammon are all examples of the phenomenon of kin-based, tribal groups joining together to form new ‘nations’ at the beginning of Iron Age I (1200-1000 BCE).²³⁵ Jo Ann Hackett states, “Indeed, the early Iron Age marked the rise of national religion in the Near East, tying belief in the national god to ethnic identity.”²³⁶ Settlement increases in all these areas between 1200-1150 BCE suggests that population groups displaced by the collapse of the Late Bronze Age system found their way to frontier communities such as the central highlands of Ancient Canaan, and formed new polities or nations.²³⁷

While the collapse of the Late Bronze Age system would have been an ideal time for the Ancient Israelites to flee Egypt, there is no direct evidence that they were ever there, nor indeed in any other location throughout the Ancient Near East. Dearman says,

²³³ For an overview of the Late Bronze Age collapse and the Sea Peoples see Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” 46, Gonen, “The Late Bronze Age,” 214-216, and Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 260-266.

²³⁴ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 87.

²³⁵ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 87, Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 101.

²³⁶ Hackett, “‘There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” 156.

²³⁷ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 90-91, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 212-213.

“Apart from the Old Testament itself, there is no extant evidence for tribal Israel (or its ancestors) outside of Canaan.”²³⁸ If they were anywhere, the evidence suggests they were in Canaan, and for this reason many believe that Ancient Israel’s origins lie within the indigenous Canaanite population of Ancient Canaan.²³⁹ Moreover, the archaeological evidence for a ‘conquest’ of Canaan is meager and while some archaeologists continue to debate the existence of destruction levels and potential sites for the ancient cities referred to in the Bible the fact remains that archaeology does not support the biblical story of the Exodus and Conquest.

For example, the first city the Israelites destroyed, according to the text, was Jericho. In the famous story found in Joshua Chapter 6, the walls of the city were miraculously brought down to kill all the inhabitants of Jericho save one household that had given aid to the Israelites. Excavations at the site of Jericho reveal that there was almost no occupation at Jericho during the thirteenth century BCE when Israel was supposed to be bringing its walls down;²⁴⁰ furthermore, according to Finkelstein and Silberman there were no walls surrounding Jericho at this time anyway.²⁴¹ Of the thirty-one cities that the Bible reports to have been taken by the Israelites, only twenty have been plausibly identified and of those twenty only Bethel, Hazor and Lachish show destruction levels in the archaeological remains from the relevant time period and which

²³⁸ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 49.

²³⁹ Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 296.

²⁴⁰ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 95, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 283.

²⁴¹ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 77, 81-82.

could be explained by an Israelite invasion.²⁴² Thus, the insufficient amount of archaeological evidence for the Conquest implies that Ancient Israel never conquered Canaan. However, dating the destruction levels at these sites is difficult and is not agreed upon by all scholars and archaeologists.²⁴³ Despite these objections, the reality remains that there is little evidence from the archaeological record to support a ‘conquest’ of Canaan by the Ancient Israelites and there is no direct archaeological evidence that Ancient Israel was in Egypt and fled during the ‘Exodus.’

Material Culture Remains of the Central Highlands of Ancient Canaan in Iron Age I

The most widely accepted date for Ancient Israel’s emergence in the land of Canaan is around 1200 BCE. One of the main reasons for the acceptance of this date has much to do with the material culture remains of the central highlands regions of Ancient Canaan. The archaeology reveals that there was a large population increase in the Iron Age I period (1200-1000 BCE) of Ancient Canaan, especially in the central highlands.²⁴⁴ Of the 678 Iron Age I settlements, 93 percent of them “are new foundations, usually

²⁴² Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 97. See also Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 71-72, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 83, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 281-285.

²⁴³ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 72.

²⁴⁴ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 100, Hackett, “‘There Was No King in Israel’: The Era of the Judges,” p. 146, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 212, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 28-29.

small, unwalled villages” and most of them were in the central highlands.²⁴⁵ Stager

states:

This extraordinary increase in occupation during Iron Age I cannot be explained only by natural population growth of the few Late Bronze Age city-states in the region: there must have been a major influx of people into the highlands in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE.²⁴⁶

Thus, the archaeology advocates the fact that outside, non-Canaanite groups caused a population increase in Ancient Canaan and especially in the central highlands. Dearman

states:

We should not assume automatically an Israelite identity for the inhabitants of each new site or for the inhabitants of each resettled site after its demise at the end of the Late Bronze Age...Nevertheless, the settlement patterns in the hill country and Galilee present a chronological and geographical profile that essentially fits an emerging tribal association named Israel.²⁴⁷

The question is whether these new people in the land of Canaan who had settled the new villages were Israelites or some other group. To answer this question, we need to start by finding if the material culture left behind by these new inhabitants was Israelite or not.

First, let us look at what appear to be the distinctive features of the material culture remains of the central highlands. For the most part, we can say that they were rural communities practicing both agriculture and sheep and goat herding.²⁴⁸ There are

²⁴⁵ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 100, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83, van der Steen, “The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages,” 63.

²⁴⁶ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 100. See also Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83.

²⁴⁷ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 30.

²⁴⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 100.

several facets of material culture remains that when found together bring archaeologists to mark the site as Israelite, including “collared-rim store jars, pillared houses, storage pits, faunal assemblages of sheep, goat and cattle (but little or no pig).”²⁴⁹ Finkelstein and Silberman believe these remains represent “temporary tent encampments of ‘semi-nomads’” and/or seminomads gradually settling down and becoming sedentary.²⁵⁰ In contrast to the Canaanite cities, the highland villages contained no temples, palaces, storehouse or public buildings, no seals or seal impressions and no luxury items such as jewelry or imported pottery.²⁵¹

The problem with these markers that are believed to indicate Israelite settlements is that they turn up at other non-Israelite sites (sites outside what is believed to be early Israel and thus Canaanite), and are thus not exclusive to Israel.²⁵² Moreover, there seems to have been a continuation from the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age I of worship sites that emphasized sacrifices, suggesting the new settlers were familiar with previous worship and religious patterns of Late Bronze Age Canaan and were most likely descendants of

²⁴⁹ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102. See also Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 211, 217-218, 223-224, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 119, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 33, van der Steen, “The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages,” 63, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 288, 290.

²⁵⁰ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 101-102. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 34, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 287-288.

²⁵¹ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 109. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 30, 32.

²⁵² Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102. See also Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 85, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 33, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 289.

Canaanites.²⁵³ While it is difficult to create an exact definition of what an Israelite site or settlement is and what is otherwise Canaanite, many believe that there are enough material culture remains distinctive to Israel for us to be able to use these markers to help us understand early Israel.

An interesting feature of proposed Israelite sites and a distinctive marker of Israelite culture was the lack of pig bones associated with these material remains. It appears in this scenario the Bible and archaeology confirms one another. In Judaic religious belief and in the laws that developed later in Judaism (perhaps after the Exile to Babylon) there is a strict dietary law code as found in the Bible stating that pigs are not to be consumed by the Jews. If early Israel practiced this same law, the nonconsumption of pigs would have clearly separated it if not religiously then culturally from its neighbor the Philistines, known consumers and/or sacrificers of pigs as indicated by their respective material remains.²⁵⁴ In fact, studies show that around 1200 BCE there was a shift in domesticated species from sheep and goat to pigs and cattle throughout Ancient Canaan, but this shift does not occur in the central highlands that are believed to be dominated by the early Israelites.²⁵⁵ Moreover, the central highlands were an ideal location for pigs according to some researchers²⁵⁶ and in previous periods (pre-Iron Age) and subsequent

²⁵³ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 31.

²⁵⁴ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 119, Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 123, Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 146.

²⁵⁵ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 223.

²⁵⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 213. Alexander H. Joffe argues against the notion that the central highlands were ideal for raising pigs. He states that the lack of pig bones

periods (post-Iron Age) pigs are common among the material culture remains of the groups occupying the central highlands.²⁵⁷ It is therefore odd that pig production was not more prevalent in the central highlands during the Iron Age when Ancient Israel is believed to have dominated this area.

The Ancient Israelites may have chosen to exclude pigs from their diet in attempt to differentiate themselves from their neighbors, or this exclusion may have been a religious restriction.²⁵⁸ In either case, the fact remains that the archaeological findings from sites in the central highlands of Ancient Canaan with no pig bones imply that these sites are Israelite. If these material remains truly represent early Israel, then the lack of pig bones suggests that the biblical account has preserved the memory of a specific religious or cultural characteristic of Ancient Israel that distinguished it from other groups of Ancient Canaan. Additionally, this connects them with later monarchic Israel and Judaism and supplies proof that Ancient Israel was in the land of Canaan, specifically the central highlands, around 1200 BCE. If this is the case that the material culture remains of the central highlands represent early Israel just after its formation then we can clearly mark Israel as a distinct population group in Iron Age I and we can begin to look for its origins based on the material culture remains that are clearly 'Israelite.'

Nonetheless, there is much debate over the material culture remains of the central highlands and how much it differs from the lowland Canaanite material culture remains

in the remains must show the difficulty of raising pigs in this region and the settlers there decided against it due to this difficulty. See Joffe, "The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant," 438.

²⁵⁷ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 119.

²⁵⁸ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 123.

in this time period. In one camp, there are those who believe the material culture remains that have been discovered clearly mark these sites as Israelite and distinct from lowland Canaan and the groups east of the Jordan (Ammon, Moab and Edom).²⁵⁹ The trouble with this stance is that it relies on textual evidence, such as the Bible, in order to claim that material culture remains from these sites are Israelite rather than Canaanite.²⁶⁰ Based purely on the archaeological artifacts it is difficult to distinguish between a rural Canaanite village and a rural Israelite village, except for the presence or absence of pig bones in the remains.²⁶¹

The other camp believes that the material culture remains in the highlands are not sufficiently different to distinguish Ancient Israel as a distinct population group from that of the Canaanites in the lowland plains²⁶² or from that of Edom, Moab and Ammon on the other side of the Jordan River.²⁶³ They argue that the material culture remains of the central highlands actually indicate that these highland dwellers were Canaanites or a

²⁵⁹ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 100, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 232, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 1-2, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, "'Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?'" *Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I*, 69, van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 63, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 285, 295.

²⁶⁰ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 102.

²⁶¹ Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 102, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83, Joffe, "The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant," 437, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 6-7.

²⁶² Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 146, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 118, Joffe, "The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant," 437, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 6-7.

²⁶³ Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 153, 162, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 119. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 27-28, van der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages," 55, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 297.

more heterogeneous population, which makes it difficult to distinguish between Israelites, Canaanites and any others who may have been there.²⁶⁴ For example, the collared-rim store jars, pillared houses, and storage pits are found at a number of Canaanite sites and thus these common material culture remains can not clearly distinguish the Ancient Israelites from the Ancient Canaanites. Dearman states, “On the basis of material cultural analysis, early Israel is indistinguishable from the larger Canaanite world.”²⁶⁵

The drawback of this view is that it ignores the textual evidence from the Merneptah Stele (see below) and the Bible that places Israel in the central highland regions during Iron Age I and as a population group different from the indigenous Canaanites. It also overlooks the evidence that the absence of pig bones at these sites suggests a clear, distinctive ethnic marker and is most likely representative of early Israel, a group for whom eating pork was probably taboo, as we know from later Judaism. Furthermore, this view disregards the fact that the material culture remains of the central highlands suggest that there was a lack of central authority in the area corroborating the biblical notion of “there was no king in Israel” (see Judges 17:6) during the period of the Judges (ca. 1200-1000 BCE).²⁶⁶ The differing points of view concerning the material culture remains of the central highlands is very complicated and depends on what interpretation seems more convincing.

²⁶⁴ Joffe, “The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant,” 437, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 83, Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 6-7.

²⁶⁵ Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 33.

²⁶⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 232-233, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, ““Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?” Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 72.

To resolve this issue it is apparent that an analysis incorporating both sides of the argument is the best way to understand the issue. Stager has made it clear that when we see difference of material culture remains in Ancient Canaan those differences are because of socio-economic rather than ethnic factors.²⁶⁷ Thus, there was more of a difference between material culture remains of a Canaanite city and a Canaanite village than there was between a Canaanite village and an Israelite village.²⁶⁸ Because of this, Stager claims that “the early Israelites were a rural subset of Canaanite culture and largely indistinguishable from Transjordanian rural cultures as well.”²⁶⁹ Moreover, Finkelstein’s interpretation that the settlers of the central highlands were pastoralists gradually adopting a more sedentary lifestyle caused Dearman to term this type of Ancient Israel as a “pastoral (Canaanite) subculture.” This explains why some of the Israelite ‘markers’ show up at Canaanite sites and how clear Israelite markers such as the lack of pig bones in the remains allows us to separate Ancient Israel from its Canaanite neighbors. This compromise between the two camps allows for these central highland dwellers of Iron Age I to be both of non-Canaanite stock (increase in population points to immigration outside of Canaan, distinct non-Canaanite markers in material remains) and Canaanite stock (material culture remains similar if not the same as other Canaanite material culture remains of the time period).

²⁶⁷ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 295.

²⁶⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102.

²⁶⁹ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 102. See also Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 49.

There is also very strong evidence to suggest that the material culture remains of the central highlands in Iron Age I are Israelite due to the fact that there is continuity between the material culture remains of the central highlands of Iron Age I and Iron Age II, a period where the Israelite existence is more well established in the archaeological record than in the previous period. Iron Age II represents the period of the United Monarchy under Kings David and Solomon. The material culture remains of the central highlands in Iron Age II share common features as found in Iron Age I, suggesting that Iron Age II Israel came from Iron Age I Israel.²⁷⁰ Scholars are more certain that a distinct Israelite material culture can be seen the Iron Age II remains.²⁷¹ That these remains continued from the previous period suggests that the Israelites of Iron Age II descended from a distinct group in Iron Age I which are most likely ‘Israelites,’ or, as some have labeled them ‘proto-Israelites.’²⁷² It is for these reasons that most scholars, historians and archaeologists believe that we can assume the material culture remains of the central highlands of Ancient Canaan in Iron Age I are Israelite.

²⁷⁰ Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 122-123, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 2, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, ““Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?” Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 69.

²⁷¹ Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 2, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, ““Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?” Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 69.

²⁷² Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 2, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 122-123, Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, ““Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?” Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 69.

The Merneptah Stele

The Merneptah Stele is a stone stele commemorating the victory of the Pharaoh Merneptah over the Libyans and the Sea Peoples around the year 1208 BCE²⁷³ unearthed by archaeologists in Merneptah's funerary temple. The significance of this stele lies in the last lines, where the text refers to a military campaign by Merneptah into the land of Canaan, and Israel is named by the stele as a group the pharaoh defeated during the campaign. The stele reads:

The Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe;
 Ashkelon has been overcome;
 Gezer has been captured;
 Yanoam is made nonexistent;
 Israel is laid waste and his seed is not;
 Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt.²⁷⁴

The analysis of the hieroglyphs reveals that the Egyptian sign or determinative for city is used with the place names of Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam,²⁷⁵ and the hieroglyph for a geographical region is used with Canaan and Hurru.²⁷⁶ Israel receives its own, different

²⁷³ Several differing dates (and translations for that matter) are given for this artifact including 1230 BCE, 1209 BCE, 1208 BCE, and 1207 BCE. See Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 68, Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 91, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, pp. 18, 101, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 12.

²⁷⁴ Taken from Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," p. 91. I am unsure why Stager indents the lines as such, but I chose to copy his version exactly as it appears in the book. For other translations see Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 92.

²⁷⁵ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 72, Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 146, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 93-94.

²⁷⁶ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 72, Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 91, Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 146, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 93-94.

determinative, one signifying a foreign people of rural or tribal status – a sign that was typically applied to nomadic groups that did not have a fixed city or were not connected to a specific geographical location.²⁷⁷ The sign was used for both agricultural and pastoral groups as well as settled and unsettled groups that formed organized confederations along tribal lines.²⁷⁸ Therefore, it is understood to mean that the ‘Israel’ mentioned in this stele was of seminomadic or rural status at the time of Merneptah’s victory over them,²⁷⁹ a fact that fits well with the biblical account of Israel ‘wandering’ in the desert and then entering Canaan and taking several years to ‘conquer’ all of Canaan and settle permanently in the land. Moreover, the Merneptah Stele suggests that the Israel it mentions “was a political-ethnic entity of sufficient importance to the Egyptians to warrant mention alongside the three Canaanite city-states.”²⁸⁰ The evidence as seen from the Merneptah Stele implies that Israel, as an entity known to the Egyptians, existed in Ancient Canaan around the time of the collapse of the Late Bronze Age and was of similar military strength as surrounding city-states.

²⁷⁷ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 72, Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 91, 146, Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 68, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 93-94.

²⁷⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 91, Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 94. Miller questions the analysis and subsequent meanings applied to the Egyptian determinatives. He believes it has been shown that the determinatives are arbitrary and thus it “should not be over read ‘what they say about Israel.’” See p. 94. G. W. Ahlström and D. Edelman also question the use of the determinative and its interpretation suggesting the sign was used by a scribe that was not familiar enough with the central highlands of Canaan to know specifically the names (or name) of the people living there or what their political status was at the time. See G.W. Ahlström and D. Edelman “Merneptah’s Israel,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan., 1985): 60-61.

²⁷⁹ Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 72.

²⁸⁰ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 92. See also Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 95.

This stele is of major importance in the quest to find the origins of Ancient Israel because it is the earliest known extrabiblical reference to Israel. If it correctly identifies Ancient Israel as being in Canaan around 1208 BCE, then we have a secure starting point to work from. From this evidence it can be stated that Israel as a tribal alliance, as a distinct population group and as a separate people from other Canaanite groups, had established itself by 1200 BCE. Thus, the origins of Israel could be dated to just before 1208 BCE. For if the Merneptah Stele is accurate, then the coming together of Israel from outside of Canaan, from within Canaan, from the pastoral nomads becoming sedentary, and/or from the Canaanites themselves moving to the central highlands, occurred some time before 1208 BCE. If one calculates that Israel wandered in the desert for forty years before entering Canaan as the Bible alludes to, then this would put Israel in Egypt around 1250 BCE and that matches well with the storyline of the Exodus. This timeline is suggested by scholars who propose that if Israel was in Egypt at any point and then left or escaped, the best time to have done this would have been around 1250-1200 BCE because of the Late Bronze Age collapse and the weakened state of the Egyptian Empire at the time of the collapse and just prior to it.²⁸¹ The stele also fits well with the evidence from the material culture remains of the central highlands, that if they are indeed remains of Israel or proto-Israel, then the stele corroborates this fact and makes the case stronger for acknowledging the new inhabitants of the central highlands as Ancient Israel.

²⁸¹ Redmount, "Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt," 79, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 212-213.

Conversely, the Merneptah Stele also provides evidence that the Ancient Israelites came from within the Canaanite population and that they were not necessarily pastoral nomads. The reliefs of the Merneptah Stele, the pictorial descriptions of the battles and military victory of Merneptah during his campaign, correspond with the written text describing the events. Thus, the reliefs show the Egyptian forces besieging the cities Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam and furthermore, show the Israelite forces as well.²⁸² In Ancient Near Eastern art, it was common for each different population or ethnic group to be represented or drawn differently to distinguish them from other groups. As a result, a Hittite had a different hair style, beard and dress than an Assyrian or Persian; a Babylonian would have a completely different look than a Canaanite or an Egyptian and so on. This was done in order to show who exactly these figures represented.

Therefore, we would expect Israel to look like the Shasu, the seminomadic groups in and around Canaan, since they were stateless and did not belong to a geographical region as the text of the stele suggests. Additionally, we would anticipate Israel to appear differently than the city dwellers of the three Canaanite city-states that were under attack in the reliefs. However, this is not the case. The reliefs depict the Israelites in the same fashion as the Canaanite city dwellers and not as Shasu, who are represented in a completely different fashion.²⁸³ This would suggest that the Egyptians viewed Israel as Canaanites or at least similar to the Canaanite city dwellers despite the fact that the text

²⁸² Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," 92.

²⁸³ Ibid.

uses a determinative sign to signify a stateless and nomadic people.²⁸⁴ Regarding the interpretation of the evidence of the Merneptah Stele, both the reliefs and the text,

Hackett states:

This leads to the conclusion that at the beginning of this period (Iron Age I) Israel was a group of Canaanite people, self-identified as 'Israel' but not occupying any territory called 'Israel,' and therefore not a stable political entity.²⁸⁵

This evidence may support the hypothesis that Ancient Israel emerged from within the indigenous Canaanite population. It may also suggest that the Ancient Israelites were not Shasu, or at least not ethnically. Moreover, the picture of Israel painted by the Merneptah Stele reliefs and inscription resembles the Israel portrayed in the book of Judges in the Bible: a segmentary tribal society that lacked both a central authority and a specific geographic home.²⁸⁶

One difficulty with using the Merneptah Stele to study the origins of Ancient Israel is that it is an anomaly among Ancient Near Eastern artifacts that deal with early Israel. No reference to Israel and the Israelites appears in any additional ancient Egyptian texts or any other Ancient Near Eastern texts until the tenth and ninth centuries BCE.²⁸⁷ Examples of such are the Mesha Stele from Moab that refers to Omri as the king of Israel (ninth century BCE), the stele from Tel Dan that refers to the "house of David" and the "king of Israel" (ninth century BCE), the Neo-Assyrian texts that refer to the "house of

²⁸⁴ Hackett, "'There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges," 147.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 147-151.

²⁸⁷ J Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 64, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 18.

Omri” (ninth century BCE), and Pharaoh Sheshonq I (Shishak in the Bible) who campaigned against Jerusalem seeking tribute from Judah in the tenth century BCE.²⁸⁸ Thus, there is a 300 – 400 year gap between references to Ancient Israel in the nonbiblical sources and archaeology. Why is there no other Egyptian or other Ancient Near Eastern text that refer to Ancient Israel in the central highlands of Ancient Canaan during Iron Age I? There are several possible answers to this question including Egypt’s incapability at the time and its withdrawal from the land,²⁸⁹ the fact that the records did not survive and/or we have not yet found them.²⁹⁰

Due to the lack of texts referring to Iron Age I Israel, some scholars want to discard the evidence from the Merneptah Stele concerning Ancient Israel’s origins since it is so unique despite the fact that archaeologists have deemed it a credible artifact of Ancient Egypt. In a sense, their main argument is that more evidence is needed to make a definitive case for early Israel’s emergence in Canaan around 1200 BCE.

Unquestionably, more evidence would be helpful and is needed, but until more texts are discovered or until more sites are excavated that unearth direct evidence for such theories

²⁸⁸ Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” 113, Carol Meyers, “Kinship and Kingship: The Early Monarchy,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 175, Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 225, Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 18-19, 129, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 61, Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel*, 12, 21, Joffe, “The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant,” 450, Herr, “Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: The Iron Age II Period: Emerging Nations,” 140, 150-151.

²⁸⁹ Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries B.C.*, 91. According to Miller, empires did not record the withdrawal from one of their colonies, perhaps in a sense to ‘save face’ or to not look so bad to future generations. Thus, if Egypt never recorded its withdrawal from the regions where Ancient Israel had established itself then it is more than apparent that we would never find such references to Ancient Israel because they never existed to begin with.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

historians can only work with the data available. Moreover, from these data historians can only then make their best guess as to which scenario is the most plausible.

Archaeology's Role in History

How then are we to view what archaeology tells us about Israel's origins and how, and from where, they arrived in Ancient Canaan? As discussed earlier, there is no direct archaeological evidence that Israel was in Egypt, left Egypt, and made its way through the wilderness of Sinai and the Transjordan and then arrived in Ancient Canaan around 1200 BCE and conquered the whole land. The silence from archaeology seems to suggest the biblical stories are not to be entirely trusted in regards to the Exodus and Conquest. The material remains in the central highlands of Canaan and the Merneptah Stele provide better and more concrete archaeological data that place Israel in Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze Age. The question then becomes how accurate is the archaeology of Ancient Israel, or how much can we trust archaeology and the interpretations of the archaeology by archaeologists?

Amihai Mazar discusses the answer to this question in regard to the evidence, or lack of evidence, of the Conquest of Canaan by Ancient Israel and Ancient Israel's origins:

Yet, the archaeological record is anonymous, and its use to prove any historical theory must be accompanied by a rigorous critical approach to the archaeological material itself. Archaeologists tend to determine precise dates of destruction, for example, on relatively flimsy evidence. In the discussion of the Israelite conquest it would therefore be best to treat the archaeological evidence with circumspection and to avoid basing far-reaching conclusions on it...Can archaeology contribute significantly to this issue or at least confirm or refute a given historical hypothesis? The answer is decidedly vague; the archaeological record can be used in

different ways to substantiate a given hypothesis... Yet these hypotheses do not provide an origin for the nucleus that developed the religion of Israel and maintained the traditions about the servitude in Egypt and the role of Moses and the revelation at Sinai in the history of the nation. It seems that archaeology, in its present state, can contribute nothing to the resolution of that question.²⁹¹

It is apparent that archaeology is not a perfect science, and since it can also be said that the field of biblical studies is also quite imprecise, working together to get the answer right might be the best approach in the end. While archaeology can shed light on a number of historical events and people, to trust the archaeological data and the interpretation of the archaeology by the archaeologists completely can not be the way to go nor can it be the definitive answer to the questions that surround history and historical events. At the present time, the ancient texts and the archaeology of Ancient Israel do not fully corroborate one another and there are still pieces missing from the puzzle because they have not yet been discovered and indeed may never be discovered.

²⁹¹ Mazar, "Iron Age I," 285, 295, 296, see also 281

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to they seed after thee.
Genesis 17:8

Critical View of Ancient Texts and Archaeology

How then are we to view the evidence for the Exodus account recorded in the Bible, the entire biblical account of the origins of Israel, and the archaeological evidence or lack of evidence to corroborate the biblical text? First let us look at the Exodus story. As noted above, most scholars believe the Exodus story is based on real historical events. They do not think that the story is completely false or solely a literary fabrication. At the same time, they approach the text very skeptically, as they should, until further evidence becomes available. Several archaeologists believe that the silence of archaeology on the matter of Israel in Egypt and the Exodus trumps the indirect evidence available and in a sense proves the Exodus never happened.

I believe this to be an erroneous way to approach archaeology, the Bible, and history. Archaeology has not proved that the Exodus did not happen; it has only proved that it is possible that it did not happen. Redmount states, “Admittedly, we cannot prove

that the Exodus took place; but we also cannot prove that it did not.”²⁹² The indirect evidence makes it appear that it was possible, but because there is no direct evidence it can be argued that it might not have happened. It is thus left to each historian and archaeologist to come up with his/her own interpretation of the evidence presented. In the end, we make our best guess as to what happened according to the evidence and through our own opinions. Then we offer the solution we find most plausible and let the debate begin. Until more texts and other archaeological artifacts are discovered to add more information and data to our knowledge of this subject, we are limited to the evidence presented above.

It is interesting to note that one of the reasons for so many different theories about Ancient Israel’s origin is the fact that archaeologists, and historians, observe the same archaeological and textual data and have different opinions concerning its interpretation. For example, Finkelstein’s opinion concerning the surveys and excavations of the central highlands region where Israel first settled in Canaan is that the circular formation of their villages resembles the way nomadic tribes form their tents when camped.²⁹³ He uses the circular formation of the villages as his main criterion to state that he believes Israel must have come from a nomadic background. While some agree with him on this issue, others argue against Finkelstein’s interpretation of the data and criticize him for stating such an opinion; thus they see the same evidence and yet do not agree on the same interpretation of such evidence. How then are we to understand the archaeological data if one archaeologist interprets the same data differently from another? Who then are we to

²⁹² Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” 88.

²⁹³ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*, 111-113, Mazar, “Iron Age I,” 287-288.

believe? Because I am not an archaeologist I must rely on people more credible in the field than myself and form my own conclusions on the basis of their opinions and interpretations.

With so many differing opinions and with a large amount of data, both archaeological and textual, there is a little collaboration among the scholars who study Ancient Israel. Such collaboration is necessary to answer the questions that surround early Israel and its origins. Dever acknowledges that “a dialogue between them (archaeology and biblical studies) is essential and beneficial”²⁹⁴ and that “it is our task as historians and archaeologists to penetrate as deeply as possible into past realities, with all means at our disposal, to learn if possible ‘how it was.’”²⁹⁵ Hess summarizes these same sentiments in his 2007 book:

Recent studies in the religion of Israel (which is vital and extremely significant to discovering Ancient Israel’s origins) have demonstrated the diversity of the sources in the textual and material culture that can and need to be used in constructing as full a picture as possible. At the same time, the many issues addressed and the ongoing disagreements about interpretation emphasize that no single method has demonstrated its competence for the interpretation of the field and that the gaps in the data create gaps in our knowledge.²⁹⁶

Hess goes on to state that the picture of early Israel’s form of worship is much more diverse than previously thought and that “great syntheses and sweeping generalizations no longer hold” with regard to how scholars attempt to present their theories on Ancient

²⁹⁴ Dever, Thompson, Ahlström, and Davies, “‘Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?’ Archaeology and Israelite Historiography: Part I,” 62.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 74.

²⁹⁶ Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, 80.

Israel.²⁹⁷ I believe the same can be said with regard to the treatment of the origins of Ancient Israel. Generalizations and specific theories that focus on one aspect of Ancient Israel's origins and utilize only texts or only archaeology while ignoring other evidence and data can no longer be accepted. Archaeologists, biblical scholars and scholars of Ancient Near Eastern texts need to work together. Without such collaboration among all fields and disciplines there will never be a more definitive answer to the question of where Ancient Israel came from.

Call for New Theories

There is an apparent need for more information on the subject of the origins of Ancient Israel and more importantly a need for new theories to be formulated. More information will be unearthed through current and future archaeological ventures and hopefully more ancient texts will be discovered. However, we may never uncover the evidence to prove exactly where Ancient Israel came from because it may not exist at all, or it was destroyed or it may just go undiscovered. Thus, until more information can be gathered and analyzed it falls upon scholars, historians, and archaeologists to work together to form new theories about the origins of Ancient Israel that make use of all the known data and all the different possibilities. Miller and Hayes state that in regard to early Israel

...we are cautious about saying anything. The evidence, or lack of evidence, is such that a confident treatment of the origins of Israel and Judah in terms of critical historiography is, in our opinion, simply

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

impossible. This is one of those places where the historian must be willing to concede that anything said is largely guesswork.²⁹⁸

Many others, including Smith, agree that the lack of both archaeological and textual evidence makes it difficult to write a history of the religion of Ancient Israel.²⁹⁹ With this in mind, I offer my opinion that it is evident from the arguments made in the text above that there is ample evidence for both a Canaanite and a non-Canaanite explanation for Ancient Israel's origins. Thus, I argue that any new theory must utilize both these elements in an attempt to understand the origins of Ancient Israel.

The Middle Ground and a New Theory

At this point let us take a moment to summarize all the preceding arguments for the origins of Ancient Israel from within Canaan and the evidence that its origins lie outside of Canaan. First and foremost, it is generally agreed upon that if there was a group that would later make up the Israel of the Bible that we know that left Egypt and traveled to Canaan then it must have been a group that flourished between 1250-1200 BCE. This coincides with the political and economic collapse of the Late Bronze Age system as well as with the mass population movements throughout the Ancient Near East at the time and it also corresponds with the evidence from the Merneptah Stele. Secondly, we know that there was an influx of people into the central highland regions of Ancient Canaan and to the extent that we have evidence for this, it suggests that it was not an increase solely due to an increase of births. Furthermore, this area was the

²⁹⁸ Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 78.

²⁹⁹ Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, xxii-xxiii, Mazar, "Iron Age I," 285, 295, 296, see also 281.

territory controlled by later Israel and is generally agreed upon as the region from which early Israel must have emerged. Third, we know that part of the establishment of early Israel must have been a consequence of pastoral nomads becoming more sedentary in lifestyle, always acknowledging that changing from one subsistence pattern to another is difficult to trace and groups fluctuated in between these two categories based on their needs. Lastly, we know that most recent studies show that Ancient Israel came mostly from the indigenous Canaanite population, yet the national god of early Israel was a foreign, non-Canaanite deity, Yahweh. With all this in mind we can now paint a picture of where the Ancient Israelites came from that shows their origins from within Ancient Canaan and from somewhere outside it.

The Canaanite Origins of Ancient Israel

The main theories that suggest Ancient Israel came from within the indigenous Canaanite population are the Pastoral Nomad theory, where the pastoralists in lowland Canaan migrate to the central highlands and become Israel, and the Peasants' Revolt theory. Does the evidence support any theory that argues Ancient Israel's origins from within Canaan? We know from the Bible that Ancient Israel venerated the god Yahweh as its national or patron deity. However, it has been shown that at times early Israel struggled with the idea of worshipping other gods, since the prophets constantly warned of the dangers of venerating deities other than Yahweh. The similarities of Yahweh with the Canaanite deities El and Baal as described in the Ugarit texts argue for the possibility that early Israel merely borrowed Canaanite deity imagery for Yahweh or that they added aspects of Canaanite deities to their own god.

The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 suggests that early Israel was a somewhat loose band of tribes, some within Canaan and some outside Canaan in the Transjordan area, who called on each other for aid. The most important evidence from the Bible is that it records the name of a group of unified tribes named after their god, 'Israel,' a name with the theophoric element 'El' within it and that the name of the god of Israel in some parts of the Bible is El, implying that El was the original god of Israel, not Yahweh, and thus arguing that Ancient Israel must have originated from within Canaan. Moreover, the overwhelming evidence of Canaanite religious practices and ritual, such as prophets, anointing with oil, and harvest festivals, all contained in the Bible, suggests the possibility that Israel came from Canaanite heritage.

Much of the evidence from archaeology also supports the claim that Ancient Israel descended from the Canaanites. Archaeology shows that Yahweh worship was gradually accepted in Canaan and that of the known religious shrines/temples of the Iron Age I when Israel is believed to have emerged in Ancient Canaan none can be positively identified with Yahweh as the deity venerated there and several sites suggest two or three gods or goddesses were worshipped there not one. The evidence from 'Ajrud and Qom imply that Asherah, a Canaanite goddess, may have been the consort of the god of Israel, Yahweh, suggesting Yahweh have been associated more with the Canaanite god El, who was the consort of Asherah in the Ugarit texts, not a foreign, non-Canaanite deity. Furthermore, the material culture of the central highlands in Iron Age I show continuity with the surrounding 'Canaanite' material culture and many believe it is difficult to distinguish an "Israelite" material culture from a "Canaanite" one. Lastly, the reliefs

from the Merneptah Stele suggest that at least to the Egyptians the Ancient Israelites were Canaanites, since the Israelites in the reliefs are portrayed the same as Canaanites. All of this evidence argues for the theory that the origins of Ancient Israel comes from within Canaan.

The Non-Canaanite Origins of Ancient Israel

The main theories to support the non-Canaanite origins of early Israel are the Pastoral Nomad theory, where the pastoralists come from outside Canaan, the Exodus and Conquest theory, and the Midian/Kenite theory. Once again we will examine the evidence for such claims. While at this point there is no way of verifying the Exodus tradition and the subsequent Conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, most believe these stories to be based in historical truth and not to be a purely literary creation. If they are describing a true history of Ancient Israel then early Israel must have come from outside Canaan as the story suggests and not surprisingly a main focus of the Bible is the theme of Israel as ‘outsiders’ to the land.

Along with other passages, the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 suggests that Yahweh, the god of Israel, was not a Canaanite deity and that he was from some land south of Canaan, specifically Teman, Sinai, Seir, Edom and/or Mount Paran. Additionally, the use of the name Yahweh in the Egyptian texts demonstrates that a group called the Shasu either lived in the land called ‘Yahweh,’ lived in the regions known to be the land dominated by the deity Yahweh, or were known as Yahweh worshippers to the Egyptians. This not only argues for Yahweh’s origins from outside Canaan and to be from the lands where the Shasu dwelt, it also implies that the biblical tradition of Moses

and Ancient Israel learning about the god Yahweh from those in Midian, a land south of Canaan where pastoral nomads lived, may in fact be true and not just a coincidence.

Archaeology also aids in our search for the origins of Ancient Israel outside Canaan. First of all, almost all (over 90%) of the personal names of the Iron Age within the boundaries set for what is believed to be early Israel are Yahwistic names, such an overwhelming majority found nowhere else in the Ancient Near East. Since Yahweh's origins were most likely outside of Israel, the evidence from the personal names implies that early Israel came from outside Canaan and used Yahwistic names, the name of a non-Canaanite deity, to distinguish themselves as such. Most believe that the material culture of the central highlands has enough distinctive features to differentiate between Israelite sites/remains and Canaanite sites/remains. The lack of pig bones in the archaeological remains seems clear evidence of Israelite sites. Since there are enough sites with this feature it is apparent that the material culture of the central highlands places early Israel, a group believed to have had a religious belief against the consumption of pork, in this region in Iron Age I. Moreover, the inscription from the Merneptah Stele gives the group 'Israel' a distinct determinative hieroglyph. Many believe this specific hieroglyph denotes Israel's political status around 1200 BCE – they were not settled in any land and they were rural and/or nomadic. All of this evidence argues for the theory that the origins of Ancient Israel comes from outside of Canaan.

A New Theory – The Yahweh/El Theory

In light of the evidence noted above we now attempt to piece everything together to form a theory that incorporates both the Canaanite and non-Canaanite origins of

Ancient Israel. Ancient Israel at its earliest formation seems to have been a league of tribes collectively bound in some sort of alliance, although at first it must have been very loose. The overwhelming push in modern scholarship has been the emphasis on the Canaanite heritage of early Israel and much of the most recent scholarship and literature produced on this topic provides evidence to support the idea that Israel came from the indigenous population of Ancient Canaan. While the evidence clearly suggests that this was the case, the question is to what degree early Israel was from Canaanite heritage, for if it were assumed that Ancient Israel descended solely from a Canaanite source this would ignore all the evidence that suggests Israel came from outside of Canaan. There is no doubt in my mind that Ancient Israel came from Canaanite stock due to the vast evidence that suggests this was so. However, there is also enough evidence to advocate that Ancient Israel must have also originated from outside Canaan, that is to say there are so many non-Canaanite elements contained in early Israel that we cannot ignore them. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a new theory that incorporates evidence from both archaeology and ancient texts that Ancient Israel originates from both Canaanite and non-Canaanite sources.

The Yahweh/El Theory, as I have termed it, is based on the assumption that Ancient Israel descended from two major sources. First, the El group which consisted of Canaanite tribes which lived within the land of Canaan and engaged in pastoral nomadism/herding and agriculture/sedentarization. For some reason, the El group decided to move itself into the central highland regions of Ancient Canaan during the latter part of the Late Bronze Age. At the same time, the Yahweh group, which was

probably not very large in number, decided to migrate from somewhere outside of Canaan, perhaps even from Egypt. This group, the Yahweh group, entered Canaan and began to settle in the more open, uninhabited, and less desirable areas of Canaan, the central highlands. As these two groups began to inhabit the same regions they began to make alliances with each other and began to merge their cultures, history and religion. This would have been possible only if the smaller, non-Canaanite group was a Semitic group, and thus related, however distantly, to the Canaanites, and most likely spoke a language similar enough to the indigenous Canaanites to make it easy for the two groups to come together.

To the new Israelite alliance, the El group brought a heritage of Canaanite culture as can be seen from the material culture remains that are similar to Canaanite material culture remains of the lowlands. Moreover, they brought the religion of Ancient Canaan with them, a pantheon of deities with the god El at its head. This group would have had to have been El followers/worshippers. The Yahweh group brought with them a non-Canaanite, foreign deity, Yahweh, into their new home along with great tales of a miraculous escape from Egypt and a unique covenantal relationship with their deity. For whatever reason, these two groups, the Yahweh group and the El group, decided to combine their religion under a tribal alliance, in which Yahweh would become El and El would become Yahweh. Furthermore, each group brought with them distinct religious elements to the newly merged religion, the El group all the Canaanite rituals and practices such as prophets and the Yahweh group all the non-Canaanite Yahwistic elements such as the prohibition against pork.

Such a merging of religious and cultural elements and a theory that emphasizes the two major sources for the origins of Ancient Israel allows us to answer some of the questions surrounding early Israel. Why do two names for the god of Israel show up in the biblical text? Because Ancient Israel came from two sources, a Canaanite El worshipping source and a non-Canaanite Yahweh worshipping source. If Ancient Israel came solely from Canaanite sources why would Ancient Canaanites discard their deities in favor of a foreign deity? This happened because they allied themselves with a foreign group that worshipped Yahweh and eventually a mixed culture, history and religion emerged as the tribal alliance grew. Why do the material culture remains in the central highlands appear to be similar to Canaanite remains (as well as Moabite and Ammonite) and yet Israelite? Because Israel was mostly Canaanite in origin, hence the Canaanite similarities, but the influence from an outside, immigrating group of Yahwists made Ancient Israel diverse enough to produce a distinctive Israelite, yet still Canaanite to some degree, material culture. Why are there so many Canaanite religious practices in the Bible? Because the religion of Ancient Israel, 'Israelite Yahwism,' was a religion that combined both Canaanite and non-Canaanite elements which reflected two major sources of religious influence, one Canaanite and the other non-Canaanite.

If the Ancient Israelites were meant to be monotheists as the Bible presents, then why did Israel follow other gods at times? This was because many of the people and tribes of early Israel were coming from a polytheistic, Canaanite background and it was not easy to leave that behind. If Yahweh is the name of the god of Israel why is their name 'Israel' and not 'Israyah' or 'Israyahweh' or something equivalent? Because

Israel's origins draw from two sources: the name of Ancient Israel reflects the fact that the early tribal alliance of Israel may have had El as the main god and then later equated Yahweh with El. Why does the Merneptah Stele portray Israel as Canaanites in dress and appearance in the reliefs, but as a different entity from the Canaanite city dwellers mentioned in the inscription? Because Israel was made up of a majority of people who were culturally Canaanite it would make sense for the Egyptians to portray them as such. Moreover, since Israel had not quite established itself in the land at the time of the stele and was a separate political and cultural unit from the other Canaanites, the inscription indicates the reality of that difference.

As one can see, it is apparent that origins of Ancient Israel were diverse and that studying one aspect of their origins results in skewing the picture to exclude evidence pertinent to the debate. I believe we must view Ancient Israel much like Stager described it as noted earlier in this thesis, that it was "a rural subset of Canaanite culture." This would help us understand why their material culture remains are similar to Canaanite remains and why they were distinguishable enough to be different from their Canaanite brothers. I believe that there is ample evidence to suggest that Ancient Israel came mostly from Canaanite sources.

However, this cannot be the sole source because all the evidence for this conclusion cannot explain why these apparent Canaanite people began to worship a non-Canaanite deity. An outside influence must have brought the god Yahweh into the land of Canaan. In my opinion, that influence must have been from a group that immigrated into the area which then merged with other Canaanite tribes in some form of tribal

alliance and began to spread the knowledge of their deity, Yahweh, throughout Canaan. It is still unclear why the Canaanite groups that would later become part of Ancient Israel would have accepted Yahweh as their god. Hence, at its earliest formation, Israel must have included two distinct groups of people: El worshippers from Canaan, and Yahweh worshippers from outside Canaan. It is only from this perspective that we can begin to understand the whole picture of the origins of Ancient Israel.

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