

2. The Peoples

The Land may be unsuitable as the homeland of a great power, but three outside peoples sought to establish such kingships as it *would* support.

1. From Ugarit in the North: The Canaanites

From his capital Amarna, Pharaoh Akhenaten (01352-01336) dominated Canaan. The towns beg for chariots to protect them from the marauding Habiru or 'Apiru.¹ That aid never comes. As long as they do not unite against him, he seems to care little who rules any *one* of them. Here are three Amarna Letters:²

Amarna #287. Behold, this deed is the deed of Milkilu and the deed of the sons of Lab'ayu, who have given the land of the king to the 'Apiru.

Amarna #288. The land of the king is lost; in its entirety it is taken from me; there is war against me, as far as the lands of Seir and Gath-carmel . . . I have become like an 'Apiru . . . for there is war against me . . . the 'Apiru capture the cities of the king . . . Behold Zimreda, the townsmen of Lachish have smitten him, slaves who had become 'Apiru.

Amarna #289]. . . Behold Milkilu and Tagu! . . . they have taken it, the town of Rubutu. And now as for Jerusalem – Behold this land belongs to the king, or why like the town of Gaza is it loyal to the king? Behold the land of the town of Gath-carmel . . . and the men of Gath have a garrison in Beth-Shan. Or shall we do like Lab'ayu, who gave the land of Shechem to the 'Apiru?

A century later comes the stele of Pharaoh Merneptah (c01230), recording a campaign into Canaan. It ends with the first on-record mention of "Israel."

The princes are prostrate, saying "Mercy!"³

Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.

Desolation is for Tehanu; Hatti is pacified;

Plundered is the Canaan with every evil;

Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer;

Yanoam is made as that which does not exist;

Israel is laid waste, his seed is not;

Hurru is become a widow for Egypt! . . .

Tehanu (Libya) was west of Egypt; Hatti, in the far north, may be a fanciful addition, or it may refer to Hittite refugee towns in Canaan. Of the Canaanite peoples, only "Israel" is written with the scribal signfic for a *people* rather than a *town*; it was thus new on the scene. But "Israel" means "strong in El," and El Shaddai ("El Almighty") suggests a warlike god. And sure enough, the worship of El (and Baal, "The Lord") became the dominant religion in all of Canaan.

¹ABD/Lemche: Not "Hebrews;" the meaning is "outcasts" or "bandits," and they are encountered at several parts of the ancient world, including the Hittite archives.

²From ANET 483-490; translation by Albright and Mendenhall, with corrections from Moran. For a complete translation of all the letters, see Moran **Amarna**.

³Or "Peace;" the Canaanite word *shalam* is used here (ANET 378 n16).

El

El was a sky god, giver of rain; the festivals of El are those of planting and harvest. This hymn⁴ (with original “El” restored) celebrates him in that role:

- Psa 29**
- 03 The voice of El is upon the waters,
the god of glory thundereth,
even El, upon many waters.
 - 04 The voice of El is powerful,
the voice of El is full of majesty.
 - 05 The voice of El breaketh the cedars;
yea, El breaketh in pieces
the cedars of Lebanon.
 - 06 He maketh them also to skip like a calf;
Lebanon and Sirion, like a young wild-ox.
 - 07 The voice of El cleaveth the flames of fire,
 - 08 The voice of El shaketh the wilderness;
El shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh . . .

The title El-Shaddai, “El Almighty,” sees El as most powerful of the gods. Such he is in this northern hymn, which, exceptionally, preserves the name El:

- Psa 82**
- 01 The gods (Elohim) take their places in the assembly of El;
he judgeth among the gods:
 - 02 “How long will ye judge unjustly,
and respect the persons of the wicked?” *Selah*
 - 03 Judge the poor and fatherless,
do justice to the afflicted and destitute.
 - 04 Rescue the poor and needy;
deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.
 - 05 They know not, neither do they understand,
They walk to and fro in darkness,
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
 - 06 I said, Ye are gods,
and all of you sons of the Most High.
 - 07 Nevertheless, ye shall die like men.
and fall like one of the princes.
 - 08 Arise, O God, judge the earth,
for thou shalt inherit all the nations.

El finally destroys these unjust gods, and reigns alone.

Biblical names are often *theophoric*: they contain a divine element. Personal names with “Yah” (Yahweh) and “El” both occur in the Bible. For example:

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Isaiah “Yah saves” | ~ | Samuel “El has heard” |
| Hezekiah “Yah strengthens” | ~ | Israel “El strengthens” |

But of 502 attested *place* names,⁵ not one has a “Yah” element; all are “El.”

The Hebrews were strangers in the land, and the land itself knew them not.

⁴For its northern origin, see Terrien 279, and more generally O’Callaghan **Echoes**.

⁵Zevit **Religions** 587.

2. From Haran in the West: The Chaldeans

They came from Ur of the Chaldees, near the mouth of the Euphrates. Their god, not mentioned⁶ in the Bible (and in Genesis often replaced by “Yahweh,” those replacements are bracketed in the quote below) was Nanna, the god of the moon and of wisdom, worshiped in Babylon, and even as far north as Haran. It is from Haran that the Chaldeans enter the story:

Gen 12:1. Now [Yahweh] said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee; [2] and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and be thou a blessing; [3] and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse, and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. [4] So Abram went as [Yahweh] had spoken unto him, and Lot went with him; and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. [5] And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls⁷ that they had gotten in Haran, and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. [6] And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Shechem, unto the oak of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. [7] and [Yahweh] appeared unto Abram and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land, and there builded he an altar unto [Yahweh] . . .

That promise to Abram we may call the Promise Narrative. It would presently be taken over from the original Chaldeans by the latecomer Hebrews.

3. From the South: The Hebrews

The pastoral people from the south brought with them their god, Yahweh. Like his people, he was portable. He was originally an image, carried about in a contained called the ark. At one point, after the Hebrews had arrived in the Land (if we credit 1Sam 4-6), the ark was carried by the Hebrews into battle. It was captured by the Philistines, and placed in the temple of Dagon in their capital city Ashdod, as a trophy of war.

1Sam 5:4. And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of Yahweh. And they; took Dagon and set him in his place again. [4] And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of Yahweh, and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands lay cut off upon the threshold;⁸ only the stump of Dagon was left to him.

Next, the ark caused disease in the two other cities to which it was sent.

⁶That the Chaldeans *had* a god is acknowledged in Josh 24:2, “Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.”

⁷The “souls” are probably servants. One (“Eliezer of Damascus”), probably acquired during an earlier stay of Abram in that city will be mentioned later (Gen 15:2).

⁸Just this much was left of Jezebel, when she fell to her death in 2Kgs 9:35.

Finally, the Philistines negotiated its return – not to Shiloh, but due to the death of one of its carriers on the way, who carelessly touched it to steady it, only as far as Kireath-jearim. From there, it would later be retrieved by David, to supply a god for his new capital, Jerusalem.

The affinities of Yahweh are with the land of Midian,⁹ with which area Moses is also associated.¹⁰ Midian may have been the common ritual center of many pastoral tribes (traders and metalsmiths as well as herdsman), though not the permanent home of any. One figure whom the Biblical texts recall is Jethro, a *priest* of Midian. It was while tending his flocks that Moses had his vision of a god – who at that moment was not yet called “Yahweh.”

It was agreed that a god had given the Land to Abram and his descendants. That is the Promise narrative. When it was taken over by the Yahweh party, much rewriting ensued, substituting “Yahweh” for “El” in many earlier texts, including the Psa 29 hymn we have just seen.

Yah was a war god. In the Joshua story, when the Hebrews enter the Land, they encounter many native peoples, whom Yahweh will “give into your hand,” in one-sided victories (§36). In the time of the kings, he is “Yahweh of Hosts” (*Yahweh tseva’ot*, 1 Sam 1:3).¹¹ When his own powers are exceeded, he has “the King of Babylon, my servant” (Jer 25:9) do his punishing for him, by attacking his own people (Jer 25:12). Yahweh’s real-world power may have been exceeded, but he is still in charge: it is noted (Jer 25:12) that this King too will be punished, when Yahweh is through making use of him.

The Chaldeans, as far as we know, lived at peace with the Canaanites and their god El, leading to a period of amicable joint worship. Not so the Hebrews: their god Yahweh demanded not only sole allegiance to himself, but the destruction of any other peoples and their gods. Thus:

Josh 10:36. And Joshua went up from Eglon, and all Israel with him, unto Hebron, and they fought against it, [37] and they took it, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof, and all the cities thereof, and all the souls that were therein; he left none remaining, according to all that he had done to Eglon, but he utterly destroyed it, and all the souls that were therein.

Any who find this distressing may find comfort in the fact that the Conquest is imaginary.¹² But Joshua asserts it as a fact, and offers it as an ideal.¹³

As for those other gods, the next chapter will take a look at some of them.

⁹Miller **Yahweh** (2018).

¹⁰Many like the Joshua picture, but the entry was *either* sudden *or* it was gradual. For the latter, see Hawkins and Ben-Schlomo (2018) and §39, Khirbet el-Mastarah.

¹¹For all his wielding of rain and storm, nothing of the kind is ever posited of El.

¹²Alt “Settlement” (1925) = Essays (1967) 173-221.

¹³That ideal is a problem for some in our time. Says Laughlin **Reading** (2015) 223, “Maybe it is time to put Joshua on the shelf, and leave it there.”