

44 A PHOENICIAN KING'S INSCRIPTION, THE MOABITE STONE, AND THE BOOKS OF RUTH, FIRST SAMUEL, FIRST KINGS AND PROVERBS

KING DAVID AND HIS FAMILY

THE SETTLEMENTS AND MOVEMENTS OF THE ISRAELITES

The Phoenician kingdom that Azitawadda ruled was small, but his ego was huge. He proclaimed his own greatness in a royal inscription: "I am Azitawadda, blessed of (the god) Baal . . . I have made peace with every king. Yes, every king considers me his father because of my goodness and my wisdom and the kindness of my heart."

Later in the inscription, Azitawadda bragged that, thanks to him, his people always had plenty to eat, that he had built a new city, and pleased the gods with his sacrifices. He believed that "the name of Azitawadda shall endure forever like the name of the sun and the moon."

But Azitawadda was forgotten for thousands of years until archaeologists discovered his inscription in the 1940s. We don't know exactly when he ruled. And we know even less about most of the other Near Eastern kings who ruled during his time. We don't even know the names of most of them. With the collapse of the five great powers, the Levant—modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—became home to many smaller kingdoms.

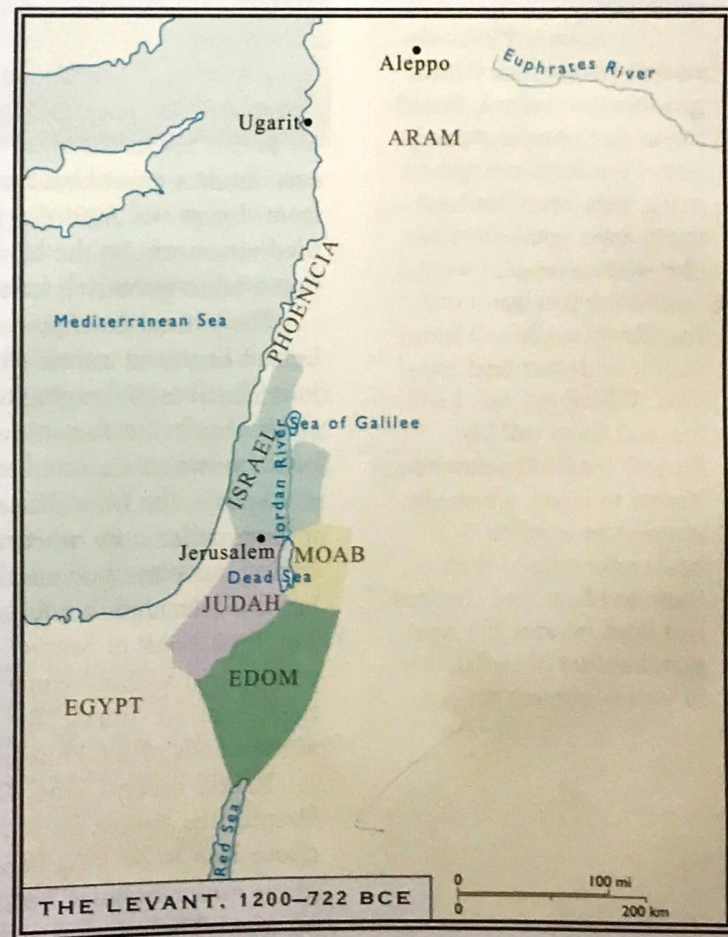
The years between 1100 and 900 BCE are called a "dark age" because so few texts survive to shed light on what was going on. In fact, historians would have very little to say about these two centuries in the Levant if it weren't for the writings of the people of Israel.

Israel and its neighboring kingdoms were alike in many ways. They all traded goods with one another, but sometimes fought over land. Their kings led troops, rebuilt cities, levied taxes, and tried to keep order at home. Shepherders, who moved from place to place with their flocks, had

founded several of these kingdoms, including Israel. One of these groups, the Arameans, became a major power in the Levant and controlled a large stretch of land. Their language, Aramaic, spread during the dark age and afterward. Aramaic became the language spoken by most of the Near Eastern peoples and was still spoken in the region more than a thousand years later. The people of Israel spoke Hebrew, which was similar to their neighbors' languages.

Despite many similarities, the Israelites differed from the other peoples of the Levant in this important way: they thought it was important to *write down* their history. They didn't just list their kings or copy a few inscriptions. Just the opposite: they wrote long books about who they were, what they did, and what they believed. Many different authors penned these books over hundreds of years. Eventually, editors put these texts into one book that became known as the Hebrew Bible. Its words have been copied, studied, and discussed, from the time it was written until now. This collection of histories, hymns, and prophecies never had to be excavated or rediscovered, because it was never lost or forgotten. So although we have almost no records from the Arameans or the other communities in the Levant, and little archaeological evidence, we can learn a lot about the Israelites' lives and beliefs from the Hebrew Bible.

The Israelites returned to the Levant around 1200 BCE. According to the Hebrew Bible,



44 Azitawadda, royal inscription, possibly 10th or 9th century BCE

THE STORY OF RUTH

The Hebrew Bible's Book of Ruth is about a young Canaanite woman who lived in the land of Moab with her husband, an Israelite. Ruth became a widow when she was still young. Her husband's mother, Naomi, decided to go back to Israel after her son's death.

The Hebrew Bible tells us that Naomi kissed Ruth goodbye and set out, intending to go to her homeland alone. But Ruth insisted on going with her. "Don't ask me to leave you," she said, "for where you go, I will go, and where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried." So Ruth went with Naomi to Israel, where she married an Israelite landowner named Boaz. Ruth and Boaz had children, and Ruth became the great-grandmother of David, one of Israel's greatest kings.

after a dramatic escape from slavery and a long journey from Egypt, the Israelites invaded Canaan, to reclaim land that they had settled before. At the same time that the Israelites were moving into Canaan, the Philistines were invading too. (The Philistines had probably been one of the Sea Peoples, who attacked Egypt in the 12th century BCE.)

For a time, the Levant churned with these invasions. It's a small area, about half the size of California, and it was overrun with people speaking many different languages and following many different customs. The invading tribes did not fight over customs, though. They battled over land. The newly arrived Israelites and Philistines first fought the local peoples, whom we call Canaanites, and then they fought each other.

The part of the Levant that was good for farming was just a narrow strip of land squeezed between the Mediterranean Sea in the west and mountains and desert in the east. Traders passed back and forth through this land, going from Egypt to Anatolia and from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. So the land, although it was small, had the potential to grow rich from farming and trade.

The biblical description of the Israelites' early years in the Levant begins at a time when the Israelites were organized into 12 tribes. Belonging to a particular tribe gave people a sense of safety as they moved into the new land, which had been known as Canaan but which they called Israel.

At first, the tribes had no single leader, uniting under a military ruler only when they had to fight against neighboring peoples. But after being repeatedly defeated, the Israelites decided that they needed a king. They chose Saul. The First Book of Samuel describes him as "an impressive young man without equal among the [Israelites] . . . a head taller than the others." But the Israelites still suffered defeat at the hands of the Philistines.

Israel's second king, David, was just a shepherd boy. Despite his simple background, he could claim that God chose him to be king because Israel's most respected religious leader, Samuel, had anointed him by pouring oil on his head. The people loved David and told about his adventures,



Samuel anoints David. This Syrian painting was made over a thousand years after David's lifetime, and his story is still important to Jews to this day.

tures, which have come down to us in the Hebrew Bible.

In one of these adventures, a hugely tall giant—a Philistine named Goliath—wearing full bronze armor and carrying a large spear and a sword, challenged the Israelites to "Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to . . . kill me, we will become your subjects, but if I . . . kill him, you will . . . serve us." David, just a boy, was the only one brave enough to take up the challenge, even though he was much smaller than the giant. David's only weapons were five smooth stones and a slingshot.

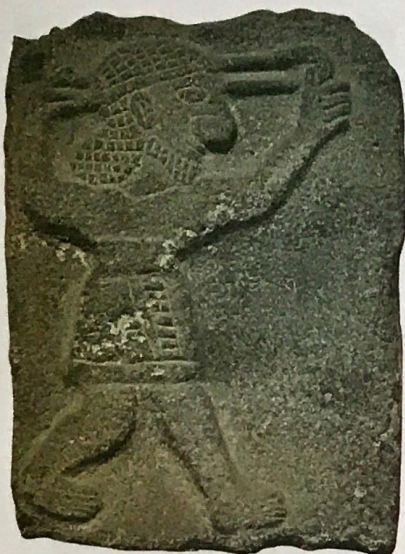
As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line . . . Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine. . . . The stone sank into his forehead and he fell facedown on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine . . . and killed him.

According to the Hebrew Bible, David moved up in the Israelites' army, became king, and united the land under his

COUSINLY BOOKS

The Hebrew Bible was the holy book of the ancient Israelites and is the holy book of their descendants, the modern Jews. Christianity developed more than a thousand years after Israel first flourished. Christians later adopted the Hebrew Bible and called it the Old Testament. Collected Christian writings eventually became the New Testament. Together, the two Testaments form the Christian Bible. The Quran, the holy book of the Muslims, also includes many accounts from the Hebrew Bible and honors many of the same leaders, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Moses.

44 1 Samuel, Hebrew Bible



A man takes aim with a sling, just as David did in the Hebrew Bible's story about David and the giant, Goliath. This Syrian sculpture was made about 200 years after David's time.

control. He conquered a city called Jerusalem, made it the capital, and built his royal palace there.

David was beloved by his people and is considered one of Israel's greatest kings. In addition to his talent for leadership, he was a musician and poet. Many of the Psalms in the Bible are attributed to David.

David brought the Israelites' most sacred object into Jerusalem: an elaborate box called the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was made from a fine, beautiful wood, overlaid with gold. Inside were treasures of the Israelite people, including two stone tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments—the most holy laws of the Israelite people.

After David's death, his son Solomon took over the kingdom. The biblical record describes Solomon as a wise king whose reign was both peaceful and prosperous. He built a new palace for himself and an elaborate temple to God, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Solomon traded with other countries, became very rich, and married many foreign princesses.

Solomon traded with the Phoenicians, Azitawadda's people, who lived on the Mediterranean coast just north of Israel. The Phoenicians were expert sailors, and their boats

THE WISDOM OF AN ANCIENT KING

King Solomon has been credited with many of the wise sayings in the Hebrew Bible's Book of Proverbs. The advice in Proverbs 15:1 is good "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

could carry them all the way across the Mediterranean. Eventually they established colonies as far away as southern Spain and North Africa, and they became very wealthy from the trade that they controlled. According to the Hebrew Bible, Solomon bought timber from the Phoenicians for his building projects, and he also hired skilled Phoenician sailors and laborers.

After Solomon's death, around 922 BCE, the kingdom of Israel broke in two. The southern part of the land chose Solomon's son as its king. These people kept Jerusalem as their capital city, but changed the kingdom's name to Judah, which was the name of the Israelite tribe that lived there. The northern part of the kingdom kept the name of Israel but chose a new king and a new capital city. For two hundred years, the two kingdoms shared a border. Sometimes they were friendly with one another; at other times they were at war.

In 1868, a British missionary traveling through the Near East was shown a stone with an inscription written by a Canaanite king of Moab, a kingdom near Israel. Historians were excited to learn about this stone, because the ancient inscription mentions a king of Israel named Omri, whom they had only read about in the Hebrew Bible: "the Israelites in the camp . . . proclaimed Omri, the commander of the army, king over Israel that very day there in the camp." According to the inscription, Omri had defeated the Moabites, a victory that the Moabite king blamed on the anger of his own god, Chemosh. "As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years, for [the god] Chemosh was angry at his land."

King Omri doesn't play a big role in the Hebrew Bible, but the Assyrians, who later controlled a powerful empire in the Near East, saw him as the founder of a dynasty of Israelite kings. In fact, the Assyrians called Israel "the House of Omri." With the discovery of this inscription, written during Omri's own time, historians at last had hard evidence that an early king of Israel actually lived and reigned, just as the biblical records claim.

“ I Kings, Hebrew Bible

“ Mesha, Moabite Stone, around 830 BCE

“Do not work to gain riches. . . . As soon as your eyes light upon [wealth], it is gone, for suddenly it takes . . . wings, flying like an eagle.”

—Book of Proverbs, Hebrew Bible

“Riches . . . have made themselves wings like geese and are flown away to the heavens.”

—Anonymous Egyptian author, “The Instruction of Amen-em-opet,” 7th or 6th century BCE