

Research article

Biblical and exterior sources concerning Old Testamental events

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Abstract:

This article should shed light on the written and iconographic sources in its Biblical context concerning peaceful contacts as well as confrontations. In that amplitude of finds in the Near and Middle Eastern region it is difficult to constrict the topic, for thanks to many excavations and a more elaborate science concerning disciplines as chronology, much information is won in recent years. There is plenty of material, in particular of mythological background. The main focus is set on the Old Testament, with some references to the New Testament. This contribution constricts on texts and depictions confirming historicity, for interpretation is less open in that field. After that nonetheless rudimentary overview the situation in the so-called Holy Land concerning archaeology and politics should be explained as well, and how both of them are used or rather misused. For that examination the perspective has to be widened, some sources are from outer regions, but referring to stories of the bible. In those cases it is mostly reports of conflicts, archaeological traces confirm peaceful contact among the tribes and nations. **Copyright © WJHCL, all rights reserved. USA**

Key words: Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Egypt, Jerusalem

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Introduction:

The written sources are still defined and wide-spread in the Western academic world, as the Classical Old History epigraphy comprises scripts on stone, metal and ostraka (broken reused sherds), material archaeologists are mainly confronted with in the Palestinian region, and papyrology that spans the mainly in Egypt existing papyri, whereas in the north they are not well preserved due to climate. Beside papyri that subject also encompasses ostraka again, as well as wooden and leaden tablets.

Mainly we find texts from outside confirming Biblical reports as Egyptian and Mesopotamian campaigns, a proper written source in Palestine itself came up quite late – initially we have to rely on those from the surrounding powers, beginning with Egyptian-Palestinian contacts in the Early Bronze Age I (3300 BCE) when at least cartouches of pharaohs Narmer and Den had been found on vessels and badges, in particular in the Negev, the area of Israel's southern desert, as in the EB-city Arad, west of the Dead Sea. Egypt expanded already quite soon, either by trade or invasion. When the Old Kingdom collapsed, in Palestine the first urbanisation stopped and people became nomads again, as archaeological finds prove.



City of Arad

But relevant textual finds concerning the relationship between Palestine and Egypt came up during the MBA, mainly IIA, when the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt ruled. Several Egyptian sources name social circumstances in Palestine, shading light on times of the so-called patriarchs as Abraham and Jacob. On one hand we are confronted with a huge amount of so-called Consecration texts, attached on tablets or figurines of Egypt's enemies, either persons or locations. After written down, they had been symbolically broken. The consecration texts are important for the list of cities and rulers in Palestine and Southern Syria, especially for their information about the development of the region. Whereas the first row of lists date from the 19th century mainly referring to tribes and only some few cities as Jerusalem and Ashkelon at the coast of present-day Gaza.³ One century later, in the 18th century BCE more settled cities are named, for the second urbanisation with all its social implications came up during that time. Another important text is the tale of Sinuhe from the 18th century. He has been an Egyptian officer leading an army in Palestine. When he had been abroad, the pharaoh back home

³Groß 2012, 115.

had been assassinated. Though innocent, Sinuhe fled and found shelter in Syria, being an honourable guest at a local noble.⁴ Later on, he could return under the new pharaoh. Beside the fact that the story reminds in some parts on the story of Moses who spent his time as refugee in Midian, that tale is interesting because of its description of the countries in the north, numerating agricultural products and the population not living in cities yet, but in camps showing up the transition from nomadic to settled peoples therefore confirming the circumstances of the Consecration texts. Concerning the story, it is not proved yet whether it is a true history or just a story incorporated in the targeted landscape description of the partially conquered north. And just to mention another text: A grave inscription of another officer – Hu-Sebech – from the 19th century reports a military invasion into the land of Reṭenu, as Palestine had been called in Egyptian sources, with some details about that country.

Concerning the patriarchs – Abraham and Jacob – several sources in Egypt are used: on one hand a tribe is mentioned called Rhm, therefore in Semitic language the name Abraham would mean Abu-Rhm / Abu-Raham – father or ancestor of the tribe Rhm, and that symbolism found place in the Old Testament; a patriarch standing for two peoples referring to him nowadays – the Jewish and the Arab community. Usually the grave in the Middle Egyptian region of Beni Hassan depicts Semitic people immigrating under guidance of a certain Abischai to Egypt, illustrated with many details.

During the so-called Second Intermediate Period in the middle of the Second Millennium BCE Egypt had been ruled for the first time by foreign rulers - the Hyksos, a Hurrite-Semitic people who had conquered around 1700 BCE Egypt, dominating the Delta. The capital had been set in the eastern Nile delta. From there they had been expelled by the pharaohs Seqenen-R^c, Kamose and Ahmose, founder of the Egyptian New Kingdom. That victory over the Semitic Hyksos often is equated with the Israelite exodus. Some reports about migrating people are mentioned in Papyrus Anastasi.⁵

Not proper texts, but confirming the contact with Egypt and showing its influence- mainly for invasion reasons in spite of Palestinian origin, are seals of two types found in the MB II context; the same time as the aforementioned texts: about 1800 – 1500 B.C. The first type consists of scarabs; very often just with geometric pattern and with signs without any significance, especially by Hyksos' influence.



Hyksos-Scarabs (from Tell el-^cAjjul)

⁴ Blumenthal 2005, 884 ff..

⁵ Tafel IV, 13-V,4. Max Müller, *Asien und Europa nach altägyptischen Denkmälern*. Leipzig 1893, 135. The scripts are deposited in the British Museum.

The second type are cylinder seals of the so-called Syrian style, originating from Alalakh and Aleppo (both cities of the kingdom Yamhad) as well as in Qatna (all of them in nowadays' Syria), found in Hazor in Northern Israel. It connects Mesopotamian tradition and local stylistic and iconographic innovations, including Egyptian motifs, for the Egyptians were forcing their way to the north. Later the Egyptian style had been adapted by the Hyksos, as concerning the scarabs.

Moreover some real written sources, giving a hint about rituals and society, but without any further historic exposure, are written in Akkadian cuneiform: Thanks to those spare finds it is secured that obviously Akkadian, the oldest Semitic language originating southern Mesopotamia around the 3rd millennium, had been used in the Palestinian region during the 2nd millennium. The Akkadian language and script is more common by its later adaptation and use by the great Mesopotamian powers as the Babylonians and Assyrians, furthermore becoming the *lingua franca* of the Ancient Near East. But it was already a way to write, for on the other hand, as mentioned before, the Egyptian hieroglyphic script was mostly just imitated, as on the scarabs, often without any sense. Though, compared to the kingdoms in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where complete archives have been revealed, 2nd millennium written texts in Palestine are still rare. Better sources are the Mesopotamian archives covering in their description regarding social structures perfectly the image of the patriarch's stories as e.g. Abraham's and Jacob's life.

The importance of Egyptian hieroglyphs changed when during the Late Bronze Age, from 1500 BCE on, they regained the Delta from the Hyksos again. Palestine became conquered by the restrengthened Egyptians and had been kept under their supremacy. And though, for correspondence still the Mesopotamian Akkadian had been used. The significance of Akkadian, even by Egyptian side is proved at latest, when the archive of Amarna has been discovered. Nowadays called the "hill of Hyenas" – Tell el-Amarna – the old Egyptian city of Achet Aton ("the horizon of the sun God Aton") had been founded by Ikhnaton, the pharaoh who initiated as first man a religion with only one God, a sun god named Aton. When that pharaoh intended to close all other temples, of course he got lots of enemies among the Gods' priests. Therefore he not only had to change the religion but also the art, to distance from former tradition – the Amarna-style had been born. Its forms only existed during his reign. The most important innovation concerning our topic though is the founding of the new capital of Egypt – Achet-Aton or Tell el-Amarna to be safe from inner enemies. During that generation there were no wars against other kingdoms, but only diplomatic contacts with their rulers. The texts had been stored in the city's archives, having found in the 80s of the 19th century. They show the correspondence between Egypt and on one hand its conquered vassals in Palestine, on the other hand with its rivals as Babylonia, Assyria, Mitanni and even Cyprus called Alašija, being quite important and mighty during that time. The texts reveal the relationship between all the powers, but also that between the Canaanite city states of Syria-Palestine rivalling each other. Obviously each bigger city had writers being able to use Akkadian. They even could use bi- and trilingual dictionaries as help. That common language was a step to oriental globalisation.

Nonetheless both, the Egyptian and the Akkadian always had been foreign languages and scripts in Syria-Palestine and for its inhabitants had not been bound to that tradition and religion – for the Akkadian and in particular the Egyptian had been holy scripts, they finally developed their own simpler systems. Presumably

those developments became the most important heritage for the Western world. Two forms came up, both influenced by their geographic sphere:

1. Ugaritic: named after a city at the Syrian coast that developed an Alphabetic system with 27 signs on the foundation of Akkadian cuneiform, because of its geographic position, not far from the Mesopotamian world. Some of those texts, mainly with mythological stories had been found in Palestine.⁶ It became extinct after the fall of Ugarit in the 12th century by the migration waves of the so-called “Sea peoples”.



Ruins of Ugarit

2. The second one had been the Protosinaïtic or Protocanaanite script, inspired by the Egyptian pictorial signs, but with their own Semitic words using as acronyms for each sign. They are known from inscriptions on rocks, vessels, stone and metal objects, mainly in the Sinaitic area, where Semitic slaves under Egyptian supremacy worked in the mines for gold, copper, and turquoise.

Some scholars as Gardiner refer those signs already into the 16th century, whereas the majority date them into the 13th century. The texts are rather short – the longest originates from the city Lachish in Israel on a vessel. In spite of the few finds, the revolutionary step is obvious. In contradiction to the former complicated different signs for each word, writing became more easily for common people: It was the first step to literacy in the Mediterranean world.

From the Sinaitic area the scripts spread northwards to the Canaanite, later on to their successors, the Phoenicians, who were trading sailors in the Mediterranean, exporting beside goods their scripts being helpful for ware lists. It became adopted by the Greeks, from there the alphabet found its way into the Latin Roman and Cyrillian letters.

Something else happened during that era, around 1200 B.C., changing the old world: Due to climate changes and social upheavals peoples from the northwest set to south, leading to the first migration of horrendous proportions: In a first phase the city states of Mycenae in Greece collapsed, then the Hittite vassal states, among them a town called Wilion. That name was incised on a seal, and thinking of the Homeric name Ilion for the Tale of the Ilias, it can be referred to the famous Troy. Cyprus had been devastated. When the so-called sea

⁶ Schuler 131-134, Dietrich – Loretz 210-219, Dietrich – Loretz 496-510, Dietrich – Loretz 94-101, Dietrich – Loretz 300-357, Dietrich – Loretz 501-505, Dietrich – Loretz 819 ff., Dietrich – Loretz 1091-1318.

peoples marched further south along the Levant, the Syro-Palestinian coast, they crushed cities as Ugarit (see above). Beside archaeological traces confirming the destructions by thick ash layers, Egyptian written sources even name the peoples who tried to invade Egypt: The temple of Medinet Habu shows and describes by words and images the battles at the Nile Delta where the Sea Peoples had been defeated by pharaohs Merenptah and a second time under Ramses III.



MedinetHabu

By language science most of the tribes are referred to regions from where they could have begun their journey. The Peleset had later been settled by the Egyptians in the area of Gaza, known by the name Philistines who were in conflict with Israel later on. Referring to the Old Testament they left their island Kaftor or Keftiu, present-day Crete. The Tjeker are from the ancient region Dacia (nowadays Romania), Shekelesh stands for Sicily, Danu for a Turkish region, Shardana for the island Sardinia, the Washash are not recognized yet. Anyway, along the Palestinian coast a power vacuum had been caused by the destructions, and even Egypt had been weakened. Those circumstances encourage Biblical scholars seeing the perfect timing for an Exodus by the Israelite people, having been able to flee from Egypt and to resettle the lands in the north. Real evidence is missing, beside the Old Testament, nowhere else any mention of Israel emigrating Egypt is given.⁷

Nonetheless, concerning the name Israel we have evidence from another Egyptian source, in the same context as the Sea Peoples: When pharaoh Merenptah defeated a coalition of Sea Peoples and Libyans, he also began a campaign against other enemies from the east, written down on a stele famous for the first mention of Israel: After a list of besieged and defeated Canaanite cities Israel is mentioned.⁸ The difference between the Canaanite cities, containing as determinative a rounded symbol with a cross as symbol for a fortified city with streets crossing each other, and Israel is the emphasis of its nomadic origin: As determinative a pastoralist stick is shown, as it is used for guarding sheep. Therefore that so-called Israel stele is the evidence that Israel had not existed yet as settled people, but as migrating tribe.

Both of the aforementioned events led to a decline of Egyptian power, not only for exterior reasons as the sea peoples, but also due to inner weakness, when the mighty priests of some temples became more and more

⁷ Hoffmeier 1999, 52.

⁸ Kaplony-Heckel 2005, 551.

independent from the Pharaonic court. The report by the priestly emissary Wen-Amun who was sent to Byblos in Lebanon to acquire cedar wood, is an important evidence. He had been robbed and persecuted, and had to stay at the sea port Dor, controlled by the Tjeker, former sea people. They do not show any respect, though he is sent by Egypt, proving the weakness of Egypt against Northern regions in contradiction to former times.⁹

Concerning the other still existing sea peoples, the Philistines, mainly the Old Testament of the Bible (Judges, Samuel) serves as literary source. Though, some seals from the area around Gaza show short inscription, of Cypro-Minoan type, confirming the Aegean origin or at least inspiration.¹⁰ Philistine sources date from the 12th to 10th century. Worth to mention are five arrow heads found near Bethlehem, belonging to the most important inscriptions from the 11th century. All of them carry on one side the sentence “arrow of ‘Abdlb’r”, on the other side “Ben Anat”. Ben Anat is a common name in Ugarit and in Egypt as well as in the Bible (Judges 3:31), where Shamgar Ben Anat as judge, therefore leader in the Israelite early history fought the Philistines. As regards to “lb’r” that name can be translated into “lioness”. The plural form “lba’im” stands for bowmen mercenaries who fought along with David.¹¹ David was the successor of Saul who fell against the Philistines at the Biblical Gilboa. He was buried on Jabesh Gilead, nowadays presumably located at Tell Abu al-Kharaz in the Northern Jordan Valley. Nothing proved the assumption of Saul’s presence, as far as that figure existed anyway. The context of the region east of the river Jordan is extraordinary, thinking of the general decline and collapse in the Near Eastern region due to sea peoples and Aramaean migrations.¹²

Furthermore, there are more sources in the Jordan area. After Egypt could not hold the Northern and Eastern areas, beside the upcoming of Israelite tribes, several kingdoms – the first examples of national states formed by proper ethnics- came up along the Jordan area. Ammon, Moab, and Edom. At the Southern end of the Dead Sea, at Wadi Mujjib, the so-called Balua stele was discovered, presumably referring to a Moabite ruler. The inscription is worn and unreadable nowadays, but the relief shows an initiation scene, where a lower goddess brings a king to a higher one. The figure reminds on illustrations of the Shasu-people from the 19th Egyptian dynasty.¹³ Those have been tribes migrating between Palestine and Egypt, sometimes even associated with other ethnics or rather social entity, the Habiru, sometimes equated with the Hebrews due to the similarity of consonants, nowadays contested or rather doubted. Though the stele is of indigenous origin, the Egyptian influence at the end of the LB / beginning of the IA (between 1200 and 1000 B.C.) is noticeable.

A further source by Israel’s Eastern neighbours, the Moabites, is the Mescha-stele, called after a Moabite king of the 9th century who is also known from the Old Testament.¹⁴ Here we have one of the first written evidences aside from the bible, mentioning the existence of a state Israel. It consists of black basalt and carries an inscription of 34 lines; between the words there are even points to divide them making the text more easily readable. The Moabite as Semitic language is related to the Hebrew. The text documents the house Omri, one of the first dynasties of Israel; moreover the Israelite God is alluded in tetragramme, one of the oldest versions –

⁹ Moers 2005, 912 ff.

¹⁰ Mazar 1993, 326.

¹¹ Mazar 1993, 362.

¹² Fischer – Feldbacher 2011, 377.

¹³ Mazar 1993, 267.

¹⁴ Kuhrt 1995, 469 ff.

JHWH. The stele is a royal construction inscription in typically oriental manner: dedicated to a God named Kemosh, but the king carries an important role. Therefore the stele served religious as well as political propaganda, especially for Mescha's victory over Israel, Judah and Edom, the southern kingdom.¹⁵ After their defeat the Moabite plundered Israelite settlements. With those actions Mescha freed his land, being vassal of the Israelite Omrides before, as is mentioned in the Old Testament 2Kings 3.

On the other side of the river Jordan, the present-day Israel, the so-called calendar of Gezer from the 10-9th century should be mentioned: It is a kind of division of the agricultural year, written in a proto type form of Hebrew. There are discussions about, whether it is a pupil's exercise, or a document for tax control. Several units are named, referring to sowing and harvest of different fruit. The quadrate hole perhaps had been used to attach it onto a wall.¹⁶



Gezer

One century later in Israel's north, in Tel Dan a basalt stele had been inscribed in Aramaic language, memorising the victory of the Aramaic king of Damascus over the kingdoms Israel and Judah. The inscription is important due to the mention of the "house of David", the oldest one referring to that king.¹⁷ Nonetheless from a historic-critical point of view that document is no evidence for the existence of David. Maybe in that time some tradition emerged already, lasting to the family tree of Jesus Christ for legitimizing his divine rule. Dating the Tel Dan inscription into the 9-8th century can be verified due to the stratigraphy. It had been found under the destruction layer caused by the Assyrians who devastated the country in the year 733/32 B.C. in a punitive expedition.

Another stele of Shalmanassar III., found in Kurkh in present-day Turkey reports the revolt of 12 states in the year 853 B.C. against Assyria, among them King Ahab. When Israel was part of that rebellion of Syro-Palestinian kingdoms and city states against their masters, they all had been crushed or at least submitted again. The different troop powers are numbered, among them Ahab.¹⁸ In that context the Arab tribes are mentioned the

¹⁵ Müller 2005, 646 ff.

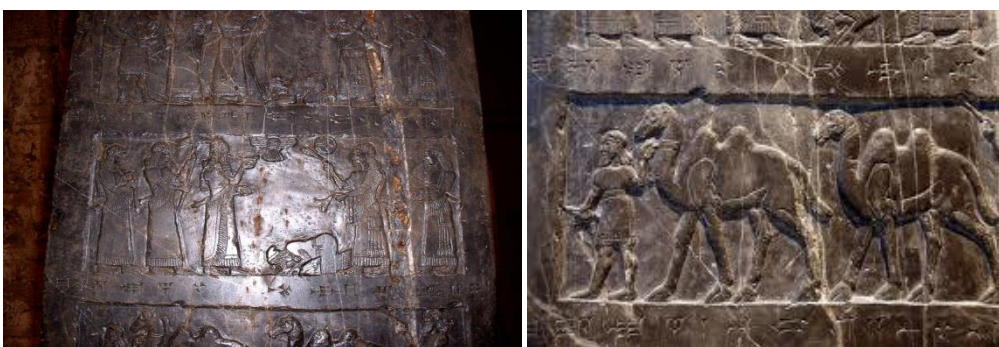
¹⁶ Conrad 2005, 247.

¹⁷ Kottsiper 2005, E-176; 2 Kings 8:16.

¹⁸ Kuhrt 1995, 488.

first time joining the alliance with dromedaries; and finally the battle at the Syrian city of Qarqar is described. The anti-Assyrian alliance had been defeated.

841 king Jehu of Israel parted from the alliance with Judah and Phoenician city states and became Assyrian vassal. Concerning those events a very important source is the Black Obelisk of king Shalmanassar III. from Nimrud, showing the power of the Assyrian king.¹⁹This obelisk is extraordinary for its image of an Israelite: the Obelisk carries 20 reliefs, 5 on each side, depicting subdued kings bringing tribute to the Assyrian king, for example even the king of Mušri – that means the Egyptian pharaoh, presumably Takeloth shown with camels, for with the upraise of the oriental powers the Egyptian dominion diminished, and so do Egyptian sources.²⁰ But the reason that the obelisk became important was the king in the second register, called in Assyrian: ia-u-a, sometimes identified with Joram, but more probable it is Jehu son of Omri from the Northern kingdom Israel.



Black Obelisk (British Museum)

Of course further revolts took place in the next years, but because of the Assyrian's severe arm never again that great as at the battle of Qarqar. After a new rebellion by the Northern kingdom Israel with its capital Samaria, the Assyrians destroyed it and deported its population. With its fall only the Southern kingdom Judah prevailed,

¹⁹Kuhrt 1995, 466 ff.

²⁰ In Semitic languages there is always a form of Misraim / Mušrim, the Egyptians nowadays call their country *misr*.

preserving Jewish tradition. But about 150 years later, in the year 702 B.C. rebellions against the Assyrian King Sennacherib came up – in the beginning in the east, and when the Western vassals became aware of that they thought it would benefit, among them king Hezekiah of Judah. They tried again to revolt. Those events had been described in the so-called Taylor’s Prism or Sennacherib prism. Generally it reports the construction of the city of Niniveh, but also the expansion of the empire. When he defeated the rebels in the east, he marched westwards.

The prism furthermore mentions at the end: “I enclosed King Hezekiah like a bird in Jerusalem.”²¹ Referring to a siege of that city, the Bible also mentions it (2 Kings, 2 Chr, Jesaja). Contradictory is the report of its end: Whereas Sennacherib went home after getting tribute by Jerusalem in accordance with the prism, the Bible tells about an archangel smiting of the Assyrian army, often equated with a pestilence forcing the army to leave.

Anyway, archaeology confirms the Assyrian reports about the campaign. Many cities contain destruction levels in that phase. One of the most impressive pictures of that war was the siege and conquest of Lachish in Southern Judah. The location itself consisted of a perfect glimpse on the tragedy that took place there: A siege ramp, many weapons, especially arrows and sling bullets, skeletons with traces of injuries, ash layers. Moreover the famous orthostats of the siege of Lachish had been excavated in present-day Iraq, at the palace of Niniveh, nowadays exhibited in the British Museum. Many details show the way of a siege during the Assyrian period, drowned men and a siege machine. Concerning written sources in Judah itself, especially from Lachish, remarkable finds are the seal impressions on handles of storage jars, the so-called “lamelech” – meaning “belongs to the king”. About thousand of those stamps are known, presumably all of them originating the same workshop due to clay analysis. The vessels have a narrow neck, broad shoulders, small base, and usually four handles; their capacity was between 45 and 53 litres. They have been found in different cities, all of them in destruction horizon of Sennacherib. Others still had been preserved in later times, as in Jerusalem that had not been conquered. Two types can be observed:

1. Beetle with 4 wings (therefore assumed as Egyptian influence)
2. Object reminding on a two-winged sun

Both of them had been concurrent. Below those symbols cities had been mentioned, sometimes also personal names. They had been interpreted as vessels for supply in cities that had been menaced by the Assyrians. A further evidence for the siege itself had been found: Letters written on ostraka located in the guards’ room between the inner and outer door, some of those letters sounding very desperately.²²

²¹Luckenbill 1924, 70.

²²Conrad 2005, 620 ff.



Lachish

That confirms again the Assyrian reports that one city after another had been conquered by the Empire, for those provincial cities had no chance against them. At the walls of some rock caves of Lachish prayers had been found, interpreted as written by refugees in their last days or hours.

Another remarkable context was the preparation against the Assyrian invasion in Jerusalem itself: During such times the water supply is one of the most important tasks. In 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles in the Old Testament a project under Hezekiah's reign is described – the tunnel. In fact in some parts already dated into the Canaanite times, therefore before the Jewish historic times, the tunnel had been extended under Hezekiah. Excavated from two sides, the dwellers met at a certain point in spite of an S-shape. That moment of appointment had been inscribed into the so-called Siloam-inscription, in a poetic style, one of the longest and most important Hebrew texts of the monarchic times.²³ Nowadays the inscription is exhibited in Istanbul, for in times of its discovery Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire and therefore sent to its capital.

As mentioned before, in spite of devastations in the Judaeen kingdom for whatever reasons Jerusalem itself had not been conquered by Assyria. The Oriental power did not last for a long time anymore, being conquered by a new rising one – the Babylonians. Judah became vassal under their supremacy but partially still independent. In the time of king Josiah, about 640 B.C. the idea had been born to unite the Jewish community. Religious reforms led to extinction of other remaining Canaanite cults, especially the still remaining cult of a female counterpart of God YHWH: Ashera. Originating the Syrian pantheon we know her better as Ishtar or Astarte,

²³Conrad 2005, 555.

she was common in the early Israelite religion, as the representations on vessels prove, for example from Kuntillet ʿAjrud from the 8th century in the Southern nowadays Israel, in the Negev desert. Due to tradition Moses and his people settled there for some time, fleeing from Egypt. Now, in Joshia's reign, only YAHWH himself should exist, as is told in 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35. Moreover a vast majority of Biblical stories originate under Joshia's rule to find a common history. Concerning the capital Jerusalem, finally becoming the ideological, political and religious centre, he extended the area and strengthened the defensive systems, including the area of the water systems, as in the present-day settlements called Silwan as heritage of the old word Siloam, referred to the tunnel's inscription.



Siloam/Silwan (Eastern Jerusalem)

His son Jehoiakim felt save enough to rebel against their Babylonian masters, also due to Egyptian encouragement who wanted to get more influence in the Palestinian area again. A Babylonian punitive expedition threw him from the throne and set another king onto it – Zedekiah. But even he revolted soon afterwards, in spite of the warnings by Jeremiah. One of the Old Testament books is dedicated to that prophet. The fall of Jerusalem was under their king Nebuchadnezzar II. in the year 587/586 B.C. and the Jewish exile, when they had been deported to Babylon. From those events buildings in destruction layers have been found south east of the Old city of Jerusalem – among them the so-called House of Ariel. The Jewish nobles, not the common population, as it is assumed many times, had been deported to Babylonia. There, as Babylonian sources as for example trade contracts show, many of them had been successful living in that society. Moreover there is the *Jehoiachin food ration tablet*. That Babylonian food ration tablet at least mentions a certain Jehoiachin, as a recipient of oil and grain rations from the Babylonian government, not really confirming it is the exiled king of Judah.



Destroyed structures in Jerusalem

What should be mentioned as well, are seals and seal's impressions, important concerning names, official titles, administration and iconography, most of them from the 8th to 7th century Judah, some of them from the Northern kingdom Israel, but even from the neighbouring kingdoms and city states as Phoenicia, Ammon and Edom, with a similar iconography but different names. A known example is the officer's seal with a roaring lion and the inscription "Shema, servant of Jerobeam".

Therefore not all of them returned to Palestine when they had the opportunity under Persian rule not even fifty years later. Though, as well as in Babylonia to differ from the non-Jewish communities, and later those who were returning home, wrote further texts concerning the common history of their people.

A common Jewish polity became the more important, for after the fall of the Persian Empire due to Alexander's the Great campaign, they had been in the following centuries under foreign rule, firstly under his successors, the Seleucids. Trying to enforce the Hellenistic way of life, the Jewish began revolts against them – the Maccabees should be mentioned. In the year 63 the Roman Empire absorbed that region, installing some kings as kind of governors, among them Herod the Great is known. In fact he was a foreign ruler, too, for his family originated from Idumaea, a region in the Southern present-day Jordan. In former times it had been called Edom, one of the kingdoms during the Iron Age beside Ammon and Moab. The more some Jewish sects needed to live isolated, the most famous ones are the Essenes, who had their refuge settlements west of the Dead Sea at Qumran. When the so-called Dead Sea scrolls had been discovered, they belonged to the oldest Biblical texts, dated to the

2nd and 1st century B.C. It must be emphasized that the majority of texts we are confronted with in the Bible are copies of much younger date. The papyri had been found in vessels, stored in caves. Though many of them have been translated and interpreted, still discussions are going whether they had been rescued from Jerusalem, or if they originated a scribe's workshop. Anyway, they belong to the most important sources for an understanding of the first versions of the Bible; and it seems that Jesus of Nazareth had been influenced by their ideas.²⁴



Qumran

In spite of the importance of those scrolls they are not the oldest collection of Biblical texts. Here we have to go back once more into the times before the Babylonian exile: In 1979 two tiny silver scrolls, inscribed with portions of the well-known apotropaic Priestly Blessing of the Book of Numbers 6:24-25, part of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, also called the Books of Moses, and apparently once used as amulets, were found in one of the burial chambers cut into the rock, located southwest of the Old City of Jerusalem.²⁵ The delicate process of unrolling the scrolls while developing a method that would prevent them

²⁴Wise – Abegg – Cook 1997, 16 ff.

²⁵Mazar 1995, 516 ff. and 524.

from disintegrating took three years. Brief as they are, they contain what may be nowadays the oldest surviving texts from the Bible, dating from around 600 BCE.

It can be observed that in Old Testament environment the majority consists of inscriptions, official texts, short notices on ostraka and dedications. The material is mainly stone as walls and caves, as well as pottery due to their long lasting preservation, and seals. But we should never underestimate the vast amount of written sources, lost due to material, as non-burnt clay and in particular papyri, not comparable with Egypt. Here we have only the Qumran scrolls and the text of Muraba'at, south of Qumran, a debenture of the times of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Seleucids. Nonetheless it can be assumed that thanks to wide spread ostraka the capability of writing increased among the population, for they usually have been used concerning lists of trade, letters or even exercising texts, written with black ink. The societies had plenty of ostraka, for they had been just broken all-day life vessels, supplying the science with a magnificent glimpse into the society and daily life. Monumental inscriptions as we know from the Mesopotamian and Egyptian sphere are rare, to mention at least once more the Siloam inscription in the tunnel of Hezekiah.

The question for historic reliability of the Bible sparks off interest, emotion and often heavy disputes, more for religious and political reasons than historic ones as mentioned above. Professional discussions often degenerate to personal attacks.²⁶ This rather small area is still an ideological and political battleground. Moreover the break-out of conflicts complicates excavations and researches,²⁷ beside the general human tragedy having negative influence on tourism and therefore on economics. Countries, weakened by the crisis anyway, lose another source of income. Those conflicts also have long-term consequences. After rebuilding infrastructure, relics of the past do not have priority. They become destroyed or sold to antique dealers, destroying findings. Archaeology can only be treated adequately in a peaceful framework. It should be emphasized at last that the intention of the Holy Book was to uncover forms of violence and to show the path to overcome it. But as always, the Bible can be interpreted differently, either living the citation „Death rather than dishonour“ (reminding on Lev 26:36-37, Deut 20:5-9 and Dan 3) - as been used for soldiers of the Israel Defense Force inaugurating them in Masada after having completed their Tironut (IDF [military] basic training)²⁸, or in finally and hopefully choosing the more constructive path to a peaceful solution, not only resolutions, concerning the conflict in the Holy Land and the whole Near Eastern Region. As already the Psalms 46, 10 in the Old Testament say:

“Breaking bow, shattering the spear, burning the shield, melting the sword!”

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²⁶ As Israel Finkelstein once said, „the battle for the Bible is becoming more fierce!“ Finkelstein – Silberman 2001, 4.

²⁷ The author of that article participated at the Swedish-Palestinian excavations in Tell el-Ajjul in Gaza as part of the SCIEM 2000 project, still being put off its plans continuing due to the Second Intifada in the year 2000 (see below).

²⁸ Though at least military, religious and ethic basic values exist as IDF's official doctrine as *Tohar ha-Neschek* („Purity of the Weapon“) and *Pikuach nefesch* („Rescuing Life“).

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