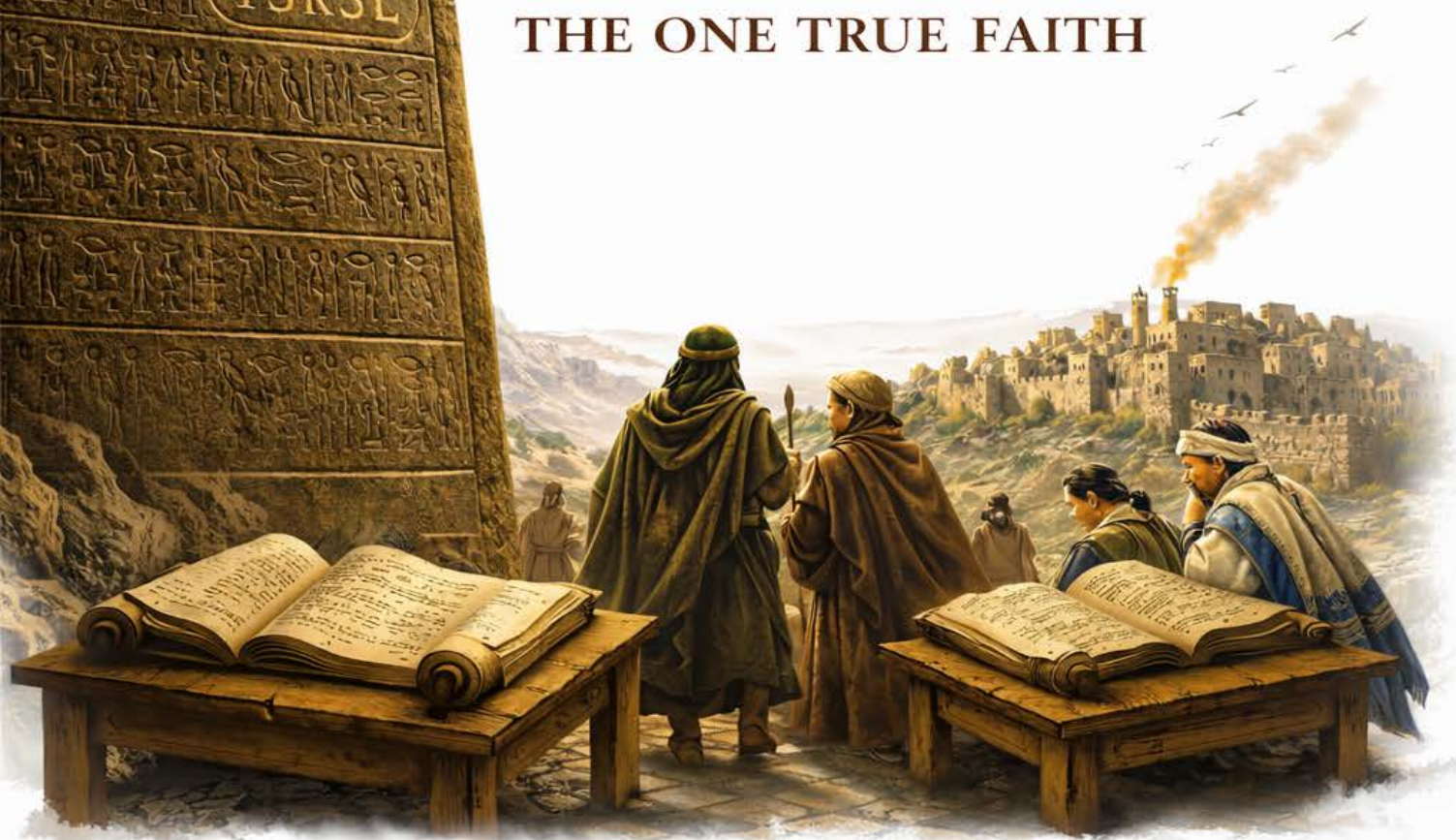




THE JEALOUS GOD

HOW REFUGEES,
BANDITS, AND SCRIBES
INVENTED
THE ONE TRUE FAITH



TOM SCHUSTER

THE JEALOUS GOD

How Refugees, Bandits, and Scribes Invented the One True Faith

A history of Israel's origins, from the outlaws of the Bronze Age hills to the sword of John Hyrcanus - and how a small, battered people gave the world the idea that would end the age of many gods.

"Israel is laid waste; his seed is not." - The Merneptah Stele, Egypt, c. 1207 BC. The first mention of Israel in history is an obituary. It was premature.

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE: A PLACARD IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM	5
CHAPTER ONE: THE OUTLAWS - EGYPT'S CANAAN AND THE HAPIRU PEOPLE	8
An empire of protection money	8
Rameses tightens the screws	9
Who were they? The evidence of the pig	10
CHAPTER TWO: FROM BANDITS TO KINGS - HOW THE MARGINS TOOK OVER	12
The oldest career path in the Near East	12
The kingdom that history forgot it had two of	12
CHAPTER THREE: THE HOUSE OF OMRI - ISRAEL'S FORGOTTEN GOLDEN AGE	14
The general who bought a hill	14
Same gods, different management	15
CHAPTER FOUR: THE FALL OF THE NORTH AND THE MAKING OF JUDAH	18
Assyria arrives	18
The refugee boom: Jerusalem transformed	19
Life in the empire's service: vassal, buffer, and entrepôt	20
CHAPTER FIVE: INVENTING THE PAST - JOSIAH & DEUTERONOMY	22
A convenient discovery	22
The uses of centralisation	24
Writing the nation	24
CHAPTER SIX: GODS OF THE LAND - WHAT ISRAELITE RELIGION ACTUALLY WAS	26
A landscape full of altars	26
"Yahweh and his Asherah"	26
The altar as an economy	27
CHAPTER SEVEN: THE GOD WHO LEARNED TO SAY "ONLY"	28
The Mosaic distinction	28
The pharaoh who tried it first	28
Forged in defeat	29
CHAPTER EIGHT: THE QUIET CENTURIES - PERSIA, THE TEMPLE, & THE EDITORS	31
A province of ruins	31
The editors at work	31
Postcards from the other Judaism: Elephantine	33
CHAPTER NINE: TWO MOUNTAINS - GERIZIM, JERUSALEM, AND THE SWORD	35
The rival on Gerizim	35
The Hasmonean state and the price of legitimacy	36
By the sword	36
CHAPTER TEN: WEST'S CONQUEST: EXCLUSIVISM ENDED AGE OF MANY GODS	38
Three heirs	38
The law does what the sermon cannot	39
The price and the prize	40
EPILOGUE: HOW COULD WE KNOW? A NOTE ON EVIDENCE AND HONEST DOUBT	42
SOURCES AND FURTHER READING	43

Table of Figures

FIGURE 1 CHRISTIANITY UNEARTHED	4
FIGURE 2 THE IRON AGE KINGDOMS: ISRAEL & JUDAH - BRITISH MUSEUM	5
FIGURE 3 EGYPTIAN DOMINATION - BRITISH MUSEUM	6
FIGURE 4 MAP OF THE LAVANT - BRITISH MUSEUM	8
FIGURE 5 LETTER FROM ABI-MILKU OF TYRE TO KING OF EGYPT 1353–36 B.C.E.	9
FIGURE 6 THE MERNEPTAH STELE	11
FIGURE 7 TEL DAN STELE, NORTHERN ISRAEL - 9TH CENTURY BCE	13
FIGURE 8 MEGIDDO (ARMAGEDDON), NORTHERN ISRAEL, 9TH CENTURY BCE	14
FIGURE 9 ELIJAH VS THE PRIESTS OF BAAL - LUCAS CRANACH THE YOUNGER	16
FIGURE 10 ANCIENT ASSYRIA C. 700 CE - AUTHOR NINGYOU	18
FIGURE 11 SIEGE OF LACHISH 701 BCE	19
FIGURE 12 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, CARAVAGGIO 1598 UFFIZI GALLERY	22
FIGURE 13 THE BIBLE UNEARTHED	25
FIGURE 14 ASHERAH, RAS SHAMRA (UGARIT) C. 1300 BCE - LOUVRE, PARIS	27
FIGURE 15 AKHENATEN IN THE GARDEN OF ARMANA	28
FIGURE 16 THE RATCHET TOWARDS MONOTHEISM	30
FIGURE 17 ISAIAH - 3 CENTURIES' TEXTS IN ONE	31
FIGURE 18 THE ALTAR AT MOUNT GERIZIM (RECONSTRUCTION)	35
FIGURE 19 ISRAEL'S ROAD TO MONOTHEISM	37
FIGURE 20 THE THREE TURNS OF MONOTHEISM	38
FIGURE 21 THE NARROWING OF THE FIELD 50 - 500 CE	39

PREFACE

Every history has a shape before it has a sentence. This one began as a voice.

For the past few years I have been telling the story of how the Judeo-Christian world was made, and then remade, across four thousand years, by writing, and in a podcast and YouTube series called Christianity Unearthed.

I began with Age II, the years from 0 to 500 CE, and the story of how one man became a religion. So many of you asked where that story began, and what made the world that made him, that I went back and wrote the pre-story. The book in your hands is that pre-story, the first movement of the larger work. It is Age I, the long formation of the biblical world before Christianity, the centuries in which a fringe people of the Bronze Age hills slowly, and against every expectation, gave the world the idea that would end the age of many gods.

The series runs in five Ages across the whole arc, from the first altars in Canaan to the last. Each stands on its own, and each feeds the next. This book ends at a sword on a northern mountain, with the idea it has traced about to pass into the hands that would remake the world a second time. The podcast is where that story goes on.

I would be glad if you followed it there. The show is where the argument lives and breathes, with the maps, the manuscripts, the ruined cities, and the artefacts laid out on the screen where a printed page cannot carry them. It is free, it runs on YouTube and on every podcast platform, and a new episode is published every Tuesday morning. You can find it by searching for Christianity Unearthed, or at the channel @christianityunearthed. If it speaks to you, please subscribe, and leave a like or a comment. It costs nothing, and it is the surest way to help other people find the work.

Everything else sits at christianityunearthed.com: the full run of episodes, a glossary, maps, source notes, and the reference materials behind the claims in these pages.

This is history built from stone and potsherd and tax record, and no honest history is ever finished. I have tried throughout to show my evidence and to mark the places where it runs thin, because a reader who can weigh the case is worth more to me than one who simply takes my word. If you find an error, or you know something I do not, I want to hear it. Write to me at contact@christianityunearthed.com. I read what arrives.

Now to the beginning, which is not a burning bush or a parted sea, but a placard behind glass in a quiet museum gallery, and the sentence on it that changes everything.

Tom Schuster



*Figure 1 Christianity
Unearthed*

Prologue: A Placard in the British Museum

It sits behind glass in a quiet gallery, next to a few unremarkable clay jars: a museum placard, the kind most visitors walk past. It says that in the reign of Rameses II, Egypt reorganised its empire in Canaan. Strategic cities like Beth Shan and Gaza were strengthened; others were allowed to rot. People lost their homes and their livelihoods, drifted up into the Judean hill country, and scratched out small farming settlements. And then comes the sentence that stops you, if you know what you are looking at: *These dispossessed Canaanites, known to the Egyptians as Hapiru, formed the basis of what was to become Israel.*

Read that again. Not slaves marching out of Egypt behind a prophet with a staff. Not twelve tribes crossing the Jordan behind the Ark of the Covenant while walls came tumbling down. Dispossessed Canaanites. Locals. People who were already there, pushed to the margins by an empire that had stopped caring about them, who walked uphill and started over.

A few paces on, a second placard quietly finishes the demolition. Around 1150 BC, it says, the Egyptians withdrew from Canaan, leaving Canaanites in the lowland cities, “Israelites (Canaanite pastoralists)” in the hills, and the newly arrived Philistines on the coast - and then two and a half centuries of impoverished recession, out of which the first Hebrew kingdom to emerge was not David’s Jerusalem but the **northern Kingdom of Israel, formed in the ninth century under the Omride dynasty at Samaria**, perhaps catalysed by nothing more romantic than Philistine pressure. And Judah? The label is almost apologetic: quite when Judah broke away from *Israelite control* to become an independent kingdom “is difficult to determine, but it would seem unlikely to have occurred before the demise of the Omride dynasty” - and the first time

THE IRON AGE KINGDOMS: ISRAEL AND JUDAH

Around 1150 BC, the Egyptians withdrew from Canaan. They left a tense and unstable situation with Canaanites occupying their cities in the lowlands, Israelites (Canaanite pastoralists) living in the hill country, and the more recently settled Philistines occupying the coastal plain. Deeply impoverished by the removal of Egyptian resources, the region experienced a period of pronounced economic recession which lasted nearly 250 years.

Although poor and ill-documented, this period of recession saw the gradual re-integration of Israelite and Canaanite populations and the inevitable period of conflict with the Philistines over territory. It might well have been the pressure of Philistine expansion that served as a catalyst to unify the scattered communities of Israelites, leading in the 9th century BC to the formation under the Omride dynasty of the Kingdom of Israel with its capital at Samaria.

Quite when Judah broke away from Israelite control to form an independent kingdom with its capital at Jerusalem is difficult to determine, but it would seem unlikely to have occurred before the demise of the Omride dynasty in Samaria in the 8th century. The first record referring to Judah occurs, in fact only in the reign of Tiglath Pileser III (745-727 BC), when a king of Jerusalem, Ahaz, appealed to the Assyrians for help against his neighbours.



Excavations in progress at Omri and Ahab's capital, Samaria, in the 1930's.
Palestine Exploration Fund

Figure 2 The Iron Age Kingdoms: Israel & Judah - British Museum

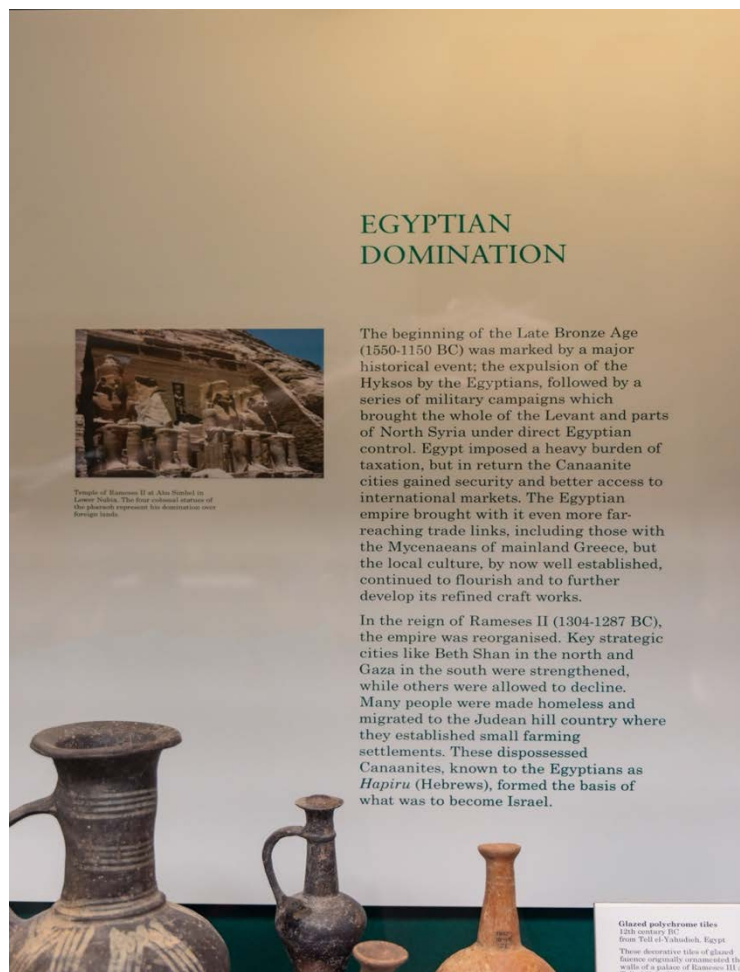


Figure 3 Egyptian Domination - British Museum

Judah appears in any external record at all is in the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC), when a king of Jerusalem named Ahaz comes begging the empire for protection against his neighbours. There, in two museum labels, is the whole inversion this book will unpack: no exodus, no conquest, no united monarchy with a breakaway north - instead an indigenous hill people, a great *northern* kingdom that came first, and a Judah that enters recorded history late, small, and pleading, quite possibly as the north's own former junior dependency rather than its wronged mother country. The Bible tells the story of two kingdoms as elder Judah and rebel Israel. The ground, and now even the museum wall, tells it the other way round.

This book is the story behind those placards. It is a story

assembled from potsherds and pig bones, from radiocarbon curves and Assyrian tax records, from a stone in Jordan boasting of dead Israelites and a bundle of papyrus letters written by homesick Jewish soldiers on an island in the Nile. It is the story of how a fringe population of Bronze Age outlaws became a kingdom, how that kingdom was destroyed, how its poorer southern neighbour inherited its refugees and quietly stole its past - and how, under the hammer blows of one catastrophe after another, a thoroughly ordinary Canaanite religion of many gods hardened into something the ancient world had never managed to sustain before: a faith that said *there is one God, and all the others are lies*.

That idea - exclusive monotheism - went on to conquer the Western world. Christianity carried it into Rome, Islam carried it across three continents, and between them they extinguished four thousand years of cheerful religious mixing in a few centuries. Whether that was humanity's great leap forward or its great narrowing is a question this book will leave with you. But how it happened - that, we can now tell with remarkable confidence, and the story is stranger, bloodier, and more human than the one in Sunday school.

A note on the line this book takes. The origins of Israel are contested academic territory, split - with only slight caricature - between the University of Tel Aviv and the older

academies of Jerusalem, between those who read the archaeology first and fit the Bible to it, and those who read the Bible first and fit the archaeology to it. This book follows the first camp: the broadly “low chronology” school associated above all with Israel Finkelstein and his colleagues, which over the past thirty years has moved from insurgency to something close to the field’s centre of gravity. Where the evidence is genuinely disputed, I will say so, briefly, and move on. Where a claim in these pages is a minority position, I will flag it. But I will not litigate every skirmish in the footnotes. This is a story, and a story needs a spine.

Chapter One: The Outlaws - Egypt's Canaan and the People Called Hapiru

An empire of protection money

To understand where Israel came from, forget Israel. Start with Egypt, because in the Late Bronze Age - roughly 1550 to 1200 BC - Canaan was not a country. It was a province, and not an especially valued one: a corridor of vassal city-states through which Egypt's real interests (trade with the north, timber from Lebanon, buffer against the Hittites) happened to pass.

The system worked like a protection racket run at continental scale. Each Canaanite city - Megiddo, Hazor, Shechem, Lachish, Gezer, Jerusalem, and dozens more - had its own kinglet, its own temple, its own little court, and its own obligation to send tribute south and grovel on demand. We know exactly how the grovelling sounded, because in 1887 an Egyptian peasant woman digging for fertilizer at Tell el-Amarna found the pharaoh's diplomatic mailbag: nearly four hundred clay tablets of correspondence from the mid-1300s BC, much of it from these Canaanite mayors. The Amarna letters are the ancient Near East's great comic archive



Figure 4 Map of the Lavant - British Museum

of sycophancy - “I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, my Sun, seven times and seven times, on the belly and on the back” is a standard opening - and beneath the flattery runs a constant whine of panic. The mayors are afraid. And the thing they are most afraid of, letter after letter, is a category of people they call the **Apiru** - in other spellings, Hapiru or Habiru.

“The Apiru are taking the cities of the king,” wails Abdi-Heba, the mayor of Jerusalem, in one letter. “If there are no archers this year, all the lands of the king, my lord, will be lost.” Rib-Hadda of Byblos writes over fifty letters, most of them variations on the theme that everyone around him is defecting to the Apiru and pharaoh does nothing. The word turns up from Egypt to Anatolia to Mesopotamia across several centuries, and scholars argued for a hundred years about whether *Hapiru* was simply an early form of *Hebrew*. The consensus that emerged is more interesting than either a yes or a no: **Hapiru was not an ethnic label at all**. It was a social one. It meant something like *outlaw, drifter, person outside the system* - runaway debtors, fugitive peasants, dispossessed farmers, brigands, and, tellingly, mercenaries. You were not born a Hapiru; you *became* one, the way a man in another age became an outlaw or a Cossack, by falling - or jumping - out of respectable settled society. Not every Hapiru became an Israelite, and the equation on the museum placard is a simplification. But that some of the people who became Israel came out of this floating population of the excluded - that is now close to common ground, and it is the thread we will follow.

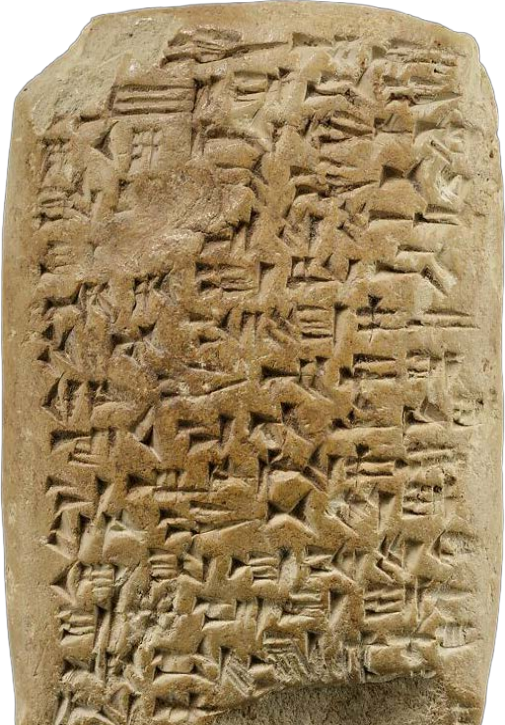


Figure 5 Letter from Abi-milku of Tyre to the king of Egypt ca. 1353–1336 B.C.E. - Metropolitan Museum

Rameses tightens the screws

Then Egypt changed the rules. Under Rameses II (whose reign is conventionally dated 1279–1213 BC; the British Museum placard’s older dating of 1304–1287 reflects a chronology now largely abandoned, a reminder that even museum labels have shelf lives), the empire in Canaan was reorganised for efficiency. Egypt stopped trying to hold everything and concentrated on what mattered: garrison cities on the strategic arteries. Beth Shan, guarding the junction of the Jezreel and Jordan valleys, was rebuilt as an Egyptian stronghold - its excavated levels from this period are full of Egyptian architecture, Egyptian pottery, even Egyptian-style burials. Gaza anchored the south as the administrative capital. Cities off the main roads were allowed to wither.

For the people of those withering towns, imperial rationalisation meant ruin. And ruin, in the Late Bronze Age, had a geography of escape: **the hills**. The central highland spine of

Canaan - the rocky, wooded, spring-poor country running from the Galilee down through Samaria into Judah - had always been the region's margin, thinly settled precisely because it was hard country. Hard country is bad for tax collectors and good for people avoiding them. Through the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BC, as the entire eastern Mediterranean slid into the general catastrophe historians call the Late Bronze Age collapse - the Hittite empire vanishing, Ugarit burning, the Sea Peoples (among them the Philistines) crashing onto the coast, Egypt itself finally staggering home - the hills began to fill up.

Archaeological surveys conducted since the 1970s, above all the fieldwork synthesised by Israel Finkelstein, revealed the scale of it. In the highlands that would become the heartland of Israel, the number of settled sites explodes from a few dozen in the Late Bronze Age to over **250 villages by the eleventh century BC**, housing perhaps 45,000 people. These were not cities. They were hamlets: rings of simple pillared farmhouses, often laid out in an oval around a central livestock pen - a plan that looks, suggestively, like a herdsman's tent camp translated into stone. No temples. No palaces. No fortifications to speak of. Terraced hillsides, plastered cisterns for catching winter rain, stone-lined silos for grain. Poverty, but self-sufficient, defensible poverty.

Who were they? The evidence of the pig

Here is the crucial question, and the placard's answer is the right one: where did these hill villagers come from? For most of the twentieth century, the default answer was *from outside* - invading Israelites, per the Book of Joshua, or infiltrating desert nomads, per the milder German theory of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth. But the villages themselves refuse to cooperate. Their pottery is plain, local, Canaanite pottery. Their house form develops from local antecedents. Their farming toolkit is Canaanite. Their language, when writing eventually appears, is a Canaanite dialect - Hebrew is, linguistically, a child of Canaanite, not an import from anywhere. Even their god, as we shall see, was the old Canaanite high god under his old Canaanite name. As Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman put it in *The Bible Unearthed* (2001), the book that carried this revolution to the general public: the early Israelites were not outsiders who conquered Canaan - *they emerged from within it*. The rise of early Israel was, in their phrase, not the cause of the Canaanite city-states' collapse but its **outcome**.

So the hill villagers were locals: displaced farmers, drifted herdsmen, and - closing the circle - people who had spent time in that floating Hapiru underclass the Amarna mayors so feared. On this reconstruction, which this book adopts, the population that became Israel had long lived a double life on the agricultural margin: herding flocks through the arid eastern slopes in the bad seasons, returning to hillside enclosures to sow a little grain in the good ones, sliding between shepherd, farmer, bandit, and mercenary as circumstance demanded. Pastoral nomads and villagers in the Near East have always been the same people at different points of an economic dial, and the Hapiru were the dial turned all the way to *outside the law*.

Was there, then, nothing at all that marked these villagers off from their lowland

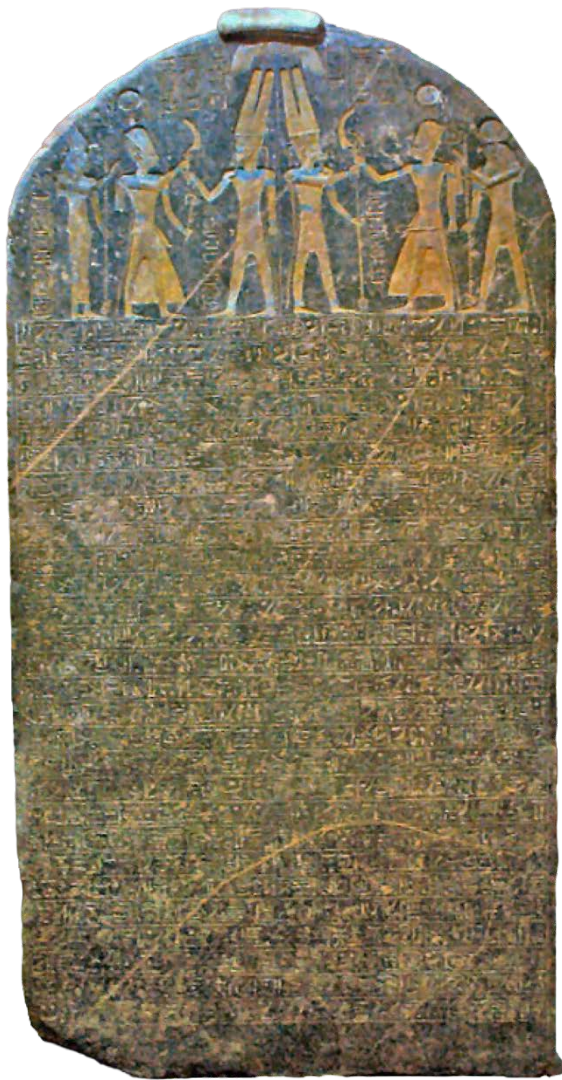


Figure 6 The Merneptah Stele

Canaanite cousins? There was one thing, and it is beautifully, absurdly concrete: **they did not eat pigs**. Animal bones are among the most durable and honest of archaeological finds - nobody fakes their kitchen garbage - and the bone counts from the Iron Age I hill villages show pig at or near zero percent, while contemporary Philistine sites on the coast run to double digits and lowland Canaanite sites fall in between. Centuries before anyone wrote the Book of Leviticus, the people of the hills were defining themselves by what they refused to put in their mouths. Why they refused is debated - ecological arguments (pigs suit neither herding nor dry hills) compete with the suggestion that avoiding pork was a deliberate boundary marker against the enthusiastically pork-eating Philistine newcomers. Probably the practice began as ecology and hardened into identity, the way such things do. Either way, the pig bone data is one of the few points in this entire field on which almost everyone agrees: it is the earliest visible badge of the people who would call themselves Israel.

And they did call themselves that, remarkably early. In 1207 BC - while Rameses' successor Merneptah was on the throne - an Egyptian victory hymn carved on a black granite stele listed the peoples chastised on a Canaanite

campaign, and among them, marked with the hieroglyphic sign for *a people* rather than a *place*: **Israel**. "Israel is laid waste; his seed is not," the stele gloats. It is the first appearance of the name in the historical record, and it tells us two priceless things: that by 1207 there existed in Canaan a group calling itself Israel, significant enough to be worth boasting about; and that it was still a people, not a state. No king, no capital, no borders. Just the hill folk, already stubborn enough to be an irritant to an empire - and note the name itself. Not Isra-yahu. Isra-**El**. The people were named for El, the grey-bearded father-god of the old Canaanite pantheon. Their exclusive romance with Yahweh still lay in the future.

Chapter Two: From Bandits to Kings - How the Margins Took Over

The oldest career path in the Near East

The Bible remembers the period after the settlement as an age of chaos, and for once the archaeology and the text rhyme. The Book of Judges is a collection of local hero-tales - a left-handed assassin here, a warlord under a palm tree there - stitched together with the refrain: *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* Strip away the theological editing and Judges describes exactly the world the Amarna letters described two centuries earlier, seen now from below: a stateless hill country of clans, feuds, cattle raids, and charismatic strongmen.

And in this world, the old Hapiru career path - margin-dweller to bandit to mercenary to warlord - kept right on working. The Bible itself, with disarming frankness, preserves the pattern. Abimelech, son of the judge Gideon, hires "worthless and reckless fellows" with temple silver from Shechem and makes himself a short-lived king (Judges 9). Jephthah, driven out by his half-brothers, gathers a raiding band in the badlands of Tob until his respectable kin come begging him to lead them in war (Judges 11) - the outlaw recalled as protector, a folktale as old as banditry itself. And then there is the big one. The future King David, on the run from Saul, retreats to the cave of Adullam, where - the text says, in what is practically a dictionary definition of Hapiru - *"everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him, and he became captain over them"* (1 Samuel 22:2). David's band of four hundred runs a protection operation against wealthy stockmen (the Nabal story in 1 Samuel 25 is a shakedown narrative barely disguised), then signs on as **mercenaries for the Philistine king of Gath** - the national enemy - before pivoting, at the moment of Saul's death, to seize the kingship of Judah at Hebron.

Whether these stories are history, legend, or (most likely) legend wrapped around a historical core, their *shape* is the point. Whoever preserved them saw nothing embarrassing in a founding dynasty that began as an outlaw gang for hire, because in the world that produced the stories this was simply how power worked. The men with swords whom the settled communities hired to protect them against roving bands were themselves drawn from the roving bands; the bodyguard of today was the king of tomorrow. It is the same escalator that would later carry Mamluk slave-soldiers to the throne of Egypt and condottieri to the duchies of Renaissance Italy. In the eleventh and tenth centuries BC, in the vacuum left by Egypt's withdrawal, that escalator was running in the Canaanite hills, and the settlements the bandsmen and their kin had founded were growing beneath them into towns.

The kingdom that history forgot it had two of

Out of this process, by the ninth century BC at the latest, came not one Hebrew kingdom but two - and here we reach the single most important correction this book has to make to the story everyone thinks they know.

In the Bible's telling, there was first a glorious United Monarchy: David conquering an empire from his capital in Jerusalem around 1000 BC, Solomon ruling it in gold-plated splendour, and only afterwards a lamentable split into a large northern kingdom (Israel) and a small southern one (Judah). Jerusalem is the hero of the story; the north is the apostate breakaway.

The ground tells a different story, and the argument over which story to believe is *the* fault line of the discipline - the Tel Aviv school against the Jerusalem school, the "low chronology" against the high. Here is the low-chronology case, in brief, which this book follows. Tenth-century Jerusalem, the supposed imperial capital of David and Solomon, is archaeologically almost invisible: excavation after excavation in the City of David has found, for that period, a modest highland stronghold - a large village, perhaps two dozen acres, a few hundred to a couple of thousand people, no monumental inscriptions, no administrative buildings that can be securely dated to the era, no signs of literacy beyond a few scratched letters. The famous "Solomonic" six-chambered gates and palaces at Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer, long dated to the tenth century because the Bible said Solomon built those cities, were redated by Finkelstein - on stratigraphic and radiocarbon grounds - to the **ninth** century, the era of a quite different dynasty. Judah's hill country south of Jerusalem remained, throughout the tenth and ninth centuries, what it had always been: sparse, poor, and marginal - perhaps a few thousand people in a scatter of villages.

Was there a David at all? Almost certainly yes - and we know it, delightfully, from his enemies. In 1993, at Tel Dan in the far north, excavators found fragments of a basalt victory stele erected by an Aramean king (almost certainly Hazael of Damascus) in the mid-ninth century BC, boasting in Aramaic of killing the king of Israel and the king of the "**House of David**" - *bytdwd*. It is the earliest mention of David outside the Bible, and it settles two things at once: that a dynasty tracing itself to a founder called David really did rule in the south by the 800s, and that outsiders knew the southern statelet *by the dynasty's name* - the way Assyria knew the north as the "House of Omri." A ruling family, then, was real. A golden empire is another matter. The mainstream of the field today - including many who reject Finkelstein's full low chronology - has converged on a David who was a real, minor hill-country chieftain-king of the tenth century, ruling something closer to a large clan territory than an empire, whose memory was later inflated beyond recognition. The maximalist Solomon of the gold shields and the Queen of Sheba belongs to literature.

The real story of Hebrew state power in the Iron Age belongs to the north - and it is time to give the north its due.



Figure 7 Tel Dan Stele, Northern Israel
- 9th Century BCE

Chapter Three: The House of Omri - Israel's Forgotten Golden Age

The general who bought a hill

Somewhere around 884 BC, an army commander named Omri came out on top of a messy civil war in the northern kingdom and did something that marks him instantly as a founder of the first rank: he bought a hill. The Bible, which loathes him, records the transaction with accountant's precision - two talents of silver to a man named Shemer for the hill that would bear his name: **Samaria** (1 Kings 16:24). On it Omri and his son Ahab built a capital from scratch, and its excavated remains are, by the standards of the region and the era, magnificent: a great rectangular royal acropolis with casemate walls, ashlar masonry of a quality not seen in the region before, and - scattered through the debris - hundreds of exquisite carved ivories, the "ivory house" of Ahab that the prophet Amos would later spit at.



Figure 8 Megiddo (Armageddon), Northern Israel, 9th Century BCE

Under the Omrides, the northern kingdom of Israel became what the Bible never quite admits it was: **a major regional power** - the strongest state between Damascus and the Nile. This is not a minority reconstruction; it is documented by Israel's enemies, in their own words, on their own stone. In 853 BC, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III fought a coalition of western kings at Qarqar on the Orontes and inscribed the order of battle on his monolith: among the allies stood "*Ahab the Israelite*" with - by the Assyrian scribe's count - **2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers**, the largest chariot corps in the entire

coalition, bigger than Damascus, bigger than Hamath. A generation later the Moabite king Mesha raised his own stele (found in 1868 at Dhiban in Jordan) complaining that “*Omri, king of Israel, oppressed Moab many days*” and that his son continued the occupation - forty years of Israelite domination east of the Jordan, from the victim’s mouth. And for more than a century after the dynasty fell, Assyrian records went on calling the whole country **Bit-Humri, “the House of Omri”** - the surest sign of who, in the neighbours’ eyes, had really put it on the map.

This was the great age of northern Israel: olive oil and wine flowing to Phoenician ports through the alliance sealed by Ahab’s marriage to the Tyrian princess Jezebel; the newly fortified chariot cities of Megiddo and Hazor (Solomon’s in the Bible’s memory, Omride in the radiocarbon lab’s); a population that dwarfed Judah’s - plausibly ten times larger. If you had toured the Levant in 850 BC and asked who spoke for the worshippers of Yahweh, the answer would have been obvious, and it would not have been Jerusalem.

Same gods, different management

What did that great northern kingdom believe? Here the placard’s quiet phrase - the Hapiru’s pantheon was “essentially the same” as their neighbours’ - pays off, because the religion of Omride Israel was recognisably the old religion of Canaan under national management.

How did a desert god travel north and capture a farming people? The scholarly reconstruction - the venerable “Midianite-Kenite hypothesis,” lately restated by Thomas Römer - points not to conquest but to the traffic of the steppe itself: the herding circuits that swung seasonally between desert and sown (the world of the Hapiru themselves); and above all the copper. The southern desert was the region’s mining country, and its itinerant smiths - the biblical Kenites, whose very name means metalworker, and whose eponym Cain wanders the earth under divine protection - were classic carriers of cult from camp to camp. At the great mines of Timna in the Aravah, excavation has caught the milieu in the act: when Egypt withdrew in the twelfth century, the Egyptian miners’ temple of Hathor was converted by the local Midianite workforce into a desert tent-shrine - within it a gilded copper serpent, disconcertingly reminiscent of the bronze serpent Moses raises in the wilderness narratives. And the exodus story itself, read with this in mind, confesses its god’s foreign pedigree with astonishing frankness: Moses flees to Midian, marries the daughter of a Midianite priest, and encounters Yahweh for the first time at the burning bush while pasturing that priest’s flock at “the mountain of God” - after which his Midianite father-in-law sacrifices to Yahweh and instructs Moses in governance (Exodus 18), and Moses’ Kenite in-laws settle among the tribes (Judges 1:16). The scribes who so ruthlessly rewrote everything else left these details standing, presumably because they were too anciently embedded to remove: Israel’s God, the tradition itself remembers, was introduced to Israel’s founder by a priest of Midian. Once arrived in the highlands, the southern storm-marcher stuck because he fitted: senior enough to merge with old El (whose name the very word Isra-El preserves), stormy enough to absorb the functions of Baal - until, in the fullness of centuries, the immigrant had swallowed his hosts entire.

Around this merged national god stood the familiar Canaanite repertory company: **Baal** the storm-rider, whose cult Jezebel patronised and whose name northern parents happily built into their children's names (the Samaria ostraca, the kingdom's own administrative receipts, are full of Baal-names alongside Yahweh-names); and **Asherah**, the great mother, whose carved poles stood beside village altars and - as we shall see in Chapter Six - beside Yahweh himself in the blessings of ordinary Israelites.

Worship happened everywhere: at the two royal sanctuaries of **Bethel and Dan**, each with its golden bull-calf - not, despite later Judahite sneering, idols of a foreign god, but pedestal-thrones for Yahweh, who was imagined enthroned invisibly upon the bull the way lowland Baal stood upon one; at town "high places"; at family shrines in ordinary houses. This was normal. This was what religion *was*, everywhere from the Nile to the Euphrates: a layered, tolerant, cheerfully redundant ecosystem of gods for every scale of life - a god for the state, a god for the harvest, a goddess for childbirth, ancestors for the household. Nobody in 850 BC, in Israel or anywhere else, thought the existence of other people's gods was a problem to be solved.



Figure 9 Elijah vs the Priests of Baal - Lucas Cranach the Younger 1545 - Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden

Almost nobody. In the northern kingdom, in exactly these years, we meet the first men in recorded history who did think so - wild-eyed dissidents from the margins, remembered as Elijah and Elisha, and after them the writing prophets Amos and Hosea. Elijah's challenge on Mount Carmel - "*How long will you go limping between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him*" (1 Kings 18:21) - is the oldest recorded demand for religious *exclusivity* in human history outside Egypt's brief Amarna experiment. Hosea went further, coining the metaphor that would organise Western religion for three thousand years: Israel as Yahweh's **wife**, and every other cult as

adultery. Note what this is and is not. It is not yet monotheism - no one denies Baal exists; Baal is the *other man*, and other men exist all too vividly. It is monolatry with a knife in its hand: *you may have only me*. A jealous god, in a world of easy-going polytheists, was a genuine novelty - and for now, a fringe one. The kings ignored the prophets, the people kept their Asherahs, and the north went on being rich.

Then, in the space of a single generation, the north ceased to exist - and its extraordinary fringe theology survived the wreck, carried south in refugees' baggage to the one place poor and pious enough to take it seriously.

Chapter Four: The Fall of the North and the Making of Judah

Assyria arrives

The Assyrian empire of the ninth and eighth centuries BC was history's first true military superpower - a state organised for permanent war, with a professional army, siege engineering, a courier system, and a deliberately advertised policy of atrocity ("I flayed the nobles," runs a typical royal inscription, "and draped their skins over the walls"). Against this machine the squabbling kingdoms of the Levant had, ultimately, no chance; the only question was the order of consumption.



Figure 10 Ancient Assyria c. 700 CE - Author Ningyou

Israel's turn came in stages. Tiglath-pileser III sheared away Galilee and the Transjordan in 732 BC, deporting the population of whole districts. Then, after a final doomed rebellion, Shalmaneser V besieged Samaria; the city fell in **722 BC** (to Shalmaneser or to his successor Sargon II, who claimed the credit - Assyrian kings were not scrupulous about bylines). Sargon's inscriptions record the aftermath with bureaucratic calm: **27,290 people deported**, resettled across the empire from the Habur to Media; foreigners from Babylonia and elsewhere settled in their place; the land reorganised as the Assyrian province of Samerina. The northern kingdom of Israel - the House of Omri, the chariot power of Qarqar, the elder and greater of the two Hebrew states - was erased from the map after two centuries of existence. Its deportees, the famous "ten lost tribes," were not

so much lost as dissolved: absorbed, within a few generations, into the populations among whom they were planted. The transplanted foreigners in Samaria, meanwhile, mixed with the Israelite peasantry that remained (deportation always skimmed the elite; farmers were left to farm) - and from that mixture, in time, would come the people we will meet again on Mount Gerizim: the Samaritans.

But not everyone went east in chains, and not everyone stayed to meet the new landlords. Many went **south**.

The refugee boom: Jerusalem transformed

Here the archaeology speaks with rare clarity, and it is the hinge of this entire book. In the space of roughly a single generation flanking 722 BC, Jerusalem exploded. From a hill town of ten or twelve acres confined to the old City of David ridge, it ballooned to a walled city of some 150 acres, spilling across the valley onto the Western Hill; the population multiplied by something like tenfold, to perhaps ten or fifteen thousand. The countryside of Judah filled in step: surveys count the kingdom's settlements and population roughly doubling in the late eighth century. Nothing internal to sleepy Judah can explain growth on that scale and at that speed. The explanation standing next to it in the timeline is obvious, and it is the one argued in detail by Finkelstein and by Nadav Na'aman (some scholars, it should be said, prefer to credit more of the growth to Judahites displaced from the Shephelah by Assyria's devastation of Lachish in 701 BC - the debate is about



Figure 11 Siege of Lachish 701 BCE

proportions, not about the boom itself): **refugees from the fallen north**. Israelites who preferred a poor cousin's kingdom under a Yahwistic dynasty to life as Assyrian provincials walked the fifty miles south, and kept coming for decades.

Consider what they brought. Not just hands and mouths: the north had been the sophisticated kingdom - the scribes, the administrators, the priests of Bethel's royal sanctuary, the keepers of whatever archives and oral traditions two centuries of statehood had accumulated: stories of the patriarch Jacob (whose legend-cycle is anchored in

northern places - Bethel, Shechem, the Jabbok), stories of an exodus from Egypt (celebrated at northern shrines; the calf of Bethel was hailed with the cry “Behold your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt”), the sagas of Saul, the victory hymns, the prophetic scrolls of Amos and Hosea. All of it now sat in Jerusalem, in the hands of refugee literati looking for patrons, in a city suddenly full of northerners who needed to be convinced that Judah’s little dynasty was *their* legitimate government too.

Out of that need, this book will argue in the next chapter, the Bible’s national story was born. But first: how did tiny Judah itself survive the Assyrian tide - and even prosper under it?

Life in the empire’s service: vassal, buffer, and entrepôt

Judah bent the knee, and bending the knee paid. King Ahaz had already volunteered as an Assyrian vassal in the 730s; his son Hezekiah’s one great rebellion (crushed in 701 BC - Sennacherib devastated the Judahite lowlands, boasted of shutting Hezekiah up “like a bird in a cage,” and carted off the population of Lachish, though Jerusalem itself, famously, did not fall); and after that lesson, Judah under the long-reigning Manasseh settled into half a century of obedient, profitable integration into the Assyrian world-system.

The geography that had made Judah poor now made it useful. Perched between the Assyrian provinces to the north and the Egyptian sphere to the south-west, astride the desert routes coming up from Arabia, Judah functioned as the empire’s soft southern frontier - a compliant buffer polity that Assyria, pragmatically, chose to manage rather than absorb. (Why leave Judah standing when Samaria was annexed? Empires often prefer a cheap client on a desert frontier to an expensive province; a Judahite king who paid tribute and policed the caravan routes cost Assyria nothing.) And through that frontier flowed money. The seventh century was the great age of the **Arabian trade** - frankincense and myrrh from the south, moving by camel caravan up the incense roads to the hungry markets of the Assyrian empire and the Mediterranean. Assyrian kings campaigned to control the Arabian tribes precisely because of this trade, and Judah, sitting at the trade’s junction with the imperial road network, took its cut. The archaeology of the era shows the Beersheba valley in the deep south suddenly studded with forts and way-stations; Judahite agriculture industrialised (the olive-oil pressing complex at Assyrian-supervised Ekron, just over the border, became the largest yet found in the ancient Near East); weights, seals and standardised measures proliferate - the toolkit of a monetising, trading economy.

The camel itself, incidentally, is a witness in this story. Domesticated dromedaries were latecomers to the Levant - the bone evidence from the Aravah copper mines, analysed by Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef of Tel Aviv University, shows pack camels appearing abruptly only around 930 BC, and the caravan trade they made possible reaching full flood precisely in the Assyrian centuries, when the empire’s records count Arabian tribute in camels by the tens of thousands. Which makes the camels of Genesis - Abraham’s servant with his string of ten, the Midianite caravan that buys Joseph - an anachronism a millennium deep:

the patriarchs, in the Bible's own chronology, lived a thousand years before a domesticated camel ever crossed Canaan. The scribes who wrote those stories furnished the distant past with the props of their own seventh-century present, and the props can be dated from the bone heaps. It is the literary equivalent of painting Moses with a wristwatch - and one more small proof of when, and by whom, the national past was actually written.

Judah was the empire's designated middleman - a low-tax conduit through which southern goods flowed into Assyrian territory, a sanctions-buster of sorts between the empire and Egypt. As a precise mechanism that goes beyond what the documents state; as a characterisation of Judah's seventh-century role - a small vassal growing conspicuously rich on transit trade it was allowed, indeed encouraged, to handle - it is very close to the mainstream reconstruction. Manasseh, the Bible's most hated king, presided over Judah's greatest prosperity to date. The two facts are not unrelated, and the men who wrote the Bible knew it, which is part of why they hated him.

By 640 BC, then, the stage is set. A swollen, wealthy, refugee-filled Jerusalem; a scribal class of mixed northern and southern heritage; a temple of Yahweh on the hill above the palace; a smouldering prophetic ideology of the jealous god, carried south in the refugees' scrolls; and - suddenly, unexpectedly - a power vacuum, as the Assyrian colossus began, with stunning speed, to die of its own overextension. Into that vacuum stepped an eight-year-old king named Josiah, and the men behind his throne saw an opening that comes once in a civilisation's lifetime: the chance to write the past.

Chapter Five: Inventing the Past - Josiah, Deuteronomy, and the Book that Made a Nation

A convenient discovery

In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign - 622 BC - during renovation works in the Jerusalem temple, the high priest Hilkiah announced a discovery: *"I have found the book of the law in the house of Yahweh"* (2 Kings 22:8). The scroll was read to the young king; he tore his robes in horror at how far the nation had strayed from its forgotten commandments; and there followed the most sweeping religious purge in the kingdom's history. Out of the temple went the vessels of Baal and Asherah, burned in the Kidron. Out went the sacred pole, the houses of the cult prostitutes, the horses dedicated to the sun. The high places across Judah were defiled, their rural priests dragged to Jerusalem and pensioned off.

That deserves a moment's unflinching attention, because it was neither foreign nor fringe. Child sacrifice - the offering of infants by fire, typically under the ritual term *mlk* (the Bible's "Molech" may be the rite itself misread as a god's name; scholars argue the point) - was an established practice of the wider Canaanite-Phoenician world of which Judah was



Figure 12 *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Caravaggio 1598 Uffizi Gallery,

part, and the biblical writers, to their evident discomfort, knew it was practised *to Yahweh*: the prophets protest not that the sacrifices go to a rival god but that Yahweh never wanted them ("they have built the high places of Topheth... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command," Jeremiah 7:31; Micah's agonised "shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" only makes sense as a live question; Ezekiel goes

furthest of all, conceding that God had given Israel "statutes that were not good" concerning the firstborn - a theologian trying to explain a practice too entrenched to deny). The logic, to its practitioners, was the logic of all sacrifice taken to its terrible conclusion: the god who gives fertility owns its firstfruits - of the field, of the flock, and of the womb ("the firstborn of your sons you shall give to me," Exodus 22:29, a law later texts scramble

to soften with redemption payments) - and in supreme crisis the supreme gift compels the god's aid. It worked, too, at least once, in the Bible's own appalled telling: when King Mesha of Moab, besieged and desperate, sacrificed his firstborn son on the city wall, "great wrath came upon Israel, and they withdrew" (2 Kings 3:27) - the besiegers fleeing before the power of another man's dead child. The parallels ring the Mediterranean: the tophets of Carthage and the Punic west, where urns holding the burned bones of infants number in the thousands and stelae record vows fulfilled to Baal Hammon and Tanit (whether every urn represents sacrifice or some infant cemetery has been fought over for a century; the current weight of scholarship, following Stager's excavations and the classical witnesses - Diodorus describes Carthaginian nobles rolling their children into a bronze idol's fire pit during the crisis of 310 BC - accepts the rite as real); Phoenician crisis-sacrifice as described by Philo of Byblos; and within the Bible itself, Jephthah's daughter, and the story of Abraham on Moriah - which many scholars read as a polemic of substitution, a founding tale whose whole point is the ram in the thicket: *this* God, the story insists against the surrounding world and against Israel's own past, takes the animal and not the child. Josiah's defilement of the Topheth was the legislative version of the same insistence, and the valley's name became the tradition's lasting verdict on the place: Ge-Hinnom, Gehenna - hell.

Passover, the text says, was celebrated as it had not been "since the days of the judges" - no longer a family rite at the village shrine, but a state festival at the one legitimate temple. Henceforth there was to be one God, one king, one sanctuary: Yahweh, Josiah, Jerusalem.

Scholars have recognised for two centuries - the insight goes back to W. M. L. de Wette in 1805, and it remains the closest thing biblical criticism has to a fixed star - that the scroll Hilkiah "found" was substantially the core of the **Book of Deuteronomy**: the one book of the Torah that demands exactly what Josiah then did (worship centralised at a single chosen place; local altars banned; Passover nationalised), in language soaked in the political idiom of the age. Indeed one of the sharpest modern observations is that Deuteronomy is structured like an **Assyrian vassal treaty** - its curses parallel, sometimes almost verbatim, the loyalty oaths Assyrian kings imposed on their subjects (the succession treaty of Esarhaddon, copies of which Judah's own court would have sworn and stored, is the standard comparison). The scribes of Josiah took the empire's instrument of domination and performed a breathtaking substitution: the suzerain to whom Israel owed exclusive, jealous, treaty-bound loyalty was no longer the king of Assyria. It was Yahweh. Exclusive religion, at its documentary birth, is imperial politics turned inside out.

Was the scroll "found" or written for the occasion? The question answers itself, mostly; pious frauds of exactly this type are a recurring feature of ancient reform movements. The likeliest reconstruction - and here virtually all critical scholars agree on the mechanism while disputing the proportions - is that Deuteronomy was composed in seventh-century Jerusalem by a coalition of temple scribes, court officials, and heirs of the northern prophetic tradition, drawing on genuinely older northern legal material (its law code shares a common ancestor with the older Covenant Code, and its whole covenant theology

breathes Hosea). Refugee ideas, Judahite institution. And the “discovery” served a king ready to use it.

The uses of centralisation

For Josiah’s court, the jealous god was also excellent policy, and it is no insult to ancient sincerity to notice it. Every rural high place closed was a rural priesthood defunded and its revenues redirected; every pilgrimage rerouted to Jerusalem was silver in the capital; every clan altar abolished was a clan’s independence diminished. Religious centralisation was state centralisation. And with Assyria visibly collapsing (Nineveh itself would fall to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC, to the open rejoicing of the prophet Nahum), Josiah’s court dreamed larger: the old Assyrian province of Samerina - the territory and population of the dead northern kingdom - lay leaderless next door. The books of Kings claim Josiah carried his purge north, personally desecrating the ancient royal altar of **Bethel**, burning dead priests’ bones upon it in fulfilment of prophecy (2 Kings 23:15–20). Whether he really controlled Bethel or merely raided it - whether this is sober report or the wishful geography of scribes dreaming of reunification - cannot now be settled; the archaeological evidence for Judahite administration that far north is thin, and a respectable school of thought (Na’aman prominent in it) reads the whole northern campaign as ideological embroidery. What matters is the ambition it encodes: Josiah’s Jerusalem was claiming to be the rightful heir of *the north* - of all Israel.

And that claim needed a story.

Writing the nation

This is the moment - the later seventh century, with a coda after the exile - in which the mainstream of critical scholarship places the composition of the Bible’s great national narrative: the so-called **Deuteronomistic History** (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), telling the whole saga from conquest to Josiah as a single morality play whose moral is Deuteronomy’s (“worship Yahweh alone, at the one place, or lose the land”), and, woven together over the following centuries, the patriarchal and exodus traditions of the Torah. The scribes did not invent from nothing - invention from nothing never convinces anyone. They did something far more effective: they **merged and annexed**. Northern traditions were absorbed and given southern loyalties. Jacob of Bethel and Shechem became the grandson of a southern Abraham of Hebron. The exodus, the north’s founding memory, became the shared national epic - with the northern calf-shrines that had celebrated it recast, in the Sinai story of Aaron’s golden calf, as the *original sin*. Saul the northern founder-king was remembered at length, but as the doomed foil to David. Above all, the scribes projected Josiah’s dream backwards three centuries and called it memory: a **United Monarchy**, ruled from Jerusalem by David and Solomon, from which the north had wickedly seceded - so that Josiah’s ambitions in Samaria were not conquest but *restoration*. The glories of the historical north - the building programs, the chariot cities, the regional power - were reassigned to the legendary Solomon, safely Judahite, safely dead. (That the “Solomonic” gates of Megiddo now radiocarbon-date to the Omride ninth century is, on

this reading, no coincidence: the memory of northern grandeur was real; only the name on the deed was changed.)

Here it must be said plainly: this reconstruction - the United Monarchy as, in large part, a seventh-century literary retrojection, and the biblical history as a Judahite appropriation of northern achievement - is the Tel Aviv school's signature claim, argued most fully in Finkelstein and Silberman's *The Bible Unearthed* (In honour of which I named my podcast: Christianity Unearthed) and *David and Solomon*. It is a major and highly influential position, probably the single most discussed thesis in the field of the last generation, but not a unanimous one: the Jerusalem school and its allies abroad (Amihai Mazar, the late William Dever in part, Kenneth Kitchen more conservatively) defend a modest but genuinely historical tenth-century united kingdom, and radiocarbon dating - which has narrowed but not closed the argument, with Mazar's "Modified Conventional Chronology" splitting the difference - still permits either a humble Solomon or none. What no serious scholar now defends is the Solomon of the text: the emperor from the Euphrates to Egypt, the 666 talents of gold. Between "small real chieftains later gilded" and "gilding all the way down," a product of the machinery of national myth-making.

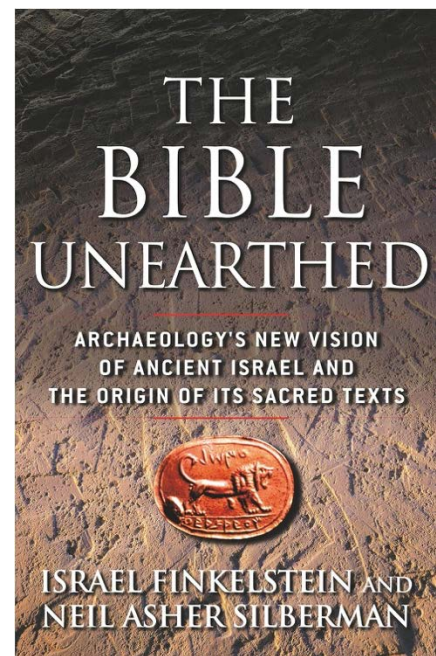


Figure 13 *The Bible Unearthed*

The deeper point is what the scribes achieved. In perhaps fifty years, a marginal kingdom's writers created the template of the national history - the genre in which a people is constituted by a shared story of origin, covenant, golden age, sin, and destiny. Every nation since has written one. Judah wrote the first, and wrote it so well that for two and a half thousand years nobody thought to check the pottery.

Josiah himself got no reward the story had prepared him for. In 609 BC, at Megiddo of all places, he intercepted Pharaoh Necho II marching north and was killed - swatted aside, in the Chronicler's embarrassed telling, almost in passing. His kingdom outlived him by barely two decades. The Babylonians, Assyria's heirs, took Jerusalem in 597, and after a final rebellion, in **586 BC** Nebuchadnezzar's army burned the city, burned Yahweh's temple, blinded the last Davidic king after slaughtering his sons before his eyes, and deported the elite of Judah to Babylon. Everything Josiah's covenant had promised - obey and keep the land - stood refuted in ash.

And it was there, in the refutation, in exile by the canals of Babylon, that the jealous god made his last and greatest metamorphosis.

Chapter Six: Gods of the Land - What Israelite Religion Actually Looked Like

Before following the exiles to Babylon, we must pause and take honest inventory: what was the religion that Josiah's reform attacked and the exile transformed? Not the religion of the Bible's editors - the religion of the ground.

A landscape full of altars

Strip away Deuteronomy's retrospective outrage and the religious landscape of Iron Age Israel and Judah looks like everywhere else in the Levant: dense, layered, and local. At the top, a handful of state temples - Jerusalem in the south; Bethel and Dan in the north; Samaria's royal chapels. Below them, the **bamot**, the "high places": open-air town and village sanctuaries, typically a platform, an altar, a standing stone (*matzevah*), a sacred tree or carved pole for Asherah. The books of Kings, grading every monarch, treat the persistence of the bamot as the chronic national sin precisely because they were universal - even approved kings "did not remove the high places; the people still sacrificed and burned incense" there. Archaeology has recovered the type: the hilltop "Bull Site" in the Samarian hills with its bronze bull figurine; the great horned altar of Beersheba, found dismantled and its stones reused in a storehouse wall - quite possibly the debris of Hezekiah's or Josiah's own purge, the reform frozen in masonry; the temple of Yahweh at the fortress of **Arad** in the deep south, a fully equipped sanctuary with altar, holy of holies and incense stands, operating for centuries inside a *royal Judahite* fort - a standing refutation of the idea that "one temple only" was ever the old rule rather than the late innovation.

And below the bamot, the true bedrock: **household religion**. Excavated Israelite and Judahite houses yield domestic cult corners, miniature altars, offering vessels, and above all figurines - in eighth-and-seventh-century Judah, the little clay "pillar figurines" of a woman supporting her breasts, found by the *hundreds* in ordinary homes, including in Jerusalem itself, within sight of the temple. Most scholars connect them with Asherah or more broadly with prayers for fertility and nursing. Whatever the theology, the demography is undeniable: in the very kingdom and century that produced Deuteronomy, virtually every family kept a goddess on the shelf.

"Yahweh and his Asherah"

If one archive buries forever the notion that pre-exilic Israel was monotheistic, it is a lonely caravanserai in the Sinai desert called **Kuntillet Ajrud**. Around 800 BC, travellers and garrison scribes at this waystation - under northern Israelite influence, to judge by the script and names - left blessings painted on storage jars and plaster walls. They read, repeatedly, in formulas as casual as a postcard: "*I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah*"; "...by Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah." A tomb inscription from Khirbet el-Qom in Judah says the same. Two bombshells in one phrase.



Figure 14 Asherah, Ras Shamra
(Ugarit) c. 1300 BCE - Louvre,

First, Yahweh has an Asherah - and she came with the house. In the Bronze Age texts of Ugarit, Asherah (there spelled Athirat, "Lady Athirat of the Sea") is the consort of El, the aged father of the gods, and mother of his divine brood of seventy. When the southern newcomer Yahweh merged with old El and assumed his position at the head of the pantheon - taking El's titles, El's seniority, El's very name in "Israel" - he assumed, on the evidence of these inscriptions, El's marriage too: the queen mother of the Canaanite gods passing to the new master of the house as naturally as the throne itself. Whether the blessing's "his Asherah" means the goddess in person or "his asherah," the carved wooden pole that was her cult-symbol beside the altar (grammarians duel over the pronoun), the point stands either way: the jealous bachelor god of Deuteronomy is here

comfortably paired with the great Canaanite mother, in an arrangement so unremarkable to the writers that they used it in a greeting formula.

Second, Yahweh comes in *regional editions* - Yahweh of **Samaria**, Yahweh of **Teman** - exactly like Baal of Ugarit or Ishtar of Nineveh: a god instantiated at his local shrines, not yet the placeless universal. This is what actual Israelite religion looked like at ground level: Yahweh supreme, Yahweh national - and Yahweh thoroughly at home in the Canaanite pantheon that had produced him.

The altar as an economy

One more piece of realism, essential for everything that follows: a temple was never just a house of prayer. It was the ancient world's most durable *economic corporation*. Temples owned farmland and flocks; collected tithes and first fruits as a matter of law; stored the community's grain against famine and its silver against theft (making them the region's proto-banks); ran workshops; and - decisively - hosted the pilgrimage festivals that were the retail high season of every shrine town. Every animal sacrificed was purchased; every pilgrim ate, lodged, and paid. A priesthood was a hereditary firm holding the concession on all of it. Keep that in view and the great religious struggles of this story snap into focus. When Jeroboam built Bethel and Dan, the Bible itself gives the motive as market share: if the people keep going up to Jerusalem to sacrifice, "the heart of this people will turn back to their lord" (1 Kings 12:27). When Josiah closed the high places, he was also nationalising their revenue streams into his own temple-capital. When, centuries later, Jerusalem's high-priestly rulers looked at the rival temple on Mount Gerizim, they saw heresy - and also the competition. Exclusive religion always had a balance sheet. That does not make the belief insincere; it explains why the belief, of all the beliefs on offer, found institutions willing to fight for it.

Chapter Seven: The God Who Learned to Say “Only” - From Akhenaten’s Failure to Israel’s Trauma

The Mosaic distinction

Somewhere in this story, something genuinely unprecedented crystallised, and it is worth naming precisely. The Egyptologist **Jan Assmann** calls it the *Mosaic distinction*: the division of religion itself into **true and false**. Old-world polytheism was, by its deep grammar, *translatable*: your storm god and my storm god are the same being under different names; treaties between empires were sworn by matched lists of each side’s gods; a traveller sacrificed politely to the gods of wherever he happened to be. Syncretism was not a corruption of ancient religion - it *was* ancient religion, its diplomatic protocol and its common sense. The Mosaic distinction breaks the protocol. It says: the gods are not translatable, because the others are not real. There is truth in religion, therefore there is falsehood, therefore there are - for the first time as a *religious* category - pagans, idolaters, heretics. Assmann’s unsettling corollary, argued in *Moses the Egyptian* and *The Price of Monotheism*, is that this new grammar carried a new capacity for religious violence: you cannot make war on a mistranslation, but you can make war on a lie.

Where did the distinction come from? Not, at first, from Israel.

The pharaoh who tried it first

In the mid-fourteenth century BC - while the Hapiru were still robbing the mayors of the Amarna letters, and indeed at Amarna itself - Egypt ran the experiment. Amenhotep IV renamed himself **Akhenaten**, “beneficial to the Aten,” and over a decade escalated devotion to the solar disk into history’s first documented exclusivism: the temples of the old gods closed, their staggering estates confiscated, the very name of Amun - king of the gods, patron of Thebes, whose priesthood was the wealthiest corporation in Egypt - chiselled out of monuments across the land, even from the pharaoh’s own father’s cartouches. A new capital in the desert; new art; a new theology in which the Aten alone gave life and the king alone knew the Aten.

It lasted seventeen years and died with its author. Within a few years of Akhenaten’s death (c. 1336 BC - cause unknown; the popular notion that the Amun priesthood murdered him is unfalsifiable speculation with no positive evidence, though their motive



Figure 15 Akhenaten in the Garden of Armana - Photo Andreas Praefcke

was ample), the boy-king Tutankhaten was rebranded Tutankhamun, the court returned to Thebes, and the Restoration Stele announced the counter-revolution in language every ancient reader understood as economic reconstruction: the temples “had fallen into ruin... the gods had turned their backs upon this land”; now their images were remade, their endowments restored, their staffs re-hired. A generation later Horemheb and the Ramessides dismantled Amarna block by block and dropped Akhenaten from the king lists - the “criminal of Akhetaten.” And here is the diagnostic detail: even in Akhenaten’s own purpose-built city, excavators found the workmen’s houses full of amulets and figurines of Bes and Taweret, the homely old household gods. Exclusivism had never reached past the court. It was a top-down project with a single point of failure - the king - and when the king died, the failure was total. The priests of Amun supplied the muscle of the restoration; popular indifference supplied the absence of resistance.

Whether a memory of Atenism reached Israel is a romantic and unprovable speculation (Freud built *Moses and Monotheism* on it; almost no historian follows him). The real lesson of Akhenaten is comparative: **exclusive monotheism imposed from the top, in a rich and secure society, does not survive its patron.** For the idea to take permanent root, it would need the opposite host: a society with no secure top to depend on - a people whose patrons kept getting killed.

Forged in defeat

That is precisely the trajectory we have traced. Follow the ratchet:

Ninth–eighth century, the north: prosperity, and the jealous idea is a *fringe* - Elijah’s and Hosea’s monolatry, “no other gods *for you*,” politically impotent, ignored by the ivory-house kings.

722 BC: the north is annihilated. The fringe idea, carried south by refugees, acquires its first great confirmation: the prophets said Yahweh would punish Israel’s divided loyalty, and behold. Defeat, which kills normal gods (a beaten people drifts to the victor’s stronger gods - the fate of every other conquered Levantine cult), is converted by the prophetic logic into *evidence*: our god is not weaker than Assur; our god **sent** Assur. The theology of the jealous husband becomes the theology of history’s hidden director.

622 BC: the idea captures a state. Josiah’s Deuteronomy makes exclusive loyalty law and centralisation policy - monolatry with an army. Still not monotheism: Deuteronomy’s own credo, “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone,” legislates allegiance, not ontology; other gods are forbidden, not denied.

586 BC: the supreme crisis. Jerusalem burned, the temple - Yahweh’s own house - in ashes, the dynasty castrated, the elite in Babylon beneath the ziggurat of Marduk, whose New Year festival annually celebrated his kingship over the gods. By every rule of ancient religion, this is checkmate: Marduk has beaten Yahweh; assimilate. And it is exactly here,

in the writings of the anonymous exile prophet we call **Second Isaiah** (Isaiah 40–55, universally dated to Babylon, c. 550–539 BC), that the final step is taken - the leap from “worship no other gods” to *there are no other gods*: “I am the first and I am the last; **besides me there is no god**” (44:6); “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe” (45:7). The idols of Babylon are mocked as carpentry - half the log warms the workman’s supper, the other half he worships (44:9–20). And in the most audacious stroke in the history of theology, the Persian conqueror Cyrus, bearing down on Babylon, is declared Yahweh’s own **anointed** - a pagan

messiah steered by a god he has never heard of (45:1–4). This is trauma theology of genius. If Yahweh lost to Marduk, Judah’s story is over. If there *is* no Marduk - if the one God of all the earth used Babylon as a rod and now raises Persia as a hammer - then the catastrophe itself becomes the proof of omnipotence. Monotheism was not the serene summit of Israelite thought. It was the survival response of a decapitated people: a god who could not be defeated because there was no one else on the field.

The pattern proposed at this book’s origin deserves to be stated as its thesis, for it holds: **each calamity hardened the theology another degree**. The Assyrian hammer forged exclusivism into scripture; the Babylonian hammer forged it into monotheism; and, as we shall see, the Greek hammer would forge martyrdom, and the Roman hammer would forge the portable, all-or-nothing faiths - rabbinic Judaism and Christianity - that finally carried the Mosaic distinction out into the world. Where Akhenaten’s monotheism died because it depended on a throne, Israel’s survived because catastrophe had burned every throne away, leaving something no ancient religion had ever been: a faith made of **text and boundary**, which could be packed in an exile’s baggage and unpacked anywhere on earth.

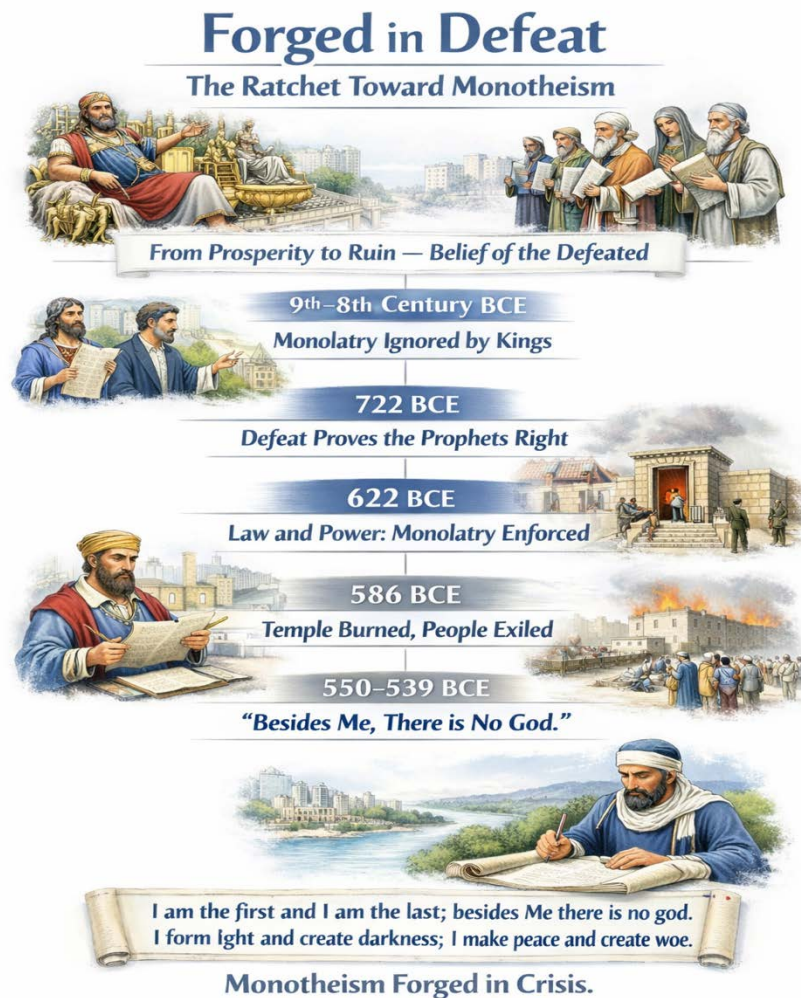


Figure 16 The Ratchet Towards Monotheism

Chapter Eight: The Quiet Centuries - Persian Yehud, the Temple, and the Editors

A province of ruins

Persia swallowed Babylon in 539 BC almost without a fight, and imperial policy changed overnight. Where Assyria and Babylon had deported, Cyrus and his successors *restored* - not from sentiment but from statecraft: contented local cults, praying for the king at their re-endowed altars, were the cheapest garrisons an empire could buy. The Cyrus Cylinder advertises the policy in Babylonian idiom (Marduk himself, it says, chose Cyrus); the book of Ezra preserves its Judean application: exiles permitted to return, temple vessels sent home, rebuilding of Yahweh's house authorised and partly funded from imperial revenue. The second temple was completed around 515 BC.

But strip away the book of Ezra's triumphal tone and the returned community was tiny and the land was poor - poorer, by every archaeological measure, than at any time since the Hapiru villages. Persian-period **Yehud** was a sub-province a day's walk across; Jerusalem within its patched walls held perhaps a few thousand people; the population of the whole province has been estimated at a mere twenty or thirty thousand. There was no king - the Davidic line flickered out of politics after one ambiguous generation (Zerubbabel, the last of the house to hold office, simply vanishes from the record) - no palace, no court, no army, no royal scribal bureaucracy. To the question posed in the conversation behind this book - *who, in such poverty, was even in control?* - the answer is the one institution the catastrophe had left standing, the one institution Persian policy actively fattened: **the temple**. The high priesthood, hereditary in the Zadokite line, became the effective native government of Yehud, and the temple became what Near Eastern temples had always been - landholder, tithe-collector, treasury, archive - now without a palace to compete with. Poverty did not mean nobody held the pen. It meant the pen changed hands: from king's scribe to priest's scribe. That transfer decided what kind of book the Bible would be.

The editors at work

For it was now - in the Persian two centuries, the least documented and most consequential era of the whole story - that scattered scrolls became Scripture. The process left no minutes, but it left seams, and the seams are legible. The scroll of Isaiah binds



Figure 17 Isaiah - 3 Centuries' texts in one

together an eighth-century Jerusalem prophet (chs. 1–39), the anonymous exile poet of Babylon (40–55), and a third, post-exilic voice (56–66) - three centuries under one name.

The Book of the Twelve gathers minor prophets from both dead kingdoms - Amos and Hosea, northerners addressing a state that no longer existed - into a single Judahite-framed anthology.

The Torah itself, in the mainstream critical view, reached essentially its final form in this period, when priestly editors wove the old narrative strands (the Judahite “J”, the northern “E”, the Deuteronomic legacy of Josiah’s circle) together with their own vast priestly stratum (“P”: the seven-day creation, the tabernacle blueprints, Leviticus) into the five-scroll charter of the new temple community. Traditions that had begun as the property of rival shrines and rival kingdoms were harmonised -

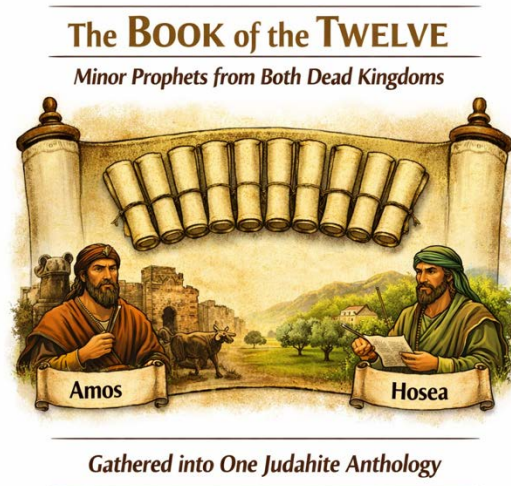


Priestly editors united Judahite, Northern, and Deuteronomic strands into the Torah's Final Form.

northern Jacob grafted to southern Abraham, rival cult legends set side by side with the contradictions left showing - into one national library, retro-fitted with a unity it had never had. It was a *redactive* achievement: not forgery, but the retrospective stitching of many local pasts into one authorised past. (A late-comer's footnote to the same process: six centuries on, Rabbi Judah the Prince would do it all again, compiling the scattered legal opinions of generations of sages into the Mishnah around 200 AD - proof that the editorial reflex, once learned, became the tradition's very method of surviving.)

Two Persian-period figures put a face on the hardening boundary.

Nehemiah, the Jewish royal cupbearer sent out as governor of Yehud (445 BC), rebuilt Jerusalem's wall in fifty-two days - and then, returning for a second term after an absence at court, discovered just how thin the new orthodoxy's hold really was. His memoir (Nehemiah 13) is an inspector's report of a community that had simply reverted to the region's immemorial normal the moment his back was turned. The high priest had installed Tobiah the Ammonite - a foreign grandee and Nehemiah's political enemy - in a furnished apartment *inside the temple precinct itself*, in a chamber meant for the tithe stores. The tithes had stopped; the Levites, unpaid, had abandoned the temple and gone back to their fields - the entire cultic apparatus quietly defunding itself. The Sabbath had collapsed back



into an ordinary market day: Judeans treading winepresses and hauling grain, Tyrian merchants selling fish inside the walls. And above all, the boundary of the community itself had dissolved: Judean men had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, and - the detail that stung the memoirist most - "half their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah." Even the high-priestly family had intermarried, one grandson of the high priest being son-in-law to Sanballat, the governor of Samaria - the rival establishment personified, comfortably embedded at the top of Jerusalem's own priesthood. Nehemiah's response was not a sermon but a purge, recorded in his own proud first person: he threw Tobiah's furniture into the street, restored the tithes, locked the city gates against the Sabbath traders and threatened to arrest them, "contended" with the intermarried men, "cursed them, beat some of them and pulled out their hair," made them swear off foreign marriage - and chased the high priest's son-in-law out of Jerusalem altogether. It is a scene worth holding in the mind's eye: a Persian-appointed official physically assaulting his countrymen in the street to enforce a boundary most of them plainly did not feel. A century after the return, exclusivism was still not the people's religion; it was a project - the project of a returned exile elite with imperial backing, imposed on a population that, left to itself, drifted straight back into the open, intermarrying, many-fingered religious world of its Canaanite ancestors, exactly as it always had.

Ezra the priest-scribe, arriving with a copy of "the law of the God of heaven" under imperial warrant, staged the great public reading of the Torah and then the era's most chilling scene: the mass divorce, the men of the community compelled in a rainstorm to send away their foreign wives *and the children of those marriages* (Ezra 10). Exclusive theology was becoming exclusive genealogy. The people of the one God were fencing themselves into a hereditary corporation of the pure - and it is precisely against this fence that our last pieces of evidence, and our last war, take shape.

Postcards from the other Judaism: Elephantine

Because not everyone had got the memo. At the empire's farthest southern edge, on **Elephantine** island in the Nile opposite Aswan, Persia maintained a garrison of Judean mercenary soldiers - descendants of families who had drifted to Egypt generations before the exile, before Josiah, before Deuteronomy. Their community archive, dug out of the dry ground in 1907-08, is the only large cache of documents written by actual Jews of the biblical era, and it is a window onto Yahwism as it existed *without* the reformers. The Elephantine Judeans had their own temple of **Yahu** (as they spelled him) - a real temple, with altar and full animal sacrifice, in flat contradiction of Deuteronomy's one-sanctuary law, which they show no sign of having heard of. Their oaths and accounts casually invoke, alongside Yahu, figures such as **Anat-Yahu** - Yahweh paired with the old Canaanite war-goddess Anat, the Kuntillet Ajrud world alive and well two centuries on - and Eshem-Bethel and Herem-Bethel besides. Here is the syncretic, translatable, thoroughly ancient religion that all Israel had once practised, preserved in a jar.

Then, in 410 BC, Egyptian priests of the ram-god Khnum next door, with a corrupt Persian officer's connivance, sacked the Yahu temple. The community wrote for help - and the correspondence that survives is the most revealing exchange in this whole history. Their first appeal, to the high priest in Jerusalem, received **no answer at all**. Their second, in 407 BC, went shrewdly to the *civil* governor of Yehud, Bagohi - and simultaneously to the sons of Sanballat, governor of **Samaria**, the north, Jerusalem's rival; the petitioners clearly knew the politics and hedged their bets. The reply that survives grants support for rebuilding - but for a temple of meal-offerings and incense **only**: no animal sacrifice. Read the diplomacy: Jerusalem's establishment would not, or dared not, bless a rival altar's full cult, and the compromise quietly reserved blood sacrifice - the economic and theological heart of temple religion - to Jerusalem alone. Deuteronomy's long arm, reaching up the Nile. The Elephantine temple was rebuilt on those terms and then, within a decade or two, community and archive fade from history. The old, easy-going Yahwism's last outpost went dark; the future belonged to the fenced and the exclusive - and to the two mountains that now glared at each other across the hills of the homeland.

Chapter Nine: Two Mountains - Gerizim, Jerusalem, and the Sword of John Hyrcanus

The rival on Gerizim

North of Yehud, the province of Samaria had never emptied. The Assyrians had deported the Israelite elite and planted foreign colonists, but the farming population - grandchildren of the kingdom of Omri - remained on the land, worshipping Yahweh as they always had. To Jerusalem's hardening genealogical orthodoxy, these people were damaged goods: mixed stock, mixed cult (the book of Kings smears them with a just-so story of imported gods). To themselves, they were what their name in their own tradition says: *Shamerim* - not "Samaritans" but "**Keepers**," keepers of the true law of Moses. When Jerusalem's priesthood rebuffed them (Ezra and Nehemiah both dramatise the rejection of northern participation and the expulsion of a priest who had married into the Samaritan governor's family), the northerners did the logical, ancient thing: they built their own house of Yahweh, on **Mount Gerizim** above Shechem - the mountain of blessing in Deuteronomy itself. Excavations by Yitzhak Magen have now dated its founding to the Persian period, the mid-fifth century BC, with a great Hellenistic expansion later: a full sacrificial temple, a walled sacred city around it, and thousands of votive inscriptions to Yahweh.



Figure 18 The Altar at Mount Gerizim (reconstruction)

Understand what the Samaritans were **not**. They were not pagans, not syncretists, not another religion. Their scripture was the Torah - the same five books, in a recension differing

mainly in one loaded particular: where Jerusalem's text says God will choose his place, theirs says God **has chosen** it, and the place is Gerizim. Their priesthood claimed the same descent from Aaron. The Gerizim inscriptions bless in the same Yahwistic formulas as Judean ones; the personal names are the same pious "-yah" names. By the second century BC the contest between Gerizim and Jerusalem was not a war of gods - it was something history would learn to fear far more: a war of **one God, two legitimacies**. The Mosaic distinction, having abolished the pagan, now discovered the *heretic* - the rival who is intolerable precisely because he is almost identical. Every subsequent monotheistic schism, from Nicaea to Sunni and Shia to Wittenberg, would replay the pattern; the Samaritans merely had it first.

For three centuries the two mountains coexisted under indifferent imperial umbrellas - Persian, then, after Alexander's whirlwind (332 BC), Ptolemaic and Seleucid Greek. Coexistence ended when the umbrella folded.

The Hasmonean state and the price of legitimacy

The story of the Maccabees is told elsewhere and needs only its skeleton here: the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, meddling in Jerusalem's high-priestly politics, escalated in 167 BC to the unthinkable - a pagan altar in the temple, the Torah proscribed, pigs on the altar of Yahweh; the priestly family of the Maccabees raised a guerrilla revolt; and out of decades of war and Seleucid dynastic collapse there emerged, by the 140s-130s BC, an independent Judean state for the first time in four and a half centuries - ruled not by the house of David but by the victors, the **Hasmoneans**, who took for themselves an unprecedented double crown: high priest *and* ruling prince in one person. (The crisis also minted a new theological coin whose spending power lay all in the future: the *martyr* - the one who dies rather than transgress, with resurrection as recompense. The books of Maccabees and the visions of Daniel, both born of this persecution, are the seedbed of ideas Christianity and Islam would carry to the ends of the earth.)

A dynasty of priest-kings whose entire legitimacy rested on one claim - *we are the defenders of the one God's one true sanctuary* - could tolerate many things. It could not tolerate a second true sanctuary twenty miles north.

By the sword

John Hyrcanus (ruled 134-104 BC), son of the last Maccabee brother, waited for his moment: the Seleucid empire's terminal convulsions after 129 BC left the whole Levant ownerless. Then he moved, and Josephus records the sequence. He marched on Shechem and **destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim** (c. 111-110 BC by the coin evidence; Josephus implies earlier), levelling the sanctuary the Samaritans had served for three and a half centuries. He conquered **Idumea**, the old Edomite south, and imposed history's first recorded *forced mass conversion*: the Idumeans could adopt circumcision and the law of the Judeans, or leave their land. (They converted; among the great-grandchildren of that decision would be Herod the Great - the "half-Jew" king whose insecure legitimacy would shadow the next century.) His sons finished the program: the ancient city of **Samaria** itself was besieged, taken and - Josephus says - effaced, its ruins flooded; Scythopolis (old Beth

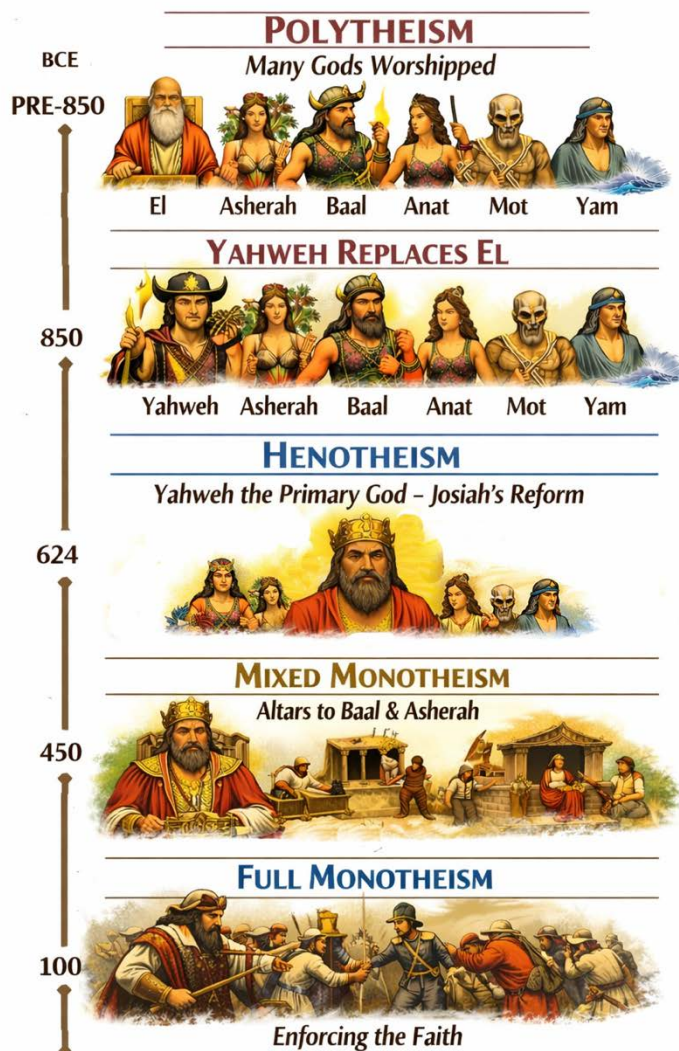


Figure 19 Israel's Road to grievance (they keep all three today: a few hundred Samaritans still sacrifice the Passover lambs on Gerizim every spring, the last functioning survival of Iron Age Yahwism on earth). And the mutual loathing of Judean and Samaritan became such a fixture of the landscape that, a century and a half later, teachers in Galilee could reach for it as the sharpest available example. When the Gospel of **John** shows Jesus asking a Samaritan woman for water at Jacob's well near Shechem, she is startled - "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans," the narrator explains - and her first theological question is *the* question, the one Hyrcanus had answered with siege engines: our fathers worshipped on this mountain; you say Jerusalem (John 4:9, 20). And when **Luke** has Jesus ask which passer-by proved neighbour to the man bleeding on the Jericho road, the sting of the parable lies wholly in the answer being *a Samaritan* - the last person the audience would grant a soul. Two mountains, one God: the wound was still open, and the movement that arose amid these very texts was about to carry the whole conflicted inheritance - the one God, the exclusive truth, the martyr's crown, and the incapacity for peaceful coexistence with error - out of the hills of Canaan and into the bloodstream of the world.

Shan) taken; Galilee absorbed and Judaized. Within one generation, the Hasmonean state had converted the map of the old northern kingdom into an enlarged Judea, and answered the two-mountains question with fire: there would be one God, one temple, one law, one people - by consent where possible, by the sword where not.

Was this religious zeal or state-building? The question dissolves on inspection: for a priest-king, they were the same act. Every rival altar closed was rival revenue captured and rival legitimacy extinguished; every forced circumcision turned a subject population into taxable, conscriptable "brothers." The jealous God had become the jealous state. Assmann's price of monotheism, paid in full and on home soil: the first thing exclusive truth conquered by force was its own nearest kin.

It did not, of course, end the kinship - hatred never does. The Samaritans, their temple in ruins, kept their mountain, their Torah, and their

Chapter Ten: The Conquest of the West - How Exclusivism Ended the Age of Many Gods

Three heirs

The Roman hammer fell twice - the temple burned in 70 AD, and Bar Kokhba's last revolt drowned in blood in 135, Jerusalem itself rebuilt as a pagan city Jews were barred from entering. By the ratchet this book has traced, the double catastrophe should have hardened the tradition once more, and it did - but now along two divergent paths, with a third to come.

Rabbinic Judaism was the ratchet's inward turn. With altar, priesthood and temple economy annihilated *permanently*, the Pharisaic sages completed the transformation the Babylonian exile had begun: a religion of pure text and boundary - Torah study as the new sacrifice, the synagogue as the new temple, the law's fence (Sabbath, kashrut, purity, endogamy) as the new city wall. Judah the Prince's Mishnah (c. 200 AD) and the oceanic Talmuds built upon it made the tradition what Akhenaten's could never be: indestructible by decapitation, because headless by design - a portable homeland, as Heinrich Heine would call it, that would carry an unbroken identity through two thousand stateless years. The price of survival was the renunciation of conquest: rabbinic Judaism kept the Mosaic distinction for itself and largely stopped seeking converts.

Christianity was the ratchet's outward turn - the same exclusive inheritance, with the boundary redrawn. Paul of Tarsus's fateful decision that gentile converts need not take on circumcision and the food laws detached the one-God faith from genealogy: the fence around Israel became a gate for everyone, and the martyr theology of the Maccabees became the founding story itself - a crucified messiah whose death defeats death. What did *not* soften was the distinction between true and false: the early church inherited in full the refusal to translate. Christians would not do the one

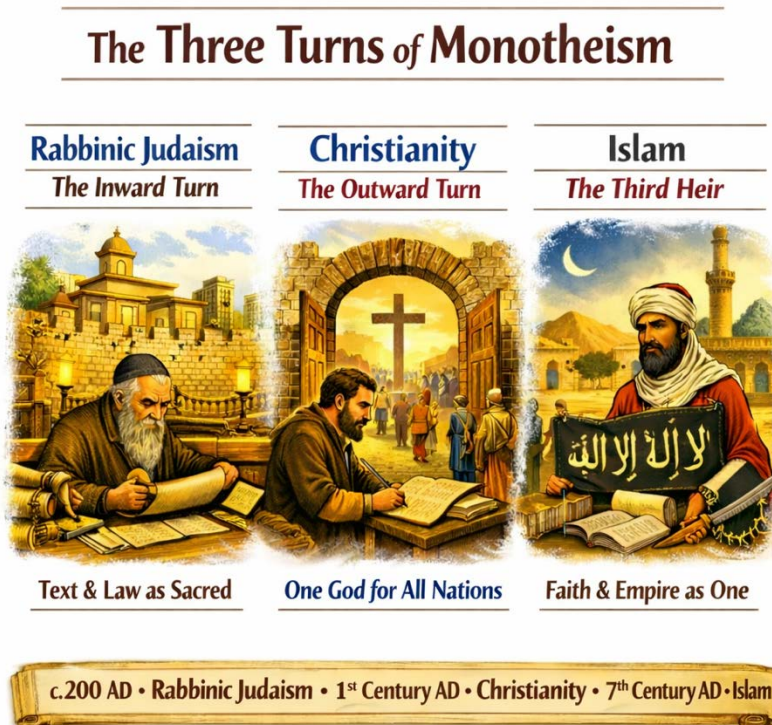


Figure 20 The Three Turns of Monotheism

civic thing Rome's tolerant polytheism required - a pinch of incense to the genius of the emperor, a courtesy any pagan cult performed without a thought - and so this tiny sect became, to Roman eyes, bafflingly criminal: *atheists* who denied everyone's gods but their own. Three centuries of intermittent persecution followed, and the ratchet worked as it always had: martyrdom advertised the faith's seriousness, and the church grew.

Islam, six centuries on, would be the third heir - the Mosaic distinction restated with desert clarity ("*There is no god but God*"), fused from birth with statehood and arms, and carried within a single century from the Hijaz to the Atlantic and the Indus. But between Christianity's rise and Islam's, the decisive turn had already come, and it came not from a prophet but from an emperor's calculation.

The law does what the sermon cannot

Here is the uncomfortable truth about how the West became monotheist, and it must be stated plainly because sixteen centuries of retrospective piety have fogged it: **the old religion did not lose an argument. It was outlawed.** In 312 AD Constantine placed the Christian sign on his soldiers' shields and won an empire; patronage, tax exemption and

Three centuries narrowing many answers toward one

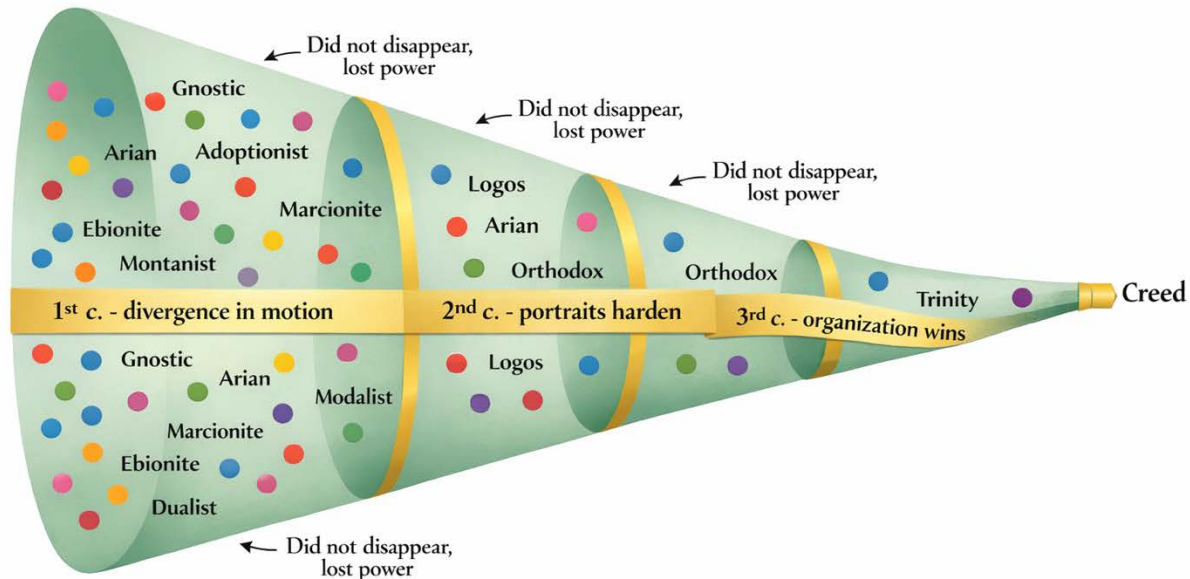


Figure 21 The Narrowing of the Field 50 - 500 CE

imperial favour flowed to the church, and ambition followed the favour. But paganism - the immemorial, translatable, syncretic religious ecosystem of the Mediterranean - remained legal and enormous for another two generations. What killed it was legislation:

the decrees of **Theodosius I** in 391–392 AD, which closed the temples, banned sacrifice public and private, extinguished the eternal fires, criminalised even the household pieties - incense to the lares, ribbons on a sacred tree - as *treason*. The Olympic games ended; the oracle at Delphi fell silent; the Serapeum of Alexandria, one of the wonders of the age, was demolished by a Christian crowd in 392; in 415 the philosopher Hypatia was flayed with potsherds by a mob of the pious. Within a century the visible apparatus of a four-thousand-year religious world was gone - not because its adherents were persuaded, but because its practice was a capital offence. Justinian closed the Academy of Athens in 529. The countryside took longer (our very word *pagan* is Christian slang from these centuries - *paganus*, the hick, the village holdout), and the process, prolonged by mission and sword through Saxon, Slavic and Baltic Europe, was not complete until Lithuania's official conversion in 1386. Call it five hundred years for the Mediterranean core, a thousand for the continent.

Islam's parallel conquest of the southern and eastern Mediterranean ran on a different legal engine - not forced conversion of the book-religions but their fiscal subordination (the *dhimma* and its poll tax), with paganism proper given no such shelter - and reached, in the end, the same destination: from the Atlantic to central Asia, the translatable gods were gone, and everyone alive belonged to a religion that called every other religion false.

The price and the prize

So end two and a half millennia: from a placard's dispossessed hill-squatters to the extinction of Western polytheism. It remains only to weigh what the jealous God's victory cost and bought - and honesty requires both columns.

The cost is the one Assmann named. Syncretism could be shallow, venal and cruel - no one should sentimentalise a world of temple monopolies and sacred kings - but it could not, by its grammar, produce the *religious* war, the heretic's pyre, the forced conversion, the iconoclast's hammer. Those are inventions of exclusive truth, and this book has watched each one being invented: the forced conversion by Hyrcanus, the war of legitimacies on Gerizim, the criminalisation of error by Theodosius. Every people the tradition touched learned, in time, to fear its edge - including, first and most often, its own dissenters and its own kin.

And the prize? It is real, and it is enormous, and it comes from the same forge. A God beyond the state could judge the state: the prophets' insistence that the king stands under the law - Nathan pointing at David, Elijah at Ahab - planted the seed of every subsequent claim that power answers to justice. A God who is one made the cosmos one, and lawful: the intuition that a single rational will underlies all things is, by a route historians of science have long traced, an ancestor of the very idea of universal natural law. A truth that belonged to no place could belong to every person: the exile's portable faith became the template for identity beyond territory, conscience beyond custom. And a story in which the defeated, the deported and the enslaved are the protagonists - that story, first drafted

by refugee scribes in a swollen hill town twenty-seven centuries ago, has never stopped being told by the powerless to the powerful.

The men who terraced the Judean hills at the Bronze Age's end wanted none of this. They wanted rain, and to be left alone by empires, and they defined themselves, as far as we can dig, by nothing grander than the refusal of pork. But history is the story of unintended consequences, and theirs is the largest on record: a band of Canaan's losers - outlaws, refugees, the repeatedly conquered - whose response to each defeat was to raise the stakes of their loyalty, until they had wagered everything on a single, invisible, undefeatable God, and won the future.

"Israel is laid waste; his seed is not." Merneptah's stonecutter, at least, is answered.

Epilogue: How Could We Know? - A Note on Evidence and Honest Doubt

A book that accuses ancient scribes of rewriting history owes its readers an account of why *its* history should be believed, and where it might yet be wrong.

The reconstruction in these pages rests on four legs. **Stratigraphy and survey:** the settlement explosion in the Iron I highlands, Jerusalem's late-eighth-century boom, Persian Yehud's poverty - these are counts of sites, walls and acreage, the hardest data the field possesses. **Inscriptions:** Merneptah, Tel Dan, Mesha, Kuntillet Ajrud, the Assyrian annals, the Elephantine archive - texts that, unlike the Bible, were never edited by later winners, and which anchor the story at a dozen points. **The bones and the pots:** pig percentages, pillar figurines, the dismantled altars of Beersheba and Arad - the unselfconscious testimony of garbage and rubble. And **the biblical text itself, read against the grain:** its seams, doublets, anachronisms and northern fingerprints, which tell the historian most precisely where it protests too much.

Where does honest doubt remain? Chiefly in the tenth century BC - the David and Solomon question - where the difference between the Tel Aviv low chronology and Amihai Mazar's compromise is a matter of decades that radiocarbon, with its stubborn calibration plateau right across these very years, has narrowed but not closed. Both camps now cite the same carbon-14 datasets from Megiddo, Tel Rehov and Khirbet Qeiyafa and model them to different conclusions; the honest summary is that the data permit a modest united polity and equally permit none, and that the maximalist empire of the biblical account is permitted by neither. How could it be settled? More short-lived samples (olive pits, not old timber) in tight Bayesian sequences across multiple sites; independent anchors from Egyptian and Assyrian synchronisms; and above all the epigrapher's lottery ticket - one administrative ostrakon with a tenth-century king's name on it would outweigh a decade of pottery seminars. Failing that, the dispute will be settled the way most academic disputes are: by the retirement of its combatants and the indifference of their students, who have already largely converged on the middle - small real kings, later gilded beyond recognition.

One methodological confession, and it is the book's last word because it is also the book's theme. Every reconstruction of this story, including this one, is written by people with stakes - national, religious, anti-religious, institutional. The Jerusalem school digs with one eye on heritage; the Tel Aviv school corrects with one eye on the Jerusalem school; and the popular writer chooses a line and goes with it. The consolation is that this, too, is continuity with the subject matter. The scribes of Josiah chose a line. The priestly editors of Yehud chose a line. What separates history from scripture is not the absence of a line but the presence of the pig bones - the evidence that cannot be redacted, waiting under the floor for whoever digs honestly. May there always be more digging.

Sources and Further Reading

The notes below give, chapter by chapter, the principal scholarship and primary sources on which the narrative rests, with brief orientation on where each stands in the academic landscape.

General

- **Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*** (Free Press, 2001). The foundational popular statement of the “low chronology”/Tel Aviv reconstruction this book follows; a major (though contested) position, now close to the field’s centre of gravity in its broad outlines.
- **Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition*** (Free Press, 2006). The United Monarchy question in full.
- **Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel*** (SBL Press, 2013). The rehabilitation of the north; source for Chapters 3–5.
- **William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?*** (Eerdmans, 2003) and *Beyond the Texts* (SBL, 2017). A leading American archaeologist, often Finkelstein’s sparring partner - useful as the loyal opposition; his agreement on indigenous Israelite origins shows how broad that consensus is.
- **Amihai Mazar, “The Debate over the Chronology of the Iron Age in the Southern Levant,”** in T. Levy & T. Higham (eds.), *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating* (Equinox, 2005). The “Modified Conventional Chronology” - the principal compromise position.
- **Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*** (Equinox, 2005). A great Assyriologist’s reconstruction, distinguishing “normal history” from “invented history”; close kin to this book’s approach.

Prologue & Chapter One (Hapiru, settlement, pig bones)

- **The Amarna Letters**, trans. William Moran (Johns Hopkins, 1992). Abdi-Heba of Jerusalem’s Apiru complaints: EA 286–290; Rib-Hadda’s correspondence: EA 68–138.
- **Nadav Na’aman, “Ḫabiru and Hebrews: The Transfer of a Social Term to the Literary Sphere,”** *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (1986). The standard treatment of Hapiru as social, not ethnic, category.
- **Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*** (Israel Exploration Society, 1988). The highland survey data; the ~250 villages.
- **Brian Hesse & Paula Wapnish** on pig husbandry and ethnicity, in N. Silberman & D. Small (eds.), *The Archaeology of Israel* (Sheffield, 1997). The pig-bone evidence and its limits.

- **The Merneptah Stele** (Cairo Museum; ANET 376–78), c. 1207 BC - “Israel is laid waste; his seed is not.”
- On the older “peasant revolt” model absorbed into this synthesis: **George Mendenhall**, “The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962); **Norman Gottwald**, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Orbis, 1979). Now minority positions in pure form, but their core insight - Israel from within Canaanite society - is mainstream.

Chapter Two (bandits to kings; Tel Dan)

- 1 Samuel 22:2; 25 (David’s band); Judges 9; 11 (Abimelech, Jephthah).
- **Avraham Biran & Joseph Naveh**, “An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993) and 45 (1995). The “House of David” (bytdwd) inscription. Its reading is accepted by the overwhelming majority; a small minimalist minority (Lemche, Thompson) has disputed it.
- **Baruch Halpern**, *David’s Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Eerdmans, 2001). David as historical warlord - a maximalist-leaning book that nonetheless portrays exactly the Hapiru-style career sketched here.

Chapter Three (the Omrides)

- 1 Kings 16:24 (purchase of Samaria); the **Kurkh Monolith** of Shalmaneser III (“Ahab the Israelite, 2,000 chariots, 10,000 troops,” ANET 278–79); the **Mesha Stele** (Louvre; ANET 320–21): “Omri, king of Israel, oppressed Moab many days.”
- “**Bit-Humri**” in Assyrian royal inscriptions: see H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III* (Israel Academy, 1994).
- **Kuntillet Ajrud**: Ze’ev Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud: An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Israel Exploration Society, 2012). “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.”
- Yahweh’s southern origins and the Midianite-Kenite hypothesis: **Thomas Römer**, *The Invention of God* (Harvard, 2015) - the standard modern statement; **Karel van der Toorn**, “Yahweh,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Brill, 1999). The hypothesis dates to F. W. Ghillany and Karl Budde in the nineteenth century and remains the majority critical view, though a minority derive Yahweh from within Canaan.
- The “Shasu of Yhw”: temple topographical lists of Amenhotep III at Soleb and Rameses II at Amarah West; discussion in **Donald B. Redford**, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 272-273.
- The Timna Midianite tent-shrine and copper serpent: **Beno Rothenberg**, *Timna: Valley of the Biblical Copper Mines* (Thames & Hudson, 1972); on the Kenites as itinerant smiths and cult-carriers, **Joseph Blenkinsopp**, “The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (2008).
- Key biblical texts: Deuteronomy 33:2; Judges 5:4-5; Habakkuk 3:3; Psalm 68:8, 17; Exodus 2-4; 18; Judges 1:16; Numbers 21:9 (the bronze serpent).

Chapters Four & Five (722 BC; Judah's boom; Josiah; the writing of the history)

- Sargon II's annals (27,290 deported): ANET 284–87.
- **Magen Broshi**, "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974). The refugee-boom thesis in its classic statement; developed by Finkelstein and **Nadav Na'aman** (who has also argued the partial alternative - Shephelah displacement after 701 - noted in the text).
- Sennacherib's prism ("Hezekiah... like a bird in a cage"): ANET 287–88.
- On Judah in the Assyrian economy and the Arabian trade: **Israel Finkelstein**, "The Rise of Jerusalem and Judah: The Missing Link," *Levant* 33 (2001); the Ekron olive-oil industry: S. Gitin's excavation reports.
- **W. M. L. de Wette** (1805) on Deuteronomy and Josiah's reform; **Moshe Weinfeld**, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, 1972) on the Assyrian treaty parallels (Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty).
- 2 Kings 22–23 (the scroll; the reform; Bethel). For scepticism on the northern campaign: **Nadav Na'aman**, "The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah," *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991).
- Camel domestication and the Genesis anachronism: **Lidar Sapir-Hen & Erez Ben-Yosef**, "The Introduction of Domestic Camels to the Southern Levant: Evidence from the Arava Valley," *Tel Aviv* 40 (2013), pp. 277–285.
- Child sacrifice and the *mlk* rite: **John Day**, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1989); **Francesca Stavrakopoulou**, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice* (de Gruyter, 2004), who argues the rite was native Yahwistic practice, not foreign import; on the Carthage tophet, **Lawrence Stager & Samuel Wolff**, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage: Religious Rite or Population Control?," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10 (1984), and the counter-debate summarised in **Josephine Quinn**, *In Search of the Phoenicians* (Princeton, 2018); Diodorus Siculus 20.14 (the sacrifice of 310 BC); key biblical texts: Exodus 22:29; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; Micah 6:7; Ezekiel 20:25–26; 2 Kings 3:27 (Mesha); Judges 11 (Jephthah's daughter); Genesis 22.

Chapters Six & Seven (religion on the ground; Akhenaten; the exile)

- **Ziony Zevit**, *The Religions of Ancient Israel* (Continuum, 2001); **Mark S. Smith**, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (2nd ed., Eerdmans, 2002) - the standard syntheses of Israelite polytheism/monolatry; mainstream positions.
- Pillar figurines: **Raz Kletter**, *The Judean Pillar-Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah* (BAR, 1996).
- Arad and Beersheba altars: Y. Aharoni's excavation reports; on the dismantled Beersheba altar as reform debris, see Ze'ev Herzog.

- **Jan Assmann**, *Moses the Egyptian* (Harvard, 1997) and *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, 2010). The “Mosaic distinction.” Widely influential; his violence corollary is debated (see the responses collected in *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, eds. Mitchell & Van Nuffelen).
- Akhenaten: **Nicholas Reeves**, *Akhenaten: Egypt’s False Prophet* (Thames & Hudson, 2001); Tutankhamun’s Restoration Stele (Cairo CG 34183). Amarna household religion: Barry Kemp’s excavation reports, *The City of Akhenaten*.
- Second Isaiah and exilic monotheism: **Peter Machinist**, “Mesopotamian Imperialism and Israelite Religion,” and **Mark S. Smith**, *God in Translation* (Eerdmans, 2010) - the latter is also the best treatment of “translatability” between pantheons.

Chapter Eight (Persian Yehud; Elephantine)

- Population and poverty of Yehud: **Oded Lipschits**, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Eisenbrauns, 2005); **Charles E. Carter**, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period* (Sheffield, 1999).
- Nehemiah’s second-term reforms: Nehemiah 13 (Tobiah’s chamber: vv. 4-9; the defunded Levites: vv. 10-14; the Sabbath market: vv. 15-22; intermarriage, the children of Ashdod, and the expulsion of the high priest’s son-in-law: vv. 23-28). On exclusivism as the programme of the *golah* minority versus the “people of the land”: **Joseph Blenkinsopp**, *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Eerdmans, 2009); **Lester Grabbe**, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Routledge, 1998) on the historical problems of the memoir.
- The Cyrus Cylinder (British Museum; ANET 315–16); Ezra 1–6; Nehemiah 13; Ezra 9–10 (the divorces).
- **Bezalel Porten**, *Archives from Elephantine* (California, 1968) and *The Elephantine Papyri in English* (Brill, 1996). The 407 BC petition to Bagohi (TAD A4.7–8) and the memorandum permitting rebuilding with meal-offering and incense but no animal sacrifice (TAD A4.9); Anat-Yahu and associated names (TAD B7.3 etc.).
- Documentary hypothesis and Persian-period redaction: **Richard Elliott Friedman**, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Summit, 1987) - the accessible classic; **Konrad Schmid**, *The Old Testament: A Literary History* (Fortress, 2012) for current European perspectives.

Chapter Nine (Samaritans; Hasmoneans; Hyrcanus)

- **Yitzhak Magen**, “The Dating of the First Phase of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim,” in O. Lipschits et al. (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (Eisenbrauns, 2007). Persian-period founding of the Gerizim temple - a discovery that pushed the “Samaritan schism” earlier than the older Hellenistic dating.
- **Josephus**, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.254–258 (destruction of Gerizim; forced conversion of Idumea), 13.275–281 (destruction of Samaria). On dating Gerizim’s

destruction by coin evidence to c. 111–110 BC: **Dan Barag**, *Israel Numismatic Journal* 12 (1992–93).

- 1–2 Maccabees; Daniel 7–12 (martyrdom and resurrection).
- **John 4:9, 20; Luke 10:25–37** (the well; the Good Samaritan).
- On the Samaritans generally: **Reinhard Pummer**, *The Samaritans: A Profile* (Eerdmans, 2016).

Chapter Ten (Christianisation; the end of paganism)

- **Theodosian Code** 16.10 (the anti-pagan laws of 391–392); on the process: **Ramsay MacMullen**, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (Yale, 1984) and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (Yale, 1997); **Alan Cameron**, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011) - who cautions against over-dramatising pagan “resistance”; the coercion, however, is documentary.
- The Serapeum (392) and Hypatia (415): **Socrates Scholasticus**, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16–17; 7.15.
- Rabbinic reconstruction after 70/135: **Shaye J. D. Cohen**, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (3rd ed., Westminster John Knox, 2014).
- Islam and the dhimma: **Fred Donner**, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Harvard, 2010).
- Lithuania, 1386, as Europe’s last official conversion: **S. C. Rowell**, *Lithuania Ascending* (Cambridge, 1994).

Biblical quotations follow the New Revised Standard Version, occasionally adjusted toward the Hebrew. Ancient Near Eastern texts cited as ANET refer to J. B. Pritchard (ed.), Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 3rd ed. (Princeton, 1969). All dates BC unless noted.