

# 1. From Ur to Canaan

## A WANDERING PEOPLE

**IN THE BEGINNING** there were wanderings. The first human beings, Adam and Eve, are banished from *Gan Eden*, from Paradise. The founder of monotheism, Abraham, follows God's command, "*Lech lecha*" ("Go forth"), and takes to wandering from his home, Ur in Mesopotamia, eventually reaching the land of Canaan, whence his great-grandson Joseph will, in turn, depart for Egypt. Many generations later Moses leads the Jews back to the homeland granted them, which henceforth will be given the name "Israel," the second name of Abraham's grandson Jacob.

So at least we are told in the Hebrew Bible, certainly the most successful and undoubtedly the most influential book in world literature. Its success story is all the more astonishing when one considers that this document was not composed by one of the powerful nations of antiquity, such as the Egyptians or Assyrians, the Persians or Babylonians, the Greeks or Romans, but by a tiny nation that at various times in the course of its history was dominated by all of the above-mentioned peoples. And yet it was precisely this legacy of the Jews that, with the spread of Christianity and Islam, became the foundation for the literary and religious inheritance of the greater part of humanity. By

this means, too, the legendary origins of the Jews told in the Bible attained worldwide renown.

The Hebrew Bible, which would later be called the Old Testament in Christian parlance, contains legislative precepts, wisdom literature, moral homilies, love songs, and mystical visions, but it also has books meant to instruct us about historical events. We are not dealing here, as a rule, with historically verifiable accounts. Nor was it the intention of the Bible's authors to describe historical events as authentically as possible. Rather, it was their theological interpretations that they placed center stage. Precisely when people began telling legends like those of the above-mentioned wanderings is as little known as the exact date when those legends were committed to writing. The core of the historical tradition handed down undoubtedly goes back to the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, but the books of the Hebrew Bible first acquired their definitive form in the Persian and Hellenistic eras. The texts of these books give us more insight into the makeup of the Israelite and Judean population during those eras than during the earlier times they purport to describe, and so must be understood in the context of the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Only starting at that time can one accurately speak of a "history" of the Jews. If our account begins earlier, however, it is for one simple reason: The books of the Bible, quite independently of their historical truth content, shaped the consciousness of the Jews in so many different ways and for so many centuries that our familiarity with them is critically important for understanding Jewish history. This chapter, therefore, does not deal mainly with historically attested events, but rather with myths and legends the importance of which extends well beyond Judaism.

### **Mythic Beginnings**

The Bible begins not with the history of Israel, but with the origins of humankind. Adam and Eve are not the first Jews, but the

first human beings. In primeval times, according to the Biblical worldview, there were no different peoples. Only the sacrilegious effort to build the Tower of Babel (that act of extreme hubris whereby humans hoped they might ascend to God) led to divine intervention that split a heretofore united humanity into different nations with different languages. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is also the figure of Abram (Abraham after his transformation), who stands for the transition from polytheism to monotheism and, thereby, for what was perhaps the greatest revolution in the ancient world. From Abraham's family are also descended those peoples who became Israel's neighbors and enemies. Special mention must be made of his eldest son Ishmael, who (according to Islamic tradition) joined Abraham in building the Kaaba in Mecca.

It may be a reflection of the future Israel's own situation, frequently kicked around between the powerful Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians, that the Bible routinely makes legitimate heirs out of younger sons. Isaac succeeded his elder half-brother Ishmael, Jacob his twin Esau, Jacob's son Joseph was the eleventh-born, and David the youngest of eight brothers. But the most important protagonist in the entire Biblical narrative is neither one of the above-mentioned heroes nor Moses, who liberated his people from Egyptian bondage, nor one of the prophets who, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, are undoubtedly among the Bible's most powerful voices. The lead character is first mentioned when Jacob wrestles with an angel. In the course of this wrestling match Jacob becomes "Israel," "he who strives with God." In contrast to the New Testament's Jesus and the Koran's Muhammad, at the center of the Biblical narratives we find a collective, the *people* of Israel. This is also what distinguishes the Bible from the contemporary Greek sagas that revolve around individual heroes like Aeneas or Odysseus.

Every culture has its own birth myths. In the case of Israel these are complex and manifold. The concepts that we would today term "religion" or "nation" are conceived as inextricably

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According to the Biblical account, Jacob wrestled with an angel and became “he who strives with God”—as shown here in Rembrandt’s representation from 1659.



linked with each other from the outset. This holds true in the consciousness of many Jews well into the modern era: To them the Bible serves both as an authoritative religious code of moral conduct and as a history book about their purported ancestors.

Abraham, who (according to Jewish tradition) broke with his father Terah’s idol worship to revere a single, invisible God, is already the recipient of God’s “national” promise: From his seed shall issue a great nation, chosen by God himself. In later Jewish self-conceptions, this election is not interpreted as a moral elevation over other nations; instead, it is above all understood to imply that special duties fall to the Jews, as elucidated in the religious law section of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. That Biblical Moses, to whom God entrusted the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai, stands at the beginning of a new understanding of religion. He is the central figure who



Moses served as the creative inspiration for legions of artists from Michelangelo through Rembrandt to Chagall. Jewish and Christian motifs thereby exerted a mutual influence on each other. Here is a nineteenth-century German-Jewish artist, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, depicting Moses with the tablets of the Law.

not only leads the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt but also shapes them into a people.

The Exodus, for which (as with all of the historical events depicted in the Five Books of Moses) there is no extra-Biblical evidence, has entered the collective consciousness of successive generations as a decisive experience and, as it were, the “second birth” of the people of Israel and the Jewish religion. To this day Jews all over the world commemorate that wandering with holidays. During the Passover festival they eat unleavened bread, as if they were wandering through the desert, and on Succoth (the “Feast of Tabernacles”) they build booths that are meant to recall how the Israelites camped out in tents during their wandering. Most impressive of all is the affirmation made on the evening of the Passover Seder in which all Jews declare that they should relate the experience of liberation from slavery

to their own existence, as if they were conscious themselves of leaving Egypt and arriving in the land of Israel. Thus, over the course of centuries, the Biblical story became a paradigm for the historical sensibility of succeeding generations.

The Jewish yearly cycle contributes to this conception of history as oriented around Biblical events. Each spring Jews experience anew the departure from Egypt when they read out the story of the Exodus. Every winter they kindle the Chanukah candles that commemorate the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in the second century BCE. Each year they reenact the rescue of the Persian Jews as described in the Book of Esther. Even more important are the portions of the Torah recited in the synagogue on a weekly cycle. Since the same passage is recited within the same time frame in every synagogue all over the world, all Jews experience, so to speak, the creation of the world in autumn, the biographies of the patriarchs in the winter, and the wandering through the desert in the spring.

In the traditional Jewish conception of history, all the events from the centuries following Biblical times are of secondary importance. The next major event is relocated to the future: the coming of the messiah, who has been longingly anticipated for centuries and is expected to usher in an epoch where all people will live together in peace. By contrast, the time between Biblical prehistory and that messianic utopia is regarded as merely a lengthy interim whose events—save for a few exceptions like the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE—are hardly worth being recorded, much less collectively remembered.

Biblical history depicts a wandering people. These two terms—“people” and “wandering”—denote central elements of the Biblical conception of history that have shaped the Jewish self-image all the way through to modern times. Bible narrative revolves around themes of homeland and exile, as exemplified by the periodic destruction of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and by the Babylonian exile of the Judeans. At the very

least these themes afforded consolation and hope to Jews experiencing dislocation in later eras.

Although the land of Israel is promised to Abraham and his descendents in the Biblical account, fulfilling that promise is not so easy: Abraham left Mesopotamian Ur by way of the city of Haran for the land of Canaan, but then he moved on to Egypt and only later returned to the Promised Land. His grandson Jacob spent two decades with his father-in-law Laban in Aram, then returned home, but in old age followed his son Joseph to Egypt. Only four hundred years later did Moses and Aaron lead the now enslaved Hebrews back to the land of Israel. Yet by no means is this return a triumphal procession. Along the way the people of Israel constantly grumble and long for the fleshpots of Egypt. The land that is supposed to be flowing with milk and honey is a strange, inhospitable land in which there are giants and very few welcoming people. What had once been home has become foreign. Ten of the twelve spies sent out to scout the territory would rather return to the country from which Pharaoh had finally agreed to expel them following the ten plagues. Finally, under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites conquer their unfamiliar homeland, yet neither Moses himself nor the generation of those who commenced that journey forty years before are allowed to cross the Jordan. Just as Odysseus returns home to Ithaca only after many tribulations, here too the homecoming resembles an obstacle course.

### **From Jacob to Israel**

The dichotomous relationship between homeland and exile has continued to shape Jewish existence. There has always been an emotional relationship to the land of Israel, and yet even in Biblical times a large portion of the “children of Israel” lived in Egypt and Babylonia under Persian, Greek, and Roman rule. Many of the books of the Bible were shaped by the perspective of this Diaspora.

The term “Israel” has multiple meanings. Originally it was the self-designation of the northern kingdom of “Israel.” If, however, one follows the Bible, it initially designates Jacob/Israel and his descendents, literally the “children of Israel.” These include the twelve tribes who, according to Biblical tradition, divided up the land they conquered west and, to some extent, also east of the Jordan, and who then appointed judges and kings to lead them. After the death of King Solomon, thus the Bible continues, the country split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah around the capital city of Jerusalem. From then on the state of Israel represented only a portion of the “children of Israel.” This northern kingdom of Israel, moreover, fell to Assyrian conquerors in the year 722 BCE, and its inhabitants were led into exile or enslaved. To this day numerous legends have circulated about the fate of these ten “lost tribes.” Their descendents are supposed to have been spotted anywhere from East Asia to West Africa and South America. After the kingdom of Israel disappeared from the map, the southern kingdom of Judah appropriated its traditions and self-conception and defined itself as “Israel.” The term “Israel” retained this usage even two and half millennia later, when a modern State of Israel was founded.

But at the same time that the southern kingdom of Judah was maintaining its provisional existence, the terms “Judeans” or “Jews” (*Yehudim*) took on added weight. Slowly the two terms began to fuse. In addition, we occasionally encounter the equally Biblical term “Hebrews” (*Ivrim*), after which the language of the people of Israel (or of the Jews) is named.

Similarly, a variety of terms are used to designate the territory of Israel. The original name was “Canaan.” The Israelites called the country “Israel” or “Judah.” The Assyrians turned the northern kingdom of Israel they had conquered into the province of “Samaria,” named after its capital. After Judah was conquered by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and its capital



Jerusalem destroyed in 586 BCE, it became first the Babylonian and then the Persian province of “Yehud.” Only in the Roman era did “Palestine” (after the Philistines) catch on, a term that was deliberately humiliating to the vanquished Jews.

The formation of a people out of different tribal communities is always associated with the cutting off of that people from their surrounding environment; among the Jews this led to increasing isolation over the course of the centuries. Certainly the gravest difference distinguishing Jews from the other peoples of the ancient world was monotheism (with some exceptions, such as a brief period under the pharaoh Akhenaton in Egypt.) The notion of a single and (moreover) invisible God was the result of a long process of evolution. It only received its purest expression during the experience of exile and against incomprehension and frequently even robust rejection by the nations surrounding Israel. Other instances of the Israelites cutting themselves off from their surroundings that are described in the Bible may have taken place earlier and more rigorously. Among the numerous dietary laws, special mention should be made of the early taboo on pig’s meat, which distinguished the Israelites from their neighboring peoples, in whose settlements archaeologist have found lots of pigs’ bones. In later times, when other peoples also began adhering to monotheistic religions, everyday peculiarities like these helped Jews preserve their own identity. Already in the Bible there are multiple references to the special role of the Jews among the nations, most clearly in the Book of Numbers (23:9–10), in which the foreign seer Balaam calls Israel “a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.”

The Bible itself (not least of all) played a decisive role in the formation of the Jewish people’s tradition. Belief in the story of the Exodus out of Egypt and passage into the Promised Land, of the violent conquest of Canaan under Joshua, and of a powerful united kingdom under David, solidified into the

myth of a past “Golden Age” to which the Jews might some day return. This Biblical narrative became their common historical legacy, a legacy that would shape not only their consciousness, but also the way they were perceived by those surrounding them, for centuries. For the first time a religion (or a people) would define itself by way of texts, through a holy scripture. In the course of time, the Biblical story became the paradigmatic narrative for a wide variety of cultures. Whether it was the subjects of the Ottoman Sultan Sulaiman recognizing in him the wisdom of Solomon, the Puritan settlers in New England establishing their “New Canaan,” or black slaves on Virginia plantations singing gospel songs about the Exodus from Egypt, the reception of the Hebrew Bible by Christianity and Islam turned the history of early Israel into the historical model for a large portion of humanity.

### **From Legend to History**

What we know about the earliest beginnings of the people of Israel comes only from its own sources, which are Biblical. Documents of other peoples that mention Israel during the first few centuries of its existence are extremely rare, and from the Biblical material alone we cannot derive any claims of historicity. It is a different matter, though, when an event that occurs in a Biblical narrative is supported by external sources and archaeological finds. But what incredible irony there is in the very first extra-Biblical document mentioning Israel’s existence! On the stele of the Pharaoh Merenptah from the thirteenth century BCE, the extermination of a people is mentioned whose millennia-long history is supposed to have just begun at that time. Exactly what was then understood by the term “Israel” remains something of a mystery, but this inscription testifies to the existence of a group of people in Canaan

designated by that name. What might the origins of these people have looked like?

Archaeological finds discovered toward the end of the twentieth century give a prosaic picture of Israel's beginnings. The patriarchal narratives may point to origins in the Mesopotamian Fertile Crescent, but this could also be the product of wishful thinking on the part of a group anxious to claim origins in the renowned city of Ur. The sojourn in Egypt may be related to the constant immigration of Semitic peoples into the land along the Nile, where famines were comparatively rare. A connection has been suggested between this episode and the immigration of the Hyksos, who had also been coming out of Canaan since the eighteenth century BCE, attained dominance over Egypt, and were then expelled from the Nile Valley around 1570. The latest scholarly research is rather skeptical about any link between the Biblical Exodus and either the Hyksos or another people mentioned later in Egyptian documents, the *Apiru* (or *Habiru*—marginal groups in ancient Near Eastern society whose name bears a resemblance to that of the Hebrews). Whether the Exodus actually took place is questionable. There are, in any event, no archaeological findings of any kind pointing to a massive immigration into Canaan from Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE.

Scholarly research today does not usually proceed from the assumption of a violent conquest; instead, it assumes that the people of Israel took shape in Canaan itself. Individual groups may indeed have immigrated to or returned from Egypt. What we know from archaeology indicates that the first Israelites were shepherds and farmers, most of whom lived in broadly autarkic village communities around the turn of the millennium. Some Biblical tribes certainly go back to the kinds of extended family communities that took their names from geographic points in their immediate surroundings. What the Israelites of



On a stele dated from around 1230 BCE, Pharaoh Merenptah celebrates his victory over different peoples. In addition to the Hittites, Canaanites, and Hurrians, this is the first time where we find the name Israel mentioned in an extra-Biblical source: “Israel is wasted, its seed exists no more.”



The Gezer Calendar from the tenth century BCE is the oldest lengthy Hebrew inscription we know. It records, month by month, the most important activities of farmers, such as sowing, harvest, and viticulture, and thus affords us our earliest look into the daily life of the population of Israel.

that period understood by religion must be envisaged as a far cry from the idealized monotheism of a later era.

The history of Israel up to the beginning of the first millennium BCE is largely unknown. The heroic deeds of the Judges, David’s powerful kingdom, Solomon’s resplendent temple—none of these can be supported either by archaeological excavations or extra-Biblical sources. There is not a shred of evidence even for the existence of a united kingdom of Israel and Judah in the tenth century BCE. Only in the ninth century does this murky past begin to be illuminated. Extra-Biblical sources point to a northern kingdom of Israel that was gaining strength but that increasingly came under pressure from Assyria in the



On the black obelisk from the ninth century BCE (above), some of the early military campaigns of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III are depicted. In the second scene King Jehu of Israel surrenders and offers the Assyrians his tribute. The text underneath says: "Tribute of Jehu, son of Omri."



This mural relief from the palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh shows a family from the vanquished city of Lachish going barefoot into exile.

eighth century and was finally deprived of its sovereignty in 722. After this date all that remained was the southern kingdom of Judah, which up to this point had been a thinly settled and militarily insignificant state with few urban structures. Under King Hezekiah (727–698) Judah's population quadrupled and its capital Jerusalem became a major political and cultic center for the first time.

The political rise of Judah, however, was brutally interrupted by the military campaigns of the Assyrian King Sennacherib (705–681), who ravaged large parts of the country and demanded



King David as he lives on in legend: a powerful figure in a stately palace, with the Book of Psalms attributed to him and the harp he was said to have played. Appearing in a cloud are the words “ruach hakodesh” or holy spirit. The artist who made this Haggadah in 1740 in what was then the Danish city of Altona (near Hamburg) was Joseph ben David (originally from Leipnik in Moravia); he produced a total of thirteen Haggadoth.

enormous tribute payments from Hezekiah and his successors. The kings who followed him, especially Manasseh (698–642), were obedient vassals of the Assyrian empire, and it was only the latter’s decline at the beginning of the seventh century that restored to Judah a measure of political and religious room for maneuver. Next the Egyptians assumed hegemony in the region of Canaan, but they were mostly interested in the coastal region.

Under King Josiah (639–609) Judah rose to become a significant regional factor. Josiah attempted to consolidate Judah's power by concentrating official cult worship at Jerusalem. He declared that the once important rulers of the northern kingdom were responsible for its decline, since they had been venerating the God of Israel in rival "idolatrous" shrines of Beth El and Dan. Josiah aimed to turn the remnants of Israel spared exile and enslavement into adherents of the Jerusalem temple cult. One possible historical interpretation is that the transfigured past of a united kingdom would underscore Judah's predominance as the successor state to Israel. David, the legendary founder of the Judaic royal house and progenitor of the lineage leading to Josiah was supposed to have ruled over both kingdoms at the same time.

A long and rich history was attributed to the formerly insignificant site Jerusalem. The religious program conceived at that time was later, during the Second Temple era, turned into the foundation for a conception of history that focused on venerating the God of Israel in Jerusalem as the only and invisible god. The apostasy of the people of Israel—who had turned away from this God, worshiped the Golden Calf during their wanderings in the desert, and been idolaters under the last kings of Israel—had brought punishment in its train. By contrast, obedience to the God of Israel and his exclusive worship in Jerusalem always resulted in reward.

A section of the Second Book of Kings tells of Josiah's three religious reforms. In the eighteenth year of his reign, the year 622 BCE, a book of the Torah was reportedly found during a renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem, and this book served Josiah as the foundation for a new covenant concluded between God and his people (2 Kings 23:2–3). This "found" book is widely held to be an early version of Deuteronomy, the Fifth Book of Moses, containing the foundation for a form of Biblical monotheism (or Biblical "monolatry," worship of a single God while

simultaneously recognizing other gods) that espoused the exclusive veneration of God in Jerusalem and established rules for Biblical festival days and numerous laws about social welfare as well as moral regulations. Whether it was the weekly day of rest or the injunction to free slaves after six years, whether love of one's neighbor or property law, many of the precepts laid down here became part of the modern world's legacy and the foundation for numerous other laws that are still in force to this day.

For reasons unknown, Josiah was killed in 609 BCE by Pharaoh Necho II in Megiddo. His four successors—three sons and a grandson—were unable to stop the advance of a menacing new power from the east, Babylonia. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II seized Jerusalem and established Judah as a Babylonian protectorate. King Jehoiachin was led into exile, along with the Judean elite, and his uncle Zedekiah was installed as a vassal king. Under the influence of the Egyptians, the Babylonians' enemies, Zedekiah attempted to break free from the empire. This ended in disaster. The prophet Jeremiah had warned against this self-destructive enterprise, which would end with the demise of the kingdom of Judah. In 586 Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, leveled the flourishing center of Judah to the ground, and had the disloyal king Zedekiah's eyes put out. Like his predecessor Jehoiachin, Zedekiah was led into exile. When the governor of Judah, Gedaliah, became the victim of an assassination, numerous Judeans fled to Egypt, where they prepared themselves for a long stay. Jeremiah has something similar in mind when he writes to the Babylonian Jews (Jeremiah 29:5–6): "Build ye houses, and dwell in them, and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply ye there, and be not diminished."



Time and time again for centuries to come, Jeremiah's maxim served the Jewish communities of the Diaspora as encouragement to establish a foothold and plant roots outside their ancestral homeland. By contrast, another Biblical passage from Psalm 137 was understood, even by Jews in exile, as evidence of the Babylonian exiles' unalterable loyalty to their country of origin. It was later quoted by Zionists as a foundational text for the Jewish return to the Land of Israel: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." Over the next two and a half millennia, the better part of Jewish history would play out between these two poles, attachment to the old homeland and loyalty to the new one.