

Dr. Jonathan Greer, Archaeology and the Old Testament, Session 3, Early Israel

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This is Dr. Jonathan Greer and his teaching on archaeology in the Old Testament. This is session 3, Early Israel.

Welcome back. We're going to now begin our sweeps through some of the big picture history and culture that we see in the Old Testament, now armed with our understanding of the three C's and also with some understanding of how the different methodologies play out in biblical and archaeological studies. So when we talk about archaeology and the Old Testament or archaeology and ancient Israel, we begin with that Merneptah Stele or Merneptah Stele that I've mentioned to you in a previous discussion. So, here's another image of it.

And it dates there's some difference of opinion on Egyptian chronology, but it dates to either 1229 or 1209 BC. So, this is in the big picture of the historical timeframe. Some will place this right around the time of the Exodus, either a little bit before or a little bit after.

There's a discussion about how the Exodus happened. We'll get to that in a coming slide. But this is, when we speak of archaeological Israel, this is the first mention that we have of Israel as a people.

And the snippet of this stele was discovered quite a long time ago, in 1896, by Sir Flinders Petrie, an eccentric and in many ways problematic archaeologist who did a lot for the field in terms of beginning to figure out how stratigraphy works and also early attempts at dating, and also very much a genius in his knowledge and grasp of the ancient world. But this is a victory hymn, a victory stele, of Pharaoh Merneptah, and he's celebrating his victory over many different peoples. And the ancient Egyptians had enemies that they would put under the rubric of the nine bows, these nine traditional enemies of Egypt.

And in one section of the hymn that I'll read a translation of here, this is what Merneptah says. The chieftains lie prostrate saying, peace, not one lifts his head among the nine bows, the traditional enemies of Egypt. Libya is captured while Hatti is pacified.

Canaan is plundered, and some will argue for a ring structure in this hymn. So, we can now think of Hatti as the large region, Canaan more specifically, and some of the city-states and peoples within this entity of Hatti and Canaan.

Ashkelon is carried off. Gezer is captured. Jenoaam is made to non-existence.

And Israel is wasted. Its seed is not. It's offspring.

And Khuru has become a widow because of Egypt. All the lands united themselves in peace. Those who went about are subdued by the king of upper, lower Egypt and then many titles before he gives his name Merneptah.

So here we have this mention of Israel alongside the cities that we know, Ashkelon and Gezer. And one particularly interesting thing is the way that the name Israel is written. You see it here on the screen, and it was actually written the other way.

I've flipped it so we can read from left to right. But this is the name Yisra'el, it's actually an R but the R and the L change going from Semitic to Egyptian. But what I want to point out are these signs at the end of the word.

These are in Egyptian what we call determinatives and you don't read them. So this is Yisra'el or Yisra'er. Then, these tell you something about the word that precedes it.

So, these determinatives are used in Akkadian as well. They occur at the beginning of the word. But here in Egyptian they come after and Ashkelon and Gezer, instead of the seated man, seated woman, have a symbol with three kind of bumps that indicates that they are city states, established peoples.

The throwing stick here indicates that they're a foreign people group, and the three strokes, the plural strokes, indicate that it's plural. So, what's significant about this is it identifies Israel as an unsettled people in contrast to, you know, Am and Gezer and Ashkelon as settled peoples in a city. So, this is fascinating because it matches very much the descriptions of early Israel in the biblical texts, be it soon after the exodus or in the period of the judges.

You get the picture that they are very much peoples who are moving around, peoples who are herding flocks and sheep and goats and cattle and living in tents. So many scholars have pointed out the significance of the determinatives in identifying archaeological Israel. As I mentioned previously, there's discussion, to put it mildly, the debate about who is this Israel and whether this is the same Israel that is referred to in the Bible. So, we need more data to answer this as we go on.

Well, this is the first kind of identification of Israel by name. But another major piece of data that we want to bring in is the settlement explosion of the 12th and 11th centuries BC. This is based on survey data where different archaeologists have collated the shift in settlement between the archaeological ages.

So, if we have the late Bronze Age, roughly 1550 down to about 1200, during the late Bronze Age period, toward the end of this late Bronze Age period, we don't have too

many settlements that had folks at them in this period. So, some would say below 100. So, in some tallies, the tally of Larry Steger, we've got 88 late Bronze Age settlements in Canaan and 36 specifically in the Hill Country.

That's the end of the late Bronze Age. Now, what happens in the Iron Age I, so from around 1200 to 1000? People are now stretching the transition between the Iron I and the Iron II into the later 10th and even 9th century. But that's something else, or later 10th.

Anyway, in this window of time, we have an explosion of settlements. There were as many as 678 settlements from 88 to 678, or 36 to 319 in the Hill Country. And then it continued even more into the Iron Age II from the 10th or 9th centuries on.

So up to 852 in the Iron Age II, 557 specifically in the Hill Country. So, what we see are a few settlements. These are the remnants of the late Bronze Age superpowers or vassals of these late Bronze Age superpowers that we'll talk about soon.

And then this explosion of settlement that can't be explained by demographics in terms of reproduction. This isn't what statisticians tell us. This is too much growth and too short of a time.

So, this fits very well with a bunch of people settling down. So many will put these two pieces of evidence together, the Merneptah stele and this settlement explosion, and say, here we have ancient Israel, ancient Israel. The question remains: where did they come from? A third piece is the discussion of the material culture of these various settlements.

Traditionally, archaeologists have noted a particular architectural style, the four-room house that has a courtyard, two side rooms, and a back room. And notice that this architectural style comes in conjunction with this settlement explosion. I did fail to mention too in the explosion, many of these sites, the proliferation of sites are on sites where there was previously was not a late Bronze Age site, just to state the obvious.

So, there are more people settling in more places. Traditionally, a number of architectural and material features have been identified with these people. The four room house, the collared rim store jar, which is a large storage vessel for grain and for oil with a distinctive rim and neck that can be identified.

Terrace farming is thought to be an innovation or at least expanded in this time period. Cisterns, these large caverns, were dug at low points in the terrain into the limestone to collect water that would then be plastered before water collection. And then particular dietary patterns of interest to me as one who deals with animal bones.

Archaeologists, starting with my animal bone mentor, Brian Hesse, noticed a distinction in the faunal profiles, the animal bone remains from sites of the hill country with sites of the coastal plain, traditionally associated with Israel and Philistia, in that there were far more pig bones in the coastal plain of the traditional heartland of Philistia. Now, he advised caution with applying this to any ethnic designation, but most scholars threw that to the wind and proceeded to identify any site that didn't have pig bones with Israelites and every site that had pig bones with Philistines, which is not what he was saying. We have another piece to this puzzle, and that is Canaanites, they also didn't like pigs so much.

So that complicates the pictures and the debate is ongoing of how we can use pig bones. And the debate continues with many of these other features as well. Four-room houses have been discovered in places not traditionally ascribed to ancient Israel, so collared room store jars and terraces are very hard to date.

And, in fact, many that have been associated with the Iron Age are, in fact, much later. Likewise, with cisterns, very hard to date, many precede any historical Israel and dietary patterns, as we've already talked about. So here is the data, but as we've mentioned, it's complicated, it's partial, and there are different interpretive frameworks that can be placed upon this.

Now, there's one more big piece of data that we need to discuss when we're thinking of archaeological Israel, and that is a step back to kind of the big picture of world history, of this transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I. Many scholars will note a major collapse that's dated roughly to about 1200 BC, 1200 BC, where you have these great superpowers that had ruled the world in the Late Bronze Age that come to a halt, some disappearing forever. So, during the Late Bronze Age, you remember those epicenters of civilization in Egypt and Mesopotamia. We had the superpower of Egypt.

We had a couple of different superpowers in Mesopotamia: one in the south, Babylon, one in the north, Assyria, and before them, Mitanni. And then in the west, we had the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia. These superpowers were few, and they were big, and they would vie for this land between famous confrontations between the Hittites and the Egyptians in the Battle of Kadesh in the northern section of biblical lands on the Orontes River.

So, we have this push-pull between the Hittites and the Egyptians. Eventually, there's peace is made and Egypt dominates the biblical lands, Israel, Palestine. And so in this region, they would have outposts and Egyptian outposts, and these have been recovered archaeologically.

We can identify Egyptian material culture. We've also noticed a great deal of hybrid culture that's a mix with local Canaanite culture. But you have these epicenters that are reporting to Egypt.

We have wonderful insight to this period through the archive of Amarna, midway down the Nile, or up the Nile rather, with the flow of the Nile. This city of the so-called heretic king Akhenaten and Amenhotep III, his father, this collection of letters to their vassals in the Levant. And these are fascinating letters.

It caused quite excitement, quite a lot of excitement at first because they often mention these habiru or these apiru, these landless marauders who would come and destroy cities. And folks kept waiting to read that one of them might be named Joshua or something like that. In fact, we know the names of some of these vassals, and the connection between the biblical material is kind of like this.

So, this could be one of the complications for those who would understand an exodus to have already happened at this point because Egypt seems firmly in control of this land. Even the fact that you have letters of complaint from these different rulers of these city-states back to the king of Egypt saying, hey, send us your troops, we're your loyal vassals, speaks to Egypt's control on this region.

But that control began to slacken a bit toward the end of the 12th century. And by the 11th century, Egypt was completely gone from this region. So, what happened? Well, first of all, the evidence.

We have destruction layers, major cities that have destruction layers throughout not just the region of the southern Levant but also as far away as the Aegean, the great Mycenaean civilizations have collapsed. Throughout Anatolia, the Hittite capital of Hattusha was destroyed at this time. Cyprus, some destructions, but also some continuity.

And then Egypt and the Levant. So, we also have literary descriptions. The most famous is the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, which has iconographic and epigraphic descriptions of what was going on.

In this scene, you see here is a group of bound sea peoples that some have identified with a particular sea people known as the Peleset. But these are quite eerie, some of these texts that you that you read about. And we have letters from Ugarit as well that reminds me of one of those scenes in the movies where they're coming, they're coming, and the pen runs off the page.

So, who's coming? Well, we have this description of Ramses III's great victory. And, of course, Egyptian kings, like all ancient Near Eastern kings outside the Bible, never lost. Even when they lose, they didn't lose.

Even when we have both sides of the battle, they never lost. So, in his version, he talks about how he laid waste to this, these marauders from the West, this group, this coalition of so-called sea peoples. The Chekher, the Shekelish, all of these names of different peoples from the West.

And now we understand some coming from Anatolia as well, who came against the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and Ramses III held them off. So, he has these great iconographic depictions of sea battles. There are pictures of land battles.

And then he says that he settled them on his border. He settled these defeated peoples on the border. It's kind of a nice thing to do, especially if you want to settle your enemies right on your border.

But anyway, that's Egyptian reporting for you. So, it seems that the sea peoples were somewhat successful but that Egypt held on just barely, just barely. And in fact, Ramses III is the last great pharaoh of this period before we slip into, before Egypt begins to lose its grip on the Levant.

But one of these sea peoples is known in the Egyptian inscriptions as the Peleset, the P-L-S-T, Peleset. No vowels there, but we can put some vowels in, and it sure sounds a lot like the Philistines. In fact, most scholars would agree this is, in fact, the Philistines, in that the Philistines are a subset of one of these sea peoples; at least the first generations are probably in waves.

There's lots of discussion now about the integration of Philistine culture with Semitic culture. In initial understandings of this, Philistine settlements could then be identified by a particular material culture in contrast to the hill country culture that I've just talked about previously. So, a particular hearth structure, presence of pig bones, and a particular style of pottery that has correlations with pottery from the Aegean.

So quite exciting, this combination again of text and artifact and even images placed the Philistines in the southern coastal plain right around this time of the collapse. So this then fits very, very well with these early stories we have in the Bible of conflict between Philistines in the coastal plain and Israelites in the hill country. The material culture, however, paints a little bit of a different picture than we have in some of our biblical imaginations, where we envision the Israelites as the more sophisticated because of our biases and the Philistines, if you look Philistine up in the dictionary, it's some uncouth person.

You can see that grow into the interpretation of material remains, when in fact, it was the other way around. The Philistines were the cosmopolitan dwellers of the

plain where the international route went through, and the Israelites were the hill people confined to the hill country. So, this is some of the literary descriptions.

The Ugaritic letters chillingly talk about seeing ships and wondering if any help is going to come, and then we have an abrupt end to these letters. Recent research has identified environmental factors as the trigger for this upheaval. Intense desiccation, a drying out that then led to a series of droughts.

And then with limited resources, people in positions of power would then vie for those resources, and it triggered a wave of political unrest. And including, but not exclusively, these movements of sea peoples from the Aegean and Anatolia into new lands of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. The aftermath that we see from this is that some of the great civilizations, namely the Cretaceous civilization in Anatolia and the Mycenaean civilization in the Aegean, are no more.

This is the end of those civilizations. We also see an abrupt end to sea trade and imports. There's de-urbanization that takes place within the southern Levant, but there is some continuity.

So, with most of these things, we're talking in generalizations. Assyria seems to have maintained some continuity in Mesopotamia and likewise, certain sections of Cyprus. But in general, when we're digging at sites in the southern Levant, we can very clearly see a distinction between late Bronze Age layers, where we have beautiful painted wares to more utilitarian coursewares in the Iron I. Some of the structures seem more temporary, certainly less monumental than the late Bronze Age.

We have a number of settlements that are marked by storage pits; whether the people lived in some kind of, we have nomads that are settling down, or whether these storage pits may be connected with more permanent dwellings remains debated. Now, the big picture with this, why are we giving this, going back in time to talk about ancient Israel? Well, we've mentioned already that we have the Merneptah Stele, we have this settlement explosion, and now we've stepped back and looked at the big picture of the geopolitical situation. Well, this is the context in which the major empires have now collapsed or are weakened.

We have all of these kingdoms popping up in the land. Well, one of these little kingdoms is we might identify as Israel. So, when we put all of these pieces together, and we look at the big picture, the story of the Bible, these pieces fit very well for the large time frame, the big picture of what's going on.

Israel in this time and in this space is one of these fledgling kingdoms that rises out of the ashes of the late Bronze Age collapse. We also have the advent of more widespread use of the alphabet. So, scribalism is a hotly debated topic in Old

Testament studies, where we know that it started, the alphabet was invented quite early.

In fact, new evidence is pointing to the fact that it was invented earlier than we thought of earlier. So, something like 1700 BC, even 1800 BC, an adaptation from hieroglyphic script instead of, as it works in Egyptian hieroglyphs and likewise with Akkadian signs, you can have a sign functioning as a determinative we've already talked about. You can have it functioning as a sound, but you can also have it functioning as an entire word, or you can have it functioning as a syllable.

So, there are many different ways different signs can function. The beauty of the alphabet is it restricts it just to the sound. And so, you can have a limited set of signs, 20 something up to 30 in Ugaritic, that can represent different sounds and much more simplistically convey language.

So even though it's invented, that idea of an alphabet quite early, it doesn't seem to have caught on until later. Most will agree that by the 7th century BC, it was more widespread. We have lots of archaeological evidence for that.

In those centuries in between, scholars will have differences of opinions for the explosion of writing. But it does seem in this context, even the very fact of the scribal culture of the late Bronze Age that is now being adapted to local kingdoms, that this is the time frame when someone besides the superpowers can afford to hire a scribe. You know, the scribes didn't go away.

Where did they go? What language, what linguistic world did they adapt to? And we have the origins of writing in smaller epicenters. So here in this transition between the late Bronze and the Iron Age, this is where some of us will see the origin of these biblical texts that we now have preserved in later forms in the Bible. So, this is a significant time.

So, in that context, what are these stories of the ancestors that we have preserved in the Bible? So, the first thing I want to do is fast forward to U.S. history before we talk about the stories of the ancestors and put up this image of a very famous painting by Immanuel Lutz, who depicted in 1851, depicting Washington's Crossing of the Delaware in 1776. And you can see it's quite a heroic depiction. And many will point out historical problems with this depiction.

First of all, come on, George, you're going to stand like that on the gunwales of a boat through icebergs? That doesn't seem quite smart. And I mean, we got horses and boats behind you. If you've been in a canoe, you know you don't even want a dog in the canoe unless it's well-behaved, let alone a horse.

Then we've got an American flag held by James Monroe, the fifth president who's behind him. He was at the battle, but I don't know if he was right behind George. And he's carrying an American flag, but Betsy Ross hasn't started stitching yet.

That's interesting. And then look at who's in the boat. We have a Tennessee frontiersman, a Scottish immigrant, an African-American, a woman.

We have several different Native American peoples represented. This is quite a unit, quite a unit. And so, people will point out this doesn't resonate historically.

But I say, don't worry, because I actually, it's little known, but I have an actual picture of what it really looked like, what it really looked like. So, you ready? Here's what it really looked like. It was a surprise attack.

The crossing was at night. So it wasn't, you couldn't see anything. That's what it really looked like.

So, then the question becomes, what is being depicted here? What is being, is history being depicted here? Well, yes, this was a real historical event. But it goes back to what we were talking about, where history informs the story rather than the story informing the history. This is based on historical occurrences, but it is so much more than just the facts.

This represents a perspective from the mid-19th century, looking at what he envisioned in his own home country and what he was hoping would play out in the United States. There's a star of hope, the idea that we are all in this boat together, whatever our ethnic background, whatever our country of origin, whatever our linguistic background that we could go for. This is the kind of message that he was trying to communicate based on a historical event, but rich with layers of meaning that go beyond the particular events.

So, I like to use this as an illustration of what the Bible is doing in a lot of its stories. It's very much rooted in the ancient world. It's rooted in the realities of real people, real places, and real times.

But it's also so much more. Remember, this is ultimately a story about God and his people and how that relationship works out. It's not, first and foremost, trying to give us a historical account in the way that we want it to be.

That's really historical snobbery, or might we even say arrogance, that we would want it to give it to us in a form that we want it to be in rather than the form that it is. So, before we talk about biblical stories, I wanted to put that out there as a reminder that many of these stories are artistic renderings of events, peoples, and

places, and times in the past. So, we're going to see evidence from that ancient culture.

But we also need to remember, we need to keep an ear for the idea that it's saying something to the generation that's telling the story. So, we see that in these stories of the ancestors. And we begin with stories of origin.

So, the first 11 chapters of Genesis that many will say were written even later, perhaps in the time of the monarchy. But they're very much enmeshed and immersed in the world of the ancient Near East. So archaeologically, for many of these stories that we're going to talk about, archaeological evidence operates in a different way.

We're looking at ancient texts that have been excavated from Mesopotamia and from Egypt to understand we have a world that's being communicated here and it's told in a particular literary style, a genre. And how do these things compare and contrast? So, we have in the biblical story creation. We have multiple creation accounts, Genesis 1 and then Genesis 2, 4, and the following.

Then we have some remnants in other places, Psalm 74. And then we have this human rebellion. Then we have this great flood.

Then there's the proliferation of humankind. We have these same things described, sometimes in the same order, in ancient Near Eastern texts. And by comparing and contrasting them, we can see the different emphases of the particular stories.

Many times, we're rooted in trying to squeeze this square peg into a round hole of the kinds of questions that we want answered from these stories, usually ones about science or history. These aren't first and foremost about any such thing. They're far bigger in their aim of what they're communicating.

They're talking about God and his people and how that all works out. I want to point out just one illustration of why this is really important, really important. That is when we're aiming for the wrong kinds of questions, we miss essential things that the Bible is communicating.

So, if you think of all of the debates in certain circles of origins, creation, evolution, all these sorts of things, when we talk about those things more than we talk about the contents of what is being communicated in its ancient context, we miss some wonderfully important things. Take, for example, the image of God. The image of God, when it's understood in its ancient Near Eastern context, is something ancients would have been very familiar with, but not in the way that we usually think of it.

They knew about the image of God. Kings were the image of God. Kings and rulers, as idols, images, and icons, were also somehow images of God.

So, they had different understandings of this in different parts of the ancient Near East, but they understood a close relationship between image and the ruler, the king. And now you have this proclamation in Genesis 1 that all human beings, male and female, regardless of any intended hierarchy that we might create, like by a social construct such as race or any kind of gender hierarchy, these things are obliterated in this concept of God imbuing all human beings with his image, with his image. We can see that in stark contrast when we are familiar with these ancient concepts that we know from ancient texts recovered via archaeological information.

So, that will be the one example. We could go on for each of these. We also have ancestral stories, the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and then we go on to Jacob, and we have Leah and Rachel and also the other wives that continue to create, or through those cohabitations, provide the context for the tribal structure that we read about throughout the rest of the Old Testament, the so-called 12 tribes of Israel, of which there are different orderings and inclusions, including half-tribes and discussion of Levites that are beyond the direct discussion here.

But we have many archaeological parallels that have been pointed out for this period, cultural parallels, that a lot of excitement was generated in the earliest periods of biblical studies, tying these stories to a particular historical period. Later scholars have come along and rightly shown that the problem with that is that many of these cultural parallels, such as surrogate adoptions, continue throughout multiple periods and historical periods. So, there are complications with trying to place these stories in any specific timeframe based on date, but they are valuable nonetheless for, again, reminding us of this ancient context of these stories of peoples who are moving around.

Remember the larger historical context, moving from place to place in tents. We also have the exodus, which is this quintessential act of God's redemption that I've mentioned previously. There isn't any unambiguous archaeological evidence for.

That's a problem. However, we've got many indications within the story itself that the writers, the scribes, are very well familiar with ancient Egyptian culture. There's very much an Egyptian flavor to the story that demonstrates the familiarity of this story with the context of historical periods within Egypt.

There's debate about when these will fall, but there are loan words. There are elements of the story that fit in one place better than another that have led many to suggest that there is, in fact, a correlation here, even if it may not be in that specific way that many would like. So, a popular theory with some is that there was a smaller group that came out of Egypt.

It becomes complicated with these other peoples who are then folded into ancient Israel. But many who suggest this note that even the Bible's testimony itself is a mixed multitude that comes up out of Egypt. And we get a picture of that in the descriptions of the stories that follow with the conquest and then the period of the judges.

And the Bible seemingly gives different perspectives on this period. One is incredibly violent and sudden. And for those of us who think deeply about these things in a theological context, it is very problematic.

Seemingly, God ordained genocide. When I engage these texts in class, I remind the students of step one in addressing these texts of terror, these violent texts in the Old Testament, whether they pertain to warfare or to abuse or treatment of women. We have to remember that the first step in addressing this is to be bothered.

These are horrible stories. These are horrible stories that seem in great contrast to the character of God portrayed in Jesus. So, if we're not first bothered, we're skipping over the real essence of being Christian to try to jump to some kind of connection with history.

So that's the first step. The second is to kind of dig into this idea of genre, the way the stories are told. And many different scholars have, in that second phase, come up with very different ideas, some ranging from it never happened, and it's all told in kind of a hyperbolic way to different understandings of what it meant that they actually did.

Others suggest that God allowed himself to be portrayed incorrectly in this text to show himself who he was. Where I'm at, these are difficult texts, very difficult texts that we need to proceed carefully and cautiously before definitively landing on any sort of conclusion and not to do that at the expense of missing some of the moral tension that we should have in engaging these texts. But the Bible also portrays a somewhat different or parallel perspective in judges as a more gradual and even in the second part of Joshua as a more gradual process.

One where different Canaanite peoples are even woven into the essence of Israel in a series of complicated stories there. Archaeologically, again, an earlier generation of scholarship would note a series of destruction layers that they would then correlate to a particular date of the exodus. And there's discussion, debate among those of us who affirm historical exodus if it's an early date or a late date, an early date in the mid-1400s, a late date into the 1200s or 1100s.

So, there's debate even among those who would affirm a historical exodus. But archaeologically, there are complications with lining up the different destruction

layers with particular descriptions in Joshua. If one follows the picture of judges where we have it kind of spread out over time and also geographically, all of these data fit together in this bigger picture of what I was discussing in the previous slide.

And that is, if we remember, we've got a story that is the main goal of these texts. Now, it's not a story that's made up out of thin air, but it's a story that's rooted in that real world, and that real-world informs that story. So if we look back at the big picture of what we know in early people Israel, right around the time of this collapse, a settlement explosion, some debate about how particularly we can get with the material culture, and then the fact of the late Bronze Age collapse and stories that arise within those contexts describing the situation within that context, we have a lot of pieces that come together in the big picture to suggest that Israel, as we have it described in the story, is very much rooted in time and in place.

So that's where we'll pause for this discussion of early Israel before turning to the kingdoms.

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