

## The *Habiru* / 'Apiru and 'ibrim and the Connection with I Samuel

SIMCHA SHALOM BROOKS

The issue of the identification of the 'Hebrews' with the *Habiru* is a complex subject and it has been discussed for over a century, ever since the discovery of the expression in the Amarna Letters. These letters provide rich evidence for the social and political history of Syria and Palestine in the fourteenth century BC. It is my intention in this article to propose a new perspective on the *Habiru* question in the light of I Samuel and to discuss the implications that this might have for early Iron Age society and the form of its development.

The Amarna letters were written by Abdi-Hepa, King of Jerusalem, around 1375 BC and they describe the *Habiru* forcing their way into Canaan. As a result of the similarities between the name *Habiru* and Hebrews, some scholars suggested that these were in fact the Israelite tribes in the process of conquest. But this suggestion was soon rejected because these *Habiru* were only mentioned in the correspondence from the King of Jerusalem and this contradicted the biblical passage in II Samuel 5:6–9 stating that David conquered Jerusalem early on in his reign, that is in about 1000 BC.

However, the *Habiru* also appear in additional ancient Near Eastern documents as a specific social component, that is as a people who were forced to flee their homeland or hometown through desperate circumstances, such as famine, heavy taxation, raids and prolonged wars, to seek their livelihood elsewhere. These new discoveries, therefore, led some scholars to reject any connection whatsoever between the *Habiru* and the Israelites. The *Habiru* appear in over 200 written documents covering much of the second millennium BC. The oldest document comes from Kaneš, the Assyrian trading centre in Anatolia in the nineteenth century BC, and the latest comes from an Egyptian source from the reign of Rameses IV around about 1166 to 1160 BC. Their geographical distribution covered most of the Near East. However, as a general Western Asiatic phenomenon they ceased to exist historically speaking by the end of the second millennium BC.

The Semitic root on which this expression is based may either be 'br (ר-ב-ר) or 'pr (ר-פ-ר) depending on the correct reading of the consonant. If we decide to read it as *Habiru*, then it must be a derivation from the verb 'br (ר ב ר) = meaning to pass or to trespass (for example, a border). This meaning would enforce the idea that *Habiru* means 'fugitive' or 'immigrant'. If we read it as Akkadian 'piru, then

it derives from the noun 'pr (ר פ ע) = meaning dust. In that case 'piru may have the meaning of 'low (social) standing'. It is also quite possible that the *Habiru*/immigrants were regarded as being of low standing and this would explain the variation as it appears in the ancient documents.

It has been suggested that the *Habiru* came from a sedentary population and not from a nomadic background. Hence, they originated from two major sectors in ancient Near Eastern society: urban and tribal. There were, of course, individuals who fled from their homeland to neighbouring states, but the majority of them moved in small bands, often under the leadership of one man. However, regardless of whether they moved as individuals or in bands, they did form an intermediate social group between the tribal and the urban groups and as such may have been regarded as people of low standing, as suggested above.

The *Habiru* had neither tribal territory nor fields or herds, and so often they posed a threat to sedentary society. Documents from Mari and from other places in Babylonia, indicate that on occasion, during the course of the nineteenth to eighteenth centuries BC, the *Habiru* served as mercenaries in the armies of the various established kingdoms. Sometimes they served in the public or private sectors, which gave them the opportunity to re-integrate back into sedentary society.

It would seem, therefore, that the *Habiru* groups appeared in various places throughout the Western Asiatic region, though they had nothing necessarily in common with each other, except for their social status. Thus, it may be concluded that the *Habiru* phenomenon is to be explained as a process during which people were forced to flee from their own society and had to adapt to a new situation, as foreigners or immigrants, and that eventually they became re-integrated. It should be emphasized that once their status had been recognised, they were not apparently persecuted or extradited, but allowed to stay and assimilate into their new environment.

At this point I should like to turn to the main purpose of this paper, which is to understand the connection between the *Habiru* and the 'Hebrews' ('*ibrim*) in the First Book of Samuel. The term '*ibrim*' appears seven times in I Samuel. Scholars have previously noted that I Samuel 14:21-22 is significant for the proper understanding of that expression. It reads as follows:

As for the Hebrews ('*ibrim*) who had sided previously with the Philistines and gone up into their camp, they too turned to be with Israel under Saul and Jonathan; and when all the Israelites (*ish-yisrael*) who had been hiding in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines had fled, they too pursued them in the fighting.

Nadav Na'aman (1986:279) has claimed that this passage relates to two separate groups who joined the battle on the side of the victor; the Hebrews who served in the camp of the Philistines and the Israelites who hid themselves in Mount Ephraim (I Samuel 13:6). In that story two groups (Hebrews and Israelites) are clearly distinguished, making it clear that the difference was not merely a literary device in the text.

In other references the name 'Hebrews' is used by the Philistines, that is in I Samuel 4:6 and 9; 13:3 and 19; 14 :11; 29:3. The text deliberately emphasized the contempt that the Philistines had for the uprooted Hebrews who were in their service and they were clearly looked down upon as an inferior group. In any case, in five of the cases where this term was applied, the reference was directed towards the Israelites who were the rivals of the Philistines.

In considering the discussion of the *Habiru* so far, the application of the term to the Israelites may now be explained. In I Samuel 29: 3, David and his band are described by the Philistines as 'Hebrews'. Indeed Na'aman correctly claimed that the story of David and his band represents the best example in all the other ancient texts in regard to the detailed description of the whole *Habiru* process: how David rose to power, first serving in Saul's army, marrying the king's daughter and then later forced to flee from Saul when he sought to kill him. As a result, David became a fugitive until after Saul's death, when he was anointed by the people of Hebron and became re-integrated into Israelite society.

Although Na'aman's explanation is convincing there is still one issue which has been overlooked. We know about the story of David, but what about the identity of the Hebrews under David's leadership (as in I Samuel 29:3) and the Hebrews mentioned in the account of the battle of Michmash? In order to answer this question, we now need to set aside the textual sources, and turn to the more recent archaeological data from the Highlands of Palestine, where the Israelites settled in Pre-Monarchic times, data which has not been considered before in this specific context and which does shed much light on the socio-economic situation of the Israelites at that time.

First, I refer to a survey published by Finklestein (1989:43-74), though for the purpose of this paper I shall focus on only one aspect - that of the population in the central hill country during the Iron I Period (about 1200-1000 BC). The population is estimated to have been about 20,000 individuals at that time, whereas by the end of the eleventh century the population is estimated to have been about 55,000 individuals as a result of natural growth. Both figures refer to sedentary populations only. It is interesting that similar surveys have been carried out in other highland regions such as for example, Manasseh and Benjamin, and these have produced similar demographic patterns.

The apparent demographic growth brought about an intensification of agricultural productivity and this played a vital role in the transformation of the Israelite social structure. But there are also additional factors that should be taken into consideration, namely that character of the family house as remarkably portrayed in the archaeological data as discussed by Lawrence Stager (1985:1-35). Hence, the interior of a farm house built in the highlands was actually quite small (averaging at 50 square meters), and a house in the steppe region was larger but never more than 75 square meters. In both examples the group occupying the space could not have been larger than a nuclear family. The most interesting houses are the cluster of dwellings discovered at Raddana, 'Ai and Mashash, consisting of multi-family compounds, made up of two or three individual houses in each case. The component

houses were either completely independent or linked to one another by a number of common walls. However, each house had a separate entrance which was accessed through a shared courtyard. The dwellings themselves are sometimes separated one from the other by streets, paths or stone enclosures. It has been demonstrated that this residential pattern denotes the presence of the patriarchal family, that is a situation where descent and inheritance was determined according to patrilineal principle and patrilocal residence. Such a family set-up could have been used for three or more generations. Sometimes married brothers and their families continued to live in a single household, with the older brother becoming the head of the household following the father's death.

In ancient Israel the rule was that only sons were entitled to inheritance and the eldest son held the privileged position. He received a double share of the father's inheritance. The same appears in documents from various parts of Mesopotamia, for example in southern Babylonia (S. Dalley: personal communication). Except for the fact that 'the first born is the beginning of his father's strength' in Mesopotamia, the eldest son was also expected to be responsible for carrying out the funerary rites for the deceased father and for his ancestors. Not only would the eldest son have to pay for the expense of the funeral, but he would also be required to make offerings of food and drink. Therefore, if the eldest was to inherit an equal share (like his brothers), in effect he would have received less than them because of his extra funerary expenses. Hence, it is possible, therefore, that only movable chattels were shared amongst the sons, while ancestral land holdings were not divided up but given in their entirety to the eldest son. At the same time, one should remember, that the multi-family household did continue to grow, as it went through the various phases of the domestic cycle, and gradually became overcrowded.

What is apparent from this discussion is that because heads of household and their lineage members exercised complete rights over inheritance in landholdings, inequalities within the various groups in Israel would inevitably have developed long before the Monarchy. Hence, in this new economic situation, there was an unequal distribution of land and an unequal accumulation of property. Therefore, the sub-units of the group could no longer depend merely upon farming for their livelihood, but had to adapt to a bartering system in order to supply themselves with the necessities of life.

With the further growth of population, survival in the highlands probably became even more difficult. There was no chance to acquire land any longer and this may in itself have led ultimately to the growth of agricultural terracing in marginal lands – a hunger for land which reached its zenith by Monarchic times (Gibson 2001:113–146). In the early Iron Age the prime agricultural areas in the valleys and in the highlands were utilised to their fullest. Consequently the situation may have become so desperate that there was no alternative for many young unmarried males but to leave their homes and to look for opportunities elsewhere.

This overflow of desperate young men in search of new opportunities reminds us of the *Habiru* and might explain how so many Hebrews came to join the Philistine

army, as well as to explain where members of David's band came from, since it was stated: 'Everyone who was in distress and everyone who was in debt and everyone who was discontented gathered to him and he became captain over them...' (I Samuel 22: 2). It must be taken into consideration, however, that David himself having suffered misfortune came from a similar background; after all he was Jesse's eighth son (I Samuel 16: 10–11). Being the youngest in a family of eight, David had no hope of any inheritance of any significance (Shalom Brooks 1998).

This socio-economic situation might be considered as one of the prime reasons for the eventual emergence of the centralised rule, that of the Monarchy in ancient Israel. The new institution of the Monarchy offered a solution for the so many dispossessed young men who were recruited for the military (I Samuel 14: 52), and then ultimately into government and the priesthood. It is quite possible that these men were also rewarded with plots of land and vineyards following a period of good service, thus enabling them to become re-integrated once again into Israelite society. In a similar fashion David himself may have begun his career in Saul's army.

Later, when Saul realised that David had set his eye on the throne, he pursued him as a traitor, thus transforming David yet again into a fugitive/ Hebrew again. He subsequently joined the Philistines' army as a mercenary, as indicated in I Samuel 29:3. Na'aman claims (and I agree with him) that the Hebrews originated within Israelite society, just like all the other *Habiru* in the neighbouring societies of the Near East in the second millennium BC. While the other *Habiru* became integrated into new societies, the *Habiru* of the Israelite society managed to re-integrate back into the society from whence they came.

This in effect forged a form of ethnic link between the 'Israelites' on the one hand and the 'Hebrews' on the other.

#### Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Dr Stephanie Dalley of the Oriental Institute, Oxford for discussing with me the topic of inheritance in Mesopotamia and for lending me her unpublished paper on the subject. I also wish to thank Dr Shimon Gibson for his useful comments on this paper. (This article is based on a lecture I gave for the Society for Biblical Literature in Cambridge in July 2003).

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## Ein Gedi Water Mills

GIDEON HADAS

Two ancient water mills are known from the oasis of Ein Gedi, on the western shore of the Dead Sea, at the eastern fringe of the Judean Desert. They were both powered by the water from the Ein Gedi spring. One is a free-standing structure and is visible next to the Ein Gedi spring and can be seen from afar by every tourist or explorer reaching the site. It was excavated and dated to the Mamluk period. The second mill was recently excavated and it has been dated to the Byzantine period. These excavations were part of an overall study of the ancient irrigation agriculture at the oasis of Ein Gedi, conducted by the author under the auspices of the Ein Gedi Archaeological Expedition of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, led by Professor Yizhar Hirschfeld.

### The Byzantine water mill

In January 1998 a water mill was investigated two-thirds of the way up the slope from Tel Goren to the spring of Ein Gedi. This mill is clearly of an earlier date than the Mamluk one, which stands close to the Ein Gedi spring (see below). The mill was first exposed when a dirt road was built in the area in the 1950s. It was marked on a map by Mazar as a 'Byzantine building' (Mazar *et al.*, 1966: 14, Fig. 2). Mazar partly excavated the structure, and Porath suggested it was a grave (Porath 1985:99, the 'Mausoleum'). In 1998 we undertook excavations within the building, clearing two rooms of debris, excavating beneath the floors and exposing parts of the water channel that fed the mill.

The mill is a square two-storied building (5 × 5 m), of which only the two rooms of the ground floor have survived, with walls preserved to a height of 2.5 m and with one opening leading to the south room. The main water channel passes next to the southern wall of the mill, with a sloping branch bringing the water into the mill (Fig. 1). The mill was built in two stages. The surrounding walls were built on a foundation layer made of small fieldstones that protrude between 0.10 - 0.20 m. Above it, the exterior walls of the mill were built of ashlar (Fig. 2), while the interior walls were built of fieldstones or rough-hewn stones. Subsequently the building was filled with soil and gravel as a foundation with a floor that was made of crushed travertine. During the second stage the western wall (W 602) was thickened with ashlar stones and a thin wall made of fieldstones (W 605) was built, cutting the building into two trapezoid rooms (Loc. 7307, 7316). There was no