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דפוס ומאל חיים הכהן בע"מ, ירושלים

THE HABIRU AND THE HEBREWS FROM A SOCIAL CLASS TO AN ETHNIC GROUP

BY STUART A. WEST

The first mention in the Bible of the word עברי (Hebrew) is in Genesis 14:13, where Abraham is referred to as אברם העברי "Abram, the Hebrew." What is the significance here of the term hebrew?"

A possible answer is that the description of Abraham as a Hebrew reflects the fact that he immigrated to Canaan from Mesopotamia, beyond the River Euphrates. Thus, in the Book of Joshua we read:

And Joshua said unto all the people: Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel: Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond (בעבר) the River (Euphrates), even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from beyond (מעבר) the River, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan...

Joshua 24:2-3

In order to indicate that Abraham came from beyond the River Euphrates, the text uses the Hebrew words בעבר and מעבר. It is the link between the word עברי (Hebrew) and the word עבר which has given rise to the explanation that the description of Abraham as העברי (the Hebrew) indicates that he came from beyond the River Euphrates.

Against this explanation it is possible to point to the genealogy of Abraham:

And unto Shem, the father of all the children of Eber (עבר), the older brother of Japheth, to him also were children born.

Genesis 10:21

And Eber lived four and thirty years, and begot Peleg.

Genesis 11:16

The following verses of Genesis 11 go on to list the family tree right down to Abraham. So, in this sense עברי (Hebrew) apparently signifies a descendant of

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Eber. However, the word עברי (Hebrew) in its Biblical usage is restricted to the Patriarchs and their descendants, from whom the Children of Israel emanated. If this is so, we must doubt the origin of the word עברי (Hebrew) as being simply descriptive of the descendants of Eber.

The Bible tells us that Eber had two sons: Peleg and Joktan (Genesis 10:25). Furthermore, we are told:

And Eber lived after he begot Peleg four hundred and thirty years, and begot sons and daughters.

Genesis 11:17

Abraham was descended from Eber through Peleg (Genesis 11:16-26), but Joktan also had sons – 13 in all (Genesis 10:26-29), whose names apparently correspond to Arabian place names and tribes; but in the Bible none of them are called Hebrews.

Abraham's first-born son, by Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, was Ishmael, the ancestor of the Ishmaelites who is not called a Hebrew in the Biblical text. However, Isaac, Abraham's only son by his wife Sarah, was most certainly a Hebrew, as was his son Jacob – but Esau, Jacob's twin brother, forbear of the Edomites, is not described as such. Likewise, the descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew – the Amonites and Moabites – are not labelled Hebrews in the Bible.

If the term עברי (Hebrew) is not applied to the descendants of Eber generally, so, too, the Bible does not designate the descendants of Abraham and Isaac generally as Hebrews; the appellation is limited to those descended through Jacob, who were later to become the Israelite nation.

But why were the Israelites originally known as Hebrews?

It could be that in 1877 an Egyptian woman living near Amarna, some 200 miles south of Cairo, stumbled upon the answer.

Amarna had been the capital of Amenhotep IV, who became Pharaoh of Egypt circa 1380 B.C.E. Amarna was the site of his palace and temple, and the mound covering its ancient ruins is known as Tel-el-Amarna. Here, in 1877, a peasant woman accidentally unearthed a large collection of clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform writing. More than 350 tablets in all were discovered, comprising in the main diplomatic letters, written in Akkadian and dating from the 14th century B.C.E. The tablets revealed correspondence between the rulers of city states in Western Asia and the Pharaohs of Egypt. It appears from the tablets

that Egyptian power was declining and that bands of outlaws called Habiru were overrunning the countryside in areas where city states were located.

The situation prompted pleas, contained in some of the Tel-el-Amarna letters, for assistance in repelling Habiru attacks. Among the letters are a few from the governor of Jerusalem urgently entreating Egyptian aid in resisting the Habiru.

In themselves, the Tel-el-Amarna letters show no definite connection between the Habiru and the Hebrews beyond the similarity of name. However, archaeological discoveries since have brought to light much more evidence relating to the subject.

Excavations on the Upper Euphrates at Mari begun in 1933 uncovered the ruins of a magnificent palace dating back to the third millennium B.C.E. together with more than 20,000 clay tablets, a number of which mention the Habiru, particularly as military auxiliaries. The biblical description of Abraham's rescue of his nephew Lot certainly could have been an account of the military exploits of a band of Habiru:

And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram, the Hebrew – now he dwelt by the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner; and these were confederate with Abram. And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan. And he divided himself against them by night, he and his servants, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus. And he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.

Genesis 14:13-16

Further important archaeological discoveries were made between 1925 and 1931 at Nuzi, about 150 miles north of Baghdad and east of the River Tigris. Nuzi, which flourished during the 15th to 14th Centuries B.C.E., belonged to the Hurrians who inhabited Haran, from which Abraham emigrated to the land of Canaan. Among the 4,000 tablets found at Nuzi, more than 30 refer to the Habiru, but depict them as persons hiring themselves out as servants in exchange for food and clothing – a kind of self-enslavement.

From the various archaeological sources it has been possible to establish that during the greater part of the second millennium B.C.E., the Habiru were an ele-

ment of society in the Fertile Crescent of Western Asia. More often depicted as military auxiliaries, used by local rulers as marauding warriors, some of them nevertheless settled down in towns where they hired themselves out as servants.

Only 30 miles or so from Ur, in Southern Mesopotamia, Abraham's birthplace (see Genesis 11) was Larsa, where records indicate the presence of the Habiru around the year 1900 B.C.E. From Ur, Abraham's father Terah led his family to Haran in the northwest of Mesopotamia. (Genesis 11:31). Although Abraham proceeded from there to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:4-5), he never lost touch with his native land, as we know from the fact that he sent his servant back to find a wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24:4). Likewise, Jacob went to Haran to flee from his brother Esau and to take a wife (Genesis 28:10) — and this was probably during the period the Habiru were in Haran.

The wealth of archaeological discoveries in the Middle East during the last 100 years has prompted many scholars to raise the question as to whether the Hebrews can be identified with the Habiru.

One argument against any such identification is the fact that the Habiru were a social element as distinct from the Hebrews, who are usually identified as an ethnic group. Nevertheless, the way of life both of the Habiru and of the Hebrews had much in common.

From the Patriarchal narratives in the Book of Genesis we learn of the semi-nomadic life style of the Patriarchs. Living in tents, they supported themselves and their families as shepherds, avoiding close contact with city dwellers as much as possible in order to preserve their monotheistic beliefs.

The story of Joseph could well be that of an individual Habiru settling in Egypt and rising from servant to high status. His ascension to power at a time when Egypt was ruled by the Hyksos is perhaps a Biblical example of such an instance. In fact, when Potiphar's wife spoke of Joseph as "the Hebrew servant" (Genesis 31:17) and Pharaoh's butler referred to him as "a Hebrew" (Genesis 41:12), the designation was probably social rather than racial. As if to emphasize this, Joseph even described himself as having been kidnapped from "the land of the Hebrews" (Genesis 40:15), an interesting remark, because the land of Israel, as a nation, was not yet in existence. In other words, "the land of the Hebrews" was the land where people of Joseph's type and social background, lived, to wit, Hebrews: a semi-nomadic people, isolated from the rest of society, strangers in the land. Thus, after the death of Sarah, Abraham said to the sons of Heth:

I am a stranger and a sojourner with you ...

Genesis 23:4

For the Hebrews, Canaan was the land of their sojourn as strangers. Indeed the Divine Promise to Abraham indicated as much:

And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession...

Genesis 17:8

So it appears that insofar as the Patriarchs were strangers in a strange land, without rights, semi-nomads, isolated from the indigenous populations of the cities, they could be said to fit the description of the social element or class known as the Habiru.

As monotheists, the Hebrews isolated themselves from local customs and therefore had to remain separate and apart from the general populace if they were to preserve this aspect of their life; hence their existence as nomads, although some Hebrews chose to hire themselves out as servants, often with their families, in much the same way as did the Habiru. This is apparent from the law as to Hebrew slaves as set out in the Book of Exodus:

If thou buy a Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve; and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing. If he come in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he be married then his wife shall go out with him. If his master give him a wife, and she bear him sons and daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. But if the servant shall plainly say: I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: then his master shall bring him unto God, and shall bring him to the door or unto the door-post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him for ever.

Exodus 21:2-6

The passage from Exodus is of particular relevance to the question identifying the Hebrews with the Habiru. Bearing in mind that this law was promulgated after the Children of Israel had left Egypt, one would have expected the text to refer to an Israelite servant rather than speak, as it does, of "a Hebrew servant."

The question therefore arises as to whether, in the context of this law, the word עבד (Hebrew) is merely referring to those of the Children of Israel who wished to

enslave themselves or is used to include the social class of the Habiru. According to the evidence found at Nuzi, the law regarding Habiru slaves bears a strong resemblance to that written in the Book of Exodus. The Habiru slave served indefinitely, and if he broke his agreement and left his master, he had to make a payment to him of silver or gold, or receive some form of punishment. Alternatively, he could provide a replacement. However, it is with regard to the slave's family that there is this strong resemblance to the Biblical law. As in the Bible, if the Habiru slave married after becoming a slave, he could not take his wife or offspring with him into freedom. Furthermore, the Nuzi tablets reveal a ceremony before the "ilani" (gods) in order to effect permanent bondage.

All the evidence from archaeological discoveries to date seems to point to the conclusion that, sociologically, the Hebrews were in fact Habiru, although not all Habiru were Hebrews. It could well be that the word עברי (Hebrew) was originally only a sociological designation, indicating status or class — in which case the words Hebrew and Habiru are synonymous. The fact that in the later Books of the Bible and in its usage in post-biblical times, the word Hebrew has been used as an ethnic designation simply means that the original meaning of the word has been changed. With the eventual disappearance of the Habiru, etymological explanations of the term "Hebrew" such as mentioned at the beginning of this article, were inevitable. In the absence of archaeological evidence until comparatively recent times, the Pentateuch itself was the oldest record extant from which an explanation could be sought. And so the term "Hebrew" ultimately became equivalent to the term "Jew" as in the Book of Jeremiah where the prophet proclaims:

that every man should let his man-servant, and every man his maid-servant being a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, go free; that none should make bondmen of them, even of a Jew his brother..."

Jeremiah 34:9

Nonetheless this cannot detract from the clear indications which exist that the origins of the Hebrews are as Habiru.

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