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## Who are the Ḫabiru of the Amarna Letters?

S. Douglas Waterhouse  
Andrews University

Despite numerous studies devoted to the question of who the “Habiru” were, a lively controversy still continues. The heart of the controversy pertains to that portion of the people referred to as “Habiru” who were attempting to take over the land of Canaan. In urgent dispatches sent to the Egyptian Court of Pharaohs Amenhotep III and his son, Akhenaten, the chieftains of the land of Canaan speak of the Habiru as a perilous threat to their city-states.

It was the discovery in 1887 of over 350 cuneiform letters at Tell el-Amarna in Middle Egypt, the site of Pharaoh Akhenaten’s capital, which opened up to the modern world new vistas on what had been occurring at a crucial time when Egypt was losing her grip upon her Asiatic Empire. These clay tablets, which were part of the Egyptian royal archives, the so-called “Amarna Letters,” continue to raise a good deal of interest. And it is within this Amarna archival correspondence that the Habiru appear as powerful foes of Egyptian authority; a major force that had important effects upon events within the region of Palestine-Syria.<sup>1</sup>

The present interest in the Habiru is primarily caused by three factors: (1) the resemblance between the names Habiru and Hebrew, (2) the chronological relationship between the Amarna Habiru and the Israelites, and (3) the proximity of their location within the land of Canaan to that of the Hebrews in Joshua’s time. The present article intends to address all three of these factors.

On the question of resemblance, it is now agreed upon that indeed there is a valid etymological relationship between the term “Habiru” and the biblical name “Hebrew” (*‘ibri*).<sup>2</sup> A major obstacle, however, prevents an automatic equating of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Astour, “Habiru,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), 383.

<sup>2</sup> Nadav Na’aman, “Ḫabiru and Hebrews, The Transfer of a Social Term to the Literary Sphere,” *JNES* 45 (1986):278; Manfred Weippert, *The Settlement of the Israelite Tribes in Pales-*

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the two terms as equivalent. For while the name “Hebrew” in Scripture serves the purpose of a gentile designation for ethnic Israelites, the purpose of the appellation “Habiru” in ancient Near Eastern cuneiform literature (of which the Amarna Letters are a part) is primarily used in a sociological sense. As already intimated, the Habiru of the Amarna correspondence appear as enemies of the crown, bent on destroying the established authority of Canaanite feudal society. Consequently, those labeled with this appellation were looked down upon as a negative component of the population.<sup>3</sup> But does this mean that they constitute a social class?

Since the discovery of the Amarna Letters, where the appellation “Habiru”<sup>4</sup> usually is written by the use of the Sumerian logogram *SA.GAZ*, the term also has turned up in a number of cuneiform texts from different parts of Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor in a time-span dating from the end of the third millennium B.C. to the end of the Late Bronze Age (1200 B.C.).<sup>5</sup> Among all these existing documents the term is not considered an ethnicon, but rather an appellation representing a certain segment of society.<sup>6</sup> This has come to influence the way the term Habiru, of the Amarna tablets, is interpreted. Even though it is hard to separate the Habiru from the Hebrews, who settled in the very same land of Canaan, many have come to view the Amarna Age Habiru as a socially marginal people, indigenous to the land of Canaan.<sup>7</sup>

If the Habiru can be identified as citizens of Canaanite states or even as heads of state, then the hypothesis would be confirmed that the term represents a non-ethnic segment of the internal population of Canaan. Two examples in the correspondence from north Canaan illustrate the state of the evidence. Rib-Haddi, the leader of the city-state of Byblos, complains in his letter to Pharaoh: “All my cities which are situated in the mountains or along the sea have sided

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*tine*. Studies in Biblical Theology, *Second Series* 21 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1971), 74-82.

<sup>3</sup> William L. Moran, “Join the ‘Apiru or Become One? In “*Working With No Data*”: *Semitic and Egyptian Studies Presented to Thomas O. Lambdin*, ed. By David M. Golomb (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 209-212. Niels Peter Lemche, “Ḫabiru, Ḫapiru,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (H-J), ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 8.

<sup>4</sup> In spite of both Egyptian and Ugaritic evidence favoring a rendering of *Ḫab/piru* by ‘*Apiru*, cuneiform literature favors the rendering as *Ḫabiru*; the name is spelled in cuneiform *Ḫabirāyu* represented by a *bi* sign which is never *pi*; Lemche, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *The Hab/piru*, American Oriental Series, Vol. 39 (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1955), 3-12.

<sup>6</sup> Nadav Na’aman, “Amarna Letters,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1 (A-C), ed. by D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 178.

<sup>7</sup> A much discussed theory is that the Habiru were Canaanite peasants who were in revolt against their overlord; that they were a poor underclass in the process of breaking away from the existing city-state structures. Hershel Shanks, “Israel’s Emergence in Canaan: *BR Interviews* Norman Gottwald,” *BR* 5/5 (October 1989):26-34.

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with (*nēpušu ana*) the Habiru-people” (EA 74:19-21).<sup>8</sup> In other words, the outlying citizenry of Rib-Haddi’s kingdom have identified themselves (in the eyes of Rib-Haddi) with the unworthy and disloyal “Habiru,” and thus are to be considered as enemies of the crown.

The second example actually defines the then current understanding of the term: “Now he [Aziru, the leader of the kingdom of Amurru] is like the SA.GAZ-people, a stray dog (*kalbu ḥalqu*), and has seized Sumur, the city of the Sun, my lord” (EA 67:16-18). In this missive the charge is made that a head of state has become like the Habiru because his actions are comparable to a “stray dog” who obeys no master, who illegally seizes what he can, and otherwise pays no attention to existing authority.<sup>9</sup>

It needs to be noticed that in these two examples, neither the citizens of Letter 74 nor the head of state in Letter 67 actually are identified as “Habiru.” Nor do they join the Habiru, so as to be part of an existing external group. Rather, the charge is made that the defectors act like Habiru-people. Being disloyal or subversive, in the idiom of that time, is “to act” (*epēšu*) Habiru, that is, to “side with” the dangerous Habiru-enemy.

If it could be shown that the biblical Hebrews were an active presence in the land of Canaan during the time of the Amarna Age (14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), then the case would become much more attractive in identifying at least some references to the Habiru as referring to the Israelites. In this connection, it may be observed that late-Egyptian texts and inscriptions from the time of Seti I (1294-1279 B.C.) and Ramses II (1279-1213 B.C.),<sup>10</sup> speak of the Western portion of Galilee as *ʿIsr*, a seeming reference to territory settled by the Hebrew tribe of Asher.<sup>11</sup> In Papyrus Anastasi I (the so-called “Satirical Letter”), composed during the reign of Ramses II, the Asherites evidently were long enough in Canaan

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<sup>8</sup> The translations given here are a result of consulting several sources, including: William L. Moran (ed. and trans.), *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); William F. Albright, “The Amarna Letters” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (hereafter *ANET*); Second Edition, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1955), 483-490; Anson F. Rainey, *El Amarna Tablets 359-379*. Second Ed. (=AOAT 8, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978); Richard S. Hess, *Amarna Personal Names*. ASOR Dissertation Series 9 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993); and Samuel A. B. Mercer (ed.), *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939).

<sup>9</sup> Following the remarks of George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), 130.

<sup>10</sup> Sh. Yeivin, *The Israelite Conquest of Canaan* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut In Nabije Oosten, 1971), 23, 31.

<sup>11</sup> The identification of *I-s-r* in the list of Seti I with the tribe of Asher is considered doubtful by W. F. Albright, “Northwest-Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves from the Eighteenth Century B.C.,” *JAOS* 74 (1954):229-231. Yeivin, on the other hand, feels the equation is certain. Yeivin, *op. cit.*, 23: “The occurrence of Asher in the list of Seti I provides the clearest indication for the name’s connection with W. Galilee.” Diana V. Edelman, “Asher,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, *op. cit.*, 482.

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to have given rise to a folk-tale about a “chief of Aser” who escaped from an angry bear by climbing a tree somewhere near the region of Megiddo.<sup>12</sup>

That the Israelites had been in Canaan from as early as the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. may also be indicated by the smaller Beth-shan stela of Seti I. The stela commemorates a military campaign in which Pharaoh’s forces encountered a band of warriors whom Seti’s scribe called “Apiru.”<sup>13</sup> (the Egyptian equivalent to cuneiform “Habiru”<sup>14</sup>). What helps to identify these Apiru warriors is the place they came from. According to the hieroglyphic inscription, their homeland was Yarmuta, a Galilean hill known in Scripture as the Yarmuth heights, within the territory of the Hebrew tribe of Issachar (Josh 21:29).<sup>15</sup>

The fact that these Apiru lived in the hill-country rather than in the plains and the low hill-country of Western Palestine, accords well with what we know from the biblical records.<sup>16</sup> For when the Israelites came into Canaan, they found the Canaanites in possession of chariots (Josh 17:16, 18; Judg 1:19; 4:3) which could more easily be maneuvered on the level, lowland plain. Utilizing these frightening war-vehicles, covered with protective metal (Josh 17:16, 18), the Canaanites successfully pushed the early Hebrews off the plains, so that they remained pressed back into the interior highlands (Judg 1:19, 34). Possibly, this was one of the reasons why the important Canaanite fortress of Beth-shan, located in the wide valley of Jezreel, long remained a Canaanite city among those allotted to the tribe of Manasseh by Joshua (Judg 1:27).

The existence of Apiru on Mount Yarmuta, probably to be identified as 13<sup>th</sup> century Hebrews of the tribe of Issachar, lend an added witness to later information concerning Israel’s whereabouts. As is well known, the so-called “Israel Stela,” the famous hieroglyphic monument erected in 1207 B.C. by Pharaoh Merneptah, boasts of a victory in battle over a people called Israel.<sup>17</sup> Not only is the defeat of Israel considered a major achievement, but the name “Israel,” within the poetic internal structure of the stela’s coda section, is considered significant enough to serve as a people-entity, in complementary tandem to city-

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<sup>12</sup> John A. Wilson, “A Satirical Letter,” in *ANET* 477; Yeivin, *op. cit.*, 31, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, “Beth-Shan Stela of Seti I,” in *ANET* 255.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *ANET* 261, n. 9, and Wilson in a review of *The Hab/piru* by Moshe Greenberg in *JNES* 16 (1957):140.

<sup>15</sup> After studying the text, W. F. Albright was led to remark: “These warriors are unquestionably the *Ha-pi-ru* warriors of the Amarna Tablets. . . . There is in general such extraordinary resemblance between the role of the <sup>c</sup>Apiru and that of the Hebrews in the earliest biblical sources that it is scarcely possible to doubt some relation.” Albright, “The Smaller Beth-shan Stele of Sethos I (1309-1290 B.C.),” *BASOR*, No. 125 (1952):27, 32. Yeivin believes that the group called “Teyer,” who are allies of the Apiru, is to be identified with *Tōlaʿ*, one of the main Issacharite clans,” Yeivin, *op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. Second Edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 277-278.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, “Hymn of Victory of Mer-ne-Ptah (The ‘Israel Stela’),” *ANET* 378.

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states in Canaan.<sup>18</sup> The stela thus testifies to the fact that Israel was a well-known ethnic establishment which had been in existence long enough to enjoy a prominent position within the land of Canaan.<sup>19</sup>

The most compelling data indicating that the Hebrews already were in Canaan by the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C., are found within the Amarna Letters themselves. Although the Scriptural account of the Hebrew Conquest of Canaan fails to mention that the land of Canaan was an Egyptian-administered province (as indicated, for example, in Amarna Letters 36:15; 8:25), the same type of political structure that Joshua encountered in Canaan may be observed in the Amarna correspondence. As in Joshua's Canaan, the Amarna texts speak of independent city-states who possess the freedom to form their own alliances and pursue their own local agendas (though they owed nominal allegiance to Egypt). They even were able to recruit their own armies, although the Egyptian government did not give official sanction to the practice.<sup>20</sup>

While the title of a Canaanite chieftain was "man" (*awilu*: man with legal status) of such-and-such a city-state, and his appointed office, under an Egyptian overseer (a *rabišu*—official), was that of a "mayor" (*ḥazannu*), nevertheless, within his own Canaanite-society, he was known as "king" (EA 147:67; 148:40-41; 197:13-14; 227:3; 256:8), exactly as he is called in the book of Joshua (Josh 10:23).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the biblical phrase "kings of Canaan" (Judg 5:19; cf. Josh 5:1) finds its duplication in the Akkadian expression "kings of Canaan" from the Amarna Letters (EA 30:1; 109:46; cf. 8:25).

A sampling of observations taken from the Amarna Letters which seem to touch upon the very events narrated in Joshua-Judges is enumerated below as examples of why the Habiru, in some cases, indeed may be considered Hebrew:

1. There is a significant silence within the Amarna correspondence about those very places in central Palestine which the Hebrew armies under Joshua had overrun. In contrast to the many references to places in the south and north, there is no word arriving at the Egyptian Court from such places as Jericho, Bethel, Gibeon, Shiloh, Mizpeh and Debir, those very cities captured by Joshua.<sup>22</sup> Was this because the Amarna sources date from a time immediately after the first impact of the invasion into Canaan by Joshua's armed forces?

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<sup>18</sup> G. W. Ahlström and D. Edelman, "Merneptah's Israel," *JNES* 44 (1985):60-61. In Michael Hasel's careful analysis of the poem's structure, Israel, as a people, constitutes a sub-division, along with other listed city-states, within the land of Canaan; Michael G. Hasel, "Israel in the Merneptah Stela," *BASOR* No. 269 (1994):48.

<sup>19</sup> Frank J. Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt," *BAR* 1 6/5 (Sept/Oct 1990):27-28.

<sup>20</sup> M. Abdul-Ḳader Mohammad, "The Administration of Syro-Palestine During the New Kingdom," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 56 (1959):108-109.

<sup>21</sup> Albright, "The Amarna Letters from Palestine," *Cambridge Ancient History*, Second Edition, Vol. II, Chap. XX (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Edward F. Campbell, Jr., "The Amarna Letters and The Amarna Period," *BA* 23 (1960):11; Theophile James Meek, *Hebrew Origins* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 21.

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2. The ruler of Gezer writes to inform Pharaoh that “there is war against me from the mountains” (EA 292:28-29). As other missives from the city of Gezer make clear, the enemy in the mountains are the Habiru. Gezer’s king pleads with Pharaoh to “save his land from the power of the Habiru,” for the war “is severe” (EA 271:10-11, 13-16). A further Gezer missive makes the telling admission that: “the Habiru are stronger than we” (EA 299:18-19).

Gezer’s critical position, as found in the Amarna texts, correlates with the city’s situation as set forth in the book of Joshua. Even as the Habiru could not overrun Gezer, so too, the Hebrews of Joshua’s time failed to conquer the city. Nevertheless, the Israelites were militarily stronger than their foes and were thus able to impress a tribute of servile work upon the Canaanites of Gezer (Josh 16:10). Perhaps this is why Gezer’s ruler reports that people (=his citizens) can be ransomed “from the mountains for 30 shekels of silver” (EA 292:48-50). The only way the king of Gezer could rescue those from his own citizenry, who had been made liable to forced labor, was to pay as ransom the going price for a slave.<sup>23</sup>

3. The letters to Pharaoh from Jerusalem speak of the Habiru as gaining power throughout the country: “I am situated like a ship in the midst of the sea. The strong arm of the king [of Egypt] took the land of Naharaim [northern Mesopotamia] and the land of Cush [south of Egypt], but now the Habiru have taken the very cities of the [Egyptian] king. Not a single mayor remains to the king, my lord; all are lost” (EA 288:33-40).

In this same letter, Abdi-Heba, who was in charge of Jerusalem, makes the revealing admission (lines 9-10) that he does not hold the office of mayor (the position of a *ḥazannu* appointed by the crown), but rather is a mere “post commander” (a *we’u*: leader of a military company). By coupling this information with events reported to have taken place during Joshua’s day, Abdi-Heba’s surprising status becomes more understandable. The fact that he was not an *awilu*, or an *ḥazannu*, nor a *šar* (king), but rather an ordinary army officer who had been called upon to take charge of a kingdom, indicates that this was a highly unusual situation.<sup>24</sup> The possibility presents itself that the previous ruler had

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<sup>23</sup> As documented at Nuzi and Ugarit, the price of a slave during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. was 30 shekels. Kenneth A. Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” *BAR* 21/2 (March/April 1995):52.

<sup>24</sup> Abdi-Heba’s position as a military officer and not as a mayor is made evident in two letters (EA 288:9-10; 285:5-67). He makes clear that his position is due neither to his father or his mother, but rather to the strong arm of the king “who brought me into my father’s house” (EA 286:9-13). Possibly it was an Egyptian military force which established Abi-Heba as ruler over Jerusalem. The reference to “father” and “house” may not be a case of filial relationship, but rather a conventional manner of stating Abi-Heba’s status as the “son” of Pharaoh. For example, the Canaanite city of Sumur is referred to as Pharaoh’s house (EA 59:34-37; 84:13). For a discussion of Abdi-Heba’s position, compare William L. Moran, “The Syrian Scribe of the Jerusalem Amarna Letters,” in *Unity and Diversity*, ed. by Han Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins P, 1975), 155-156.

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been none other than Adoni-zedek, who had been king of Jerusalem, only to have been defeated and then slain by Joshua (Josh 10:23-26). In spite of this defeat, the Bible points out that the inhabitants of Jerusalem could not be driven out, or forced to surrender (Josh 15:63; Judg 1:21). Having been left in the void of a leaderless city-state, it would be plausible for the inhabitants of Jerusalem to have been placed under a surviving military commander.

Abdi-Heba warned Pharaoh of the impending gravity of the situation which he faced: “The king has no lands. The Habiru-people<sup>25</sup> plunder all the lands of the king....if there are no archers [sent here, then] lost are the lands of the king” (EA 286:55-60). Though the logogram *SA.GAZ* is used exclusively throughout the Amarna Letters, a singular exception is to be found in the letters of Abdi-Heba. In his missives, he plainly spells out (to avoid confusion?) the name of the enemy as *Ha-bi-ru*.

In Joshua’s day, Jerusalem was a powerful kingdom at the head of a coalition of city-states, enjoying a political influence which extended over a wide range of the surrounding hill-country and the Shephelah (Josh 10). But in the Amarna tablets the political standing of Abdi-Heba’s city has been reduced to a modest position. Illustrative of this political decline is Letter 290, in which Abdi-Heba passes on the bad news that the neighboring city-state of Beth-horon (northwest of Jerusalem) had broken her covenant commitment (the verb used is *paṭāru*, “to loose” [the bond]) with Jerusalem (EA 290:12-18).<sup>26</sup>

The first stage of the disintegration of the Jerusalemite coalition had been the breaking away of the territory of the Gibeonites (comprised of four towns) to the enemy, that is, the camp of Israel (Josh 9:3-15; 10:3-4). A second stage of the disintegration was Joshua’s defeat of a coalition army, consisting of five allied kings headed by the ruler of Jerusalem. The book of Joshua reports that the victorious Hebrews slew all five kings (Josh 10:5, 23-24). Letter 290 reports further disintegration, the loss of the town of Beth-horon. Faced with such a deteriorating situation, Abdi-Heba is compelled to warn Pharaoh that if he does not send military help, then “the land of the king will desert (*paṭāru*) to the Habiru” (lines 23-24).

4. The most telling convergence between the Amarna tablets and the biblical “Conquest” account is found in letters concerning an interesting ruler by the name of Labayu, who controlled an extensive kingdom which included the region of Shechem. In Abdi-Heba’s eyes, Labayu had become a traitor. Jerusa-

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<sup>25</sup> The word *Habiru* (EA 286:56) is used with the determinative of people (*amelūti*). Hence it seems unlikely that the word should be confined to a single individual, as W. Moran asserts; Moran, *Amarna Letters*, *op. cit.*, 327, n. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Compare the analysis of Z. Kallai and H. Tadmor, “Bit Ninurta=Beth Horon—On the History of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Amarna Period,” *Eretz-Israel* 9 (W. F. Albright Volume), ed. by A. Malamat (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1969), 138. On the identity of Beth-horon the Nether in EA 290, see Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: Athlone, 1968), 120 and n. 72.

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lem's leader rhetorically asks if Pharaoh would want Egypt's vassal rulers to act in the same treacherous manner as Labayu "who gave Shechem to the Habiru?" (EA 289:21-24). Since the word "Habiru," as here used, is linked with both the determinative of country (*ki*) as well as people (*amelūti*), the phrase could be understood to mean that Labayu made the land of Shechem into Habiru territory. The tie-in with biblical history is so striking that one prominent scholar was led to observe: "This may be one of the early crises in the history of Shechem which led to its being occupied by a dominantly Hebrew population in the time of Joshua . . . ."<sup>27</sup>

Nowhere does Scripture mention a military conquest of Shechem by the Hebrews. Apparently Amarna Letter 289 reveals how the Israelites gained possession of the Shechem region without the use of force. In parallel agreement, the archaeological evidence indicates that the Late Bronze city once ruled by Labayu and his sons never suffered a destruction, but rather experienced a peaceful transition from Labayu's time to the later Iron Age.<sup>28</sup>

As reported by the Bible, after defeating the cities of Jericho and Ai, the Hebrews, under their leader Joshua, gathered for a great covenant-renewal assembly at Shechem (Josh 8:30-35; *cf.* Deut 11:29-30; 27:4-13). Even though the whole region of central Canaan still remained unconquered territory, the entire camp of the Israelites, with their defenseless women and children, were able to move safely all the way from their base-camp at Gilgal, in the plains of Jericho, to their convocation at Shechem.<sup>29</sup>

Was this due to the largess and goodwill of the Canaanite chieftain Labayu? Since the patriarch Jacob had once owned a portion of ground at Shechem, and had willed it to his son Joseph (Gen 48:22 with 50:25-26; Josh 24:32), it may have been that the Hebrews pressed a prior legal claim to the region. One can only speculate on the background of events allowing the Hebrews a peaceful and safe arrival at Shechem.

We do, however, possess a letter from Labayu, in which he defends his actions: "Who am I that the king [of Egypt] should lose his land on account of me? The fact is that I am a loyal servant of the king" (EA 254:8-11). Fortunately for the historian, a hieratic docket written in ink was placed by an Egyptian scribe at the base of cuneiform tablet 254, thus indicating that the letter had been received by the Egyptian Court in what appears to be the thirty-second

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<sup>27</sup> Albright, *ibid.*, 77; *cf.* G. Ernest Wright, *Shechem: The Biography of a Biblical City* (London: Duckworth, 1965), 18, 200.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell and James F. Ross, "The Excavation of Shechem and the Biblical Tradition," *BA* 26 (1963):10.

<sup>29</sup> Following after Bryant G. Wood, "The Role of Shechem in the Conquest of Canaan," in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. by David Merling (Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archaeology, Andrews U, 1997), 246-247.



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regnal year of Pharaoh. Though the name of the Pharaoh is not given, it could only have been Amenhotep III, who enjoyed a reign of some 38 years.<sup>30</sup>

The significance of this chronological datum may be appreciated when placed in the context of biblical history. If it is conceded that Israel's Exodus from Egypt took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the very time favored by the chronological statements in the Bible (see 1 Kgs 6:1; Judg 11:16), then the conclusion necessarily follows that one of the rulers of the Egyptian 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty is the "Pharaoh of the Exodus." The biblical chronological data makes it likely that the best candidate for that title would be Amenhotep II.<sup>31</sup> If so, then he would have been the infamous Pharaoh who came to an ignominious end by drowning in the Red Sea (Ex 15:4-5; Ps 136:15).

Following the demise of Amenhotep II, the next ruler, Thutmose IV, reigned for nine years and eight months; subsequently being followed on the throne by Amenhotep III. This means that the thirty-second regnal year of Amenhotep III occurs forty-one years after the death of his grandfather Amenhotep II. Was it not at this precise time, forty years after the Exodus, that the Hebrews had their convocation at Shechem? Is it coincidence that the turning over of Shechem into Habiru territory appears at this very time in secular history, forty years after the death of the Pharaoh of the Exodus? Here is a synchronous merging of both Hebrew and Habiru history which offers a plausible indication as to the true nature of the events taking place within the Amarna correspondence.

5. In Letter 148, Abi-Milku, the ruler of Tyre, provides a report to Pharaoh Akhenaten concerning enemies who were causing grave problems in the province of Canaan. The king of Sidon, a rival ruler to the north, is of major concern, for his forces were besieging Tyre (lines 23-40). Another enemy is the king of Hazor, who abandoned his fortress<sup>32</sup> "and has aligned himself with the Habiru....[and] has turned over the king's land to the Habiru" (lines 41-43, 45).

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<sup>30</sup> Albright, *Cambridge Ancient History*, *op. cit.*, 5; Albright, review of J. de Koning's *Studien over de El-Amarnabrieven en het Oude-Testament inzonderheid uit historisch oogpunt*, *JNES* 6 (1947):59; Donald B. Redford, *History and Chronology of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt: Seven Studies* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967), 155, n. 282.

<sup>31</sup> Charles F. Aling, *Egypt and Bible History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 97. Siegfried H. Horn, "Exodus," in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*. Revised Edition (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1979), 349-350; Horn, "What We Don't Know About Moses and the Exodus," *BAR* 3 (June 1977):22-24.

<sup>32</sup> EA 148:41-42 reports that the king of Hazor (the Abdi-Tirshi of Letters 227 and 228) "has left his *qar* (fortified residence) and has been added with the *SA.GAZ* people." Moran interprets this as: "the king's deserting his family and aligning himself with the 'Apiru' (*Working with No Data*, *op. cit.*, 211). From the context it would seem that certain difficulties caused by the Habiru compelled the king of Hazor to leave his city. Recent excavations at Hazor may have uncovered the king's palace. "The absence of any later building above the core of this palace is truly surprising: City residents do not normally leave open such prime real estate . . ." Amon Ben-Tor and Maria Teresa Rubiato, "Excavating Hazor Part II: Did the Israelites Destroy the Canaanite City?" *BAR* 25/3 (May/June 1999):27.

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Seemingly, like Labayu, the king of Hazor was looked upon by the Canaanites as a traitor for having surrendered an unspecified portion of his kingdom, which was composed of several cities (EA 228:15-16). Hazor, which once ruled over a large region (Josh 11:10), had been reduced by a stronger power identified as the Habiru. Two extant missives from Hazor to Pharaoh Akhenaten (EA 227, 228) provide a denial by Hazor's king that he has failed to guard his city and villages.

In the biblical narrative, the city of Hazor had suffered an enormous defeat during Israel's final military campaign under Joshua. The city had been sacked and destroyed by fire. Jabin, Hazor's king at that time,<sup>33</sup> perished under the fierce onslaught (Josh 11:10-14). Yet Hazor managed to survive and thrive again as a Canaanite kingdom, as is evident from both the Amarna tablets (Letters 227 and 228) and the Bible (Judg 4:2-3). Though the Hebrew conquest initially was a success, the Israelite invasion failed to embrace some of the most important parts of the land. As already noted, Judah could not dispossess the Jebusites of Jerusalem (Josh 15:63); Ephraim failed to conquer Gezer (Josh 16:10); Manasseh left the cities of the Jezreel Valley in Canaanite hands (Josh 17:11-13); and Hazor remained a foreign enclave within Israel until her fall, some 150 years later, to the victorious army of Deborah and Barak (Judg 4:4-24).

As the Hebrews became ever stronger, they made many of the Canaanites tributary (Judg 1:28) and eventually dispossessed them. The process, however, was gradual. The time placement of the Amarna Letters<sup>34</sup> evidently fell soon after the initial Hebrew invasion, the Canaanite kings mentioned being the immediate survivors of an onslaught that slew many of their predecessors mentioned in the book of Joshua.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a number of questions remain to be addressed:

1. Is there any indication that an ethnic people is meant by the term Habiru? Unquestionably in some texts a specific people is meant. King Idrimi of Ala-

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<sup>33</sup> Jabin may have been a dynastic name for the rulers of Hazor. In the Bible the name is associated with two Canaanite kings of Hazor (Josh 11:1 and Judg 4:2). A fragment of a royal letter addressed "to Ibni," a name similar in derivation to Jabin, was discovered by excavators at Hazor. Written in Old Babylonian, it could be a reference to Ibni-Addu, (meaning "Son of the storm-god Hadad"), the 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C. king of Hazor known from the Mari archives. Wayne Horowitz and Aaron Shaffer, "A Fragment of a Letter from Hazor," *IEJ* 42 (1992):165-167.

<sup>34</sup> The site of Amarna, which served as Egypt's administrative capital, was occupied about Year 6 of Akhenaten's reign and abandoned soon after Year 1 of Tutankhamun. The correspondence received at the Egyptian Amarna Court during that time stretched over a period of some 16 years, if a coregency between Amenhotep III and Akhenaten is accepted. Compare the remarks of Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten: Pharaoh of Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 204-205.

### *Waterhouse: Who Are the Habiru of the Amarna Letters?*

lakh spent seven years as a refugee living among Habiru people.<sup>35</sup> Pharaoh Amenhotep II includes Apiru people in a list of captive ethnic-groups.<sup>36</sup> In the Amarna Letters, Biryawaza, ruler of Damascus, writes that his army includes mercenaries from both Habiru and ethnic Sutu peoples (EA 195:27-29). Since the Biryawaza report singles out the Habiru as a particular people, in parallel-coupling with the Sutu (“the sons of Sheth,” in Num 24:17), the evidence thus would favor identifying these Habiru as ethnic Hebrews.<sup>37</sup>

2. Is there any indication that the Habiru were invaders, conquering the land of Canaan? In Letter 366, the chief of the Habiru, “who rose up against the lands,” is such a formidable foe that only a large coalition of armies is able to challenge the threat. In order to confront the forces of the Habiru, the Canaanites gather their forces together from a wide area; bringing with them at least 50 chariots. Included in the coalition are Jerusalem, with her southern allies, and the combined armies of the rulers of Accho and Achshaph. The result, as provided by Letter 366, is a pitched battle fought against the intruding Habiru, who clearly are invaders. This is made especially evident by the letter’s closing plea: “may he [Pharaoh] send Yanhamu [the Egyptian administrator over Canaan], so that we may all wage war and [thus] . . . regain the land of the king, my lord, to its [former] borders” (lines 30-34).

3. Why is the term Habiru so often used simply as a derogatory appellation in the Amarna tablets? Perhaps an analogy would be the term “vandal.” Originally an ethnic name for an East Germanic tribe that ravaged Gaul, Spain, North Africa, and sacked Rome in A.D. 455, the name became a term of opprobrium, meaning one who spoils, destroys, pillages, and robs. In similar fashion, the Amarna Age Canaanites called people “Habiru” in the same way Americans suspected of disloyalty were labelled “Commies” in the 1950s.

4. Finally, what about the Habiru mentioned in the ancient texts prior to the Amarna Age; who were they? This is a question that goes beyond the scope of the present paper. As a side note, however, it does need to be pointed out that there is a reference in the book of Genesis in which the term “Hebrew” connotes a broad sense meaning which includes all the descendants of the eponymous ancestor Eber (Gen 10:21).<sup>38</sup> Such an ethnic designation includes Peleg, Joktan,

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<sup>35</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, “The Story of Idrimi, King of Alalakh,” in *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969, 557-558.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, “The Asiatic Campaigning of Amen-hotep II,” *ANET* 247.

<sup>37</sup> “. . . there is no denying that small ‘Hebrew’ bands were present (EA 195);” Baruch Halpern, “Settlement of Canaan,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (O-Sh), *op. cit.*, 1139. On the ethnic identity of the Sutu/Shasu, see Horn, “Sheth” in his *Dictionary*, *op. cit.*, 1026; also Yurco, *op. cit.*, 33-35.

<sup>38</sup> Genesis 10:21 designates Shem as the father, that is, ancestor of all the sons of Eber. The intention of this disclosure seems to be to relate Eber to the Hebrews; the name sharing the same root. In Num 24:24, the name Eber is used collectively, designating the region settled by his descendants.

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Abraham, and his brothers. Possibly the term also includes Abraham's children through his second wife Keturah, and other collateral descendants (Gen 10:25-29; 11:17-26; 25:1-5). The Apiru mentioned by Amenhotep II, along with other ethnic peoples, probably are to be included in this wider usage of the designation. Ultimately, of course, the term "Hebrew," as later used in Scripture, became restricted into the narrower classification of Jacob's descendants.

Revealingly, Joseph is called a Hebrew (Gen 39:14) who came from the land of the Hebrews (Gen 40:15). In the ancient world, all Israelites were Hebrews, but not all Hebrews were Israelites. All Hebrews were *Habiru*, but not all *Habiru* were of the stock of Jacob.

**S. Douglas Waterhouse** is Professor of Religion, Emeritus at Andrews University, serving on its faculty as a teacher from 1963 until his retirement in 1996. His Ph.D. was earned at the University of Michigan in 1965, his dissertation being entitled "Syria in the Amarna Age: A Borderland Between Conflicting Empires." He has done extensive research into the historical backgrounds for biblical symbolism, especially symbols in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation. Waterhouse has served as a staff member of archaeological campaigns at *Tell Hesban* (biblical Heshbon) and the Madaba Plains Project in Jordan. He has authored articles relating to archaeology and the Bible. His most recent publication is the tenth volume of the Hesban series: *The Necropolis of Hesban: A Typology of Tombs* (Andrews University Press, 1998).