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# 1177 BC: The Collapse of Civilizations and the Rise of Ancient Israel and Philistia

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*The debates about the Conquest of Israel have been long and drawn out affairs, from the days of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth to the present decade. All other things aside, recent discoveries allow us to investigate again the specific reason why the Israelites and Philistines were able to establish a foothold in the land of Canaan, namely the power vacuum that was created by the collapse of the Late Bronze Age kingdoms and empires in the ancient Near East in the decades after 1200 BC. The following material is adapted from my recent book *1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed* (<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10185.html>), published by Princeton University Press in 2014 (also available from Amazon.com ([http://www.amazon.com/1177-B-C-Civilization-Collapsed-Turning/dp/0691140898/ref=asap\\_B001HCVOR8?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/1177-B-C-Civilization-Collapsed-Turning/dp/0691140898/ref=asap_B001HCVOR8?ie=UTF8))), which received the first ever “Best Popular Book” award from the American Schools of Oriental Research. [1] Note that footnotes and references to relevant further reading have not been included here but may be found in the full book.*

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The book of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible describes in detail the conquest of Canaanite cities by the invading Israelites. Based on this account, one might have expected to find evidence of wholesale destruction at the Canaanite sites that have been excavated, such as Hazor, Megiddo, Lachish, Bethel, Ai, and so on. We need to keep in mind, though, the somewhat conflicting account in the book of Judges, which gives a slightly different (lengthier and less bloody) picture of the conquest, in which the Israelites and the Canaanites lived together in the various cities. Perhaps even more importantly, when discussing not only the rise of Israel but also Philistia, we must also keep in mind the larger picture, for the entire interconnected world of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean was destroyed and collapsed in the decades following 1200 BC. It is only with the demise of the Great Kingdoms that flourished during the Late Bronze Age that Israel, Philistia, and Phoenicia arose in the land that was once called Canaan.

Unfortunately, there is currently no scholarly consensus as to the cause or causes of the collapse of these multiple interconnected societies just over three thousand years ago; culprits recently blamed by scholars include “attacks by foreign enemies, social uprising, natural catastrophes, systems collapse, and changes in warfare.” In short, it is not always clear who, or what, caused the destruction at a specific site, be it Sea Peoples, Israelites, Egyptians, internal rebellions, or even Mother Nature. Moreover, the sites were not all destroyed simultaneously, or even necessarily within the same decade; their cumulative demise spans several decades and perhaps as much as a century. In addition,

most suffered only partial, rather than total, destruction, which may support the account in the book of Judges rather than that in the book of Joshua. We can see this by looking briefly at Hazor, Megiddo, Lachish, and the cities of the Philistine pentapolis.

### *Hazor*

At Hazor, the Late Bronze Age palace (or temple) on the acropolis was clearly burned and at least part of the city was destroyed, as evidenced by fallen wooden roof beams and jars full of scorched wheat. These edifices—built during the heyday of Hazor in the fourteenth century BC, when it was mentioned in the Egyptian Amarna Letters—suffered tremendously during the destruction, as did the city gate, which was destroyed “in a ‘fierce and devastating conflagration,’ represented by heaps of fallen mudbricks and ashes reaching a height of 1.5 m.” The most recent excavations on the upper tel of the city uncovered more of the same: “thick layers of ashes, burnt wooden beams, cracked basalt slabs, vitrified mudbricks, fallen walls, and mutilated basalt statues.” In particular, the remains of public and religious structures from Stratum 1A in the ceremonial precinct and elsewhere at Hazor were “totally covered and sealed by the thick destruction debris.”

The date of this destruction is still debated, however, with the original excavator, Yigael Yadin, and Amnon Ben-Tor, one of the current co-excavators of the site, both favoring ca. 1230 BC. However, it is possible that the destruction took place later, even into the early twelfth century BC. We will have to wait for the results of the radiocarbon testing of the storage jars full of wheat found at the site during the summer of 2012 for a definitive scientific answer.

The identification of the perpetrators is also uncertain. The recent excavators have made a good case for arguing that it was neither the Egyptians nor the Canaanites, for statues belonging to both cultures were defaced during the destruction, which soldiers of those armies would not have done. The Sea Peoples—unified groups of foreigners identified by the Egyptians as responsible for the destruction of the Canaanites, Hittites, Cypriots, and others during two waves of attacks in 1207 and 1177 BC—have also been excluded as culprits, on the basis of a lack of identifying pottery and distance from the sea, although these seem less cogent arguments. Ben-Tor generally agrees with the previous excavator Yigael Yadin that the Israelites are the most likely, and logical, agents of destruction, while the other co-director, the late Sharon Zuckerman, sees a period of decline immediately preceding the destruction and suggests that the devastation was perhaps caused by an internal rebellion of the city-dwellers themselves, after which the city lay abandoned until sometime during the eleventh century BC. In summary, although it is clear that Hazor was destroyed in the thirteenth or twelfth century BC, and was abandoned for a century or more after that, it is not clear exactly when or by whom it was destroyed.

### *Megiddo*

At Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley of modern-day Israel, the site of biblical Armageddon, some twenty cities have been found layered one on top of another. Of these, the seventh city, with two phases labeled VIIB and VIIA, was violently destroyed either in the thirteenth and the twelfth centuries BC, respectively, or perhaps in a single destruction in the twelfth century.

Traditionally, ever since the University of Chicago excavators published the findings from their excavations at the site during the years 1925–39, it has been accepted that Stratum VIIB ended sometime between 1250 and 1200 BC, while the succeeding city of Stratum VIIA ended sometime around 1130 BC. In these strata were found the remains of a Canaanite palace, or perhaps the remains of two palaces, one built upon the ruins of the other.

According to the Chicago excavators, the Stratum VIIB palace “suffered violent destruction so extensive that the Stratum VIIA builders deemed it more expedient to level off the resulting debris and build over it than to remove it all as was the procedure in previous rebuilding undertakings.” The rooms “were filled with fallen stone to a height of about a meter and a half . . . charred horizontal lines found here and there on the walls of the rooms to the north of the court . . . supply a general floor level throughout the palace.” The Stratum VIIA palace, built directly on top, was then thought to have lasted until about 1130 BC.

Recently, however, David Ussishkin, a Tel Aviv University archaeologist and the recently retired co-director of the Megiddo Expedition, has convincingly suggested that the Chicago excavators had misinterpreted the levels. Rather than two palaces, one atop the other, he believes we should understand this structure as a single two-story palace, renovated slightly during the transition from VIIB to VIIA, about 1200 BC. There was only a single destruction, he says—a great fire that destroyed the palace at the end of Stratum VIIA. According to Ussishkin, what the Chicago archaeologists thought was the “VIIB palace” was simply the basement or lower story of the palace, while the “VIIA palace” was the upper story. The main city temple (the so-called Tower Temple) was also destroyed at this time, but the most recent excavations at the site indicate that much of the rest of the city survived; it appears that only the elite areas were torched at this time.

This Stratum VIIA destruction is usually dated to ca. 1130 BC, based upon two objects inscribed with Egyptian cartouches found associated with the debris. The first is an ivory pen case inscribed with the name of Ramses III, which was found among other ivory treasures within a room in the palace, in a context sealed by debris from the destruction of the palace. This would imply that the destruction had taken place sometime during or after the time of Ramses III, about 1177 BC or thereafter.

The ivory pieces found in this room within the palace are among the best-known objects recovered from the site of Megiddo. They include fragmentary boxes and bowls, plaques, spoons, disks, game boards and game pieces, jar lids, and combs, among numerous other items. They are on display at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. It is unclear why these ivory pieces were originally collected together, and why they were in this particular part of the palace.

Nevertheless, they have received a great deal of attention over the years, for the ivories themselves and the scenes inscribed upon them exhibit a truly globalized style, now commonly called the International Style, which is also seen elsewhere at sites like Ugarit and Mycenae. The distinctive style combines elements found in Mycenaean, Canaanite, and Egyptian cultures, thereby creating hybrid objects unique to, and typifying, this cosmopolitan age.

The second object of relevance from Megiddo is a bronze statue base inscribed with the name of Pharaoh Ramses VI, who ruled a few decades later, ca. 1141–1133 BC. This was not found in a secure archaeological context, but rather was found beneath a Stratum VIIB wall in the residential area at the site. As Ussishkin notes, this is not a reliable context, since Stratum VIIB was much earlier in time than Ramses VI. This means that the statue base must have been deliberately buried in a hole dug by a later inhabitant, either during the VIIA period or even during the following Iron Age VIB-A city. The base is usually attributed to Stratum VIIA by archaeologists, but this is merely a guess.

These two objects, of Ramses III and VI, are always discussed together in relevant publications, and thus the destruction of Megiddo VIIA is dated after the reign of Ramses VI, or about 1130 BC. However, since the bronze statue base of

Ramses VI is not found in a good context, it should not be used to date the ending of Megiddo VIIA. On the other hand, the ivory pen case of Ramses III was indeed sealed within the destruction layer of VIIA and therefore can confidently be used to provide a limiting date before which the city could not have been destroyed, that is, before the reign of this pharaoh. This would indeed fit well with evidence of destruction at several other sites throughout the Near East discussed in these pages.

However, archaeology is a continuously evolving field with new data and new analyses requiring the rethinking of old concepts. In this regard, ongoing studies involving radiocarbon dating of remains found within the destruction of VIIA now are indicating that a date of 1130 BC, or possibly even later, is likely to be correct after all. If this proves to be accurate, it would mean that Megiddo was destroyed more than forty years after the Sea People came through the region in 1177 BC. In any event, as Ussishkin has noted, "Lack of written sources leaves [open] the questions of who was responsible for the destruction of Stratum VIIA . . . the city may have been successfully attacked by invading Sea People groups, by Levantine Canaanite elements, by the Israelites, or by a force combined from different groups." In other words, at Megiddo, we have the same situation as seen at the relevant level at Hazor, described above, where the elite parts of the city were destroyed, but those responsible for the destruction cannot be readily identified.

### *Lachish*

Lachish also suffered two destructions during this approximate time period, if David Ussishkin, who excavated at the site from 1973 to 1994, is correct. Here, at this multilayered site located south of Jerusalem, the seventh and sixth cities (Strata VII and VI) are identified as the last Canaanite cities, based on the material remains found during the excavations. This was a period of great prosperity for Lachish, during the period of Egyptian control of the region. It was one of the largest cities in all of Canaan at that time, with some six thousand people living in its territory, and large temples and public buildings within the city itself.

The Stratum VII city is thought to have been destroyed by fire in about 1200 BC, but the excavators have not speculated as to the nature of the destruction or who might have been responsible. In part, this is because it is unclear how much of the city was actually destroyed. At the moment, evidence for a fiery destruction has been found in only the remains of one temple (the so-called Fosse III Temple) and the domestic quarter in Area S. It is conceivable that the destruction could have been caused by the first wave of Sea Peoples, who came through the region in approximately 1207 BC, but there is no proof for such an attribution.

The Stratum VI city has been the major focus of scholarly attention to date. It appears that the survivors of the Stratum VII conflagration simply rebuilt all or part of the city and continued the same material culture that had existed previously. The Stratum VI city is thought to have been an even richer and more prosperous city than the one that had just been destroyed, with a large public building (the Pillared Building) constructed in Area S where domestic structures had previously stood. A new temple was also built, in Area P, but little remains of it because of the destruction that it subsequently suffered. Imported objects from Egypt, Cyprus, and the Aegean, primarily pottery vessels, were found throughout the city in this level, attesting to its international connections.

It is thought that there was an influx of poor refugees into the Stratum VI city just before large portions of it were violently destroyed. One structure in particular, the Pillared Building in Area S, "was destroyed suddenly and violently; ash layers and fallen mudbricks covered the whole structure, and several skeletons of

adults, children and babies were found trapped under the collapsed wall.” Other buildings at Lachish were also destroyed at this time, after which there ensued a period of abandonment lasting up to three hundred years. According to Ussishkin: “The Level VI city was razed in a violent, fiery destruction, traces of which were detected at every point at which remains of Level VI were uncovered. . . . The destruction was complete, the population liquidated or driven out.”

Earlier archaeologists thought that the city had been destroyed in the late thirteenth century BC, ca. 1230 BC (with the Stratum VII city devastated even earlier), but the date of the destruction of Stratum VI has now been changed significantly by Ussishkin, primarily based on the discovery of a bronze plaque, possibly part of a door bolt, with the cartouche of Ramses III. This plaque was part of a cache of broken or defective bronze objects lying buried and sealed beneath the destruction debris of the Stratum VI city.

The find context of this object at Lachish indicates that the destruction of the city must have taken place during or after the time of Ramses III. Ussishkin therefore originally dated the destruction to ca. 1150 BC, based on the fact that the bronze plaque could not have been made before the accession of Ramses III to the throne in 1184 BC, and his belief that one must allow time for it “to have been used, then broken and finally discarded and set aside in this cache of defective or broken bronze objects.”

He subsequently revised the date to 1130 BC, based upon the discovery that a scarab of Ramses IV had been found at the site, probably in this level, by the previous British excavators, and upon comparison with Megiddo VII: he argued that if Megiddo had lasted that long, then so probably had Lachish. Another scholar has recently noted that there is another possible scarab of Ramses IV in Tomb 570 at Lachish, but he has also emphasized that the reading of the name on both scarabs is not actually certain, and that the stratigraphy for the find-spot of the first one is not completely clear.

Thus, it is not at all clear who, or what, caused the destruction, or even when it happened at Lachish; all we can actually say with confidence is that it took place during or after the reign of Ramses III. As Ussishkin states, “The evidence points to the devastation of Level VI by a strong and resolute enemy, but the archaeological data provide no direct clue as to the nature and identity of that enemy or to the immediate circumstances surrounding the city’s downfall.” He notes that three candidates have been proposed by previous scholars: the Egyptian army, the Israelite tribes, and the invading Sea Peoples, but he also notes that “no remains of a battle were uncovered, apart from a single bronze arrowhead . . . uncovered in the Pillared Building in Area S.”

It is unlikely that the Egyptians caused the destruction, for Lachish was prospering during this period of their overlordship and was actively trading with them, as shown by the several items with royal cartouches inscribed upon them that were found in the ruins. It is still possible that the destruction was caused by the Israelites under Joshua, as William F. Albright of Johns Hopkins University thought, although that was when the destruction was believed to date to ca. 1230 BC.

However, Ussishkin identifies the Sea Peoples as the most likely agents of destruction for the city of Stratum VI. In this he is following Olga Tufnell, a previous excavator of Lachish. Yet he presents no evidence that it was actually the Sea Peoples who were responsible; we simply see the end result of the destruction, with no indication as to who brought it about. Moreover, a date of 1130 BC would seem to be far too late for the Sea Peoples, by approximately four decades, just as with the destruction at Megiddo. We should note that Ussishkin may be incorrect in linking the destruction of Lachish to that of

Megiddo and placing it that late; there is no good reason to link the two, and so it may be that his original date of ca. 1150 BC (or possibly even earlier, if the Ramses III bronze bolt was not in use for very long) should be embraced instead.

It is also possible that a massive earthquake caused the destruction of the Stratum VI city. The bodies of the four people killed in the Pillared Building were found “apparently trapped and crushed under falling debris while trying to escape it.” A child of two–three years had “either been thrown down on its face or had died while crawling along the ground,” while an infant “had been thrown or had fallen to the ground.” These observations, combined with the fact that no weapons were found in the debris, point to Mother Nature rather than humans as the responsible agent, as may also have been the case at other sites toward the end of the Late Bronze Age. Arguing against this hypothesis is the fact that no other evidence for an earthquake, such as cracked or tilted walls, was found by the excavators. Moreover, the new Canaanite temple built in Area P seems to have been pillaged and looted before its destruction by fire, which would seem to indicate human involvement.

In summary, as with Hazor and Megiddo, it is unclear who destroyed Lachish VI or the earlier city of Lachish VII. Both, or neither, could have been devastated by the Sea Peoples, the Israelites, or by someone—or something—else entirely. As James Weinstein of Cornell University has said, “while the Sea Peoples may have been culpable for the end of Egyptian garrisons in southern and western Palestine, we must allow for the possibility that non–Sea Peoples’ groups were responsible for the ruin of sites in other areas of the country.”

#### *The Philistine Pentapolis*

However, it is also clear that at the end of the Late Bronze Age, the earlier Canaanite cities at Ekron and Ashdod were violently destroyed and replaced with new settlements in which there was an almost complete change in material culture, including pottery, hearths, bathtubs, kitchenware, and architecture. This seems to indicate either a change in population or a significant influx of new people following the collapse of Canaan and the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from the area. These are presumably the Philistines, since Ekron and Ashdod are part of the so-called Philistine pentapolis; i.e., the five major Philistine sites: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza.

Trude Dothan, professor emerita at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and former codirector of the Ekron excavations, located at modern Tel Miqne, describes the end of the Late Bronze Age city at Ekron as follows: “In Field I, the upper city or acropolis, we could follow the total destruction of the last Late Bronze Age Canaanite city by fire. Here the destruction is evident: the remains of a large mud-brick storage building, traces of figs and lentils in storage jars, and a large well-preserved silo are buried under the collapsed mud-bricks. . . . The new Philistine city lies flush on the destruction of the Late Bronze Age settlement in the upper city and on the open fields of the Middle Bronze Age lower city.”

A similar situation seems to have arisen at Ashkelon, where recent excavations have documented the transformation of the settlement from an Egyptian garrison to a Philistine seaport sometime during the first half of the twelfth century BC—probably just after the reign of Ramses III, to judge from the several scarabs with his cartouche that have been found. In Ashkelon, however, the transition appears to have been peaceful, at least insofar as one can tell from the limited area that has been exposed to date. The excavators have described the “sudden appearance of new cultural patterns expressed in architecture, ceramics, diet, and crafts, particularly weaving.” They connect these changes to the Sea Peoples, specifically the Philistines, and describe them as the result of migrations from the Mycenaean world.

However, our understanding of this situation in Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze Age may still be evolving. Although the classic 1995 article on the coming of the Philistines to Canaan by Larry Stager of Harvard University describes the Philistines as “destroy[ing] indigenous cities and supplant[ing] them with their own in the four corners of the territory they conquered,” Assaf Yasur-Landau of the University of Haifa has recently taken issue with this traditional picture of a Philistine military takeover of Canaan. He says: “The circumstances of the settlement do not reflect a violent incursion. Recent discoveries at Ashkelon show that the migrants [actually] settled on a deserted site, on top of the unfinished remains of an Egyptian garrison. . . . There are no clear signs for any violent destruction at Ashdod . . . the signs of destruction described by the excavators [there] may be no more than evidence for cooking. . . . At Ekron, the small Canaanite village . . . was indeed destroyed by fire, but . . . [was] replaced by another Canaanite village . . . before the arrival of the migrants.”

Rather than a hostile military-style takeover, Yasur-Landau sees instead intercultural marriages and intercultural families, maintaining both Canaanite and Aegean traditions, mostly in the domestic arena. As he puts it, “material remains from early Iron Age Philistia reveal intricate, and predominantly peaceful, interactions between migrants and locals. . . . I would therefore venture to suggest that the general lack of violence connected with the foundation of the Philistine cities . . . and the co-existence of both Aegean and local cultural traditions indicate that these were joint foundations of Aegean migrants and local populations, rather than colonial enterprises.”

Other scholars agree, pointing out that, at most, the Philistines destroyed only the elite portions at some of the sites—the palace and its environs, for instance—and that the components that we now identify with the Philistines were “of a mixed nature and include features from the Aegean, Cyprus, Anatolia, Southeast Europe and beyond.” It does not appear that completely foreign elements simply replaced the previous Canaanite material culture lock, stock, and barrel (in terms of pottery, building practices, and so on); rather, what we now identify as Philistine culture may be the result of a hybridization and a mingling of different cultures, containing both the older local Canaanite and newer foreign intrusive elements.

In other words, although there is no question that there were new peoples entering and settling down in Canaan at this time, in this reconstruction the bogeyman specter of the invading Sea Peoples/Philistines has been replaced by a somewhat more peaceful picture of a mixed group of migrants in search of a new start in a new land, much like the so-called “Peaceful Infiltration” model for the Israelites, as suggested by some scholars. Rather than militant invaders intent only on destruction, the Sea Peoples were more likely to have been refugees who did not necessarily always attack and conquer the local peoples but frequently simply settled down among them. Either way, they are unlikely, all by themselves, to have ended civilization in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.

#### *The Rise of Israel and Philistia in Context*

The end of the Late Bronze Age and the transition to the Iron Age was a rolling event, taking place between approximately 1225 and 1175 BC or, in some places, as late as 1130 BC. However, the second invasion by the Sea Peoples, ending in their cataclysmic fight against the Egyptians under Ramses III during the eighth year of his reign, in 1177 BC, is a reasonable benchmark and allows us to put a finite date on a rather elusive pivotal moment and the end of an age. We can say with certainty that the far-reaching civilizations that were still flourishing in the Aegean and the ancient Near East in 1225 BC had begun to

vanish by 1177 BC and were almost completely gone by 1130 BC. The mighty Bronze Age kingdoms and empires were gradually replaced by smaller city-states during the following Early Iron Age. Consequently, our picture of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world of 1200 BC is quite different from that of 1100 BC and completely different from that of 1000 BC.

It must be realized, therefore, that the destructions in Canaan at this time are just part of the much larger picture and need to be placed in the context of the general collapse in the entire region at the end of the Late Bronze Age, just after 1200 BC. It is, though, not always clear who or what caused the destruction of the Late Bronze Age cities, kingdoms, and empires of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean at this time, for, as was the case later with the fall of the western Roman Empire, the end of the Bronze Age empires in the Eastern Mediterranean was not the result of a single invasion or cause, but came about because of multiple incursions and manifold reasons. No single incident can really be imagined to have brought about the end of the Bronze Age; rather, the end must have come as the consequence of a complex series of events that reverberated throughout the interconnected kingdoms and empires of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean and eventually led to a collapse of the entire system.

In addition to the loss of populations and the collapse of ordinary buildings and palaces alike, it seems likely that there was a loss, or at least a significant decline, in the relationships among the various kingdoms of the region. Even if not all of the places crashed and collapsed at exactly the same time, by the mid-twelfth century BC they had lost their interconnectedness and the globalization that had existed, especially during the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC. As Marc Van De Mieroop of Columbia University has said, the elites lost the international framework and the diplomatic contacts that had supported them, at the same time as foreign goods and ideas stopped arriving. They now had to start afresh.

When the world emerged from the collapse of the Bronze Age, it was indeed a new age, including new opportunities for growth, particularly with the demise of the Hittites and the decline of the Egyptians, who, in addition to ruling their own regions, had also between them controlled most of Syria and Canaan for much of the Late Bronze Age. Although there was a certain amount of continuity in some areas, particularly with the Neo-Assyrians in Mesopotamia, overall it was time for a new set of powers and a fresh start with new civilizations, including the Israelites, Philistines, and Phoenicians in what had once been Canaan; the Neo-Hittites in southeastern Anatolia, north Syria, and points farther east; and the Greeks in geometric, archaic, and then classical Greece.

Thus, as other scholars have pointed out, the emergence of the Israelites, as well as the Philistines and Phoenicians, was made possible in part not only by the collapse of the Canaanite cities but also by the withdrawal of the Egyptians from Canaan in the decades following their Pyrrhic victory over the Sea Peoples. If it had not been for these conditions, and the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Great Powers, it is much less likely, for instance, that the Israelites would have been able to establish a foothold in the Promised Land.

The exact mechanism by which this took place is still not completely clear, however. At the moment, all that we can say is that the archaeological evidence, in the form of pottery, architecture, and other aspects of material culture, indicate the *possibility* that Israelites as an identifiable group were present in Canaan by the end of the thirteenth century BC, and that it is their culture, along with that of the Philistines and the Phoenicians, that rises up out of the ashes of the

destruction of the Canaanite civilization sometime during the twelfth century BC. They are among the groups of peoples who will make up a new world order, emerging out of the chaos that was the end of the Late Bronze Age.

### *What If?*

The period of the Late Bronze Age has rightfully been hailed as one of the golden ages in the history of the world, and as a period during which an early global economy successfully flourished. So we might ask, would the history of the world have taken a different turn, or followed a different path, if the civilizations in these regions had not come to an end? What if the series of earthquakes in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean had not taken place? What if there had been no drought, no famine, no migrants or invaders? Would the Late Bronze Age have eventually come to an end anyway, since all civilizations seem to rise and fall? Would any of the developments that followed have eventually come about no matter what? Would progress have continued? Would additional advances in technology, literature, and politics have been made centuries earlier than they actually were?

Of course, these are rhetorical questions, and ones that cannot be answered, because the Bronze Age civilizations did come to an end and development did essentially have to begin completely anew in areas from Greece to the Levant and beyond. As a result, new peoples and/or new city-states like the Israelites, Philistines, and Phoenicians were able to establish themselves in the Eastern Mediterranean. From them eventually came fresh developments and innovative ideas, such as the alphabet and monotheistic religion. Sometimes it takes a large-scale wildfire to help renew the ecosystem of an old-growth forest and allow it to thrive afresh.

### Notes

[1]

(<http://www.bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/2015/01/cli398005#sdfootnote1anc>) 1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed wins 2014 Award for the Best Popular Book, American Schools of Oriental Research (<http://blog.press.princeton.edu/2014/12/16/1177-b-c-the-year-civilization-collapsed-wins-2014-award-for-the-best-popular-book-american-schools-of-oriental-research/>).

### Comments (13)

1. I haven't read the book and am commenting only on the short essay written in the book's support.
2. Here we have an idea, year of collapse, and also evidence - but the idea is not just inadequately supported by the presented evidence but actually indefensible in the light of it. The evidence is all about a fairly long period of trouble.
3. Furthermore the evidence when looked at in detail increases not certainty but doubt about what happened in each place: or at least demonstrates the lack of that famously elusive thing, scholarly agreement.
4. It does seem clear that the Hittite Kingdom broke up in some way - and that would surely have created a power vacuum and violent competition to fill it. On the other hand there surely were limits to the damage: Egypt and Assyria continued to exist, recognisably themselves.
5. Further, we hear much these days about a northern 'Palestine' as one of the successor states to the Hittites - so perhaps there was some sort of continuity between the older and younger Indo-Euro language speakers on either side of the period of turmoil?
6. If there is to be a 476 analogy perhaps we should consider the idea of foederati, who played such an important and ambivalent part in the fall of the Roman system. Were the Philistines of the Gaza Strip Egyptian foederati? It

seems hard to think that they could have survived for so long and with basically hostile relationships both to north and south.

7. The Israelites seem to spend a long period in this essay as characters in search of a role, though evidently they get to be considered only for roles involving horrible behaviour. I have often read that it is very difficult to identify an Israelite culture amid the debris - well, that may have been the conclusion before the latest round of archaeological research which is described here. But since the effect of that research has been to sow uncertainty and dispute I find it difficult to see how the Israelite role could actually have been clarified? If there was clear material evidence of an Israelite presence and settlement at specific places it would be much less hard - much easier than, on this very showing, it appears to be - to assign the destruction of previous settlements of this place and that to Israelite intervention?

8. Is it really credible that two quite small groups of immigrants, one from the desert and one travelling by sea, could either have achieved near-genocide of the existing Canaanites or have 'peacefully infiltrated' themselves into an utterly dominant position - how does one do that? Must say I'm suspicious of the term 'Sea Peoples' which seems to come from Egyptian propaganda.

#1 - Martin Hughes - 01/06/2015 - 17:52

Martin — Thanks for your detailed eight-point comment. My immediate response is: read the book. Most of your comments are addressed in there, especially your point #8 about the Sea Peoples, which is essentially my point of departure in the Prologue of the book. And, this essay is not written in the book's support, as you state in point #1; it is perhaps the other way around. In reading the book, you will see that this is just one piece in a much larger context, for the discussion of the Exodus & Conquest is but a small snippet within a single chapter there. We should talk after you've read the book, for I think that we are closer in agreement than you might suspect, including that "the evidence is all about a fairly long period of trouble" and that there "is doubt about what happened in each place." I also think that you will change your mind about this being "inadequately supported" and "actually indefensible." I am actually surprised that you say that, but I will be even more surprised if you still say it after reading the whole book. If you need a copy, let me know and I'll send you one. Cheers, Eric

#2 - Eric H. Cline - 01/06/2015 - 23:17

Dear Eric,

I look forward to reading your book, which I haven't seen yet.

While I am puzzled about your effort to revive Joshua and his Israelites, I like your effort to see a considerable period of depression, transition and gradual recovery as an alternative to simpler claims for biblical historicity.

Thomas

Thomas L. Thompson  
professor emeritus, University of Copenhagen

#3 - Thomas L. Thompson - 01/07/2015 - 10:33

Prof. Cline: Pardon any ignorance or naivete in this question. When you state: "At the moment, all that we can say is that the archaeological evidence, in the form of pottery, architecture, and other aspects of material culture, indicate the possibility that Israelites as an identifiable group were present in Canaan by the end of the thirteenth century BC, and that it is their culture, along with that of the Philistines and the Phoenicians, that rises up out of the ashes of the destruction of the Canaanite civilization sometime during the twelfth century BC," what examples of material evidence would indicate Israelite culture in contrast to Phoenician or Philistine? Is this documented in more detail in your book? In

short, what physical evidence in the various locations (Hazor, Lachish, Megiddo) identifies Israelite activity? This is more a question of wanting to learn than questioning your claims.

#4 - Timothy Bagley - 01/07/2015 - 21:47

Timothy — Thanks for your comment and question. This is, of course, a matter of ongoing debate and not necessarily an easy question to answer, especially since some of the previous items thought to be hallmarks of the Israelites (e.g., collared-rim jar; four-room houses) may not actually be the good ethnic identifiers that they were once thought. At sites like Megiddo and Hazor, I will say that there does seem to be a distinct difference in architecture, material culture, and so on, between the Canaanite levels of the period before the Late Bronze Age collapse and the cities that are built following the Collapse (either immediately or with a gap in between). I do not discuss this further in the book, preferring to focus more on the Philistines, but others have written at length about it, especially Avi Faust very recently, as well as Ann Killebrew and others. See for instance,

Faust, A. 2012. *The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.

Faust, A., and Katz, H. 2011. Philistines, Israelites and Canaanites in the Southern Trough Valley during the Iron Age I, *Egypt and the Levant* 21: 231-247.

(available on Academia.edu

at [https://www.academia.edu/3152495/Faust\\_A.\\_and\\_Katz\\_H.\\_2011\\_Philistines\\_Israelites\\_and\\_Canaanites\\_in\\_247](https://www.academia.edu/3152495/Faust_A._and_Katz_H._2011_Philistines_Israelites_and_Canaanites_in_247))

([https://www.academia.edu/3152495/Faust\\_A.\\_and\\_Katz\\_H.\\_2011\\_Philistines\\_Israelites\\_and\\_Canaanites\\_in\\_247](https://www.academia.edu/3152495/Faust_A._and_Katz_H._2011_Philistines_Israelites_and_Canaanites_in_247)))

Faust, A. 2007. *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance*. London: Equinox.

Killebrew, A. 2005. *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel 1300-1100 B.C.E.* Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

#5 - Eric H. Cline - 01/07/2015 - 22:59

Thank you, Eric. This is very helpful to me.

#6 - Timothy Bagley - 01/08/2015 - 01:05

Dear Eric,

I haven't read your book, but will probably have my copy sometime within a week or two.

Just one thing in connection with the commentary about the Hittites above. They did not vanish from history at all, although the empire was no more. However, they consolidated in the form of several "Neo-Hittite" states, some with a direct link to the old system, like Karkemish where the royal family carried names belonging to the tradition within Suppiluliumas' family.

A recent review of these states, their history and culture can be found in Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy* (London Routledge: 2014), 448-457.

Otherwise, I will keep back my commentaries until I have your book, although only one point: Archaeologists and ethnicity, that is the problem. I touched on the problem in an article in *SJOT* a couple of years ago about the Philistines and ethnicity, and in a review of Killebrew given at Edinburgh in 2006).

NPL

#7 - Niels Peter Lemche - 01/10/2015 - 11:41

Niels Peter,

Thank you for these additional bibliographic details. Was your Killibrew review published? Citation? The enigma of ethnicity and archaeology interests me greatly.

#8 - Timothy Bagley - 01/10/2015 - 19:13

Niels Peter --

Re the Neo-Hittites, of course; they are mentioned in the book. I will look forward to your additional comments, after you've had a chance to read the book.

Cheers, Eric

#9 - Eric H, Cline - 01/10/2015 - 21:38

For Timothy Bagley,

I do not think that it was published but the essence can be found in my:

"Using the Concept of Ethnicity in Defining Philistine Identity in the Iron Age," The Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament 26, 2012, 12-29

#10 - Niels Peter Lemche - 01/11/2015 - 08:25

Niels Peter, Thank you. I have requested this article through interlibrary loan. I look forward to reading it.

#11 - Timothy Bagley - 01/12/2015 - 18:48

Eric,

I started reading your book back in May 2014 (I bought both a hard copy and a Kindle version), but I got sidetracked with other things.

Thanks for giving me a reason to put the book at the top of my "to read" list again.

#12 - Scot Griffin - 01/14/2015 - 05:08

I still think that there's an enormous difference between the propositions that 'the Aegean/Near Eastern civilisations that were flourishing in 1225 had begun to vanish in or by 1177 and were almost completely gone by 1130' and that 'civilisation collapsed in 1177': indeed that the second proposition is indefensible if the first is true and the relevant process continued for several decades beyond '77. Moreover 'civilisation collapsed' is a much stronger statement than 'some civilisations collapsed', implying a terrifying totality about the event and no short-term replacements, such as Hittites to neo-Hittites. Perhaps the book is a real treasure trove but the scare-inducing title isn't a motive for reading it.

#13 - Martin Hughes - 01/18/2015 - 15:48

## Article Comments

Submitted by Anthony Migchels on Wed, 03/17/2021 - 06:16

Permalink (</comment/1045#comment-1045>)

It's clear from the Bible that it was Israel and Moses and Joshua caused the Bronze Age collapse:

Moses claims outright that he is going to destroy the Hittites, and six other Nations in Canaan, in Deuteronomy 7. The destruction of the Hittites was perhaps the central event in the Bronze Age Collapse.

Israel was also the successor power in the region, which clearly indicates they were the ones who had won the preceding war.

What went wrong is the Biblical Timeline. Rabbis and Church Fathers placing Moses in the 15th century BC. But he must have died around 1177, at the even of the Canaanite Conquest/Bronze Age Collapse. Note that the Biblical Timeline is not part of the Bible, but a commentary.

Reply ([/comment/reply/node/2341/field\\_article\\_comments/1045](/comment/reply/node/2341/field_article_comments/1045))

Submitted by Joshua Davis on Sun, 08/21/2022 - 14:06

Permalink (</comment/1247#comment-1247>)

There is increasing evidence that Joshua's conquest of the Levant occurred in the late 13th century-early 12th century BC, and that the destruction of these sites in the Levant can be ascribed to the Israelites. First and foremost is that there is no evidence of an Israelite people in Egyptian records prior to c.1205 BCE with the famous Merneptah stele. Second is the dating of an annular eclipse that can explain the famous lengthening of the day during the Battle of Aijalon to 30th October 1207 BCE

(<https://academic.oup.com/astrogeo/article/58/5/5.39/4159289?login=false> (<https://academic.oup.com/astrogeo/article/58/5/5.39/4159289?login=false>)).

This date accords well with the dating of the destruction layer of Stratum VII at Lachish to c.1200 BCE, for which a siege of Lachish by Joshua after the Battle of Aijalon is recorded (Joshua 10:31-32). The account in Joshua then states that Hazor was destroyed, specifically noting its destruction by fire, to which the archaeological record agrees and the dating is not inconsistent. Megiddo is also in the list of cities, or rather kings, conquered by Joshua, though no specifics are given in the text. It is noteworthy that the Philistine pentapolis is specifically mentioned as not being conquered by Joshua. Their arrival around the same time and possible patronage by the Egyptians by being allowed to settle in the military outposts of the Pentapolis at that time by Ramesses III (see Papyrus Harris I) is likely a large factor of why they remained unconquered. Of particular interest is the fact that the Israelites were aware that the Philistines originated in Caphtor (Amos 9:7), cognate with Egyptian Keftiu and believed to be Crete, suggesting that they were around when the Philistines first settled in the region. They were also seemingly aware that they were settled by the Egyptians as Caphtor is listed as a son of Mizraim in the Table of Nations, further illustrating that contemporary knowledge. As for whether or not there was violence with the locals relating to the settlement of the Philistines in the area of the Pentapolis, Deuteronomy notes that the Caphtorim (read Philistines) destroyed the inhabitants (Deut.2:23). The use of Caphtorim to describe the Philistines suggests a particularly early date for this passage. One final note is that the destruction of Jericho by Joshua has been noted as an anachronism as Jericho was uninhabited at the time. This supposes a 15th-14th century BCE date for the Exodus and Conquest. However, if we look at a 13th-12th century BCE date for the Conquest, there is evidence for it being significant again by this time as it is listed as a city attacked by Ramesses II during his 3rd Syrian campaign in 1273 BCE.

Reply ([/comment/reply/node/2341/field\\_article\\_comments/1247](/comment/reply/node/2341/field_article_comments/1247))

Submitted by Lewis Brackett on Mon, 12/05/2022 - 15:48

Permalink (</comment/1301#comment-1301>)

Excuse me, but the Bible first Kings chapter six makes it absolutely clear that the Exodus was 1440 BCE... So Joshua entering Canaan was 1400 BCE!!! You timeline is way way off!!!

You cannot just alter the historical timeline to fit your theory!

Reply ([/comment/reply/node/2341/field\\_article\\_comments/1301](/comment/reply/node/2341/field_article_comments/1301))

Submitted by Joshua Davis on Sun, 12/11/2022 - 16:19

Permalink (/comment/1303#comment-1303)

Yes, 1 Kings 6 does state that the Exodus occurred 480 years before Solomon began to build the Temple. The latter event occurred ~938 BCE, and if one accepts the 480 years at face value, then they would be led to believe that the Exodus occurred around the year 1417 BCE. However, two important things need to be noted. First, 1417 BCE or the late 15th-early 14th century BCE must be shown as a suitable context for the Exodus through the historical records we have from the period and through archaeology, neither of which support this dating. Second, 480 is a multiple of two very symbolic numbers for the Hebrews, 12 and 40. 12 represents each of the tribes and 40 represents a large amount or long time, so it can be read that a long time prior to starting to build the Temple the Exodus of all the Israelite tribes occurred rather than a literal 480 years. Context is the key to everything, and if you're going to say something is true, you need to back it up with sufficient evidence to support your position against the burden of proof.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2341/field\_article\_comments/1303)

Submitted by Donald N Kasch on Mon, 12/29/2025 - 08:21

Permalink (/comment/2801#comment-2801)

I find it interesting that the term Israelite exists in this issue at all. Israelite can only mean persons who were from the Northern Canaanite Kingdom of Israel. No relation whatsoever to a biblical group of some 2.5 million descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's 12 sons who were completely isolated in Egypt... How handy that the Exodus writers get Jacob a second name from an angel that just happens to be the same as Israel in Canaan. To continue to peddle Exodus and Joshua as historical fact while flagrantly using the term of Israelites as meaning invaders who committed absolute genocide on the population of Canaan at the orders of God is absurd. This interchange between historical writings and biblical nonsense simply has to stop.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2341/field\_article\_comments/2801)

Submitted by Joshua Davis on Thu, 05/28/2026 - 08:29

Permalink (/comment/3457#comment-3457)

The very fact that Israel exists as a term for a nomadic group of people in the Merneptah stele makes your point moot. It clearly was not a term used just for the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which did not exist in 1207 BCE. The Biblical text is not nonsense but is clearly rooted in real historical events, even if the depictions of those events may not be wholly accurate.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2341/field\_article\_comments/3457)

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