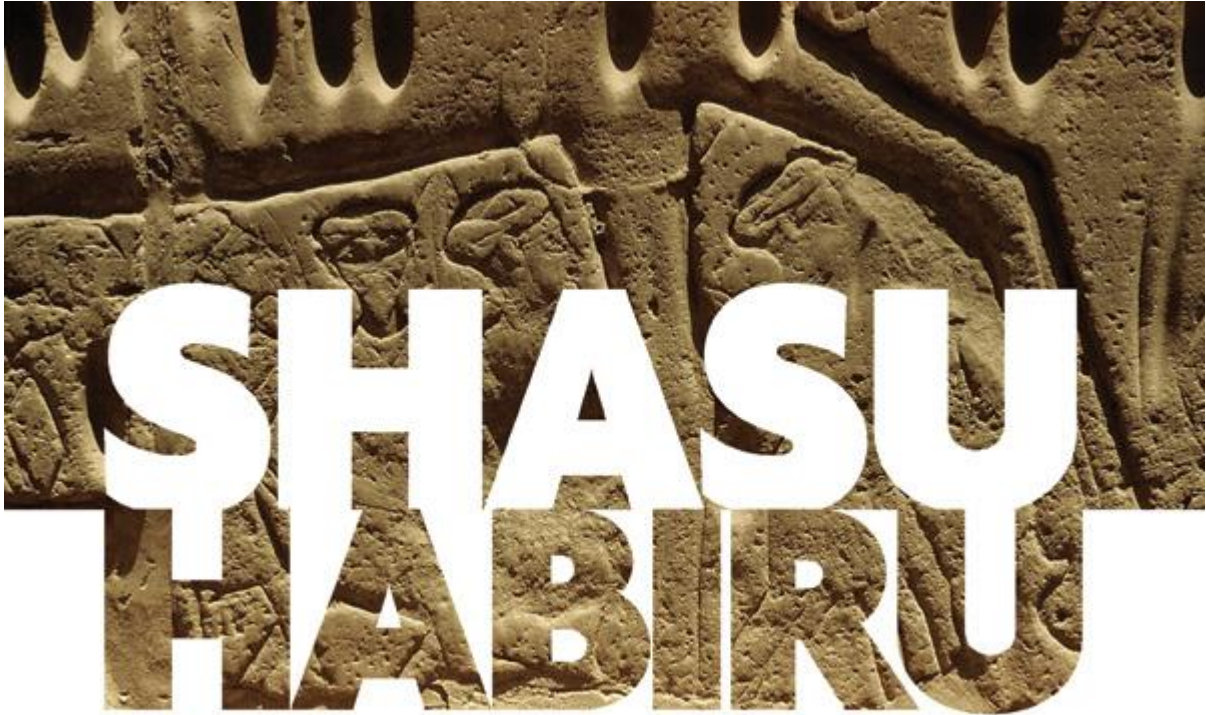


Who Were the Early Israelites? By Anson Rainey

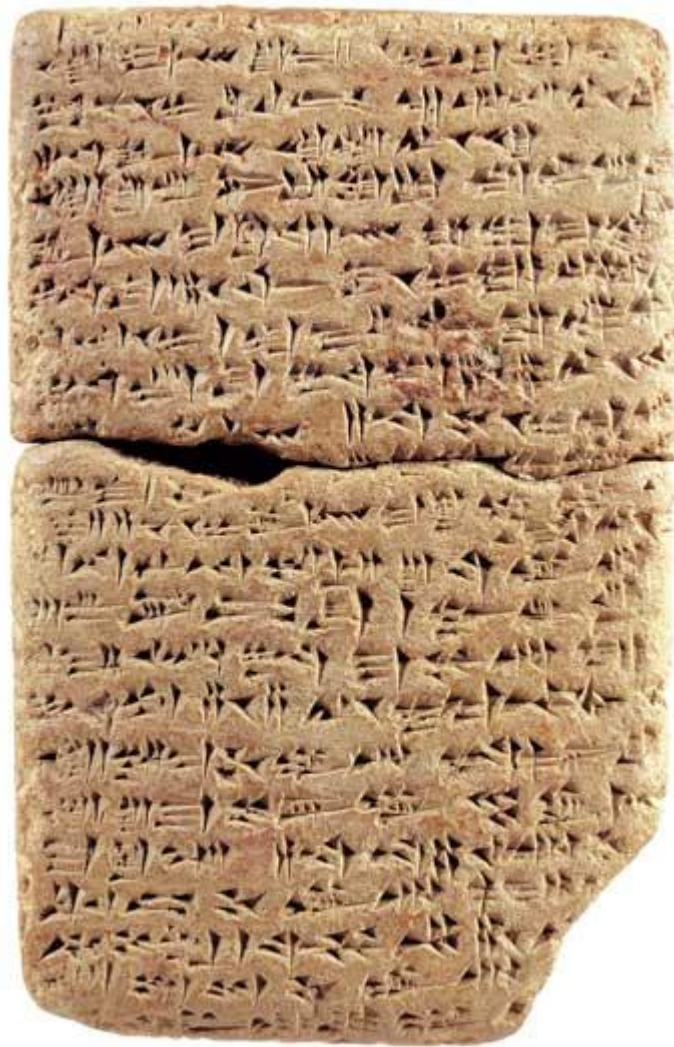


It is time to clarify for **BAR** readers the widely discussed relationship between the *habiru*, who are well documented in Egyptian and Near Eastern inscriptions, and the Hebrews of the Bible. There is absolutely no relationship!

The first appearance of the term *habiru* (also ‘*apiru*¹’ The true Semitic form of the word is obscured by the Akkadian syllabic script of the Amarna Letters and other cuneiform documents. The word is really ‘*apiru*’ meaning “dusty, dirty.”) surfaced in the late 19th century in the cuneiform archive from Egypt known as the Amarna Letters. Seven of the letters in the archive are letters of Abdi-Heba, king of Canaanite Jerusalem, to his overlord, the pharaoh (king) of Egypt.² (For Abdi-Heba’s letters, see EA 280, 285, 286, 287, 288 in William Moran, *The Amarna Letters* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992], pp. 279–280, 325–332.) “I fall at the feet of my lord, the king, seven times and seven times,” Abdi-Heba’s letters often begin. A frequent complaint is that “*habiru* have plundered all the lands of the king.” And again: “the *habiru* have taken the very cities of the king.” If Pharaoh does not send archers, “the land of the king will desert to the *habiru*.”

Abdi-Heba complains that the pharaoh is not sufficiently helpful to him: “I am treated like a *habiru*.”

It was not long before some scholars suggested a relationship between “*habiru*” and the similar-sounding “Hebrew.”



Since then, we have literally hundreds of references to *habiru* (*'apiru*) from Egypt, Nuzi (beyond the Tigris), Syria and Canaan. Most recently an 8.5-inch-high square cuneiform prism was recovered from Anatolia that lists 438 names of *habiru*.^a (See Strata, "A 3,500-Year-Old Inscription From a Syrian Kingdom May Tell Us Who the Habiru Were," **BAR** 22:06.) We now have a plethora of references to *habiru* from over a 600-year period, from the 18th to 12th centuries B.C.E.

It is clear from these references, however, that *habiru* is not an ethnic designation. The *habiru* are a social element. It is likewise clear from the personal names of individual *habiru* that they are not from a single linguistic group.

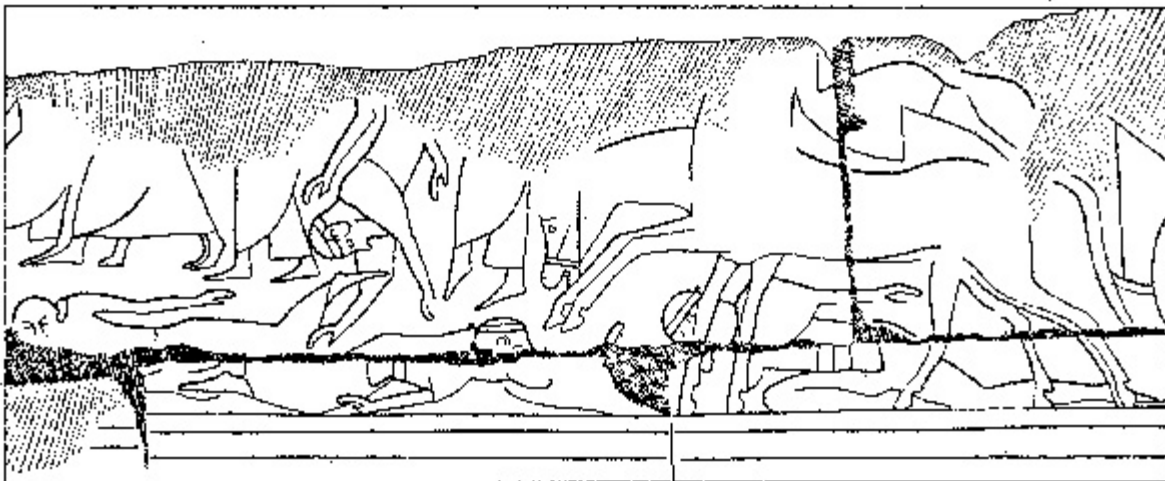
There seem to have been several kinds of *habiru*—but always of inferior status. The term itself has a negative connotation. The word is sometimes used as a synonym for mutineer or pauper. Sometimes *habiru* are individuals and sometimes members of a group. Some are servants or slaves. Others are members of robber bands who attack and plunder, especially in times of disintegrating rule. Elsewhere they seem to have become a ruler's militia. In other instances, individual *habiru* are recruited as mercenaries into a militia. Sometimes as a benefice, they were given lands and estates.

But they are never mentioned as pastoralists (as are the Hebrews). And they are never referred to as belonging to tribes.

Moreover, as I have shown elsewhere in a discussion too technical for **BAR**, there is absolutely no linguistic relationship between *habiru* and Hebrew (*'ivri*)³ (Anson Rainey, Review of O. Loretz, *Habiru-Hebräer, Eine sozio-linguistische Studie über die Herkunft des Gentiliziums 'ibr zum Appellativum 'abiru*, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987), pp. 539–541.) I have described the effort of some scholars to relate the two as nothing short of “silly” and “absurd mental gymnastics” by “wishful thinkers who tend to ignore the reality of linguistics.”⁴ (Anson Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), p. 89.)

But another term may indeed have something to do with the early Israelites, not linguistically but socially: namely the *shasu* who are often found in Egyptian texts and inscriptions of the Late Bronze Age. The Egyptians probably learned the term from West Semites of the Levant. Whether the original meaning of the term was “pastoralist” or “plunderer” is uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the *shasu* were pastoralists (nomads) who lived in symbiosis with sedentary populations but were prone to violence in times of distress.

The term first appears in the 15th century B.C.E. in Egypt. One inscription refers to “*shasu* country.” Several different *shasu* lands appear in Egyptian topographical lists. The *shasu* are also known from the Amarna Letters referred to above. There the language is Akkadian; the Akkadian form of the term applied to the pastoralist, nomadic element in Canaanite society is *sutu*. The *sutu* appear to be Egyptian mercenaries in the Lebanese Beqa' near Damascus, where we read of a place called 'Ain-Shasu.





A text in the hypostyle hall at Karnak that can be dated quite precisely to 1291 B.C.E. (to the reign of Seti I) tells of *shasu* pastoralists on the mountain ridges of Canaan. They have no regard for the laws of the Egyptian palace.

A similar text locates a clash with *shasu* in northern Sinai or the western Negev.





Another well-known Egyptian text from the late 13th century B.C.E., called Papyrus Anastasi VI, refers to the transfer of “*shasu* tribes . . . in order to keep them alive and in order to keep their cattle alive.”

This text provides clear evidence of the pastoral character of the *shasu* and, indeed, of their being permitted to enter the eastern Egyptian Delta in order to graze their flocks. This, of course, is the same area referred to in the Bible as the land of Goshen where Jacob’s sons took their flocks to Egypt in a time of drought (Genesis 42–45).

A picture of a group of *shasu* can be found on a wall of the Karnak temple, where they may be the “Israel” of the Merneptah Stele, although this is disputed.^b (See “Can You Name the Panel with the Israelites?” containing “Rainey’s Challenge” and “Yurco’s Response,” **BAR** 17:06.)

These *shasu* were the main source of early hill-country settlements in Canaan that represent the Israelites’ settling down. The earliest hill-country settlements from Iron Age I sprang up in marginal areas where pastoralists could graze their flocks and engage in dry farming.

This same thing was happening elsewhere in the Levant. In the *shasu* tribes, we may well find the origins of not only the Israelites, but also their eastern neighbors, including the Midianites, Moabites and Edomites. The pastoralists from the steppe lands all around the Fertile Crescent were driven into more settled areas at the same time as the Israelites were emerging in the hill country of Canaan. Israel was simply one group among many *shasu* who were moving out of the steppe lands to find their livelihood in areas that would provide them with food in times of drought and famine.



Correction (11/11/08): There are only six letters (not seven, as stated above) from Jerusalem, through Abdi-Heba, in the Amarna letters. Abdi-Heba is, however, mentioned in a seventh letter (EA 280) from his arch-enemy Shuwardata. **BAR** regrets the error.