Introduction to Biblical Israel

September 6, 2006

- Course housekeeping matters
- What is Biblical Israel?
- History and “Prehistory”

Housekeeping

- Sections
  - HIST282H/JWST234H: will meet in 0142 Holzapfel
  - Mr. Phelan will make up the work in the Tuesday sections next week.
- Quizzes begin Next Week
- Electronic Reserves: a quick how-to guide

Searching the catalog
What is Biblical Israel?

- Some terminology
- Geography
- Bible and historians

Some terminology

- BCE/BC-CE/AD
- Before Christ-Anno Domini (Year of the Lord)
- Before Common Era-Common Era
- Jews, Judaism vs. Israel
  - For the purposes of this course:
    - Israel-Biblical Period, Jews-later
  - Reasons to be discussed later
- Bible
  - A collection of books spanning several centuries
  - Literature of Israel, sacred to Jews
Geography

- Canaan/Israel
- Mesopotamia
- "The Fertile Crescent"
Bible and historians

- For traditional Jews, Christians: Bible is authoritative history
- For historians bible is a historical artifact
  - Contains historical (historicizing) myth
  - To be evaluated against other artifacts and data
- Two brief examples
  - Merneptah stele
  - Israelite Entry into Canaan

Merneptah stele

- First reference to Israel outside the Bible (1207 BCE)
- “Israel is vanquished and his seed is naught”
- In this case another document “confirms” the Bible, while giving a less plausible scenario than the Bible

Israelite Entry into Canaan

- Most scholars agree that by ca 1200 BCE there was an “Israel” in Canaan (Merneptah Stele). Where did they come from?
- Bible gives one (or more) accounts
- Archaeology undermines some specific details (e.g. walls of Jericho), while suggesting some plausible models for explaining the Israelite presence

*More on this next time in lecture and in two weeks in section*
History and “Prehistory”

For our purposes: History begins with 1200 BCE, when there is a population called “Israel.”

The story of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), the descent into Egypt, and the exodus are part of the prehistory.

Prehistory (especially exodus) essential aspect of biblical and later Jewish self-identity (“I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt”; “You shall love the resident alien, for you were resident aliens in Egypt”)

We begin our narrative next time with the emergence of an Israelite polity in Canaan.