

WHAT'S IN A NAME? AN EXAMINATION OF THE USAGE OF THE TERM "HEBREW" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

As any student of the OT knows, the word “Hebrew” (עִבְרִי) pertains to Israel, God’s covenant people. Although one might expect “Hebrew” to be a commonly occurring term in Scripture, the writers of the OT used the word rather sparingly. F. F. Bruce noted that “Hebrew” “is used of the Israelites or their ancestors some thirty-four times in the Old Testament.”¹ The bulk of the allusions to the Hebrews lie in the Pentateuch; all other citations appear only in the books of 1 Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah.

Several of the passages that make reference to “Hebrew” contain intriguing details that raise questions concerning the usage of the term in early OT times. This fact leads one to question whether “Hebrew” always possesses the same meaning, or if it meant different things to different people in different eras. The purpose of this paper is to examine this important, yet little considered subject.

II. THE PLIABILITY OF ETHNONYMS

Languages constantly undergo change. This process of transformation typically progresses at a measured pace, but the sound shifts and alterations accumulate over the years and centuries. As a result of these unending modifications, languages such as German and English, which share a common ancestor, now are drastically different from one another. Similarly, Vulgar Latin spawned Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Romanian, and Catalan. An ancient example of this phenomenon is the development of Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Ugaritic, and Phoenician from the same linguistic predecessor.

Similarly, shifting political boundaries and the designations for people groups change over time. European explorers called the indigenous residents of the New World “Indians” because they mistakenly believed that they had discovered a new route to India. Today the descendants of the New World inhabitants who reside in North America are referred to as “Aboriginals,” “Native Americans” or “Amerin-

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¹ F. F. Bruce, “Tell Amarna,” in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (ed. Winton Thomas; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 11.

dians.”² Since the term “American” is an anachronistic label, many indigenous residents of Canada prefer to refer to themselves collectively as the “First Nations.”³ So “Indian” may refer either to residents of an Asian country or the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, and the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas answer to a variety of names.

Additionally, the term “Indian” may take on a positive or negative connotation depending on a speaker’s intent. For an indigenous person, the term typically is a source of pride. For some mestizos and non-indigenous people, the word takes on the derogatory meaning of “unsophisticated” or “savage.”

This brief consideration of the numerous designations for the indigenous peoples of the Americas provides insight into the usage of the word “Hebrew” in the OT. Although the term appears only a few dozen times, evidence suggests that it meant different things to different people in different time periods. In order to validate this assertion, the next section will examine the origin of the term “Hebrew.”

III. EBER’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE HEBREWS

1. *Eber and his descendants.* Genesis 10 lists the offspring of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the three sons of Noah who repopulated the entire planet after the Flood. Shem’s grandson fathered Eber (עֵבֶר), a man inextricably linked to the study of the word “Hebrew.” Not only did Eber become the father of Peleg, from which the Israelites sprang, but also Joktan, whose children settled in places such as Edom, Canaan, Arabia, Aram, and Syria.⁴ Accordingly, Eber via his descendants was one of the major contributors to the population of the ancient Near East.

The tendency of the OT period was for peoples to be identified with the name of their patriarch/founder as the following chart demonstrates:

CHART 1: THE PATRIARCHAL ORIGIN OF PEOPLE GROUP NAMES
IN THE EARLY OLD TESTAMENT ERA

	PATRIARCH	PEOPLE GROUP
Hebrew	עֵבֶר	עֵבְרִי
Israel	יִשְׂרָאֵל	יִשְׂרָאֵלִי
Mizraim (Egypt)	מִצְרַיִם	מִצְרִי
Edom	אֲדָם	אֲדָמִי
Moab	מוֹאָב	מוֹאָבִי
Ammon	בְּנֵי עַמִּי	עַמּוֹנִי

² Olive Patricia Dickason, ed., *Canada’s First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (The Civilization of the American Indian Series 208; Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) 16.

³ <http://firstpeoplesofcanada.com> (accessed November 7, 2011).

⁴ David O’Brien, “David the Hebrew,” *JETS* 23 (1980) 198.

Because of this phenomenon the question arises, therefore, whether other descendants of Eber besides Israel were known as Hebrews or a similar appellation.⁵ The following sections briefly will survey the evidence.

2. *Eber, the ancestor of the Israelites.* Although the connection occasionally still is refuted, the name Eber (עֵבֶר) almost certainly is “the etymological source of the word ‘Hebrew’” (עֵבֶרִי).⁶ Traces of this lineage appear in the names of two OT Israelite men. First Chronicles 8:12 records that a man named Eber was a son of Elpaal of the tribe of Benjamin. Nehemiah 12:20 informs that a priest known as Eber returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem.

3. *Eber, the ancestor of other peoples.* Abraham Malamat warned that “anyone assuming that the biblical term ‘Hebrew’ embraces a circle wider than the Israelites alone ... must beat the *onus probandi*,”⁷ but the evidence is available. For example, a mid-third millennium BC king of Ebla was named Ibrum,⁸ which is a cognate of עֵבֶר. Obviously the ruler is not a part of the line that produced Abram, so he likely descended from another branch of the family tree.

Furthermore, the existence of a people known as the *Hapiru* in fifteenth-century BC Canaan is of interest. The old argument posited by Moshe Greenberg that expressed problems with associating the “p” of *Hapiru*⁹ with the “b” of *Hebrew*¹⁰ no longer holds. Edward Lipinski correctly noted that the interchange of the letters p/b is a typical feature of Semitic languages.¹¹ As a matter of fact, “the middle sign [of Ha-Bi-Ru] could in that age be read *pi* as well as *bi*”¹² in cuneiform. Accordingly, scholars have compiled lists that demonstrate “examples of words written with either *b* or *p* without alteration of meaning.”¹³ In other words, as most experts of ancient Semitic languages recognize, it is as correct to render the name *Habiru* as it is to transliterate it as *Hapiru*.

4. *The Hebrews and the Habiru.* Evidence abounds that the Hebrews and *Habiru* are related somehow. Perhaps the strongest evidence lies in the words themselves. The consonants that form the words “Hebrew” and *Habiru* are both *hbr*, rendering the words “etymologically identical.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the definitions of the terms overlap significantly.

⁵ Indeed, “Eber” itself is listed as a place name in Num 24:24: “ships shall come from the coast of Kittim, and they shall afflict Ashur and will afflict Eber; so they also will come to destruction.”

⁶ O’Brien, “David the Hebrew” 198.

⁷ Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Bible* (ed. B. Halpern and M. H. E. Weippert; Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 12; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 227.

⁸ Allen C. Myers, ed., *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 300.

⁹ Older treatments translated the term as *Apiru* or *Hapiru*. This paper has followed the trend that now renders the appellation as *Habiru*.

¹⁰ Moshe Greenberg, *The Habiru* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1955) 91.

¹¹ Edouard Lipinski, “L’Esclave Hébreu,” *VT* 26 (1976) 121.

¹² William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the God of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 87.

¹³ D. J. Wiseman, ed., *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 22.

¹⁴ Niels Peter Lemche, “Great Canaan: The Implications of a Correct Reading of EA 151:49–67,” *BAASOR* 310 (1998) 1.

a. *The semantic domain of Hebrew.* The root of the ethnonym עֵבְרִי encompasses several intriguing shades of meaning. Depending on the context, עֵבְרִי contains four general uses that all carry the idea of movement: (1) to go beyond or further; (2) movement between two places; (3) movement in a metaphorical sense; as well as (4) the spiritual concept of transgression (i.e. negative spiritual movement).¹⁵ The fourth domain is strikingly similar to the usage of *Habiru* in the Amarna Letters, likely preserving an earlier connotation of the word.

b. *The semantic domain of Habiru.* Scholars claim at least two definitions for the root meaning of *Habiru*. Some see the origin of the term in the Akkadian *aparu*, “dirt, dust.”¹⁶ Since “they did a great deal of traveling on foot [it is plausible that] ... they were nicknamed the ‘dusty ones.’”¹⁷ This sense of the expression is preserved in the Syriac word *ʿafīr* or *ʿappīr*, “dusty.”¹⁸ Equally plausible is that the root means “to pass” or “to cross.”¹⁹ Accordingly, *habiru* often is translated “immigrer.”²⁰ Both options employ the idea of movement.

c. *Overlap between the domains of Hebrew and Habiru.* When one compares “Hebrew” and *Habiru*, it becomes evident that the meanings of the terms overlap.²¹ Both phrases can signify crossing a border, one who leaves “their original land and dwell[is] in another land.”²² This fits the biblical image nicely: (1) Abram the Hebrew left his land of Mesopotamia and sojourned in Canaan; (2) the enslaved sons of Israel dwelt in Egypt for centuries, but remained outsiders in a foreign land.

IV. THE USAGE OF *HABIRU* (*HBR*) IN EXTANT ANCIENT LITERATURE

Allusions to the *Habiru* appear in over 210 texts²³ produced from 2500 BC²⁴ until about 1200 BC.²⁵ Places where the *Habiru* appeared include Akkad, Alalakh, Arabia, Babylonia, Bogazkoy, Egypt, Mari, Nuzi, Sumer, Tikunani, and Ugarit. The most significant references are treated below.

1. *The Habiru of Sumer.* In about 2500 BC attestation to a *Habiru* presence appears in Sumer.²⁶ The references continue through the Ur III Period (ca. 2050

¹⁵ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 641.

¹⁶ Anson F. Rainey, *El Amarna Tablets 359–379* (Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte des Alten Orients und des Alten Testaments; Supplement to J. A. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln*, 2d rev. ed.; Jerusalem: Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1978) 64.

¹⁷ Lemche, “Great Canaan” 7.

¹⁸ Albright, *Yabweh and the God of Canaan* 75.

¹⁹ Jack Finegan, *Archaeological History of the Ancient Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979) 68.

²⁰ Nadav Na’aman, “Biryawaza of Damascus and the Date of the Kamid el-LozApiru Letters,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 20 (1988) 274.

²¹ Lemche, “Great Canaan” 1.

²² Finegan, *Archaeological History of the ANE* 68.

²³ Nadav Na’aman, “Biryawaza of Damascus and the Date of the Kamid el-LozApiru Letters,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 22 (1988) 272.

²⁴ Albright, *Yabweh and the God of Canaan* 87.

²⁵ Finegan, *Archaeological History of the ANE* 68.

²⁶ Albright, *Yabweh and the God of Canaan* 87.

BC),²⁷ and even find their way into the Lipit-Ishtar Code of 1870 BC, which describes people as performing *Habiru* activities.²⁸ The *Habiru* are portrayed as rebels who rub against the grain of the culture's acceptable practices.

2. *The Habiru of Babylonia.* The image of the *Habiru* in the region of Babylonia is no more attractive than the conception of their counterparts at Sumer. In 2300 BC the *Habiru* were branded as robbers.²⁹ During the age of Hammurabi (1728–1686 BC) the *Habiru* appear in a number of documents.³⁰ Not until about 1050 BC did many *Habiru* begin to rise to prominence in Babylonia.³¹ As a rule, however, the members of the group were “described as foreigners” who often found employment as soldiers or by “voluntarily enter[ing] into labor contracts.”³²

3. *The Habiru of Mari.* A number of eighteenth-century BC Akkadian texts originating from Mari, a region situated north of the Euphrates between the Habur and Balikh rivers,³³ provide a wealth of information. The *Habiru* dwelt in Mari during the reign of Zimri Lim (c. 1730–1700 BC)³⁴ because letters addressed to the king note their presence. Itūr-Asdu, the Mariote governor of Nahur, informed the king of the activity of the mysterious people group: “The [*Habiru*] who had left the city of Šurusum (*Šu-ru-si-im^{KI}*) and remained before Hāya-sūmū, went at night and took the city of Yahmumun (*Ia-ab-mu-ma-am*)—by now that city has returned into the power of Hāya-sūmū.”³⁵ The *Habiru* involved in this attack amounted to about two thousand soldiers.³⁶

Both the noun and verb usages of *Habiru* emerge in the Mari accounts. In document ARM 1450, a man named Ami-ibāl migrated (verb: *habāru*) from Ilānsura to Subartu.³⁷ ARM 1472 offered the account of Addu-sharrum, a Babylonian overseer, who fled from Babylon to Mari as a migrant (*Habiru*).³⁸ These examples indicate that the inhabitants of Mari viewed the *Habiru* as foreigners who more often than not were warriors that the native populace feared.

4. *The Habiru of Alalakh.* A significant archaeological site known as Tell el-‘Atshānāh also has uncovered useful information concerning the *Habiru*:

The inscriptions unearthed at Alalakh ... in north Syria in 1937–39 and 1946–49 proved to contain further references to the *Habiru*, dating from Level VII (eighteenth century BC) and Level IV (fifteenth century BC). In these inscriptions the *Habiru* appear as a military corps or fraternity ... the most interesting reference to the SA-GAZ [i.e. *Habiru*] from Alalakh comes in the inscription on

²⁷ Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Tell El Amarna and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963) 52.

²⁸ Albright, *Yabneh and the God of Canaan* 87.

²⁹ Niels Peter Lemche, “Hebrew as a National Name for Israel,” *JT* 33 (1979) 7.

³⁰ Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Tell El Amarna and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963) 52.

³¹ Harry M. Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel* (London: Cornell University Press, 1954) 18.

³² Finegan, *Archaeological History of the ANE* 68.

³³ Pfeiffer, *Tell El Amarna* 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Michael C. Astour, “The North Mesopotamian Kingdom of IlānŠurā,” in *Mari in Retrospect: Fifty Years of Mari and Mari Studies* (ed. Gordon D. Young; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 23.

³⁶ Finegan, *Archaeological History of the ANE* 67.

³⁷ Na‘aman, “Biryawaza of Damascus and the Date of the Kamid el-LozApiru Letters” 274–75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the statue of King Idrimi. In this Akkadian inscription (also from Level IV) Idrimi, king of Alalakh, took refuge in north Canaan, in the town of Ammiya, mentioned also in the Amarna texts, and there he spent seven years among the SA-GAZ warriors. This may imply that the SA-GAZ warriors of Ammiya had become a more or less settled community in that area.³⁹

Some scholars have suggested that Idrimi may have become a *Habiru*⁴⁰ by adopting their way of life.

Three observations must be made at this point. First, the *Habiru* are attested at Alalakh in at least three consecutive centuries at a time in which the sons of Israel continued to toil in Egypt. Second, the *Habiru* contain names from at least two languages, indicating mixed heritage. Third, the documents from Alalakh indicate that one may become a *Habiru*, demonstrating that the term possessed the ability to describe one's activities as well as functioning as a racial marker.

5. *The Habiru of Hatti*. Hittite cuneiform texts stemming from 1740–1200 BC⁴¹ note the presence of the *Habiru* in the kingdom of Hatti. Not only do the texts record the activities of the *Habiru*, but also information concerning their religion. According to fourteenth and thirteenth-century BC records the *Habiru* were not monotheists, but polytheists.⁴² This series of documents demonstrate that “their sphere of activity was not confined solely to Canaan,”⁴³ since Hatti was located in modern day Turkey.

6. *The Habiru of Tikunani*. A fifteenth-century BC prism from Tikunani, a kingdom located near the present-day border between Syria and Turkey, offers important insight into the usage of *Habiru*. The artifact lists 438 workers dedicated to King Tunnip-Teššup, all *Habiru*.⁴⁴ Although many of the names are Hurrian, others are Semitic.⁴⁵ Once more, the indication is that the term *Habiru* did not serve only as an ethnic designation.

7. *The Habiru of Nuzi*. Fifteenth-century BC documents from Nuzi, a Hurrian state, refer to *Habiru* who were not involved in any sort of warfare: “The *Habiru* are mentioned in over thirty Nuzian documents, but not as armed marauders or mercenary contingents in this or that military force. Here we find them hiring themselves out under contract as household servants—men, women, and families These *Habiru* have migrated to Nuzi from other areas; their names belong to a wide variety of languages, though the majority seem to be Semitic.”⁴⁶ Based on usage,

³⁹ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 10.

⁴⁰ Wiseman, *Peoples of Old Testament Times* 23.

⁴¹ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 9.

⁴² Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (trans. David Smith; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 9.

⁴³ Jonathan N. Tubb, *Canaanites, Peoples of the Past*, vol. 2 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 80.

⁴⁴ “Tunip-Tessup of Tikunani: A 3,500-Year-Old Cuneiform Inscription From a Syrian Kingdom May Tell Us Who the Habiru Were,” *BAR* 22 (Nov.–Dec. 1996) 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 9–10.

the term *Habiru* in this context appears to connote a foreigner or an outsider,⁴⁷ one who is not ethnically or culturally similar to the established group.

8. *The 'pr/ 'pr.w of Egypt.* A number of Egyptian inscriptions hailing from the Eighteenth to Twentieth Dynasties (1450 to 1150 BC)⁴⁸ allude to a group known as the *'pr* or *'pr.w*, the Egyptian equivalent of *habiru*. “The *'prw* are mentioned in a number of Egyptian texts and range from fighting men in Canaan to captives employed as servants to strain wine, to prisoners given to the temples, to workers in the quarries of the Wadi Hammamat Above all they are foreigners.”⁴⁹ Moshe Greenberg explained that “the identity of the Egyptian *'pr.w* with the cuneiform SA.GAZ/H is made all but certain” by philological identity of the *'pr.w* with the Ugaritic *'pru* (who have been positively identified as SA.GAZ), similarity of activity between the *'pr.w* and SA.GAZ, as well as “similarity in social activity between the two.”⁵⁰

Papyrus Harris 500 “records the capture of Joppa by a general of Tuthmosis III.”⁵¹ The document warned the men of Joppa to “bring in the horses ... or a [*'pr.w*] may pass by and take them.”⁵² The *'pr.w* in this document are represented as nothing more than opportunistic robbers who prey upon the weak.

The Memphis Stele of Amenophis II records the results of a campaign undertaken in the Syro-Palestine region.⁵³ Pharaoh's conquest was victorious, for he brought back to Egypt “3,600 [*'pr.w*], 15,200 *shasu*, and 36,300 *Hurru*, with all their goods, sheep, goats and cattle.”⁵⁴ This account places a large population of *'pr.w* in Syro-Palestine before the Exodus.⁵⁵

Seti I, the first ruler of the Nineteenth Dynasty, recorded a *'pr.w* attack on the Beth-Shan Stele. The strike occurred in the region of Palestine: “On this day, lo [one came to tell] his [majesty]: The [*'pr.w*] of Mount Yarmuta, with Teger ... [have ari]sen in attack upon the Asiatics of Rehém.”⁵⁶ Yarmuta may be the Egyptian form of *Jarmuth*,⁵⁷ a portion of the land allotted to the tribe of Issacher in Josh 21:29.

Papyrus Leiden 349, dating from the reign of Ramesses II, preserves the message of a charioteer to the king: “I have taken note of my lord's message to me

⁴⁷ Barry L. Eichler, *Indenture at Nuzi: The Personal Tidenmütu Contract and its Mesopotamian Analogues* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973) 47.

⁴⁸ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 8.

⁴⁹ “The Name ‘Hebrew’ in Archaeology and in Scripture,” <http://www.geocities.com/gene-siscommentary/hebrews.html> (March 10, 2008).

⁵⁰ Greenberg, *TheHab/piru* 81–82.

⁵¹ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 8.

⁵² “Hebrew, Habiru, and ‘Apiru,” <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.net/judges/hebrewhabiru.htm> (March 10, 2008).

⁵³ de Vaux, *Early History of Israel* 108.

⁵⁴ Robert B. Coote, *Early Israel: A New Horizon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 90.

⁵⁵ Amenophis II, the pharaoh of the Exodus, died in the Red Sea as he attempted to seize the Israelites.

⁵⁶ “Hebrew, Habiru, and ‘Apiru,” <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.net/judges/hebrewhabiru.htm> (March 10, 2008). The parentheses located within this quote are additions by the translator rather than supplementary notations provided by the author of this article.

⁵⁷ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 8.

saying, ‘Give grain rations to the soldiers and the [*ʾpr.w*]- (laborers) who are drawing (water from) the well of Per Ramesses II.’⁵⁸ In much the same manner, Papyrus Leiden 348 refers to the *ʾpr.w* “who drag stone for the great pylon of . . . Rames[s]es-II-Beloved-of-Truth.”⁵⁹ A recently discovered hieratic ostrakon also stemming from the same period associates *ʾpr.w* with “construction work at Pi-Ramesses.”⁶⁰ The usage of the term during this period therefore does not suggest “a special racial or ethnic group but a social concept—inferior people who were employed by forced labor.”⁶¹

A papyrus dated to the rule of Twentieth Dynasty Ramesses III recorded a list of items dedicated to the temple at Heliopolis: “Warriors, sons of (foreign) princes, maryannu, [*ʾpr.w*], and people settled who are in this place: 2,093 persons.”⁶² These individuals were in all likelihood prisoners of war.⁶³ His successor Ramesses IV, in an inscription discovered at Wadi Hammāmāt, referred to 800 *ʾpr.w* who toiled in a quarry in the region.⁶⁴ Accordingly, the *ʾpr.w* of Egyptian documents appears to have “become a standard term for the enslaved captives of semi-nomadic Semitic tribes held in Egypt.”⁶⁵

9. *The ʾprm of Ugarit.* While the Egyptians knew the *Habiru* as the *ʾpr/ʾpr.w*, the people of Ugarit referred to them as *ʾprm*.⁶⁶ Documents such as the Ras Shamra texts portrayed them as immigrants away from their homeland.⁶⁷ A proper reading of the materials appears to represent the *Habiru* “not so much an ethnic group as a sociological phenomenon.”⁶⁸ In other words, culture or way of life, rather than genetic heritage, formed the basis of *Habiru* society.

10. *Ramifications.* This examination of the cognates of “Hebrew” has revealed several things. First, the root *hbr* is an ethnonym for descendants of the man Eber. Second, the root *hbr* often refers not only to a particular people group, but to their nomadic way of life. Third, because some who were classified as *hbr* were mercenaries, and settled people tended to distrust foreigners who sojourned in their lands, *hbr* takes on a negative connotation in certain circumstances. This understanding of *hbr* is a beneficial tool that helps the researcher to understand the meaning of “Hebrew” in the OT.

⁵⁸ Edward F. Wente, *Letters from Egypt* (SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series 1; ed. Edmund S. Meltzer; trans. Edward F. Wente; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 124.

⁵⁹ “Hebrew, Habiru, and ‘Apiru,” <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.net/judges/hebrewhabiru.htm> (March 10, 2008).

⁶⁰ Abraham Malamat, *History of Biblical Israel: Major Problems and Minor Issues* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 7; ed. B. Halpern, M. H. E. Weippert, Th. P. J. van Den Hout, and I. Winter; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 60.

⁶¹ Paul Johnson, *The Civilization of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) 80.

⁶² “Hebrew, Habiru, and ‘Apiru,” <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.net/judges/hebrewhabiru.htm> (March 10, 2008).

⁶³ de Vaux, *Early History of Israel* 108.

⁶⁴ Bruce, “Tell El-Amarna” 8.

⁶⁵ Henry Leopold Ellison, “Hebrew Slave: A Study in Early Israelite Society,” *EvQ* 45 (1973) 32.

⁶⁶ Edouard Lipinski, “L’EsclaveHébreu,” *VT* 26 (1976) 121.

⁶⁷ Finegan, *Archaeological History of the ANE* 68.

⁶⁸ Wiseman, *Peoples of Old Testament Times* 23.

V. THE USAGE OF "HEBREW" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. *Persons identified as Hebrews.*

a. *Abram the Hebrew.* In Genesis 14, long before God changed Jacob's name to Israel (Gen 32:28), Abram defeated King Chedorlaomer and his allies. The Bible refers to the patriarch as "Abram the Hebrew" (Gen 14:13). This, the first usage of "Hebrew" in the Bible,⁶⁹ explains not the reason why Abram is called a Hebrew or the purpose of such a designation. In fact, no definition of "Hebrew" ever appears in any other segment of the OT either.

Abram's actions in the section provide the strongest clue to his classification as a Hebrew. "Hebrew" refers either to Abram's status as a semi-nomad and non-citizen⁷⁰ in his residence "by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite" (Gen 14:13), or his reputation as a mighty warrior—indeed "we have [in Abram] what is really a typical [*Habiru*] of the Amarna type."⁷¹ The idea of "Hebrew" most likely carries both of these concepts in this passage. Abram's connection with Mesopotamia, the location of the first historical reference to the *Habiru*,⁷² serves to strengthen this position as well as to provide a reasonable explanation for the origin of the biblical word "Hebrew."

b. *Joseph the Hebrew.* Two people identify Joseph as a Hebrew in the Genesis account. First, Potiphar's wife, in the course of her false accusation, labeled Joseph thus: "See, he has brought in a *Hebrew* to us to make sport of us" (Gen 39:14). In subsequent dialogue she added that Joseph was a "Hebrew slave" (Gen 39:17), demonstrating that Joseph would fit the Egyptian concept of the *pr.w*. Later, Pharaoh's imprisoned chief cupbearer referred to Joseph as "a Hebrew youth" (Gen 41:12).

Worth mentioning are two other references that appear in the Joseph account. In Gen 40:15, Joseph related to the cupbearer that he was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews. Genesis 43:32 explains that "the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians."

Several observations are in order. First, Potiphar's wife employed "Hebrew" in a derogatory manner, much as the word "Indian" today can be intended as a slight in Hispanic culture. Second, the fact that Joseph's brothers did not eat their meal at the same table as the Egyptians demonstrates that "Hebrew," like "the term '*Habiru*' had a negative connotation in the Egyptian court."⁷³ Third, the phrase "the land of the Hebrews" as well as Potiphar's wife's disparaging remarks indicate that "Hebrew" must have referred to more than just Jacob and his children, for the family numbered only seventy individuals at this time (Gen 46:27). Why would the

⁶⁹ Finegan, *Archaeological History of the ANE* 68.

⁷⁰ As a citizen of Ur of the Chaldees Abram was a foreigner in the land of Canaan.

⁷¹ Wiseman, *Peoples of Old Testament Times* 22. The *Amarna Letters* record the invasion of Canaan in the late 15th century BC by a group of ferocious warriors known as the *Hapiru/Habiru*. The designation appears alongside the word "robber" (EA 318), and it appears that one could become a *Hapiru/Habiru* by taking part in warlike activities that challenged existing political powers (EA 290).

⁷² Albright, *Yabneh and the God of Canaan* 87.

⁷³ Na'aman, "Biryawaza of Damascus and the Date of the Kamid el-LozApiru Letters" 276.

Egyptians officials refuse to eat with a little-known family of less than one hundred individuals that they likely never had heard of, unless the term “Hebrew” pertained to more than just the descendants of Abraham?

c. *Moses the Hebrew*. The Book of Exodus refers to Moses as a Hebrew. As he watched Egypt’s slave population strain and groan under the burdens placed upon them by Pharaoh, “he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren” (Exod 2:11). Since one of Moses’s kin was a Hebrew, this relationship, by extension, would make Moses a Hebrew. The purpose of the passage is to remind the reader of Moses’ heritage as a member of the covenant people and it does not assist in identifying the parameters of the word “Hebrew.”

d. *David the Hebrew*. During the early days of the Israelite monarchy, the Philistines tended to refer to God’s people as Hebrews rather than as sons of Israel.⁷⁴ On one such occasion David and his army were called Hebrews: “Now the Philistines gathered together all their armies to Aphek, while the Israelites were camping by the spring which is Jezreel. And the lords of the Philistines were proceeding on by hundreds and by thousands, and David and his men were proceeding on in the rear with Achish. Then the commanders of the Philistines said, ‘What are these *Hebrews* doing here?’”⁷⁵ This reference to the Israelites clearly is an insult because the Philistines utilized the word in a pejorative sense.⁷⁶

Besides functioning as a disparaging slur, the Philistines employed such terminology because they saw the Israelites as rebels.⁷⁷ David O’Brien rightly pointed out that in 1 Samuel 14 “Hebrew” “occurs twice in a clear context of rebellion.”⁷⁸ Thus, this passage contains a usage similar to that of *Habiru* in the Amarna Letters.

e. *Jonah the Hebrew*. In the first chapter of the book of Jonah, after the prophet found himself on a ship in the middle of a storm-tossed sea, the crew demanded to know his heritage. He replied by calling himself a Hebrew (Jonah 1:9), perhaps in part evoking the idea of travel that is inherent in the root עִבְרָא because he was voyaging from location to another. Unlike the previous OT references, which usually contain negative or warlike connotations, Jonah’s admission appears to refer to the ethnic group known as the Israelites. A change in the usage of the word, therefore, appears to have occurred over the two centuries or so since the beginning of the Monarchy. This meaning of “Hebrew” is compatible with the NT usage of the term as a racial designation for the descendants of Abraham from Jacob’s line (cf. Acts 6:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5).

⁷⁴ Cf. 1 Sam 4:6, 9; 13:19; 14:11; 29:3.

⁷⁵ 1 Sam 29:1–3a.

⁷⁶ Na’aman, “Biryawaza of Damascus and the Date of the Kamid el-LozApiru Letters” 279.

⁷⁷ First Samuel 4:9 serves as a good example: “Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight.” At certain times between the periods of the Conquest and the Monarchy Philistia ruled parts of the Israelite population. In the passage mentioned above the Philistines unmistakably called the Israelites “Hebrews” because they viewed them as mutinous to the established order.

⁷⁸ O’Brien, “David the Hebrew” 193–206.

2. *References to the Hebrews as a people group.*

a. *The God of the Hebrews.* Time after time the book of Exodus names the Creator as “the God of the Hebrews,”⁷⁹ always in the context of Moses speaking to Pharaoh. The phrase’s appearance at this point in Israel’s history is significant. In this early period, Abraham’s descendants were known as Hebrews or as “the sons of Israel” rather than Israel (the common designation of later times), primarily because the Egyptians considered them to be only a people rather than a nation because they did not possess their own land or have a king.⁸⁰

b. *The Hebrews of Saul’s Day.* An interesting statement emerges in 1 Samuel 13. The term “Hebrew” appears in the chapter a total of three times, each time in the context of warfare. The first instance springs from the mouth of Saul. Although the surrounding passage refers to Israel (1 Sam 13:1, 4, 6), the first king of Israel called for combat against the Philistines: “Let the Hebrews hear” (1 Sam 13:3). When the Philistines began to overwhelm Saul’s numbers many of “the people hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits. Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead” (1 Sam 13:6b–7a). First Samuel 13:19 adds that no blacksmith operated in the land of Israel because the Philistine feared that the Hebrews would fashion swords and spears.

In this text, Israel is a title for the entire population that descended from Jacob. The usage of “Hebrew,” however, is not parallel to “Israel.” Context demonstrates that “Hebrew” refers only to the warriors of Israel. This employment is reminiscent of the Genesis passage that designates the battle-hardened Abram as a Hebrew.

c. *Observations.* The above examples reveal several important details. During the 600-year period that the OT employed the word “Hebrew,” a change in meaning seems to have taken place. Although “Hebrew” serves “to distinguish [the Israelites] from other ethnic groups, it usually appears in unfavorable contexts”⁸¹ up until the time of the Monarchy. Only after the reign of Saul does one find “the use of the term ‘Hebrew’ without a derogatory tinge.”⁸² Two hundred years after the period began, Jonah referred to himself as a Hebrew, which in this context clearly is an ethnic marker rather than a description of a warrior or a rebel.

VI. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the above evidence, several observations may be made. First, “Hebrew” and *Habiru* certainly are cognates. Both words, second, possess nearly identical shades of meaning. The terms were ethnic designations that over time began to denote immigrants, warriors, and servants. Third, one of the earliest refer-

⁷⁹ Exod 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3.

⁸⁰ The Merneptah Stele supports this observation. In the 13th century BC, Merneptah employed a hieroglyphic determinative that identified the sons of Israel as a people group rather than the unified nation that they would become under the Monarchy in the late 11th century BC.

⁸¹ Na’aman, “Biryawaza of Damascus and the Date of the Kamid el-LozApiru Letters” 279.

⁸² B. S. J. Isserlin, *The Israelites* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 50.

ences to the *Habiru* hails from Mesopotamia,⁸³ the region from which God called Abram the Hebrew. The shared geography cannot be a coincidence.

For these reasons, the populace of the ancient Near East would have regarded Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph as *Habiru*⁸⁴ because of their semi-nomadic sojourner lifestyle.⁸⁵ It does not follow, however, that they would have considered the *Habiru* to be Israelites⁸⁶ as the lineage of Eber establishes. Simply put, in the early OT era, “Hebrew” refers to any descendant of Eber, while “Israelite” pertains only to the branch of Eber’s family that Jacob sired. Only later in OT history did “Hebrew” finally become a racial designation for God’s covenant people.

⁸³ Daniel C. Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100–322 B.C.E.* (New Haven: Yale, 1997) 68.

⁸⁴ Pfeiffer, *Tell El Amarna* 53.

⁸⁵ Michael Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984) 29.

⁸⁶ Tubb, *Canaanites* 81.