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In his book 'When God formed a people'(Koinonia Press, Manchester 1978, page 7), speaking of the Book of Exodus, Michael Maher MSC writes:

'It is obvious that a book which tells of Redemption, Passover, Covenant, Law, Sin and Forgiveness, Divine Grace and Human Response, and of God's Presence among us, must have meaning for the Christian to whom all these themes are familiar.'

Story-telling cultures

Prior to the Greek Period (late 4th century BC) writers in the Ancient Near East, though just as interested in reality, generally expressed their insights, not in 'history', but in epic, saga, song and story. Other writings from the ancient world chose the elevated, poetic and sophisticated style of epic literature, a style typical of an aristocratic and ruling class. Not so, Israel. In the Bible we find a more popular style, open to everyone, the style of story-telling. This style links immediately with experience, and provides a simple and effective way of sharing experience, and so truth (see Jesus' parables!).

Story-telling cultures

This brings us to a key insight that we must have as we approach the story of the Exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land. It is that, for the most part, the Older Testament offers us truth as truth is expressed in story. The stories draw on facts, but only rarely do we find in them what we would regard as 'history'.

Those responsible for the Exodus story (found in the Books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) were interested in history, in the sense that they were interested in real people and their lives, but their aim was to connect their contemporaries with the precious religious insights that had come down to them from their ancestors, and they used folklore and legend when this helped to achieve their aim. Like all the writings of the Ancient Near East, they drew on oral tradition, in which the aim is on-going interest not historical accuracy.

Robert Alter: The Art of Biblical Narrative (page 189):

'The Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning [depicting] of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for a hundred generation of readers.

But that pleasure of imaginative play is deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency.

The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality, because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to, or resists, Him.

Robert Alter: The Art of Biblical Narrative (page 189):

'Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.'

'History' for them was a way of understanding their destiny in the world as a people special to YHWH. To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised them by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will.

The biblical writers are not seeking to give their readers historically accurate information about their past; they are interested in forming the consciousness of the nation by keeping before them the stories that remind them of who they are and what they are called to be. Their explicit focus was not on accurate historical detail but on the way they understood God to have acted in the past and to be acting in their present, and on how they are to respond if they want to receive God's blessing.

Deuteronomy 7:1-2

When YHWH your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you — the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you — and when YHWH your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

Weinfeld

'The Hittites constituted an empire in Anatolia [central Turkey] and Syria in the fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C.E. After the collapse of the Hittite Empire at the end of the thirteenth century, when the 'sea peoples' attacked the Anatolian and Syrian coast, there came down to Palestine hosts of refugees and immigrants consisting of various ethnic groups including Hittites, Jebusites, Hivites and Girgashites, who settled in the densely populated areas in the hill country. They seized power in the few existing cities in the mountains such as Shechem, Gibeon, and Hebron.'

Deuteronomy 7:1-2

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Ezekiel 16:3

- 'Thus says the Lord YHWH to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.'

- The Jebusites controlled Jerusalem till David captured the city and made it the capital of the United Kingdom (see 2Samuel 5:6-10).

To get some idea of the early history of Israel we turn to the discoveries of archaeology. Our earliest glimpse into Canaan comes from the Amarna tablets (14th century BC), which consist in correspondence between Egypt and cities in Canaan, notably Jerusalem, Shechem, Megiddo, Hazor and Lachish. The tablets reveal that the cities were quite weak, and were paying heavy tribute to their Egyptian overlord. They had no city walls and consisted of little more than a palace, a temple compound and a few public buildings. The Egyptian provincial capital was at Gaza and there were Egyptian garrisons in Joppa and Beth-shan.

Exodus

From the Bible itself it is impossible to establish a date for the Exodus. 1Kings 6:1 places it as 480 years prior to the fourth year of Solomon's reign; in other words c. 1436BC. Such a date poses too many problems. When it is recognised that 480 is 12 by 40, we have every reason to suspect that the number is symbolic, not chronological.
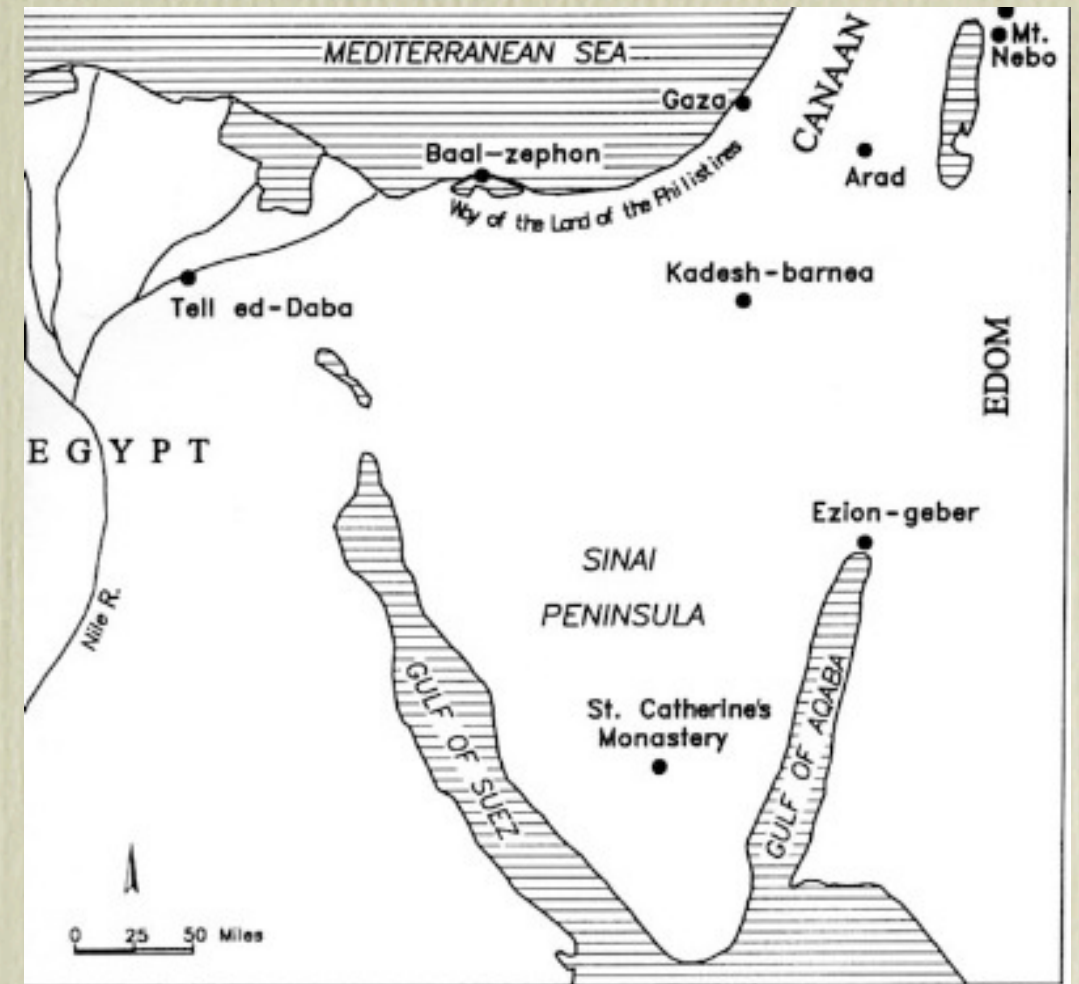
A more likely historical background for the exodus story is the late 13th century BC. Ramesses II (1279-1213) had a massive building programme in the delta of the Nile, partly as a defence against the 'Sea Peoples'. He used slave labour.

It was at the end of his long reign that the small Canaanite states sustained by Egyptian power collapsed, which entailed the 'liberation' of some local populations from the 'slavery' of Egyptian rule.
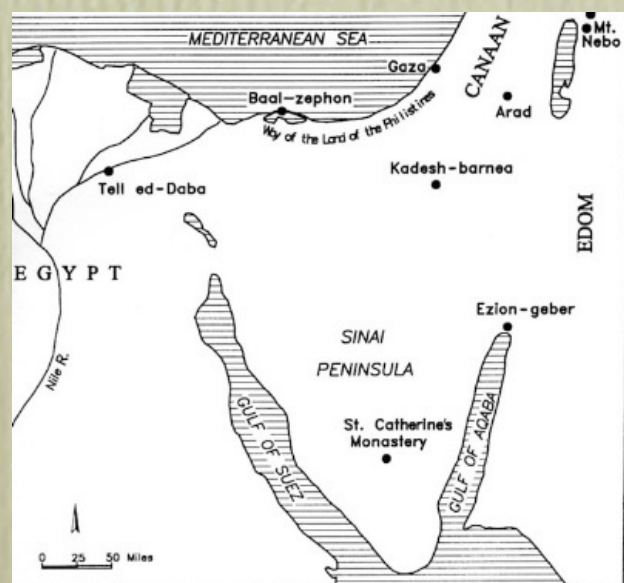
There was an age-old rhythm of migration of people to Egypt from Canaan. Egypt was watered by the Nile, whereas Canaan depended on rainfall for its crops. When the rains failed, they sought help from their neighbour, Egypt. In the thirteenth century there were Canaanites in Egypt for purposes of trade and as prisoners of war (Finkelstein and Silberman ('Unearthing the Bible') page 54).

Furthermore, in an attempt to ward off the incursions of the Sea Peoples, Pharaoh Ramesses II was building fortified cities in the land of Goshen in the eastern delta of the Nile and using the forced labour of refugees, called 'Habiru'(Exodus 11:4; 12:38) because they were stateless and so without any protection against the mercenary armies pillaging their way through the Near East and profiting from the ready market for slaves.
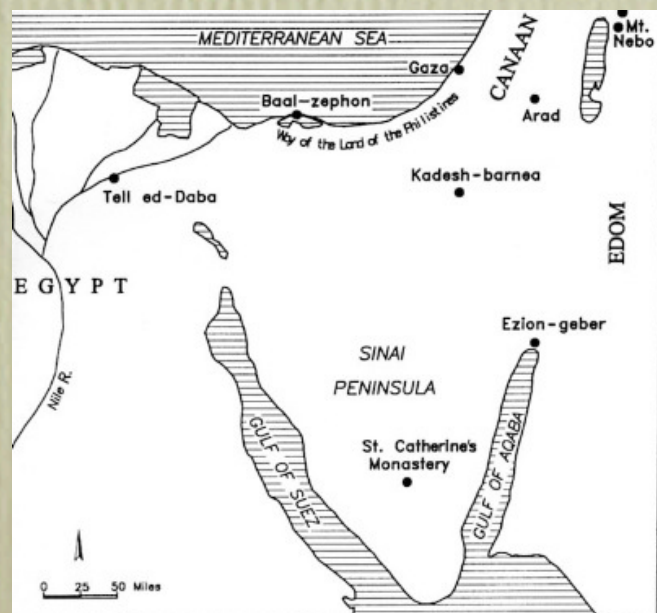
The Book of Exodus states that the Israelites in Egypt were 'more numerous and more powerful' that the Egyptians (Exodus 1:9), How can we accept this as a fact when we can find not one single reference in Egyptian literature to Israelites even existing in Egypt? We do know that there was frequent contact between Canaan and Egypt, and there would have been people from Canaan in Egypt, but they never outnumbered the Egyptians, nor were they ever seen as a threat to the greatest of the pharaohs, Ramesses II.

Pharaoh Ramses II fortified and closely controlled the border with Canaan. As Finkelstein and Silberman say: 'The escape of more than a tiny group from Egyptian control at the time of Ramses II seems highly unlikely, as is the crossing of the desert and the entrance into Canaan ...
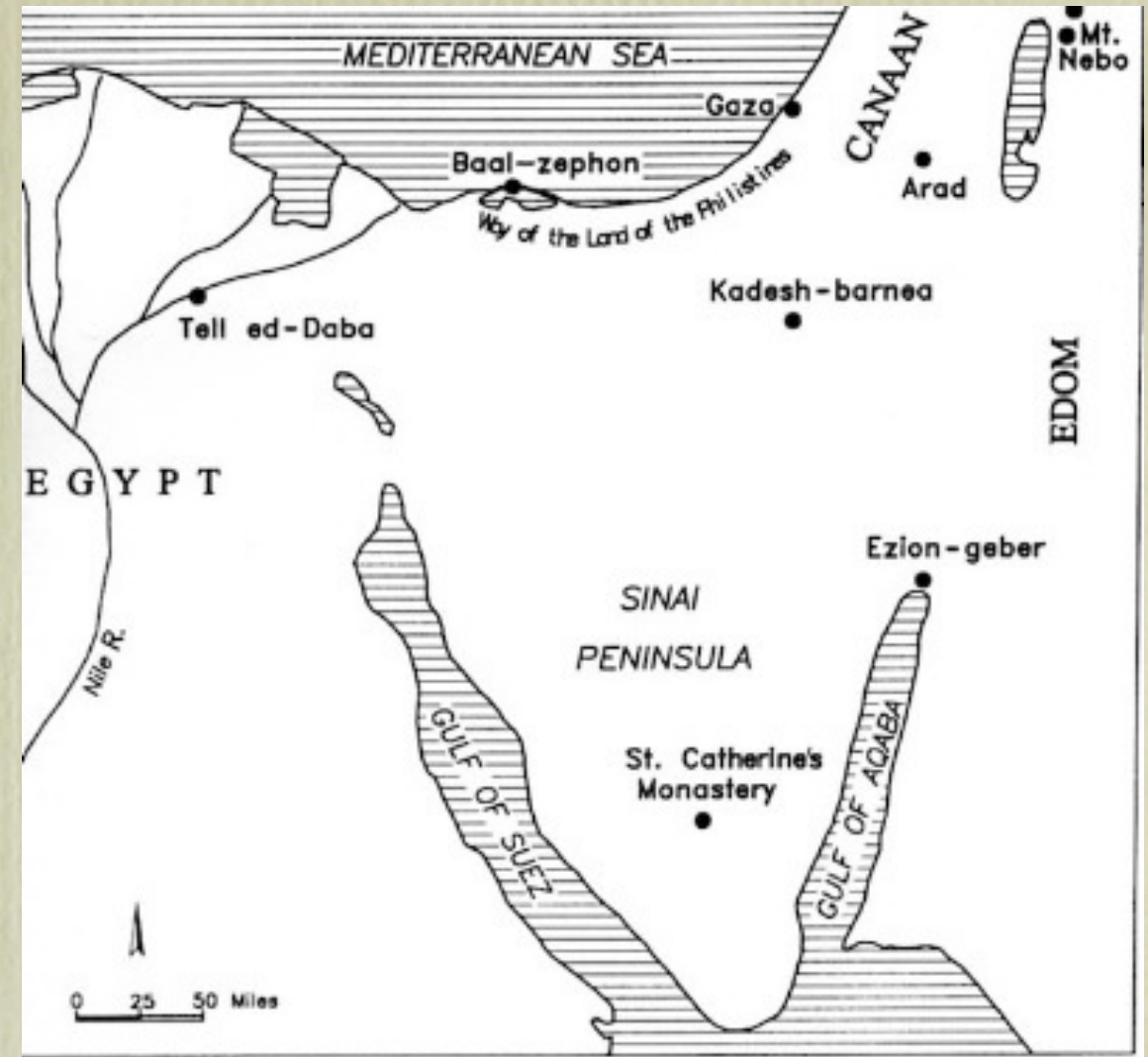
Except for the Egyptian forts along the northern coast, not a single campsite or sign of occupation from the time of Ramses II and his immediate predecessors and successors has ever been identified in Sinai ... not even a single sherd'(page 60, 62-63).

Signs of habitation in the Sinai peninsula from the third millennium have been found, but not from thirteenth century. If the escaping slaves were at Kadesh-barnea, they left no trace. There are no traces at Ezion-geber.
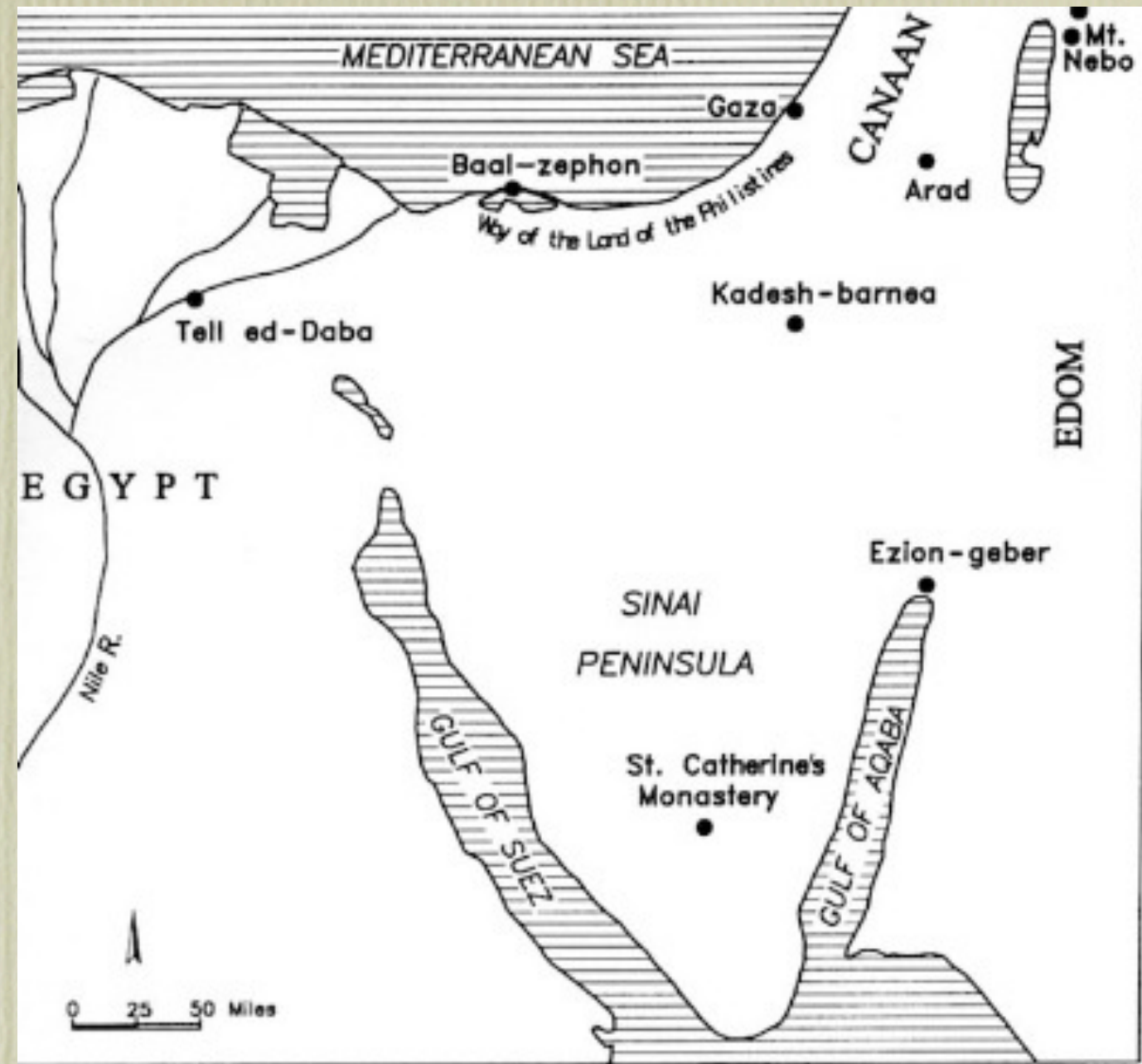
In the thirteenth century BC Arad was deserted. Heshbon, the city of Sihon, did not exist at this time, and Edom and Ammon were sparsely populated by nomadic tribes.

Though we have no evidence of a significant group of slaves escaping from Egypt, there is nothing to contradict that such escapes happened. But 'six hundred thousand men [gbr]'(Exodus 12:37)! Add the women and children, think of the supplies needed, and factor in that archaeology has found not one trace of their presence in the Sinai.
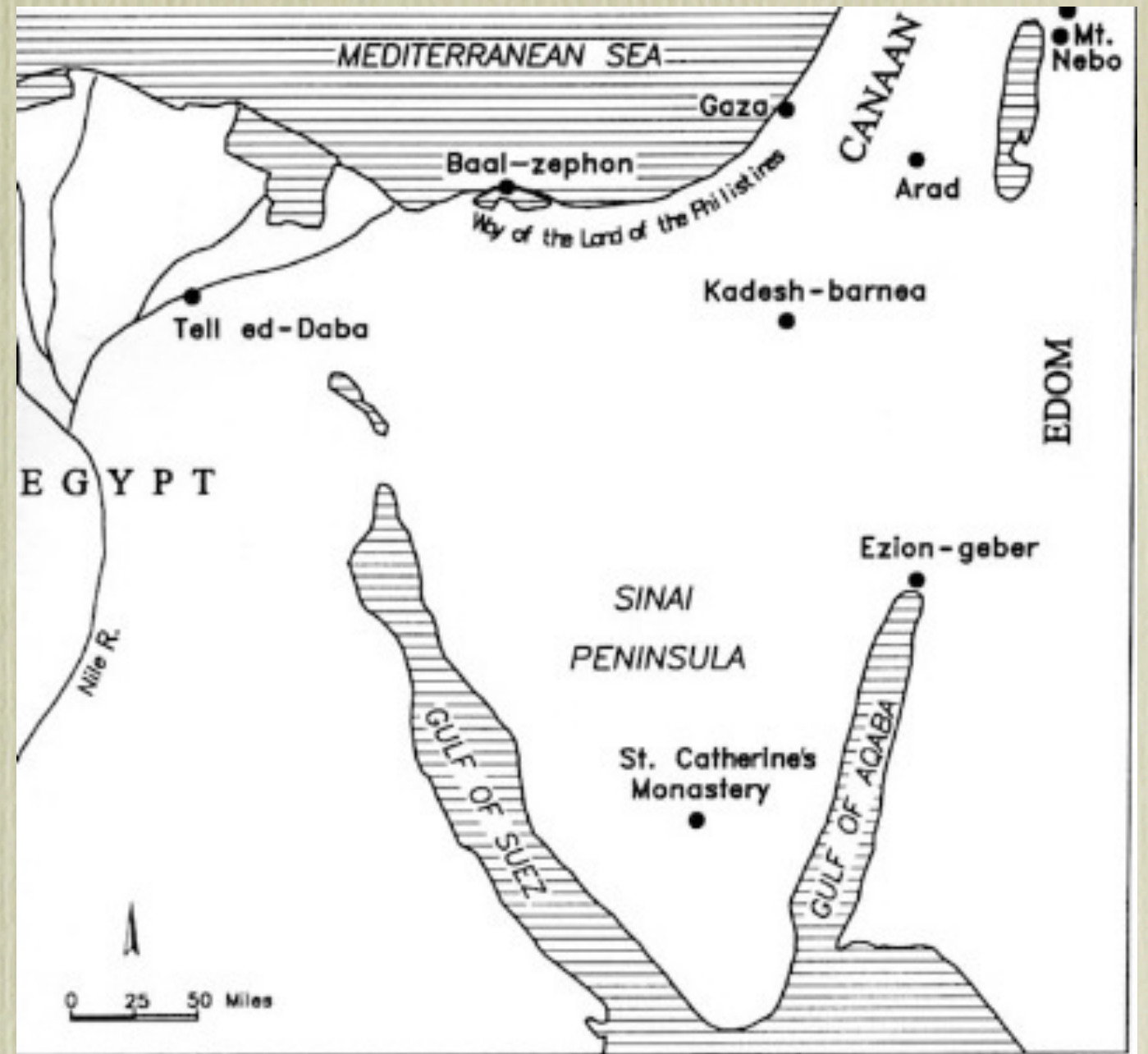
The plagues of Egypt

The imagery for the first nine plagues is drawn from natural phenomena. Isn't this all we need to know? As a story it would have spoken powerfully to people who experienced such 'plagues'. Do we need to read the text as giving us historically reliable facts; namely, that sometime in the late 13th century over a short period God intervened to produce all these plagues through Moses?

We should not miss the point that in the first plague YHWH defeats Hapi, the god of the Nile, and in the 9th plague YHWH defeats Ra, the sun-god!

Exodus describes the crossing of the Red Sea (yam suf). suf can mean 'reed'(see Exodus 2:3,5; Isaiah 19:6). Do we need to try to make the story more plausible as history by translating the text as 'Reed Sea', and imagining that the authors of Exodus are describing a crossing that took place in a marshy area somewhere between the western arm of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, or can we leave 'Red Sea'(as in 1Kings 9:26) and let the drama of the story carry its full weight of amazement as a story?

There are allusions to the creation and flood narratives, which give the 'sea' an almost mythical character. God is once again conquering chaos. Do we have to believe, as an historical fact, that 'the waters formed a wall for the Israelites on their right and on their left'(Exodus 14:22), but that they 'returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained'(Exodus 14:28)'?

The thirteenth century was a tumultuous time throughout the ancient Near East. Empires clashed and collapsed, armies of mercenary soldiers wrought havoc in the area, and with the collapse of the Mycenean Empire the 'Sea Peoples' ravaged the shores of Egypt and Canaan.

In *The Bible Unearthed: archaeology's new vision of ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts* Finkelstein, an Israeli archaeologist, and Silberman, an Israeli historian, write:

'The Ugaritic and Egyptian records of the early twelfth century BCE mention these marauders. A text found in the ruins of the port city of Ugarit provides dramatic testimony for the situation around 1185 BCE. Sent by Ammurapi, the last king of Ugarit, to the king of Alashiya (Cyprus), it frantically describes how "enemy boats have arrived, the enemy has set fire to the cities and wrought havoc. My troops are in Hittite country, my boats in Lycia, and the country has been left to its own devices'. Likewise, a letter from the same period from the great king of Hatti to the prefect of Ugarit expresses his anxiety about the presence of a group of Sea People called Shiqalaya, "who live on boats".

'Ten years later, in 1175 BCE, it was all over in the north. Hatti, Alashiya, and Ugarit lay in ruins. But Egypt was still a formidable power, determined to make a desperate defence. The monumental inscriptions of Ramses II at the temple of Medinet Habu in Upper Egypt recount the Sea Peoples' purported conspiracy to ravage the settled lands of the eastern Mediterranean'(page 87).

A number of cities in Canaan were destroyed in the late thirteenth century including Debir, Bethel, Lachish, and Hazor. This destruction could have been the result of clashes between Israel and these city states. It could also have resulted from the clash between Egypt and the Hittites, or the result of struggles between the city states themselves as trade was disrupted due to the ravages brought about at this time by the 'Sea Peoples', including the Philistines.
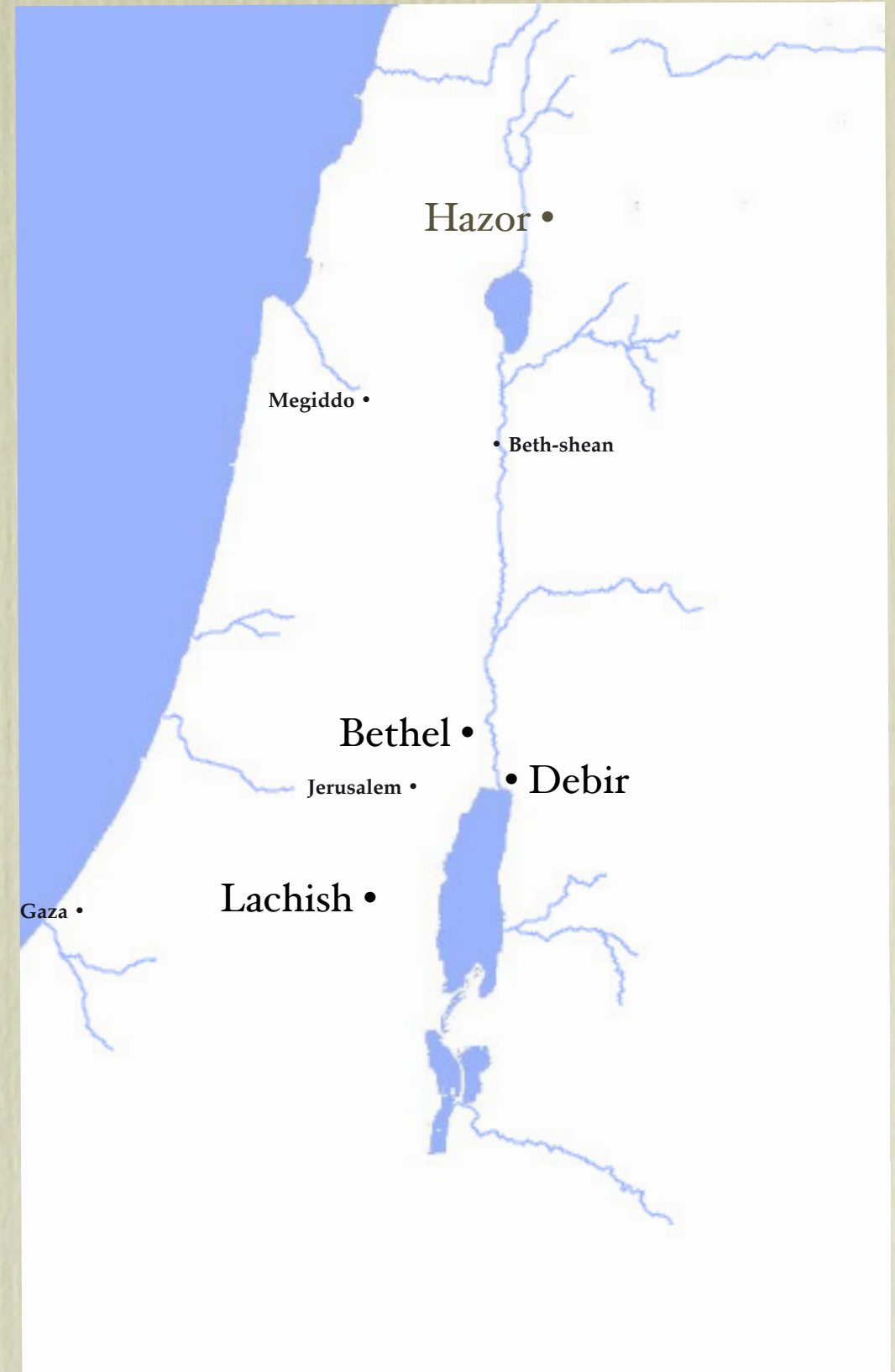
It is likely that the Sea Peoples themselves were the main cause of the destruction of the small city states and so of the need for the herders to escape the disorder of the plains and settle the highlands – the settlers we know as 'Israel'.

TRIBES OF ISRAEL
BEFORE THE MONARCHY
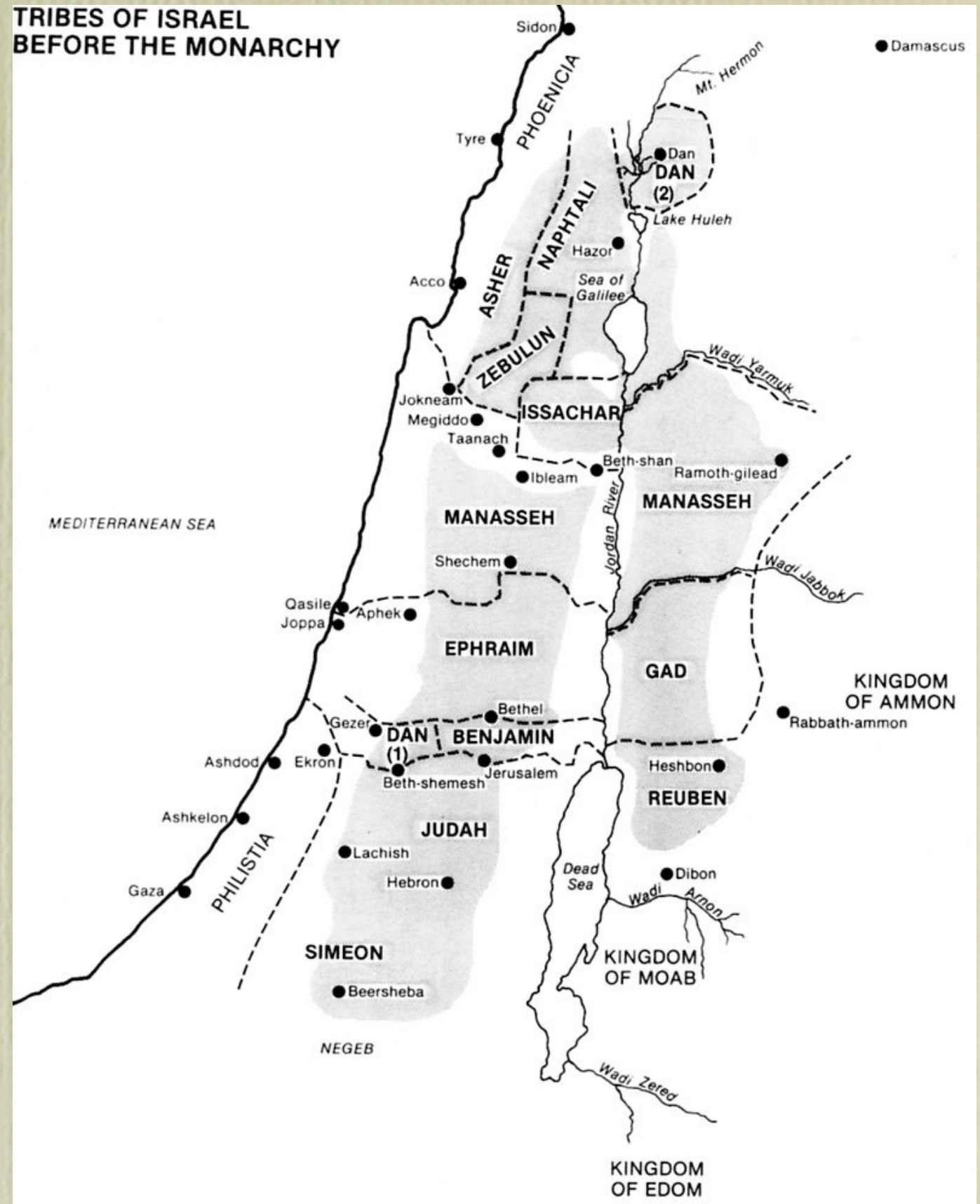
The oldest extant record of the existence of a people called 'Israel' is an Egyptian stone inscription from the time of Merneptah (1207BC), son of pharaoh Ramesses II. Israel Finkelstein, in his *The Archaeology of the Israelite settlement (Israel Exploration Society* 1988) notes evidence of an increase in settlement in the highlands of Canaan in the 13th century BC, and writes: 'The vast majority of the people who settled in the hill country and in the Transjordan during the Iron I period must have been indigenous'(page 348).

TRIBES OF ISRAEL BEFORE THE MONARCHY