

The Warrior God

Prologue

Some thirteen hundred years before Christ, the land of Canaan was in turmoil. Stability and order were everywhere threatened or already crumbling. In the hill country, roving bands of homeless, landless families - gypsies, bandits, nomads, Habiru, call them what you will - were no longer just a nuisance, but a serious threat. They brought trouble and fear wherever they went with their herds and their hungry children, with their flocks and tents and pretended claims to other people's territory. The bolder among them banded together to attack and loot established towns, while unprotected villages were always at their mercy, and if they did settle down at all, the land and the wells they seized were then lost to the Canaanites. They were skilful killers and robbers, cunning and determined rogues, and in the best of times it had taken all the toughness and skill of Canaanite leaders, together with the power of the Egyptian army, to keep them under control. Now, as the country's power structure was cracking and toppling around them, they poured in unchecked.

For generations the little Canaanite city states had been subject, more or less, to the Pharaohs, and if they ever resented the empire of Egypt, at least they could count on Egyptian protection in time of trouble. But now their masters' power was waning, and Egypt was fully stretched attending to its own problems. Rival empires had come and gone, and, to the north, new powers were flexing their muscle. Egypt was weakened from within and no longer able to dictate to foreigners. Between struggles for survival and struggles for power no one was in a position to impose stability on the in-between country of Canaan. As the bandits and nomads showed their strength, the less independent Canaanite chiefs sent desperate messages to Egypt, pleading for help - but to little purpose. It was no longer an easy matter for Egyptian forces to dash up the coast road and assert Pharaoh's authority.

A new wave of Habiru incursions took up where their kinsmen before them had left off and settled down; and the late arrivals looked likely to overrun the whole country. From the south and from the east tribes of them were taking over, devouring the land like locusts out of the desert, or like the east wind that blows hot from the wilderness, withering the grass before it. They looked less and less like wandering, unconnected gypsies - more and more like an organised invading nation.

It was every town for itself. Some Canaanite chiefs, glad to assert their independence of Egypt, became powerful little kings in their own districts. Those who were able to fight off the Habiru earned the loyalty of their people and the respect of their neighbours. They stood secure within their city fortifications and the wanderers learned to leave them alone,

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in control of their traditional land and of the routes guarded by their towns. Others, like the Gibeonites, made their way into alliance with the Habiru, and, to the dismay of neighbouring Canaanites, gave them an undisputed footing in the land, and easy access to their next conquests. Occasionally the Canaanite chiefs rallied themselves sufficiently to form their own alliances, patching up their quarrels to meet the common threat, but without permanent success. The one other alternative of surrender was not feasible, for the invaders were no empire builders bent on enslaving and ruling other nations, but a landless rabble desperate enough to exterminate the existing population for a place to live in.

However, as sometimes happens in history, it was not the great flood of events that decided the future, but a lesser movement working like a ferment within some of the Habiru clans, who spoke of themselves as descendants of Israel. These had their own story to inspire and galvanise them, to give them an identity and an attractive confidence in their future as a people. Unlike the others who were drifting in from the deserts, they had come up from Egypt, where their forefathers had been slaves to the Egyptians ...