

CHAPTER III
THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE ḪABIRU
TO THE HEBREWS

The archaeological investigations in the Near East within the past sixty to seventy years have recovered a wide variety of texts in which there is reference to the *Ḫabiru*, the *SA.GAZ*, and the *ʿApiru*. It has now been well established by the scholars in this field that these terms apply to the same group,¹ and this group was spread throughout the entire Near East during the second millennium B.C. According to the analysis of Greenberg the *SAG.AZ* were found in Ur III (20th century B.C.), Isin (19th century B.C.), Larsa (18th century B.C.), Babylon (17th century B.C.), Alalah (19th century B.C.), and Phoenicia, Boghazköi, and Palestine (14–13th century B.C.). The *Ḫabiru* were found at Alishar (19th century B.C.); Alalah, vicinity of Harran, Mari, and Larsa (18th century B.C.), Boghazköi (17th century B.C.); Nuzi and Alalah (15th century B.C.); and Palestine and Boghazköi (14–13th century B.C.). The *ʿApiru* were found at Joppa and in Egypt (15th century B.C.); in Palestine and Egypt (14–13th century B.C.); and the *ʿprm* were at Ugarit (14th century B.C.).²

The problem at hand is the proposed identification of this *Ḫabiru/SAG.AZ/ʿApiru* group (hereafter referred to as *Ḫabiru*) with the *ʿIbrîm*, the Hebrew of the Bible. Of primary importance is the identification of the *Ḫabiru* of Tell el-Amarna with the tribal participants of the Israelite conquest of Palestine. But since both terms, *Ḫabiru* and *ʿIbrîm*, are used of larger groups over several centuries, it is necessary

to consider the relationship of the *Ḥabiru* to the Hebrew patriarchs.

Whether or not this identification and equation of the *Ḥabiru* to the Hebrews is valid or not is dependent on the following three factors: (1) the philological relationship of the terms *ḥabiru* and *‘ibrî*, (2) the nature of the ethnic-social structure of both groups, and (3) the historical activity of both groups.

The philological relationship of the two terms is dependent upon the etymology of the terms as well as their morphological relationship. That *‘ibrî* is a gentilic form of the root *‘br*, having the basic meaning “to cross, pass, or traverse” is now generally accepted.³ Without the gentilic ending it is found in the name of the eponymous ancestor of the Hebrew people, Eber. Just as *melek* is derived from the earlier form of *milk* (and that from an earlier form of *malk*), so *‘eber* and *‘ibrî* are derived from an earlier form of *‘abir(u)*.⁴ The cuneiform equivalent of *‘ab/piru* would be *ḥabiru*. Thus, the equation of *‘ibrî* to *‘ab/piru* to *ḥabiru* is quite possible.

Speiser indicates that there is good evidence that etymologically the relationship of *‘ibrî* to *ḥabiru* is very close. The root *‘br* is capable of yielding the meaning “passing from place to place,” and in a derived sense “being a nomad.”

Such an interpretation is by no means inconsistent with what we have learned about the *Ḥabiru*. . . . They were nomads in the same sense as the Bedouin . . . ‘Nomad’ is not an ethnic designation, it is an appellative, but so was also *ḥabiru* at the start. As yet there is no way of establishing this etymology beyond possibility of dispute; it appears however to be gaining in likelihood with each new strand of evidence.⁵

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The social status of the *Ḥabiru*, who were scattered throughout the Near East in the second millennium B.C., varied from place to place and from time to time in the same place. These various social positions included being socially independents, military auxiliaries, private dependents, state dependents, slaves, vagrants, or members of a settled population.⁶

The social status of the migrating and nomadic Hebrew patriarchs is well expressed in the term *gerîm*, “being sojourners, living in the land on sufferance, without legal rights.” Thus, only in part is the social status of the Hebrews coincident with the *Ḥabiru*.

Concerning the Amarna period and the conquest in particular, the Hebrews and the Israelites which participated in the conquest were united into tribal units of related kinsmen and moved in large massive tribal groups. Contrary to this it should be noted that there is no indication that the scattered *Ḥabiru* of the Amarna period were ever constituted into such a structured social organization and moved in such large and ordered groups.

Also of importance in the problem of the ethnic nature of these two groups is the question whether the respective terms for these groups are appellatives or ethnicons. There is little, if any, doubt raised that the term *‘ibrî* is an ethnicon in the gentilic, denoting the descendants of Eber the Noachide, and in particular the ancestors of the Israelite nation. As Greenberg indicates, this is well demonstrated by (1) the antithesis of the *‘ibrîm / ‘ibriyyot* and the *mišrîm / mišriyyot* in Gn 43:32, Ex 1:19, and implied in Ex 2:7; (2) the use of *‘ibrî* as a distinguishing term after the honorific *bēnê yisra’ēl* is assumed in Ex. 1:19; and (3) the distinction of the ethnic Israelites from the non-Israelites in the slave laws of Lev. 25:44–46,

Ex. 21:2. Dt. 15:12—the former serve for a limited period and the latter for a lifetime.⁷

However, there has been widespread disagreement as to whether *ʿapiru* / *ḫabiru* is an ethnic form of an appellative. According to Speiser, an ethnic form *ʿibrî* developed from the appellative *ʿabiri* (*ḫabiru*).⁸ This development was as follows: the term *ḫabiru* represent in earlier times socially organized groups of diverse national elements, but the large Semitic element in this group at the Amarna period may have imparted to this group as quasi-ethnic status. Full ethnic content, issuing in the term *ʿibrî*, paralleled the conquest of the *Ḫabiru* over the Ammonites, Moabites, *etc.* On the other hand, Rowley—contrary to the social usage of the term in Nuzi—on the basis of the reference to the gods of the *Ḫabiru* in Hittite texts maintains that the term is essentially ethnic and may have developed into an appellative and non-ethnic term.⁹

Dhorme has also rejected any possibility of *ḫabiru* being an ethnic term. He states, “Les *Ḫabiri* ne seraient donc pas une peuplade, une quantité ethnique ou géographique, mais la désignation d’une collectivité.”¹⁰ Greenberg likewise rejected the ethnic usage of the term, saying, “*ʿapiru* is the appellation of a population element composed of diverse ethnic elements, having in common only a general inferior social status.”¹¹

It should be noted that Greenberg disagrees with the view of Parzen, Meek, and Rowley that there is a corresponding derogatory nuance to the term *ʿibrî* as there is to the term *ḫabiru*.¹²

When Abraham is called an *ʿibrî*, when the land of the patriarchs’ sojourn is called *ʿereṣ haʿibrîm* (Gn. 40:15), when Joseph and his brothers are called *ʿibrîm* (Gn 39:14, 43:32) it is merely because this was the

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only gentilic available to the writer to set off those proto-Israelites from the surrounding Canaanites and Egyptians of his narrative.¹³

The equation of the *Ḫabiru* to the Hebrews with reference to the historical activity of each group addresses itself to the identification of the *Ḫabiru* with the patriarchs and with the tribes of the Palestinian conquest. In reference to the question of the *Ḫabiru* and the patriarchs, Albright stated, "The *Ḫabiru* correspond closely, at all events, to the Hebrews of the patriarchal period in many important respects: in their independence of towns, in their geographical location, in their warlike spirit."¹⁴ Likewise, Speiser stated, "If Abraham had not been called a Hebrew, we should be nevertheless justified in classing him with the *Ḫabiru*."¹⁵

The identification and equation of *Ḫabiru* of the Amarna letters with the Israelite conquest of Palestine has been made by Meek¹⁶ Rowley,¹⁷ Albright,¹⁸ and others¹⁹ on the basis of the following factors: (1) the biblical accounts speak of the infiltration of the migrating patriarchs and their attacking Shechem, which is the only place where the *Ḫabiru* are known to have been active in the center of the land;²⁰ (2) the chronology of Jericho and I Kings 6:1 demand a date of the conquest in the Amarna period; (3) Ju. 1 would suggest a conquest different from the united movement under Joshua in that it was gradual, sporadic, and executed by individual tribes; (4) the unlikeliness of a historical coincidence of two different peoples, having the same form of a name, invading the same area in the same general era; and (5) the strong parallels between the two accounts, including the actions of the native princes in making alliance with the invaders, the intrigue of the petty kings of the city-states, and the evidence

of an incomplete conquest.

Speiser's statement,

Historical conditions render the equation attractive; there are still many knotty problems on the whole subject, but the situation become hopeless if the equation is rejected²¹

is perhaps the most accurate statement of those who maintain the equation of the two groups, in that it recognizes the problems inherent in the identification and makes no final and particular identification.

Opposed to this identification and equation of the *Ḫabiru* to the Israelites of the conquest are Greenberg and Dhorme.²² This rejection is based upon the following evidence: (1) the apparent purpose of the *Ḫabiru* was the ending of the Egyptian authority, as opposed to the Hebrew conquest in which there is evidently an absence of Egyptian authority; (2) the lack of evidence that the *Ḫabiru* of Amarna were an invading element,²³ (3) the *Ḫabiru* adopted the role of military contingents subordinate to the local chieftains; (4) the purpose of the *Ḫabiru* attacks was the acquisition of the spoils of *razzia* as compared to the destruction, depopulation, and acquisition of land of the Hebrews; (5) the *Ḫabiru* of Amarna gave the appearance of being small bands of fugitives and renegades which thrived on the anarchy that existed in that era and not the appearance of united and organized tribes of kinsmen which was characteristic of the Israelites; and (6) the ease with which one could become a *Ḫabiru*—which would indicate a social and political status—had no parallel among the Israelites.²⁴

In summary, it may be stated that the equation of the *Ḫabiru* to the Hebrews and the identification of the Amarna

groups to the Israelite tribes of conquest is philologically possible from both the standpoint of morphology and etymology, but it is neither certain nor required. In reference to the social-ethnic aspect, it appears certain that *Ḫabiru* was an appellative (which may easily have developed into an ethnonym) even though the geographical determinative is found in reference to the gods of the *Ḫabiru* (for these latter references may well indicate a familial relationship). Nor did the social status of the *Ḫabiru* correspond directly to the Hebrew *gerîm* or the Israelite tribal units. In reference to the historical aspect, there seems to be adequate grounds for accepting the possibility of a relationship or equation between the patriarchal *‘ibrîm* and the *Ḫabiru*. However, the identification of the *Ḫabiru* of the Amarna period with the Israelite tribes of the conquest, or even with the patriarchal period, seems most unlikely. The evidence against this equation, based on concrete and specific differences of the two groups, seems definitely to outweigh the evidence for the identification, based as it is upon indefinite references in the Bible and possible similarities between the two groups.

CHAPTER III NOTES

1. See Greenberg, *The Ḫab/piru*, pp. 210–211 and 224–228. Here he states that the primary support for the identification of the *SA.GAZ* with the *Ḫabiru* (*Ḫab/piru*) is from the texts themselves. The Hittite god-lists coming from the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries alternate freely the terms *DINGER.MES lu SA.GAZ* and *DINGER.MES ḫa-BI-ri*. There is also evidence from Ugarit in the parallel usages of *SA.GAZ* and *‘prm*, and from Larsa in which there is reference to the state-

supported *SA.GAZ* of Warad-Sin, the state supported *Ḫabiru* of Rim-sin, and the *SA.GAZ* under Hammurabi's *aklum*—all of which can hardly be disassociated from each other. The validity of this identification is evident also from the social status of the *SA.GAZ* and the *Ḫabiru* as they are found in Larsa, El-Amarna Syria-Palestine, and Alalah; namely, an element of the settled population as over against the nomadic population, and an ethnic composite as over against an ethnic unit.

As for the identification of the *Ḫabiru* and the *ʿApiru* Greenberg makes the following statements: “The derivation of *Ḫab/piru* is still obscure. In form it appears to be a *qatil* verbal adjective. The first consonant is established as *ʿ* [*ʿayin*] by Ugaritic and Egyptian *ʿpr.w*. Its appearance in Akkadian as *ḫ* points to a West Semitic derivation since an original *ʿ* would have become *ʾ* [*ʾaleph*] in Akkadian. The quality of the labial is still a matter of dispute. On the one hand is the unequivocal Ugaritic and Egyptian evidence for *p*. . . . On the other hand, *b* offers the advantage of an immediately transparent etymology from West Semitic *ʿbr* and facilitates the combination with Biblical *ʿibrî* Some evidence is available to show that Egyptian *p* occasionally represented a foreign *b* and Ugaritic as well can be made to yield an original *b* losing its voice” (pp. 224–226).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

3. Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 41. See also Meek, *op. cit.*, p. 7, and Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

4. Speiser, *ibid.*, and Greenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

5. Speiser, *Ibid.*

6. Greenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 230–234.

8. Speiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42. This is also the position of Meek (*op. cit.*, p. 13) who stated, “That the word ‘*apiru*, *ḫabiru*, was not an ethnic term originally, but an appellative, is confirmed by an examination of all the *ḫabiru* names that we have. . . . But though the term had no ethnic content originally, tendencies early developed in that direction, as was natural under the circumstances.”

9. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 52–53. See also Albright, *JBL* 18 (1934) p. 391 and Jack *PEQ* (1940), p. 95, where the ethnic usage of the term is maintained.

10. Dhorme, *op. cit.*, p. 166. He also made the statement “que le terme Ḫabiru est un mot du vocabulaire cananeen qui represente essentiellement les ennemis de la domination egyptienne en Canaan” (p. 163).

11. Greenberg, *op.cit.*, p. 230.

12. See Greenberg, *ibid.*; Parzen, *AJSL* 49 (1933) pp. 254–258; Meek, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11; and Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

13. Greenberg, *ibid.*, p. 30.

14. Albright, *Archaeology and the Bible*, p. 132.

15. Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

16. Meek, *op. cit.*, p. 21. He states: "This contemporaneous account of the settlement of the Ḫabiru in Palestine so exactly parallels the Old Testament account of the Israelite conquest of Jericho and the invasion of the highlands of Ephraim under Joshua that the two manifestly must reference the same episode."

17. Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 164. Rowley, whose entire reconstruction of the period relies on this identification, states, "Pressure northwards from Kadesh of Hebrew groups, together with Kenite and other elements equals the Ḫabiru of the Amarna letters. Simultaneous pressure from the north of kindred groups including Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and other Israelite tribes, together with other groups, equals the SA.GAZ of the Amarna letters."

18. Albright *BASOR* 58, p. 15. He identifies at least a part of the Israelites with the Ḫabiru in his statement, "That the tribe of Joseph belonged to the group designated as Khabiru in the Amarna Tablets and as Shasu in the inscriptions of Sethos I is more and more probable."

19. See Lewy, *HUCA* 14 (1939), pp. 609 and 620; and Jack, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

20. See especially Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 111–113, who states, "I connect the Amarna age rather with the age of Jacob."

21. Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

22. Dhorme (*JPOS* 4, p. 126) rejects this identification completely, stating, "Le mouvement des Ḫabiri est l'insurrection

de l'indigene contre de l'etranger. L'invasion d'Israel est l'installation de l'etranger chez l'indigene. . . . l'identification des Hebreux et des Ḥabiri ne nous semble acceptable.” Likewise Greenberg in his statement (*op. cit.*, p. 243), “The proposed ^c*Apiru* - Hebrew equation faces thus at present a series of objections. None of these is indeed decisive, but their accumulative effect must be conceded to diminish its probability. . . . Further historical combinations between the two groups appear to be highly doubtful; they may serve now as they served in the past, only to obscure the distinctive features of each.” See also Garstang, *Joshua–Judges*, p. 255.

23. Greenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–187, 238–239.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 186. “It seems that to ‘become a Ḥabiru’ did not involve any particular ethnic affiliation, but rather the assumption of a special status. ”