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## **Where did the Ancient Semites come from?**

### Abstract

The original homeland of all ancient Semitic peoples, including Hebrews, was not northern Arabia, as is currently believed, but northwestern Mesopotamia. Around 6,000-4,000 years B.C., an ecological catastrophe in the Black Sea area forced the Indo-European tribes to migrate outward in all directions. On their way to the south and the south-east, the Indo-Arians displaced and partially mingled with the Hurrians of Eastern Anatolia. In turn, arianized Hurrians first displaced the Eastern Semites (Akkadians) from the upper courses of Tigris, and then, at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C., occupied the land of Western Semites (Amorites) in the upper courses of Euphrates. The referencing by the Bible of Harran as the original birthplace of Abraham is the indirect evidence of these ethnic changes. The last wave of Western Semites (Arameans) in 12-11 centuries B.C. was also caused by the movements of Hurrians and Indo-Europeans in northwestern Mesopotamia.

The ancient Near East represented a world dominated by Semitic peoples. Akkad and Assyria, Babylonia and Phoenicia, Israel and the Syrian kingdoms were all the offspring of the Semites' activities. Although Sumer, the first country in the world, was not of Semitic origin, its inhabitants had already been, since ancient times, fully assimilated with the Semites and had become an integral part of their world. Egypt, on the other hand, had long resisted the supremacy of the Semitic peoples; however it also finally adopted their language and culture. The Indo-Europeans appeared later on the scene. More importantly, their first countries, including the Hittite Empire, remained on the periphery within the northern and eastern boundaries of the Near East. This same concept applied to the Hurrians, an ancient, non-Semitic people whose ethnic origin is still unclear at present.

Today, most believe that the original homeland of the ancient Semites should indeed be sought in the Near East. But where should we look? In the twentieth century, the opinion was established that the most probable region of the Semites' origin was in northern Arabia. Its geographical position, in the center of the modern Semitic world, allows for an easy explanation of these peoples' dispersion in the Near East. This version is also ideal for understanding the diffusion of the Semitic languages group. In favor of

this option, people speak of the significant water reserves in the northern Arabian aquifer, without which the wells for the nomadic and pastoral tribes would not have been possible. This proves that in ancient times the climate of this region, and indeed of the whole of the Near East, was significantly more humid. Archeological excavations have shown that that approximately 8-9 thousand years ago, so much rain fell that today's deserts in the Negev and in northern Sinai had rich vegetation and that settlements of people existed there.<sup>1</sup>

Only with time, in relation to the climate which became drier, did northern Arabia transform into a desert; this was the main reason for the exodus of the Semitic tribes from their original homeland. This seemingly convenient and convincing version has one very serious fault. Northern Arabia had already become a desert a minimum of 7,000 years ago, i.e. long before the massive migrations of the Semites had begun. Archaeological data confirms that by the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, the climate in the Near East had become increasingly dry and thus people gradually left their settlements in northern Sinai and in the Negev.<sup>2</sup> The life of the Bedouins in today's Arabia would not have been possible without the camel and this animal was domesticated only in the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC. To summarize, the climatic conditions in northern Arabia did not correspond to the living needs of a large group of tribes.

In addition, there exists other circumstantial evidence against searching for the fatherland of the Semites in northern Arabia. All the ancient Egyptian frescos depict the Semites as people with relatively light skin, as compared to the Egyptians themselves. Consequently, they came from regions located primarily to the north where the sun's radiation was less of an issue than in Egypt or in northern Arabia.

People have also searched for the fatherland of the ancient Semites in Palestine, Syria and in central Mesopotamia, but the absence of continuity in the shifting cultural strata renders these assumptions doubtful. There also exists a more eccentric version, locating the Semites' original homeland in the territory of today's Sahara. The primary supporters of this have been linguists who have thus been able to explain the relationship of the Semitic languages with Berber, Cushitic, Chadic, and the ancient Egyptian

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<sup>1</sup> Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 38

<sup>2</sup> A. Mazar, *Archaeology*, 48-49.

languages. Indeed, the Sahara has not always been a fruitless desert, but the problem lies in the fact that it had already become a desert earlier than the whole of northern Arabia had. Thus, it is clear that the Semites' migrations took place in a period which hardly differed from today's climate in the Near East. Moreover, the most important of these migrations, e.g. those of the Amorites and the Aramaeans, had already happened in the historical period when literacy existed. Although the evidence showing where the Semites came from is not yet clear, we can still use written and archeological sources to definitively confirm that the Semites came to central Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine not from the south (Arabia), but from the north (northwestern Mesopotamia) and from the upper courses of the two large-scale rivers in Western Asia, the Tigris and the Euphrates.

The Bible concretely designates the fatherland of the Jewish patriarchs, specifying the region surrounding the city of Haran which was situated approximately 30 km to the southwest of today's Turkish city Sanliurfa (ancient Edessa), not far from the border with Syria. The biblical texts unambiguously show that the city of Ur in Sumer, from which Abraham came into Canaan (Palestine), was never his place of birth. Moreover, on the way to Canaan, the family of Abraham and his father Terah, stopped for a long time in the place of their birth, Haran.<sup>3</sup> This is where Terah died and the clan leadership was transferred to his son – Abraham. Later, the Bible again recalls that the native land of the ancient Jewish forefathers was not Canaan, but Haran, in northwestern Mesopotamia. The book of Genesis also gives two names for this region: Aram-Naharaim and Padan-Aram.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, they secured the region of Haran after the arrival of the Aramaeans. It was precisely here that Abraham sent his trusted servant to find a wife for his son Isaac, since he did not want him to form relations with the foreigners in Canaan.<sup>5</sup> Wishing to save her beloved son from the revenge of his brother, Esau, Jacob's mother Rebecca sent her son to their relatives in their homeland.<sup>6</sup> Similar to Abraham, Isaac likewise did not wish to enter into family relations with the foreigners of Canaan.<sup>7</sup> The Bible does not

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<sup>3</sup> Gen. 11:31-32.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 24:10; 25:20.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 24:2-4,10.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 27:42-43.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 28:1-2.

hide the disappointment and pain felt by Esau's parents because of his marriage to a local woman.<sup>8</sup>

The prolonged archeological excavations in Palestine have unearthed sufficient proof that the Western Semitic people, the Canaanites, also came from the north in the 4-3 millennia BC. In addition, the Canaanites' predecessors – the bearers of the so-called Ghassulian culture, which appeared in Palestine approximately 4,000 years BC, were most likely also Western Semites who had come to Canaan from the north as well.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, large groups of Western Semitic peoples, specifically the Amorites, began settling in mass in Mesopotamia, Syria and Canaan and took control over the majority of the cities, forming their own Amorite countries. One of these, for example, was Babylon – during the reign of the infamous ruler Hammurapi in the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC. This written and material evidence gathered in the last decades speaks in favor of the fact that the Amorites did not come from northern Arabia or the Syrian Desert region, as had previously been thought, but instead from the north, from northwestern Mesopotamia.

The second mass wave of Western Semites, known as the Aramaeans, came to Syria, central and southern Mesopotamia much later in the 12-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Judging from the directions of their migrations, their place of exodus was again northwestern Mesopotamia.

It is well known that the first Semitic country, Akkad, was built in central Mesopotamia not by Western, but by Eastern Semites. Subsequently, they also subordinated their southern neighbor Sumer. The history of the relations between these two countries testifies that the Akkadians did not come from the south, but from the north, as did all Western Semites.<sup>10</sup>

What did northwestern Mesopotamia actually represent – the fatherland of the Semites? This significant area, in terms of territory, is portioned off from the remaining portion of Anatolia by the imposing mountain range Taurus from the north to the east and from the west by the mountain chain Nur. This three-sided natural shelter had a

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<sup>8</sup> Gen. 26:34-35.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (1985).

<sup>10</sup> Seton Lloyd, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia: from the Old Stone to the Persian Conquest* (1984); Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (1990); I.M. Diakonov (ed), *Ancient Mesopotamia: Socio-Economic History* (1981).

significant effect on the lives of the people during this troubled period. Even today, the mountains surrounding northwestern Mesopotamia in a semicircle protect it from the cold north winds, making the local climate substantially milder and warmer in comparison to the interior regions of Anatolia. This region is only uncovered on the southern side, the side of the Syrian lowlands. The upper courses of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as well as their tributaries supply this region with water in abundance. The sufficient precipitation, in combination with the relatively flat landscape and fertile soil, allows for agriculture and cattle raising, even at a significant distance from the rivers. This land ideally suited the lives of the ancient people from all points of view. It is not by accident that today, cotton, a warm-loving crop requiring much water and good ground, is tilled in this area. Nowadays, the fatherland of ancient Semites, is located almost entirely in modern-day Turkey. The Turkish cities of Gaziantep and Kilis are located in its western part, Sanliurfa and Mardin in the south and Batman, Diyarbakir and Adiyaman in the north. As fate would have it, the Semites' native land has turned out to be located at the very northern border of the Semitic world. It was precisely from this area that they had begun to descend south, along the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, continuing along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. But what forced them to abandon their blessed land? After all, the new lands with their hotter, more difficult climate, pressured by the enormous Syrian Desert, had chronically suffered from a lack of rain. Most likely, two factors had primarily contributed to this: the natural growth and advance of the Indo-Europeans and the Hurrians from the north. Thus, this brings us to another problem linked with the fatherland of the Indo-European peoples.

The search for the Indo-European cradle of civilization is a more complex affair than the Semites' native land. Various researchers have located it in different places entirely distant from one another: some on the territory of today's Poland, some in the Balkans, others in Iran or Central Asia. Such varying opinions are not by chance. Not less than one and a half to two thousand years ago, the bearers of the Indo-European languages scattered into the large territory of Europe and Asia – from Spain in the west, to the borders of Tibet in the east and from the Arctic Ocean in the north, to the Indian Ocean in the south. But where did this movement of these people's ancestors begin and what forced them to abandon their original land? The Roman and the ancient Greek

authors left us a good deal of information about the movements of the Germanic and Slavic peoples, the Scythians and Sarmatians, while the ancient Egyptian sources contain information about the Hittites and the Sea Peoples.<sup>11</sup> The Babylonians and Assyrians were in contact with the Medes, Iranians, Cimmerians and the peoples of Urartu.

Indeed, the very history of the ancient Greeks and Romans appears only as a part of the entire, Indo-European history. From the wealth of this isolated and fragmentary information provided by different authors during different periods, it follows that the place of exodus of all the Indo-Europeans' movements was their original homeland, located somewhere in the region near the Black Sea, specifically on its northern and western shores. Most probably, the principal region where the Indo-Europeans lived in prehistoric times was the exact area which is occupied today by the waters of the Black Sea. Approximately, 8,000 years ago, our modern Black and Azov Seas did not exist at all. Their territory was occupied by a large cavity lying substantially lower than the level of the world's ocean. At the time, there was a large fresh-water lake in the area, however because of its size, it completely yielded to today's Black Sea.<sup>12</sup> Great rivers flowed into this lake, including the Danube, Dniester, Bug, Dnieper, Don, Kuban and Kizil-irmak. The plentiful fresh water, mild climate and conveniently flat lands were obviously a favorable area for people, similar to the Semites' original homeland in northwestern Mesopotamia. However, as a result of the seismic processes between the 6-4<sup>th</sup> millennia BC, a decline in the level of the land ensued in the area covering the modern-day Bosphorus and the water from the Mediterranean Sea began to flood into the Black Sea cavity.<sup>13</sup> A geological cataclysm had resulted in an ecological catastrophe: the former fresh-water lake had turned into a salty sea and gradually flooded the regions where many Indo-Europeans lived. It took decades, perhaps even hundreds of years to fill up the Black Sea, therefore it could not bring the people to ruin, but it did force their migrations in all directions. The newly-formed sea literally squeezed the Indo-Europeans from their former territory, all the more so since it affected the tribes occupying the region to the

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<sup>11</sup> Julius Caesar, *War in Gaul*, 4.16-18; Tacitus, *Germania*, Part II; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (4.100); Pomponius Mela, *Description of the World* (III.3.31)

<sup>12</sup> A.I. Riabinin and V.N. Kravets, *Sovremennoe sostoianie serovodorodnoy zony Chernogo moria: 1960-1986 gody* (1989).

<sup>13</sup> D. Tolmazin, "Changing Coastal Oceanography of the Black Sea," *Progress in Oceanography*, 15(4):217-316 (1985).

north and the west of the Black Sea. Here, in fact, the water had covered the most territory. Based on the information we have available about the history of the Indo-Europeans' movements, the Celts and the Germans occupied the northwestern borders of the Black Sea, the Balts and Slavs took the northern borders, the ancestors of the Cimmerians, Sarmatians and Scythians occupied the northeast, and in the southeast the Indo-Iranian tribes lived. Most likely, the ancestors of the Italics and the Greeks lived in the northern portion of the Balkan Peninsula to the southwest of the Celts and the Germans. The Hittites, Luwians, Palaics and all those whom we classify with the Anatolian group of Indo-European languages, occupied the southernmost regions of the Black Sea cavity and were forced out by the advancing sea towards the north of Asia Minor and towards Anatolia. Subsequently, the Celts and after them, the Germans, gradually occupied the northwest of Europe, while the Slavs and Balts spread into northern and eastern Europe, already occupied by the Finno-Ugric peoples. The Indo-Iranian languages speakers invaded the territory of Iran, Central Asia and northern India. This model of the Indo-Europeans' expansion to all directions from the Black Sea finds circumstantial evidence in the ancient historians' sources, covering the life of the Germanic tribes of Ostrogoths in the Crimea during the first centuries AD.<sup>14</sup> These sources also deal with the eastern Slavic people, the Drevlians, as a neighbor of the "lost" German tribe in the territory of today's Ukraine, as well as with the sojourn of the Baltic Lats in the Upper Volga region.

The movement of the Indo-Europeans to the south and east resulted in the displacement of the Semites from their original homeland in the northwest of Mesopotamia. But the Semites were not the only ones whom the Indo-Europeans forced to abandon their native regions. An analogous situation happened to the Hurrians in eastern Anatolia. Highly oppressed by the Indo-Europeans in that region, they were also forced to go to the south and settle in northern Syria and Mesopotamia. Hurrian names appeared quite early in northern Mesopotamia, already at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. This ethnic group created several of their own states, the strongest of which were the

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<sup>14</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* (3.12); R. Chevalier: The Greco-Roman Conception of the North: from Pytheas to Tacitus. *Arctic* 37:4 (December 1984), 341-346; James J. O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

Mitanni.<sup>15</sup> To date, the language and ethnic origins of the Hurrians remain a mystery. Many historians consider the Hurrians to be of Indo-European origin, just like the Hittites, however a linguistic analysis of their language has not been able to confirm this. Most likely, the Hurrians were one of the autochthonous peoples from southern Trans-Caucasia and eastern Anatolia, related to the ethnic groups which later constituted the country of Urartu. It may also be the case that they, as other peoples native to the Trans-Caucasia, had already assimilated the culture and language of the advancing Indo-Iranians. Their most probable heirs in the modern world are only the Armenians.

The interior regions of Anatolia were populated by another autochthonous people, the Hatti, who had given their name to the arriving Indo-Europeans, the Hittites. Unfortunately, we know very little about them and we can suppose that they completely merged with the newcomers from the north. Most likely, there existed quite a few natives in the territory of Asia Minor, Anatolia, Trans-Caucasia and Iran. Just like the Hatti and the Hurrians, these peoples were not related to the Semites nor to the Indo-Europeans. Instead, the stronger and more numerous Indo-Europeans either subdued and assimilated them or they forced them into other regions. This may have been the same for the Sumerians, as the arrival of the Indo-Iranians pushed them out of their fatherland in the area of ancient Elam and thus forced them to go into southern Mesopotamia. There is no trace of these peoples today. They were already fully assimilated in ancient times by either the Indo-Europeans or the Semites. Therefore, today we cannot decipher their languages by trying to identify them only on the basis of our known language groups.

Even while still in their original homeland, the ancient Semites, similar to the Indo-Europeans, were far from homogenous. Judging from the date and direction of their migrations, we can suppose that already in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, there was a distinct division between the Western Semites (Amorites and Aramaeans) and the Eastern Semites (Akkadians and Assyrians). The former concentrated in the upper Euphrates and the area near its tributaries, while the latter occupied the upper course of the Tigris River valley. This geographical division even existed among the Western Semites themselves. The southwest belonged to the Amorites, while the north to the Aramaeans. The well-known Canaanites represented a part of these Amorites who, earlier than the other

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<sup>15</sup> Gernot Wilhelm, *The Hurrians* (1989).

Western Semites, had gone to Syria, Phoenicia and Canaan. All the cultural and language differences among them are the result of living separately for almost a thousand years. It is possible that the even earlier arrival of people from the Ghassulian culture into Canaan represented, from an ethnic point of view, the first Canaanites – specifically, their vanguard. Most likely, the reasons for the forcing out of the Western Semites from their original homeland were different at different times. The gradual exodus of the Ghassulians and the Canaanites was most probably caused by the growth in the number of inhabitants and internal clashes in their fatherland of northwestern Mesopotamia. However, the mass migrations of the Amorites, and later of the Aramaeans, to the south are connected with the pressure of Indo-Europeans from the north. Over time, the beginning of the Amorites' exodus coincided with the arrival the Hittites into Anatolia and other peoples related to them, while the Aramaean migration wave chronologically coincides with the invasion of the Sea Peoples.

Thus, the exodus of the Semites from their original homeland in the upper courses of the Tigris and Euphrates was initiated by the movement of the Indo-Europeans and the Indo-Arians who, in turn, were gradually squeezed out by the ecological catastrophe from their own native land in area of the Black Sea. The migrations eventually also involved the Hurrians – the indigenous population of Trans-Caucasia and northeastern Anatolia. By leaving the region of the Black Sea, the Indo-Arians displaced the Hurrians to the south (in the north of Mesopotamia) where they clashed with the Semites living there. The invasion of the Hurrians into the Tigris and Euphrates upper courses resulted in a mass exodus to the south; at first the Eastern Semites (the Akkadians) left, later followed by the Western Semites (the Amorites). The area left by the Amorites was occupied by the Hurrians and the Aramaeans, who were related to the Amorites. Thus, the Aramaeans appeared in the Haran region. Biblical texts mistakenly figure the patriarch Abraham and his relatives among them. On their way to the southeast, several Indo-Arian tribes did not simply displace the Hurrians, but partially mingled with them. As a result, Indo-Arian groups such as the Maryannu became part of the Hurrian community.

The second mass migration of the Western Semites from their original homeland began in approximately the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC and also happened as a result of the Indo-Europeans' migrations. This time, the Aramaeans backed out, practically retracing the

path of their predecessors, the Amorites. One of these peoples, the Chaldeans descended down the river valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates into southern Mesopotamia. Others went to the southwest, into Syria, where they founded their own kingdoms. However, within the Semites' native land there remained a significant Aramaean population for a long time, even though they were crowded out by the Luwians (a group related to the Hittites) and the Iranians, advancing from the east. Despite the successive waves of Hellenization and then Christianization, the local population as a whole preserved their Semitic roots. The ethnic situation substantially changed only after the arrival of the Turkic tribes at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> century. Over the course of several centuries, the population became completely Turkish and Islamic. Today, the entire territory of this vast region is primarily occupied by Turks and Kurds, thus no one recalls the fatherland of the ancient Semites any longer.

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