The Hittites:
Between Tradition and History

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY REVIEW



The Hittites are mentioned 54 times in the Bible.[1] Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah were all buried in the Cave of Machpelah, which Abraham had purchased from Ephron the Hittite (*Genesis 49:29–32*).

Isaac's son Esau married Hittite women (*Genesis 26:34*; *36:2*). Isaac's wife, Rebecca, feared that Esau's twin, Jacob, might also marry a Hittite woman. She tells her husband, "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from those who live here, what good will life be to me?" (*Genesis 27:46*).[2]

The impression is that many Hittites are living in the land of Canaan during the time of the Founding Families (e.g., *Genesis 15:20*; *23*; *25:9–10*; *50:13*). And this impression is reinforced by Biblical references to Hittites during the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (e.g., *1 Kings 9:20*; *10:29*; *11:1*; *2 Kings 7:6*; *2 Chronicles 1:17*; *8:7*).

Beautiful Bathsheba, whom King David desired when he spied her bathing, was married to a Hittite named Uriah who served in David's army. David had him killed in battle so he could have Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11–12*; *23:39*; *1 Kings 15:5*; *1 Chronicles 11:41*).[3] There seems to be nothing special about a Hittite serving in David's army.

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[1] We have extensively consulted Ilan Peled of the University of Chicago in connection with this article. Many—but not all—of the ideas in it are his and so is much of the verbiage. We are grateful to Dr. Peled for his assistance. But he is not responsible for the final text. This version includes research by BAS Senior Editor Ellen White.

[2] Compare *Exodus 3:8*, *17*; *13:5*; *23:23*, *28*; *33:2*; *Numbers 13:29*; *Deuteronomy 7:1*; *20:17*; *Joshua 1:4*; *3:10*; *9:1*; *11:3*; *12:8*; *24:11*; *Judges 1:26*; *3:5*. Hittites are also known from *Ezekiel 16:3*, *45*; *Ezra 9:1*; *Nehemiah 9:8*.

[3] Compare Solomon, who had a Hittite wife (*1 Kings 11*).

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It is difficult to reconcile the Biblical picture with the archaeological picture, however, despite the fact that archaeology has much to tell us about the Hittites. Actually, there are two principal periods in which the Hittites figure prominently in the archaeological record: in the Late Bronze Age (17–12th centuries B.C.E.), the time of the Founding Families, and then again in the Iron Age (ninth–sixth centuries B.C.E.), the time of the Israelite kingdoms.

The Hittites were one of the most prominent cultures to have inhabited the ancient Near East during the second millennium B.C.E. They ruled over a vast area, covering most of modern Turkey as well as parts of northwest Syria.



The royal capital of the Hittites, Hattuša, was located in the central Anatolian plateau near the modern village of Boğazköy, about 150 kilometers east of Ankara.[4] It has been continuously excavated by a German archaeological team for more than a century. It is difficult to understand why this site was chosen for the capital; it was isolated geographically, and the climate was not temperate. Perhaps its defensibility due to the Büyükkale, which means "Big Castle" and refers to an outcropping of rock that looms over the city, and a year-round water supply made the site attractive.[5]



A site of more than 400 acres, Hattuša includes an Upper and Lower City. The southern city wall contains three gates that are known by their sculptures—a lion, a king and a sphinx—that adorn the various entrances. In the north, the modern city of Boğazköy encroaches on the ancient Lower City. In this Lower City is the Great Temple that was dedicated to the divine couple—the Storm God and the Sun Goddess—who ruled the Hittite pantheon.[6] Unlike modern churches, this ancient temple was both a commercial and religious center. This is not the only temple in Hattuša; 30 temples have been excavated in the Upper City temple district. A large barrack has been uncovered on the

[4] Trevor Bryce, "The Last Days of Hattusa," *Archaeology Odyssey* 08:01.
[5] Billie Jean Collins, *The Hittites and Their World*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), pp. 32–33.
[6] Collins, *The Hittites*, p. 33.

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western side of the Upper City. This provides insight into the city's defense and military excursions.



Water and rock were important elements in Hittite religion, and both were incorporated into the city design; however, the most extensive living rock installation was found outside the city gates. Within walking distance of the Lion Gate, the Hittite ruler Tudhaliya IV (reigned 1237–1209 B.C.E.) built a shrine to his personal god Saruma featuring magnificent rock-cut reliefs. This shrine was located within a naturally occurring rock sanctuary called Yazilikaya.[7] While used by the Hittites for many years to perform religious rituals, it was not until the Hittites augmented the shrine that a series of detailed and grandiose rock reliefs were added to adorn the space.



Most important, however, the excavation of Hattuša yielded thousands of clay tablets written in cuneiform script. Most of what we know about the Hittites comes from the image that arises out of this rich treasure. The picture is supplemented by texts from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt.



Strangely enough, we do not know what the Hittites called themselves. The name "Hittites" to denote this cultural group was mistakenly coined by 19th-century scholars who first encountered the archaeological remains. The people we call "Hittites" never referred to themselves as such. They were known as "the people of the land of Hatti," who spoke the language "of the city of Neša." In fact, the Hittites, as we shall call them, migrated into Anatolia sometime during the third millennium B.C.E. That's about as precise as we can be.[8]

To the great surprise of many scholars who tried to decipher the unknown Hittite language, the Hittites spoke the earliest known Indo-European language, a family of languages that includes English, German, Latin and their derivative languages, as well as Russian and others.

[7] E.C. Krupp, "Sacred Sex in the Hittite Temple of Yazilikaya," *Archaeology Odyssey* 03:02.
[8] For a detailed discussion of the language and its decipherment, see Collins, *The Hittites*, pp. 1–20.

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Based on linguistic considerations, scholars speculate that the Hittites stemmed from one of many nomadic groups that roamed the steppes of what is now southern Russia—fanning out in two different directions: One group went west, leading toward Europe, and the other went southeast, down along the Indus valley. According to this commonly accepted hypothesis, the Hittites traveled south through the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, eventually settling in the central Anatolian plateau. No written evidence illuminates the first several centuries of their presence in Anatolia, so we remain utterly ignorant as to the sequence of events during this time. Assyrian merchants apparently introduced the knowledge of writing and the cuneiform script to the local population at the beginning of the second millennium.

Most of what we know about this early Hittite history comes from the cuneiform tablets uncovered at Hattuša. In about 1650 B.C.E., King Hattušili I relocated the capital of the Hittite kingdom to the city he named Hattuša. During the next two centuries, the borders of the kingdom expanded, reaching the border of Babylon. (The Hittites even sacked the city of Babylon and put an end to Hammurabi's dynasty).

Internal stability led to the Hittites becoming more and more interested in the outside world, and expanding borders inevitably led to conflict with the other major superpower of the time—Egypt.

The two world powers had a long relationship with its natural ups and downs. At times it was marked by ferocious clashes; at others, by peaceful diplomacy. Both the ups and the downs are reflected in the following passage from one of the famous Amarna letters (No. 41) in which the Hittite king Suppiluliuma I (c. 1350–1320 B.C.E.) writes to Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1350–1332 B.C.E.):[9]

The messages I sent to your father and the wishes he expressed to me will certainly be renewed between us. O king, I did not reject anything your father asked for, and your father never neglected any of the wishes I expressed, but granted me everything. Why have you, my brother, refused to send me what your father during his lifetime has sent me?

The border between the two empires was only roughly drawn—somewhere in northwest Syria and northern Canaan. At times of Hittite dominance, the borderline was pushed southward; when the Egyptians had the upper hand, the borderline was pushed northward. These tensions between the two superpowers eventually culminated in the

[9] Brian Fagan, "Did Akhenaten's Monotheism Influence Moses?" **BAR**, July/August 2015; Peter van der Veen, "When Pharaohs Ruled Jerusalem," **BAR** 39:02; James P. Allen, "Monotheism," *Archaeology Odyssey* 02:03; Carolyn R. Higginbotham, "The Egyptianizing of Canaan," **BAR** 24:03.

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1274 B.C.E. Battle of Kadesh, one of the most famous military encounters of the ancient world.

As reflected in the Amarna letter quoted above, Suppiluliuma I did not wish to get involved in a conflict with Egypt; he was concerned with a more immediate threat on the Syrian front posed by the Hurrian Kingdom of Mitanni.

One of history's most peculiar episodes occurred at this point. As Šuppiluliuma was preparing to attack the Syrian city of Carchemish, he received a letter from none other than the queen of Egypt herself, saying: "My husband died, and I have no son. But to you, they say, your sons are many. If you would give me one son of yours, he would become my husband. Never will I take a servant of mine and make him my husband!"[10]



The queen in question was in all likelihood the widow of the deceased Pharaoh Tutankhamun. Had her request materialized, we can only wonder how history would have unfurled: A Hittite-born pharaoh and a hybrid Hittite-Egyptian dynasty to rule over Egypt could have reshaped the Near East dramatically. Events, however, did not ensue favorably. After much hesitation by the amazed Šuppiluliuma, and further entreaties by the Egyptian widow, the Hittite king indeed sent one of his sons, Prince Zannanza, to Egypt to marry the queen. The affair was ill-fated, however. The prince was murdered on his way to Egypt, in all likelihood by members of the Egyptian court who opposed the alliance. As a result, the raging Šuppiluliuma sent an onslaught against Egyptian territories south of the Syrian border between the empires.

Though the relations between Hatti and Egypt remained highly tense, no major clashes followed. After Šuppiluliuma's death, the Hittites were concerned with battling on all fronts of their kingdom, while the Egyptians had to consolidate their own kingdom with the rise of the new 19th Dynasty.

[10] Eric H. Cline, "Warriors of Hatti," *Archaeology Odyssey* 05:01.

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In 1274 B.C.E., however, the two superpowers clashed in the Battle of Kadesh.





The Egyptian army, led by Ramesses II, was caught by a surprise Hittite attack, led by King Muwatalli II and his brother (and future king) Hattušili III.

Two Egyptian inscriptions, called the "Poem" and the "Bulletin," and a series of wall reliefs from the Karnak temple describe the battle—and proclaim an Egyptian victory:[11] "Then my army came to praise me … my high officers having come to magnify my strong arm, and my chariotry likewise boasting of my name and saying … 'You are great of victory in the presence of your army, in the face of the entire land … You have broken the back of Hatti forever!'"[12]

In reality the battle was probably a draw, and the Egyptian army eventually abandoned Kadesh and retreated to Damascus.[13] This allowed the Hittites to advance farther into Syrian territories, which they then held firmly under their control.

Ancient history often seems to operate like a pendulum. A mere 13 years after the Battle of Kadesh, following centuries of enmity and bloodshed, the two fighting arch-foes signed a peace treaty—the oldest known.

The Hittite version (written in Akkadian cuneiform) of the treaty was discovered among the cuneiform tablets preserved in the royal palace at Hattuša. It is now displayed in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. The Egyptian version of the treaty, in hieroglyphs, is preserved on a wall of the Ramesses Mortuary Temple and in the Temple of Amun at Karnak, both in Thebes. Although the majority of the text is identical, the Hittite version claims that the Egyptians came suing for peace, while the Egyptian version claims the

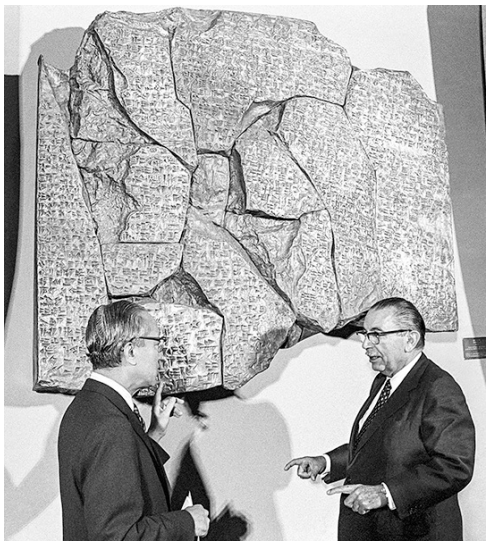
[11] Michael M. Homan, "The Divine Warrior in His Tent: A Military Model for Yahweh's Tabernacle," *Bible Review* 16:06.

[12] Despite its name, the "Poem" is a prose account of the battle, whereas the "Bulletin" is really an extended caption written to accompany the temple reliefs. These two inscriptions are repeated in temples throughout Egypt (e.g., Abydos, Luxor, Karnak and Abu Simbel) and in Papyrus Raifet and Papyrus Sallier III.

[13] Nicholas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell Books, 1992), p. 256.

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reverse. A replica of the Hittite version is prominently displayed at the entrance to the Security Council in the United Nations Headquarters in New York City.[14]



At the beginning of the 12th century B.C.E., major historical, social and cultural changes swept through the entire Near East. The long-lasting geopolitical system of the so-called "International Era" of the Late Bronze Age collapsed. Major superpowers such as Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia were weakened and diminished; others completely disappeared from the scene. Such was the fate of the Hittite kingdom. Inexplicably, the vast realm ceased to exist. With its demise, the writing of the Hittite language ended.

The map of the region was then redrawn as numerous smaller kingdoms emerged within the Anatolian-Syrian-Canaanite basin, in what marked the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Some of these new kingdoms, known as Neo-Hittite kingdoms, were the successors of the ancient Hittite empire and were established by people who originated from it.

A branch of the royal Hittite family continued to rule Carchemish in an undisturbed manner for several centuries. Other newly established geopolitical entities formed in southeast Anatolia and northwest Syria, all now referred to as "Neo-Hittite kingdoms/states." The term "Neo-Hittite" is somewhat misleading, however. Though the original Hittite component in these kingdoms is undeniable, it was merely one element, albeit significant, within a complex amalgam of cultural and ethnic features that were combined in the formation of these new geopolitical entities. A mixture of Hittite, Luwian, Hurrian, Mesopotamian, Aramean and other traditions influenced all aspects of the inhabitants of these states—their art, architecture, religion and administration. The very language they spoke, and certainly wrote, was not Hittite, but rather Luwian, and occasionally Akkadian or Aramaic.

One of the outcomes of this upheaval in the southern Levant was the emergence of ancient Israel as a geopolitical entity. The Neo-Hittite states and the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah show up essentially contemporaneously.

[14] www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/239/0239282.html.

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Not surprisingly, the term "Land of Hatti," a term used by the first-millennium Assyrians to denote the general area later inhabited by the Neo-Hittite kingdoms, also appears in the Bible.

So who is the Bible referring to when it speaks of Hittites in Israel during the period of the patriarchs?[15] This is a tricky question, as some interpretation and even speculation is involved—unlike the references to Hittites in the time of the Israelite monarchy, where the Bible is clearly referring to the Neo-Hittites of the contemporaneous Iron Age.

The Hittites of the Late Bronze Age, however, had little to do with the Neo-Hittites of the Iron Age. The Bronze Age Hittites were an Indo-European-speaking people who migrated from an unknown place of origin into Anatolia during the third millennium B.C.E. In the course of time, they founded a kingdom, which after several centuries of internal instability was finally stabilized, prospered and became one of the major powers of the ancient Near East. During this time, occasional Hittite travelers, such as diplomatic envoys and merchants, surely passed through Canaan on their journeys back and forth between Hatti and Egypt. This would explain the occasional finds of Hittite artifacts found in Canaan. At Megiddo, an important stop on the route between Hatti and Egypt, for example, an ivory Hittite panel was found in a larger collection of ivories from the palace treasury. There was also a seal belonging to charioteer Anuziti—a Hittite diplomat. This discovery, alongside seals from Tell el-Farah, a signet ring from Tel Nami and bullae from Aphek, demonstrates that there was an economic and political exchange between the Hittites and Egyptians carried out through the land of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age.[16]



But this still leaves us with an open question regarding the references to the Hittites during the time of the patriarchs. To a certain extent, the composition history of the Pentateuch may be relevant to this discussion. If one were to assume that these narratives depict historical realities that were written down close to the time of occurrence, then one might conclude that the references are to the original Hittites rather than the Neo-Hittites. However, the majority of scholars believe that these narratives were composed hundreds of years after the events that they describe and often contain

[15] Aharon Kempinski, "Hittites in the Bible: What Does Archaeology Say?" **BAR** 05:05.
[16] Marian Feldman, "The Iconography of Power," *Archaeology Odyssey* 05:03.

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anachronisms for the time of composition superimposed on the narrative time. This would suggest that the references reflect the Neo-Hittites.



A third theory has arisen from scholars such as Robert L. Cohn, Peter Machinist, E. Theodore Mullen and Billie Jean Collins.[17] The theory has two aspects—historical and literary. From the historical side, we know that, as Israel was developing a scribal tradition of its own, the Israelites were exposed to the Assyrian literary traditions. From the literary side, the Assyrians often used the phrase "wicked Hittites" as a strawman in regards to geopolitical events in Syria.[18] Perhaps the Israelites picked up this literary tradition and applied it to their own literary context.



In the theological worldview expressed in these early Biblical narratives, it was important to depict the Israelites as a pure Yahwistic community coming from outside and therefore untainted by the customs and beliefs of the land. In order for the Israelites to be true insiders, there must be outsiders—"the other."

Following the Assyrian example, the Hittites served to fill the position of the other in the Biblical narrative. At least that is the theory. It may not be entirely accurate, but it may be the best we have. The Hittites in the Bible may essentially remain a puzzle.

YAZILIKAYA: AN OPEN-AIR SHRINE FOR KINGS AND GODS



[17] See Collins, *The Hittites*, pp. 197–218.
[18] Collins, *The Hittites*, pp. 205–209, 212–213.

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A dozen armed gods decorate the rock wall of the outdoor sanctuary at Yazilikaya. Situated less than a mile from Hattuša, Yazilikaya was not used for everyday rituals but was reserved for special ceremonies, such as the New Year festival.

Tudhaliya IV (1237–1209 B.C.E.), one of the most important Hittite kings, is depicted on the wall of a cavern in the shrine at Yazilikaya. He was an effective diplomat who kept the fidelity of his vassal states. His seal impression comes from a diplomatic letter that he wrote to the king of Ugarit. Although the letter was written in cuneiform, the seal was written in Hittite hieroglyphs.





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