

Egyptian Influences in Ancient Canaan:

A SOCIOECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF AN ANCIENT SUPERPOWER’S FALL



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Jonathan M. Golden states that “when studying any culture area from a long-term perspective, it is necessary to consider a range of questions concerning continuity and change among peoples and cultures over the course of time.”[[1]](#footnote-1) These changes result from a variety of factors, including “evolution of cultures, the movement of peoples, the impact of external influences, or some combination of all three.”[[2]](#footnote-2) When studying the disintegration of the Ancient Canaanite culture, for instance, the impact of external influences and movement of peoples played a profound role in both building up and tearing down Ancient Canaan. Starting in what is known as the Chalcolithic period and thriving through the Late Bronze Age, the Ancient Canaanites were a force to be reckoned with until, finally, a combination of Egyptian oppression and socioeconomic pressures caused the civilization to collapse. Understanding the development of the Canaanite culture can help researchers analyze the earliest evidence of divisions of labor, as well as the emergence of the use of bronze and, later, iron.[[3]](#footnote-3) Analyzing the rise and fall of the Ancient Canaanite culture is thus an important window in which we can begin to understand how external influences, such as those from Egypt, and internal pressures, such as population density and depression of resources, lead to a socioeconomic inequality that ends up being detrimental to the growth and success of the culture itself.

Current research on the Ancient Canaanites and their relations with the Egyptians tends to focus on two different factors: Egyptian colonization and warfare, and economic relations which helped trade flourish and relations with even farther, foreign peoples thrive. Like with any event in history, the influence of the Egyptians posed both positive results and negative results for the Canaanites throughout the Chalcolithic Period and Bronze Age. The difficulty in examining these relations, however, lies in the fact that much research must depend on the archaeological findings at the sites of the Ancient Canaanite civilization. The archaeological process is long and lengthy, and due to the age of the artifacts, sometimes produces results that are not physically able to contribute to research due to their states of disrepair. “We must always keep in mind,” says Garry K. Brantley, “the limitations of archaeological inquiry and the oftentimes inconclusive nature of its evidence. Such data can be ambiguous, and subject to a variety of interpretations.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The most profound finds tend to be pottery and archaeological evidence of socially constructed burial customs. Something that most researchers do tend to agree on is that socioeconomic life underwent significant transformations during the time of the Ancient Canaanites.

The analysis to be undertaken herein shall incorporate the past interpretations of those who have taken it upon themselves to understand the social and economic contributions which led to the disintegration of the Ancient Canaanite culture. This research will also strive to incorporate new theories which suggest that simple Darwinian evolutionary theory may provide powerful answers by looking at culture practices such as systems of behavior, adaptation to new conditions, social relations, and the ability to produce and distribute adequate resources. There are generally two categories into which cultures fall: managerial and agency. “Managerial models vary widely and include population pressure, scalar stress, warfare, and ecological patchiness and population packing” whereas “agency approaches look to the processes of the social field as primary to the development of inequality.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Incorporating Darwinian evolutionary theory has always been one of the most instrumental strategies with which historians and scientists have been able to demonstrate effective abilities in “explaining the emergence” of certain cultural phenomena. It is said that:

“From an evolutionary standpoint, the triggers for emergence of new

population scale characters, such as social structures featuring hereditary

inequality, are historically contingent in nature, the often unintended

by-product of action by individuals and groups of various sizes within

their socio-natural contexts. The results of these actions are constrained

by preexisting social structures and are also conditioned over the longer

term by basic evolutionary processes like natural selection.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some of the most profound research produced on the topic of the rise and fall of the Ancient Canaanites has been undertaken by Jonathan M. Golden, Amnon Ben-Tor, Shemuel Ehituv, and Barbara J. Sivertsen. Golden’s book, *Ancient Canaan and Israel: An Introduction,* provides a thorough chronology of the rise and fall of both Canaanite and Israelite culture. This is done through thorough evaluations of every relevant lens, beginning with general background information and descriptions of the physical land to the economic, social, political, religious, and material focal points. The book even ends by discussing some of the more controversial “conspiracies” surrounding the Canaanites, such as the story of Exodus. It is evident that much research went into the execution of the book, which is shown by the number of sources listed at the end of each chapter and the details included throughout the text. Each chapter is organized by starting at the Chalcolithic period, and going through the Bronze and Iron Ages. The main purpose of the book comes off as being an attempt to tell a holistic history of one of the most infamous cultures in the ancient and biblical worlds. Holistic accounts like this, which make sure to utilize multiple lenses and perspectives, help ensure that readers are getting as full a picture of a historical figure, culture, or event as possible. This allows for greater understanding of how this historical instance affects the overall historical record through the present day.

Amnon Ben-Tor’s article, “The Relations between Egypt and the Land of Canaan during the Third Millenium B.C.,” takes a different stance on foreign influences in the land of Canaan, by analyzing archaeological evidence in North and South Sinai. It’s worth noting that relations between Egypt and Canaan were not always as ruler and vassal. In the Archaic Period and Dynastic Periods, relations between the two cultures were relatively peaceful and focused on trade. There were some signs of warfare, but not to the extent that there may have been toward the end of the Late Bronze Age. Ben-Tor hypothesizes about what may have led to Egyptian domination, however, by pointing out that “when the balance of power among more or less equal trading partners tips in favor of one polity, interaction tends to become one-sided and may escalate in intensity from simple hostility and period raiding upon the weakest through various kinds of tribute relations to ultimate conquest and occupation by the strongest.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is likely one of the most accurate theories about what happened to allow Canaanite culture to so quickly become burdened under Egyptian domination to the point of collapse.

Shemuel Ehituy’s article, “Economic Factors in the Egyptian Conquest of Canaan,” goes into depth about how the Egyptian conquest transformed Canaanite life. The article talks about the aspirations the Egyptians had in their taking over of Canaan, and the way in which thought of those they suddenly dominated. Egypt’s exploitation of Canaan’s economic structure meant that now Canaanite’s interests and well-being came second to that of their “overlords.” Tax payments were especially burdensome to the Canaanites, and what they didn’t forcibly owe the Egyptians was further exacerbated by looting from the armies and “plundering” of resources, such as wheat. Ehutiv makes use of the annals from the pharaohs as primary sources for ascertaining what the Egyptian goals for their vassal lands were, and how these numbers would have “realistically represented the agricultural wealth of the land of Canaan.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Attention was also paid to the taking of slaves and the deportation of individuals to Egypt itself. The main point of the article is posed with this question posed on the last page: What then was the cause of the waning Canaanite material culture toward the end of the period under discussion? It was not the burden of taxes, but rather the constant wars and, even more than the wars, the yoke of the Egyptian colonial administrations.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Barbara J. Sivertsen takes a unique look into the conquest of Canaan in her article, “The Conquest and Settlement of Canaan,” by pairing archaeological evidence with Biblical theories and chronology. She also looks heartily into why the population of Canaan declined so rapidly, positing theories such as an increase in pastoralist nomadism, disease, and natural disasters such as earthquakes. The Egyptians further complicated the socioeconomic life in Canaan by conquering and cutting off major trading centers. Sivertsen’s chapter will be helpful in analyzing more of the natural phenomena which helped contribute to the fall of Canaan alongside Egyptian domination.[[10]](#footnote-10) Drawing from the Biblical lens will be insightful for this topic, as there are so many religious connotations attributed to the rise and fall of the Ancient Canaanites, particularly in the story of Exodus. These interpretations will help with analyzing some of the more socio-cultural phenomena, and with helping to corroborate the timeline of events which are posed by researchers writing outside of the Biblical lens.

The historiography surrounding the rise and fall of the Ancient Canaanites can be grouped together depending on what they attribute as the defining factor of collapse.

Publications by Garry K. Brantley and Truthnet.org focus on the Biblical story of evidence and agree that Canaan fell after being ravaged by Joshua’s forces, in combination with natural disasters, such as earthquakes. These texts describe the Canaanite culture as being fairly advanced for the age, stating that “cities were well laid out, houses showed good design and construction, floors of buildings were often paved or plastered, drainage systems were developed, workers were skilled in the use of metals and ores, such as copper, lead and gold, pottery was among the finest in the world, and extensive trade was conducted with foreign countries, including Egypt, Northern Mesopotamia, and Cyprus.”[[11]](#footnote-11) For decades biblical archaeologists have attempted to corroborate the chronology of the Exodus and the fall of Canaan with physical evidence. Heavy focus, of course, was paid to the walls of Jericho. The walls “were of a type which made direct assault practically impossible. An approaching enemy first encountered a stone abutment eleven feet high, back and up from which sloped a thirty-five-degree plastered scarp reaching to the main wall some thirty-five vertical feet above. An army trying to storm the wall found difficulty in climbing the slope, and ladders to scale it could find no satisfactory holding.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The Bible, of course, as well as centuries of Christian religious teachings, have held to walls of Jericho collapsing under a rain of “fire and brimstone.” Archaeologists, however, have in fact found evidence that a massive fire tore through the city at the same time as the Biblical story of Exodus dictates. In the 1950s, a British archaeologist by the name of Kathleen Kenyon excavated the site at Jericho with some of the new modern methods which had been developing. She was the one who determined that the piles of bricks being unearthed were in fact remains of the walls which had collapsed upon the destruction of Jericho. In her excavation report, Kenyon writes that “destruction was complete. Walls and floors were blackened or reddened by fire, and every room was filled with fallen bricks, timbers, and household utensils; in most rooms the fallen debris was heavily burnt.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is hypothesized by researchers that Joshua’s army and the fire may have had some help knocking down the walls in the form of an earthquake.

A 1995 issue of *The Biblical Archaeologist* puts a heavy Egyptian presence in Canaan in the late Protodynastic and Early Dynastic periods. It attests that “1994 excavations revealed large quantities of Egyptian prestige goods…and administrative artifacts such as a clay bullae, or stamp impression, depicting a flag hieroglyph which generally represents the concept of God in ancient Egyptian.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Starting in the Chalcolithic and through the beginning of the Bronze Age, slow, but steady and increasing trade with Egypt is evidenced in southern Canaan. It has not been until the last thirty or forty years that archaeologists and historians have been able to understand the processes which characterized the relationships between Egypt and its neighbors to the east, such as Canaan. In fact, Robin Ngo alleges that “Little of the Canaanites’ textual records remain…much of the Canaanites’ history is reconstructed through the writings of contemporary peoples in addition to archaeological examinations of the material world.”[[15]](#footnote-15) New strategies, such as studying DNA sequencing which can be conducted on skeletons, can even help these archaeologists pinpoint where some of the descendants of the Ancient Canaanites can be found today, such as in Lebanon.[[16]](#footnote-16) This research is helping scholars to be able to monitor and interpret social relations between the different cultures.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In contrast, others such as Shemuel Ehituy and Nadav Na’aman provide insight into the economic factors concerning the Egyptian occupation of Canaan. Egyptian presence in Canaan is said to have resulted most dramatically in the exploitation of land and stratification of social classes by way of further dividing the elite and wealthy from commoners. Ehituy reports that “the whole land became the property of the Pharaoh, but this was only a continuation of the formal ownership upon which the feudal-like Canaanite regime had been based. The kings of Canaan and the population were obliged to pay tribute in goods to the Pharaoh.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Taxes were of particular burden to the common Canaanite peoples, and this was further exacerbated by looting “by the armies engaged in quelling the frequent Canaanite revolts.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Known for their advancement in the working of metals, the Canaanites were also obligated to supply Egypt with copper and bronze tools, weapons, utensils, and especially for the Pharaohs and elites, luxury goods and wares. Na’aman places Canaan as an Egyptian vassal state. Vassals were obligated to take part in military activities and campaigns, as well as pay yearly tributes, which were seen as signs of loyalty to the Pharaoh.[[20]](#footnote-20) The most detrimental factor of Egyptian rule, however, was in the “ruin of agriculture…The annals of Thutmosis III mention the ruin caused by the Egyptian army.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This was coupled with corrupt Egyptian officials. Ehituy ultimately contributes the collapse of the Canaanite culture with “frequent wars upon Canaanite soil, internal strife and mismanagement by corrupt Egyptian officials.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

While the various sources described in the preceding pages focus on particular reasons for the collapse of the Ancient Canaanite culture, few, in fact, seemed to attribute any sort of theory or model of theory to the findings of the individual scholars. Bringing in interpretations from Darwinian evolutionary theory and socio-economic models of analysis will contribute to the “growing literature that has sought to define variation and evolutionary origins of this phenomenon around the world.”[[23]](#footnote-23) It is important to remember that history and human agency have vital roles in the “evolutionary process.” Likewise, “it is the need to feed and protect ones’ family that caused people to join and support a cultural system that at some point began to permit elite wealth building strategies resulting in resource control, ownership, hoarding, and use of surplus to create long term debt.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

During the Chalcolithic period, the coastal plains saw rapid urban development. Golden states that “one of the hallmarks of the Canaanite culture was the construction of massive earthworks, also referred to as ramparts, or glacial systems, which surrounded virtually all of the major cities as well as a number of smaller centers.”[[25]](#footnote-25) At this point in the rise of the Ancient Canaanite culture, farming was the major source of subsistence. Barley was a staple crop in the region, due to the fact that that it can grow with little rainfall, which is scarce in the region the Canaanite culture was part of. Food production was starting to become more complex, and the production of copper became an instrumental industry in the building up of the Canaanite economy and trade relations.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In the Early Bronze Age, citizens began engaging in horticulture. Golden also highlights the agricultural breakthrough of terracing “in order to create beds for planting and to prevent soil erosion.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Larger cities emerged as centers for economic growth and interaction, and “it appears that some settlements thrived by positioning themselves as specialized production communities that could take advantage of ecological diversity and strategic location to manufacture specific commodities for export.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This urbanism saw a decline going into the Intermediate and Middle Bronze Ages, however, and a resurgence of ruralization, and much of the population dispersed into more outlying zones of the region. Canaanites were “involved in extensive trade networks extending from Syria to Anatolia to Egypt” and the larger urban cities still serve as economic hubs. This was the first evidence of luxury goods being imported as well. The Late Bronze Age, however, is when the cataclysmic entrance of the Egyptians into Canaan started to spell the entire culture’s downfall. Golden sums up the archaeological evidence as “intriguing in that it offers the picture of a society that was at once both prosperous and poor.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Egyptian occupation in Canaan lasted from the mid-to-late second millennium BC. This greatly affected the distribution of resources. Those living in the urban areas were able to have access to resources despite having to pay tribute to the Egyptian overlords. Those people “living in areas peripheral to the sphere of Egyptian…were unable to benefit from either agricultural surpluses or profits from trade.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The Egyptian occupation is credited with possibly changing the structure of the Canaanite economy altogether. By the Late Bronze Age, when the occupation was in full swing, Canaan had been reduced to few cities, and most of the staple wealth went straight to the Egyptians, whether it was to the armies or the Pharaohs themselves. This ended up impoverishing many of the cities. The only reason any of them managed to survive was because they had access to the remaining trade routes and necessary resources. “Many of the more marginal cities and rural villages may have found that imperial demands exceeded their capacity for production, causing them in some cases to simply fold in the face of adversity. It was the large urban centers that interested the Egyptians, and it is possible that the combined effect of Egyptian transplants and the cosmopolitanism of local urbanites allowed these cities to prosper in the face of major economic change.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Barbara J. Sivertsen states that along with the economic pressures, “widespread social breakdown caused much of the population in the central hill country to become nomadic pastoralists.”[[32]](#footnote-32) During the Middle Bronze Age, the Canaanites had built a complex, but open system that allowed for stability to fluctuate between intermittent periods of chaos. This meant that the whole civilization could be subject to collapse with even a minor trigger, such as migration, a natural disaster, or internal strife and conflicts. Population density also played a role in the success of the Canaanites, insomuch as it contributed to that fluctuation between chaos and stability. Sivertsen notes that “the survival of young children is the most important factor in determining population increase, and thus societies in which these children are more likely to survive will “outcompete” their neighbors in terms of population growth.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Disease, therefore, was a contributing factor in the mortality rate of children. The environment was a heavy influence in producing the perfect formulas for epidemics like malaria, which is especially dangerous for young children. Outside the city, “the lowland areas and interior valleys of Canaan contained many interior drainage networks, resulting in more standing water and swamps. These swamps were breeding grounds for mosquitoes.”[[34]](#footnote-34) As the lowlands were filled with towns in the Late Bronze Age, which contributed to increased population, residents of those areas would be more susceptible to being bitten by these mosquitoes. Those who engaged in pastoralism, however, have populations that are not as densely packed and also have animals near them, which mosquitoes are more likely to target than humans.

The factors of the Egyptian occupation coupled with internal pressures such as population pressure, insufficient resources, and disease are all examples of how socio-economic influences can result in inequalities that ultimately are dangerous for the survival of a culture, such as the Ancient Canaanites. They also serve as good examples for how the Darwinian evolutionary theory can be applied to cultural phenomena. Much of what happened in Canaan falls under the Managerial model of phenomena. This largely reflects how cultures and societies adapt when changes make themselves apparent. In terms of the Egyptian occupation of Canaan, the influx of the foreign powers presented optimal resource conditions which allowed for the Pharaohs and Egyptian officials to gain the opportunity to both exploit and dominate the Canaanites. Optimal resource conditions can be attributed to how the occupation affected distribution of resources.

“Optimal resource conditions are necessary for people to tolerate new forms of resource ownership and control associated with proto-elite wealth building schemes that might eventually give rise to hereditary inequality…elites will not gain opportunity to exert control over new groups until those groups become stressed enough to be willing to submit to these actions.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Much of archaeological history dedicated to the Ancient Canaanites has made the mistake of putting too much focus on the artifacts unearthed during the countless digs at sites such as Jericho. More focus needs to be put on discussing the emergence of cultural constructs and phenomena above the artifact, which are “only visible within the actions of groups or populations.”[[36]](#footnote-36) These phenomena are considered emergent when they are identified for the first time within the historical record. For example, subsistence strategies have been known to be intimately tied to the success or failure of communities, and the Ancient Canaanites certainly knew this.

What researchers have begun to conclude is that “simple population pressure appears to have little role in the process of inequality. Demographics were, however, undoubtedly important.”[[37]](#footnote-37) In looking at the subsistence strategies of the Ancient Canaanites, we see shifts from nomadic pastoralism to horticulture to more sophisticated agriculture and back again. The environment played an important role in the selection of subsistence strategies because certain environments would have attracted more people, such as the coastal regions which saw settlement of urban centers and cities. On the other hand, the more inland regions would have tended to stick with more rural traditions and thus would have had a harder time adapting to the increased pressures of the Egyptian overlords to produce more crops. This was largely a result of not having enough people to keep up the with manual labor required to produce the larger amounts of crops. This would also have meant that commercial production of agriculture and tribute to the pharaohs might have had to come before the need to continue to feed their own families. It would be easy for this pressure to result in commoners having to sacrifice some of their own food supplies in order to pay the required taxes and tributes to the Pharaohs and often corrupt Egyptian officials. This would thus result in there being little or no surplus crops, which would have brought in extra income.

Amnon Ben-Tor hypothesizes that the balance of power between the Egyptians and Canaanites may have undergone a shift at some point. As Sivertsen mentioned that Canaanite socio-economic structure allowed for fluctuations between stability and chaos, or internal strife and conflict, it is possible, then, that a fluctuation toward chaos allowed for the Egyptians to find an opportunity to step in to overtake their one-time trading partners. This would have been the opportunity that Darwinian evolutionary theory would have required for the Canaanite culture to allow the Egyptian elite to take control over their culture, because they had allowed themselves to become stressed enough to end up submitting to the actions of the dominating force, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Ben-Tor says that “when the balance of power among more or less equal trading partners tips in favor of one polity, interaction tends to become one-sided and may escalate in intensity from simple hostility and periodic raiding upon the weakest…to ultimate conquest and occupation by the strongest.”[[38]](#footnote-38) This is a prime example of Darwinian evolutionary theory because it is a case of natural selection: the strongest culture overtook the culture which was weakening, thus taking advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves to them. It is possible that the Egyptian occupation of Canaan created “increasingly unpredictable resource conditions” and “demographic changes” which caused some villages and urban centers to collapse and be abandoned. It caused others to be brought under the control of the Egyptians, and essentially caused Canaan to become an Egyptian colony rather than an independently thriving culture.

The conquest of Canaan has been the subject of a lot of doubt for hundreds of years as scholars debate the causes and whether they are the result of biblical aspirations or influences from outside, dominating forces such as the Egyptians. The Egyptians took control around 1400 BC and that control was maintained by “treaties with kings of the local city states,” and exploitation of resources by way of taxes, tributes, and military control and destruction.[[39]](#footnote-39) It is clear that understanding Egyptian-Canaanite relations needs to go far beyond just analyzing archaeological evidence. Canaanite resources certainly seemed to have benefits for the Egyptians, and they took full advantage of obtaining these resources by finding the opportunities to sweep in and take control of the entire culture. While the wealthy and elite were rewarded and prospered as a result of the takeover, the more numerous outlying farmers and commoners fell deeper into poverty and despair. It thus seems that the Egyptian occupation contributed to the collapse of the Ancient Canaanites by exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. Eventually the external stresses and internal conflicts would result in the slow disintegration of the Canaanites. Unable to manage under foreign rule and domination, the processes of natural selection proved fatal as the Egyptians emerged in a race of the ‘survival of the fittest.’

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