

This week's installment is part of a larger project, at the request of Gann's Tanakh department, to produce a literary argument for the unified authorship of Torah. Comments as always are welcome. I hope to go back to the regular format next week. For those interested, the new Klapper address is  
121 Billings Street  
Sharon, MA 02067  
and donations to the Center can also be sent to that address. Shabbat Shalom!

. **“The Canaanites were then in the land”**

So here is Genesis 12:1-7:

**בראשית פרק יב**

- (א) ויאמר יקוק אל אברם לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך:  
(ב) ואעשך לגוי גדול ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה:  
(ג) ואברכה מברכך ומקללך אאר ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה:  
(ד) וילך אברם כאשר דבר אליו יקוק וילך אתו לוט ואברם בן חמש שנים ושבעים שנה בצאתו מחרן:  
(ה) ויקח אברם את שרי אשתו ואת לוט בן אחיו ואת כל רכושם אשר רכשו ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן ויצאו ללכת ארצה כנען ויבאו ארצה כנען:  
(ו) ויעבר אברם בארץ עד מקום שכם עד אלון מורה והכנעני אז בארץ:  
(ז) וירא יקוק אל אברם ויאמר לזרעך אתן את הארץ הזאת ויבן שם מזבח ליקוק הנראה אליו:

JPS Translation

1. The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.
2. I will make of you a great nation,  
And I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
And you will be a blessing.
3. I will bless those who curse you  
And curse him that curses you;  
And all the families of the earth  
Shall bless themselves by you.
4. Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him.
5. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth they had amassed, and the persons they had acquire in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan,
6. Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shekhem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.
7. The L-rd appeared to Abram and said: ‘I will assign this land to your offspring’. And he built an altar there to the L-rd who had appeared to him.”

Spinoza argued that the last sentence, “The Canaanites were then in the land”, meaning “*then* as opposed to *now*”, could not have been written at the time of Moses, as the Canaanites were *still* in the land. The sentence could only have been written at a time when the Canaanites were no longer in the land, so as to convey needed historical/ethnographic context to contemporary readers.

Spinoza did not see himself as having discovered this; he believed that he was following in the footsteps of the thirteenth century Spanish commentator Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra. Let’s take a look then at Ibn Ezra’s comments to Genesis 12:6:

”והכנעני אז בארץ” - יתכן שארץ כנען תפשה כנען מיד אחר. ואם איננו כן יש לו סוד. והמשכיל ידום:  
“The Canaanites were then in the land” – likely that the Land of Canaan was grabbed by Canaan from the hands of another. But if this is not so, it has a secret, and the one who comprehends it will fall silent.

The “secret” Ibn Ezra alludes to here is the “secret of the twelve” that he refers to elsewhere in his commentary, and the other verses he mentions in those contexts also seem to raise the possibility of post-Mosaic editorial insertions. As I have not yet understood any other attempt at explaining the secret, it seems to me fair to cite Ibn Ezra as someone who was theologically okay with there being post-Mosaic insertions in the Torah.

However, Ibn Ezra does not prefer this reading. On literary rather than theological grounds, he suggests that the more likely correct interpretation is that the verse teaches us that the Canaanites had taken the land by force from someone else. In other words, he thinks the better translation of the verse is “The Canaanites were *then* in the land”, meaning “*then* as opposed to *previously*”. That translation allows the verse to be written at the time of Moses.

Why does Ibn Ezra think this reading more likely? I suggest that the answer can be found one chapter later, in Genesis 13:1-7.

#### בראשית פרק יג

- (א) ויעל אברם ממצרים הוא ואשתו וכל אשר לו ולוט עמו הנגבה:  
 (ב) ואברם כבד מאד במקנה בכסף ובזהב:  
 (ג) וילך למסעיו מנגב ועד בית אל עד המקום אשר היה שם אהלה בתחלה בין בית אל ובין העי:  
 (ד) אל מקום המזבח אשר עשה שם בראשונה ויקרא שם אברם בשם יקוק:  
 (ה) וגם ללוט ההלך את אברם היה צאן ובקר ואהלים:  
 (ו) ולא נשא אתם הארץ לשבת יחדו כי היה רכושם רב ולא יכלו לשבת יחדו:  
 (ז) ויהי ריב בין רעי מקנה אברם ובין רעי מקנה לוט והכנעני והפרזי אז ישב בארץ:

#### JPS Translation

1. From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negeb, with his wife and all that he possessed, together with Lot.
2. Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold.
3. And he proceeded by stages from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Bethel and Ai,
4. the site of the altar that he had built there at first; and there Abram invoked the L-rd by name.
5. Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents,
6. so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.
7. And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and those of Lot’s cattle – the Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land.

Here are Ibn Ezra’s comments to 13:7:

וטעם הכנעני והפריזי כרעו. ויתכן היות הפריזי מבני כנען והוא אחד מהנזכרים, ויש לו שני שמות כאשר מצאנו שני שמות לבן שמואל, וגם לאבי אביו:

The meaning of “The Canaanites and the Perizzites” is like its peer. It is likely that the Perizzites were among the Sons of Canaan and that he was one of the sons mentioned, but that he has to names, as we found two names for Shmuel’s son, and also for his grandfather.

Ibn Ezra recognizes that this verse raises the same interpretive issue as its peer, 12:6. In other words, one can either translate “then, as opposed to now”, or “then, as opposed to earlier”.

But here a new issue intrudes. Granted that each verse on its own can stand either translation, the new issue is how either translation accounts for the existence of both verses. Should not readers of 12:6 have been aware by now that the Canaanites were then in the land? Why is it necessary to inform them of this twice?

Furthermore, it is reasonably clear why 12:6 is a good place to inform an otherwise ignorant reader of the Canaanite presence; Avram has just entered the land. But what purpose does the information serve in 13:7?

Finally, the two verses are not identical: 12:6 refers only to Canaanites, whereas 13:7 refers to both Canaanites and Perizzites, and 12:6 mentions Canaanite presence, whereas 13:7 refers to Canaanites and Perizzites as *dwelling* in the land. Are these differences significant?

To these questions, Ibn Ezra has no evident response. Rashi, however, who shares Ibn Ezra's preferred reading, addresses some of them directly and others implicitly. Here are Rashi's comments to 12:6 and 13:7.

והכנעני אז בארץ - היה הולך וכובש את ארץ ישראל מזרעו של שם,  
שבחלקו של שם נפלה כשחלק נח את הארץ לבניו, שנאמר (בראשית יד יח)  
ומלכי צדק מלך שלם. לפיכך (פסוק ז) ויאמר ה' אל אברהם לזרעך אתן את  
הארץ הזאת, עתיד אני להחזירה לבניך שהם מזרעו של שם:

ויהי ריב - לפי שהיו רועים של לוט רשעים ומרעים בהמתם בשדות אחרים,  
ורועי אברם מוכיחים אותם על הגזל, והם אומרים נתנה הארץ לאברם, ולו  
אין יורש, ולוט יורשו, ואין זה גזל, והכתוב אומר והכנעני והפרזי אז יושב  
בארץ ולא זכה בה אברם עדיין:

“The Canaanites were then in the land” – he was in the process of conquering the Land of Israel from the descendants of Shem, as it fell into the portion of Shem when Noah divided the land among his sons, as Scripture says ‘And MalkiTzedek King of Shalem’<sup>1</sup> (Genesis 14:18). Therefore Hashem said to Avraham: “I will assign this land to your descendants” – I will ultimately return it to your children, who are from the descendants of Shem.

“And there was quarreling” – because Lot's herdsmen were wicked and would graze their cattle on other people's land, and Avram's herdsmen would rebuke them about this robbery, and they would reply: “The land is given to Avram, and as he has no heir, Lot will be his heir, so this is not robbery”. So Scripture says “the Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land”, and Avram had not yet acquired it.

Rashi takes these two verses as together making a complex point: promising the land to Avraham did not deprive the Canaanites as a class of their patrimony, but rather reversed an illegitimate conquest that occurred at just about the same time as his arrival (12:6), but that nonetheless the individual property rights of the Canaanites were valid so long as the conquest had not been reversed (13:7). Thus the shift from “Canaanites” in

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rabbinic tradition MalkiTzedek was another name for Shem, and Shalem for Yerushalayim (Jerusalem)

12:6 to “Canaanite and Perizzites” is intended to show that the conquest was ongoing and developing. The same is true of the shift from present to “dwelling”.

It should be clear that Rashi’s interpretation of these phrases does not depend on the accuracy of his reconstruction of the argument between the shepherds. I might argue, for instance, that the point of 13:7 in its specific context is to provide an ironic counterpoint: the land could not sustain both individuals, Avraham and Lot, and yet it could sustain two entire nations, the Canaanites and the Perizzites! Nor is it necessary to believe that Malki Tzedek was in fact Shem, or that the original inhabitants of Canaan were Shemites. The key point is that it was necessary for the text to provide two separated snapshots of the Canaanite presence so as to show that it was developing, and therefore that at the time Hashem promised it to Avraham, He was not taking it away from anyone. Avraham’s claim is therefore morally legitimate.

On these grounds it seems to me that Ibn Ezra was correct to prefer the first reading in 12:6, that “the land of Canaan was grabbed by Canaan from another”.<sup>2</sup>

We can now point out that the first reading brilliantly situates this story within the overall context of the book of Genesis.

- a. In 15:16, as part of The Covenant among the Torn Pieces, G-d tells Avraham that His promise will not be fulfilled until the fourth generation because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete”. In other words, Avraham cannot receive the land until his claim is just.
- b. Nachmanides compellingly reads the pre-Abrahamic narrative in Genesis as an extended demonstration that the consequence of sin is exile. Thus Adam sins and is exiled from the Garden of Eden; Cain sins and is sentenced to wander; the Flood Generation sins and is wiped off the land; and the Tower generation sins and is scattered from Babel.

In the second reading, there is no thematic content to the editorial insertions, and the story of Avraham’s arrival is largely isolated from anything that happens before or after.

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<sup>2</sup> I have two additional grounds for preferring the first reading.

- a. The second reading assumes that the editorial insertion was necessary for readers who were unaware that Canaanites had ever lived in the land of Israel. This requires a quite astonishing feat of historical amnesia on the part of an Israelite of any time, as every cultural history of Israel mentions the Canaanites.
- b. Genesis 11:31 already refers to Israel as the Land of Canaan. If the hypothetical editor’s intent was simply to provide background information for ignorant readers, s/he could have provided the information there rather than waiting for 12:6.