

Were the Greeks Israelites?

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Here are a few sources to help unveil this question.

Hecataeus of Abdera, a Greek historian of the fourth century B.C., “tells us that the Egyptians, formerly being troubled by calamities [in context, assumedly the 10 plagues at the time of the Exodus] in order that the divine wrath might be averted, expelled all the aliens [i.e., Israelites] gathered together in Egypt. Of these, some under their leaders Danuss and Cadmus, migrated into Greece; others into other regions, the greater part into Syria [i.e., the whole eastern Mediterranean, including the land of Israel]. Their leader is said to have been Moses, a man renowned for wisdom and courage, founder and legislator of the state” (cited by C.W. Muller, *Fragmenta Historicum Graecorum* , 1883, Vol. 2, p. 385).

In confirmation of the Israelite identity of these people, Diodorus of Sicily, a historian of the first century B.C., states: “They say also that those who set forth with Danaus, likewise from Egypt, settled what is practically the oldest city of Greece, Argos, and that the nations of the Colchi in Pontus and that of the Jews, which lies between Arabia and Syria, were founded as colonies by certain emigrants from their country [i.e., Egypt]; and this is the reason why it is a long-established institution among these peoples to circumcise their male children . . . the custom having been brought over from Egypt. Even the Athenians, they say, are colonists from Sais in [the Nile Delta of] Egypt” (Book 1, sec. 28, 1-5).

Whether or not Danaus and Cadmus were actual people is difficult to ascertain. Danaus was supposedly the head of the “Danae” under whom Argos flourished. And Cadmus was considered by the Greeks of Thebes to have founded their city (Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization* , Vol. 2: *The Life of Greece* , pp. 40, 72). Yet these may have simply been the Israelite tribal names Dan and Gad. (Such a possibility should be considered since the us endings are Latinized Greek suffixes. Cadmus would actually be Cadm—perhaps Gadim in Hebrew, meaning Gadites.)

Indeed, the famed Greek poet Homer often used the term Danaans for the Greeks. For this name, or variants such as Danai or Danoi, is what they called themselves. Dr. Robert Latham, a respected ethnologist of the 19th century, made the connection, writing: “Neither do I think that the eponymus [eponym or ancestral name] of the Argive Danai [i.e., Greeks of Argos] was other than that of the Israelite tribe of Dan; only we are so used to confining ourselves to the soil of Palestine in our consideration of the history of the Israelites that we . . . ignore the share they may have taken in the ordinary history of the world . . . Yet with the Danai and the tribe of Dan this is the case, and no one connects them” (*Ethnology of Europe* , 1852, p. 137).

Yet more scholars since have connected them (see Cyrus Gordon, *Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*, 1966; Allen Jones, *Bronze Age Civilization: The Philistines and the Danites*, 1975; “Danaans and Danites: Were the Hebrews Greek?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* , June 1976; “Against the Tide: An Interview with Maverick Scholar Cyrus Gordon,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* , Nov.-Dec. 2000, pp. 52-63).

And the connection had even been made by the people in question themselves at one time. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus recorded the contents of a letter sent to the Jews of the Holy Land a few centuries earlier by the king of the Lacedemonians (the Spartans of southern Greece):

“Ares king of the Lacedemonians, to Onias [the Jewish high priest], sendeth greeting; we have met with a certain writing, whereby we have discovered that both the Jews and the Lacedemonians are of one stock, and are derived from the kindred of Abraham. It is but just, therefore, that you, who are our brethren, should send to us about any of your concerns as you please. We will also do the same thing, and esteem your concerns as our own; and will look upon our concerns as in common with yours. Demoteles, who brings you this letter, will

bring your answer back to us. This letter is foursquare: and the seal is an eagle, with a dragon [a serpent] in its claws” (Book 12, chap. 4, sec. 10).

This was the heraldic emblem of the tribe of Dan (“Flag,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, p. 405), apparently derived in part from Jacob’s prophecy: “Dan shall be a serpent by the way, a viper by the path” (Genesis 49:17). The four main standards surrounding God’s tabernacle in the wilderness, those of Ephraim, Judah, Reuben and Dan (see Numbers 2), are widely believed to have carried the emblems of a bull, a lion, a man and an eagle respectively—parallel to the four living creatures surrounding God’s throne in heaven (Revelation 4:7) and the faces of the angelic cherubim (Ezekiel 1:10).

Later, another Jewish high priest, Jonathan, wrote back to the Spartans in affirmation “concerning the kindred that was between us and you ... because we were well satisfied about it from the sacred writings ... It is a long time since this relation of ours to you hath been renewed, and when we, upon holy and festival days, offer sacrifices to God, we pray to Him for your preservation and victory” (Book 13, chap. 5, sec. 1).

Indeed, the “sacred writings” do address this matter indirectly. For by the time of the Israelite judge Deborah around 1200 B.C., the tribe of Dan had become a seafaring people, sailing on ships (Judges 5:17). They were no doubt later the preeminent sailors of Solomon’s fleet, which plied distant waters with the Phoenicians (see 1 Kings 9:26-28; 1 Kings 10:22; 2 Chronicles 8:18; 2 Chronicles 9:21). And notice this from Ezekiel: “Dan also and Javan [or Yavan, i.e., the Old Testament Hebrew word for the Greeks, see *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*] going to and fro [as mariners] occupied in thy fairs” (Ezekiel 27:19, KJV). So a close relationship still existed between Dan and the Greeks.

It should be noted that not all of the Greeks were Israelites. Indeed, the word translated Greece in the Old Testament is, as mentioned, Yavan, who was one of the sons of Noah’s son Japheth (see Genesis 10:2).

Says scholar Cyrus Gordon: “Noah’s son Shem is the ancestor of the Semites. Japheth [another son of Noah] is connected with the Greeks. Now look at Genesis 9:27: ‘May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of the Shem.’ The Greeks will dwell in the tents of the Semites. In other words the [Aegean] area was Semitic before it became Indo-European” (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov.-Dec. 2000, p. 61).

When the New Testament uses the term Greeks, it is clearly referring to gentiles—non-Israelites. Of course, this is mainly because all people who weren’t Israelite were considered “Greek”—the Greek language and culture having been spread throughout the known world. Furthermore, by the time the New Testament was written, most of the Danaans of Greece and nearby lands had migrated elsewhere.