
Jewish History in the Hebron Hills

Settlement in the Southern Hebron Hills – A Historical Overview

In the southern Hebron Hills, we find evidence of Jewish settlement dating back to the time of Joshua. In Joshua, Chapter 15 (the Chapter on the Inheritance of Judah), the settlements of Carmel, Ma'on, Ziph, Yotah and others. The Arab villages in the southern Hebron Hills today are situated on these sites and preserve in their names the names of the settlements from biblical times. As a frontier region remote from the seat of government, the area served as a refuge for David's flight from Saul. Many chapters in the Book of 1 Samuel describe David's flight to the wilderness of Ziph, the wilderness of Maon and the more eastern wilderness of Ein Gedi, even Nabal the Carmelite, who lived in Ma'on and carried out his schemes in the Carmel, attempted to bring David down from his position of power and remind him of who held authority in his day: „Today there are many servants who rebel, each against his master ...“ (1 Samuel 25).

Towards the end of the First Temple period, with the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the villages in the southern Hebron Hills were also destroyed and their inhabitants were exiled to Babylon along with the exiles from Jerusalem; the region was taken over by the Edomites, who had even assisted the Babylonians in the destruction of the southern region. This can be deduced from ostraca found at Tel Arad and from the Book of Obadiah.

A further flourishing of the southern Hebron Hills took place during the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods (the Byzantine period); from both the abundant archaeological finds in the area and letters dating from that period, we learn of large Jewish communities that lived and were active in the region.

In his work *Onomasticon* – The Book of Names – Eusebius, the Church Father from Caesarea, identifies the sites mentioned in the Bible and the New Testament with the settlements in the region of his time (the 4th century) in the southern Hebron Hills. Eusebius mentions seven Jewish villages: Carmel, Yuta, Lower Anem, Eshtemoa, Rimon, Tela and Ein Gedi. He also mentions two Christian villages – Yitir and Upper Anem. In addition to the *Onomasticon*, field surveys and archaeological excavations over the past few decades have revealed numerous communities in the region not mentioned in Eusebius' work; for example, the large town of Susya, with its magnificent entrance and mosaics, which leave no doubt as to Susya's Jewish character.

A study of the words of the Sages in the Mishnah and the Talmud shows that this region was called 'Droma' or 'Droma'; the Greek spelling reveals that the letter 'D' was vowelised with a kamatz, which is essentially the translation of 'the South'. In many sources, the geographical term 'the South' refers to the whole of Judea, as the sages of the Galilee called it. However, there are sources that refer specifically to the south of Mount Hebron. Eusebius, mentioned above, also used this term in his *Onomasticon*: „And in Droma there is a very large Jewish village called Ania, nine mil south of Hebron.“

At the beginning of a letter appearing in the Tosefta (Sanhedrin 2:6), sent by Rabban Gamliel and the elders from Jerusalem to the Jews throughout the land and the world, it is stated “To us, the people of the Upper Galilee (Galil Elyon) and the people of the Lower Galilee (Galil Tachton), and to us, the people of the Upper South (Droma Elyon) and the people of the Lower South, may peace be upon you ...” It is customary to identify the Upper South as the higher-altitude area – the southern Mount Hebron region – and the Lower South as the southern Judean Lowlands (Kibbutz Lahav, Shomria and others), in a similar comparison to the Upper Galilee and the Lower Galilee.

In the 9th century, a glorious chapter in the lives of the Jews in the southern Mount Hebron region came to an end; all the major communities of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods disappeared, and to this day there is no clear answer as to where the Jews of the south vanished to during that period. Their place was taken by mosques and a new population – the Muslims. It is possible that the Jews of the south fled from Islam, perhaps out of fear, or perhaps due to the undermining of security in the border regions with the advent of Islam.