

On the Historicity of the Exodus

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A deeply committed believer does not require archaeological evidence to sustain faith. Faith is an impulse of the spirit that transcends the bounds of scientific reasoning. It asserts itself as a personal commitment transmitted through the ages, independent of the historical verification of biblical narratives. That being said, since the biblical message primarily aims to convey a moral and human lesson drawn from history – or from a spiritual reading of events – the factual precision of its accounts is not central. Nevertheless, the insights offered by biblical exegesis and academic research are valuable. Their contributions deserve recognition, especially given the Bible's profound influence on the shaping of our civilization.

The attempt to situate the Exodus within history is a major challenge faced by many scholars. Beyond biblical exegesis, these scholars strive to cross-reference the biblical text with disciplines such as archaeology, climatology, geology, and literary criticism. This interdisciplinary approach sheds partial light on certain elements of the biblical narrative without definitively confirming or denying its entirety. In this essay, the term "Hebrews" refers to the nation of Israel before the Exodus. All dates mentioned are BCE.

Archaeological Evidence and Egyptian Traces

Archaeological documentation offers few direct traces of a Hebrew sojourn in Egypt. However, Egyptian sources mention, under various designations (Shasu, Habiru, Semites, Canaanites, Hurrians), a significant foreign presence spanning several centuries. The Hyksos in particular – populations predominantly of Hurrian origin – ruled the Egyptian Delta from 1650 to 1550.

Most ancient Egyptian accounts are pharaonic propaganda texts and often distort reality, sometimes even presenting defeats as victories. A well-

known example is the Battle of Kadesh (1274 BCE), where Ramses II confronted the Hittite king Muwatalli. Despite the military stalemate, Egyptian bas-reliefs portray it as a glorious triumph. It would therefore be unsurprising for a successful slave revolt to be omitted altogether.

Among the most intriguing documents is the *Ipuwer Papyrus*, housed at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. This text, likely dating from the mid-13th century during the 19th Dynasty (1292–1203), describes a series of social and natural catastrophes—rivers turning to blood, lack of drinking water, destruction of vegetation, collapse of social order—that echo the biblical ten plagues.

The construction of the city of Pi-Ramesses in the eastern Nile Delta under Ramses II aligns with the biblical account (Exodus 1–11), which mentions the building of the cities of Pithom and Ramesses by Hebrew slaves. Pi-Ramesses is also cited as the departure point of the Exodus.

The Merneptah Stele (1209), inscribed by Ramses II's son, states: "Israel is laid waste, its seed is no more," suggesting that Israelite groups were already settled in Canaan at that time.

However, this reference might pertain only to part of Joseph's descendants, specifically segments of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who remained in Canaan after Jacob's funeral. Psalm 81:6–7 alludes to a specific liberation linked to Joseph: "I removed the burden from his shoulder...".

The Hebrew word *shekhem* (shoulder) also designates the city of Shechem (modern-day Nablus), bequeathed by Jacob to Joseph. This city was not conquered by Joshua, which may indicate that the tribe of Ephraim was already established there before the general entry into Canaan. This could also explain the significant demographic growth of the tribe of Manasseh between the beginning and end of the desert sojourn.

Insights from Climatology and Geology

A global climate crisis in the mid-13th century may have triggered massive population movements: the invasion of the Sea Peoples, the fall of the Hittite

Empire, and conflicts with Egypt—frequently depicted in the Egyptian reliefs of Medinet Habu.

In this turbulent context, a Hebrew slave revolt becomes historically plausible. Their route, which avoided the well-guarded coastal road, suggests a wartime strategy of evasion. The ongoing conflict between Egypt and the Sea Peoples would have facilitated an escape through the desert.

Additionally, the eruption of the Thera (Santorini) volcano, dated to the 15th or 16th century BCE and accompanied by a tsunami, may have inspired the account of the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea and other natural upheavals similar to the ten plagues—devastated fauna and flora included.

According to the biblical account, Jericho was the first city besieged by the Israelites after crossing the Jordan into Canaan. Yet, the Bronze Age Jericho that Joshua would have attacked shortly after Moses' death was, in fact, destroyed by a massive earthquake in the 16th century BCE. This event may have been later incorporated into the biblical narrative.

Cultural Influences

Among the Egyptian influences in the biblical account, the design of the Tabernacle (*Mishkan*) stands out. Its dimensions are similar to Ramses II's military tent at Kadesh. Expressions like “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,” common in Egyptian rhetoric, also appear in the biblical text.

Akhenaten's 14th-century monotheism has sometimes been compared to the worship of YHWH, though the god Aten was inseparable from the pharaoh's divine persona. In this light, the Levites—who received no territorial inheritance—may have been former opponents of royal deification in Egypt and later guided the Hebrews. Moreover, several Hebrew names of Egyptian origin are associated with the Levites: Moses (Mses), Aaron, Phinehas, Merari, Mushi, Pashur, Hophni, and Hur.

Some scholars, such as Richard Elliott Friedman, restrict the Exodus to the tribe of Levi alone—whose name means “companion” or “one who joins.” Unlike the other tribes, the Levites received no territorial allotment. They

may have introduced the worship of Yahweh, merged it with the cult of Elohim, and imposed it upon the populations occupying the Canaanite highlands in the late 13th century. Thus, Levites worshiping YHWH from Egypt would have joined Israelite tribes worshiping Elohim—some descended from Joseph, others recent arrivals from Bashan in northern Transjordan.

Deuteronomy (6:20–23) refers to the intergenerational transmission of the Exodus memory during the offering of first fruits to the priest: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out...” This collective “we” illustrates how an active minority can influence an entire people—just as the Scottish Puritans established Thanksgiving as a national tradition in North America.

Textual criticism of the Pentateuch identifies several source traditions: Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Priestly (P), Deuteronomist (D), and Redactor (R). The Redactor is thought to have compiled and organized the other sources into the final Pentateuch. Notably, the Priestly source (P) is nearly alone in addressing the laws on foreigners, slavery, and the Exodus itself.

Temporal References and the Narrative’s Complexity

Theories attempting to date the Exodus are numerous and far from unanimous. A few representative examples follow.

In the correspondence of Pharaoh Akhenaten (14th century BCE) discovered at Tell el-Amarna, Canaanite city-kings complain of attacks by the *Habiru*. Some scholars suggest that these Habiru may have been Hebrews who entered Canaan earlier.

Other theories date the composition of the Exodus narrative to the 7th century BCE, during the reign of King Josiah (640–609), a time when Judah resisted Egyptian influence after the fall of Assyrian dominance. Geographic details from the Negev and Transjordan regions may have been added during this period. However, the Exodus is already mentioned by the prophets Amos and Joel in the 8th century, pushing its origins further back.

The *Song of the Sea* (Exodus 15:1-18) also refers to the Philistines, Edom, Moab, and Canaan – peoples attested specifically in the 12th century BCE.

A major obstacle to a literal reading of the account is the figure of 603,500 adult men. The Hebrew word *eleph* could denote a clan rather than a thousand, yet this interpretation conflicts with other biblical figures (e.g., the 22,273 firstborn males). Several passages emphasize Israel's small size (Exodus 23:29-30; Numbers 3:13). Notably, the census data comes from the Priestly source (P), which may have used demographic data from a later period.