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Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?



WILLIAM G. DEVER

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In loving memory of my son Sean William Dever 1969-2001

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Introduction

For nearly two thousand years the so-called “Western cultural tradition” has traced its origins back to ancient Israel. In Israel’s claims to have experienced in its own history revealed truth of a higher, universal, and eternal order, we in Europe and much of the New World have seen a metaphor for our own situation. We considered ourselves the “New Israel,” particularly we in America. And for that reason we knew who we were, what we believed in and valued, and what our “manifest destiny” was.

But what if ancient Israel was “invented” by Jews living much later, and the biblical literature therefore nothing but pious propaganda? If that is the case, as some revisionist historians now loudly proclaim, then there was no ancient Israel. There was no actual historical experience of any real people in a real time and place from whom we could hope to learn anything historically true, much less anything morally or ethically enduring. The story of Israel in the Hebrew Bible would have to be considered a monstrous literary hoax, one that has cruelly deceived countless millions of people until its recent exposure by a few courageous scholars. And now, at last, thanks to these social revolutionaries, we sophisticated modern secularists can be “liberated” from the biblical myths, free to venture into a Brave New World unencumbered by the biblical baggage with which we grew up. Our gurus will be those renegade biblical scholars - along with the “new historians,” anti-humanists, and cultural relativists whom the historian Keith Windschuttle has described so well in his devastating critique *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (1996).

Anyone who is uninspired by this vision of a postmodern utopia, who wishes to salvage something of the biblical story of ancient Israel and its value for our cultural traditions, will have to begin at the beginning with the biblical accounts of Israel’s origins in Egypt and Canaan, the so-called Exodus and Conquest. But are these dramatic, memorable stories “historical” at all in the modern sense? Where might we turn for external, corroborative (or corrective) evidence? And finally, why should the biblical narratives about ancient Israel, factual or fanciful, matter to anyone any longer?

It is to these questions that this book is addressed.

A word about methodology may be helpful, with particular reference to my task here - that of using archaeological evidence as a “control” (not “proof”) in rereading the biblical texts. I would argue that there are at least five basic approaches to doing so, in a continuum from the right to the left. One can

1. Assume that the biblical text is literally true, and ignore all external evidence as irrelevant.
2. Hold that the biblical text is probably true, but seek external corroboration.
3. Approach the text, as well as the external data, with no preconceptions. Single out the “convergences” of the two lines of evidence, and remain skeptical about the rest.
4. Contend that nothing in the biblical text is true, unless proven by external data.
5. Reject the text and any other data, since the Bible cannot be true.

In the following, I shall resolutely hold to the middle ground - that is, to Approach 3 - because I think that truth is most likely to be found there.

I should acknowledge that in my attempt to tell the “story” of early Israel and to make it accessible to the average educated reader, I have indulged in some oversimplifications. This has been necessary, but nevertheless I have tried to give a balanced account of the data and an honest account of the views of other scholars. The reader will find more details in the works cited at the end of the book. As for my own biases, they will be clear enough.

Since I approach this topic as an archaeologist and historian, not a literary critic of the Hebrew Bible, I have not discussed the numerous works that deal simply with the relevant texts as “literature.” Most of these works, oddly enough, including those both to the left and to the right, eschew the problem of actual historical reconstruction. Such works tend to be a “history of the literature about the history of ancient Israel,” whereas I focus more on what Albright termed the realia.

Finally, by way of introduction, when referring to time periods I shall use some shorthand, thus:

“Late Bronze Age” = ca. 1500-1200 B.C. “Iron I” = ca. 1200-1000 B.C.

Also, for the sake of convenience, I shall often refer to the former as the “Canaanite” era, the latter as the “Israelite” (or “proto-Israelite”) era. Throughout I capitalize “Exodus” and “Conquest” when I am referring specifically to the biblical stories and their traditions, without necessarily prejudging their historicity.

I have not encumbered the text with footnotes, although I do cite year of publication and page numbers for authors whom I quote directly. These and a few other basic works are listed by subject matter at the end of the book, so that readers who wish may delve further into the sources.

I owe a debt to nearly all of the scholars whose works I quote throughout, because I have been privileged to know nearly all of them personally, even those of the pioneer generation, and I have built on their foundations. In particular, I am grateful to my many Israeli colleagues, with whom I have worked for years “viewing the land” (Josh. 2:11), trying to learn the facts on the ground.

I also wish to thank my colleague Professor J. Edward Wright, who read the first draft and made many helpful suggestions on the biblical side - although of course he is not to be held accountable for any idiosyncrasies that remain.

I wrote this book in the few weeks following the death of my son Sean in the spring of 2001, since work is the only therapy I know. His memory inspired me then and now. I dedicate this work, although still in progress, to Sean, for he taught me that it is the journey, not the destination, that matters.

Tucson, Arizona May 2001

CHAPTER 1

The Current Crisis in Understanding the Origins of Early Israel

Until modern literary-critical biblical scholarship began to emerge in the mid-to-late 19th century, the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament was regarded as Scripture, as Holy Writ. Its stories were taken at face value and were read more or less literally by Jews, by Christians, and by the public at large. Indeed, in some circles this is still the case: as my favorite bumper-sticker (usually to be found on a pickup with a rifle rack) puts it: "God said it; I believe it; that settles it!" If only it were that simple.

The Birth of Skepticism

Biblical scholars have long known that all the books of the Hebrew Bible were written long after the events that they purport to describe, and that the Bible as a whole was produced by composite writers and editors in a long and exceedingly complex literary process that stretched over a thousand years. Furthermore, the biases of those orthodox nationalist parties who wrote the Bible are often painfully obvious, even to pious believers. Finally, many of the biblical stories are legend-like and abound with miraculous and fantastic elements that strain the credulity of almost any modern reader of any religious persuasion. All these factors have contributed to the rise of doubts about the Bible's trustworthiness.

The Public Catches On

Gradually the skepticism - in some cases nihilism - of scholars has trickled down to the general public. And in the past few years, readers who value the biblical traditions have become puzzled and even alarmed by what they perceive as a concerted, hostile attack on the Bible - much of it coming from reputable biblical scholars themselves. Now even a few Syro-Palestinian (or "biblical") archaeologists are entering the fray.

A sampling of recent book titles, many intended for the general reader, will indicate the direction in which some current biblical scholarship is taking:

Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (1992).

Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (1996).

Lester Grabbe (ed.), *Can a "History of Israel" Be Written?* (1997).

Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (1999).

Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (2001).

I have even published a recent book myself, although it attempts to counterbalance the skepticism of most of these, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology*

Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel (2001; to sum up my argument, the biblical writers knew a lot, and they knew it early on).

Journalists have already seized on the controversies over “the Bible as history,” especially now that archaeology has become involved. Thus the recent popular expose by Amy Dockser Marcus, a former Middle East correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, entitled *The View from Nebo: How Archaeology Is Rewriting the Bible and Reshaping the Middle East* (2000). Even though this book's treatment of archaeology is superficial and tends toward the sensational, it has been influential in some circles (more on this in Chapter 12).

Largely as a result of these and a few similar books, the public is becoming aware that long-cherished notions about the “Bible as history” are being questioned, undermined, and often rejected, not only by a generation of younger, disaffected, postmodern scholars, but even by members of the religious and institutional Establishment. In seminaries the Bible and biblical history are being rewritten by constructionist literary critics, political activists, New Left ideologues, radical feminists, Third World Liberation theologians, social constructivists, multiculturalists, New Age pop-psychologists, and the like. Nor is this a “quiet revolution.”

Sensational stories about these developments in our understanding of the Bible have appeared not only in popular specialty magazines like the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, but also in such mainstream media as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Science*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and even the *Wall Street Journal*. In July of 2000 the *New York Times* ran a lead story entitled “The Bible, as History, Flunks New Archaeological Tests.” Finkelstein and Silberman's recent book, despite its controversial themes and (as we shall see) many flaws, has become an instant bestseller. Its authors, along with myself and others, have recently appeared in many newspaper stories, in interviews with National Public Radio, on television programs for the History Channel and the Learning Channel, and in documentaries filmed for a BBC education television subsidiary.

“Exodus” and “Conquest”: Hot Topics

Whenever I give popular lectures, I find that one of the principal concerns of laypeople is the question of the “Exodus and Conquest.” Anyone even remotely acquainted with Jewish and Christian tradition instinctively grasps that these are fundamental issues, as they have to do with the origins, as well as the distinctive nature, of the people of the Bible. People rightly ask, “If the story of the Exodus from Egypt is all a myth, what can we believe?”

In Israel, the suddenly-fashionable denial of the biblical stories of the Exodus and Conquest takes on special urgency for many because it calls into question early Zionism's fundamental rationale for Jewish claims to the land. A seemingly harmless report of recent archaeological interpretation by Ze'ev Herzog, a Tel Aviv University archaeologist, in the *Ha'aretz Magazine* in October, 1999, caused a firestorm (more on this in Chapter 12). Nor have Palestinian activists been slow to see the implications of the new notion that ancient Israel was “invented” (more on this presently).

Toward a Consensus - and Its Dissolution

Both biblical scholars and archaeologists have pursued the question of what I shall call here “Israelite origins” from the very beginnings of modern scholarship in the late 19th century. Scholars did not raise questions of authorship, date, context, authenticity, and theological significance in order to discredit the texts, as laypeople suspicious of “critical” biblical scholarship often thought in the early 20th century debate between fundamentalists and modernists. They rather meant to provide a more reliable “history-of-events” in biblical times. And none of the events described in the biblical narratives was more formative than those enshrined in the stories of the “Exodus and Conquest.” God’s deliverance of his people from Egyptian bondage to the Promised Land in Canaan - this was the very foundation on which the entire biblical edifice was erected. It was as fundamental to late Israelite history, to the biblical vision of the people’s selfhood, as the American Revolution is to the uniquely American experience and sense of destiny.

As for early archaeologists, they, too, sought to probe ancient Israel’s origins, equally believing them to be unique. Nearly all of the sites excavated in the infancy of archaeology in the Holy Land were sites known from the Bible, dug precisely for the light it was thought they might shed on early biblical history. The principal items on the agenda of the American founder of the “biblical archaeology school” - the inimitable William Foxwell Albright - were “the historicity of the Patriarchs”; “Moses and Monotheisms”; and “the Exodus and Conquest.” Bible in hand, archaeologists excavated sites like Jericho and confidently announced to the waiting world that they had brought to light the very walls that Joshua brought tumbling down. As the English translation of the title of a German journalist’s best-selling book put it, “The Bible Was Right After All” (Und die Bibel hat doch Recht). Earlier in the 20th century, even more enthusiasm and optimism about “biblical archaeology’s” potential for proving the truth of the Bible were common. As one biblical Old Testament scholar put it in the 1930s:

Not a ruined city has been opened up that has given any comfort to unbelieving critics and evolutionists. Every find of archaeologists in Bible lands has gone to confirm Scripture and confound its enemies.... Not since Christ ascended back to heaven have there been so many scientific proofs that God’s word is truth.

As archaeological evidence mounted, however, in the heyday of “biblical archaeology” between the 1930s and the 1950s, the question of Israelite origins grew more intractable. To everyone’s frustration, new data brought more questions than answers. In fact, no one had ever found any archaeological evidence for the Exodus from Egypt. But in order to try to reconstruct the conquest and settlement of Canaan, three competing theories or “models” eventually emerged, to which we shall turn presently.

The “Exodus”- History or Myth?

The story of the Israelites establishing themselves in the Land of Canaan commences with the Exodus from Egypt. It is the beginning of the history of Israel as a nation, and it is recounted in lavish and dramatic detail in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. This epic makes up about one-seventh of the entire material in the history of “all Israel” that extends from Genesis through 2 Kings.

The Biblical Sources and the Background

This sweeping national epic is comprised of two major works that once stood alone: (1) the Pentateuch, or “Five Books of Moses,” Genesis through Deuteronomy (probably originally the “Tetrateuch,” without Deuteronomy); and (2) the “Deuteronomistic history,” the book of Deuteronomy plus Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Scholars have long since known that each of these “strands” of the literary tradition in the Hebrew Bible, now so skillfully woven into a whole, in turn a composite work, written and edited by a group of anonymous authors. The sources of the Pentateuch are thus divided into a “J school” (because of its preference for the divine name Yahweh or Jahweh in German); and an “E school” (for the other Hebrew divine name, Elohim). Traditionally it was thought that J, dated as early as the 10th century B.C., and E, perhaps composed in the 9th century B.C., were edited together in the 8th century or so. Then a final “Priestly school” (known as P) edited both together into the work that we now have, adding much priestly legislation, sometime during the exilic or post-exilic period (6th century B.C.).

Nowadays, however, there is a tendency to see the Pentateuch (or Tetrateuch) as a more unified work, although dated somewhat later, toward the very end of the Monarchy in the 8th or 7th century B.C. Part of the reason for lowering the date is that archaeologists have recently shown that literacy was not widespread in ancient Israel until the 8th century B.C. at the earliest. The Deuteronomistic history, on the other hand, is almost certainly the work of a school of Mosaic reformers (thus “Deuteronomy,” “Second Law”) under Josiah (650-609 B.C.), with final additions concerning the end of Judah added during the exile in the 6th century B.C.

The point here is that both the Pentateuch/Tetrateuch and the Deuteronomistic history were set down in writing in their present form at least 500 years after the Exodus and Conquest they purport to describe. That alone should raise the question of their historical trustworthiness. Most scholars, however, will also argue as I do that the biblical tradition rests not only on contemporary and earlier documentary sources now lost to us, but also on even older oral traditions. Some of these may have their roots in pre-Israelite times in the Bronze Age, when the Exodus would have had to occur.

The specific time frame for the Exodus is now confirmed as the middle to late 13th century B.C., not the 15th century B.C. as formerly thought. The old “high” date, based on imprecise and contradictory biblical schemes of chronology, was determined using the following calculations: Work began on the Jerusalem Temple in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign, and that was 480 years after the Exodus (1 Kings 6:1). Since we know that Solomon died in 930 B.C. (14:25-28; “Shishak” = Sheshonq I, now c. 945-924 B.C.), and he reigned 40 years (11:42), he would have ascended the throne in 970. Thus we add 480 to 966 to get 1446 B.C. - the exact date of the Exodus. But such a high date does not accord at all with the archaeological record in Palestine; today only a handful of diehard fundamentalists would

argue in its favor.

All authorities today agree that the major break in the archaeological sequence in Palestine that would have to be correlated with a shift from “Canaanite” to “Israelite” culture occurred at the end of the Bronze Age, ca. 1250-1150 B.C. This, then, is the actual historical context for the biblical story we know, even though the writers do not tell us that (and, writing centuries later, without the benefit of modern scientific knowledge, could not actually have known it). For instance, the biblical writers speak again and again of the villain of the piece, referring to him simply as “Pharaoh.” This personage, if historical, can only be the infamous Ramses II of the 19th Dynasty (ca. 1290-1224 B.C.). Of the other supposedly “historical details” in the biblical story we shall speak directly.

Virtually everyone is familiar with the basic outline of the biblical story, if not from Sunday school days then from Cecil B. DeMille’s movie *The Ten Commandments* (which starred Yul Brynner as a suitably malevolent Ramses and Charlton Heston as a cardboard Moses). But let us take a look at various details of the ancient biblical narrative, the historical veracity of which might be “tested” against the textual or archaeological evidence that we have today.

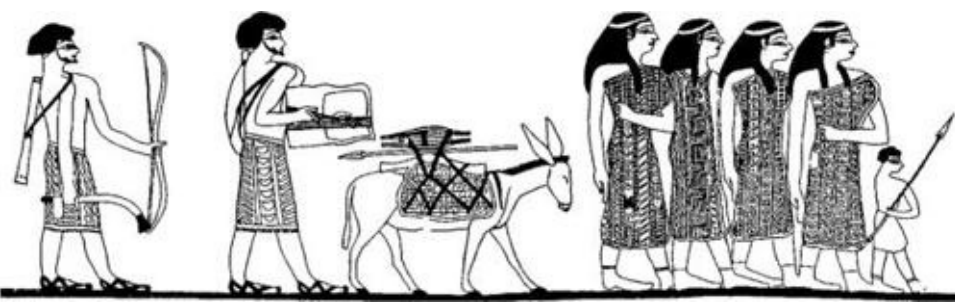


Ramses II, the putative “Pharaoh of the Exodus”

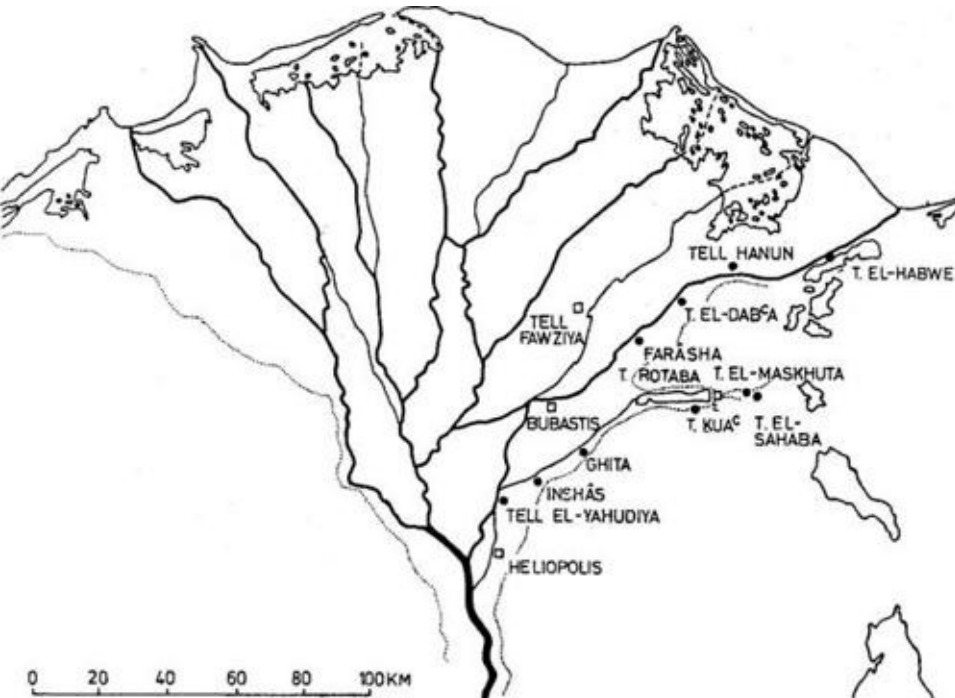
The “Joseph Story”

According to the book of Exodus, trouble for the “children of Israel” in Egypt began with the accession of a “new king ... who did not know Joseph” (1:8). That is all the Bible tells us. However, long ago as the Roman period, scholars were looking for a context in which to place Joseph’s story. The Jewish historian Josephus connected it with the rule of the oncemysterious Hyksos, or “foreign rulers.” The Hyksos were kings of Asiatic descent, interlopers from Canaan who prevailed in the Delta during the 15th dynasty, ca. 1640-1500 B.C., and rivaled the contemporary 16th and 17th Dynasty in central and southern Egypt. Archaeologists have even located and extensively excavated the long-lost Hyksos capital of Avaris, at Tell ed-Dab`a on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile. And its pottery, burial customs, architectural style, and other material culture remains all suggest that the Hyksos were Canaanite in origin. Furthermore, three of the names of the six Hyksos kings that are known from the ancient Egyptian “King Lists” are demonstrably Semitic: one of them is the Amorite/Canaanite name “Yaqub” - the exact equivalent of the Hebrew name of the biblical Patriarch Jacob. The same name occurs on a scarab of the Hyksos period found recently at a site near the coast of Israel.

In Josephus’s scenario, the “new king” who did not know the Hyksos Joseph would have been one of the early rulers of the nascent 18th Dynasty. These vigorous leaders founded the New Kingdom and expelled the Asiatics from the Delta, destroying Avaris and pursuing the survivors all the way back to Canaan. There, in a series of annual campaigns from ca. 1524 to 1450 B.C., the 18th Dynasty Egyptian kings ruthlessly destroyed almost every fortified Middle Bronze site. All this is corroborated by both the Egyptian texts and recent archaeological excavations at Tell ed-Dab`a in Egypt and at numerous sites in Israel and the West Bank. Josephus goes so far as to identify the “new king” specifically with Thutmose III, whose annual campaigns in Canaan following his accession in 1457 B.C. are wellattested. And of course that date, along with biblical synchronisms, was once thought to point to ca. 1446 B.C. as the date of the Exodus. We can see from all this that Josephus’s recasting of the traditional biblical stories that he knew is far from being fantastic; it may even seem to have some genuine historical basis. But the archaeological evidence we have today tells us that the “new king” who persecuted Joseph’s descendants could not have been Thutmose. It would have to have been Ramses II, some two centuries later. I shall come back to the Joseph story later, at the end of the book, because it turns out to be significant whatever the supposed historical background and date of composition. But now the stage is set for the events of the Exodus that are about to unfold; and so far the story is credible, at least to the extent that we can realistically expect accuracy from ancient historians and their sources. As we continue, however, it must be borne in mind that no Egyptian text ever found contains a single reference to “Hebrews” or “Israelites” in Egypt, much less to a “Exodus.” Of course, true believers will explain the silence by supposing that the proud Egyptians would never have admitted such a defeat. But archaeology may tell us a different story.

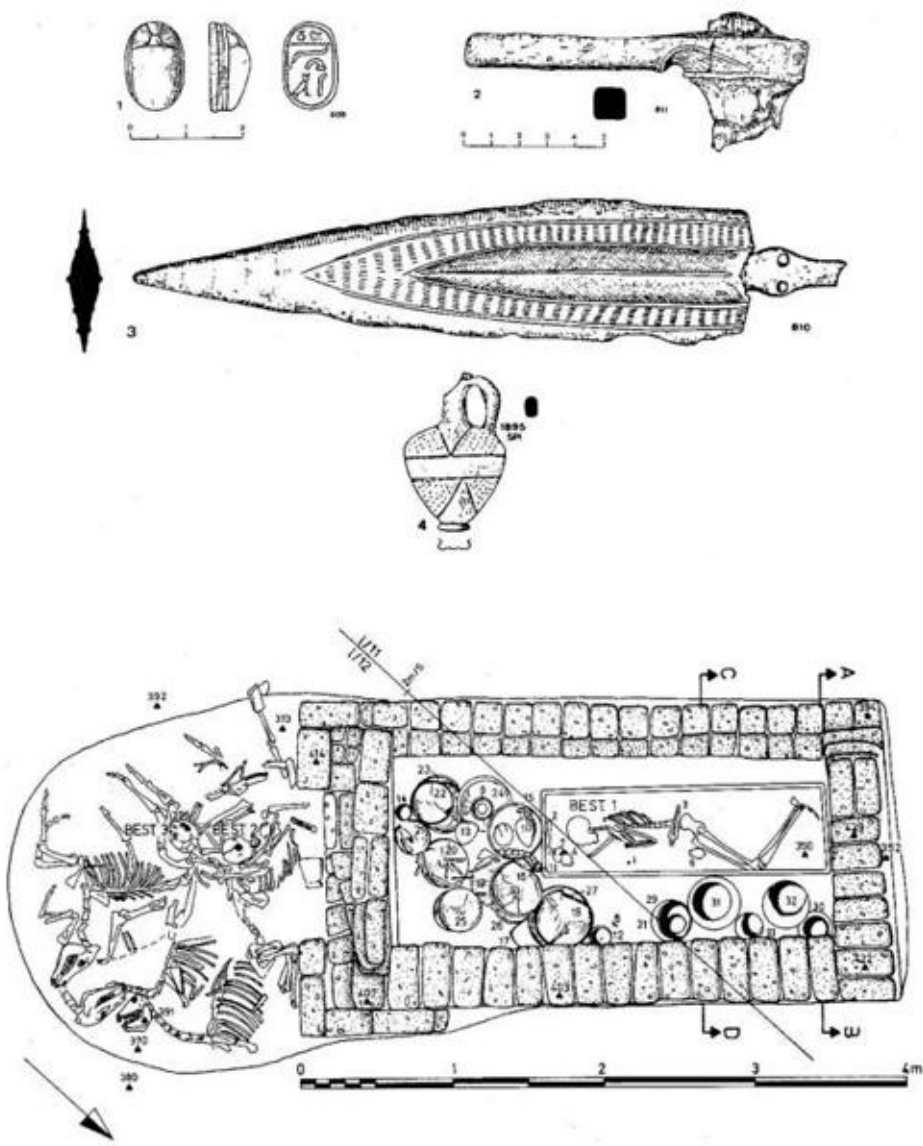


Wall painting from a tomb at Beni Hassan in Egypt, depicting a trading party of Asiatics from Canaan; note the “coat of many colors” resembling that of Joseph (Gen. 37:23). Early 12th Dynasty (ca. 1900 B.C.).



Map of Middle Bronze Age sites in the eastern Nile Delta, ca. 1900-1500 B.C.

Manfred Bietak, Avaris: The Capital of the Hyksos

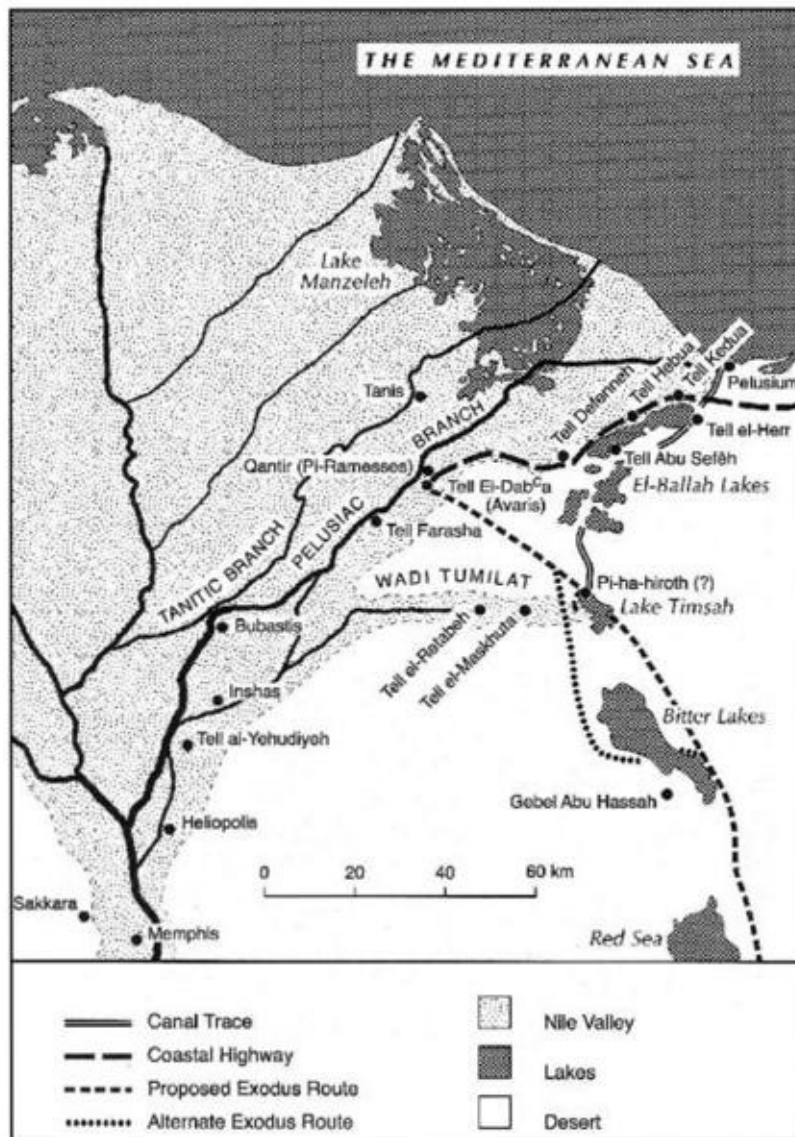


Tomb and grave goods of typical Asiatic (Canaanite) Middle Bronze Age types from Tell ed-Dab' ca. 1900-1750 B.C.

Manfred Bietak, Avaris: The Capital of the Hyksos

Bondage in Egypt

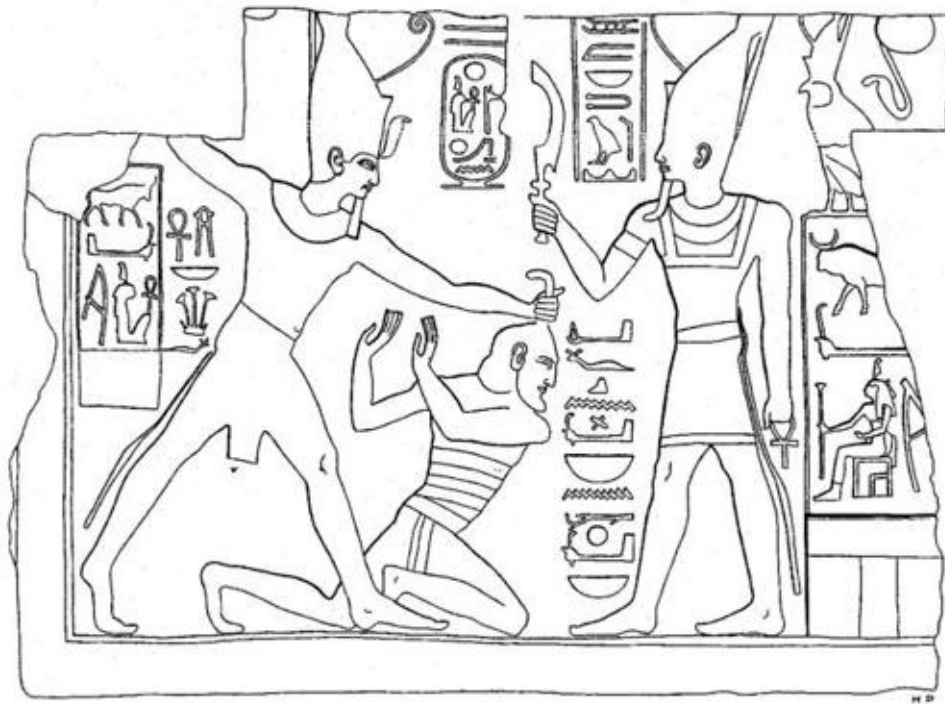
According to the biblical story, what precipitated the crisis was the fact that the Egyptian king enslaved the Hebrews, who had been long-time resident aliens in Egypt, in order to construct royal “store cities, Pithom and Ramses” (Exod. iiii). Scholars have long searched for Egyptian sites by the names. “Pithom” (Per-Atum) has been plausibly identified with the mound of Tell el-Maskhuta, or possibly nearby Tell el-Retabeh. Both sites have been partially excavated by archaeologists, and they turn out to have been occupied in the “Hyksos” or Middle Kingdom period. The latter, however, was abandoned throughout the New Kingdom and the early Ramesside period, resettled only in the 12th century B.C. And the former has no occupation after the Middle Kingdom until the Saite period (late 7th century B.C.). Thus our best candidates for “Pithom” do not fit the required historical circumstances in the mid-13th century B.C.



Map of the eastern Nile Delta, showing possible location of “Pithom” and “Ramses”

James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*

Biblical “Ramses,” however, has now been conclusively identified with Avaris, the old Hyksos capital located at Tell ed-Dab`a, mentioned above. And Dab`a provides extensive evidence for a possible historical setting for some of the biblical memories and stories. There is an Egyptian destruction that took place around 1530 B.c.; a long period of abandonment during most of the New Kingdom; and a refounding as the royal city of “Ramses” (or “Pi-Ramesses”) in the time of Ramses II. Of course, no actual building remains have been found, much less the slave camps (of which little could be expected to be preserved, and nothing definitive). But Asiatic slaves - among them possibly the ancestors of the Israelites - may indeed have been employed in making mudbricks (Exod. 5:5-21) for Ramses II’s construction projects there and elsewhere in the Delta.



Ramses II smiting a foreigner

The Ten Plagues

At this point the biblical writers bring the character of Moses to the fore. As a result of Pharaoh's increasing oppression, Moses, born a Hebrew but reared an adopted son of the royal household, becomes a protagonist for the Hebrew slaves. He challenges Pharaoh, but Pharaoh's "heart hardened" (Exod. 7:14). So Yahweh, Moses' newly revealed patron deity, sends terrible plagues upon the Egyptians until Pharaoh finally relents and frees the slaves (chs. 8-12).

The story of the ten plagues has intrigued and troubled both lay readers and scholars for centuries. The events are all presented as miracles: dramatic and conclusive proof of Yahweh's intervention in nature and history on behalf of his people, and also of course an exhibition of the impotence of Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Yet since these "fantastic" events are scarcely credible to sophisticated modern readers, it is tempting to seek naturalistic explanations. And most of the plagues are susceptible to such common-sense explanations - indeed are all too familiar to those who live in the Middle East and have experienced them as typical "natural disasters." Periodic infestations by frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts (plague nos. 2, 3, 4, and 8) are common in the region. Contagious diseases whose causes are unknown but which afflict cattle (no. 5) are nearly as common today as they were in antiquity. Adverse weather conditions like unseasonal flooding, hail, and dark storms (nos. 7, 9) are characteristic of the eastern Mediterranean climate. And anyone who has traveled widely in the Middle East has seen the ubiquitous skin diseases (no. 6, "boils") of the area, among them the "Baghdad boil" or the "Jericho rose," now identified and treated as subcutaneous Leishmaniasis, a pernicious infection caused by a parasite carried by sand flies (as I know from contracting it in Jordan in 1962).

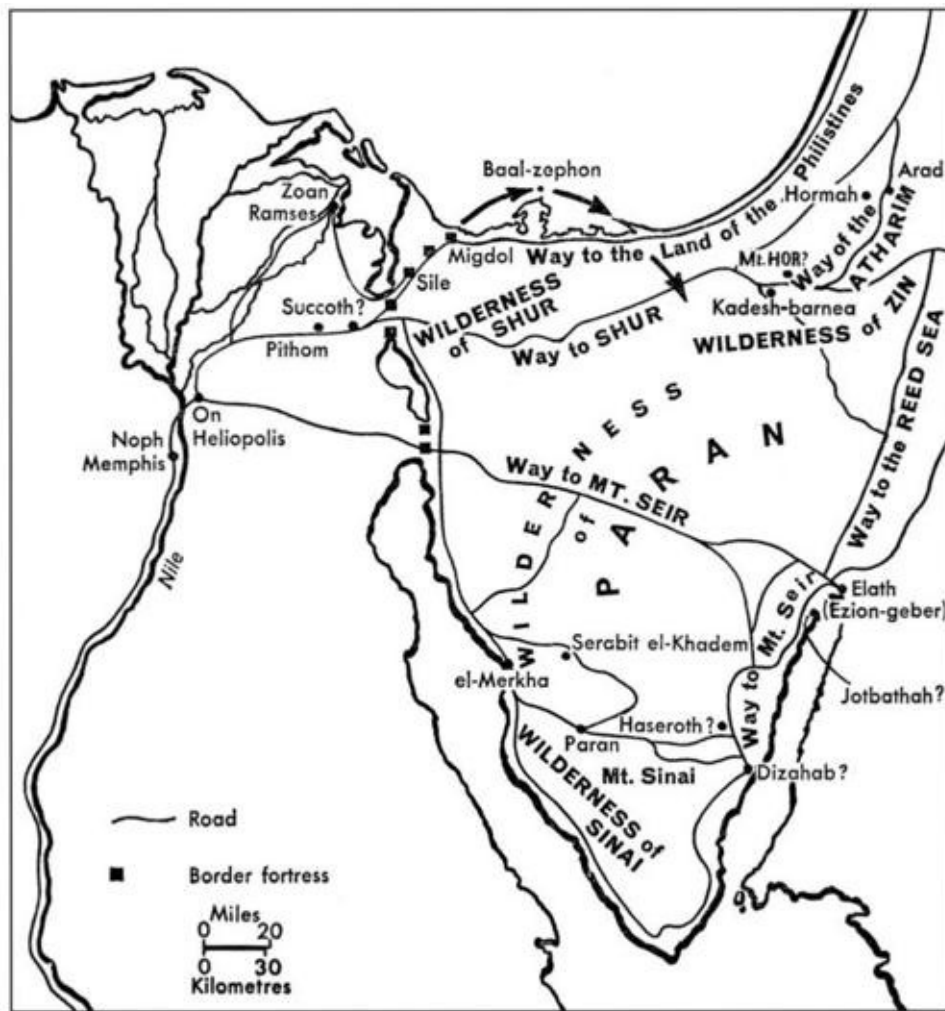
The last and most terrible plague, however - the death of all firstborn males among the Egyptians (Exod. 12:29-32) - is not easily explained. Even some deadly contagious disease that is documentable

could not have been that selective. There is simply no naturalistic way of accounting for this particular plague (and whether there is a moral way of accounting for the actions of such a vengeful deity is another question altogether).

Impressive though various attempts at rational explanations of the ten plagues of Exodus may be, they all miss the point of the biblical narrative, which is that such events cannot be explained. They are miracles, supernatural events. To say otherwise would be to negate Yahweh's power over Nature; and that is among the most damnable of all heresies. Attempting to "explain away" the biblical miracles is profoundly against the spirit and intent of the biblical writers. You either accept them, incredible as they may seem, or you do not. It is a matter of faith, not of reason - nor archaeology. Archaeological data can illuminate the historical context of the biblical narratives; to think it can (or should) prove or disprove miracles is, again, to miss the point.

The Crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea

Following Pharaoh's capitulation, the biblical story has the freed slaves setting out on their perilous journey through the Sinai Desert in the direction of faraway Canaan, the "Land of Promise." First comes another, stupendous miracle: thousands upon thousands of the helpless refugees from Pharaoh's wrath flee across the Red Sea, crossing on dry land as Moses parts the waters. Pharaoh's horses and chariots pursue, only to be drowned when the waters close over them (Exod. 14:21-31; who can forget the scene in *The Ten Commandments*?). As with the plagues, naturalistic explanations have long been sought for this miracle. For instance, it has been pointed out that the Hebrew text in Exodus does not actually mean "Red Sea"; the correct rendering of the term *yam siif* here and elsewhere (Isaiah 11:15) is "Reed Sea." Some suggest that the Reed Sea was a shallow, marshy area somewhere where the northern section of the Suez Canal is today, where it was possible for people on foot to ford the water, but which would have bogged horses and heavy iron chariots down in the mud. In any case it is unlikely to refer to any part of the Red Sea, which is salt water and thus devoid of reeds. Furthermore, an exhaustive analysis of the topography of the northern Nile Valley in ancient times does not reveal any place where the water could easily have been forded, although various "routes" have been proposed. But again, all this rationalization misses the point of the biblical story.



Proposed “routes of the Exodus” and “wandering in the wilderness”

Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*

(Some time ago, I was visited by a frustrated entrepreneur, obviously a pious believer, who claimed that he knew exactly where the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. He even predicted where the remains of the Egyptian chariots would be found, well preserved in the deep salt water. But I explained that the Egyptian authorities had refused to grant him a license to do underwater archaeology. If I would only come in with him, as a professional archaeologist, we would get the permit, carry out a fabulous project, and would both become, as he put it, “rich and famous.” I told him that I was already sufficiently rich and famous, and suggested another destination where the good man might go. I never heard from him again, but I imagine that he is still a believer.)

Wandering in the Wilderness

Much of the biblical story of the escape from Egypt and its aftermath is devoted to the crossing of the Sinai Desert, largely because of the literary and theological themes that the writers intend to develop in this setting. Among the events are the census of the people; the revelation of Yahweh at Sinai; the giving of the Ten Commandments; the establishment of a covenant relationship with Israel’s new god, Yahweh (who soon supplants the old Canaanite-style deity El); Yahweh’s miraculous guidance and sustenance in the “great and terrible wilderness” (Deut. 8:15); the establishment of the tabernacle, priesthood, and cult; the people’s faithlessness and disobedience; the punishment of an entire

generation, forced to camp for thirty-eight years at the oasis of Kadesh-barnea; the renewal of the promise of the Land of Canaan and the demarcation of the Israelite boundaries; and, finally, instructions for the conquest of the land after making a forced entry at Jericho (Exodus 15-4; Leviticus 1-24; Numbers 1-36).

Much of this long account is very detailed, listing dozens if not hundreds of individuals, place-names, commandments, regulations, and the like. But the account is often disjointed, and scholars have long regarded it as a composite work of the so-called J and E schools of authors in the 8th-7th centuries B.C., extensively reworked by the P (or "Priestly") editors in the 6th-5th centuries B.C. (for instance, the addition of almost the whole of Leviticus; see further above). What evidence from either textual or archaeological data can be brought to bear on the question of the historicity of the Sinai epic? The biblical texts themselves are suspect, for many reasons.

i. The cumbersome detail throughout often seems superfluous, and since it can scarcely have been handed down accurately for centuries in oral tradition, it must have been partly invented to give the story credence.

2. Some of the information is clearly fanciful, as for instance the tribal census lists (Num. 1), which total 603,550; similarly the contradictory claim that the tribes could field a fighting force of 600,000 men (Exod. 12:37), which would work out to a total population of some 2.5-3 million. There is simply no way that the Sinai Desert, then or now, could have supported more than a very few thousand nomads.

3. Much of the incredibly complex priestly legislation (especially throughout Leviticus) can only reflect the later institutional cult of urban life in the Monarchy, not the experience of desert wanderers. And even then, the tradition clearly represents a priestly ideal, not the realities of either State or folk religion. Most of Leviticus, for instance, simply does not have the "ring of truth" about it; and, not surprisingly, historians and lay readers alike tend to ignore it, or find it lacking in moral edification. (Try to read the book sometime!)

4. Then there is the problem of the itinerary, or the "stages" of the journey as Numbers 33 puts it in its summary. Dozens of sites are listed matter-of-factly here and there in the overall account, as though the reader of a later day knew of their existence. But the fact is that only a few sites in the entire biblical text have ever been persuasively identified (if indeed so many ever existed in the barren and hostile Sinai). One is "Migdol," which is probably to be located at the site of a fortress on the Sinai coast near Lake Bardawil. But Israeli excavations have shown that Migdol was an Egyptian fortress on the border of the eastern Nile Delta, and it was occupied only in the Saite period (7th-6th centuries B.C.). That is when many scholars think that the Priestly version was written and the J and E accounts re-edited. That would explain why the biblical editors knew where the site of "Migdol" actually was, although they did not know that it lacked any earlier history.

The only other known site is "Kadesh-barnea," where the Israelites are said to have sojourned for some 38 years (Num. 13,14, 20). It has long been identified with Tell el-Qudeirat near the oasis of Ain Qudeis in the northeastern Sinai, on the border with Canaan, which still preserves in Arabic the ancient Hebrew name. The mound near the springs was extensively excavated by Israeli archaeologists in 1956 and again in 1976-1982, when Israel temporarily occupied the Sinai. Yet despite high hopes of

shedding light on what would have amounted to a national shrine, Israeli archaeologists found that there was only a small fort there, with several phases dating to the 10th-7th centuries B.C.

There was not so much as a potsherd from the 13th-12th centuries B.C., the time frame required, as we have seen, for the Exodus. It would appear that Kadesh-barnea was not occupied earlier, but became a pilgrim-site during the Monarchy, no doubt because it had come to be associated with the biblical tradition which by then would have begun to take shape. Thus after a hundred years of exploration and excavation in the Sinai Desert, archaeologists can say little about "the route of the Exodus," even where the dry desert sands would likely have preserved the evidence. Both a "northern" and a "southern" route have been proposed, but these are almost entirely speculative (see the illustration on p. 17 above).

5. Finally there is the recurrent problem of miracles - the whole of the biblical story of the crossing of the Sinai is miraculous, and deliberately so. Yahweh himself goes at the head of the column, guiding the wandering hordes with "a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night" (Num. 14:14). He provides water from rocks; multitudinous birds for prey; and a breadlike substance, "manna," that can be gathered fresh each morning. The desert miraculously feeds several million people.



The small mound of Tell el-Qudeirat, probably biblical Kadesh-barnea

William G. Dever

Once again, attempts have been made to explain these miracles as natural phenomena. It has been suggested that the heavenly fire and smoke may have been caused by the well-known volcanic eruption on Santorini, ancient Thera, debris from which might have drifted and been visible in the atmosphere this far away. As long as that eruption was dated ca. 1450 B.C., the chronology seemed to work, at least for the traditional 15th century B.C. date (above). But now the date of the "Exodus" must be lowered to the 13th century B.C.; and meanwhile a growing consensus based on scientific chronometric methods dates the eruption at Thera to ca. 1675 B.C.

The reference to abundant quails that are said to have "covered the camp" (Exod. 16:13) may be

explained by the fact that low-flying migrating birds do come in over the northern Sinai coast in great numbers, and even today Bedouin catch them easily in nets rigged on the sand dunes (but not inland). The description of the mysterious “manna” (the Hebrew name means “What is it?”; Exod. 16:14-21) has been connected to the secretion of a sweet sticky substance by tamarisk shrubs in the desert, caused by two species of scale insects. Considerable quantities of the edible stuff could have been gathered; but it is seasonal, and in any case would hardly have been enough to feed several million people for even a short time. Once again, such “naturalistic” explanations beg the question of miracles and their religious significance in the Hebrew Bible. The events are the *magnalia dei*, the “mighty acts of God,” or they are nothing.

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