

THE HISTORICITY OF THE EXODUS: PERSPECTIVES FROM ANCIENT EGYPT

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Introduction

One of the most controversial and profound debates of the past two millennia concerns the historicity of the many stories of the Hebrew Bible. These are difficult arguments to make, as the Bible, which began as an oral tradition, only contains stories written long after the occurrence of the events within them. One of the most important debates, fundamental to the story of the creation of the Jewish “nation,” is the discussion surrounding the Exodus. Debating the historicity of the Exodus differs from that of other Bible stories in that it can draw from con-

temporary Egyptian literary sources, which are especially abundant in comparison to the lack of contemporary written sources found in the Levant. Analyzing these sources is complicated by the fact that the Exodus does not explicitly state when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, however. Contemporary Egyptian sources also fail to mention an exodus; that being said, because these sources were forms of royal propaganda, they would have avoided mentioning military defeat, thereby not discounting the historicity of the Exodus.¹ Nonetheless, these

conversations surrounding the Exodus have continued for thousands of years. In the discussion of the historicity of the Exodus, many scholars have argued that the historical basis for the latter parts of Genesis—the stories of Jacob and Joseph—and of Exodus is the rulership of the 15th dynasty Hyksos kings in Egypt and their subsequent expulsion at the end of the Second Intermediate Period. There are a myriad of problems with this theory, however; it is much more plausible that the Exodus occurred under the 19th dynasty Pharaoh, Merneptah.

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An Argument Against Hyksos Rulers as the Historical Basis for Genesis and Exodus

The Hyksos rulers—also known as Asiatics—were non-Egyptian kings from the Near East that ruled northern Egypt during the 15th dynasty, ca. 1640-1550 BCE. Many proponents of the historical truth of the Exodus argue that the Hyksos rulers were analogous to the Israelites discussed in Exodus. Scholars have held this view for thousands of years; the theory's first advocate was Flavius Josephus, who lived around the first century CE or earlier.² As explained in Ronald Geobey's article, "Joseph the Infiltrator, Jacob the Conqueror? Reexamining the Hyksos-Hebrew Correlation," however, it is implausible that the Hyksos were the Israelites of the end of Genesis and Exodus.

There are several fundamental differences between the story of the Hyksos rulers and the biblical story of the Exodus. Most notably, the timelines of the Exodus and of the 15th dynasty fail to align. Exodus 1:11 makes it clear that the Jewish slaves of Exodus constructed the city of "Rameses," which scholars

agree is the city of Piramesse built by Pharaoh Ramesses II (who reigned from 1279-1213 BCE).¹ As such, the



Israelites could not have been the Hyksos rulers who were deposed and expelled from Egypt over 300

years prior. In addition, the Hyksos kings only ruled for about a century, and Exodus asserts that the Israelites lived in Egypt for 430 years. The failure to connect the timelines of Hyksos rule and Israelite Exodus alone sheds doubt on the "Hyksos-Hebrew correlation."

Other troubling incongruities arise from the story that the Israelites, who in the Bible were slaves, were actually Hyksos kings. The Hebrew Bible's demonization of Egypt that begins in Exodus and continues throughout the rest of the text must be considered. Why would biblical writers not celebrate or even mention Israelite rulership over a large part of Egypt, their "ancient arch-enemy"? Would biblical writers not have celebrated Israelite power over Egypt during this period of ethnic formation? What motivation would they have to change the story of Hyksos rulership to a story of slavery and oppression?² No matter how the story of the Hyksos rulership is contorted, it cannot fit the story of Genesis and Exodus.

Statue of Amenemhat III found at the entrance of the Temple of Bubastis

A Plausible Historical View of the Exodus

Even though there are clear holes in the theory that the Hyksos rulers were the historical Israelites expelled from Egypt, that does not mean that the Exodus did not happen. In fact, many biblical scholars and archaeologists believe in the historicity of the Exodus, including Hoffmeier. Archaeological evidence, the Hebrew Bible, and Egyptian texts support the narrative of a Jewish Exodus, one that probably occurred during the reign of the 19th dynasty pharaoh, Merenptah.

Available archaeological evidence confirms the existence of a large population of people of Canaanite origin in Egypt. Beginning in the First Intermediate Period, when the Delta was not substantially controlled by either of the two competing Egyptian pharaohs, there was a significant influx of Asiatic peoples. In fact, Avaris, the capital of the kingdom ruled by the Hyksos during the Second Intermediate period, was likely founded as a military outpost during the First Intermediate Period in order to

"check" Asiatic immigration, as evidenced by the outer wall that protected it. Between the First and Second Intermediate Periods, there was a clear presence of Asiatic culture in Avaris, but the presence of Asiatic people was not entirely confirmed until the Second Intermediate Period.³ While this finding indicates the presence of Asiatic people in Egypt, it does not speak to whether these people were the historical Israelites, per se, whose tribal grouping represented only a fraction of the Asiatic peoples.

The Hebrew text of Exodus contains several Egyptian linguistic roots. First and foremost, Moses is an Egyptian name, sharing a root with many other common Egyptian names—e.g. the pharaonic names Thutmose and Ramesses—that means "born of." This is consistent with the story of Moses's birth and upbringing by the daughter of the pharaoh, who named him as such because she "drew him out of the water" after his mother left him in a basket floating down the Nile.¹

In addition, many words in Exodus are probably of Egyptian origin. For example, in Exodus 2:3, "And when she could hide him no longer she took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed it with bitumen and pitch; and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink," the Hebrew words for basket, bulrushes, pitch, reeds, and river's brink derive from ancient Egyptian.³ The influence of ancient Egyptian on the development of the Hebrew language indicates substantial cultural interaction between the Israelites and the Egyptians; these cultures were geographically proximate and participated in interregional trade, so Egypt's influence on Hebrew is predictable and does not confirm that the Israelites as a whole lived in Egypt. The linguistic connection between the two nations, however, especially in the words of Exodus itself, emphasizes the great extent to which the two cultures interacted. In addition to linguistic evidence for Jewish presence in Egypt, there are various types of textual ev-

idence. References to Egypt in other parts of the Hebrew Bible indicate Israel's detailed awareness of Egyptian history and culture at the time of its writing. Richard Steiner argues the same by analyzing Leviticus 18; Leviticus 18:3 reads, "So do not act like the people in Egypt, where you used to live, or like the people of Canaan, where I am taking you. You must not imitate their way of life." The remainder of Leviticus 18 outlaws many extremely specific incestuous practices. Leviticus's admonition against incest as an Egyptian practice is paradoxical, however, as incest was not a widespread practice in ancient Egypt, with the exception of incestuous marriages within the royal family. Steiner argues that based on the scholarly claim that the Israelites left Egypt under Merenptah soon after the death of his father, Ramesses II, Leviticus 18 is based on Ramesses II's incestuous marriage practices.⁴ With comparatively so little intercultural communication during this period, few arguments for specific Israelite knowledge of Ramesses II's incestuous activities make sense besides Israelite presence in Egypt.

Biblical literature also has other clearly Egyptian cultural influences hidden within it; Joshua Berman

argues that the Kadesh poem inscription, written in the reign of Ramesses II, lays the structural foundation for the Exodus sea account. He compares the order of events of the Kadesh poem and the Exodus sea account, which are remarkably analogous, although Exodus omits some scenes that appear only in the Kadesh poem.⁵ These stories' incredible similarities suggest that the authors of one had knowledge of the other while they composed their stories. Two versions of the story told in the Kadesh poem exist in Egyptian monuments: the "bulletin"—written in prose—and the "poem." Both versions had multiple copies inscribed on temple walls throughout Egypt, including at Luxor, Karnak, Abydos, the Ramesseum, and Abu Simbel, and the poem has also been found on multiple papyri. It is possible that if Israelites were enslaved to build the pharaoh's monuments, they could have memorized such inscriptions and then carved them onto the pharaoh's temples themselves. Even if the Israelites were not employed in these specific temple building projects, the survival of numerous copies of the poem—eight of which have been discovered—suggests that literate Israelites would have known the poem.⁶ The clear correlation

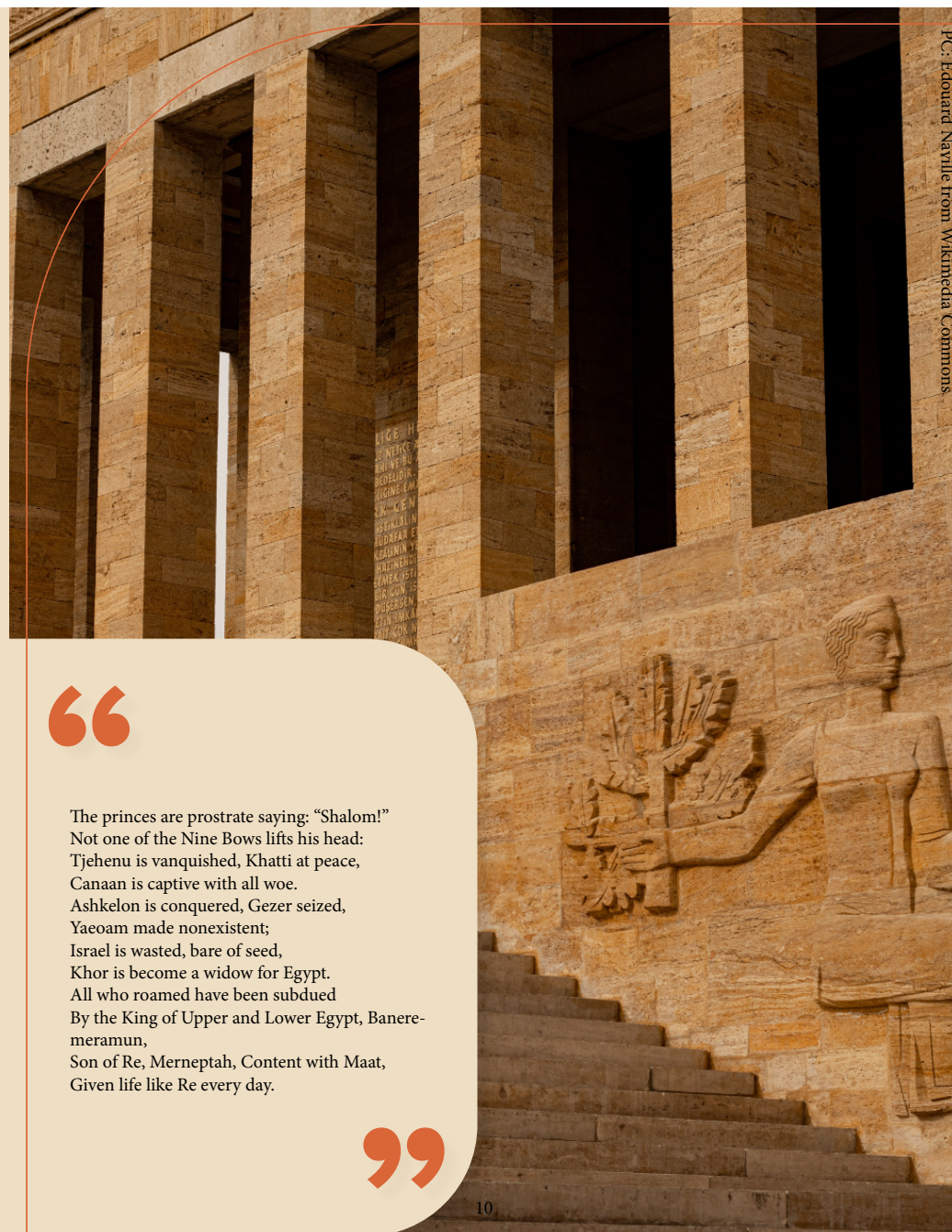
between the Kadesh poem and two chapters of Exodus indicates Israel's strong familiarity with Egyptian culture under Ramesses II.

The text of Exodus also offers an overt hint at a plausible time period for its story: the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites with forced labor, demanding that they build the city of Pithom and Ramesses.¹ Most Egyptologists agree that the biblical city of Ramesses is Piramesse—"House of Ramesses"—built by Ramesses II.⁴ Thus, the Israelites would have left Egypt during the reign of Ramesses's son, Merenptah, who reigned from 1213–1203 BCE. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Israelites arrived in Canaan around 1200 BCE, making their Exodus from Egypt during the reign of Merenptah plausible.¹ Besides the chronological sense made when postulating that Merenptah was the Exodus pharaoh, other evidence from within Egypt itself supports this possibility. A stele exalting Merenptah and his time as pharaoh carved during his lifetime is often interpreted as an account of the Exodus from an Egyptian point of view.⁴ The relevant section of Merenptah's stele reads:

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The princes are prostrate saying: "Shalom!"
Not one of the Nine Bows lifts his head:
Tjehenu is vanquished, Khatti at peace,
Canaan is captive with all woe.
Ashkelon is conquered, Gezer seized,
Yaoam made nonexistent;
Israel is wasted, bare of seed,
Khor is become a widow for Egypt.
All who roamed have been subdued
By the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Banerem-
meramun,
Son of Re, Merneptah, Content with Maat,
Given life like Re every day.

”



Though this is a work of royal Egyptian propaganda, and thus must be taken with a grain of salt, it is important to note that the only mention of Israel in all ancient Egyptian texts occurs in this inscription.⁶ Though Merenptah's stele appears to contradict the story of the Israelites' victory in the Exodus, the claimed outcome of the conflict with Israel in the inscription is probably far from the truth because it was a work of propaganda. Whether or not the inscription tells the truth, the presence of Israel in royal propaganda at this time indicates that Egypt had some sort of major conflict with the Israelites during Merenptah's reign.

Both of the opposing arguments for assigning the appropriate time period to the Exodus center on the same location: Ramesses II's capital of Pi-Ramesse was in the same place as the Hyksos capital city, Avaris, and was built or expanded upon the pre-existing city. The previously mentioned archaeological evidence, combined with Pi-Ramesse/Avaris's strategic location near the border between Egypt and Syria-Palestine offers an explanation for this coincidence: Egyptian cities in the Northwestern Delta were more likely to have large populations of Asiatic peoples than those far to the south because of their proximity to the Near East.³ Although there is no concrete evidence for this, one explanation for the Avaris-Pi-Ramesse connection can be found in Exodus. If the Bible's timeline—which indicates that the Israelites lived in Egypt for 430 years—is true, then they would have arrived in Egypt around 1638 BCE, at the start of the Hyksos rul-

ership.⁷ This is a plausible explanation for the Israelites' initial arrival in Egypt: there was an influx of Asiatic people into Avaris who, rather than being expelled with their king and elites at the end of the Hyksos dynasty, remained in Egypt as slaves for several centuries.³ That being said, more archaeological investigation into this possibility is needed.

Based on evidence from both the Hebrew Bible and Egypt itself, it is clear that the Egyptian and Israelite cultures interacted in a significant way during the reigns of Ramesses II and his son, Merenptah. In the Bible, both Exodus and Leviticus 18 contain subtle references to and influences from Egyptian culture and history. Exodus' brief revelation that the Israelites built the city of Ramesses also allows us to construct a plausible historical timeline of the Exodus around the reigns of Pharaohs Ramesses II and Merenptah. As Berlin and Brettler remark in their introduction to Exodus in *The Jewish Study Bible*, "if the Israelites had invented their history, it seems more likely that they would have portrayed themselves as the original inhabitants of their land rather than as interlopers with a humiliating background as slaves."¹ This is a complex issue that will probably never be proven one way or the other unless archaeologists find more concrete evidence of Jewish presence in Egypt; nevertheless, however, currently available evidence indicates that a historical basis for the Exodus occurred during the reign of Merenptah during Egypt's 19th dynasty.

Conclusion

The Exodus is an important story to the Jewish people. In analyzing the available evidence on the subject, it is clear that Egypt and Israel had substantial interactions that informed the book of Exodus as well as other parts of the Hebrew Bible. It is also clear that whatever happened between the two peoples occurred during the 19th dynasty reigns of Ramesses II and Merenptah, not during the 15th dynasty Hyksos rul-

ership as some scholars have argued. Even though the evidence is scarce, as it is in many parts of the ancient world, the success of Exodus is astounding. Exodus is the first part of the Hebrew Bible in which the Israelites become a people or a nation rather than just the small family of Abraham. Israel's nation-building period in Egypt worked: Merenptah, the probable pharaoh of the book of Exodus, mentioned Israel in one of

his inscriptions. There is always further research to be done around this topic, and in this case, it must involve greater archaeological inspection of Avaris/Pi-Ramesse. No matter what is found in these excavations, Israel's fascinating rise to nationhood within the Egyptian empire will continue to produce engaging academic arguments, as it has for the past 2000 years.

