

# The Theology and History of the Exodus: The State of the Question

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**Abstract:** The archaeological record as we currently understand it does not confirm the circumstances and date for the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Indeed it does not unequivocally indicate that it happened at all. It is argued that while it may not matter that the precise details of the event are unknown to us, it is important to accept that the event did actually happen.

The Exodus is the early apex of the salvation history of the Old Testament. The Exodus fueled Israel's self-identity as the chosen people of God. It was part of the complex of redemptive events that transformed them from a family of God to a nation of God. The Exodus was a salvation event that was epitomized by the crossing of the *Yam Suph*, commonly, but probably incorrectly, translated Red Sea (Exod. 14-15). This Sea crossing not only provided rescue for threatened Israel but also simultaneously judged her enemies. The special status of this rescue is underlined by the fact that Moses and his people found themselves in an impossible situation with the Sea on one side and an embarrassed and angry Pharaoh and his elite chariot troops on the other. There was no human avenue of escape. They were cut off, but God did the impossible, opened the Sea and allowed them to escape. And then he closed the Sea to execute judgment on their enemies. The Exodus gave Israel its self-identity. From such a description we can recognize that it is hard to underestimate the importance of the Exodus event. But did it happen and does it matter whether or not it happened?

We begin with an assessment of the current state of the historical evidence in regard to the Exodus. We must admit that there is no direct evidence outside of the Bible for the Exodus. There is no mention of Israel or Moses in Egyptian sources for instance. Purported discoveries of the wheels of Pharaoh's chariots beside the Red Sea are misleading if not fraudulent and are decisively debunked by Cline (2007).

Of course, we can immediately recognize why there is such an absence. We rarely hear of Egyptian defeats from Egyptian sources and this event would have been particularly embarrassing to Egypt. This is not the type of event that they would want to remember or memorialize on a large stone monument or on tomb walls.

What we do have on tomb walls, however, does show that Semitic peoples were engaged in slave labour in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium in Egypt. As early as the reign of Thutmose III around 1460 BC we have scenes of foreigners who are making bricks for the temple of Amun in Thebes for instance. This is one example of some indirect evidence that can be marshalled to make the account of the Exodus sound reasonable.<sup>1</sup> In this context, we should also note that the first extra-biblical evidence for the existence of Israel as a people in Egypt comes from the very end of the 13<sup>th</sup>

Century BC in a victory monument of Pharaoh Merneptah (also known as the Israel stele), which mentions Israel as a vanquished enemy (Hallo and Younger 2000: 40-1).

However, there are further problems connected to the archaeology of both Egypt and Palestine as it relates to the Exodus and the closely related Conquest. Here we can only be illustrative rather than exhaustive, but in short the results of archaeological research over the past one hundred years do not fit easily with the biblical description of the Exodus and conquest.

The problem extends to the issue of the date of the conquest. This problem is raised on two levels. For one, the chronological information that we do get in the Bible is in the form of relative, not absolute dates and we have to transform them to our system. As we will see, we also have to reckon with the possibility that the dates we are given are not actual numbers but symbolic. And then second, the biblical text does not provide the name of the pharaohs.

Beginning with the second issue, imagine how many of our issues would be resolved if the narrative had named the Pharaoh! Thutmose or Raamses, or perhaps another, but the account does not give us a name and its absence raises the question of why not. Hoffmeier has been helpful in responding to this issue by pointing out that it is likely that the biblical account is mimicking the Egyptian practice of not naming and thus glorifying an enemy (Hoffmeier 1997:109, 112).

Now on to the first issue: How do biblical scholars convert the relative dates of the Bible into absolute dates? After all, in the Bible we do not have an absolute dating system like our contemporary BC (BCE) and AD (CE) system. Events are recorded using a relative dating system. The same is true when it comes to dating the Exodus. The main text is 1 Kings 6:1: "In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites had come out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, he began to build the temple of the LORD."

The text places the Exodus four hundred and eighty years before the fourth year of Solomon, the year he began to construct the temple. Thus, if we can determine the date of the fourth year of Solomon, theoretically at least we could establish an absolute date for the Exodus. But, if all the dates in the Bible are relative, how can we transition to an absolute date?

## Dating the Old Testament

We begin by turning our attention to chronological texts from Assyria, the most important of which is the Assyrian Eponym Canon (AEC), a dating system that covers the years 910-612 BC. The Eponym Canon does not provide absolute dates on the surface; it lists years by the names of a *limu* (important official) or king and associates that year with a significant event that occurred during that year. These events include statements about war, flooding, and astronomical phenomena, including eclipses. Since eclipses occur at regular and predictable times, astronomers today can calculate when they occurred in antiquity in Assyria (ancient northern Iraq) and thus provide an absolute date for the *limu*. An eclipse of the sun is mentioned during the “eponymate of Bar-sagale, of Guzan.” This event can be dated to 763 BC and the date provides a centre from which other relative dates can be determined. By the use of the AEC in comparison with other Assyrian historical texts that mention Israel (i.e. the Black Obelisk that mentions the Assyrian king Shalmaneser making Jehu of Israel pay tribute), scholars can absolutely date certain biblical events. Once some biblical events are dated this way, then other relative dates can be converted into absolute dates.

Without going through all the details, by proceeding in this fashion it is possible to situate the fourth year of Solomon to 966 BC, give or take a few years. If so, then by adding 480 years to 966, we end up with an approximate date of the Exodus in the middle of the fifteenth century BC. (Cryer 1995).

Other biblical texts support this date, but they are not as precise or dependable as 1 Kings 6:1. For instance, in his negotiations with the Ammonites concerning the occupation of land in the Transjordan region, Jephthah makes the argument that “For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn’t you retake them during that time?” (Judges 11:26).

Jephthah here refers to the taking of this region in the time just before the Conquest of Palestine, which of course takes place forty years after the Exodus. The chronology of Judges does not allow us to specifically date the time of Jephthah, though a period of 300 years certainly makes more sense of a fifteenth century Exodus followed by the Conquest, than its leading rival date of the thirteenth century, to be described below.

### The Problem with a Fifteenth Century Date

On the surface at least the biblical text is clear and self-consistent, pointing to the fifteenth century BC. The problem arises not with the Bible, but rather with the archaeological evidence. In a word, the conclusions of archaeologists working in the second half of the twentieth century and into the present century do not support the biblical picture. Many books may be cited as adopting this conclusion, but W. G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (2003) may be taken as a recent representative. In this section, we will present the problem and respond to them in a section to follow.

The issues surround (1) problems as to the names and identification of the cities Exodus 1:11 names as the location of Israel’s forced labour and (2) archaeological evidence from the cities defeated by Joshua during the conquest.

### Pithom and Rameses

According to Exodus 1:11: “So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.”

The first problem for a fifteenth century date is the name of the second city: Rameses.<sup>2</sup> The name of this city derives from a royal name known from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, beginning in the late fourteenth/early thirteenth century BC. As we will observe later, one of the leading contenders for the pharaoh of the Exodus is Rameses II (1279-1213 BC).

More telling, since we could explain the name as an instance of postmosaica,<sup>3</sup> is the second problem that concerns the dating of the archaeological site associated with Rameses.<sup>4</sup> Consensus now is that Rameses should be associated with Pi-Rameses and identified with Qantir (Tell el-Daba’a). Kitchen (2003: 210), for example, states “Beyond any serious doubt, Raamses is Pi-Ramesses, the once vast Delta residence-city built by Ramesses II (1279-1213 BC), marked by ruin-fields that extend for almost four miles north to south and nearly two miles west to east, centered on Qantir (Tell el-Dab’a), a dozen miles or so south of Tanis (Zoan).” He is also representative of the view that the archaeology of Qantir settles the question of the date of the Exodus, since, in his opinion, the archaeological results only point to the thirteenth century BC. Kitchen, though aware of some remains of Seti I (1294-1279 BC), points to massive building during the reign of Rameses II. He also emphasizes the short-lived nature of the settlement here; due to a change in the course of the Nile, Qantir was soon abandoned and by the eleventh century the centre of power (as well as much of the stone and other remains of Qantir) was moved to Tanis (Zoan). However, more recently, M. Bietak, the archaeologist of the site, has reported remains of a citadel and storage facility from the time of Thutmosis III during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (mid-15<sup>th</sup> century BC), using bricks from an even earlier citadel from the Hyksos period (2001: 353).

### The Archaeology of the Conquest

Another problem for the fifteenth century date has to do with the date of the Conquest, which of course bears on the date of the Exodus since the biblical record reports the conquest began forty years after the Exodus.

Close reading of the book of Joshua indicates that widespread destruction of urban centres did not occur.<sup>5</sup> Only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were said to be burned during Joshua’s campaign, most of the other victories took place on the open battlefield. Thus, the absence of burn layers throughout Palestine dated to this period is not disturbing. However, many of the sites said to have been in existence according to the Exodus and Conquest accounts do not show signs of habitation during the Late Bronze Age (c.

1550-1200 BC), the period in which the events purportedly took place.

Let's take a look, for instance, at Jericho. Of course, Jericho was Israel's first great victory after crossing the Jordan River. The biblical text describes it as a major city with massive walls. When John Garstang, the British archaeologist, dug at Tell es-Sultan, universally recognized as ancient Jericho, in the 1930's, he claims to have discovered the walls that fell at the time of the Conquest. However, from 1952-1958, a new archaeological investigation was launched by Kathleen Kenyon, also a British archaeologist. Her conclusions were radically different than Garstang's. According to her work, Jericho shows signs of existing before the fifteenth century and afterward, but not at the time of the Conquest. Her conclusions were driven largely by the lack of a certain type of ceramic pottery, imported Cypriot bichrome ware, that was characteristic of the period. Its lack indicated to her that no one lived at Tell es-Sultan at that time.

Ai proved to be another problem for those who want to date the Exodus-Conquest to the late fifteenth century. Ai means "dump" or "ruin" in Hebrew and so it is often associated with a modern archaeological site that has the name Khirbet et-Tell, et-Tell being Arabic for "the ruin." It is located near Beiten, often associated with the ancient city of Bethel, which the Bible tells us was near ancient Ai. Archaeologists who have studied the remains at this site note that there is no evidence of occupation for the period between 2400-1200 (Isserlin 1998: 57). Thus, according to this interpretation of the archaeological evidence, the biblical picture must be wrong in terms of date or substance.

### **Re-Dating the Exodus Event**

As we will describe below, the problematic archaeological evidence has led many scholars to abandon or modify the idea of the Exodus and the Conquest as explanations for how Israel comes into being in the land of Palestine. For now, we will focus on those scholars who are persuaded by the archaeological evidence, but continue to believe that the Exodus and Conquest actually happened. In a word, they re-calibrate the biblical statements about date.

The most passionate recent defenders of the following position are Kenneth Kitchen and James Hoffmeier,<sup>6</sup> both of whom hold a high view of Scripture and are eminent Egyptologists. They propose that the 480 year period between the Exodus and the fourth year of Solomon (1 Kgs. 6:1) is not a literal but a symbolic number. The key is the fact that the number is divisible by 40, which represents a generation. After all, the wilderness wandering period was forty years, the time for the first generation to die and for a second generation to rise in its place. So 480 stands for 12 generations.

However, while 40 is a symbolic number for a generation, it is not the actual, typical age when people start having children and thus begin the next generation. They suggest that 25 is the actual number of a generation. Thus, to get

the real number of years represented by the number 480, we must multiply 12 times 25. The result is 300 which added to 966 BC (the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Solomon, give or take) points to 1266, or the thirteenth century BC. Such a date works much better with the results of archaeology.

While this solution is tenable, it does have a tone of desperation around it. It takes a bit of imagination to make the number work. Imagination may be what is called for, but, on the other hand, perhaps the conflict between archaeology and the biblical evidence should lead us in the opposite direction. Rather than re-reading the biblical text, perhaps we should re-read the archaeological material.

### **Re-Reading the Archaeological Material**

The metaphor of reading and re-reading the archaeological remains is intentionally chosen. Many lay people and minimalists (see below) have the mistaken impression that archaeology is a science that involves no or minimal interpretation, contrasting with the study of the Bible which everyone recognizes demands interpretation. While archaeology utilizes some methods of study that are scientific (and science itself involves interpretation), the understanding of mute archaeological remains is a hermeneutical (interpretive) task just like the study of the Bible. Archaeological remains are amenable to more than one interpretation.

Can the materials associated with the dating of the Egyptian store cities and the cities of the conquest be re-read in a way that conforms to a fifteenth century date of the conquest?

In a now classic and controversial study published in 1978, J. J. Bimson argued that there was a way to interpret the archaeological materials that is amenable to a fifteenth century date of the Exodus (Halpern 1987). The details of his arguments cannot be presented here, but the broad outline of his reinterpretation is as follows:

According to a traditional reading of the archaeological work done in the twentieth century in Palestine, the end of the Middle Bronze Age in Palestine (ca. 1550 BC) witnessed the destruction of many cities. The destruction has been attributed to Egyptian armies that moved into Palestine in pursuit of fleeing Hyksos, a Semitic group that had dominated Egypt for about one hundred years. Bimson, however, points out that there is no textual or artifactual reason to associate the destruction of these cities with the fleeing Hyksos. Indeed, the texts speak of a pursuit only as far as Sharuhin in southern Palestine and the Egyptians took that city only after a three year siege.

Bimson thus questions dating the destruction of these cities to the sixteenth century and their association with the Hyksos. He presents the view that they should rather be placed in the fifteenth century and associated with the Hebrews.

Some other scholars argue that these northern Palestinian cities were destroyed later by Thutmosis III and indeed we have textual evidence of this pharaoh's campaigns into northern Palestine. However, we have no evidence that

he destroyed all the cities on his list. Rather he may have been making a show of force as he collected tribute. Yet other scholars have also joined the effort of reassessing archaeological interpretations that have dominated the field for years. Bryant Wood (1990), for instance, has questioned Kathleen Kenyon's chronology of Jericho based on ceramics.

Bimson appropriately does not insist that his interpretation is definitely the right one, but what he does effectively demonstrate, even if certain aspects of his theory can be shown to be wrong, is that archaeology is amenable to more than one reading or interpretation. In my opinion, it is utterly wrong minded to divorce textual evidence from archaeological evidence. J. Walton (2003) makes the point very clearly: "From the above discussions it is evident that the complexity of this issue derives from the need to juxtapose biblical, historical and archaeological data to one another. When the data are not easily reconciled, which data hold priority?"

Many scholars today operate with a method that says archaeology should not be interpreted in the light of the biblical text but rather independently. I think that archaeology should be done in the light of textual records (biblical or otherwise). Not that archaeology should be misread to make it fit the biblical record, but rather the archaeologist and historian should ask if the material that we have fits with the biblical text. Bimson's conclusions are an example of this. Palestinian cities show a destruction level that, in the light of what we know from texts, could be associated with the Hyksos or the Israelites. However, those texts say nothing about destruction of cities to the north of Sharuhen, but do inform us that Joshua destroyed certain cities. Thus, why not interpret the archaeology in that direction?

Of course, this would put the emergence of Israel at the start of the Late Bronze Age rather than the Iron Age. Neither transition provides strong evidence for a significant break in culture that some expect when a foreign intruding culture (Israelite) replaces the resident culture (Canaanite). Thus, a number of scholars argue that what we call Israelite is really an inner-Canaanite development (Dever 2003). That is, there are no external intruders. However, it is questionable whether an intrusive migratory people would enter the land and establish a discernibly different material culture. Perhaps they adapted to Canaanite pot making techniques. They likely used the cisterns and other technologies of the Canaanites. Indeed, Deuteronomy 6:10b-11 warns the Israelites not to forget God who will give them a land "with large flourishing cities you did not build; houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant." Perhaps if the list went on it would include, "pots you did not make..." In addition, in a fascinating article, Millard (2003) points out that many invasions that are well known from textual witness bear no archaeological trace including the Amorite invasion of the Third Dynasty of Ur around 2000 BC, the Saxon and Norman invasion of Britain and the Arab invasion of Palestine.

## Conclusion

We therefore cannot be utterly confident that the Exodus and Conquest took place at the early date. Though that seems the most natural reading of texts like 1 Kings 6:1, they aren't the only reading (so Kitchen, et. al.). The truth is that the archaeological data, as traditionally interpreted, fits in better with the late date. It also, of course, makes sense of the name Rameses for one of the two store cities in Exodus 1:11. However, even the late date has problems with certain archaeological facts (see Ai above).

Some of my readers will be frustrated by the fact that I am unable to come to a clear decision regarding the time period of the Exodus and further exasperated by the idea that archaeology does not definitively support the presence of Israel in Egypt, their escape, their wilderness wanderings, or the conquest.

On the one hand, however, the truth is that the biblical record was not written in a way to satisfy all our historical questions. Not even the few chronological statements we have (i.e. 1 Kings 6:1) are uncontroversial as we convert them to our dating system.

On the other hand, archaeological evidence is not in the business of providing objective evidence one way or the other. Such evidence is open to multiple interpretations, not any interpretation, but more than one.

What can we say in conclusion? Our present day knowledge of the archaeology of Palestine and Egypt does not lead to an easy correlation with the biblical testimony of the Exodus.

Why? In the first place, the biblical material is amenable to different interpretations. What the Bible intends to teach in the book of Exodus is perfectly clear. God intervened on behalf of ancient Israel to save them from their powerful enemies in a dramatic way. However, the Bible is not perfectly clear about the precise date that this event happened. The Egyptian kings are not named in keeping with the Egyptian practice of not naming enemies (Hoffmeier 1997: 111-12). The meagre chronological information that we get from 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 are not pointing to a precise date and there is a legitimate question as to whether the number in Kings is symbolic rather than literal.

On the other hand, the archaeological material is also amenable to different interpretations. The traditional interpretation of archaeological materials is not the only possible reading. My introduction of Bimson's work intended to illustrate this point, not argue his interpretation is the only possible one, a claim that not even Bimson makes.<sup>7</sup>

Good archaeological arguments can be made to support both the early and the late date of the Exodus and Conquest, though they both have abiding questions.

In reaction to the present state of our knowledge, two extremes should be avoided. First, there are those like the minimalists (see below) and others who conclude that since archaeology does not prove the Exodus we must reject the

idea that the Exodus happened. They reach this conclusion because they a priori reject the idea that the Bible itself counts as a historical testimony.<sup>8</sup>

The second extreme that should be avoided is the appeal of amateur archaeology or sensationalist archaeology. As one example of his phenomenon, it is not uncommon to hear the claim that Pharaoh's chariots' wheels have been discovered at the bottom of the Red Sea (the Gulf of Aqaba). An amateur archaeologist named Ron Wyatt promoted this idea through a series of church seminars. He claimed that he had seen them and had pictures to prove his contention. They were "coral incrustrated." Many ministers and Christian laypeople took this as proof of the biblical account of the Exodus. On the surface of it, however, the claim is ridiculous. How could one know that these wheels were from Pharaoh's army? But the claim is a fraud. The supposed coral incrustrated wheels are really coral wheels.<sup>9</sup>

Another strategy to make the Exodus a more palatable story is through giving it a naturalistic interpretation, the most recent example of which is Colin Humphreys' book, *The Miracles of Exodus* (2003). By miracle, he means a miracle of timing. All the events of the Exodus from the burning bush<sup>10</sup> to the crossing of the Sea, which happened by a strong wind at the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, can be explained by natural phenomena. This approach makes a mockery of the Bible's description of what happened.

The Bible claims that the Exodus and the crossing of the *Yam Suph* actually took place and was a witness to God's power and desire to save his people. The archaeology and historical witness can be read in such a way as to conform to an understanding of either an early or a late date, though neither is without problems.

We should hope that future archaeological research will illumine matters further. One of the problems is the fact that archaeology has really only scratched the surface of the available material. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions like Jim Hoffmeier's digs in Egypt (1997, 2004, 2005), many archaeologists are no longer interested in this question, so we may not be getting a lot of new material in the near future.

### **Does It Matter?**

Radical challenges to the historicity of the Old Testament have dominated the scholarly discussion for the past decade and a half. A group of loosely affiliated scholars have led the charge, questioning the historical value of biblical narrative.<sup>11</sup> They have been dubbed "minimalists" because their conclusion is that a minimum of the Old Testament story is historically valid. They argue that a new group came into Palestine in the Persian (for some, even the Greek) period for the first time.<sup>12</sup> People like Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar, Ezra and Nehemiah weren't returning to Judah after an exile, they were coming into the area for the very first time. In order to justify their presence in the land, they constructed a story that told of their long occupation and the divine gift of the land to an ancestor, Abraham, who never existed.

The deep scepticism of the minimalists is new and not shared by the broad circle of scholars, even those who practise historical critical scholarship. Most scholars don't question the exile, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the monarchy, even Solomon and David. However, many scholars have doubted the stories that precede the time period of the rise of kingship in Israel, the Exodus included.

Recently, I've noticed a trend that concerns me: fellow evangelical scholars who have questioned or doubted the historical truth of the Exodus event. Granted, few have put their thoughts in print and most of my knowledge comes from personal communication and discussion, but the trend to discount the history of the Exodus is present in the mind of more than a handful of such scholars. I imagine too that thoughtful seminarians, college students, and pastors have wondered about the significance of the historicity of the Exodus.

Such doubts arise for a variety of understandable reasons. As we have seen, there is no direct evidence for the Exodus outside of the Bible. Is it possible to be confident in the historicity of the Exodus if Egyptian records do not mention it? Why are there no traces of the Exodus story from the time period in which it purportedly took place?

Second, post-modern culture has promoted the value of story. Stories are powerful agents of transformation and vehicles of insight. Indeed, many modern and post-modern approaches to the study of literature warn against moving outside of the story itself to find its significance. Using a technical phrase, they argue against the referential function of literature. To find its meaning, one needs to enter the story and its world and not worry about anything outside of it. In the light of these issues, I ask: Does it matter? Does it matter whether or not the Exodus took place?

### **Establishing a Track Record**

The book of Exodus is a work of theological history. However, theological intentions do not mitigate its historical purpose. The book intends to teach us about God and his relationship with us by describing how he acted in history.

In the Exodus, God acted to rescue his people from an impossible situation. Pharaoh and his chariot troops had cornered the unarmed Israelite people with their backs literally against the water. They could not go forward, backward, or sideways. There was absolutely no possible route of escape available to them. However, in response to their prayers God opened up a way through the Sea. Thus, they escaped. Further, the Egyptians followed and God used the same act to both rescue his people and judge their enemies.

The story thus teaches us a great deal about God. He is the Saviour and the Judge.

Yet, if the event described by the story did not happen, it would teach us nothing about God. The story has no power apart from the event. If God did not actually rescue, why

would we think of him as a Saviour? If he did not actually judge, why would we think of him as a Judge?

The account of the Exodus establishes a track record for God. He is more than words. He acts on his words. Such a past action elicits present confidence and hope for the future after the event. If God could do such a marvellous act to save his people in the past, he could certainly do so in the present. This, after all, is how the Exodus tradition is used in later Scripture.

### The Use of the Exodus in Later Tradition

The importance of the historical basis of the Exodus account is also emphasized by its use in later biblical tradition. The Exodus story echoes through Scripture, remembered in a variety of ways and for a number of different purposes. Psalm 77 illustrates one such use of the tradition:

For Jeduthan, the choir director: A psalm of Asaph

1. *I cry out to God; yes, I shout.  
Oh, that God would listen to me!*
2. *When I was in deep trouble,  
I searched for the Lord.  
All night long I prayed, with hands lifted toward  
heaven,  
but my soul was not comforted.*
3. *I think of God, and I moan,  
overwhelmed with longing for his help.*
4. *You don't let me sleep.  
I am too distressed even to pray!*
5. *I think of the good old days,  
long since ended,*
6. *when my nights were filled with joyful songs.  
I search my soul and ponder the difference now.*
7. *Has the Lord rejected me forever?  
Will he never again be kind to me?*
8. *Is his unfailing love gone forever?  
Have his promises permanently failed?*
9. *Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he slammed his door on his compassion?*
10. *And I said, "This is my fate;  
the Most High has turned his hand against me."*
11. *But then I recalled all you have done, O LORD;  
I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago.*
12. *They are constantly in my thoughts.  
I cannot stop thinking about your mighty works.*
13. *O God, your ways are holy.  
is there any god as mighty as you?*
14. *You are the God of great wonders!  
You demonstrate your awesome power among the  
nations.*
15. *By your strong arm, you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.*
16. *When the Red Sea saw you, O God,  
its waters looked and trembled!  
The sea quaked to its very depths.*
17. *The clouds poured down rain;  
the thunder rumbled in the sky.  
Your arrows of lightning flashed.*
18. *Your thunder roared from the whirlwind;  
the lightning lit up the world!*

*The earth trembled and shook.*

19. *Your road led through the sea,  
your pathway through the mighty waters—  
a pathway no one knew was there!*
20. *You led your people along that road like a flock of  
sheep with Moses and Aaron as their shepherds.*

(New Living Translation)

Psalm 77 is an individual lament. The psalmist begins by expressing deep emotional pain, but not specifying the cause. The latter is typical of the psalms. They almost certainly were written in the light of the poet's experience, but the specific event is suppressed so that later worshippers can use the psalm as their prayer in similar though not necessarily identical circumstances (Longman III 1987).

After comparing his present distress with the bliss of the past (vss. 4-6), he blames God. In a series of rhetorical questions (vss. 7-9), he accuses God of breaking his covenant promise that he would care and protect him.

Abruptly, however, the psalmist changes his tune from accusation to praise in vss. 13-15. Laments frequently demonstrate such turns, leaving the later reader wondering why. Note, for instance, the movement in Psalm 69 from verse 29 to 30:

*I am suffering and in pain.  
Rescue me, O God, by your saving power.  
I will praise God's name with singing,  
and I will honour him with thanksgiving.*

Though no explanation for the change is stated in Psalm 69, Psalm 77 is clear about what motivates the poet to praise. In a word, it is the past and specifically it is the Exodus, the crossing of the Sea. Remembrance of the past triggers confidence in the present and hope for the future. Vss. 11-12 begin the move:

*But then I recall all you have done, O LORD;  
I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago.  
They are constantly in my thoughts.  
I cannot stop thinking about your mighty works.*

And then, vss. 16-20 end the poem with a reflection on God's act at the Sea. Interestingly, but not uniquely (see Ps. 114), the poet personifies the waters and envisions the moment as a conflict of sorts between God and the Sea. In this way, the poet utilizes the age-old motif of the waters representing the forces of evil and chaos (and probably in this instance specifically the Egyptian army, the agent of evil).

The psalmist's move from severe agitation to calm is now understandable. He is presently in the position of the Israelites at the Sea, in trouble and beyond human aid. But God is in the business, he remembers, of saving his people in such circumstances. When God saves independently from human help, then those he rescues know beyond a shadow of doubt who helped them.

Notice it is because God actually saved his people in the past that the psalmist finds confidence and hope for his present. To belabour the point, it is because God has established a track record with his people—he actually

did it—that the psalmist can find relief. Imagine telling the psalmist it is a story, and in this case the often misused “it’s just a story” is to the point. God never actually saved anyone. It would completely and utterly eviscerate the point of the psalmist.

Again, the point of this section is not to argue that the Exodus did take place. Rather it is to point out that it loses its significance if it did not. Psalm 77 demonstrates that the power of the story of the Exodus is in its connection with the event of the Exodus.

### **Did Job really have to suffer for the book to be true?**

Does our insistence on the historical quality of the Exodus event extend to the rest of the Old Testament as well? Certainly not. In this section, we will briefly examine the case of another biblical book: Job.

The book of Job sends mixed signals concerning its literary type. Likely, the genre of the book was clear to its ancient audience, but at such a historical distance, we do not have the literary sensitivity to be dogmatic.

It is unnecessary for our purposes to run through all the nuances of this issue (Longman III & Dillard 2006: 224-36). On the side of reading the book as fiction is the presentation of the dialogue in poetic format. Poetry indicates artifice. People do not and did not speak to one another in elaborate poetic speeches like we see in Job 3:1-42:6. Granted the Bible never reports speech as if it was spoken into a microphone. While all speech is presented with artifice, the dialogues of Job go to an extreme, likely to raise the level of discourse from a specific historical event to the level of general ethical and theological reflection. Poetry elevates the book from a specific historical event to a story with universal application. The book of Job, then, may not be a historical chronicle but rather the expression of wisdom that is to be applied to all who hear it.

On the other hand, the book begins like a historical narrative. Formally, we can detect no real grammatical difference between the opening lines of the book and books that do have historical intent (compare with the opening verses of Judges 17 and 1 Samuel 1). A broader discussion of this issue would include comment about the mention of Job in other places in the Bible (Ezek. 14:14, 20) and a comparison between Job and similar extra-biblical books (*Ludlul bel Nemeqi* and the *Babylonian Theodicy*).

On a full analysis, our conclusion would be that it is not certain whether we should judge Job historical or fictional or, as is probably more likely, historical fiction. But does it matter? And, if not, why doesn’t it matter with Job when we argued that it did matter with the Exodus and the crossing of the Sea?

The theological significance of the Exodus, including the crossing of the Sea, depends on its historicity, because it is a part, indeed an integral part of the history of redemption. A crucial feature of biblical religion is that God entered space and time to be involved with his people. He participates

in history in order to rescue his people from the effects of sin. The Exodus contributes to this redemptive history that leads to Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, Job’s suffering does not serve a redemptive purpose. Job’s pain does not alleviate our pain. Job’s story rather serves a didactic purpose. It teaches us that suffering is not always the result of personal sin. Job is the ideal wise, righteous person, and yet he suffers. Thus, we cannot judge people’s piety or morality based on their success or suffering.

Again, the case of Job may be contrasted with the Exodus in regard to the question of theology and history. The book reminds us that we should not automatically assume that all biblical narrative must have a historical intention. On the other hand, we cannot use a book like Job to diminish the theological importance of the historical nature of the Exodus event.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In the final analysis, we must concede that we cannot prove that the Exodus happened to all impartial and neutral observers. This conclusion results from the fact that there is no direct evidence for the Exodus event, save one. The one text that directly provides testimony for the Exodus is the book of Exodus. Of course, the quality of the book of Exodus (and the whole Old Testament) is a matter of intense disagreement and debate. Those, like myself, who have confidence in the book of Exodus as a witness to actual events will be untroubled by a lack of external evidence that supports it, while those who do not share this perspective will disregard it.

Upon reflection, we should not be surprised to find ourselves in the position of affirming the historical foundation of our faith apart from external evidence that would convince every scholar. The Exodus stands along with the patriarchs, the conquest, the period of the Judges, the early monarchy, even the crucifixion and resurrection itself in this regard.

We, thus, find ourselves in the school of Augustine: “I believe in order to understand” not in the school of Aquinas, “I understand in order to believe.” But we are also not in the school of Tertullian, “I believe because it is absurd.”

The archaeological evidence, which is amenable to more than one interpretation, can be read in such a way as to lend support to the view that the Exodus happened. And, finally and importantly, we cannot permit ourselves the easy way out by saying it does not matter. The Exodus loses its theological and ethical significance if it did not happen in space and time.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For a full and excellent presentation of the indirect evidence for the Exodus event (Hoffmeier 1997). Figures 8 and 9 in this book reproduce the scene of the Asiatic labourers making bricks.
- 2 Exodus 1:11 spells the name Raameses, though other occurrences of the name in the Bible (Gen. 47:11; Exod. 12:37; Num. 33:3, 5) spell it Rameses.
- 3 It is clear that additions and updates were made to the Pentateuch during the period of canon formation, the most famous of which is the account of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34. Indeed, the reference to Rameses in Genesis 47:11 is such an updating, no matter when one dates the Exodus. Hoffmeier (2007) has been successfully answered by B. Wood (2007). In a most peculiar article, R. Vasholz (2006) has argued that the city was actually named Rameses in the fifteenth century. His view has been effectively undermined by Hoffmeier (2007a).
- 4 The archaeological evidence for Tel er-Retebe, often identified as Pithom, is not problematic for either the early or the late date of the Exodus.
- 5 For a more detailed account of the evidence, as well as a rejoinder to many of the conclusions of archaeologists, see I. Provan, V. P. Long, and T. Longman (2003: 174-89).
- 6 See the recent interchange between Hoffmeier (2007) and the rejoinder, defending the early date, by Bryant Wood (2007).
- 7 See Walton (2003) for a number of other possible syntheses of biblical and archaeological evidence concerning the Exodus.
- 8 For a defence of the Bible as historical testimony, see I. Provan, V. P. Long, and T. Longman III, (2003: 3-104).
- 9 See Cline (2007). Also in a personal communication, the archaeologist Randall Younker told me that he examined the claim personally and saw the so-called wheels, confirming that they are completely composed of coral.
- 10 He explains that the bush "was growing on top of a region containing natural gas, which is known to exist in Midian. The natural gas came up from under the bush through cracks in the rocks, was ignited either spontaneously or by lightning." He also allows for an alternative source for the gas and that is a "volcanic vent." (2003: 77)
- 11 The minimalist approach is different from the perspective adopted by many literary scholars of the Bible in the period of roughly 1980-1995. The latter believed that the fact that the Bible was story meant that the question of history was unimportant. A. Berlin's (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, p. 13) comments about Abraham are representative: "Above all, we must keep in mind that narrative is a form of representation. Abraham in Genesis is not a real person any more than the painting of an apple is a real fruit."
- 12 Some representative minimalist scholars are K. W. Whitelam (*The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*, London: Routledge, 1996); T. L. Thompson (*Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources*, SHANE 4, Leiden: Brill, 1992); N. P. Lemche (*Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*, BSem 5; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988); G. Garbini, (*History and Ideology in Ancient Sources*, New York: Crossroad, 1988); P. R. Davies, (*In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, JSOTS 148, Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).