

Dating the Exodus

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Probably one of the most controversial and hotly debated subjects pertaining to biblical chronology is the dating of the Exodus. Basically, most biblical historians are divided between what are called the late date¹ and the early date² of the Exodus. Most proponents of the late date believe the biblical and archaeological data discovered so far indicate the Exodus happened in the thirteenth century B.C. sometime around 1267 B.C. in the nineteenth dynasty, twenty years into the reign of Pharaoh Ramesses II (1279-1213 B.C.).³ Most proponents of the early date of the Exodus argue it happened during the eighteenth dynasty in the fifteenth century B.C. about 1447/46 B.C. The following is an overview of major arguments pertaining to both sides of the debate.

The Debated Texts

Exodus 1:11

Exodus 1:11 is a key passage in the debate. It states, "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Rameses." Many have equated the city of Rameses with the city of Pi-Ramesses. According to Kitchen, Seti I initially built a summer palace at its location, then Ramesses II built the vast store-city of Exodus 1:11.⁴ Pi-Ramesses was located at modern-day Qantir near Faqus and is called Tell el-Dabva. Hoffmeier suggests Ramesses II probably commenced work on Pi-Ramesses about 1270 B.C., but he recognizes that construction on this site predates Ramesses II at least to the time of Horemheb (1323-1295 B.C.),

meaning the oppression of the Hebrews may have begun a number of decades before Ramesses II came to the throne.⁵ Ramesses II finished the construction of the city naming it after himself. It is inconceivable that the city could have been named after a pharaoh who did not even exist. Therefore, it is impossible for the Exodus to have happened before a pharaoh named Ramesses was on the throne. Furthermore, the majority of archaeological discoveries along with inscriptional references to geographical locations from this site appear to come from the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C. and not the fifteenth century B.C.⁶

Much debate has risen over this understanding of the store city of Rameses by those who advocate the early date of the Exodus. First, archaeologists have discovered an eighteenth dynasty citadel at the location of Tell el-Dabva. West of the citadel they located what might have been a temple. About 150 meters south of the location excavators found a large storage building containing pottery dating to the Late Bronze I period. North of the citadel they discovered a number of Minoan frescoes from the same period.⁷ Shea says those who have argued against the early date of the Exodus because there has been no evidence of an eighteenth dynasty presence at Tell el-Dabva must lay that argument to rest.⁸

Second, Robert I. Vasholz questions the notion that a pharaoh would indeed name cities which "were basically depots for the storage of supplies and taxes paid in terms of foodstuffs" after himself.⁹ He

argues that Egyptian records of cities from the old, middle, and new kingdoms reveal that pharaohs did not name cities they built or rebuilt after themselves. Instead, they tended to name cities after their gods. For instance, during the new kingdom period, Menfe (also known as Memphis) was renamed to Hitpuah, which means “spirit of [the god] Ptah.”¹⁰ Furthermore, a number of pharaohs had names that came from their gods. Rameses means “begotten by Ra.” Ra was a sun god and was also a primary god in Egypt. Vasholz concedes the possibility that Rameses II could be that one exception of a pharaoh who named a city after himself.¹¹ However, if he is indeed correct, then it would suggest the possibility that Rameses II of the nineteenth dynasty got his name in much the same way the city of Rameses got its name some two centuries earlier; both were named after Ra at different times.

Third, convinced of the early date, Wood believes the name Rameses in Exod 1:11 is an editorial updating of an earlier name that went out of use.¹² Kitchen allows for editorial updating with the term Rameses in Gen 47:11 but not in Exod 1:11.¹³ Hoffmeier argues against such an updating because it fails to fit the normal pattern of editorial glossing of names in the Old Testament. Typically, both the earlier name and the later name occur together with a formula connecting the old name with the new name, or the new name is accompanied by an explanatory clause.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Wood demonstrates there are number of occurrences where a name that has been changed appears without any formula or explanation in the Old Testament.¹⁵

Dyer says that those who hold to the late date of the Exodus have failed to

prove the case concerning Rameses in at least one of two ways. First, though they are convinced of it, they have failed to demonstrate that the Rameses of Exod 1:11 was indeed the city Pi-Rameses built by Rameses II. They have made an assumption based on the similarity of the names. Second, even if they are the same cities, advocates of the late date have failed to show that the events of Exod 1:11 happened during the time of Rameses II. Dyer believes basing the date of the Exodus on the similarity of names fails to be a compelling argument.¹⁶

Merrill argues,

it is by no means certain that the city of Rameses was named after the Pharaoh of that name. In fact, Genesis 47:11 states that Jacob and his family settled in the land of Rameses when they entered Egypt in the nineteenth century; unless we postulate an anachronism, for which there is not the slightest proof, we must conclude that there was an area by that name before there was ever a Pharaoh Rameses. It could well be that there had been an ancient Ramesside dynasty long ages before and the Ramessides of the Nineteenth Dynasty were named for them, the city also having taken this name. In any case, there is no need to assume that the mention of the city of Rameses proves that the Exodus must have taken place during the reign of Rameses II.¹⁷

1 Kings 6:1

First Kings 6:1 is another important text concerning the date of the Exodus. It says, “In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the LORD.” Solomon reigned from 971/970 – 931/930 B.C.¹⁸ Therefore, according to this passage, Solomon began building the temple

in 967/966 B.C. Taking the number four hundred and eighty literally would then point to 1447/1446 B.C. as the date of the Exodus. Obviously, 1 Kgs 6:1 is a major text for proponents of the early date to argue their case. In fact, on the surface it seems to be an open and closed case.

However, advocates of the late date emphasize the importance of understanding how the biblical writers used numbers. Hoffmeier addresses the issue:

the culture and conventions of the penman's milieu must be borne in mind when addressing the question of how to interpret numbers. Such a view of Scripture encourages the researcher to investigate seriously how large numbers were used and understood among Israel's neighbors. A literal understanding of certain large numbers may not always be correct if the authorial intent was not literal. Such a misplaced literalism would be a "misinterpretation" of Scripture's meaning.¹⁹

Proponents of the late date believe the number 480 should be understood to represent twelve generations made up of periods of forty years each.²⁰ Actually, these generations are best understood to have lasted twenty-five years each. Therefore, 12 x 25, or 300 years, is a more reasonable actual number for the time elapsed between the building of the temple and the Exodus. This calculation means the Exodus happened about 1267 B.C. during the reign of Ramesses II.²¹

Most supporters of the late date contend that the number forty should be taken symbolically in 1 Kgs 6:1. They observe that numbers in the Bible were used for purposes other than just precise counting. In fact, several numbers in Scripture "are used symbolically, are stylized for other purposes than simple counting, or are approximate numbers based on different cultural ways of reck-

oning time than just counting years."²² Bratcher says that there are several groups of numbers that perform certain roles in Scripture. For instance, the number three often denotes a short period of time or extent without intending to be specific (Jonah 1:17; 3:3). The number seven often symbolizes completion (Gen 2:2; 29; Matt 15:35). The number twelve symbolizes community and wholeness (Gen 35:22; Jud 19:29). And the number forty is a "schematized number used for a generation or simply an unspecified long period of time" (Gen 7:4; Exod 16:35). Furthermore, Bratcher points out how multiples of these numbers appear in the Scripture, such as seventy or seventy-seven (Gen 4:24; Matt 18:22), one hundred twenty (Gen 6:3), one hundred forty-four (Deut 34:7), one hundred and forty-four thousand (Rev 14:1), four hundred (Gen 15:3), four thousand (1 Sam 4:2), forty thousand (Josh 4:13; 1 Kgs 4:26), and four hundred thousand (Josh 20:2).²³ Understanding this use of numbers has led many scholars to believe the 480 years of 1 Kgs 6:1 should be taken symbolically.

Hoffmeier has suggested that perhaps prevalent use of the number forty in the Old Testament originated with the Israelite wandering in the wilderness; from there it possibly took on symbolic meaning throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Hoffmeier continues,

There are obvious cases where the number 40 is extremely difficult to interpret literally. For example, Moses is said to have been on Mt. Sinai to receive the law 40 days and 40 nights and during the period "he neither ate bread nor drank water" (Exod 34:28; cf. Deut 9:9,18,25). No human could last 40 days without water. Consequently, this verse forces us to accept either the 40 days or the complete fasting literally, but not both. Outside of the Bible,

the number 40 also has symbolic meaning. Consider the statement by the king Mesha in his famous stele. He declared that “Omri had taken possession of the whole la[n]d of Medeba, and lived there (in) his days half the days of his son, forty years.” According to 1 Kgs 16:23, Omri reigned 12 years, and to Ahab 22 years are credited (1 Kgs 16:29). Mesha claims to have liberated his land from Israelite dominance half-way through Ahab’s 22 years, meaning that the 40 year period actually was no more than 23 years.

Passages like these, and the use of the number 40 with such regularity, suggests that the number may symbolize an undisclosed period of time—an approximate number. Consequently, trying to reconstruct history and to establish dates involving the number 40 is indeed challenging. Then, too, it is undeniable that 480 does correspond to “12 times 40,” and therefore one should not lightly dismiss the possible symbolic nature of the number.²⁴

Alternative understandings of these passages where one understands the number forty literally might be discussed at another time, but for the sake of this discussion, Hoffmeier clearly demonstrates the line of reasoning pertaining to 1 Kgs 1:6 given by many who contend for the late date of the Exodus.

There are a couple of issues concerning the notion that the number 480 is derived from the number of generations between the time of Solomon and the Exodus. First, nowhere in the Bible does it communicate that forty years is the ideal or full generation. Second, 1 Chron 6:33-37 indicates there were eighteen generations from the time of Korah, the instigator who raised a rebellion against Moses (Numbers 16), to the time of Heman, a musician from the time of David. If one adds one more generation to get to Solomon’s time, then there were nineteen generations from the

time of the Exodus to the time of Solomon. Following the logic of Hoffmeier and Kitchen who say twenty-five years is a reasonable span for an actual generation, nineteen generations multiplied by twenty-five years yields the number 475 years, a number that coincides well with the 480 years of 1 Kgs 1:6.²⁵ Other genealogies giving the generations from the time of Moses to the time of Solomon appear to be “truncated.” The genealogy of 1 Chron 6:3-10 showing the generations of the high priests from Aaron to Azariah indicates there were fourteen high priests from the time of Moses to the time of Solomon.²⁶

Furthermore, what appears in 1 Kgs 1:6 is the number, four hundred and eighty, not twelve and forty. Applying the numbers twelve and forty as stock numbers found in this verse may be reading into the text something that is not really there.²⁷ Also, this number is couched in a verse that gives very specific information about the date of the building of the temple. Given its context, it seems reasonable to read all of the information literally. When the context and genre of a text should be taken literally, then it is logical to take all of its constituent parts literally.

Umberto Cassuto’s lectures, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, raise another interesting point for one trying to understand 1 Kgs 1:6. Cassuto’s study gave attention to the biblical writers’ use of numbers in the Old Testament. He determined that the order in which numbers are given in the Old Testament are an indication of how the biblical authors intended the numbers to be understood. Cassuto observed that compound numbers appear in two different ways: sometimes the ones precede the tens, the tens precede the hundreds, and the hundreds precede the thousands;

in other instances the thousands precede the hundreds, the hundreds precede the tens, and the tens precede the ones. For example, one may find *eighty and four hundred* or one may find *four hundred and eighty*. Cassuto writes,

This is the principal rule: when the Bible gives us technical or statistical data and the like, it frequently prefers the ascending order, since the tendency to exactness in these instances causes the smaller numbers to be given precedence and prominence. On the other hand, when a solitary number occurs in a narrative passage or in a poem or in a speech and so forth, the numbers are invariably arranged, save in a few cases where special circumstances operate, according to the more natural and spontaneous order, to wit, the descending order. This is a fundamental rule governing the use of the numerals in Hebrew.²⁸

While one often finds “In the four hundred and eightieth year” in English translations of 1 Kgs 6:1, the number appears “in the eightieth year and four hundredth year” in the Masoretic Text. According to Cassuto, this ascending order would indicate a “technical or statistical” number in order to show “the tendency to exactness.” Up to this point, no proponent of the late date of the Exodus has provided a response to Cassuto’s study as applied to 1 Kgs 1:6.

Judges 11:26

The final Scriptural text for consideration concerning the Exodus is Judg 11:26. This verse is located in a message Jephthah sent to the king of Ammon in order to persuade the king to discontinue his aggression against the Israelites living in the Transjordan. The Ammonites were attempting to retake some of the land that Israel had taken when Moses had led his people there. As Jephthah was contending

with the Ammonites over land he said, “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?” Jephthah was appealing to the idea of “squatter’s rights,” that is, since Israel had been in the land for three hundred years, there was no reason to give it back to the Ammonites now. Even though it is impossible to know the exact date of Jephthah, most scholars estimate his dealings with the Ammonites happened sometime from 1130 to 1073 B.C.²⁹ Therefore, if the Israelites had been in the land for 300 years that would mean they had been there since between 1430 and 1373 B.C., a time that well fits an early date of the Exodus. In fact, the number of years given thus far in Judges for the cycles of oppression and peace comes to 301 years, not counting the Ammonite oppression Jephthah was fighting.

Nevertheless, some scholars object to this understanding of Judg 11:26. Bratcher observes that the context of Jephthah’s speech suggests that the number is not intended to be precise but rather a general reference to an extended span of time. Also, the narrator of the text portrays Jephthah as one who probably would have had little access to historical records in order to speak with such precision, and if the narrator had access to the information and wanted to convey chronological details, then it is odd that the rest of passage is void of any other historical details. Therefore, one may assume the narrator had something else in mind rather than precision in dating as his main concern. Moreover, Bratcher states the meager evidence and tenuous nature of understanding the specific chronology of the judges makes trying to do so nearly impossible

because the conclusions are compromised by inadequate data.³⁰

Some say that the “300 years” is a gloss.³¹ R. G. Boling argues the number of years is intended to be an “exact figure” but that it is a secondary insertion.³² Either way, it could still support the either date of the Exodus. Kitchen discounts Jephthah’s claim also. Confident of his chronology of Jephthah’s activities in 1073 B.C., concerning the number three hundred he says,

At roughly 1070, that would place that occupation at about 1370, which in itself makes no sense whatsoever on any current date of the exodus 40 years before, whether in 1447, 1260/1250, or any time in between. Brave fellow that he was, Jephthah was a roughneck, an outcast, and not exactly the kind of man who would scruple first to take a Ph.D. in local chronology at some ancient university of the Yarmuk before making strident claims to the Ammonite ruler. What we have is nothing more than the report of a brave but ignorant man’s bold bluster in favor of his people, not a mathematical precise chronological datum. So it can offer us no practical help. It is in the same class as other statements that biblical writers may well report accurately but which they would not necessarily expect readers to believe.³³

Therefore, according to Kitchen, the biblical writers were accurate in recording what Jephthah said, but what Jephthah said was inaccurate. Either he was ignorant of the facts or perhaps he intentionally lied about them in order to make the case for his own people, certainly not the last time a leader would have done so.

Why is it so impossible for the number to be accurate unless one needs it to fit an already established historical reconstruction of events? Would it have even been necessary for Jephthah to have a “Ph.D. in chronology at some ancient university” to have knowledge of the span of time his people had been in the land? Granted, Jephthah probably had little concern for providing the Ammonite king with a “mathematical precise chronological datum.” However, is it reasonable to consider his use of “300 years” to be something like the way most typical Americans would have responded ten to twenty years ago if they had been asked “How old is the United States of America?” Most would have answered “200 years old,” and when they did most people would have understood it to be a reasonable estimation of the span of time in question. There are those Americans who would still give that answer today. Moreover, most Americans, sad to say, have little knowledge of a detailed chronology of American history, but they do have an idea of the length of time the United States has been a nation. Therefore, it is reasonable to conceive that while Jephthah was not trying to give a definitive time of their occupation of the land, he was giving a very close approximation of it. It would not have taken a Ph.D. to have that knowledge. In fact, it would be odd if both the Israelites and Ammonites were ignorant of such information. That is Jephthah’s point. It is reasonable to expect it to have been common knowledge.³⁴ As Davis observes,

It is scarcely possible, however, that Jephthah should make such a blunder in the midst of important international negotiations. His knowledge of the Torah is evident from the context of Chapter 11 of

Judges. It is doubtful that Jephthah could have exaggerated this number as it was used in the argument to the king and have gotten away with it. The King of Ammon had some knowledge of the historical precedence involved in Israel's occupation of the territory of Transjordan (cf. Judg 11:13). Again it would be well to point out that numerical information given in the passage under question does not appear in a poetic section and therefore probably reflects sober fact.³⁵

Archaeological Interests

Having given a look at many of the issues concerning the date of the Exodus in Scripture, now attention should be given to the way scholars use archaeological discoveries to pinpoint the date of the Exodus realizing that archaeological finds provide no more "hard/objective" evidence than does Scripture. Just like any text in the Bible, ancient inscriptions, artifacts, and structures must be interpreted. Interpretations of the same data may sometimes vary quite a bit. One reason for this variance is because of the intricate nature of archaeology. Archaeologists must take into account several issues including the following: (1) topography – the study of the surface features of a region, (2) hydrology – the study of water, its properties, sources, and distribution, (3) stratigraphy – the study of the deposition and relationships of the occupational layers of an archeological site, (4) regional archaeology – the study of the material remains of a geographical area that covers numerous sites, and (5) the tell – a mound consisting of debris from cities built on top of one another on the same site.³⁶ Archaeologists encounter numerous challenges when addressing each of these issues. Another reason for such variance is because it is human nature to look for what one expects to

find. Archaeologists must be careful to avoid allowing presuppositions to influence their interpretations, but doing so is nearly impossible. Therefore, it is important for those of us who study the Scriptures and are interested in archaeology to have an understanding of the role archaeology may play. Archaeology certainly provides an important piece to the puzzle of our attempting to put together all of the events we see in the Bible, but it cannot stand alone.

One may find numerous volumes pertaining to the various discoveries that may have some impact on one's understanding of the date of the Exodus. Therefore, the following is just an overview of some of the major concerns archaeologists have brought to the discussion.

Destruction Layers

Besides the reference to the city of Rameses in Exod 1:11, probably the strongest argument for the late date of the Exodus comes from a number of cities that were in ancient Palestine that indicate their destruction and rebuilding during the thirteenth century B.C. Kitchen and Mitchell observe, "Various Palestinian city-sites show evidence of clear destruction in the second half of the 13th century B.C., which would agree with the onset of the Israelites placed roughly 1240 B.C. onward. Such sites are Tell Beit Mirsim (possibly biblical Debir/Kiriath-sepher), Lachish, Bethel, and Hazor."³⁷ The two biblical cities that have received the most attention are Jericho and Hazor. The Bible describes the complete destruction of both of these cities (Josh 2:1-21; 6:1-27; 11:1-11).

The first city the Israelites defeated as they came into the Promised Land was Jericho. A British archaeologist from the 1930s, John Garstang, concluded that Jer-

icho showed evidence of destruction at the end of the fifteenth century.³⁸ He based his conclusion on a detailed study of the pottery he discovered at the destruction level.³⁹ In the 1950s, Kathleen Kenyon, another renowned British archaeologist, excavated the site and came to a very different understanding of ancient Jericho. Based on her extensive work, she concluded that Jericho actually was destroyed in the middle of the sixteenth century B.C., not at the end of the fifteenth century B.C. Furthermore, after that, she concluded there was no occupation of the site during the fifteenth century.⁴⁰ Most scholars have adopted Kenyon's conclusions. Nonetheless, Wood argues that Kenyon failed to thoroughly study the pottery of the site, yet what she did discover corroborates the biblical account of Jericho and its destruction. In other words, Garstang's study of the pottery was correct after all. According to Wood, the fortification system and evidence of its collapse did not happen in the sixteenth century as Kenyon espoused, but it happened at the end of the fifteenth century B.C., supporting the early date of the Exodus.⁴¹

Hazor is another city at the center of the debate.⁴² It is the largest excavated site in Israel. Hazor was strategically located ten miles north of the Sea of Galilee. According to the biblical writers, it is the only one of three cities captured and destroyed by Joshua and the Israelites (Josh 11:1-11). The other two are Jericho and Ai. Excavations at Hazor have revealed the fifteenth century B.C. city of Hazor (Stratum XV in the upper city and Stratum 2 in the lower city) was destroyed by fire. In the upper city the temple/palace in area A was destroyed and never rebuilt.⁴³ In fact, the heat was so intense, probably fueled by the blustery winds that move across

the area each day, that excavators have discovered where much of the mud brick of the structure melted and then resolidified into the charred bricks that may still be seen today in its reconstruction. Wood argues that Joshua and the Israelites caused this destruction, thus supporting an early date of the Exodus.⁴⁴

Furthermore, excavators have uncovered a destruction layer that dates to the thirteenth century B.C. in Stratum 1a and Stratum XIII. Wood maintains that this destruction level is the result of Deborah and Barak's war over King Jabin of Hazor and his general, Sisera.⁴⁵ However, the Israeli archaeologist overseeing the excavations of Hazor, Amnon Ben-Tor, contends that Joshua is responsible for the destruction levels dating to the thirteenth century B.C. The destruction was so severe that the city was not reinhabited until the time of Solomon in the tenth century B.C.⁴⁶ Yigael Yadin, the Israeli archaeologist who first excavated these stratum attributed the destruction to the Israelites.⁴⁷ Also, Ben-Tor is convinced Israelites were responsible for this destruction because of the mutilated statues of Egyptian and Canaanite gods and kings many of which were decapitated.⁴⁸ Hoffmeier maintains Deborah and Barak could not be responsible for this destruction because the battle they fought with King Jabin and Sisera happened about thirty-five miles south of Hazor (Judg 4:6, 12-13). While the text indicates God "subdued" Jabin and that the Israelites "cut off" or "exterminated" Jabin (Judg 4:23-24), Hoffmeier observes that the text is silent regarding any kind of military action against the city of Hazor itself. He says,

It is hard to believe that the city that was the "head" of all kingdoms of northern Canaan would so thoroughly be devastated by Joshua in

1400 BC and then rise from the ashes to be rebuilt to its peak of prosperity only to be demolished by a much smaller force from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulon (Judg 4:6, 10) under Deborah and Barak.⁴⁹

In his response to Hoffmeier, Wood says,

Judg 5:14-18 indicates that Ephraim, Benjamin, Makir (Manasseh), Zebulon, Issachar, and Naphtali, six northern hill country tribes, participated in the war against Jabin king of Hazor. Furthermore, Hoffmeier denies that there was any military action against Hazor itself by Deborah and Barak, as the battle described in Judges 4 took place at the Kishon River resulted in Jabin being “subdued” (Judg 4:23). Following this, the “Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin” until they “destroyed him” (Judg 4:24). The destruction of Jabin implies the destruction of his capital city Hazor.

These are minor points, however, compared to the major issues facing the 13th-century model which Hoffmeier does not address. That is, if the 1320 BC destruction at Hazor is assigned to Joshua, where is the city that Jabin of Judges 4 ruled, since Hazor was not rebuilt until the time of Solomon.⁵⁰

As already indicated, the advocates of the late date say the destruction levels of numerous cities in the thirteenth century B.C. are evidence of the conquest of the promised land. The Bible only mentions three cities that were destroyed by Joshua, but advocates of the late date say that these cities are representative of the mass destruction wielded by the Israelites throughout the land. Nevertheless, could it be that Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were the only cities destroyed in the conquest? Deut 6:10-12 says,

And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you--

with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Is it logical for people who are conquering a land with the intention of settling in it to destroy the cities they are intending on inhabiting themselves? Moses gives the impression that the Israelites were going to live in the Canaanite cities and houses that the Canaanites had built, not that the Israelites would have to rebuild. The destruction of the three cities mentioned in Joshua each seem to have happened under special circumstances, yet it is reasonable that the Israelite military strategy was to eliminate the inhabitants of the land without destroying their cities, homes, or crops. Moreover, the book of Judges seems to indicate that there was a great deal of conflict happening during that period in ancient Palestine. Could it be that the numerous destruction levels of the thirteenth century B.C. are the remains of those conflicts along with the destruction of Hazor?

Amarna Letters

Excavators have uncovered 382 tablets at Tell el Amarna, which is located about 180 miles south of Cairo.⁵¹ This site was the location of the capital during the reign of the ninth pharaoh in the eighteenth dynasty named Amenhotep IV or Akhenaton, named for the sun god Aten or Aton. The Amarna tablets are significant because they are a collection of diplomatic correspondences. Out of this collection, 106 of the letters were requests from various vassals of Egypt in Canaan

for military aid from the pharaoh in the face of attacks by a group of people called *Hapiru*.⁵² These attacks happened in the early to mid-fourteenth century B.C. The term, *Hapiru*, appears in texts dating from 1750 to 1150 B.C. and was a designation for semi-nomadic peoples who “were in the process of sedentarization, who came from the semi-desert zone and entered civilized regions as strangers . . . they were members of tightly knit tribal units whose allegiance was determined by kinship and who had their own system of law.”⁵³ Astour says the Amarna tablets indicate the *Hapiru* “acted in large armed units which were not only engaged in plundering raids but were also seizing for themselves towns and parts of the lands under Egyptian rule.”⁵⁴ He continues, “History shows that whenever one finds independent armed bands, these were always ethnically homogeneous.”⁵⁵ While not all *Hapiru* attacking cities in Palestine were Hebrews, some proponents of the early date believe that some of the *Hapiru* mentioned in the letters were references to Hebrews.⁵⁶ From the perspective of the Canaanites the Hebrews would have fit the description of *Hapiru*.

Probably the best argument against equating the Israelites with the any of the *Hapiru* comes from Hoffmeier. He points out that one of the Amarna tablets indicates that the king of Hazor was an ally of the *Hapiru* as they attacked Tyre.⁵⁷ This observation raises two issues for an early date of the Exodus. First, the books of Joshua and Judges indicate that the Israelites and the inhabitants of Hazor were anything but allies. Second, if the Israelites had come into the land in ca. 1400 B.C., then how could the king of Hazor be waging war on other city-states in northern Palestine if Joshua and the

Israelites had just destroyed the city? In response to the first issue, the *Hapiru* who were allies with Hazor obviously were not Israelites. Once again, “*Hapiru*” is a generic as well as derogatory term that was given to these semi-nomadic peoples causing unrest in settled areas. Not all *Hapiru* were Israelites, but some may have been called this by the Canaanites who certainly would not have been concerned with making any distinction between these groups as they were conquering Canaanite settlements. The second issue assumes it was impossible for Hazor to rebuild within forty to fifty years. However, the books of Joshua and Judges suggest it did regardless of which date of the Exodus one takes. Another possibility is that the *Hapiru* appeared after the initial conquest led by Joshua. They would have been among those who oppressed Israel during the time of the judges.⁵⁸

Extra-biblical References to Israel

The Merenptah Stele is a monument heralding military campaigns carried out by Pharaoh Merenptah (1237-1227 B.C.). The close of this “Hymn of Victory” contains a passage concerning a campaign that happened early in his reign saying,

Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon
is Gezer;
Yanoam is made as that which does
not exist;
Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.⁵⁹

This inscription is the oldest extra-biblical inscription where scholars agree on the mention of Israel. Most attention has been given to the determinatives (signs in the text that indicate the nature of the accompanying word) that follow the names of the cities and Israel. The determinatives accompanying the cities indicate that they were city-states. The

determinative accompanying Israel indicates that it was a less settled people indicating they were a tribal people without any fixed territorial boundaries, a picture in keeping with the time of the judges.⁶⁰ Since, no other mention of Israel appears prior to ca. 1220 B.C. and Merenptah recognized Israel as only a tribal people instead of a nation, some argue the stele supports a late date.⁶¹ On the other hand, supporters of the early date contend that Merenptah's mention of Israel indicates the Israelites were established enough for Merenptah to boast about having fought Israel, meaning Israel was well-established in Canaan by this time.⁶²

Manfred Görg's publication concerning a column base fragment located in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin has peaked some interest in the debate. Görg has discovered that it preserves three place names that were part of a longer list. The first two names are clearly Ashkelon and Canaan. Görg contends that the third is Israel. The orthography⁶³ suggests this inscription dates to the eighteenth dynasty.⁶⁴ If so, then it would lend support to an early date of the Exodus. Hoffmeier says Görg's reading of "Israel" is "plagued by serious linguistic and orthographic problems which preclude it from being Israel," then he proceeds by addressing "four of the most glaring objections."⁶⁵ In Görg's formal response to Hoffmeier, Görg puts forth his reasons for maintaining the inscription should be read "Israel." What is just as interesting is that Görg says, "My commentary has no relationship to questions about the date of the so-called exodus."⁶⁶ Apparently, Görg has no interest in the debate concerning the Exodus, indicating his objectivity in the matter.

Conclusion

Several more issues surround the debate concerning the date of the Exodus. Was there an Egyptian capital near Goshen during the eighteenth dynasty in the mid-fifteenth century B.C.?⁶⁷ Did Pharaoh actually perish in the Red Sea?⁶⁸ Can one trust the Jubilee's data from the Talmud that seems to indicate the beginning of the conquest happened in 1406 B.C.?⁶⁹ Did the populations in Moab and Edom during the fifteenth century B.C. correspond to biblical descriptions during Israel's trek to Canaan?⁷⁰ The list goes on as does the debate.

So why is it important for evangelicals to concern themselves with what seems to be insignificant compared to other matters concerning Scriptures? It is important because a great many people are abandoning the notion that the Exodus ever really happened.⁷¹ No doubt, the message of the text is preeminent over any chronological issues, but chronological issues naturally arise if we acknowledge the historicity of the text. While evangelicals have no need for extra-biblical evidence to uphold our conviction pertaining to the message, inspiration, and authority of Scripture, we should be committed to upholding the truth before a skeptical and unbelieving world. Evangelicals do not need to prove the veracity of the bible, yet apologetics is an important aspect of contending for the faith. Our chronological understanding of events before the Exodus and after the Exodus until Israel's monarchy is largely dependant upon our understanding of the date of the Exodus. As Wood states, "If we are looking in the wrong century for evidence to support the biblical account of the exodus, clearly we will not find any evidence!"⁷²

Both sides of the debate raise serious

questions concerning the date of the Exodus. If Moses had recorded the name of the pharaoh there would be no debate. However, during that time it was customary for people to call the Egyptian monarch "Pharaoh." Until stronger evidence points to the contrary, the mid-fifteenth century B.C. appears to be the most probable date for the Exodus.

ENDNOTES

¹The following are some well-known proponents of the late date of the exodus: Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 40-43; John Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical, 2000), 27-29; Richard Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 139-43; James K. Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus? A Response to Bryant Wood," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2008): 225-47; K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1966), 57-69; idem, *The Bible in Its World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 75-79; idem, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 307-09; Alan Millard (archeological notes), *Picture Archive of the Bible* (ed. Caroline Masom and Pat Alexander; Tring, Herts, England: Lion Books, 1987), 22.

²The following are some well-known proponents of the early date of the exodus: Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *A History of Israel from the Bronze Age Through The Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 104-11; idem, *Exodus*, in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 288-91; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament*

Israel (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 66-75; Bryant Wood, "The Rise and Fall of the 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 475-89; idem, "The Biblical Date for the Exodus is 1446 BC: A Response to James Hoffmeier," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2008): 249-58; idem, "From Ramesses to Shiloh: Archaeological Discoveries Bearing on the Exodus-Judges Period" in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 256-62; William H. Shea, "The Date of the Exodus," in *Giving the Sense*, 236-55.

³Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 236.

⁴Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 256.

⁵Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 233.

⁶Ibid., 234-35.

⁷M. Bietak, *Avaris and PiRamesse: Archaeological Exploration in the Eastern Nile Delta* (Wheeler Lecture for 1979; Oxford: Oxford University, 1981), 67-79.

⁸Shea, "The Date of the Exodus," 249.

⁹Robert I. Vasholz, "On the Dating of the Exodus," *Presbyterion* 32 (2006): 111.

¹⁰Ibid., 112.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Wood, "The 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 479. Wood gives several examples, such as Bethel in Gen 28:19, used proleptically in Gen 12:8 and 13:3, and Dan, named by the Danites in Judg 18:29 but used proleptically in Gen 14:14.

¹³Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 354

¹⁴Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 233.

- ¹⁵Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 250-51.
- ¹⁶Charles H. Dyer, "The Date of the Exodus Reexamined," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 3 (1983): 226.
- ¹⁷Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 107.
- ¹⁸Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 83.
- ¹⁹Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 235-36.
- ²⁰Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 307.
- ²¹Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 236.
- ²²Dennis Bratcher, "The Date of the Exodus: The Historical Study of Scripture," n.p. [cited 25 August 2008]. Online: <http://www.cresourcei.org/exodusdate.html>.
- ²³Ibid.
- ²⁴Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 237. See R. D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austell *1 & 2 Kings*, in vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 181, for a discussion of the events taking forty literally.
- ²⁵I would like to thank my colleague Peter Gentry for pointing out this passage to me and its significance to this discussion; cf. Wood, "The 13th Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 486-86.
- ²⁶Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 253.
- ²⁷Dyer, "The Date of the Exodus Reexamined," 235.
- ²⁸Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1961), 52.
- ²⁹John J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1981), 103; Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 148; Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 207.
- ³⁰Bratcher, "The Date of the Exodus."
- ³¹J. Hughes, *Secrets of the Times: Myth and History in Biblical Chronology* (JSOTSup 66; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); R. G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 204.
- ³²Boling, *Judges*, 204.
- ³³Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 209.
- ³⁴I am always amazed at how we moderns portray the ancients as so ignorant. The more I study ancient near Eastern cultures the more I am amazed at how much they did know.
- ³⁵John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1971), 31.
- ³⁶See John D. Currid, *Doing Archaeology in the Land of the Bible: A Basic Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) for an excellent introduction to Palestinian Archaeology; for further reading see Joel F. Drinkard, Gerald L. Mattingly, and J. Maxwell Mill, *Benchmarks in Time and Culture* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).
- ³⁷Kenneth A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, "Chronology," in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3 vol.; ed. J. D. Douglas; Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1980), 1:275.
- ³⁸John Garstang, "Jericho and the Biblical Story," in *Wonders of the Past* (ed. J. A. Hammerton; New York: Wise, 1937), 1222.
- ³⁹John Garstang, "Jericho: City and Necropolis, Fourth Report," *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 21 (1934): 118-30.
- ⁴⁰Kathleen Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (London: Ernest Benn, 1957), 262; idem, "Jericho," in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (ed. D. Winton Thomas; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 265-67; idem, *The Bible in Recent Archaeology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 33-37.
- ⁴¹Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 262-63.
- ⁴²I had the privilege of participating in the 2006 excavations at Hazor.
- ⁴³Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 268.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., 268.
- ⁴⁵Wood, "The 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 487-88.
- ⁴⁶Amnon Ben-Tor, "The Fall of Canaanite Hazor—The 'Who' and 'When' Questions," in *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition, Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries B.C.E* (ed. Semour Gitin, Amihai Mazar, and Ephraim Stern; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998), 456-67.
- ⁴⁷Yigael Yadin, "The Fourth Season of Excavation at Hazor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 22 (February, 1959): 9.
- ⁴⁸Ben-Tor, "The Fall of Canaanite Hazor," 456, 465.
- ⁴⁹Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 244.
- ⁵⁰Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 256.
- ⁵¹For a detailed study see Y. Goren, Y. I. Finkelstein, and N. Na'aman, *Inscribed in Clay - Provenance Study of the Amarna Tablets and Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Tel Aviv: Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of

- Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, 2004).
- ⁵²Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 269.
- ⁵³Michael C. Astour, "The Hapiru in the Amarna Texts: Basic Points of Controversy," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 31 (1999): 41.
- ⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 31.
- ⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁵⁶Kaiser, *A History of Israel from the Bronze Age Through The Jewish Wars*, 109-11; Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 102-108; Wood, "The 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory," 489.
- ⁵⁷Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 245.
- ⁵⁸Meredith Kline, "The Ha-Bi-Ru—Kin or Foe of Israel?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1957): 54-61.
- ⁵⁹Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 228.
- ⁶⁰K. A. Kitchen, "The Physical Text of Merenptah's Victory Hymn (The 'Israel Stele')," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 24 (1994): 74-75.
- ⁶¹Andrew E. Hill, *Baker's Handbook of Bible Lists* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 71-72.
- ⁶²Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 155-56; Wood, "From Ramesses to Shiloh," 274.
- ⁶³Orthography describes or defines the set of symbols used in a language and the rules about how to write these symbols.
- ⁶⁴Manfred Görg, "Israel in Hieroglyphen," *Biblische Notizen* 106 (2001): 24.
- ⁶⁵Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 241.
- ⁶⁶Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 255.
- ⁶⁷Dyer, "The Date of the Exodus Reexamined," 233; J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 60-62.
- ⁶⁸Hoffmeier, "What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?" 239-40; Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 253-54.
- ⁶⁹Robert C. Young, "When Did Solomon Die?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46 (2003): 599-603.
- ⁷⁰Nelson Glueck, "Explorations in Eastern Palestine and the Negeb," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 55 (1934): 3-21; Gerald L. Mattingly, "The Exodus-Conquest and the Archaeology of Transjordan: New Light on an Old Problem," *Grace Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (1983): 245-62; Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 220-21.
- ⁷¹Carl Rasmussen, "Conquest, Infiltration, Revolt, or Resettlement?" in *Giving the Sense*, 153.
- ⁷²Wood, "A Response to James Hoffmeier," 249.