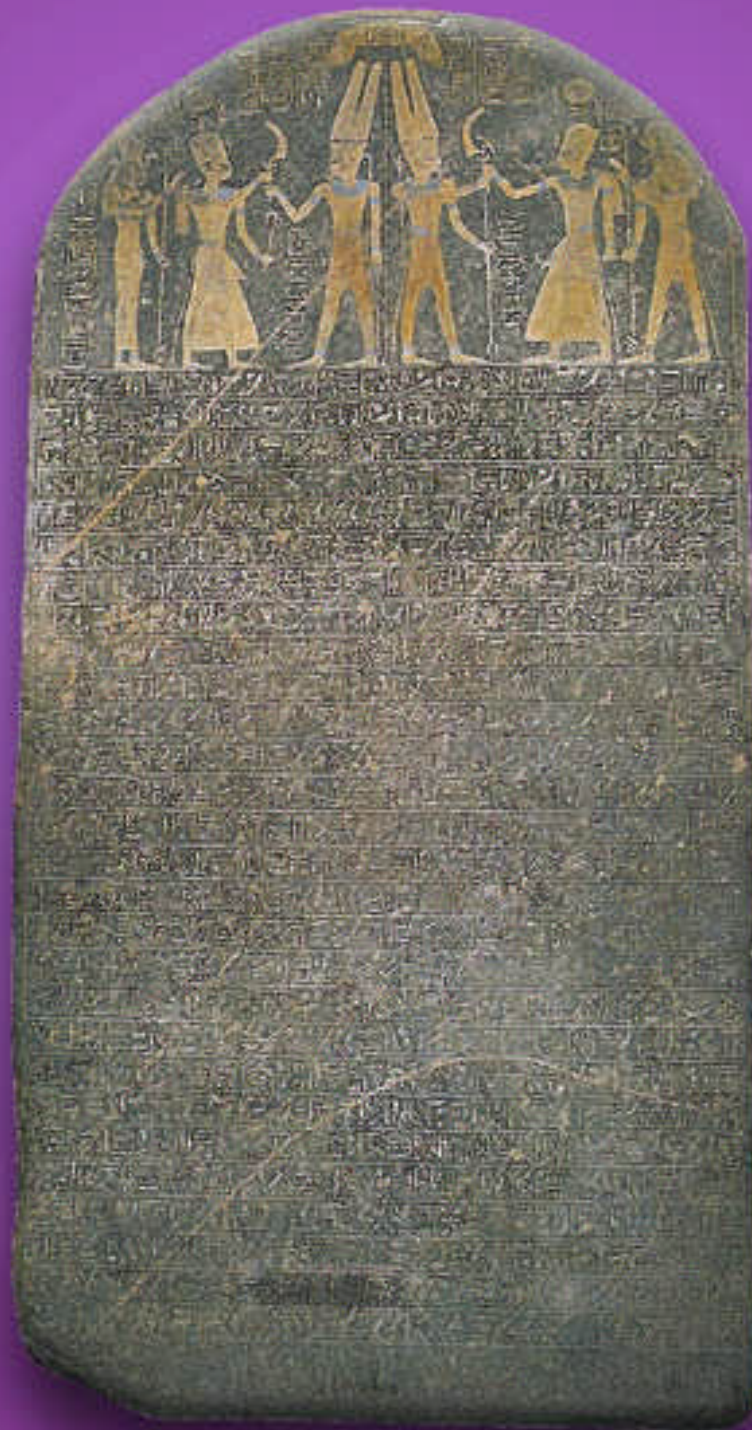


# ANCIENT ISRAEL IN EGYPT AND THE EXODUS



# Ancient Israel in Egypt and the Exodus

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## Introduction

The Exodus is one of the most dramatic events in the Hebrew Bible – the flight of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their miraculous escape across the Red Sea. It is traditionally viewed as the single event that gave birth to the nation of Israel.

The Biblical narrative of the Exodus is a fascinating account that can be supplemented by additional historical sources. This eBook, taken from articles in *Biblical Archaeology Review* magazine, considers texts and archaeological evidence from the second millennium B.C.E. that describe Israel in Egypt and the Exodus.

In “Out of Egypt,” James K. Hoffmeier questions how likely is it that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. And if they were there, which way did they go when they left? Hoffmeier uses recent archaeological excavation data from Egypt to shed new light on the Israelites’ time as Pharaoh’s slaves, the locations mentioned in Exodus and the route the Israelites took out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

Abraham Malamat’s article “Let my People Go and Go and Go and Go” questions the historicity of the Biblical account. Malamat suggests that once we give up the search for a single, dramatic Exodus, the evidence for a more subtle Exodus—one dispersed over time—will emerge.

Finally, in “When Did Ancient Israel Begin?” Hershel Shanks takes a new look at the late-13<sup>th</sup>-century B.C.E. Merneptah Stele, which has long been considered the earliest reference to Israel outside of the Bible. But now three German scholars say they may have found another hieroglyphic inscription almost 200 years older naming “Israel.” The Bible may be more accurate than some thought.

We hope that you will find this eBook interesting and thought provoking. These articles are just a taste of the ancient insights found in *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

Margaret Warker  
eBook Editor  
2012

## Out of Egypt

*The Archaeological Context of the Exodus*

By James K. Hoffmeier



Every spring as Passover nears, TV audiences in America are accustomed to seeing Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston as Moses and Yul Brynner as Ramesses II, the putative pharaoh of the Exodus. For millions, the images from this classic film have shaped their understanding of the bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt and their triumphant departure under their liberator Moses who subsequently receives the Law from God at Mt. Sinai.

In the mid-20th century, the historicity of the Bible's portrayal was, by and large, affirmed by leading North American scholars like William Foxwell Albright and, arguably his best-known student, George Ernest Wright. Not only did they accept the general accuracy of the Exodus narratives, but they believed that secondary archaeological evidence could be adduced to support the Biblical tradition. John Bright, another Albright student, maintained this view in his *A History of Israel* (1959). In the third edition of this classic work (1981), Bright opined that "There can really be little doubt that ancestors of Israel had been

slaves in Egypt and had escaped in some marvelous way. Almost no one today would question it.”<sup>1</sup>

Just as this positive portrayal was being made, however, the origins-of-Israel debate was beginning, and battle lines between historical maximalists and minimalists were being drawn. The pages of **BAR** have regularly covered this debate over the past 20 years. At a gathering of Biblical-minimalist historians in Rome in 2005, they reaffirmed their antipathy toward the historical value of the Old Testament; the Exodus story was singled out for special mention.<sup>a</sup> “It never happened” was the theme.

Scholars who now question or reject the Biblical reports generally do so for several reasons: (1) the lack of corroborating archaeological evidence in Egypt and Sinai, (2) because they regard the Exodus narratives as myth, legends, folktales, and/or, (3) because the narratives were written so many centuries after the events and are so theologically and ideologically shaped that they cannot be read as history.

Concerning the first point, Scandinavian minimalist Niels Peter Lemche has commented that “The silence in the Egyptian sources as to the presence of Israel in the country” is “an obstacle to the notion of Israel’s 40 years sojourn.”<sup>2</sup> On the second point, American scholar Bernard Batto speaks for a number of other scholars when he declares that “The biblical narrative in the books of Genesis through Joshua owes more to the folkloristic tradition of the ancient Near East than to the historical genre.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite over a century of archaeological excavations in Egypt, proof of the dramatic Exodus has not been found. Pioneer Egyptologists like William Matthew Flinders Petrie and H. Edouard Naville explored the Nile Delta and Wadi Tumilat to identify sites mentioned in the Exodus narratives. They may have successfully identified some of these places, but they, like archaeologists ever since, have not

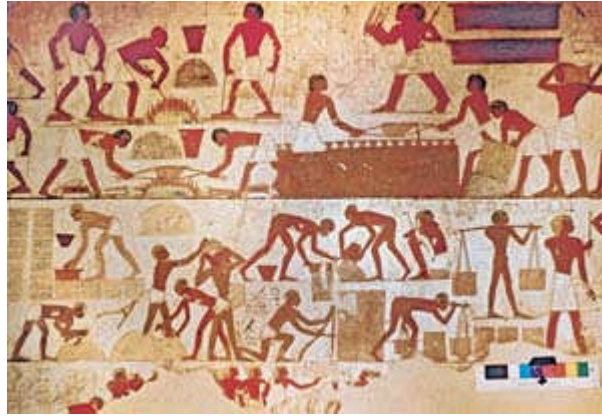


been able to produce direct evidence to demonstrate the presence of the Hebrews in Egypt.

There are several possible reasons for this absence of evidence. The first possibility is, as the Biblical minimalists suppose, that the Hebrews were never there.

A second, more likely explanation is that we have had unrealistic expectations as to what archaeology can deliver.<sup>4</sup> After all, what evidence, short of an inscription in a Proto-Canaanite script stating “bricks made by Hebrew slaves” would be considered proof that the Israelites were in Egypt? Archaeology’s ability to determine the ethnicity of a people in the archaeological record, especially of the Israelites at such an early period, is quite limited. Assuming the Israelites were in Egypt during Egypt’s New Kingdom (c. 1540–1200 B.C.), what kind of pottery would they have used? What house plans would they have lived in? What sort of burial traditions did they practice? And would archaeologists be able to identify the burial of these early Israelites who ended up as slaves anyway? And how are all these things different from those of Canaanites or other Semitic-speaking peoples in Egypt at this time?

The Bible locates the Hebrews in Egypt’s northeastern Delta, called the Land of Ra’amses (Genesis 47:11) and Goshen (Genesis 45:10, 47:4, 6; Exodus 8:22; 9:26). Although the Delta contains hundreds of archaeological sites, comparatively they have not received as much attention as sites on the Nile from Cairo south to Aswan. Thus in John Baines and Jaromir Malek’s *The Atlas of Ancient Egypt*,<sup>5</sup> 94 pages are needed to describe sites between Cairo and Aswan; just ten are devoted to Delta sites.



*Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY*

"Hard labor in mortar and brick" (Exodus 1:14) was the lot of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. In the lower extreme right of this 15th-century B.C. wall painting from the tomb of Rekhmire, mayor of Thebes and vizier of Thutmose III, Egyptian overseers with sticks in their hands put foreigners to work making mud bricks to build the storehouse for the temple of Amun in Karnak. The overseer warns the workers, "The rod is in my hand; be not idle."

The painting shows the various stages of the brick-making process. In the upper left of the bottom register, a Syrian prisoner/slave draws water from a pool. Others, among them a Nubian, work the moistened mud with some sort of tool. Another worker carries the prepared mud in a bucket on his shoulders to the brick-makers who shape the mud into bricks. The bricks are then stacked and left to dry in the hot Egyptian sun. When the bricks are properly set, they are carried off to the building project.

The upper register shows foundry workers who are crafting metal doors for the temple. At right, workers bring in Asiatic copper and gold. In the upper left, a worker stokes the fire with a stick, while on either side two other workers intensify the fire with a bellows. The bellows is inflated by pulling on the strings in the workers' hands, and the air is then expelled when they step down on the inflated bellows.

Below them two other workers are melting bronze ingots over a furnace. The workers then lift the molten metal from the fire with two poles that serve as tongs. To the right they pour the molten metal into clay molds to cast the doors of the temple.

The picture has improved somewhat since 1980 but the fact remains that high water tables in the Delta make excavating to early levels difficult and expensive. Moreover, in the moist environment of the Delta, surviving papyri are rare.<sup>6</sup> The excavation at Tell el-Dab'a (ancient Avaris, the Hyksos capital), directed by Manfred Bietak of Vienna University, uses a pump and an elaborate network of pipes in order to remove water from the ground to allow diggers to reach New Kingdom levels. During a visit in 2002, I saw the scribes' quarter of the early-18th-Dynasty palace (c. 1500–1450 B.C.) that was being exposed from the moist mud of the Delta. A number of inscribed clay seals and seal impressions were found, some of which date to the 12th Dynasty (c. 1900 B.C.), but no papyrus had survived.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, after more than 35 years, Bietak's team has not discovered any papyri.

At the nearby sister site of Qantir, after nearly 25 years of work, Edgar Pusch and his colleagues have likewise not discovered any papyri at what is now believed to be Pi-Ramesses, which was the capital of Egypt during the 13th–12th centuries,<sup>8</sup> and might be the site known as Ra'amses built by Israelite slaves (see Exodus 1:11).

In short, the Nile Delta where the Bible says the ancient Israelites lived has produced no historical or administrative documents that might shed light *on any period*.

Moreover, the types of royal inscriptions found on stelae and temples never include any negative reports about Pharaoh and his armies. Rather, they speak of his triumphs and deeds of valor, and even distort set-backs such as the near disaster to Ramesses II's army at the battle of Kadesh, about which we know from other sources. Consequently, no one will ever find a stela commemorating the humiliation of Pharaoh as a result of the plagues or the defeat of the Egyptian forces dispatched to bring the fleeing Hebrews back to Egypt.

Because we cannot expect to find textual proof of the Israelites in Egypt, we must ask whether the Bible's report is plausible in light of secondary evidence provided by archaeology. Do elements of the story have the ring of authenticity or are they fanciful? Did pastoralists from the Levant migrate to Egypt during times of famine? Is there evidence from Egypt of foreigners being pressed into hard labor for Pharaoh? Do the geographical places named in the Exodus story square with realities on the ground?



*Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY*

Pharaoh Rameses II crushes the Hittites under the wheels of his chariot at the Battle of Kadesh in 1273 B.C in this relief from the Ramesseum in Thebes. In fact, the Egyptians suffered a near disaster and the battle was more a stalemate than a victory. The ancient Egyptians, however, did not trumpet—or admit—their defeats. There is no reason to expect an Egyptian reference to the Israelite Exodus.

First, were there Semites in Egypt? The famous Assyriologist Jean Bottero summarizes what historians and archaeologists know to be the case, “On the borders of the Delta, from time immemorial, small groups of these bedawin [Bedouin] came to pasture their flocks, tempted by the proximity of better grazing-grounds and possible loot.” This testimony is supported in Egyptian literature. One sage, Neferti, who lived around 1900 B.C., laments the fact that Semitic-speaking people had infiltrated the Delta:

All happiness has gone away, the land is cast down in trouble because of those feeders, Asiatics (*sttyw*) who are throughout the land. Enemies have arisen in the East, Asiatics (*'amu*) have come down to Egypt ... One will build the “Walls of the Ruler” to prevent Asiatics (*'amu*) from going down to Egypt. They beg for water in the customary manner in order to let their flocks drink.<sup>9</sup>



*Hershel Shanks*

Colorfully dressed bedouin identified as “37 Asiatics” ask for permission to enter Egypt in this 19th-century B.C. wall painting from the tomb of Nomarch Khnum-Hotep in Beni-Hassan. The head Bedouin, whose depiction has been emphasized by a cleaning of the wall, is identified as, “The Ruler of a Foreign Country Ibsha.” Egyptian literature, too, tells that “Asiatics” and foreigners came to Egypt to graze and water their livestock.

Seven hundred years later, Papyrus Anastasi 6 (from the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah [1213–1203 B.C.]), contains a report from a border fort in the Wadi Tumilat region that an Edomite Bedouin tribe was permitted to “pass the fortress Merneptah-hetep-hir-maat which is in Tjeku (Succoth)” to water their flocks at “the pools of Pi-Atum.”<sup>10</sup>

These texts span a period of 700 years during the second millennium B.C., illustrating that pastoralists from western Asia regularly come with their flocks into Egypt to water and pasture them.

Support for the historicity of these texts comes from burials with Canaanite artifacts found in the Delta and the Wadi Tumilat at more than half a dozen sites.<sup>11</sup> Some of these remains belonged to these pastoralists, while others can be attributed to Semitic-speaking peoples from the Levant who settled in Egypt, some of whom became identified with the Hyksos who actually ruled Egypt from their capital at Avaris for at least a century (c. 1650–1540 B.C.).

Thus both texts from Egypt and archaeological evidence from the second millennium B.C. agree that Semites entered Egypt with flocks and herds, especially in times of drought in Canaan.

This is precisely the picture portrayed in Genesis regarding Jacob and his family. Drought and famine in Canaan prompted the patriarch to send his sons to Egypt where there was grain, which eventually led them to settle in Egypt with their flocks and herds (Genesis 43:1–15).

The Bible describes two kinds of labor imposed on the Israelites: (1) brick-making for building projects and (2) farm work: “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor” (Exodus 1:13–14).

New Kingdom Egypt is well-known for its military campaigns north into Canaan and Syria, and south into Nubia. Thousands of POWs were brought back to Egypt, some of whom are depicted on the famous tomb painting of Rekhmire, Vizier of Thutmose III (1457–1425 B.C.). Egyptian taskmasters are shown with sticks, supervising foreign workers making mud bricks, as they haul the bricks in shoulder yokes to a nearby temple building-project. The accompanying text identifies these laborers as having been brought back from military campaigns in Canaan-Syria and Nubia.

The Bible reports that the Hebrew slaves could not reach the quotas set by Egyptian officials (Exodus 5:7–8). To make matters worse, the straw required for making bricks was withheld (Exodus 5:18). Egyptian texts from the third and second millennia B.C. report on how work targets and quotas were imposed on brick makers.<sup>12</sup> Records of brick-making teams, targets and shortfalls, are found on a leather scroll now in the Louvre that dates to the fifth year of Ramesses II (1275 B.C.).<sup>13</sup> Occasionally a quota was reached, leading one Ramesside period supervisor to boast in a letter that his workers “are making their quota of daily bricks.”<sup>14</sup> Another officer from the same period complains that he was unable to get on with his brick-making because “there are no men to make bricks nor straw in the neighborhood.”<sup>15</sup> These statements from Ramesside period texts have a familiar Biblical ring to them.



*Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY*

A 19th-century painted copy from the Kunst-historisches Museum in Vienna shows off the tribes' multi-colored costumes.

Another papyrus (Leiden 348) reports that “the ‘Apiru ... are dragging stone to the great pylon of [///]” for the construction of a palace.<sup>16</sup> While scholars continue to debate whether the term *‘Apiru/Habiru* refers (and is philologically related) to the early Hebrews, it is clear from this text that right up to the time when many believe the Exodus occurred that foreigners, in this case *‘Apiru*, were engaged in hard labor in Egypt.

Because the Exodus narratives report dramatically about the hardships surrounding the brick-making (e.g., Exodus 2:11, 23; 5:4–19), the mention of “every kind of field labor” in Exodus 1:14 is often overlooked by researchers. Studies of paintings and reliefs from tombs of the New Kingdom reveal, however, that foreigners, typically POWs, are depicted herding cattle and doing various types of field work.<sup>17</sup> They are also portrayed working in vineyards and working winepresses. In the 18th-Dynasty tomb of Intef, one such scene reports that *‘Apiru* were pressing grapes for wine.

The Bible reports that the Israelites worked as slaves for Pharaoh. Egyptian sources confirm that forced labor was imposed on foreigners, typically POWs, during the general period when the oppression of the Israelites occurred.

In sum, the entry of the ancient Hebrews into Egypt in search of water during famine and their subsequent enslavement seems authentic. It is certainly unlikely that such a demeaning and ignoble origin would have later been invented by the Biblical authors. If it were fiction, one would expect the product of the creative imagination to offer a more glorious picture of their own origins.

Egyptologists and Biblical scholars have long been interested in the toponyms or place names relating to the route of the Exodus. There is a good reason for such an investigation: A concocted story written centuries after the purported event would likely not bother with such trivial details as geography. No archaeologist to my knowledge has attempted to discover, for example, The



Shire or Mordor from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, because they recognize that these great stories are novels, modern mythology that flowed from the creative imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien. They are not history.



*Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY*

“All kinds of work in the fields” (*Exodus 1:14*). This too was the lot of the Israelite slaves. In this 19th-century copy of a wall painting from the tomb of Nakht in Thebes, slaves are gathering grapes (upper right). Further to the left in the upper register, three slaves stomp on the grapes in a vat. The juice drains out of a pipe in the right side into a collection pool over which another slave is working. The juice is then gathered in jugs for fermentation and storage.

To the far left a worker carries captured fowl. The bottom register shows the collection and preparation of fowl and fish.



*Courtesy of the Louvre*

“Paherypedjet son of Paser” is one of the brickmakers who fails to deliver his quota of 2,000 bricks, according to a list on a leather scroll from the fifth year of Ramesses II, now in the Louvre. The text echoes the Biblical story: Pharaoh, angry at Moses, stops providing the Israelites with straw for the bricks, leaving them to forage for it on their own but still requiring them to fulfill the same quota of bricks. Pharaoh says to Moses, “Lazy, that’s what you are—lazy! That is why you keep saying, “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.” Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks” (*Exodus 5:18*).

But the Exodus sites are different. And there are some recent discoveries, discussed here for the first time in popular print, that shed new light on the existence of some of these Egyptian sites.

Ra’amses is a “store city” for which the Israelites made construction bricks (*Exodus 1:11*). It is also the starting point for the Exodus (*Exodus 12:37*; *Numbers 33:3*). This is likely to be equated with the Delta capital built by and



named for Ramesses II, that is, Pi-Ramesses, “the house of Ramesses,”<sup>18</sup> as we know from Egyptian records. Its precise location, however, has been difficult to pin down. Since the 19th century, archaeologists have suggested several sites. Since 1980, Edgar Pusch of the Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim Germany has been excavating at Qantir,<sup>19</sup> and there is now widespread agreement that he has identified Pi-Ramesses,<sup>20</sup> a massive city that a magnetometer survey reveals occupied about six square miles.<sup>21</sup>

Egyptian records tell us that during the reign of Ramesses IX (1099–1069 B.C.), Pi-Ramesses was abandoned apparently because the Pelusiac branch of the Nile through the Delta had migrated away from the city, limiting transportation and communication. By about 1075 B.C., before the passing of the last Ramesside pharaoh,<sup>22</sup> a new Delta capital was built that remained so until Greco-Roman times. It is known in Egyptian texts as Djanet, which is Zoan in the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 13:22), and is better known by its Greek name, Tanis.

A FALCON FROM PITHOM. Two sites have been proposed as the location of Biblical Pithom—Maskhuta and Retabeh. But Maskhuta was not inhabited in the Ramesside period, even though this Ramesside falcon was found there. Author Hoffmeier argues that it was brought from nearby Retabeh and moved to Maskhuta in the seventh century B.C. when Retabeh (Biblical Pithom) was destroyed. Pithom in the Bible is therefore to be identified with Retabeh.



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The fact that the city of Pi-Ramesses had a history limited to the period from c. 1275–1075 B.C. is extremely significant for the appearance of a Delta site named Ra’amses in the Exodus narrative. Archaeologist Israel Finkelstein,<sup>23</sup> Egyptologist Donald Redford<sup>24</sup> and Bible scholar John Van Seters<sup>25</sup> all argue that the toponyms in the Book of Exodus reflect *realia* of the seventh or sixth century

B.C. rather than the time of the Exodus. What do they do with Pi-Ramesses, however, which didn't exist in the seventh or sixth century B.C.? Some Biblical minimalists simply dismiss this significant correlation of the dates of Biblical Ra'amses and Egyptian Pi-Ramesses. Other minimalists say that the old name of the cults of Pi-Ramesses lived on in Tanis, and this is the seventh-century B.C. Ra'amses of the Bible.<sup>26</sup> This creative explanation leads Niels Peter Lemche to believe that "Ramses may in Exodus 1:11 refer to Tanis."<sup>27</sup> This explanation is convenient for those bent on dating the narratives to the late period. The reason for rejecting this explanation, however, is clear: The author(s) of the Exodus narrative knew the difference between Pi-Ramesses and the first millennium B.C. city of Tanis. Tanis was *the* prominent city of northern Egypt in the first millennium B.C. When the first millennium B.C. psalmist reflected on the plagues that struck Egypt prior to the Exodus, they occurred in Tanis/Zoan (Psalm 78:12, 43), and not Ra'amses. The simplest explanation is that the city of Ra'amses in the Exodus story corresponds to Pi-Ramesses, a city that was unknown to seventh-century B.C. writers.



NO EASY WAY OUT. The "Way of Horus," or the Coastal Road, from Egypt to Canaan was lined with forts about a day's march from one another, as depicted in a relief of Seti I (1294–1279 B.C.) from Karnak. Seti is shown here returning from a campaign against the Shasu-bedouin, with POWs marching before the pharaoh's chariot. Behind the pharaoh, labeled "G" in this drawing, is the fourth fort or "Edjo of Seti-Merneptal." Directly beneath the horse's tail is "E" or "the Migdol of Men-maat-re," the third fort.

A crocodile-infested canal ("A", "the dividing waters") extends vertically on the right of the POWs and is surrounded by reeds. A bridge over the canal connects the two sides of the Tjaru fortress ("B"), which has been identified as Tell Hebua near Qantara East in Sinai and where a massive fortress from the 18th Dynasty (1540–1307 B.C.) has been found. The fort labeled "D" on the drawing (left of the horse's front hooves) is "The Dwelling of the Lion," which author James Hoffmeier believes is the site he has been excavating at Tel el-Borg. Not surprisingly, the Israelites avoided this road on their flight out of Egypt.



*Zev Radovan*

Pithom is mentioned only in Exodus 1:11. It is the second city for which the Hebrews made mudbricks. The name derives from the Egyptian *p(r)-itm*, “House of Atum.” Atum, the sun-god of Heliopolis, was also the patron deity of the Wadi Tumilat, whose present-day Arabic name preserves the deity’s name in *Tumilat*. Hence it has been thought to be the region where Pithom is located. Two sites in the wadi have been proposed for Pithom—Tell el-Maskhuta and Tell el-Retabeh. John S. Holladay of the University of Toronto dug at Maskhuta in the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> and determined that the site was unoccupied between the 17th century B.C. and the end of the seventh century B.C. Therefore, it could not be Biblical Pithom.



*Zev Radovan*

Archaeological work at Tell el-Retabeh during the 1970s revealed that it was occupied throughout the New Kingdom.<sup>29</sup> It was then suddenly abandoned during seventh century at precisely the time that Maskhuta was being built. In the process, blocks from Ramesside Retabeh were likely moved and reused at Maskhuta. That explains why, even though Maskhuta was unoccupied in the Ramesside period, Ramesside objects were found at the site.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the name Pithom was transferred from one site to the other. In any event, I believe that Retabeh is Biblical Pithom, although the name Pithom might also have applied to neighboring Maskhuta beginning in the seventh century B.C. From the second millennium B.C. and through the first millennium B.C., however, Pithom was located at Retabeh. Therefore Pithom would have been known to a Biblical writer in the late-second millennium B.C. just as well as the late period.

Succoth is the Israelites' first stop after departing from Ra'amses (Exodus 12:37; Numbers 33:5). After heading directly southeast from Ra'amses to Succoth, the Israelites were instructed to make a sharp turn back north. The Lord told Moses, "Turn back (Hebrew *šûb*–) and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zaphon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea" (Exodus 14:2). This would take the Israelites toward the well-defended coastal highway leading to Canaan. It is best known from a relief of Seti I (1294–1279 B.C.) (the father of Ramesses II) in the Karnak Temple. That relief illustrates a series of forts on the route, recording each of their names. This was the route that the Israelites tried to avoid after leaving Ra'amses; Exodus 13:17 states that the Israelites did not go by the "way of the land of the Philistines" (i.e., the coastal route) for fear of encountering Egyptian hostilities and then having to return to Egypt. No one who has studied the Exodus itinerary has thus far offered any compelling reason why the Israelites would turn back north into the teeth of Egypt's east-frontier defense network. The route they had been traveling was equally dangerous; the Anastasi Papyri reveal that the eastern end of the Wadi Tumilat was also heavily defended by forts. Additionally there were lakes and

marshlands throughout the Isthmus of Suez between the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Suez. So there was no easy way out of Egypt.

Recent archaeological evidence, however, suggests how the Israelites may have found a way through these dangers on either side. The sequence of forts in the Seti relief at Karnak dramatically illustrates the Egyptian defenses on the eastern frontier.

The first fort on the route is Tjaru/Sile. The next one is “The Dwelling of the Lion.” This is followed by the “the Migdol of Men-maat-re” (i.e., “the Fortress of Seti I”). Ten additional forts guarded the route on the way to Canaan.

The excavations of Mohamad Abd el-Maksoud of the Supreme Council for Antiquities of Egypt has finally settled the location of the first site, Tjaru/Sile—Tell Hebua located 3 miles east of the Suez Canal near Qantara East in Sinai. In 1999 Abd el-Maksoud’s team discovered a Ramesside-period votive statue identifying the site as the long-sought Tjaru.<sup>31</sup>

The most impressive structure at Tell Hebua is a massive fortress 865 yards long and 430 yards wide. It is not hard to see why the Israelites did not take the “way of the Land of the Philistines.” It would have been a deadly trap!

Just 3 miles southeast of Tell Hebua is the site of Tell el-Borg. Since 2000 it has been excavated by the North Sinai Archaeological Project, which I direct. There we found the remains of what we believe to be a Ramesside-period fort with walls 12 feet thick. It seems to have been square-shaped about 275 feet on a side. We recovered a small stone inscription stating that during the reign of Ramesses II the fort was occupied by a unit of soldiers from the Division of Amun. This unit would have constituted up to 250 soldiers. We believe that el-Borg is the second site on the Seti relief, namely “The Dwelling of the Lion.”



A unique fired mud-brick moat at Tel el-Borg predated a Ramesside fort with massive 12-foot-thick walls. Excavator Hoffmeier believes this is the fort called the “The Dwelling of the Lion” (“D” in the drawing).

If el-Borg is “The Dwelling of the Lion,” then somewhere very close, within 3 to 5 miles is Migdol (marked “E” on the drawing), the third fort on “the Way of Horus” where Moses and the Hebrews camped on their way out of Egypt.



“God led the people around by the wilderness road toward the Reed Sea” (Exodus 13:18), not by the northern route. Faced with Egyptian forts like that at Tel el-Borg, the Israelites fled through the marshlands of the el-Ballah lakes (highlighted on the satellite image). These lakes were mostly drained when the Suez Canal was dug in the early 20th century, but they were extensive and marshy in Pharaonic times. They could well be Yam Suf (the Sea of Reeds), that the Israelites confronted and then marched through after turning back north and camping near Migdol.

If that is the case, the third fort, Migdol of Men-maat-re, was probably located 3 to 5 miles away. This third fort might hold the key to locating the Hebrew escape route. In Exodus 14:2 we are told that the Israelites camped “between Migdol and the sea.” In the latter part of the 1980s, coastal geologist Daniel Stanley of the Smithsonian Institution conducted subsurface drilling of the east delta and north Sinai. His results show that the Mediterranean coastline at



the time the Exodus was approximately 20 miles south of its present location.<sup>32</sup> This in turn leads to the conclusion that Tjaru/Sile was situated on an ancient barrier island. It was probably the major port of entry to Egypt from the Levant during the second millennium B.C. Immediately south of this narrow barrier island, a Nile channel passed, surrounded by marshy areas that emptied into a large lagoon to the east that in turn emptied into the Mediterranean Sea.

From the Bible, we know that Migdol was near the sea through which the Israelites would later pass. It was the Yam Suf, the Sea of Reeds (not the Red Sea of the Septuagint, the Greek translation that has unfortunately been followed by most English translations over the centuries). The word *sûp*– reflects the Hebrew writing of the Egyptian word *t-wf(y)* meaning *reeds*,<sup>33</sup> and it corresponds to the marshy wetlands and lakes on Egypt’s eastern frontier.<sup>34</sup> The Onomastica of Amenemopet, a type of ancient geographical list from the Ramesside period, contains a sequence of major Egyptian toponyms (place-names), running from the southern frontier to its northern limit. Tjaru/Sile is named as the northernmost point in Egypt.<sup>35</sup> The name on this list before that is *p3 t-wf(y)*, the marshes or reedy wetlands. This sequence demonstrates that this reedy, marshy lake district was south of Tjaru/Sile on Egypt’s eastern border with Sinai.

Immediately south of Tell el-Borg and our tentatively proposed location of Migdol farther to the east is a system of lakes that was known until the last century as the el-Ballah lakes, the most viable candidate for Yam Suf. Thirty years ago, Manfred Bietak proposed that this lake basin was Egyptian *p3 twfy* which the Biblical writers of the Exodus story called Yam Suf in Hebrew.<sup>36</sup> I believe Bietak was right.

Tjaru/Sile, lying on a barrier island, was situated with the Mediterranean on the north and a large lagoon on the south. Migdol probably lay on the southern shore of the lagoon. The Israelites probably avoided Tjaru/Sile by

passing to its south and in the direction of Migdol and then proceeding through the marshy el-Ballah lakes.

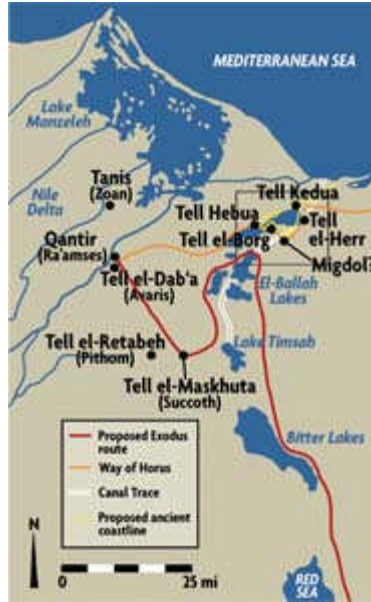
The recent discovery of New Kingdom-period forts in northern Sinai, and the likelihood that Migdol of Exodus 14:2 is close to Tell el-Borg means that we are indeed close to the location of a key site for pinpointing the location of the Exodus from Egypt as described in the Bible.

I have shown that the Biblical description of the entry into Egypt, the enslavement and the Exodus are all plausible. I have also shown that several of the geographical sites on the Exodus route are attested in Egyptian records of the New Kingdom.

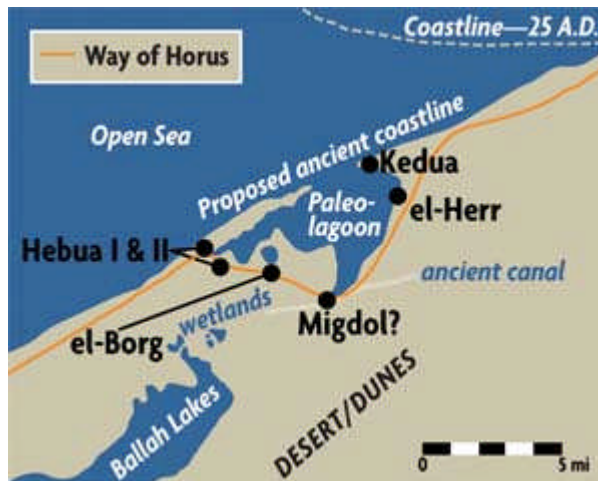
But what about the Biblical text itself? I may be charged with circularity because I look in part to the Biblical text to determine the historicity of the Biblical text. But I do believe the text is entitled to some weight, especially because the Exodus is such a central event—and remembered as such—in the long history of ancient Israel, and the Bible offers no other story about Israel's origins. It is so in the Torah (the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses), as well as in the historical books and in the Prophets.

As the Ten Commandments puts it: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). The rationale for Israel's obligation to her God Yahweh, then, is because he liberated the Hebrews from slavery and brought them out of Egypt.





WHICH WAY DID THEY GO? The archaeological evidence: The identification of Qantir as Pi-Ramesses, Tel el-Retabeh as Pithom, Hebua as Tjaru and el-Borg as “The Dwelling of the Lion,” along with the Egyptian texts and reliefs, all suggest that the Exodus could well have been a historical event. The sites give a new route for it as well—away from the “Way of Horus,” through the marshes of the el-Ballah Lakes south of a barrier island in the Mediterranean Sea and then due south out of Egypt.



The memories of Egypt do not fade with the arrival of the Israelites in Canaan. The helpful Canaanite prostitute Rahab of Jericho declares:

I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Reed Sea before you when you came out of Egypt (Joshua 2:9–10).

Events in Egypt also left an indelible impression on Israel's prophets:  
When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

(Hosea 11:1)

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel,  
against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt.

(Amos 3:1)

It is abundantly clear that ancient Israelites believed the Exodus to be an actual event that served as the basis for their religion and self-understanding. The Biblical evidence concerning the sojourn and Exodus are so deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible that it cannot be cavalierly dismissed.

In short, the Bible paints a plausible scenario and archaeology provides the context.

Uncredited photos courtesy of the author.

## Let My People Go and Go and Go and Go

*Egyptian records support a centuries-long exodus*

By Abraham Malamat



*Erich Lessing*

Semites in Egypt. Bearing the title Hyksos, a figure named Abisha (leaning over an ibex just to the right of center) leads his Semitic clansmen into Egypt to conduct trade. This scene dates to about 1890 B.C. and is preserved at Beni Hasan, halfway between Cairo and Luxor. The Hyksos (a Greek term meaning "ruler of foreign lands" or "shepherd kings") were Canaanites who ruled Egypt for roughly two and a half centuries, starting in about 1800 B.C. Foreign groups often sojourned in Egypt for business reasons or, at times, to escape from drought—a fact echoed in the Bible's account of Abraham and Jacob.

While we have Egyptian evidence for Semites entering Egypt, what proof is there for Semites—specifically the ancient Israelites—escaping Egypt? Author Abraham Malamat shows in the accompanying article that while there is little direct corroboration for the Exodus, there is much indirect evidence—not for a sudden Exodus, but for a gradual one that reached a climax about 1200 B.C.

Nothing in the archaeological record of Egypt directly substantiates the Biblical story of the Exodus. Yet a considerable body of Egyptian material provides such close analogies to the Biblical account that it may, in part, serve as indirect proof for the Israelite episode.

No other event figures so prominently in the Biblical tradition as one of the foundations of Israelite faith. The Bible refers to the Exodus from Egypt more often than it does to any other event in Israel's past—in the historical narratives, in the prophets and even in the psalms.

Is the Exodus story merely the product of later, primarily theological, contemplation, or was it a historic event? To decide, we must first recognize that the Exodus story is a folktale. This does not automatically deprive it of all

historicity, but it does require us to focus not on the elements of folklore and artifice in the account, but on what Goethe called *die grossen Züge*, “the broad sweep of affairs.” Does the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt, their enslavement there in what the Bible terms *beth avadim*, the house of bondage (a very apt coinage characterizing totalitarian regimes throughout history), their exit and flight from Egypt into the Sinai desert and, finally, their takeover of Canaan hold a kernel of historical truth, or are these events merely figments of the imagination of later scribes?

The lack of direct Egyptian evidence for any of these events does not prove that they didn’t happen. Egyptian sources could have been indifferent to the Exodus and the takeover of Canaan merely because these events did not shake the foundations of the political and military scene of the day. The events were central, however, to Israel’s turbulent history.

In the past, the debate over the Exodus often focused on when it could have happened. Much of this debate, unfortunately, ignored what I call the “telescoping process”—the compression of a chain of historical events into a simplified and brief account of Biblical historiography—especially of Israel’s proto-history. Complex events were compressed into a severely curtailed time span by later editors viewing the events in retrospect. The Bible presents a relatively brief, streamlined account of the Exodus, a “punctual” event, as opposed to a “durative” event, which could conceivably involve two or more exoduses or even a steady flow of Israelites from Egypt over hundreds of years.

If the Exodus was a durative event, as seems likely, the search for a specific date for it is futile, since it might have happened anywhere from the 15th to the 12th centuries B.C. Even so, there must have been a peak period when the most Israelites left Egypt—we will call this the Moses movement—that can be dated more exactly. To identify when this punctual peak, the climactic stage

within the durative event, happened, we must survey the history of Egypt in the context of the contemporaneous regional history.

In the 13th century B.C., the Egyptians fought the famous battle of Kadesh against the Hittites, the other superpower of the day. The battle site, Kadesh-on-the-Orontes (to be distinguished from Kadesh-Barnea, where the Israelites camped in the Sinai), lies about 70 miles north of Damascus, in modern Lebanon. Descriptions of this battle have survived in both Egyptian and Hittite records. The Hittite account explicitly states that the battle was a fiasco for the Egyptians, although this is not as clear in the Egyptian records. Even before the battle, which we can now date rather securely to 1273 B.C., give or take a few years, Egyptian hegemony was suffering a decline, especially in Canaan, where local rulers had erupted in revolt. In the wake of the battle of Kadesh, such a situation could well have facilitated, in a broad manner of speaking, an Israelite exodus. For some time I set the punctual peak, the Moses movement, at this time, as did other scholars.



*Erich Lessing*

Pharaoh's mighty steeds rear menacingly at left in this depiction of the Battle of Kadesh, preserved on the walls of the Ramesseum at Luxor, Egypt. The battle occurred in about 1273 B.C. on the banks of the Orontes, in modern Lebanon, and pitted the two great superpowers of the day—the Egyptians and the Hittites—against each other. Ramesses II (1279–1212 B.C.) tried to put the best face on the outcome with heroic battle scenes such as this, but the Hittite account states that the pharaoh's forces were routed. In the wake of the battle, Egyptian hegemony over Canaan went into eclipse and numerous local rulers broke away in revolt. Some scholars have suggested that this period of Egyptian decline would have been a likely time for the Israelite Exodus.

Now, however, I am inclined to lower the date of the Moses movement to the early 12th century B.C. During this time both the Egyptian and Hittite empires

suffered breakdowns. In modern terminology, the political systems of two opposing superpowers collapsed. This simultaneous decline of previously dominating empires provided a rare historical opportunity, the *occasione*, in Machiavellian terms, for the oppressed—the small peoples and ethnic minorities from Anatolia to lower Egypt. This fluid time may be the true setting for the Israelite escape from Egypt into Canaan.

Significant *indirect* Egyptian sources provide a sort of circumstantial evidence for this dating of the Moses movement and thereby lend greater authority to the Biblical account. Let us look at some of this evidence.

### The Leiden Papyrus 348 and Pi-Ramesses



*Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim*

Pi-Ramesses. The fertile plain at Tell el-Daba is believed by archaeologists to have been the ancient store city of Ramesses. Excavations at the site are divided between teams from Austria and Germany. Among the discoveries so far are the round column bases seen at lower right in the photo; one such base supported an octagonal pillar. The pillar originally bore the titles of Sety I, but they were overwritten by order of his son, Ramesses II, who had his own titles engraved over those of his father. Many scholars believe Ramesses II is the best candidate for the pharaoh of the Exodus, but author Malamat suggests that there was no single, dramatic Exodus but rather a drawn-out interplay between Semitic peoples and the Egyptians—a series of interactions that climaxed in about 1200 B.C., just after the reign of Ramesses II.

According to Egyptian records, Ramesses II (1279–1212 B.C.) built a new capital called Pi-Ramesses, the House of Ramesses, on the eastern delta (where the Israelites had apparently settled). Exodus 1:11 records that the store cities of

Pithom and Ramesses were built by enslaved Israelites. Are these sources referring to the same place?



*Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim*

Octagonal pillar from Tell el-Daba. The pillar originally bore the titles of Sety I, but they were overwritten by order of his son, Ramesses II, who had his own titles engraved over those of his father.

Leiden Papyrus 348, a decree by an official of Ramesses II concerning construction work at his new capital, Pi-Ramesses, declares: “Distribute grain rations to the soldiers and to the *Apiru* who transport stones to the great pylon of Ramesses.” Although the matter is still debated, some scholars connect the *Apiru* (and *Habiru*) referred to in this and other Egyptian documents with the Hebrews (*Ibri*), both linguistically and ethnically. From the context of the *Apiru* references, they were apparently a renegade population or displaced persons, possibly outlaws or mercenaries.<sup>1</sup> If the *Apiru* were indeed connected to the Hebrews,<sup>2</sup> it would seem that the Hebrews were forced to build the capital city of Ramesses. This evidence is circumstantial at best, but it is as much as a historian can argue.

### **The Merneptah Stele**

Although it has no direct connection with the Exodus, the famous Merneptah Stele, now dated to 1208 B.C., does mention a people called Israel living in Canaan.

### **The Egyptian Military Road in Northern Sinai**

Exodus 13:17 states:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said: “Lest the people repent when they see war and return to Egypt.”

Early in the 13th century B.C., Pharaoh Seti I built the tight network of strongholds along the coast of northern Sinai referred to as the “way of the Philistines” in Exodus 13:17. This military road remained under the strict control of the Egyptians throughout that century.<sup>3</sup> It might easily have become a trap for the wandering Israelites; hence, the command attributed to God to avoid this route.

Also, Moses tells the Israelites to encamp at a site that will mislead the pharaoh: Once camped here, the pharaoh will say (according to Moses) that the Israelites “are entangled in the land [that is, Sinai]; the wilderness has closed in on them” (Exodus 14:3). This passage reflects a distinctly Egyptian viewpoint that must have been common at the time: In view of the fortresses on the northern coast, anyone seeking to flee Egypt would necessarily make a detour south into the desert, where they might well perish.



## Papyri Anastasi



*British Museum*

News from the front. Egyptian officials kept careful watch over the frontier between Egypt and Sinai in the late 13th century B.C. Papyrus Anastasi III, a remnant of an Egyptian historical archive known as the Papyri Anastasi, provides a daily account of movement across the border. Although no one was permitted to cross without a permit, Papyrus Anastasi V tells of the escape of two slaves (or servants) from the palace at Pi-Ramesses. According to the report prepared by the border official assigned to capture them, the slaves fled into the Sinai. The nighttime flight of the slaves, with Egyptian authorities close at their heels, roughly parallels that of the Biblical Exodus.

The reports of Egyptian frontier officials stationed in the border zone between Egypt and Sinai, known as the Papyri Anastasi, are especially significant. They reveal the tight control exercised by Egyptian authorities over their eastern frontier in the last decades of the 13th century B.C. Some of these papyri, which surfaced as early as 1839, show that neither Egyptians nor foreigners could enter or leave Egypt without a special permit from the Egyptian authorities.

Papyrus Anastasi III<sup>4</sup> records the daily border crossings of Egyptian-approved individuals during the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah (at the end of the 13th century B.C.). Papyrus Anastasi VI<sup>5</sup> records the passage of an entire tribe from Edom into Egypt during a drought. The papyrus records that for some travelers, passage into Egypt was necessary “to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive.” This report is reminiscent of several Biblical episodes involving Abraham and Jacob, who are also said to have descended into Egypt to escape a drought.

Without this strict border control, minorities as well as entire groups of Egyptians could have escaped from the Nile delta into Sinai and Palestine. No wonder Moses and Aaron had to repeatedly plead with Pharaoh to “Let my people go!”

Indeed, Papyrus Anastasi V (also from the end of the 13th century B.C.) refers to the escape of two slaves, or servants, from the royal residence at Pi-Ramesses. The fugitives fled across the fortified border into the Sinai wilderness. The high-ranking Egyptian military commander who wrote the papyrus had been ordered by the Egyptian authorities to ensure the capture of the runaways and their return to Egypt. He writes to the Chief of Bowmen of Tjeku, Ka-Kem-wer, the Chief of Bowmen Ani and the Chief of Bowmen Bak-en-Ptah:

In life, prosperity, health! In the favor of Amon-Re, King of the Gods, and of the *ka* of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: ... Another matter: I was sent forth ... at the time of evening, following after these two slaves ... [Now] when [I] reached the fortress, they told me that the scout had come from the desert [saying that] they had passed the walled place north of the Migdol of Seti Mer-ne-Ptah ... [W]hen my letter reaches you, write to me about all that has happened to [them]. Who found their tracks? Which watch found their tracks? What people are after them? Write to me about all that has happened to them and how many people you send out after them. [May your health] be good!<sup>6</sup>

This story shares at least four parallels with the Exodus story: (1) Slaves, or semi-slaves, escape from the area near the city of Ramesses in search of freedom; (2) an Egyptian military force pursues them with the intention of returning them to Egypt; (3) the runaways follow an escape route into Sinai roughly identical with the Biblical route; and (4) the flight takes place at night, as hinted at by the pursuing Egyptian official, who mentions leaving a short time after the escapees, “at the time of evening.” Similarly, the Exodus of the Israelites started “toward midnight” (Exodus 11:4).

### The Elephantine Stele

Our final indirect proof comes from a stele found on the island of Elephantine near the First Cataract of the Nile. Published for the first time in 1972, this stele still receives intense study. It dates to the second year of Pharaoh Sethnakht's rule (or Setnakht), in the second decade of the 12th century B.C.<sup>7</sup> According to the stele, one Egyptian faction was apparently rebelling against the pharaoh and battling a faction that remained loyal. The revolutionaries bribed some Asiatics in Egypt to assist them in their plot against the crown. They bribe them with silver, gold and copper—"the possession of Egypt." The pharaoh foiled the plot and drove the Asiatics out of Egypt, most likely forcing them on an exodus of sorts toward southern Canaan.

An enigmatic episode in the Exodus story<sup>8</sup> resembles this stele story. Exodus records that the Israelites, according to the usual translations, "borrow" from or "ask" (*sha'al*) the Egyptians for "silver and gold, and clothing," which the Israelites then take with them on their flight (Exodus 3:21–22, 11:2, 12:35–36; Psalm 105:37). In this context the word *sha'al* really means "appropriate" or "steal" rather than "borrow" or "ask."

In both cases, Asiatics take the same objects from the Egyptians. This may simply be an example of parallel literary motifs. But Exodus 1:10 reveals the pharaoh saying, "Come let us deal shrewdly with [the Israelites] ... [lest] if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." The Egyptians are explicitly fearful that these Asiatics, the Israelites, might join the Egyptians' enemies in a revolt. That is precisely what happened in the episode recorded in the Elephantine stele.

In sum, although an Israelite exodus is not mentioned in Egyptian sources, a number of important analogs are apparent. These may date back to the time of the Hyksos, an Asiatic people who conquered Egypt in the 17th to 16th centuries

B.C., during the 15th and 16th Egyptian dynasties. These analogs are more concentrated, however, in the late 13th century, around 1200 B.C., supporting that date for the climax of the Israelite Exodus.<sup>9</sup>

For a more extensive version of this paper, and an expanded bibliography, see Abraham Malamat, "The Exodus: Egyptian Analogies," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

## When Did Ancient Israel Begin?

*New hieroglyphic inscription may date Israel's ethnogenesis 200 years earlier than you thought*

By Hershel Shanks



*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, ÄM 21687/Permission of Dr. Olivia Zorn*

Longtime **BAR** readers are familiar with the Merneptah Stele, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, which is generally recognized as containing the oldest extrabiblical reference to Israel.<sup>a</sup> The hieroglyphic inscription can be dated quite precisely to somewhere between 1210 and 1205 B.C.E.

But is it the oldest?

Egyptologists are now twittering about whether there is another hieroglyphic inscription, centuries earlier than the Merneptah Stele, that mentions Israel.



*Maryl Levine*

THE OLD STANDARD. The well-known Merneptah Stele is a monumental inscribed stone that was set up to commemorate the military conquests of Pharaoh Merneptah. The hieroglyphic inscription, which dates to 1210–1205 B.C.E., mentions that the king wiped out a people called “Israel.” It is widely considered the oldest extrabiblical reference to Israel. The pedestal inscription that may now claim that honor finds support in the Merneptah Stele itself. The two name-rings that accompany the purported “Israel” prisoner are identified as Ashkelon and Canaan (or possibly Gaza). Not only does the geographical proximity of these places strengthen the “Israel” reading, but Ashkelon and Canaan are also mentioned adjacent to the Israel verse on the Merneptah Stele. The parallel use of these three names together in another hieroglyphic inscription makes the identification on the Berlin slab even more likely.



*Maryl Levine*

THE OLD STANDARD. The well-known Merneptah Stele is a monumental inscribed stone that was set up to commemorate the military conquests of Pharaoh Merneptah. The hieroglyphic inscription, which dates to 1210–1205 B.C.E., mentions that the king wiped out a people called “Israel.”

If so, this may have significant implications for the early history of Israel, they say, suggesting that the Bible is more reliable than some doubting scholars have been willing to admit.

The new candidate was spotted in the storerooms of the Egyptian Museum of Berlin by University of Munich Hebrew Bible scholar and Egyptologist Manfred Görg on a gray granite slab 18 inches high and 15.5 inches wide. The slab was acquired by the museum in 1913 from the famous founder of the

German Archaeological Institute in Cairo, Ludwig Borchardt, who had acquired it from an antiquities dealer.

It was common for Egyptian pharaohs to adorn their tombs and temples with scenes and inscriptions boasting of their conquests. Merneptah, for example, boasts that “Israel is laid waste; its seed is not,” clearly a gross exaggeration. It was also common for pharaohs to put the names of places they conquered in rows of what scholars call name-rings. Each name-ring consists of a small image of a prisoner presenting a place conquered; below the neck of the prisoner an oval cartouche-like ring contains the name of the conquered place in hieroglyphic.



*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, ÄM 21687/Permission of Dr. Olivia Zorn*

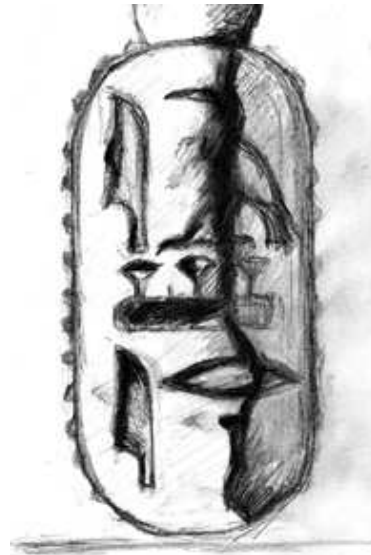
AGE BEFORE BEAUTY. This broken granite piece of a statue's pedestal in the Berlin Museum may not look as impressive as the famous Merneptah Stele (which contains a late-13th-century B.C.E. reference to “Israel”), but the age of its inscription makes it an important new player in Biblical history. The three heads and hieroglyphic name-rings represent foreign enemies conquered by the pharaoh who set up the commemorative inscription. The name-ring on the left identifies Ashkelon. The middle name-ring appears to represent Canaan. The third (broken) name-ring may read “Israel,” according to three German scholars. Based on the early-14th-century B.C.E. dating of these hieroglyphs, this would be the oldest known reference to Israel by nearly 200 years.

The critical slab that Görg spotted in the Berlin Museum contains three name-rings. Unfortunately, some of the name-ring on the right has been chipped off. It is only a little more than half there. And of course it is the one that is said to

contain the name “Israel.” This hacking may have happened in modern times when the piece was looted. The slab appears to have been part of the pedestal of a statue.

Sometimes the face or hat of the prisoner can help scholars identify a doubtful conquered place within a name-ring. For example, another slab made of the same gray granite that appears to have come from the pedestal of the same statue contains a name-ring of a prisoner who is clearly a Nubian—and the name in the name-ring, unsurprisingly, also appears to be Nubian. The three prisoners on the slab that may contain the name Israel are all clearly West Semites—recognizable by their typical shoulder-length hair, headbands and pointed beards—a significant clue to the identification of the name as Israel.

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN. Although nearly half of the crucial name-ring is broken off, the missing hieroglyphs can be reconstructed with confidence, as shown in this drawing. Yet scholars don't all agree that it can be read as “Israel.” Those who oppose the reading point out that here the name contains a “sh” hieroglyph instead of the “s” sign used to spell Israel on the Merneptah Stele. Supporters of the reading, however, point out that place names were not always spelled consistently in hieroglyphic inscriptions and that there is no other known West Semitic name that so closely resembles “Israel.”



*Line Drawing by P. Van der Veen*

Although the hieroglyphs in the ring on the right are only partially preserved, they can be reconstructed with some confidence. The problem arises because, if this is Israel, it is spelled slightly differently from the spelling of Israel in the Merneptah Stele. In Hebrew, the same letter represents the sound “s” and “sh.” In hieroglyphic the two sounds are represented by different signs. The Merneptah Stele uses a hieroglyphic “s” in the name Israel; the Berlin Museum



slab uses a “sh” hieroglyph.<sup>1</sup> On this basis and others, James Hoffmeier, an Egyptologist from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, maintains that the name cannot reasonably be read as Israel. Israeli paleographer Shmuel Ahituv agrees with Hoffmeier.<sup>2</sup> Disagreeing with them, however, are not only Görg, but also Peter van der Veen of the University of Mainz and Christoffer Theis of the University of Heidelberg. All three have jointly written a scholarly defense of the “Israel” reading.<sup>3</sup> They point out that there is no known West Semitic toponym, other than Israel, that these hieroglyphs could be identified with. “What other name in the same general region would be so strikingly reminiscent as that of Biblical Israel?” they ask rhetorically. Moreover, many toponyms are spelled in more than one way in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Indeed, the spelling can be a key to dating the inscription, as we shall see.

The German scholars also have another string to their bow: the other two name-rings on this slab of granite. One of the other names is Ashkelon, in southern Israel. The third name appears to be Canaan, although there is some question as to whether it refers generally to the land of Canaan or more specifically to the city of Gaza. As the German scholars contend, “The geographical proximity of [the proposed name Israel] to Ashkelon and Canaan makes the identification with Israel likely.”

THE FACE OF THE ENEMY. The hat or face of the prisoners on the name-rings can sometimes help scholars identify the conquered enemy mentioned in the hieroglyphic inscription. On another fragmentary slab of granite that seems to be from the same statue pedestal, the figure on the left is a Nubian, and the name contained in the ring also appears to be Nubian. In the case of the larger slab with three name-rings, all of the prisoners are clearly depicted as West Semitic peoples, which strengthens the theory that the third may be Israel.



*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, ÄM 21687/Permission of Dr. Olivia Zorn*

Strengthening this argument is the text of the Merneptah Stele. In the verses adjacent to the reference to Israel are Canaan and Ashkelon! The proximity of the same names in the two inscriptions, in the words of the three German scholars cited above, “seems to suggest that both texts are related in some way,” thus buttressing the reading “Israel.”

The next question is how to date the hieroglyphs on the slab that may contain the name Israel. There is nothing in the slab itself that provides any hint. So the Egyptologists look to paleography and orthography, that is, the form of the hieroglyphic signs and the spelling of the names. The way the hieroglyphs are written and the spelling of the names changed over time, and that provides a key to the date of the inscription. A leading Israeli Egyptologist, Raphael Giveon, has dated the inscription to about 1400 B.C.E (during the reign of Amenhotep III), 200 years earlier than the Merneptah inscription. The three German scholars cited above suggest Ramesses II as another possibility, even though they prefer a date nearer 1400 B.C.E. This famous pharaoh, often associated with the Israelite enslavement in Egypt, reigned for much of the 13th century (1279–1213 B.C.E.).

Most scholars accept the ethnogenesis of Israel<sup>b</sup> in about 1200 B.C.E., the end of the Late Bronze Age or the beginning of the Iron Age, archaeologically speaking. But reading the name Israel in this slab in the Berlin Museum raises the question of whether Biblical Israel had its ethnogenesis centuries earlier. The German scholars note that “in the German-speaking world [e.g., the great Albrecht Alt], the idea of multiple entries [into Canaan] by different tribes of Israel starting during the Eighteenth Dynasty [c. 1550–1300 B.C.E.] has a long tradition.”

The late great Israeli archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni and, more recently, the American archaeologist Aaron Burke have observed that the Bible describes the cities of Canaan as being strongly fortified.<sup>4</sup> This was true at the end of the Middle Bronze Age (about 1550 B.C.E.), but it was not true at the end of the Late

Bronze Age (1200 B.C.E.), when the prevailing view dates the ethnogenesis of Biblical Israel. The German scholars cite Israeli scholar Rivka Gonen as noting that at the end of the Late Bronze Age “the Canaanite towns were frequently unfortified and therefore did not fit the Biblical descriptions well.”

Some scholars are even considering whether there are echoes in the Biblical tradition of the Hyksos, an Asiatic (West Semitic) people who ruled Egypt for more than a century during the Second Intermediate Period before being expelled from Egypt in about 1550 B.C.E. The first-century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus equates the expulsion of the Hyksos with the Exodus described in the Bible. Modern scholarship has largely rejected this view. But now it might be getting a second look. Even Tel Aviv University archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, known largely for his minimalist views, has suggested, in the words of the German scholars, “that the Biblical tradition likely contains vague memories of the expulsion of the (West Semitic) Hyksos.”

The view that there was more than one Exodus has gained considerable traction since the publication of Abraham Malamat’s article in **BAR** titled “Let My People Go and Go and Go and Go.”<sup>c</sup> Barbara Sivertsen has denominated the plural as “Exodi” in a recent book.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there was one with the Hyksos, another at the time of Ramesses II and still another at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Perhaps different groups (or tribes) that included proto-Israelites left (or escaped) at different times.

Nothing conclusive here, but much food for thought.

## The Authors

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**James K. Hoffmeier** is Professor of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern History and Archaeology at Trinity International University, Divinity School (Deerfield, IL). He has been engaged in fieldwork and research in Egypt on a regular basis since 1975. Since 1994 Dr. Hoffmeier has directed the North Sinai Archaeological Project, a research project devoted to studying Egypt's frontier during the New Kingdom, and how this area may relate to the Israelite exodus from Egypt. Dr. Hoffmeier has authored and edited a number of books, including *The Future of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), *Ancient Israel in Sinai: Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2005), and *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion, 2008).

**Abraham Malamat**, professor emeritus of Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, passed away on January 21, 2010, just a few days before his 88th birthday. Malamat made important contributions to the study of the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East—particularly in our understanding of the emergence of Israel, the collapse of the kingdom of Judah, and the relationship of Mari and the Hebrew Bible. His many books include *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience* (Oxford, 1984). His article, “Let My People Go,” is an adaptation of his chapter in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (Eisenbrauns, 1997). He served as editor of the Israel Exploration Society's Hebrew bulletin *Yediot* from 1956 to 1967 and was on the editorial boards of the *Israel Exploration Journal* and the *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*.

## Notes

### Out of Egypt

Endnotes (numbered)

1. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), p. 120.
2. Neils Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel; A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), p. 31.
3. Bernard Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 102.
4. For a recent discussion of this type of problem, see David Merling, "The Relationship Between Archaeology and the Bible: Expectations and Reality," in James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard, eds., *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 29–42.
5. John Baines and Jaromír Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980).
6. One example is the corpus found by Petrie at Tanis in the late 19th century. See F.L. Griffith & W.M.F. Petrie, *Two Hieroglyphic Papyri from Tanis* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1889). These texts are from the Roman era.
7. I am grateful to Professor Bietak for showing me his excavations and the bullae.
8. Only in September 2003 was the first fragment of a clay tablet discovered at Qantir, and this was a portion of a letter from the Hittite king, Hatusilis III, to Ramesses II. Formal publication of the text is in progress.
9. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 141.
10. Translation my own, text is found in Alan H. Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies* (Brussels: Queen Elizabeth Egyptological Foundation, 1937), p. 77.
11. Tell el-Maskhuta, Tell el-Retabeh, Tell el-Yehudiah, Inshas, Tell Farasha, Tell el-Kebir and of course Tell el-Dab'a, the Hyksos capital. J.K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999) pp. 62–68.
12. Kenneth Kitchen, "From the Brickfields of Egypt," *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976), pp. 141–144.
13. Kitchen, pp. 141–142.
14. Richard A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), p. 106.
15. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, p. 188.
16. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, p. 114. The break in the text makes identifying the building under construction, but the epithet "beloved of Ma'at" used in Papyrus Leiden 348 is found in Papyrus Anastasi IV 5, 6 applied to the king's palace; cf. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, p. 153.
17. Unpublished study by Ellen Morris ("The Consequences of Conquest: A Foreign Population's Entrance and Acculturation into Ancient Egyptian Society"). Dr. Morris, a professor at the University of Wales, Swansea, kindly gave me a version of this paper some years ago, and at the recent International Congress of Egyptology (September 2004) presented an updated version (cf. *Abstracts of the IXe Congrès des Egyptologues, 6–12 Septembre 2004*, p. 85).
18. Alan H. Gardiner, "The Residence of the Ramessides," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 5 (1918), pp. 127–138.
19. In the early 1940s, Labib Habachi led him to believe that Tell el Dab'a-Qantir were home to Avaris and Pi-Ramesses respectively. Most of his discoveries were only recently published 20 years after his death and nearly 40 years after his excavations. cf. Labib Habachi, *Tell el-Dab'a I: Tell el-Dab'a and Qantir the Site and Its Connection with Avaris and Piramesse* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001).
20. Edgar Pusch, "Piramesse," in D. Redford, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* 3 (New York: Oxford Univ., 2001), pp. 48–50. It should be noted that back in the 1940s and 1950s, the Egyptian archaeologist Labib Habachi had excavated in the Qantir/Tell el-Dab'a region. His reports were only recently published nearly 20 years after his death, but in 1955 he proposed that Qantir was Pi-Ramesses and Ra'amses of the Bible. See Habachi, *Tell el Dab'a I*, pp. 23–127.
21. Edgar Pusch, "Towards a Map of Piramesse," *Egyptian Archaeology* 14 (1999), pp. 13–15.

22. Kenneth Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100–650 B.C.)*, 3rd ed. (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1986), pp. 243–254.
23. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).
24. Donald Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1992), p. 409.
25. John Van Seters, "The Geography of the Exodus," in J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham, eds., *The Land That I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of J. Maxwell Miller* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2001), p. 256.
26. Edward Wente, "Rameses," in D.N. Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 617–618.
27. Niels Peter Lemche, "Is It Still Possible to Write a History of Israel?," *Scandinavian Journal of Old Testament* 8 (1994), pp. 172–174.
28. John S. Holladay, *Tell El-Maskhuta: Preliminary Report on the Wadi Tumilat Project 1978–1979, Cities of the Delta, Part III*, vol. 6, ARCE Reports (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982).
29. (See <http://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/Retaba/Retaba1981profiles.html>)
30. H. Edouard Naville, *The Store City of Pithom and the Route of the Exodus* (London: EEF Memoir, 1888).
31. This statue is not yet published, but I studied it together with Dr. Abd el-Maksoud on the day it was discovered and agree with his reading. See James K. Hoffmeier and Mohamed Abd el Maksoud, "A New Military Site on the 'Ways of Horus'—Tell El-Borg 1999–2001: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 89 (2003), pp. 171–172.
32. Daniel J. Stanley and Mahmoud M. Abu-Zeid, "Temporal and Spatial Distribution of Clay Minerals in Late Quaternary Deposits of the Nile Delta, Egypt," *Journal of Coastal Research* 6, no. 3 (1990); Daniel and Vincent Coutellier Stanley, "Late Quaternary Stratigraphy and Paleogeography of the Eastern Nile Delta, Egypt," *Marine Geology* 77 (1987).
33. William Ward, "The Biconsonantal Root Sp and the Common Origin of Egyptian *Cwf* and the Hebrew *Sup*: Marsh (-Plant)," *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974), pp. 339–349.
34. Manfred Bietak, *Tell El-Dab'a*, vol. 2 (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1975), pp. 136–137.
35. Alan H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, vol. 2 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 122–202.
36. Bietak, *Tell El-Dab'a* vol. 2, pp. 136–137.

BAS/BAR and general notes (lettered)

a. "Minimalists on Parade," **BAR** 31:01.

## Let My People Go and Go and Go and Go

Endnotes (numbered)

1. If the *Apiru* are, as I suggest, connected with the Hebrews, this would rule out the suggested connection with the *Shasu*, another group sometimes alleged to be connected with the emerging Hebrews/Israelites.
2. Although every Israelite is a Hebrew and likely an *Apiru*, not every Hebrew or *Apiru* is necessarily an Israelite.
3. Alan H. Gardiner, "The Ancient Military Road Between Egypt and Palestine," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 6 (1920), pp. 99–116; Eliezer D. Oren, "'Ways of Horus' in North Sinai," in *Egypt, Israel, Sinai*, ed. Anson F. Rainey (Tel Aviv: Dayan Institute, Tel Aviv Univ., 1987), pp. 69–119.
4. John A. Wilson in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 258.
5. Wilson, *Texts*, p. 259.
6. Wilson, *Texts*, p. 259.
7. See R. Drenkhahn, *Die Elephantine Stele des Sethnakht* (Wiesbaden, 1980).
8. Hinted at by M. Görg, *Kairos* 20 (1978), p. 279f. and n. 28.

9. For an even later dating in the 12th century B.C., see M.B. Rowton, "The Problem of the Exodus," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 85 (1953), pp. 46–60; and Gary A. Rendsberg, "The Date of the Exodus," *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992), pp. 510–527.

## When Did Ancient Israel Begin?

Endnotes (numbered)

1. "Sha," the Egyptian sign for *shin*, can also read "shar" or "shra," as is the case with multiple topographical and personal names from New Kingdom Egypt. See Peter van der Veen, Christoffer Theis and Manfred Görg, "Israel in Canaan (Long) Before Pharaoh Merneptah? A Fresh Look at Berlin Statue Pedestal Relief 21687," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 2 (2010), pp. 15–25. This article is based largely on their article.

2. Personal communication.

3. Van der Veen et al., "Israel in Canaan (Long) Before Pharaoh Merneptah?"

4. Yohanan Aharoni, "Nothing Early and Nothing Late: Re-Writing Israel's Conquest," *Biblical Archaeologist* (May 1976), pp. 71–74; Aaron A. Burke, *Walled Up to Heaven: The Evolution of Middle Bronze Age Fortification Strategies in the Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), esp. p. xiii.

5. Barbara J. Sivertsen, *The Parting of the Sea: How Volcanoes, Earthquakes and Plagues Shaped the Story of Exodus* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009).

BAS/BAR and general notes (lettered)

a. See Frank J. Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt," **BAR** 16:05.

b. See Avraham Faust, "How Did Israel Become a People?" **BAR**, 35:06.

c. See Abraham Malamat, "Let My People Go and Go and Go and Go," **BAR** 24:01.