

Finding Exodus- A Kernel Of Truth.

By Stacey Game

Introduction:

The story of the Exodus can be argued as one of the biggest and most significant, it overshadows most other biblical tales.

It is central to both Christianity and Judaism, but Moses also holds some importance to Muslims, being a prominent prophet and messenger of God.

The Exodus is where the Israelite people meet their god Yahweh and receive the commandments to live by.

In order to find out if there is any truth behind the tale, evaluation of historical plausibility of an exodus having taken place must be made, with a range of evidence and opinion examined.

Overview:

The word exodus, in Greek, means 'departure'. The Israelites depart from Egypt, freed from slavery by Moses, a Levite, who was placed in a basket as a baby and left in the river.

Moses was found and raised in the Egyptian kingdom by the pharaoh's daughter.

In Hebrew the name Moses means 'to draw out' but is also closely tied to Egyptian names at that time. Mose was an Egyptian official; many pharaohs had Mose in their name, such as Thutmose and Ptahmose, for the Egyptians it means birth or born, which closely ties to the name Moses as he was born and drawn out of the river.

Because the exodus sees the freedom flight of a large group of people, the destruction of a pharaoh's army and forty years of wandering the desert before coming to the promised land of Canaan, there should be some record other than what the bible tells us.

From a biblical scholars perspective:

Biblical scholars have long identified a number of difficulties that the exodus account presents-making it hard to think that everything happened as described in the book. We may be dealing with legends, not with objective historical facts.¹

Some scholars have argued that the very tradition of the passover must have come from somewhere 'why would anyone invent this history if it never really happened'²

Passover, or Pesach in Hebrew is one of the most sacred holidays for the Jewish, it commemorates the story of the exodus and appears in many texts including Exodus, Deuteronomy and the book of Numbers in the bible. Although all three are credited as being written by Moses himself, from a scholarly perspective Deuteronomy is believed to have been written much later.

¹ Bart D Ehrman, Is the Exodus a myth?, Ehrmanblog.org, 2022

² Johnathan Moore, the date of the exodus, does it matter, part 1, Apologetics Press.org, 2024

The Passover is a week-long festival, the Jews were influenced by the Babylonians, who first introduced the seven day week, being skilled astronomers they observed the sun, moon and five close planets. They also observed that each of the moon's cycles took seven days, the date of the passover changes each year due to the fact it is set by the Lunar calendar, not the Gregorian.

Ancient Egypt:

The ancient Egyptians kept thorough records, despite this no mention has been found of the Israelites in Egypt and little prior to the Merneptah Stele, a stele created in 1208BC, by pharaoh Merneptah.

Merneptah was the only surviving son of Rameses II, on it is written an inscription citing the name of a group of people known as Israel, that they had been laid to waste and their seed was no more.

This is arguably the most important evidence as it places a group called Israelites, in the area of Canaan in the 18th dynasty.

We know that Israel was not destroyed however, the stele lists places and towns within the Levant that Merneptah had fought, because Israel was not destroyed we know that this stele was wildly exaggerated. We also know that Merneptah destroyed Amenhotep II mortuary temple and used the parts to build his own.

This recycling of sorts was common practice, evidence could have been lost and destroyed by Egypt herself.

'If the people, places and the events of the Exodus are not historical but, instead, are legends, then the trustworthiness of the biblical revelation is seriously undermined.'³

Although archeology plays an important role in biblical studies, archeology has its limits. Many documents have likely been lost to time, for example papyrus, in the wrong conditions, particularly moist climates, would decay quickly.

Looting and destruction of artefacts can destroy evidence, external factors such as war and natural disasters all impede the possibility of finding evidence through archeology.

From an Egyptologist perspective:

Some scholars believe that the writers of ancient Israel knew little or nothing about the origin of Israel, that these periods never existed.

In the tomb of Vizier Rekmire from the 15th century, on the walls is a depiction of brick making using moulds, the faint inscription using the word plunder, it is clearly depicted in the picture that the men are of different ethnic backgrounds.

The bricks, according to the description, were for a temple.

The pictures on the tomb of Vizier Rekmire, depicting different races making mud bricks, as was written in the bible, is strong supporting evidence that Hebrew slaves could indeed have served in Egypt.

The Egyptians plundered many places including Canaan and acquired many slaves from different areas.

³ Johnathan Moore, apologetics press

Egypt ruled Canaan during its 18th dynasty, many Canaanite kings offered slaves as tribute to the pharaohs.

Thutmose III began the first of the great conqueror campaigns into Canaan, Egypt dominated the region for around the next 250 years, as depicted in the Annals of Thutmose from Karnak.

For the remainder of the 18th and 19th dynasties, Egypt ruled.

Due to these two examples, we have evidence that slaves were taken, who built mud bricks, as is written in the bible.

Egypt's withdrawal from Canaan saw many sites abandoned or destroyed, Egypt was no longer as powerful.

'I am the Lord your god, who has delivered you from the land of Egypt, the house of slaves' Exodus 20:2.⁴

Egypt's documentation provides evidence of marginalized groups, prisoners of war and ambiguous terminology that blurs the lines between servant and slave.

There is virtually no evidence for large scale slavery in Egypt, it was likely small groups involved in domestic labour and other duties.

Several work rosters, both in stone and in papyrus have been found, including the clay tablet roster Deir-el-Medineh.

People were given time off for their personal religious special holidays or festivals, no record has been found of Israelites and their festivals.

There was no seven day week in Egypt and no weekends. Instead they had three ten day work cycles in a month, workers were referred to as *habiru*, which is linguistically believed by some to be related to the word Hebrew.

The term *Habiru* did not mean a single person or group but rather referred to someone of a lesser status such as a slave or pauper.



Merneptah, pharaoh (1208 BC), The Merneptah Stele, inscription-Y-s-rl (Israel), Flinders Petrie, Thebes, (1896), Egyptian Museum, Cairo

⁴ The bible-NRSV, (Exodus, 20:2-) bible gateway, 1995

Summary:

In order to see the evidence of an Exodus we must consider the following facts: 1st kings chapter 6 tells us 'in the four hundredth and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt' Solomon builds his temple, in his fourth year of reign. The building of Solomon's temple would have started in 966 BC if he started his reign in 970 BC.

If we take this section of the bible at its word then the exodus would be around 1450 BC, Rameses was a pharaoh in 1279 BC, there are around two hundred years missing.

Pi-Ramesses or Per Ramessu, was built around the same area as Seti I palace. Through archeology we can tell there was a city even earlier for the Hyksos, but it was destroyed by Ahmose I in 1521 BC, this city was called Avaris.

Prior to Avaris there was a small village called Ezbet Rushdi, likely built by Amenemhat I, later expanded by Senusret III, a 12th dynasty mud brick temple. What would become known as Israelite slaves could have built the mud bricks of the palaces and temples, prior to Pi-Ramesses and the scribes happened to use the current name, so readers would know what they were referring to.

*Exodus 1:11 they built supply cities Pithom and Rameses.*⁵

The pharaoh for the date 1450 BC was Thutmose III, he became pharaoh following a co-regency with Hatshepsut, his step-mother, as his father Thutmose II died when he was two years old.

Thutmose III first son died, Hatshepsut was the only daughter to Thutmose I, therefore this would align with our biblical account.

Hatshepsut, having a father, husband and son named Thutmose, closely links to the name Moses, so Hatshepsut could very well be the pharaoh's daughter who pulled Moses from the river as a baby.

The bible tells us that Moses flees after killing an Egyptian and spends his time as a shepherd in Midian for forty years, before god asks him to return and confront the pharaoh and free his people.

As Thutmose III reigned for fifty-four years, this could also align with what was written in the bible, as the same pharaoh ruled during this period of exile for Moses.

Conclusion:

The existence of an Exodus as written in the bible lacks the historical evidence needed to prove, without any doubt, that it happened the way it has been told.

Although there is no record resembling the biblical plagues and no evidence has been found of a large encampment in the Sinai Peninsula, that would have held a large group of people. It does not rule out entirely that something similar to what is written as an account in Exodus didn't happen to some degree.

*About six hundred thousand men on foot beside little ones, a mixed crowd also went-Exodus 12:38.*⁶

⁵ The Bible, NRSV, (Exodus 1:11)-biblegateway.com, 1995

⁶ The Bible, NRSV (Exodus 12:38)-bible gateway 1995

There is no evidence of any sudden fluctuation in the archaeological record that would indicate a departure and return of a large population, however nothing rules out a significantly smaller group.

It is imagined that a large group of Israelites left the land of Egypt to escape to the promised land in Canaan.

At the height of its power Pi-Ramesses had a population of around three hundred thousand, over six hundred thousand slaves would not have been a correct population for the city. This number is likely over exaggerated.

Prior to the Merneptah stele, there is evidence of semitic slaves in Egypt in the 13th dynasty, with biblical names such as 'Shiphrah', 'Asher' and 'Issachar'. Almost a hundred slaves were on a single estate.

The exodus story does not glorify the people of Israel, it talks about their slavery and their escape to freedom. It aligns with how they came to believe in their god Yahweh and where their traditions came from.

What we likely see is a tale passed down from one generation to the next that has changed and grown with each person telling it. It was not meant to have been looked at, as complete history.

What we have is a story of the founding of a group of people, who could have served under Egyptian rule, as many areas at that time did.

They found a god to believe in from the semitic tribes such as the Shasu and founded their own set of beliefs when the height of Egyptian rule had fallen.

Bibliography:

Ehrman, Bart D , 'the Bart Ehrman blog-is the exodus a myth?', (2022)
<<https://www.ehrmanblog.org> >[accessed 2024]

Halley, Keaton, Creation ministries, exodus evidence revisited, (2022) <<https://www.creationministries.org>>[accessed 2024]

Hoffmeier, James, the exodus-recent archeology and geological work-Lanier theological library, (2011) <<https://www.youtube.com/laniertheologicallibrary>>[accessed 2024]

Houdmann, Michael, S, solomon's temple, (2002) <<https://gotquestions.org>>[accessed 2025]

Mark, Joshua j, Canaan-definition, world history encyclopedia (2018)
<<https://www.worldhistory.org> > accessed [2025]

Moore, Johnathan, The date of the Exodus: what does it say and why does it matter? part 1-apologetics press, (2024) <<https://apologeticspress.org> >[accessed 2024]

Nat, The Merneptah stele-beyond apologetics (2022) <<https://biblicalhistoricalcontext.com>>[accessed 2024]

Rainey, Anson F, Shasu or habiru-who were the early Israelites, November/December issue-biblical archeology society library (2008)
<<https://biblicalarcheologysocietylibrary.org>>[accessed 24]

Reinsch, Warren, The Merneptah Stele (2018) inscription-Y-s-rl (Israel)-Armstrong Institute of biblical archeology, <<https://www.armstronginstitute.org> >[accessed 2024]

Windle, Bryan-Top 10 discoveries related to Moses (2022)
<<https://biblicalarcheology.org>>[accessed 2024]

The editors, history.com, passover, updated (2024)-original (2009)
<<https://www.history.com> > [accessed 2024]

The editors, bible gateway, the bible NRSV (1995) [accessed 2024] <<https://www.biblegateway.com> >