

## **The Date of the Exodus Reexamined**

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Why reexamine the date of the Exodus? Some might object to such a reexamination of the evidence as simply “beating a dead horse.” However, this type of objection fails on two counts. First, each generation needs to reexamine the problem to decide for itself the validity of the possible solutions based on the most recent textual and archaeological studies. New evidence can help condemn or confirm previous hypotheses. Second, the problem must be reexamined because other options are continually being advanced which must be evaluated.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the limited scope of this article, only the two views which currently hold sway in the Exodus problem will be examined. These are known as the “early date” and the “late date.” The early date places the Exodus in 1445 B.C. while the late date identifies the Exodus as having occurred about 1290 B.C.

### **The Late Date**

The late date is that date held by nearly all liberal scholars and by a fair number of conservative scholars. Four lines of evidence are presented in favor of a late date.

### **The Cities of Pithom and Raamses**

A biblical argument used to support the late date of the Exodus is based on Exodus 1:11. “So they appointed taskmasters

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent theory is that advanced by Hans Goedicke which places the Exodus in 1477 B.C. during the reign of Queen Hatshepsut (Hershel Shanks, “The Exodus and the Crossing of the Red Sea According to Hans Goedicke,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 7 [September-October 1981]: 42-50). This position was popularized in a recent issue of *Reader's Digest* (Ronald Schiller, “The Biblical Exodus: Fact or Fiction,” *Reader's Digest*, April 1983, pp. 133-38). For a critique of the new theory see Eliezer D. Oren, “How Not to Create a History of the Exodus—A Critique of Professor Goedicke's Theories,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 7 (November-December 1981): 46-53.

over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses.” The thrust of this argument is this: (1) The Israelites built the city of Raamses just before the Exodus. (2) This city is to be equated with the city of Pi-Ramesse built by Pharaoh Ramesses II, who ruled from 1240 to 1224. (3) Therefore the Exodus must have occurred sometime in the 13th century during the reign of this pharaoh. Kitchen feels that this argument alone is determinative for dating the Exodus in the 13th century.<sup>2</sup>

Those who hold to this position have failed to prove two links in their chain of evidence. First, they have failed to *prove* that the city of Raamses mentioned in Exodus 1:11 should be equated with Pi-Ramesse built by Ramesses II. Rather they have *assumed* the connection solely on the basis of similarity of the words “Raamses” and “Ramesses.” Second, they have failed to prove that a similarity of names requires a chronological unity between the two events. That is, even *if* the two cities are to be equated, this still does not by itself *prove* that the events occurred simultaneously. Those holding a late Exodus date must still demonstrate a chronological harmony.

Unger attempts to argue against the late date of the Exodus by using the second argument from the preceding paragraph. He argues that the reference to Raamses in Exodus 1:11 does not provide a chronological marker that can be used to date the Exodus. Instead it is a later “modernization” of the Hebrew text used to designate a city which was in existence before Ramesses II.<sup>3</sup>

While Unger’s explanation is possible, it does (to this author) raise some questions concerning the validity of the biblical text. And yet the possible validity of his argument must be allowed by those who attempt to use Exodus 1:11 to prove a late date. The reason for this can be explained as follows. If the Exodus took place about 1290 or 1280 B.C. and if Moses was 80 years old at the time of the Exodus (Exod 7:7), then Moses was born in 1370-1360 B.C. The text of Exodus 1 indicates that the building of the cities of Pithom and Raamses preceded Pharaoh’s command to kill all newborn males, which preceded the birth of Moses. Therefore the building of the city of Raamses had to begin sometime before 1360 B.C. This is over 45 years before the start of the Nineteenth Dynasty and the first Ramasside king! Thus either the city of Raamses did exist before the reign of Ramesses II (which would allow for a prior city in Exodus 1:11) or else the name is a later modernization (which would allow for Unger’s

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), pp. 57-59.

<sup>3</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), pp. 149-50.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Walton, *Chronological Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 31.

argument). In either case those who hold to a 13th-century Exodus cannot argue against the early-date interpretation of Exodus 1:11 without destroying their own argument.

Because of the doctrine of inspiration, this writer feels more comfortable in adopting the *first* argument—the lack of evidence for associating the city of Raameses in Exodus 1:11 with the city of Pi-Ramesse built by Ramesses II. In fact, the biblical text provides some support for not making this identification. Genesis 47:11 clearly indicates that the name “Rameses” was in use before the time of Ramesses II. “So Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses as Pharaoh had ordered.” Obviously no one would date the *entrance* of Israel into Egypt during the reign of Ramesses II on the basis of this verse. But since the presence of the term here does not indicate a chronological correspondence, then why does the presence of the term in Exodus 1:11 indicate such correspondence? Why could not Exodus 1:11 be referring to a city of this area called Rameses the name of which existed centuries before Ramesses II? Merrill argues cogently for this possibility.

...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.<sup>5</sup>

Exodus 1:11 offers little proof for the late date of the Exodus. The city mentioned was founded and named at least 70 years *before* the reign of Ramesses II even if one assumes the late date. It was located in an area which had been designated as “the land of Rameses” 550 years before Ramesses II. Thus there is no compelling evidence for associating the city with Ramesses II solely on the basis of similarity of name.

### **The Status of Edom and Moab**

The second argument advanced in favor of the late date focuses on the status of Edom and Moab at the time of the

<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), p. 107.

Exodus. "From Kadesh Moses then sent messengers to the king of Edom.... 'Please let us pass through your land. We shall not pass through field or through vineyard; we shall not even drink water from a well. We shall go along the king's highway, not turning to the right or left, until we pass through your territory.' Edom, however, said to him, 'You shall not pass through us, lest I come out with the sword against you'.... And Edom came out against him with a heavy force, and with a strong hand" (Num 20:17-20). "Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab and beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho.... And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time" (Num 22:1, 4).

These verses indicate that Edom and Moab were populated during the period shortly after the Exodus. However, according to Glueck the Transjordan area was largely uninhabited from about 1800 to 1300 B.C.<sup>6</sup>

Since the book of Numbers refers to established kingdoms in the Transjordan, namely, the kingdoms of the Moabites and Ammonites, through whose territories the Israelites had to cross, and since surface explorations carried on for two decades by Nelson Glueck showed little or no trace of sedentary life in that region until the thirteenth century, some see in this another evidence that the Exodus took place in the thirteenth rather than in the fifteenth century B.C.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible records the fact that Israel encountered the nations of Edom and Moab during its journey through Transjordan. And yet, according to Glueck no evidence of any nations inhabiting this area between 1800 and 1300 B.C. has been found. His archaeological work sought to prove that the Transjordan kingdoms encountered or avoided by the Israelites did not appear till the 13th century.<sup>8</sup>

Can this argument be answered? Merrill offers a simple explanation, which attacks the central weakness of Glueck's position.

The answer is quite obvious from a careful study of the Old Testament record and even a superficial knowledge of Biblical geography. We are told that Moses wanted to take the King's Highway, a road which passed through an extremely narrow mountain pass into and out from the city of Petra (Sela). This pass could easily be defended by only a very few hundred well-trained troops, and they need not be sedentary peoples. Nomads or semi-nomads could well have occupied the area in such sufficient numbers that they precluded Israel's passing through their difficult land; yet the nature of

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan* (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1940), pp. 125-47.

<sup>7</sup> Siegfried J. Schwantes, *A Short History of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Clyde T. Francisco, "The Exodus in its Historical Setting," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 20 (Fall 1977): 12.

their existence would explain the lack of any material remains such as permanent structures.... The absence of remains of a settled people need not militate against the early date of the Exodus if the people simply did not leave remains. *Argumentum ad silentium* is not sufficient to overthrow the Biblical position.<sup>9</sup>

Merrill's point is well taken. An argument based on negative evidence is always tenuous. Thus it is interesting to note Kitchen's inconsistency in this regard. He uses Glueck's survey as his first line of proof from Palestinian archaeology to argue against the early date and for the late date of the Exodus.<sup>10</sup> However, he offers a different explanation of the evidence when excavations at Dibon failed to find any support for a settlement there in the 13th century (which would be required according to the Book of Num).

In Moab proper Dibon offers an equally instructive example.... Here, the excavations found virtually nothing of Late Bronze Age date, even though Dibon is mentioned in Numbers (21:30 ; 32:2, 34, 33:45-46 , etc.). precisely like the "gap" at the Negeb sites. However, *in this case we have independent written evidence at first hand to prove the existence of Dibon* in the thirteenth century BC: the war-reliefs of Ramesses II depicting his conquest of Batora and of Dibon "in the land of Moab," these being shown as fortresses.... the archaeological data from Dibon (Dhiban) are clearly inadequate, as is so often the case with mute, uninscribed, time-worn, incompletely-dug, archaeological sites. *Such evidence is a very unsatisfactory basis from which to pass judgment upon the biblical or any other literary source.*<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Kitchen should be more consistent in his application of the biblical and archaeological evidence. Glueck's surface explorations are hardly sufficient to pass judgment on the occupation of the Transjordan area. Archer provides the most complete attack on this position.

But Glueck's investigations were largely in the nature of surface exploration, and could hardly have been called thorough. Moreover, there has come to light more recently a new line of evidence which seems to belie his deductions. In the *Biblical Archaeologist* for February 1953, C. Lankester Harding reported that the discovery of an ancient tomb in Amman containing numerous artifacts (including black pricked ware, button-base vases, oil flasks, scarabs, and toggle pins) dating from about 1600 B.C. In Harding's *Antiquities of Jordan* (1959) he also speaks of characteristic Middle Bronze pottery and other objects found at Naur and Mount Nebo. A sixteenth century tomb was discovered at Pella in 1967 (*ASOR* newsletter, Dec. 1967). A Late Bronze Age temple was uncovered under a runway at the Amman airport in 1955 (*CT*, Dec. 22, 1971, p. 26). Franken's excavations at Deir Alla and those of Siegfried Horn at

<sup>9</sup> Merrill, *Historical Survey*, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 88 (italics added).

Heshbon have shown that the pottery of Transjordan was quite dissimilar from that produced on the west bank of the Jordan at the same period. Yamauchi suggests that Glueck mistakenly assumed the homogeneity of pottery from both regions and thus may have introduced confusion into his interpretation of the data (ibid.). Further excavation will no doubt uncover more products of this intermediate period and demonstrate once again the fallacy of hasty conclusions from superficial investigations.<sup>12</sup>

Once again an argument for the late date of the Exodus must be rejected. The argument is primarily an argument from silence which can be explained in the light of the lack of archaeological evidence left by a nomadic or semi-nomadic people. Also, additional evidence has been trickling in, evidence which *does* seem to confirm the existence of people in the Transjordan area in the period from 1800 to 1300 B.C.

### **The Situation in Western Palestine**

Perhaps the strongest evidence in favor of the late date is found in the archaeology of western Palestine.

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 at roughly 1240 B.C. onward. Such sites are Tell Beit Mirsim (possibly biblical Debir/Kiriath-sepher), Lachish, Bethel and Hazor.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence in this section is too numerous to examine in detail. However, some material needs to be considered carefully. Two specific archaeological sites will be considered.

*Jericho*. The biblical account clearly indicates that the first city destroyed by the Israelites as they entered Canaan was Jericho. Since this occurred approximately 40 years after the Exodus, the dating of the fall of Jericho should provide a clue for the dating of the Exodus. Initial work by Garstang seemed to provide good support for the early date of the Exodus.<sup>14</sup>

While Garstang's position is still held by some conservative writers,<sup>15</sup> most have abandoned the position in favor of that proposed by Kenyon. Kenyon has done extensive work at Jericho. Her general conclusions vary from those of Garstang.

The evidence of the published pottery makes it clear, in the first place, that none of the areas excavated were occupied in the thirteenth century, nor the tombs discovered used then. There is no trace of any of the comparatively well-known thirteenth century forms. On the other hand, it is clear that there was occupation within some part of the fourteenth century. Our knowledge of

<sup>12</sup> Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 225-26.

<sup>13</sup> *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. s.v. "Chronology (OT)," by Kenneth A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, 1:275.

<sup>14</sup> John Garstang and J. B. E. Garstang, *The Story of Jericho*, rev. ed. (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1948), p. 179.

<sup>15</sup> Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, pp. 146-48. See also Archer, *Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 223-24.

pottery makes it difficult to assign very exact dates. It would appear that most of the typically fifteenth forms are lacking. . . .<sup>16</sup>

The question now, however, is this: which date of the Exodus does the archaeological evidence from Jericho support? Actually the evidence from the ruins themselves is somewhat sketchy. Kitchen notes that “the Late Bronze Age levels appear to have been almost completely washed away during the four centuries that the mound lay desolate from Joshua until Ahab’s time. . . .”<sup>17</sup> Thus much of the evidence has been lost or jumbled through erosion and weathering over the centuries. Still, Waltke believes that a date can be established through the use of other archaeological markers.

Now can the fall of the city be dated more precisely during the Late Bronze period? Garstang argued convincingly that the Conquest must have occurred before the reign of Akhenaten, who began to reign ca. 1375 B.C. because (1) not one of the distinctive, plentiful, and well-established archaeological criteria characteristic of Akhenaten’s reign has been found in either the city or in the tombs; (2) there is no reference to Jericho in the Amarna letters dated to Akhenaten’s reign, though numerous cities of Canaan are mentioned frequently; (3) there is no scarab after Amenhotep III (1412 B.C.-1375 B.C.) though there survived an abundant and continuous series of scarabs of the Egyptian kings from the Middle Bronze Age right on down through the reign of Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep III of the Late Bronze I period. Confessedly these are all negative evidences and may be subject to other explanations than that the Canaanite city ceased to exist before 1375 B.C., but together they lead to the plausible suggestion that the destruction of the city previously established by the ceramic evidence between 1410 B.C. and 1340 B.C. occurred before 1375 B.C.<sup>18</sup>

While Waltke labels his evidence for a 1375 B.C. destruction “negative evidences,” one item could be considered in a more positive sense as an answer to Kenyon’s position. Kenyon has argued that there is no evidence of occupation suddenly ending about 1375 B.C. However, she is then forced to deal with a 15th-century royal scarab which was found in one of the tombs by proposing a concept that has no supporting evidence.

The suggestion put forward in the report that [the scarab] was the insignia of office of the person buried is tempting, but it is so much at variance with the lack of what we now know as fifteenth century pottery, that it can only be suggested that it was an heirloom. We have not sufficient evidence of how in Palestine such scarabs, which may in origin have been insignia, were treated, to allow such a find by itself to contradict other evidence.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen M. Kenyon, “Some Notes on the History of Jericho in the Second Millennium B.C.,” *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 83 (1951): 121-22.

<sup>17</sup> Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Waltke, “Palestinian Artifactual Evidence Supporting the Early Date of the Exodus,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (January-March 1972): 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> Kenyon, “Notes on the History of Jericho,” p. 117.

Kenyon seems to be guilty of manipulating her evidence to fit a preconceived idea. If evidence is found which contradicts her thesis she explains it away even though there is no warrant for doing so. Taken as a whole the evidence for Jericho is mixed. While Garstang's support for the destruction of the walls in 1400 has been challenged by Kenyon, she has not conclusively shown that her alternative is correct. Additional evidence points to a destruction sometime between 1400 and 1375 B.C. Still, the evidence is mixed.

*Hazor.* The second city to be examined is Hazor. This site has been extensively excavated by Yigael Yadin. He discovered evidence of 21 cities covering a span of 2,550 years from 2700 B.C. to 150 B.C.<sup>20</sup> Yadin accepts the late date for the Exodus and Conquest and associates the destruction of the city "at the end of the Late Bronze Age II in the second half of the 13th cent. B.C."<sup>21</sup>

However, Yadin does present some other interesting evidence. He notes the discovery of a Late Bronze II period gate erected on the foundation of the earlier Middle Bronze Age II gate.<sup>22</sup> He then writes:

This gate must have been destroyed in a violent conflagration, though the exterior walls still stand to a height of nine feet. Traces of the burnt bricks of its inner walls and the ashes of the burnt beams still cover the floors in thick heaps. *The evidence suggests that this destruction occurred before the final destruction of Hazor by the Israelites*, but this problem remains to be studied.<sup>23</sup>

While the point could easily be missed, it is significant. Since Yadin accepts the 1250 B.C. destruction as being that of Israel, he is saying that another earlier destruction also took place during the Late Bronze II period. Walton dates both phases of the Late Bronze II period as extending from 1400 to 1200 B.C.<sup>24</sup> Thus if two destructions were in this period, how does one know which is to be associated with the Exodus? The first would correspond to the early date for the Exodus and the second would correspond to the late date for the Exodus. But which destruction is correct? The problem is even more complex because a third period of destruction is also in evidence during this period.

There are then from the Late Bronze Age Canaanite city layers of destruction at *ca.* 1400 B.C., *ca.* + 1300 B.C. and *ca.* + 1230 B.C. Moreover, there is no occupation after 1230 B.C. on the Lower Canaanite City and a probable gap on the tell between 1230 B.C. and the era of Solomon. The interpretive problem then is: "With which of these strata shall one associate Joshua?" Most probably Yadin is

<sup>20</sup> Yigael Yadin, "The Fourth Season of Excavation at Hazor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 22 (February 1959): 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9 (italics added).

<sup>24</sup> Walton, *Chronological Charts*, p. 28.

correct in his suggestion that the destruction level at *ca.* + 1300 B.C. should be associated with the burning of the city by Seti I (*ca.* 1318 B.C.). So then one is left with the destruction levels at 1400 B.C. and 1230 B.C. Yadin opted for the 1230 B.C. level.<sup>25</sup>

Which date should be assigned to Joshua? The Bible itself helps provide an answer. Judges 4:2–3 indicates that Jabin, king of Hazor, oppressed the Israelites during the period of the Judges for 20 years. Israel was finally delivered by Deborah and Barak when they destroyed Jabin (4:23–24). Whitcomb places the defeat of Jabin approximately 165 years after Joshua’s destruction of Hazor.<sup>26</sup> This passage argues strongly against the 1230 destruction as that of Joshua since the city was uninhabited between 1230 and the time of Solomon. As Waltke notes, “If the city ceased to exist after 1230 B.C., and if it is still in existence at least three or four generations after Joshua, then Joshua’s destruction cannot be attributed to the destruction level dated at 1230 B.C. . . .”<sup>27</sup>

Rather than arguing for the late date of the Exodus, the destruction at Hazor actually favors the early date. In fact, neither Hazor nor Jericho argue conclusively for the late date of the Exodus. The data are capable of harmonization with the early date and in fact sometimes fit better with that date.

### **The Location of Pharaoh’s Residence**

A fourth argument in favor of the late date for the Exodus centers on the location of pharaoh’s residence during the time of the Exodus. Those who hold to the late date argue that during the Eighteenth Dynasty (1580-1314 B.C.) the capital of Egypt was in the south at Thebes. It was not until the Nineteenth Dynasty that it was moved to the north to Pi-Ramesses. Thus for the pharaoh to have been geographically close to the Israelites (as the Exodus account seems to indicate), the pharaoh must have been from the Nineteenth Dynasty since only the Nineteenth Dynasty capital of Pi-Ramesses is close enough to the land of Goshen.<sup>28</sup>

Kitchen concurs with this assessment when he notes, “The official building-works of the Ramesside kings in the E. Delta are usually found to be the first original works there since the Hyksos period four centuries earlier. . . .”<sup>29</sup> Obviously if this evidence is true, then one would be hard pressed to place the pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty near the land of Goshen if his capital was located far to the south. However, does the evidence actually support these claims? This writer thinks not.

<sup>25</sup> Waltke, “Palestinian Artifactual Evidence,” p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> John C. Whitcomb, *Chart of the Old Testament Patriarchs and Judges* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> Waltke, “Palestinian Artifactual Evidence,” p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982). pp. 60-62.

<sup>29</sup> Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, p. 59. n. 11.

Davis has amassed several items of evidence which point to the pharaoh's presence in the Delta region during the Eighteenth Dynasty.

However, it is well known both from archaeological remains and important inscriptions that the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs did have a keen interest in building projects in the northern part of Egypt. Along with the two red granite obelisks erected by Thutmose III in front of the Temple of Ra' -Heliopolis, a scarab has been discovered that refers to the birth of Amenhotep II as having taken place in Memphis just below Heliopolis. It appears that as a youth Amenhotep II spent considerable time in that area. It has also been demonstrated that in the Eighteenth Dynasty there were two viziers in Egypt, one in upper Egypt and one in lower Egypt. Since Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs were very active in Palestinian campaigns, it would seem reasonable that they would have established garrisons and store-cities somewhere in the Delta region to facilitate movement between Syro-Palestinian sites and Egypt itself.<sup>30</sup>

Other archaeological evidence found in Egypt confirms Davis's statement. A stela from Amenhotep II was found in Memphis which recorded some of his military exploits. One section dealt with his victorious return to Egypt. "His majesty reached Memphis, his heart joyful. . . . Now the God's Wife, King's Wife, and King's [Daughter] beheld the victory of his majesty."<sup>31</sup> The text seems to imply that the king at least had a temporary dwelling in the Delta area where his family would at times reside and which he would use as his base of operation for excursions into Palestine.

The location of the pharaoh's residence has little bearing on the date of the Exodus since the pharaohs of both the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties had residences in the northern delta region. Thus the pharaoh could easily come from either dynasty and still meet the scriptural requirements.

### **Conclusion**

Much of the evidence advanced in favor of the late date is based on archaeological data which are subject to different interpretations. None of the material offers compelling evidence in favor of the late date. Instead, all the data can harmonize with the early date.

### **The Early Date**

The early date of the Exodus (ca. 1445 B.C.) is held by many (but not all) conservative scholars. Several lines of evidence,

<sup>30</sup> John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> James B. Pritchard. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 246.

both biblical and archaeological, are often presented as support for an early date.

### **First Kings 6:1**

Perhaps the strongest evidence in favor of an early date is the statement of 1 Kings 6:1 which dates the beginning of the construction of the temple. “Now it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the sons 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 that he began to build the house of the Lord.” Whitcomb dates the fourth year of Solomon’s reign to 966 B.C.<sup>32</sup> Thus 480 years prior to the fourth year of Solomon would place the Exodus at 1445 B.C.

Since the statement of 1 Kings 6:1 is so straightforward, one wonders why the early date for the Exodus would ever be questioned. And yet questions are raised.

Against this line of reasoning stands the plain statement of 1 K. 6:1 that there were 480 years between the Exodus and the building of the Temple. If the reasoning is correct, how can that figure be explained? Commonly it is seen as a round figure, the sum of twelve generations of forty years each. The presence of two stock numbers, twelve and forty, is enough to create some presumption in favor of this explanation. Although there is no direction in the text that the number should be interpreted as an approximation, neither is there any evidence that the Hebrew people during the judges period had any need for, or any inclination to keep, an exact overall chronology.<sup>33</sup>

This argument is very tenuous. First, Oswalt argues in a circle. He takes the 480-year figure, divides it into two figures (12 and 40), and then argues that the presence of these “stock numbers” points to the fact that the number is an approximation. But where in the text are the numbers 12 and 40? He produced these himself from the 480 figure (i.e.,  $12 \times 40 = 480$ ). Yet the text itself does *not* have these “stock numbers”; it simply has 480. Second, Oswalt, fails to account for the specifics of the text in which the “480” is couched. This was also “the fourth year of Solomon’s reign.” “the month of Ziv,” and “the second month.” These are hardly “approximations.” Rather the author of 1 Kings was citing a specific date for the beginning of the temple’s construction. Should not this “create a presumption” in favor of a literal interpretation of the 480-year figure? Third, Oswalt is arguing from silence when he intimates that the people during the Judges period did not keep accurate chronological records.

<sup>32</sup> John C. Whitcomb, *Chart of the Old Testament Kings and Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968).

<sup>33</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1979), s.v. “Chronology of the Old Testament,” by J. N. Oswalt, 1:677.

Judges 11:26 indicates just the opposite. Jephthah knew the exact amount of time that Israel lived in Heshbon (300 years). Evidently he *did* have “an inclination to keep an exact overall chronology.” Furthermore, 1 Kings 6:1 was recorded during the monarchy; and a glance at 1 and 2 Kings reveals that the writer was concerned with chronology. Based on his use of numbers elsewhere in the book it seems probable that he intended the 480 year figure to be interpreted literally.

Wood provides a telling critique of this position.

This explanation, however, must be rejected by one who holds to a high view of inspiration. The text in no way states or implies the thought of twelve generations. It refers merely to the definite number 480, which means that any idea of generations must be read into the text. One is minded to say that if this plain number can be reduced so drastically by this manner of analysis, then many other biblical numbers can be similarly adjusted by parallel methods, making Scriptural numbers very uncertain indeed.<sup>34</sup>

Those who would seek to reinterpret 1 Kings 6:1 do so on the basis of external archaeological evidence. Thus they are seeking to reinterpret the biblical data to “match” the archaeological data. This is a very dangerous position because archaeology is a very inexact, changing science. Unless there is good textual or contextual evidence to the contrary, it is better to let the Bible stand on its own.

### **Judges 11:26**

The second argument in favor of the early date are the words of Jephthah in Judges 11:26. “While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?” Jephthah was saying, in effect, that Israel had been occupying the city of Heshbon (and other villages) in Moab for 300 years. These cities were taken by Israel just before their invasion of Canaan (cf. Num 21:25–35). The possession of Heshbon occurred approximately 340 years before Jephthah. The problem for those who hold the late Exodus date is obvious. If the Exodus took place in 1280 B.C., then Jephthah would have been a judge in 940 B.C.—during the reign of King Solomon! However, if the Exodus took place in 1445 B.C., then Jephthah judged in 1105 B.C., well within the period of the Judges.

How does one who holds to a late date for the Exodus answer this? Some use a mixture of agnosticism and circular reasoning,

<sup>34</sup> Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 89.

They begin by assuming that the Conquest occurred around 1240-1220 B.C. Since Jephthah's remark (made ca. 1100) would mean the Exodus occurred about 1400, his remark cannot be interpreted literally since it does not square with the "evidence." That is, they must reinterpret Scripture to "fit" their archaeological scheme.

But here again, we do not know the basis of Jephthah's figure—it could, again, be an aggregate of partly concurrent periods (*e.g.*, for Reuben, Gad, and East Manasseh?), but we have no indications on which to build.... Empty speculation is profitless, and sound method would counsel one to await fresh light on matters of this type. No-one is compelled to produce a complete answer when there is simply not enough information to do so.<sup>35</sup>

Davis makes a notable observation on the context of Judges 11 in which Jephthah's statement occurs. It is a prose section involving talks between two nations, both of which are aware of the historical situation of Heshbon.

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.<sup>36</sup>

It seems best to accept the testimony of Judges 11:26 at face value. There is nothing in the context to argue against a normal interpretation. Thus the early date of the Exodus seems to accord better with the biblical data.

### **The "Dream Stele" of Thutmose IV**

A third argument advanced to support the early date for the Exodus is the "dream stele" of Thutmose IV. This stele records a dream of Thutmose IV in which he was promised the throne of Egypt.

One of those days it happened that the King's Son Thut-mose came on an excursion at noon time. Then he rested in the shadow of this great god. Sleep took hold of him, slumbering at the time when the sun was at its peak. He found the majesty of this august god speaking with his own mouth, as a father speaks to his son, saying,

<sup>35</sup> Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>36</sup> Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, p. 31.

“See me, look at me, my son, Thut-mose! I am thy father, Harmakhis-Khepri-Re-Atum. I shall give thee my kingdom upon earth at the head of the living. Thou shalt wear the southern crown and the northern crown on the throne of Geb, the crown prince (of the gods). Thine is the land in its length and its breadth, that which the Eye of the All-Lord illumines.”<sup>37</sup>

The argument here is that had Thutmose IV been the firstborn son, he would have had no need for the god to promise him the throne since he would have already been heir. Thus he must have had an older brother who later died. This would harmonize with the death of the firstborn at the time of the Exodus.

It is quite obvious that if Thutmose IV had been the eldest son of his father, Amenhotep II, there would have been no purpose in divine promise that he should some day become king. He would naturally have succeeded to the throne if he had survived his father. It is a necessary inference, therefore, that the oldest son of Amenhotep must have later predeceased his father, thus leaving the succession to his younger brother. This well accords with the record in Exodus 12:29 that the eldest son of Pharaoh died at the time of the tenth plague.<sup>38</sup>

While this argument sounds impressive, it has some serious difficulties. First, it is an argument from silence. Second, for it to be valid Thutmose IV would have had to be old enough to go hunting and to have such a dream prior to the death of his brother (once the older brother was dead the dream was unnecessary). However, as Aling notes, “This seems highly unlikely, since the prince was *at most* five years old at the time of the exodus. The events described on the Sphinx Stele should in all probability be dated some years after the exodus, and therefore the stele is definitely not evidence for the death of the Egyptian firstborn.”<sup>39</sup>

While there might be some latitude on the exact date of Thutmose IV’s birth, Aling has presented a strong case against using the dream stele as an argument for the early date of the Exodus. This does not argue *against* the early date; it merely indicates that the dream stele has no bearing either way on the debate. Thus unless evidence arises which shows that (a) Thutmose IV was old enough to have this experience before 1445 and (b) Thutmose IV had only one older brother, it seems better to eliminate this argument from the evidence for the early date.

### **The 'Apiru and the Amarna Letters**

A fourth argument for the early date of the Exodus focuses on two interrelated events. The first is a class of people who

<sup>37</sup> Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 449.

<sup>38</sup> Archer, *Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 229-30.

<sup>39</sup> Charles F. Aling, “The Sphinx Stele of Thutmose IV and the Date of the Exodus,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (June 1979): 98.

invaded Palestine in the 14th century, and the second is a series of letters written from Canaan to Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), also from the 14th century.

The important question is whether there is any such invasion of central and southern Palestine hinted at in contemporary records that would suggest the Israelite conquest under Joshua. That there is such an invasion of outsiders recounted in the famous Amarna Letters, which deal with this period from about 1400-1366 B.C., has been known virtually since their discovery in 1886. These invaders, called Habiru, are etymologically actually equatable with the Hebrews. . . .<sup>40</sup>

The letters of this period illustrate Unger's point. One example is EA, No. 271 written by Milkilu, prince of Gezar, to the pharaoh. He writes, "Let the king, my lord, protect his land from the hand of the 'Apiru. If not, (then) let the king, my lord, send chariots to fetch us, lest our servants smite us." A second example is from 'Abdu-Heba, king of Jerusalem, who writes:<sup>41</sup>

As truly as the king, my lord, lives, when the commis [sioners] go forth I will say, "Lost are the lands of the king! Do you not hearken unto me? All the governors are lost; the king, my lord, does not have a (single) governor (left)! Let the king turn his attention to the archers, and let the king, my lord, send out troops of archers, (for) the king has no lands (left)!" The 'Apiru' plunder all the lands of the king. If there are archers (here) in this year, the lands of the king, my lord, will remain (intact); but if there are not archers (here) the lands of the king, my lord, will be lost!<sup>42</sup>

While this does seem to describe an invasion (a) at the same time as that of an early date conquest and (b) by a people with a similar name to the Hebrews, not all associate the 'Apiru or the Amarna Letters with the Israelite Conquest. Pfeiffer presents at least four arguments against this identification: (1) "A strong argument against identification comes from the fact that 'Apiru appear in a wide variety of places of which there is no hint in the Biblical narrative." (2) "There is considerable evidence that the 'Apiru were regarded as a social rather than an ethnic group. . . . The 'Apiru of the Amarna tablets are never described as invaders." (3) "Although the place names of the Amarna texts are parallel to those of the Old Testament, the personal names are totally different." (4) "Most contemporary scholars date the conquest of Canaan after the Amarna Age, suggesting some time around 1280 B.C., as the probable date of the Exodus."<sup>43</sup>

While Pfeiffer's points are well taken, his arguments are answerable. The first argument assumes a one-for-one

<sup>40</sup> Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, pp. 145-46.

<sup>41</sup> Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 486-87.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 488.

<sup>43</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Tell El Amarna and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1963), pp. 52-54.

correspondence between 'Apiru and Hebrew. If 'Apiru could denote a larger class of people of which the Hebrews were considered one segment, then the argument has been answered. Much as one today might use the larger designation "American" or "European" to denote an individual who is actually from El Salvador or France, so a Hebrew could have been designated by the larger term 'Apiru. Pfeiffer's second argument is also somewhat moot for it is difficult to distinguish social and ethnic traits from the limited material available. Also it is easy to see the invading Israelites as *both* a social group (with their own laws, patterns of conduct, etc.) and an ethnic group. Pfeiffer's third argument assumes that individuals had only one name. However, there are examples in the Bible of individuals who had two names (or more). It is possible that the two accounts are reflecting the two different names (cf. 2 Kings 23:34 where Eliakim's name was changed to Jehoiakim by the pharaoh to signify Egypt's control of Judah's king). Pfeiffer's fourth argument involved circular reasoning. He is assuming what he is trying to prove.

While Pfeiffer's arguments can be answered, he should cause one to think before indiscriminately applying archaeological evidence to biblical events. Actually the Amarna letters and the 'Apiru *by themselves* do not prove the early date for the Exodus. Apart from clear scriptural testimony placing the Hebrews in the same location during the same period of time the evidence would be incomplete. As it is, the Amarna letters and the 'Apiru can *confirm* the early date of the Exodus but they cannot *prove* the early date.

### **Other Evidence**

Other relatively minor arguments are offered in favor of an early date for the Exodus. The first of these is the argument from antiquity. Josephus quoted the Egyptian historian Manetho to show that his records mention the Exodus. Josephus quoted Manetho as saying that "Tethmosis was king when they went away." However, Josephus then chided Manetho for erring in later declaring that a king named "Amenophis" was the pharaoh at the time of the Exodus.<sup>44</sup> Could it be possible that Josephus was preserving a garbled tradition that was associating Thutmose III and Amenhotep II with the Exodus? One cannot say for sure but the similarity is striking.

A second minor argument offered in favor of an early date for the Exodus is based on the chronology of the life of Moses. Moses

<sup>44</sup> Josephus *Contra Apionem* 1.26.

was 40 years old when he fled from the pharaoh after killing an Egyptian (Exod 2:11–15; Acts 7:23–29). Moses was 80 years old when God told him to go back to Egypt “for all the men who were seeking your life are dead” (Exod 4:19; cf. 7:7 ; Acts 7:30). Since the pharaoh had been seeking Moses’ life (Exod 2:15), one needs to find a pharaoh who reigned for approximately 40 years to fulfill the chronological gap. Only two kings lived long enough to fill this gap—Thutmose who reigned for 54 years (1504-1450 B.C.) and Rameses II who reigned for 66 years (1290-1224 B.C.). However Rameses II must be eliminated because the pharaoh following him would be Merneptah and it was during his reign that the stele was written which identified his victory over the Israelites in Palestine. Thus Thutmose III must have been the pharaoh of the oppression and Amenhotep II the pharaoh of the Exodus.<sup>45</sup>

The main argument against this position is that it assumes that the pharaoh must have lived for the 40 years Moses was in the wilderness even though the biblical text never says that. Theoretically the pharaoh could have died years earlier. Thus the argument is interesting, but irrelevant. While it does not prove the early date, neither does it disprove it.

### **Conclusion**

Two types of evidence have been presented—biblical and archaeological. The biblical evidence was seen to be very strong for the early date. Both 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26, when interpreted normally, point to an Exodus sometime around 1445 B.C. The archaeological evidence is interesting but not quite as strong. The “dream stele” of Thutmose IV, the ‘Apiru and Amarna letters, the testimony of Josephus, and the historical setting provide interesting, but not incontrovertible, evidence in favor of an early date. Some of these arguments are stronger than others, but each of them is capable of another interpretation. Thus the primary support for the early date must still rest on the biblical testimony.

### **Conclusion**

The fact is that the available archaeological evidence simply does not square well with the biblical account of the conquest [and Exodus] regardless of what one proposes as a date. If the Bible and archaeology are to be correlated *vis-a-vis* the conquest, the claims of the biblical account will have to be modified in some fashion and/or

<sup>45</sup> Adam William Fisher, “The Argument for the Early Date of the Exodus,” Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1968, pp. 32-35.

some of the archaeological evidence will have to be explained away. This brings into focus a crucial methodological issue which divides biblical scholars (and Palestinian archaeologists) more than we generally admit. The issue is simply this: What sort of conclusion is to be reached when carefully excavated archaeological evidence does not seem to meet the minimum requirements of the historical implications of the biblical texts?<sup>46</sup>

Miller has hit the heart of the question as it relates to the Exodus. Is the archaeological evidence or the biblical text to be the primary source of information? Those who opt for the late date of the Exodus do so primarily on the basis of archaeological evidence. And yet that evidence is always colored by the presuppositions and prejudices of those interpreting the raw data. On the other side are those who opt for the early date of the Exodus. They do so primarily because of the biblical data. So what is the answer? All truth is God's truth; yet the only truth which can be known absolutely is that truth which God chooses to reveal in His Word. Thus the biblical evidence must be the primary evidence. For this reason the writer accepts the early date of the Exodus as being the better alternative.

<sup>46</sup> J. Maxwell Miller, "Archaeology and the Israelite Conquest of Canaan: Some Methodological Observations," *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 109 (July-December 1977): 88.

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