

Exodus Evidence: An Egyptologist Looks at Biblical History

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The question of elements of historicity in the Biblical account of the Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites and their subsequent Exodus from Egypt is an extremely complicated matter with many uncertainties.^a But a number of aspects of the account can be reliably—that is, historically—traced back to the late 13th–12th century B.C.E., the time when proto-Israelites appear both in Egypt and Canaan and in what would become Israel. In short, although the Biblical text was undoubtedly composed later, it draws in some particulars on accurate memories from the time of the enslavement and Exodus that it describes.

For example, the Bible refers to several important toponyms (place names) that in combination appear only in the Ramesside period (12th–13th century B.C.E.). According to the Biblical account, Pharaoh famously forced the Israelites to build the store-cities of Pithom and Ramses (*Exodus 1:11*). The Israelites miraculously crossed the Yam Suph, which may be translated either Red Sea or Reed Sea.^b These toponyms correspond to the Egyptian toponyms Pi-Ramesse, Pi-Atum and (Pa-)Tjuf.¹



It is true that two of these toponyms—Pi-Atum [Pithom] and (Pa-)Tjuf [Yam Suph]—also appear in later Egyptian texts. Pi-Ramesse does not, however. It reappears only in the third century B.C.E. Moreover, although two of the three do appear in later Egyptian texts, all three appear together only in the Ramesside period.



This indicates that the place name Ramses in the books of Genesis and Exodus, which corresponds to the Egyptian toponym Pi-Ramesse, must have been adopted from a tradition older than the Third Intermediate Period because by the time of the Third Intermediate Period, which began with the 21st Dynasty in 1085 B.C.E., Pi-Ramesse was out of function as a residence and used as a quarry for building Tanis. The name Pi-Ramesse had already gone out of use and only reappears in the fourth century B.C.E.

Another example places the house remains of workers (most probably slaves in the Egyptian temple) who may have been proto-Israelites (or a closely related population) in Egypt in the 12th century B.C.E. (the time of Ramses IV). The workers were part of a team in western Thebes tasked with demolishing the temple of earlier kings Aya and Horemheb. The University of Chicago archaeologists who excavated the site in the 1930s uncovered the remains of a house (and part of a second one) in which the workers lived at the site. It was not made of bricks or stones—after all, these were workers—but of wattle and daub. Nevertheless, the plan of the dwellings was unmistakably that of the four-room house,

considered characteristic of proto-Israelites emerging in Canaan at this time. Indeed the four-room house is widely considered as an ethnic marker for the presence of Israelites.¹ (As Israel's 036 ethnogenesis had not yet been finalized, one might also consider that some other closely related population might be the builders of these houses.)

In the famous Papyrus Anastasi VI, a group of Shosu Bedouin from Edom is granted permission by the Egyptian authorities to pass the border stronghold and proceed with their flocks to the lakes of Pithom where they will find the water needed to keep the animals alive. This papyrus dates to the end of the 13th century B.C.E., more precisely to the fifth year of the reign of Sethos (Seti) II (c. 1209 B.C.E.). These tribesmen are not Edomites but rather Shosu from Edom. In the Bible, the Israelite God Yahweh is said to have arisen from Seir in Edom. In *Deuteronomy* 33:1–2, Moses blesses the people before he dies:

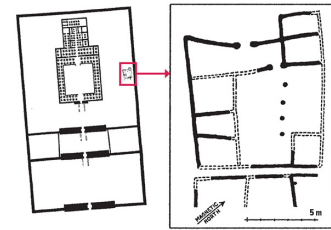
Yahweh came from Sinai;
He shone upon them from Seir.

And again in *Judges* 5:4–5:

O Yahweh, when you came forth from Seir,
Advanced from the country of Edom,
The earth trembled ...

This event was originally considered by Biblical scholars just as an illustration how the proto-Israelites had entered Egypt. Due to the Biblical chronology prevailing half a century ago, this event was considered, however, as too late for the migration of proto-Israelites to Egypt. As archaeological evidence now dates the emergence of these people only with the coming of the Iron Age at the end of the 13th century B.C.E.—a date supported by the Merneptah Stele (also known as the “Israel” Stele, c. 1219 B.C.E.), the event in Papyrus Anastasi VI suddenly demands much more of our attention. The pastoralists described in the Papyrus Anastasi could indeed be proto-Israelites or Midianites. In either case the event described can only be seen as symptomatic—that is, an incident recorded and preserved in an Egyptian text by accident that doubtless occurred repeatedly. Here in the late 13th century B.C.E. is an event in Egypt that no doubt occurred countless times that might well be describing the situation out of which the early Israelites emerged.

Moreover, in the Papyrus Anastasi the border fortress that the pastoralists seek to cross is in the region of Tjeku in what is today the Wadi Tumilat. Tjeku is regarded by many scholars (but not by the great A.H. Gardiner in a 1922 publication²) as the 037 Egyptian rendering of



Biblical Sukkot. Sukkot is on the first leg of the Exodus: The Israelites journeyed from Ramses to Sukkot, where they baked unleavened bread (*matzah*) (*Exodus 12:37*).

Tjeku is not the only toponym in the Wadi Tumilat region that has West Semitic roots. A more secure Semitic name in Papyrus Anastasi VI is *b-r-k-w.t* (Arabic *birkat*, Hebrew *brekhot*), which refers to pools or lakes of Pithom, most likely to be identified with the paleo-lake between Abu Hamad and Tell el-Retabe.



In another papyrus, the so-called Onomasticon Amenope, word 33, our *b-r-k.t* (lake) is followed by *kh-n.tyu* which means “borderland” or “frontier,” a meaningful association with the Wadi Tumilat.³

Another example is in Papyrus Anastasi V.19.7, where the Semitic word *s-g-r* is used for an enclosure.⁴

Still another example. The renowned Egyptologist Sarah I. Groll pointed out that in Papyrus Anastasi IV, lb:1–2 reference is made to a lake that produced waves.⁵ Therefore, it must have been a lake of considerable size. It is referred to as *g-s-m*, which according to Groll should be identified as the Biblical Goshen.

All this could be seen as evidence that this Egyptian borderland had been settled at this time by a Semitic-speaking population.

The well-known Merneptah Stele (c. 1219 B.C.E.) refers to “Israel” along with three towns—Ashkelon, Gezer and Yeno’am. The Egyptian classifier for “town” is attached to each of these three. The classifier attached to “Israel,” however, is for “people.” Israel had therefore not yet created settlements in what was to become the land of Israel.

Thus we have evidence of population groups in Egypt and elsewhere in the late Ramesside period (late 13th–12th century B.C.E.) who were culturally and ethnically close to what we know as Israel in the Iron Age (c. 1200–586 B.C.E.).

There is another, more general, reason why I believe the Biblical account incorporates some memories of actual conditions: The storyline of the Exodus, of a people fleeing from a humiliating slavery, suggests elements that are historically credible. Normally, it is only tales of glory and victory that are preserved in narratives from one generation to the next. A history of being slaves is likely to bear elements of truth.

Footnotes:

- a. This article is a free abstract from Manfred Bietak’s article, “On the Historicity of the Exodus: What Egyptology Today Can Contribute to Assessing the Biblical Account of the Sojourn in Egypt,” in Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H.C. Propp, eds., *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture and Geoscience* (Cham: Springer, 2015). In Bietak’s article, the scholarly debate about the

archaeological remains and the onomastic data of Wadi Tumilat is more elaborately treated.

- b. Bernard F. Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea?” **BAR** 10:04.
- c. Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust, “Ideology in Stone.” **BAR** 28:04.

Endnotes:

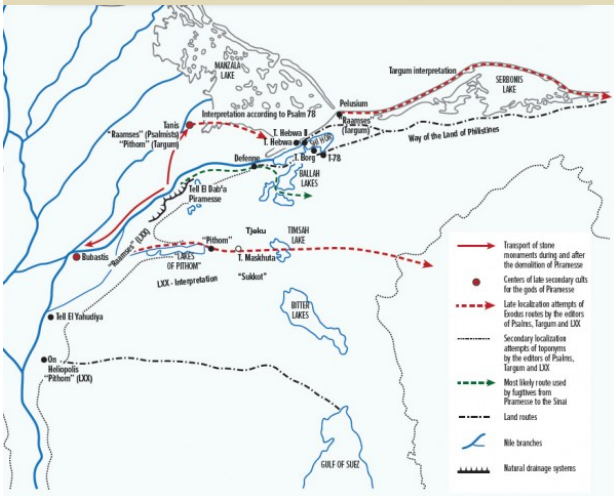
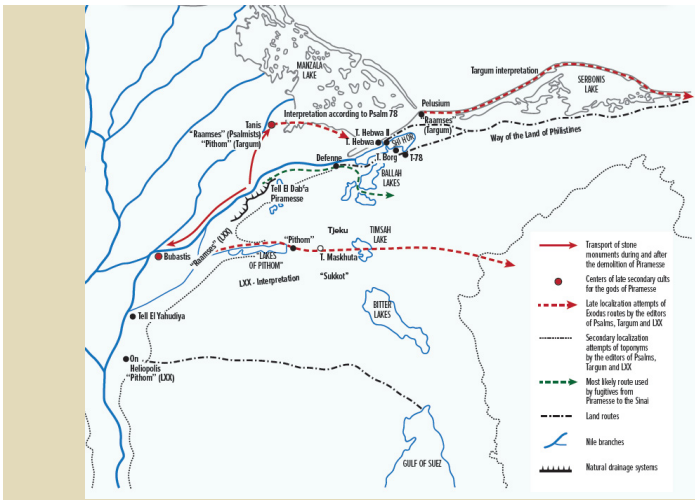
1. For a scholarly demonstration of this, see Manfred Bietak, “On the Historicity of the Exodus: What Egyptology Today Can Contribute to Assessing the Biblical Account of the Sojourn in Egypt,” in Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H.C. Propp, eds., *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture and Geoscience* (Cham: Springer, 2015), pp. 17–38.
2. Alan H. Gardiner, “The Geography of the Exodus,” *Recueil d’ études égyptologiques dédiées à la mémoire de Jean-François Champollion*, Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études 4 (Paris: Champion, 1922), pp. 203–215.
3. Alan H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), p. 8, no. 34.
4. James E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 270–271, no. 385.
5. Sarah I. Groll, “The Egyptian Background of the Exodus and the Crossing of the Reed Sea: A New Reading of Papyrus Anastasi VIII,” in I. Shirun-Grumach, ed., *Jerusalem Studies in Egyptology*, ÄAT 40 (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1998), p. 190.

SIDEBAR

Exodus Routes

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There are several routes that the Israelites might have taken from Piramesse to the Sinai. Some possibilities are plotted on this map. These different routes reflect the various interpretations of the psalmists, the Septuagint and the Targum, as well as recent geographic studies and reconstructions of the area.



A map of possible Exodus routes.

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Maryl Levine

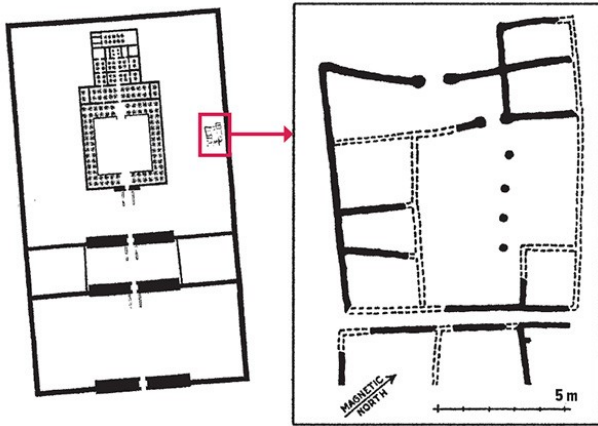
ISRAEL'S DEBUT. Dated to c. 1219 B.C.E., the Merneptah Stele is the earliest extrabiblical

record of a people group called Israel. Set up by Pharaoh Merneptah to commemorate his military victories, the stele proclaims, "Ashkelon is carried off, and Gezer is captured. Yeno'am is made into nonexistence; Israel is wasted, its seed is not." Ashkelon, Gezer and Yeno'am are followed by an Egyptian hieroglyph that designates a town. Israel is followed by a hieroglyph that means a people (detail shown here).



Maryl Levine

ISRAEL'S DEBUT. Dated to c. 1219 B.C.E., the Merneptah Stele is the earliest extrabiblical record of a people group called Israel. Set up by Pharaoh Merneptah to commemorate his military victories, the stele proclaims, "Ashkelon is carried off, and Gezer is captured. Yeno'am is made into nonexistence; Israel is wasted, its seed is not." Ashkelon, Gezer and Yeno'am are followed by an Egyptian hieroglyph that designates a town. Israel is followed by a hieroglyph that means a people.



Courtesy of Manfred Bietak

FAMILIAR DWELLINGS. The plan of this worker's house in western Thebes is similar to that of the four-room house characteristic of Israelite dwellings during the Iron Age. The four-room house is characterized by three parallel long rooms, which are separated by walls or rows of columns, and a fourth room at one end of the house that is perpendicular to the others. Sometimes these rooms are subdivided, and subsidiary rooms may be added, but the general plan remains the same. Most of these houses had a second story, and some scholars believe that the center room was unroofed and served as a courtyard.

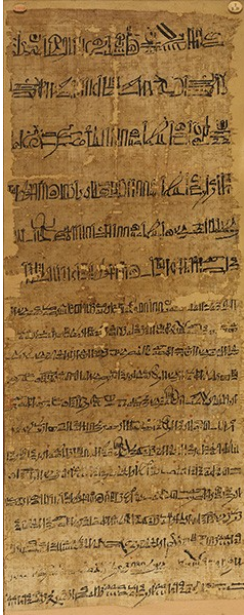
Unlike the Israelite models that were usually constructed of stone, the Theban house—most likely from the 12th or 11th century B.C.E.—was made of wattle and daub. The similarities between this house in western Thebes and the four-room houses in Israel have caused some to speculate that the builders of the Theban house were either Proto-Israelites or a group closely related to the Israelites.



Israel Finkelstein/Tel Aviv University

A four-room house at Izbet Sartah characteristic of Israelite dwellings during the Iron Age. The four-room house is characterized by three parallel long rooms, which are separated by

walls or rows of columns, and a fourth room at one end of the house that is perpendicular to the others. Sometimes these rooms are subdivided, and subsidiary rooms may be added, but the general plan remains the same. Most of these houses had a second story, and some scholars believe that the center room was unroofed and served as a courtyard.



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Papyrus Anastasi VI records how a group of Shosu Bedouin from Edom was given permission to pass an Egyptian stronghold and to water its flocks by the lakes of Pithom in Egypt. It dates from the fifth year of Sethos II (c. 1209 B.C.E.). Emerging Israelites may well have done the same thing.



Todd Bolen/bibleplaces.com

IN BIBLICAL SUKKOT? Tell el-Maskhuta in the Wadi Tumilat was excavated by a University of Toronto expedition that uncovered archaeological remains from Egypt's Middle Kingdom, Saite, Persian, Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Recent excavations by Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities have also recovered remains from the Ramesside period during Egypt's New Kingdom.

The Wadi Tumilat region was called Tjeku by the ancient Egyptians. Many scholars consider this name to be an Egyptian rendering of the Biblical name Sukkot—listed in Exodus 12:37 as one of the stations on the first leg of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt where the Israelites baked unleavened bread (matzah).

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