

# Chapter 2

## Origins

(Late Second Millennium BCE)

*Children of Israel,  
remember the favour I have bestowed upon you,  
and that I exalted you among the nations.*

*Remember how we delivered you from Pharaoh's people,  
who had oppressed you cruelly,  
slaying your sons and sparing only your daughters.  
Surely that was a great trial by your Lord.*

*We parted the sea for you,  
and, taking you to safety, drowned Pharaoh's men before your very eyes.  
We made a tryst with Moses for the fortieth night,  
and in his absence, you took up the calf and thus committed evil.  
Yet after that, we pardoned you, so that you might give thanks.*

*Believers, Jews, Christians and Sabeans,  
whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right,  
shall be rewarded by their Lord;  
they have nothing to fear or to regret.*

Verses from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Surah of the Koran<sup>1</sup>

The Exodus and the Conquest are events of fundamental importance to the Hebrew bible for which no origin can readily be found – neither in the archaeological record nor in non-biblical historical sources of comparable antiquity. It is generally agreed that the biblical authors set these events in the second millennium BCE. Finding a century on which scholars can agree, or an event that might provide a context, is much more difficult. Before examining the alternative hypotheses, it is worth reviewing the history of that millennium.

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BCE in the Near East; a brief history**

#### **The players and their opening positions.**

The main players in this millennium were the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hurrians and their offspring the Mitanni, and, towards the end, the Philistines and the Arameans. The Hittites were based in Anatolia, roughly modern Turkey, and sought to dominate the Levant from the north just as Egypt sought to dominate it from the south. They were an Indo-European group who established Hattusas as their capital early in the second millennium; to their southwest was the Ionian coast of modern Turkey; to their southeast was Syria. The Amorites emerged out of Syria to become a force throughout the Fertile Crescent in the early part of the millennium. Those that settled in the coastal Levant became known as Canaanites merging with whatever indigenous population may have existed there. The Hurrians emerged in northern Mesopotamia; they were neither Semitic nor Indo-European but had come from the Zagros mountains of modern Iran to dwell in the area that surrounds today's Kirkuk in modern Iraq<sup>2</sup>.

The Sumerian renaissance that spread from Ur in the last years of the third millennium reached as far as the Lebanese coast. Their empire was diminished by the increasing power of the semi-nomadic semitic Amorites, who spread gradually into the river valleys of Mesopotamia. This does not appear to have been the result of conquest by an organised army under the direction of empire building potentates: it seems rather to have been more like a steady shift of political power, such that one-by-one the cities came to be ruled by people with Semitic names, and one-by-one the provinces of the Sumerian states ruled by the Ur III dynasty broke away. The last Sumerian ruler built defensive walls around Ur and Nippur to keep out Amorite tribes, but to no avail. The final blow that ended the

<sup>1</sup> From the translation by N.J. Dawood, Penguin classics, p 14 & 15

<sup>2</sup> Redford (1992, 1993), p 135

Sumerian revival did not, however, come from the Amorites. A coalition involving Elam and other states located in the area that is today's southern Iran overcame the last of the Sumerians - although the sacking of Ur had probably been rendered easier than it otherwise might have been by the repeated Amorite incursions.

From early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, Byblos had enjoyed a special relationship with Egypt. It was a major trading port - famous amongst other things for the export of the timber of Lebanon. Indeed, the term 'Byblos-ships' became synonymous with sea-worthy trading vessels. The Egypt-Byblos relationship continued until about 1200 BCE, with only a few temporary lapses. Their maritime strength was the basis of the power by which the northern Canaanite cities would dominate the Mediterranean Sea routes till well into the first millennium.

When the great pyramid building Old Kingdom came to an end around 2200 BCE, Egypt broke up into smaller states and entered its First Intermediate period. Egypt was no longer respected as an invincible power and descended into a degree of anarchy at home. Power and wealth moved away from the centre.

North of Egypt, in what would one day be called Palestine, a trading urbanised civilisation gave way to a pastoral society whose principle economic activity was stock breeding. Many villages were abandoned as the population decreased and became nomadic. A combination of climatic change and political mismanagement in Egypt may have been the cause of these changes. The effect was a weakened northern border for Egypt and the immigration of Semitic peoples into the delta area.

### **From 2000 BCE to 1650; Egypt raids in Canaan**

An Egyptian, around 2000 BCE, wrote:

*The vile Asiatic! It goes ill with the place where he is, lacking in water and covered in brushwood, with tortuous paths because of the mountains. ... (He fights) like an outlaw thief. Don't give him a thought. The Asiatic is a crocodile on the riverbank; he snatches on the lonely road, but he will never seize at the harbour of the prosperous city.*

Another scribe, fearing that the Delta might be overwhelmed with foreigners, wrote:

*The Asiatics should not be allowed to come down to Egypt that they may ask for water beggar fashion to water their flocks.<sup>3</sup>*

In Egypt, the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> into the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia saw the re-unification of the nation, the creation of the Middle Kingdom under Montuhotep II and the restoration of trade via the Red Sea, the Levant and the Aegean. After two more Pharaohs, there was a transfer of power to an extremely able administrator, Amenemhet I, who secured Egypt's borders and further reduced the powers of the regional rulers. It is possible that his accession was associated with a civil war involving Asiatic mercenaries. His son, Senusert I (1917-1872 BCE), the probable hero of the 'Tale of Sinuhe'<sup>4</sup> was a strong advocate of the god Amon, whose worship became pre-eminent in his reign. Senusert's grandson, Senusert III, established Egypt's southern border as far south as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cataract. His grandson, Amenemhet III (1843-1798) built canals to control part of the Nile, indulged in turquoise mining in Sinai using Semitic slaves, built a 'Labyrinth' (which may have been an enormous state grain warehouse) as well as several temples, colossal statues of himself and two pyramids. This was a period of immense Egyptian wealth and influence. In one year alone military expeditions were sent to bring back timber from the Lebanon and turquoise from Sinai, punitive campaigns were run against three Asian locations and substantial tribute was received from Kush (Ethiopia) and elsewhere.

Raids not only secured wealth in the form of material goods but were also one source of slaves. Contemporary texts show that Asiatics were used as domestics, doorkeepers and dancers - amongst other things. Raids were supplemented with gift exchanges as a means of obtaining the wealth of Asia. Ebla, Ugarit, Baalbek, Byblos and Beirut all contributed in this way<sup>5</sup>.

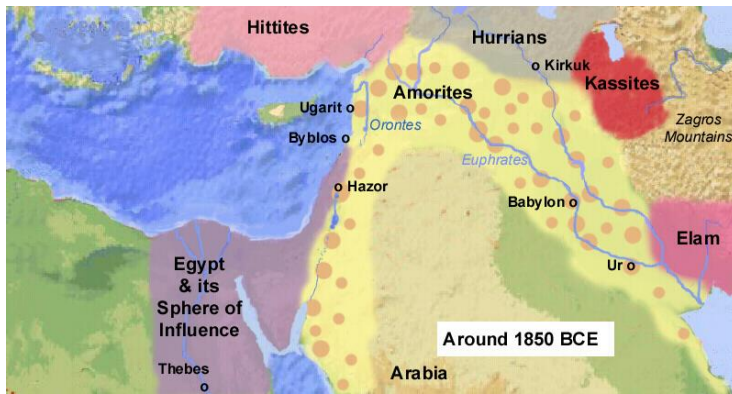
Egyptian execration texts list the towns that were too far away to be controlled by military force and which therefore needed to be controlled by magic. They marked the perimeter of Egypt's directly controlled territory. Around 1800 BCE, that perimeter included towns in the Levantine coastal plain, the Jordan valley, around Haifa and Carmel and north to Be'ka, the upper Orontes, Damascus, Haifa, Jerusalem, Acco, Lachish and the coastal towns to the North.

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<sup>3</sup> Texts by Aktoy and Neferty respectively quoted in Redford (1992,1993) p 67-8

<sup>4</sup> See chapter 1

<sup>5</sup> Redford (1992,1993), p.77-81



Much of the Levant was execrated probably because its towns were drawn into the orbits of the more powerful Amorite states and thus away from Egypt's influence. An exception was Byblos, which remained true to its special relationship with Egypt, and is never mentioned in the execration texts. For the ordinary people of the Levant, the deprivations and nomadic lifestyle of the late 3<sup>rd</sup>

millennium slowly came to an end as conditions at the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium enabled the formation of more permanent settlements.

Extensive excavations by Manfred Bietak on the site of the ancient delta city of Avaris in the Nile Delta have clarified the existence and nature of Canaanite settlement in Northern Egypt<sup>6</sup>. He has shown that carriers of the Middle Bronze IIA Syro-palestinian Culture settled in the town in the last years of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty, probably around 1800 BCE. Most of the tomb offerings of the time comprised Egyptian pottery, but 20% were imported Canaanite artefacts. But weapons were exclusively Canaanite.

Analysis of burials showed that, although the men were Asiatics, the women were predominantly local Egyptians. Avaris was an important port with good safe access to the Mediterranean a few kilometres to the north. Donkey burials were found – a custom that derived from the Levant, probably suggesting that some of the deceased ran trading caravans. All this indicates that the men were mercenaries, sailors, shipbuilders, traders or itinerant craftsmen. There is no evidence that their society was noticeably stratified.

Of special interest is a tomb statue of a larger than life-size man wearing a striped coat and a red rounded headdress of a form associated with Asiatics by Middle Kingdom Egyptian artists. He has a yellowish skin colour and is holding a throw stick against his right shoulder. He was clearly a man of power and wealth who was happy to make plain his Asiatic origin<sup>7</sup>. It is tempting to see in him a model for the biblical 'Joseph'. The statue had been deliberately damaged, perhaps as a result of a revolution or other political instability.

A palatial quarter was established for officials in order perhaps to supervise trade. While donkey burials were occasionally found in the earlier strata, they are a regular feature of the later ones – often accompanied by burials of sheep and goats, but not pigs. The tombs excavated contained expensive artefacts such as Canaanite storage jars, a golden pendant, beads of amethyst, agate, carnelian and garnet, and Canaanite weapons including a magnificent dagger with golden decorations. A ring with the inscription of "ruler of retenu" has been found. 'Retenu' is an Egyptian term for the northern Levant. This person could have been a supervisor of foreign trade or a state official responsible for controlling the large number of foreign workers in the city. Also present were goods of Minoan and Cypriot origin, indicating the wide Mediterranean trading relationships enjoyed by the city. In a wing of the palace, a cylinder has been found containing a depiction of the Northern Syrian god, Hadad or Baal Zaphon, a protector of sailors and overlord of the sea, His Egyptian counterpart was Seth, and as such this god was worshipped in Avaris for the next 400 years. The palace was suddenly abandoned whilst in the process of being redecorated – pots of decorator's paint have been found dropped on the floor just where they were. Whilst the area around the palace continued to be occupied, the palace itself remained empty for a time.

The Amorites who had gradually come to power in Babylonia during the first centuries of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium were gradually seduced by the Akkadian culture of the people they had conquered. The sixth king of the Amorite dynasty in Babylonia was Hammurapi, the famous lawgiver. By his time (1792-1750 BCE), Mesopotamia had a multi-centred power structure with the kings of dominant cities exercising some leadership over lesser states:

<sup>6</sup> Bietak (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Schist; The cemeteries of F/1 in the strata d/2(H) and d/1(G/4) late 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and early 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; 2007; [www.auaris.at/html/stratum\\_f1\\_en.html](http://www.auaris.at/html/stratum_f1_en.html); based on excavations 1979-89 under the direction of Manfred Bietak.

*“There is no king who, of himself, is the strongest. Ten or fifteen kings follow Hammurapi of Babylon, the same number follow Rim-Sin of Larsa, the same number follow Amut-pi-il of Quatna, twenty kings follow Yarim-Lim of Aleppo”<sup>8</sup>*

It was a time of shifting power balances, of quick opportunism, of strike and counter-strike. Initially Hammurapi aligned himself closely with Mari, whilst he subdued the kingdoms to his south. Once this was done, however, he turned on his ally and secured the whole of Mesopotamia except for the western states based around Aleppo and Quatna. But within 10 years of Hammurapi’s death, the scope of the influence of the Babylonian Amorites started to diminish. The final blow came from the Hittites, who swept down from the north taking Mari and Aleppo on the way and finally sacking Babylon around 1650. The Hittite ascendancy in this area was short-lived, for domestic problems forced them to withdraw, leaving behind a power vacuum.

Around 1750 the Amorite states based on Aleppo in Syria and Hazor in the North Jordan Valley still dominated their respective areas, as they had done for the previous hundred years. Byblos had become a notable power. Around 1700 a development of fundamental significance took place. The administrators of the successful Canaanite states developed alphabetic writing, an innovation that much simplified the scribal and administrative work and may have strengthened Canaanite power and influence. A series of rulers of Byblos described themselves in Egyptian hieroglyphs and used Egyptian ranks. One, known as far away as Mari, described himself as ‘ruler of rulers’ and the last, around 1650, interestingly described himself as a ‘ruler of foreign lands’, a phrase which seems to have been a title used by potentates exercising delegated power under overall Egyptian sovereignty.

Back in Avaris, continued immigration expanded the city further in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The culture of the newcomers was principally Canaanite. This period saw the abandonment of the Amenemhat temple. In the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century a new sacred area was established with two temples of the Near Eastern type and mortuary chapels following Egyptian practice. In front of the main temple oak tree pits have been identified indicating that Asherah poles may have been placed there. Oak acorns have been found. It seems that the worship of Seth continued but also that Asherah and Hathor, who had a following in the Near East as well as Egypt, were also revered.

By contrast, but around this time, upstream Egypt was weakened under a combination of adverse harvests and poor rulers. The Nile’s flooding became irregular, with high late floods being as disastrous for the land as weak ones. The people were generally of poor health throughout this period with anaemic diseases, probably born by parasites, affecting at least a third of the population. Less than half the children survived beyond infancy; those that did had a life expectancy around 30 years for women and 34 years for men. With this background it is not surprising to find evidence that at least one epidemic raged through the population of Avaris, causing mass burials hurriedly carried out. After the epidemic, the settlement resumed, but now with big houses surrounded by smaller servant’s houses on the same plots. Immigration continued. It seems that Egyptianised Asiatics were coming from elsewhere in Egypt and building a strong centre for Egyptian-born carriers of Canaanite culture. The walls of some of the new villas were strong enough to have second floors. The pottery shows signs of local production independent of the rest of Egypt with imports (40% of the pottery found) coming from Southern Canaan. The tomb architecture is more elaborate; the society more stratified. Servant burials occur; skeletons of sturdy women are now found in the entrances of wealthy male tombs, servants who were presumably sacrificed in order to be able to serve their masters in the afterlife<sup>9</sup>. The city expanded to 250 Hectares and increased in occupation density.

### **From around 1650 BCE to 1535; Northern Egypt is ruled by Canaanites**

Around 1650, Hyksos<sup>10</sup> rule arrived in the Avaris – though the archaeologists do not remark on any substantial destruction layer. It is not entirely clear whether this was an invasion from outside or a coup engineered by the leaders of the substantial Semitic group that was now living in the Delta area, although the archaeological evidence points to an external invasion. The invaders probably came from the mountains of modern Israel and Lebanon<sup>11</sup>, bringing with them such local produce as olive oil and wine. The conquest would no doubt have been made easier by the presence in the Delta area of the

<sup>8</sup> Report of a foreign office official in Mari; quoted in ‘Peoples’ p.48.

<sup>9</sup> Karin Kopetzky; [www.auraris.st/html/stratum\\_b\\_en.html](http://www.auraris.st/html/stratum_b_en.html). Also Bietak (1996)

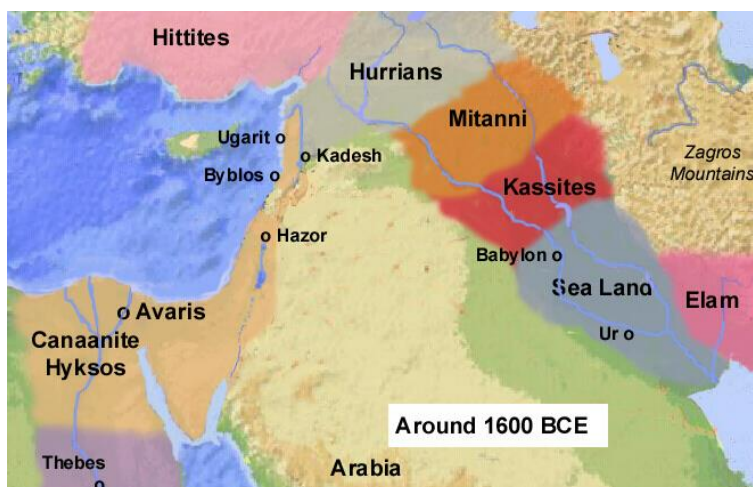
<sup>10</sup> Hyksos is a transliteration of the Greek form of an Egyptian word meaning ‘foreign rulers’. Folk etymology of the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE incorrectly derived the term from different Egyptian roots meaning ‘shepherd kings’ or ‘captive shepherds’. The error may stem from Judeo-pagan polemics of the Hellenistic period. See Redford’s article on the Hyksos in ABD for more details.

<sup>11</sup> Redford (1992,1993), p 100 and Peoples p 271

substantial Semitic community.

The Hyksos used the Delta city of Avaris as their capital in Egypt. They established control of Egypt in the Eastern Delta and as far south as Hermiopolis,

whilst the native Egyptian rulers retreated to Thebes (modern Luxor). The western delta remained populated by Egyptians, whose leaders were later to be regarded as collaborators. In their heyday the Hyksos dynasties engaged in trade, diplomatic exchanges and marriages with the city-states of Syria, Canaan and the Aegean. The port at Avaris was filled with hundreds of ships trading in 'gold, lapis, silver, turquoise,



bronze axe-heads, oil, fat, honey, willow, boxwood and all the fine products of Syria'<sup>12</sup> A huge palace and citadel was constructed on vacant land around 1560.

1650 to 1535 was a period of wealth, power and great cultural achievements in Canaan – particularly in the north where cities such as Ugarit and Alalahk flourished. It was a highly-stratified society, with a Royal family, a palace-based administration, peasants and slaves. Beautiful ivories, bronzes and statues have been recovered from Hazor, Ugarit and Megiddo. A great library was built in Ugarit that, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE, housed a written version of the ancient Baal Epic.

In Southern Canaan, society was probably less stratified; the people living in villages run by local headmen rather than in city-states with kings.

In 1535, Avaris was captured by the Egyptian ruler of Thebes, Ahmose I. Hyksos rule was brought to an end. The palace and citadel were destroyed and the city, apart from the temple to Seth, was largely abandoned by civilians. The area was converted into a military staging post. Enormous storage facilities were set up, numerous silos dug. The old palace area shows evidence of a camp with bonfires, ovens and postholes for tents. Bodies (perhaps soldiers, perhaps slaves) were buried without any offerings in pits. Horse skeletons have been found in the area suggestive of the presence of cavalry.

On the site of the soldier's camp, a set of new palaces was eventually built by the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty rulers. The area continued in use as a major Egyptian naval and military stronghold throughout the rules of Tuthmoses III and Amenotep II – until about 1400.

At least two of the three palaces incorporated Minoan wall paintings with Bull-leaping a prominent theme. Pumice with properties similar to that associated with the volcanic eruption of Santorini has been found in the palace area in layers roughly dated to 1520 on the conventional chronology<sup>13</sup>.

### 1535 BCE to 1200; The Egyptian Empire

At about the same time as the Egyptians were driving the Hyksos back Northwards, the Hittites were moving south, attacking and destroying Aleppo. The situation was further complicated by the newly vitalised Hurrians and by their offspring, the Mitanni. The Mitanni were based in the north of modern Syria, in a natural area enclosed by the Euphrates, the Mountains of southern Turkey and the

<sup>12</sup> Kamose II, quoted by Redford (1992, 1993) p 120

<sup>13</sup> Recent Carbon 14 dating of the Santorini eruption puts the event fairly firmly at 1613 BCE with a margin of error, at the 95% certainty level, of only 13 years. (Santorini Eruption Radio Carbon dated 1627-1600 BC; Walter Friedrich et al; Science Vol 312 (April 2006) p 548.) This confirms earlier date determinations using other radiocarbon samples, ice core observations and Chinese records. It is roughly 100 years earlier than the date given for the eruption in the conventional Egyptian chronology – including that used by Manfred Bietak's team working on the Avaris excavations. Whilst the conventional chronology is certainly subject to serious questioning, it is not realistically possible to rewrite the entire history of the ANE in another chronological time frame. It is therefore prudent to stick to the conventional chronology as far as Egypt is concerned, but note the dates for events earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> Intermediate Period are mis-aligned with other chronologies by a century or more if the pumice is regarded as definitively linked to the Santorini eruption

Balk, a tributary of Euphrates running south out of the mountains about 40 miles east of the main river. This group was to become a major problem for both the Hittites and the Egyptians.

The Hurrians had been transformed from a people to a political force by the arrival of an Indo-Aryan group from the Russian steppes who became the rulers of the Hurrians. The resultant body possessed expansive energy that resulted in the conquest of Alalakh around 1550 BCE. (Alalakh is on the Orontes near to its northernmost point, where it turns to run south and west to the coast.) Nearly every major town in Canaan and Syria experienced a violent destruction around this time – quite probably as a result of Hurrian aggression. By about 1500 BCE, Kadesh on the Orontes, about 100m North of Damascus, dominated Canaan as far south as modern Gaza and was ruled by people with Hurrian names.

Ahmose, having liberated Egypt from the Hyksos, carried the fight north until Egypt controlled the coastal route to the strategic pass of Megiddo and thus into Syria. Ahmose probably managed to raid as far north as the countryside behind Byblos (a few miles north of modern Beirut). In doing so, he established an Egyptian Empire in Canaan that was to last for more than 300 years from 1535 to about 1200 BCE. The dominating motivation was to ensure that never again would foreign rulers, such as the Hyksos, acquire power over any part of Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

The Egyptian Empire has provided us with topographic lists that refers to ‘*Yhw*’ in the land of the Shasu (Bedouin). *Yhw* has long been accepted as a reference to Yahweh, and the land of the Shasu as being Se’ir.<sup>15</sup> These lists come from temples in Soleb and Amara West both built in today’s Sudan, the former in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE by Amenhotep III, the father of the monotheistic Akhenaten, and the latter by Ramses II. Biblical texts describe the wilderness through which the Israelites wandered as Se’ir and state that “*Yahweh came from Sinai, and dawned on us from Se’ir*”<sup>16</sup>. Se’ir is conventionally identified as comprising what is now southern Jordan but it could also have been modern Asir in western Saudi Arabia. Both would be written the same way in consonantal writing

At almost the other extreme of the empire, an Egyptian inscription from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century mentioned some tribes active around Beth-Shean (then a centre of Egyptian Administration for its northern territories). One of the tribes was called ‘*Rhm*’, perhaps pronounced Raham. Ab’Raham could have been the designation of the leader or ‘father’ (Ab) of the Raham tribe.<sup>17</sup> The Patriarchal stories in the bible reflect a Hurrian culture, so it could be that part of the Raham tribe migrated south and over time became absorbed into Canaanite society. Excavations by the university of Pennsylvania have found Canaanite graves in Beth-Shean area dating from between 2000 and 1600 BCE.<sup>18</sup>

The Middle Bronze Age settlements in the northern hill country and southern highlands of modern Israel were progressively depopulated as a deliberate act of Egyptian policy. Successive 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty pharaohs deported large numbers of Canaanites. Amenophis II alone claims to have deported 89,600, while deportations are also recorded under both his predecessors and successors as well as under the pharaohs of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Numerous towns and villages are found to have been destroyed. From 1500 to around 1200 the few remaining people who wandered through the highlands and hill country of Canaan seem to have been nomads leaving few traces of their passing.<sup>19</sup>

1520 BCE is the date usually given in the conventional chronology for the explosive eruption of the volcano comprising the island of Santorini, just over 100 kms north of the island of Crete and about 1000 kms from the Levantine coast. It was one of the largest volcanic eruptions the world has ever known. The column of erupting material is thought to have reached a height of 36 kms. At least 30 cubic kilometres of magma was blown out causing the collapse of the caldera and the creation of a Tsunami that swept the eastern Mediterranean shores. Cyprus and Southern Turkey received more than

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<sup>14</sup> But this was not the only foreign policy concern of these 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty rulers; they were even more determined to subdue Nubia.

<sup>15</sup> Redford 1992 p 272. The Land of Shasu in these Egyptian lists also includes *s’r*, *wrbr*, and places that the author spells out as Laban, and Sam’ath, Arabah, Timna and Edom – locating all these places except *wrbr* in southern Jordan. The connection of Edom with Se’ir is largely biblical rather than based on the derivation of present place names. However, the probable originals of these can also be located in today’s *s’r* (Asir, a contender for the location of ancient Se’ir) where can be found present day place names incorporating references to *jhw*, and in the nearby Hijaz where the Thamudic and Lihyanite inscriptions refer to *jhw*. (see also Salibi (1985) p 14f, p 86-87, p 148 and p 204 n8 and n1).

<sup>16</sup> Deut 2:1 & 33:2

<sup>17</sup> N.P. Lemche article in the Anchor Bible Dictionary; Israel (History); The Pre-monarchic period. Beth-shean is in Northern Israel just south of Lake Galilee.

<sup>18</sup> Rowe (1930)

<sup>19</sup> ANET p 247. Also Redford 1992 p 168-9 and p 208-9 and Finkelstein and Silberman, “The Bible Unearthed” p 101-111.

30 cms of ash. Ash from the explosion has been found in Canaan and in parts of northern Egypt (including at Avaris). The massive volume of ash would have caused a darkness to spread over the whole earth – a fact remarked upon by Chinese observers during the reign of the emperor Qin around 1600 BC in the Chinese chronology. (The 80-year date difference can be accounted for in terms of the discrepancies between the chronologies used.) The Chinese said that the sun was ‘distressed’, that there was frost in July and rainfall so heavy it caused temples to collapse; hot and cold weather occurred in a disorderly manner and crops failed. The cost for Egypt and Canaan would have been the loss of a harvest, abnormal weather, and higher than normal mortality rates. The possible association of Ahmose’s expulsion of the Hyksos with the Santorini explosion is of interest because of the possibility that a memory of these events may have been woven into the story of the Exodus and the associated plagues.

Ahmose’s grandson, Thutmose I (1493 – 1481) raided well to the north. In his sixth year he reached the Euphrates, fought the Mitanni and set up a victory stele. This appears to have been an isolated foray, however, as both he and his successor Thutmose II were more concerned to establish dominance over Nubia to the south.

After the first two Thutmoses, Egypt was ruled for 20 years by a queen. Queen Hatshepsut’s declared policy was the internal rebuilding of the kingdom and for this she needed, and secured, peace. The Mitanni used the time during which the Egyptians were internally preoccupied to expand their territorial dominance. By the end of this period, the sphere of influence of the King of Kadesh was such that he not only dominated the adjacent areas of Syria but also owned property in modern Galilee and the north Jordan valley. As Hatshepsut weakened towards the end of her reign, Kadesh made a bid to move south and annex further territory at Egypt’s expense. For this purpose, he formed a coalition of the ‘kings’ of the Canaanite cities.

Within weeks of Hatshepsut’s death, the new Pharaoh, Thutmose III, crossed into Canaan determined to meet this threat. In a tactically brilliant move, Thutmose trapped the Canaanite kings in Megiddo, which eventually fell after a seven-month siege. All the kings, except the king of Kadesh himself, who had escaped, were captured and forced to become vassals of Egypt. To remind them, Thutmose sent armed tax collecting expeditions north nearly every year for the rest of his long reign (1458 –1425).

Thutmose strengthened his hold on Canaan such that he was able to attempt a direct attack on the Mitannian heartlands in 1447. He transported his army by sea to Byblos, moved rapidly inland taking the region around Aleppo and drove the Mitanni to the banks of the Euphrates at Carchemesh (just inside modern Turkey). There he assembled his flat-packed assault craft, crossed the river and pursued a confused Mitannian force downstream destroying the towns in his path. Follow up campaigns consolidated this success. As Egypt’s Asian empire reached its maximum extent, a garrison was established at Ugarit on the Syrian coast opposite Cyprus.

The next four Pharaohs following Thutmose III maintained their interests in Canaan, using it as a source of revenue. But not without difficulty, for the Mitanni were constantly attempting to press southwards. Thutmose successor had to execute seven rebellious chiefs and deport, as he claimed, 15,070 people from the upper Orontes area in order to establish discipline. He also decided to clear large areas between the coast and the Jordan, the area that was to become Israel, moving a massive 89,600 from there to the deep South - Nubia or Ethiopia.

The Mitannians were not just pushing south; they were also battling with their northern neighbours, the Hittites. They saw an advantage in forming a treaty with the ruthless, but distant, Egyptian Pharaoh in order to be free to concentrate their forces against the closer Hittite threat. The resulting treaty confirmed the northern border of the Egyptian Empire at the Orontes river. The peace that followed lasted three generations till about 1320. During this period taxes poured into Egypt, Caravans traded along the Levantine routes and merchant shipping increased in the Eastern Mediterranean. The ties with Mitanni produced gift and marriage exchanges that were complimented by similar ties with Cyprus and with Babylon.

Under the empire, the children of the rulers of vassal states were required to be present at the Egyptian court. This would have included the children of the city-bosses and village headmen of Canaan. Whilst they may have been hostages ensuring the loyalty of their parents, they were, whilst there, given a thorough Egyptian education, so that when they in turn became the ruler of their tribe, town and villages, they would naturally understand the Egyptian position.

Their duties when they did return were more akin to that of village headman than that of a ‘king’. They had to regularly supply the assessed tax demand on their towns and villages to Pharaoh, and to entertain any visiting Egyptian officials. No doubt they also had to administer local justice. Various middle ranking Egyptian officials lived in the main towns of Canaan in houses distinct from Canaanite houses but similar to upper middle-class residences in Egypt. The headmen were able to

correspond with the Egyptian court in Akkadian, but there is no evidence that they used this skill for more literary or religious purposes.

In addition to some regular garrisons, Egypt employed a police force of Nubian extraction. These had helped Egypt rid itself of the Hyksos and had now secured the policemen's role pretty well throughout Egypt and its empire.

Slavery was a well-regulated institution in Egypt. Many slaves were foreign captives. Their details were recorded by a special department of the state and they were branded with the name of the king or god they were to serve and assigned to an officer of the institution in which they were to work. Escape would have been extremely difficult.

Egypt extracted from its empire the products it could not easily produce itself. Silver, Asiatic copper, timber, incense, opium, wine and ornamental metalwork were required to be sent to the homeland. Taxation probably fell hardest on the peasants of the vassal states as it was their produce that was necessary for the sustenance of the Egyptian army, garrisons, police and local officials. Whilst the upper classes prospered in the peace, the peasantry may have found the taxes both arbitrary and oppressive. If so, then one option was to become nomadic pastoralists. This may account for the continuing nomadism of the time as evidenced from surveys of the Judean highlands and Galilean hill country.

Another option was to join the outlaw refugee bands known as 'Habiru' (or 'Apiru') and prey on the upper classes, hire themselves out as mercenaries, offer 'protection' to the rich or raid distant nomadic herds and settlements. The Habiru were a phenomenon mentioned in Egyptian correspondence from 1450 BCE to 1310 BCE. But they were not a just an Egyptian or Levantine issue; they are also mentioned as a problem in the Zagros mountains of Iran and in Asia Minor. The term appears to designate any outlaw group.

Occasionally a 'Habiru' leader was able to expand his sphere of operations to a scale that threatened not just the perimeter, but the very existence of the neighbouring states. A 'Habiru' leader called Abdi-ashirta, who had started out as a bandit on the northern slopes of Mount Lebanon did just that. He expanded his sphere of activities so as to gain control of Amurru – a small Amorite state which had once been under the control of Mitanni but had become a haunt of outlaw bands. It was situated between Lake Homs and the Phoenician coast. It could control the Eleutheros valley (the northern border of modern Lebanon) and thus an important route from the Mediterranean coast to the upper Orontes. Whilst protesting his loyalty to Egypt, Abdi-ashirta expanded his fiefdom over the neighbouring states. The King of Byblos, Rib-abdi, wrote to the Egyptians repeatedly seeking help, probably without success.<sup>20</sup>

Azizu, Abdi-ashirta's son and successor continued his father's work taking Sumur, an Egyptian garrison town and then proceeding south along the coast to Byblos where he executed the unfortunate letter-writing Rib-abdi. Eventually Egypt felt compelled to do something and summoned Azizu to Amarna where they detained him for awhile.

Amurru was nominally in Egypt's sphere of influence, but right at the periphery of its reach, and Egypt's desire to do anything practical to control Amurru was limited. Perhaps, therefore, Mitanni felt that an attempt to crush this Habiru state would meet with Egyptian approval, but to do so they needed to cross the Orontes into Egypt's sphere of influence. Whether an attempt was made or not, Amurru remained a 'failed state' under Habiru domination. It seems, however, that the relationship between Egypt and Mitanni deteriorated.

Mitanni had been attempting to expand their area of influence at the expense of Hittite Aleppo. The Hittite response had resulted in a battle to the east of the Orontes that ended in a stalemate. To resolve this, the Hittite leadership decided to try and exploit the poor relationship between Egypt and Mitanni and so approached Amenhotep IV early in his reign with the idea of a treaty – one that would inevitably undermine the existing agreements between Egypt and Mitanni.

Amenhotep IV had succeeded to the Egyptian throne in 1353. Shortly afterwards he renamed himself Akhenaten in recognition of his faith in the god Aten. In the light of the Egyptian distrust of Mitanni, it is not surprising that Akhenaten was open to at least considering the Hittite ideas. Hittites attended his Jubilee in the third year of his reign, and an alliance appears to have been nearly agreed. With Egypt almost on his side, the Hittite ruler found a pretext to move against Mitanni. Egypt did nothing to help its old ally, with the result that the ruling Mitannian dynasty were forced to flee their capital and to lose their empire. The Hittites moved their boundary to the Orontes but were careful not to cross into Egyptian territory.

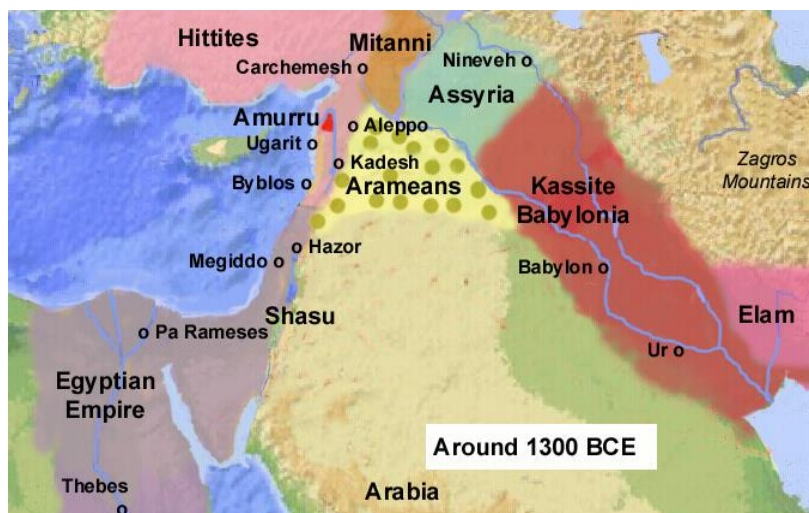
Perhaps persuaded by Azizu's protestations of loyalty, the Egyptians decided it would be safe to release the 'Habiru' leader of Amurru. Once released, however, Azizu recognised the new reality of

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<sup>20</sup> Amarna Letters EA 92 – summarised in the Encyclopaedia of Amarna Letters

power in the northern Levant and offered Amurru as a vassal to the Hittites, effectively moving the Hittite sphere of influence southwards. The Hittites were thus able to consolidate the results of their diplomatic and military manoeuvres. With the Mitannians removed, a treaty was formalised which established the new northern border of the Egyptian Empire along the Eleuthoros valley. Some of Egypt's northern vassals opposed the Hittite expansion; others, notably Ugarit, decided they would be safer under the new order. Despite minor difficulties, the new border proved stable. It was a long way from the heartlands of both countries and difficult for either to cross in force.

All of this concerned land well to the north of the area that would form the future Palestine, but there too the local village-bosses wrote to Akhenaten's officials asking for help in dealing with the Habiru and complaining about each other. Egypt's foreign policy for its northern territory probably remained that of ensuring that no-one should ever become strong enough to repeat the Hyksos' invasion. It follows that a number of squabbling vassals troubled by Habiru bands may have suited Egypt's policy makers well enough. It seems that they did little to resolve the disputes that were reported to them.



There were two village bosses of particular interest in relation to the historical background to the bible. One was Addi-Heba who ruled over Jerusalem and the surrounding territory to the south and the other was Labayu who ruled from Shechem over the northern hill country. Each ruled a territory of around 1000 square miles - larger areas, but with fewer people, than their coastal counterparts. These two state-lets occupied the territories that would become known in the future as Judah and Israel respectively. It seems that the division between the northern and southern Hebrew polities goes back to at least this time. The northern state based around Shechem appears to have been the more expansionist one – possibly because of its stronger economy based on more productive land and better access to the markets provided by the coastal city-states. Correspondence filed by Akhenaten's officials included a request from Megiddo for 100 men to protect the town from the attentions of the neighbouring Shechem and another from Jerusalem to supply fifty men to protect their land (also from Shechem perhaps). Small scale forces for small scale district territories.

The actions that Akhenaten did undertake were probably designed to prevent any other Habiru group repeating Amurru's success. He deported some Canaanite Habiru to Nubia, set up a military governor in Jerusalem to keep the hill country under surveillance and built a series of forts to control the coastal route from Egypt to Palestine.

At home, Akhenaten radically changed Egypt's religion, forcing the worship of only one god, Aten, 'the sun's disc', and creating a new capital at Amarna. Akhenaten's new religion was not popular – especially with the deposed but powerful priesthood – and his reign ended with a revolution in which his general Horemheb (1323 – 1295) came to power. There have been suggestions that Akhenaten's son, Tutankhamen, may have been murdered to prevent his full accession to the throne as an adult, but it now seems likely that he died as a result of a hunting accident. In any event, Akhenaten's religious changes were rapidly reversed after his death.

The Shasu, a nomadic group operating in the desert around Se'ir had always been a troublesome element on Egypt's borders, but were particularly irritating when they managed for a time to cut the coastal trade route from Egypt to the Canaan.

Seti I (1295 – 1279) set out to restore the Egyptian empire in Asia to its former glory. In his second year he marched up the coast restoring Egyptian control over this trade route, struck Amurru and regained Kadesh – at least temporarily. Early in his successor's reign, the Amurru tried to remove themselves from the Hittite sphere of influence and offered themselves to Egypt. Ramses II accepted his new vassal. The Hittites chose not to ignore this loss and mustered a substantial army with which they marched south the following year. Ramses moved north to meet the threat and the two superpowers clashed at the battle of Kadesh, the largest battle of the ancient world. The Hittites nearly

defeated the Egyptian army; but the personal bravery of the Pharaoh turned a near rout into a draw, and a truce was agreed under which Ramses conceded both Amurru and Kadesh and the border reverted to the status quo ante. The near defeat of the Egyptian army prompted much of Canaan to revolt. Ramses was sufficiently damaged to need to regroup. He built Pa-Ramses in the delta - next to the site of the abandoned Avaris - as a stronghold from which to defend Egypt's northern territories and possibly as a base from which to control the Levantine states. Three years later he was able to return north and to punish the insurgents – Migdol, Beth-Anath, Qana, Merom, Acco, Aphek ... and Shalem.

The 'Shalem' in the list of places scheduled for punishment was probably Jerusalem. There is a stone in Ramses' mortuary temple near Thebes whose inscription refers to a raid on Shalem in his 8<sup>th</sup> year (ca 1270) and there may be a relief depicting this raid in Abu-Simbal. According to the conventional chronologies of Egypt and biblical Judah this would have been 300 years before David captured the city. Nevertheless, a long folk memory of the raid may have something to do with the comments by the author of Kings to the effect that an Egyptian Pharaoh seized all the treasure from the Jerusalem Temple. Ramses nickname was Sese, which may have become the Shishak referred to in the book of Kings. The author of Kings supposes an Egyptian raid on Jerusalem during the reign of a 10<sup>th</sup> century Judean King, a time long after Ramses death and a date for which there is no Egyptian record of a raid on Jerusalem. Rohl, in his book 'A Test of Time' attempts to resolve the problem by suggesting dates for Ramses that are much later than those conventionally agreed, but his ideas have not gained much acceptance. The more conventional explanation of the biblical raid on Jerusalem is that it was an excursion from a drive through Benjamite territory by the Pharaoh Sheshonk. This will be discussed later in the context of the events of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but the problem remains - Sheshonk made no claim to have attacked Jerusalem, and Pharaohs were not known for their modesty in military matters.

Two years after their success at Kadesh, the Hittite leader Mutuwallis died and a struggle for the succession ensued between his brother and his son. After seven years the brother staged a successful coup and exiled and imprisoned his nephew in Syria. This nephew later escaped to Pa-Ramses where he sought and got political asylum. By now Ramses' annual campaigns were taking him into Hittite territory. A resurgent Assyria had moved into the space left by the defeated Mitanni and was challenging the Hittite's south-eastern border. To simplify his problems, the Hittite leader chose to seek a new treaty with Egypt. The result left Ugarit, Amurru and Kadesh in Hittite control and the border once more running along the Eleutheros valley.

Peace was secured and both powers enjoyed fifty years of prosperity from 1260 to 1210 BCE.

### **The Archaeology and Geography of the Exodus**

A major logical problem with the accounts of the Exodus in the biblical texts is that of scale. The bible states that:

“So the whole number of the Israelites, from twenty years old and upward, everyone fit to bear arms, were counted by families - their whole number came to six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty.”<sup>21</sup>

Extrapolating to include their wives and children, this suggests a total population of at least 2.5 million people; and this at a time when the whole population of Egypt is estimated to be, at most, 4.5 million.<sup>22</sup> Even if the Egyptian texts discretely covered up this imperial failure, the economic consequence of such a catastrophic loss of the working population would be apparent in the archaeological record; but it is not. Even if the record of such a catastrophe were missing, the logistics of taking a group of this size across the desert are impossible. The waterholes of the Sinai can today support a total population of around 20,000; and that only provided it is broken down into small groups of a few hundred at most. Furthermore, at no time in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, does the area of Canaan allegedly conquered by the incoming Israelites show a population increase even remotely of this order of magnitude.

The situation is somewhat resolved if the Hebrew word '*eleph*' – normally read as 'thousands' – is interpreted to mean '*group*' or, in military contexts, '*squad*'. Some scholars argue that the size of the '*eleph*' when it has this meaning is between 5 and 14.<sup>23</sup> If this reading is accepted then the passage in Numbers refers to 603 '*groups*', perhaps 6000 adult men, which, with their families, would then

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<sup>21</sup> Numbers 1:45-46

<sup>22</sup> Redford1992 p 408.

<sup>23</sup> This interpretation of '*eleph*' is discussed by P.K. McCarter in I Samuel (Anchor Bible) where he refers to G.E. Mendelhall's work on the Census lists in Numbers.

come to around 30,000 people in total. This is still an almost impossible number to live in the desert for a substantial period of time unless they split themselves up into much smaller numbers.

It is, however, possible that a small army 600 squads could move quickly across the desert that separated Egypt from Canaan and there is some historical evidence that an event of this nature did take place - although it did not involve escaped slaves. Although scholars do not find the wealth of Egyptian cultural influences in the record that might be expected if the biblical Israelites had spent many generations living there, the elements in the biblical tradition that did come out of Egypt are not insignificant.

#### The evidence of 'Moses'

One of the stronger pieces of evidence for an historical Exodus is Moses' name. 'Moses' is a part of many Egyptian names: Ramose means '[the god] Ra is born', Ptahmose means '[the god] Ptah is born'. These names were common in the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and later (1514 BCE onwards)<sup>24</sup>. In the name 'Moses', tradition then has simply shortened the name, or excised the reference to an Egyptian god. Indeed, the great Ramesses II was known by a number of nick-names which could be transliterated Ss and Ms, the latter of which could have been vocalised as Mose<sup>25</sup>.

If the Exodus were fictional, the author would surely have created a Semitic leader with a Semitic name – not a Semitic leader with an Egyptian name, but if the story has some truth in it, then the idea of an Egyptian leading a Canaanite Exodus would be difficult for Canaanite nationalists to accept. The author of Exodus 2, apparently aware of this problem, went to some trouble to create a Semitic background for Moses. First the ancient story of the great leader being drawn out of the water is brought into play – perhaps picking up the idea from Sargon's birth myth. Then a Canaanite etymology is provided for the name 'Moses'. The reader was invited to suppose that the child was adopted by an Egyptian Princess who was fluent in Hebrew and chose to name the child by means of a word-play in what, to her, would have been a foreign tongue:

'She named him Moses (Hebrew *Mosheh*), "because," she said, "I drew him out (Hebrew *Mashah*) of the water.'"

It is argued by some that this is highly improbable. Others point out that there are examples of Egyptian royals being given Semitic names; even the great Ramses II bestowed the name of Bint-Anath<sup>26</sup> upon his eldest daughter; and youths from Canaan served as court attendants and in the Egyptian army during the 15<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Certainly, Egyptian officials had some knowledge of Canaanite<sup>27</sup>. Under the empire, many foreign children, including the sons and daughters of Semitic headmen came into the court and harem to be educated in the Egyptian way – and as hostages for the good behaviour of their parents<sup>28</sup>. Thus Canaanite wordplays may not have been entirely absent from the Egyptian court. Nevertheless, Josephus, writing centuries later, seems to have found it unconvincing, for he employed a different etymology for the name – this time basing it on the Egyptian language. In the process, he named the Egyptian princess who allegedly adopted Moses.

'Thermuthis imposed the name Mo-uses upon him...for the Egyptians call water by the name 'Mo', and such as are saved out of it by the name 'Uses'.'<sup>29</sup>

All this suggests to some that the Moses adoption story is, in reality, an attempt to cover up the fact that the greatest of all the prophetic leaders of Israel was an Egyptian – possibly of royal blood.

Josephus used additional material, omitted from the biblical record, which provides further evidence of Moses as an Egyptian Royal. He wrote that Moses was heir to the throne and that as a young man he led the Egyptian army in a successful campaign against the Ethiopians and that, whilst there, he married an Ethiopian princess, Tharbis, who surrendered both herself and her city to the

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<sup>24</sup> Oxford p 88

<sup>25</sup> Or perhaps 'Mes'. See Rohl (1996) p 160.

<sup>26</sup> Anath is a reference to the ferocious Virgin Anat of the Canaanite pantheon. She is Baal's sister and thus a goddess of fertility. She rescues Baal from death. She overcomes the forces of chaos. She revels in warfare.

<sup>27</sup> Some Canaanite words are written on a potsherd from Thebes

<sup>28</sup> For references for all these Canaanite influences on the Egyptian court see ABD – the article on Exodus (section 2(b)) by K.A. Kitchen.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus; Antiquities 2:9:5 (224)

young conqueror.<sup>30</sup> Josephus suggests that royal jealousy over Moses success in Ethiopia led to his exile. Some modern writers therefore look to identify Moses by finding an Egyptian heir to the Kingdom, who led the army in Ethiopia, but who was exiled before he could ascend the throne. One such was Tuthmoses, Akhenaten's elder brother and heir to the throne. His candidacy is further enhanced by virtue of his association with Akhenaten, the Pharaoh who attempted to introduce monotheism into Egypt.

Another alternative is that Moses was one of the handful of Semites who achieved high office in Egypt and adopted an Egyptian name. In this case he could have abandoned that name when he abandoned his Egyptian career. Does not the very awkwardness of the fact that the first great leader of the Israelites had an Egyptian name suggest that it was a truth that could not be escaped?

#### The evidence from Avaris

The centre of Semitic immigration into the Delta area was a city known for most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BCE as Avaris. It sat on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile delta about 60 km from the coast. The site has been extensively excavated by Manfred Bietak and provides some interesting potential contexts for the events described in the biblical tradition.

It confirms the biblical account of Semitic groups going down into Egypt when times were difficult in Canaan. It confirms that many of them settled there and became partially Egyptianised. It confirms that at least one of the leaders appointed by the Egyptians was himself a distinguished Semite, such as Joseph in the bible story.

Some excitement has been occasioned by the discovery of burial sites containing disproportionately high numbers of infants and women – possible evidence of the culling of male children, as alleged in the bible story. Other burial sites have however been found with disproportionately high numbers of adult men. A study conducted by the Austrian anthropologists Winkler and Wilfing showed that overall infant mortality rates (deaths before the age of 6 years) was nearly 32%.<sup>31</sup> Whilst high, this was not an exceptional figure for the ancient world. Life expectancy was low. For those who survived into adulthood, the average age at death was 34 years for men and only 30 years for women. This average included the elite group. Slaves would have died younger still.

There is evidence that the site suffered at least one serious epidemic resulting in mass deaths. Bodies from this event seem to have been buried quickly without full ritual, careful placement or grave goods. Nevertheless, the site remained occupied or was re-occupied shortly after – also by people showing evidence of being carriers of Canaanite culture. There is no evidence of a permanent mass Exodus following this tragedy. Indeed, it was roughly then that a temple to Asherah, the favourite goddess of the Canaanites and later of the Israelites, was established. A temple to Seth, an Egyptian incarnation of the Canaanite Ba'al, was also introduced.

At some point, Avaris society became highly stratified with an elite wealthy slave-owning Canaanite group ruling in what seems to have been an oppressive manner. This was the group that practised servant burials in their graves. They were probably the Hyksos, the group that the historian Manetho, writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, claims became the rulers of Egypt.

“God was averse to us, and there came, after a surprising manner, men of ignoble birth out of the eastern part, and had boldness enough to make expedition into our country and with ease subdued it by force, yet without our hazarding a single battle against them. ...They afterwards burnt down our cities and demolished the temple to our gods and used all the inhabitants in a most barbarous manner; some they slew, and led their children and wives into slavery”<sup>32</sup>

The new Canaanites were fewer, but richer, than the earlier occupants of the site. These elite newcomers appear to have acquired Avaris with little effort, in accordance with the history of the event as described by Manetho. Perhaps their conquest was easy because of their cultural affinity to the large body of existing Semitic settlers in the area.

The Hyksos were driven out by Ahmose whose reign lasted from 1539 to 1514. Not all the Canaanites escaped; some were captured and taken away as slaves as is revealed in the diary of one of

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<sup>30</sup> Josephus; Antiquities 2:10

<sup>31</sup>Winkler, E.M and H. Wilfing (1991) Tell el-Dab'a VI. Die menschlichen Skelettfunde aus dem Bereich des Tells.

<sup>32</sup> Manetho, as quoted by Josephus in Against Apion; 1.14 (74-76)

Ahmore's officers<sup>33</sup>, but traces left by the elite group disappear from the archaeological record. The town becomes emptied of all civilians.

Manetho wrote about the end of the Hyksos in Avaris. He attributes their expulsion to an Egyptian leader called Thummoses<sup>34</sup> who: -

...made an attempt to take them by force and by siege, with 480,000 men to lie round about them; but that, upon his despair at taking the place by that siege, they came to a composition with them that they should leave Egypt, without any harm being done to them, whithersoever they would; and that...they went away, with their families and effects, not fewer in number than 240,000 and took their journey, through the wilderness, for Syria; but that as they were in fear of the Assyrians, who had then the dominion over Asia, they built a city in that country which is now called Judea, and that large enough to contain this great number of men, and called it Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup>

The quotations from Manetho come to us via Josephus whose purpose was to establish the great antiquity of the Jews, his people, by using impartial foreign sources. He summarises Manetho's contribution as having demonstrated "we came out of another country into Egypt, and that withal our deliverance out of it was so ancient in time as to have preceded the siege of Troy by almost a thousand years."

The contemporary records suggest that the evacuation of Avaris was not quite as peaceful as Manetho suggests. Some of the inhabitants were retained as slaves. The archaeological evidence shows that the area where the elite Semitic group had lived was subsequently unoccupied save for the Seth temple. Elsewhere the site was converted to a military base in support of Ahmore's campaigns in the north. It is unlikely that the elite group and the Canaanite military would have taken all their slaves and servants with them when they made their retreat pursued by Ahmore's army: such an encumbrance would have been tactically disadvantageous. The absence therefore of all civilian occupations of the site following Ahmore's victory suggests that the lower-class inhabitants of Avaris – those that were not enslaved by Ahmore's men – were either killed or escaped from the city. They may have had to leave opportunistically, without preparation, and possibly pursued by minor elements of the Egyptian army - though Ahmore's main force would presumably be pursuing the Hyksos' military. The archaeological evidence indicates that after a short interval, a permanent establishment was built on the site of the military camp. Some of the buildings established at this time were decorated with Minoan wall paintings. Pumice characteristic of the Santorini eruption has been found in subsequent layers – about 50 years after the Hyksos expulsion. Some believe that the Santorini eruption is the source of the stories concerning the column of smoke and fire that accompanied the retreating proto-Israelites, but direct observation of the 36 km. high eruption would have been impossible from 1000 kms away in the Levant.

The earliest archaeological evidence of the brick building for which the Canaanite slaves were used according to the biblical tradition comes from some nearby storage facilities that can be dated to Thutmose III (ca 1450 – about three generations after the expulsion of the Hyksos).

The next new building on the main Avaris site probably occurred during the reign of Horemheb (ca. 1300) possibly associated with the erection of a stele to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> year of the Seth temple. Nearby, just across the river, Seti I (ca 1290) built a palace at Quantir around which his son, Ramesses II (ca 1250) created his great city of Pi-Ramesse – possibly using Semitic labour.<sup>36</sup>

#### Cultural and linguistic evidence

Hebrew incorporates a few Egyptian words. Significantly these include words used for the clothes of priests – the sash (Hebrew '*abnet*') and the '*ephod*'. Some other words are suggestive not only of an Egyptian origin but also of the place and status of Hebrew speakers in Egypt; '*ye'or*' means 'river' but derives from the Egyptian for 'Nile'; '*ebyon*' means 'poor' from the Egyptian for 'bad';

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<sup>33</sup> ANET p 233. The captain of a Nile vessel obtains a man and three women as slaves following the sacking of Avaris. He obtains further slaves as the campaign moves northwards, three of whom have Canaanite names.

<sup>34</sup> Manetho may have had Tutmose I in mind – he was Ahmore's son-in-law.

<sup>35</sup> Manetho as quoted by Josephus in *Against Apion*; 1.14 (88-90)

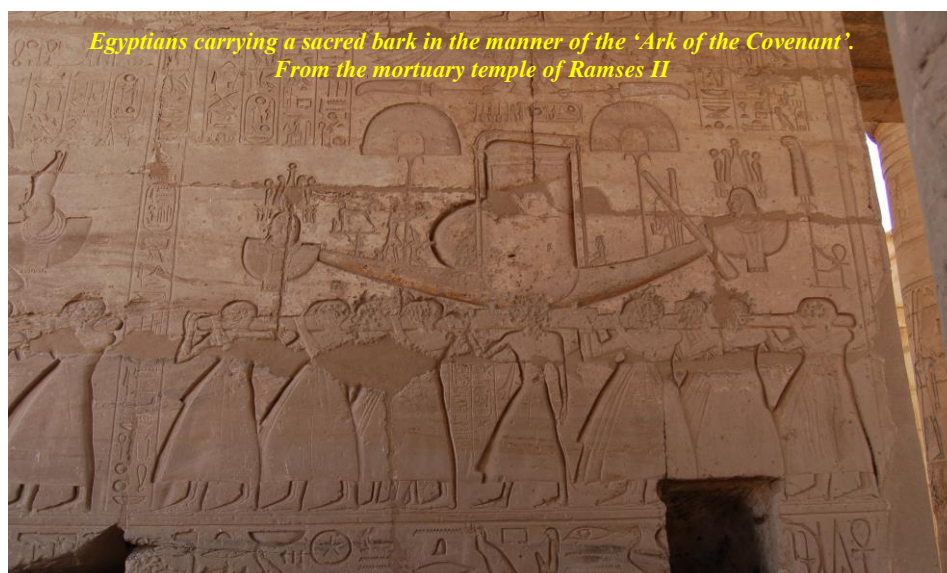
<sup>36</sup> Much of the above is elaborated in 'Israel in Egypt' by James K. Hoffmeier (1996). See esp. pp 122-123). Additional source material comes from [www.auris.at](http://www.auris.at) – the web site of the archaeological team led by Manfred Bietak (updated to Feb 2008)

'*uggat*' refers to a type of bread from the Egyptian for 'rations'; and '*ger*' means 'alien' or 'visitor' from the Egyptian for 'neighbour'.<sup>37</sup>

And then there are the Hebrew characters used to depict numerals. These are the same as the Egyptian numerals used up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century but not thereafter. They are, however, found on Israelite weights dating to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century.

There are some biblical artefacts which, although not found in the Israelite archaeological record, can be traced back to Egypt. These include:

- The description of the tabernacle. It was made of gilded wooden frames socketed together and covered with curtains. Similar tabernacles – apparently used as embalming booths - appear in Egyptian tomb paintings dating from around 1800 BCE. (A curtained and wood-framed tabernacular structure was also used for worship at Midianite Timna.)
- The Hebrew religious trumpet. The normal Hebrew trumpet was the ram's horn. But the bible states that long silver trumpets were used for religious feasts and as a signal for the tribes to move onward. The tomb of Tutankhamen (ca. 1330 BCE) contained a gilded copper or bronze trumpet and a silver trumpet that fits the description.
- The transport for the Tabernacle. To transport the dismantled tabernacle, the Israelites employed ox-wagons (Num 7:3). The term used for the wagons is the same as is the Egyptian term for ox-wagons employed under Ramses IV (ca. 1140 BCE) for wilderness transport.
- The Ark of the Covenant was a gilded box carried upon removable gilded poles. Egyptian sacred-barque shrines were also carried on such poles by priests in procession.<sup>38</sup> A similar 'ark' was found in Tutankhamen's tomb.
- The names of some of the priests, such as Moses, Hophni, Phinehas and perhaps Aaron have Egyptian etymologies whilst their tribal name, Levi, is referred to in Egyptian texts.
- It may also be relevant that the Egyptians believed that the colour red had the power to ward off evil. Those who adopted this belief may therefore have painted their door lintels with blood to ward off plague.<sup>39</sup> Is this the origin of the Passover story that states "the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt"<sup>40</sup>?



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<sup>37</sup> Redford 1992 pp 384-385

<sup>38</sup> See ABD on Exodus; para D;5

<sup>39</sup> Redford 1992 p 411

<sup>40</sup> Exodus 12:13

From Ramses IV's reign comes a hymn that finds an echo, not only in the Hebrew bible, but also in the New Testament. In this hymn, the Pharaoh is described as a saviour under whose reign:

“... those who were hungry were fed;  
those who were thirsty were given drink;  
those who had been naked were clad,  
those who had been ragged were clothed in fine garments,  
those who were in prison were set free,  
those who were in bonds were filled with joy”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, although the inhabitants of Judah and Israel have left virtually no artefacts which demonstrate a link with Egyptian culture, their language – especially in connection with the cult – is suggestive of some relationship.

It is, however, a weak link. Hebrew was principally a dialect of Canaanite. The evidence of language thus points primarily to the fact that the early Israelites came overwhelmingly from Canaan. They spoke the language, they enjoyed a cultural affinity and, as we shall see, they retained much of their poetry and religious imagery. There may be some foreign words they inherited from Egypt, but their language came from Canaan.

Their name *Isra-el* points to the strength of the Canaanite, rather than the Egyptian connections<sup>42</sup>. It suggests a connection with the god ‘El’ – the father god of the Canaanite pantheon. The early traditions reveal that the Patriarchs worshiped El Shaddai, El Elyon, El Olam and El Sabaoth. Moses is credited with receiving the revelation that the divine name should change to Yahweh and with introducing new practices, such as the handling of the ark, that have precedents in Egypt. It seems that, although language and culture provide only weak links with Egypt, some of those links concern the practise of religion.

### **1200 – 1000 BCE; The end of the empires**

Around the year 1200 BCE, massive changes swept through the eastern Mediterranean; empires came to an end; small city-states arose; great migrations disrupted the status quo. At the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE the Hittite empire had controlled most of Eastern Anatolia (Turkey); the Kassite Kingdom of Babylon controlled most of Mesopotamia; Egypt controlled the coastal Levant south of the Eleutheros valley; and the Achaean Greek states were exporting their culture and beautiful Mycenaean ceramics all over the East. As the century drew to an end, all this was to change with the collapse of the great empires. It may have started with a famine in Greece, or a natural disaster or a plague. The initial causes are unknown, but the initial direction of the disruption came from Thrace.

Dorian Greeks broke south into the Greek mainland methodically destroying Achaean Greek strongholds and carrying on into Crete and Rhodes<sup>43</sup>. A group whom the Egyptians called the ‘Sea Peoples’ disrupted the region in a number of ways; they allied themselves with the Libyans who opposed the Egyptian Pharaoh and they invaded the Levantine coast.

The Assyrian king Tukulti-ninurta (1243-1207) sacked Babylon and removed the statue of Marduk for ‘safe keeping’. But Tukulti-ninurta was assassinated by his son in a coup that initiated a period of decline. Amongst the problems facing Assyria was the emergence of a significant new group, the Arameans.

The Hittite empire lost its imperial capital in 1180 BCE but continued in regional centres for a while. But the weakened Hittites were under pressure in the west from the Phrygian Greeks coming out of Thrace and the Luvians in the south-west of modern Turkey.

<sup>41</sup> Compare this idea with Psalm 107:9-39, Psalm 146:7 and Mathew 25:31-46 and parallels.

<sup>42</sup> The early ‘*Isra-el*’, the one that Merenptah mentioned, would not have been the full 12 tribe version that became the constituent parts of Judah and Israel; it may have comprised no more than the two tribes of Joseph, and the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh that were ensconced in the hill country around Shechem. To the east of Ephraim and Manasseh were the tribes of Marcher (a son of Manasseh in the patriarchal tradition) and Gilead (a grandson of Manasseh in the tradition). To the south of Ephraim was the tribe of Benjamin, whose name means ‘southerners’. ‘Har Jehudah’, meaning ‘the district of the mountain gorges’, the home of the tribe of Judah, was not populated before the 10<sup>th</sup> century and even then only sparsely. Similarly, the Galilean tribes of Naphali, Zebulun, Issachar and Gad probably arrived later – possibly in monarchic times. Dan may originally have been a philistine tribe, at least in its coastal location; some scholars link it with the people the Danune – one of the ‘Sea Peoples’. (Redford 1992 pp 295-296).

<sup>43</sup> The Trojan War, Achaeans versus Hittites, was perhaps the Achaean's last fling.

### The Merenptah stele and the early Israelites

Ramses II's prosperous reign had lasted for 66 years. He was followed by Merenptah (1213-1203) who had to deal with the invasion of the alliance of the Libyans and some of the 'Sea People'. He erected a stele to commemorate his, as he saw it, success in this respect. The inscription closed with this verse, which contains the first known reference to Israel.

*The princes are prostrate, crying "Shalam"<sup>44</sup>  
No-one raises their head amongst the enemies.<sup>45</sup>  
Captured is the land of Libya; The land of Hatti is pacified.  
Plundered is the state of Canaan<sup>46</sup> - with every evil.  
Carried off is the state of Ashkelon,  
Captured is the state of Gezer.  
The land of Yenoam is destroyed,  
The men of Israel are wasted – their seed no more.  
The land of Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt.  
All lands together are pacified,  
All who are restless have been bound<sup>47</sup>*

He starts with Libya and Hatti (modern Turkey) – the extreme points over which he claims some power. Next there is a geographical group formed by three coastal philistine cities – using the verb form translated by 'plundered is...', 'captured is...' etc. Finally, there is another geographical group linked by a different verb form; this group comprises three linked inland areas of Canaan - Yanoam (an area south of the Sea of Galilee), Israel (the hill country south of Yanoam) and Hurru (an area north of Yanoam - possibly part of modern Syria). The groupings reflect different grammatical structures in the Egyptian, which the translation above attempts to reflect. The second group places Israel geographically in the hill country of Canaan. The translation also makes explicit the 'determinatives' in the Egyptian text. Only Israel is given the determinative associated with a loose group of people; all the others are treated as settled 'lands', suggesting that Israel was not yet an organised entity – not yet a state with a settled territory and a king. "The seed" of Israel is as ambiguous in Egyptian as it is in English; it could mean the next generation of Israelites - or it could simply mean the harvest.

Merenptah's inscription may be supported by an adjacent relief at Karnak that shows the Egyptian army defeating several fortified Canaanite cities and a military force (possibly Israelite) in the field. The defeated 'Israelites' are the depressed and injured soldiers beneath the hooves of Pharaoh's horse. The photograph has been enhanced by replacing the missing parts of Pharaoh's chariot with a similar image from a nearby wall.



Not too much credence should be given to the details of the image, however, since it was probably intended to glorify the Pharaoh rather than to accurately depict the battle. It is, for example, very unlikely that Israel had chariots.

Archaeological surveys of the area suggest that the population of the hill country at the time of Merenptah's raid was of the order of 15,000 people distributed amongst small undefended villages of

<sup>44</sup> The Canaanite word for 'Peace'!

<sup>45</sup> Literally 'the nine bows'. The 'nine bows' is the name given to Egypt's traditional enemies.

<sup>46</sup> Some translators prefer 'Gaza' – a case can be made for either. See James Hoffmeier's 'Israel in Egypt'; p 29

<sup>47</sup> The text quoted here uses the translation in ANET (p 376,378) as a basis, but adjusts it in the light of the comments in 'Egypt in Israel' p 28f. The determinatives ('land', 'tribe') are made explicit.

between 100 and 300 people. It is surely unlikely that such a society would have openly opposed an Egyptian army; much more likely that they simply melted into the hills and suffered the destruction or seizure of their crops – “*the men of Israel are wasted – their seed no more*”.

Merenptah’s raid is remarkable in that there is no corresponding mention of any such raid by an Egyptian king in the Bible. The book of Judges, which might be expected to record folk memories of this time, describes battles with the Philistines, also Merenptah’s enemy, but makes no mention of anything that could be interpreted as a struggle with Egyptian forces.

Tus the inscription uses the name ‘Israel’ in a manner that could refer to a loose group of nomadic tribesman whose loyalty would have been to their local leaders, rather than to a nation or confederation. Only Israel is not described as a land or state. The name ‘Israel’ can be interpreted to mean “the heights of El” or perhaps ‘the men of the mountain of El’ – the name of the Canaanite father deity<sup>48</sup>.

#### The Philistines and the Arameans

The Egyptian 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty petered out around 1186 BCE. Towards the end it was run by a Semitic administrator, from whom the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty took over.

The second Pharaoh of the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Ramses III (1184-1153) had to contend with the armed migration of the ‘sea people’ who threatened his delta area from both sides by land and by sea. Ramses III succeeded in containing some (maybe most) of the sea peoples in coastal southern Canaan. He achieved this by surrounding their territory with garrisoned outposts at, amongst other places, Gezer to the north, Tell el-Farah in the south and Lachish and Shariyah in the west<sup>49</sup>. The people he surrounded, who are generally identified as the biblical Philistines, would presumably have displaced Canaanites.

The archaeological evidence shows a clear demarcation between the Philistine area and the Egyptian military garrisons that surrounded it<sup>50</sup>. It also confirms a rapid increase both in the coastal population (probably Philistines) and hill dwellers (possibly proto-Israelites) at this time. The coastal population kept pigs as well as sheep and goats, but the hill dwellers did not keep pigs<sup>51</sup>. This may be just the result of agricultural economics – or it may result from religious dietary traditions – or both.

By the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, the population of the hill country, which has been estimated to be 15,000 in Merenptah’s time, had grown to 50,000. A hundred years later it had reached perhaps 80,000.<sup>52</sup> The new villages were small and un-walled. They comprised groups of family houses, suitable for a subsistence agrarian lifestyle. There were very few cult sites. This was the third wave of settlements that archaeologists have identified; it followed the pattern of the first two – those of the Early Bronze Age (ca 3500 BCE) and the Late Bronze Age (ca 2000 BCE). It was denser and more stratified in the northern hill country and less dense, but more homogeneous in the more mountainous area around Jerusalem. It appears that when climatic conditions no longer required extensive nomadic techniques for the effective husbandry of flocks and herds, then the previously nomadic people tended to settle – provided that the political conditions did not prevent this. These newcomers could have been settling nomads from further inland; or Canaanites displaced by the incursions of the ‘Sea Peoples’ or other disturbances in the region; or perhaps a combination of both. The only clear difference between them and their neighbours was that they did not eat pork. The new settlements that arose at this time proved stable, especially in the north – many of which were to be continuously inhabited from this time forth for the next five centuries.

In Egypt, the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty declined under internal stresses and ended in 1069 BCE. Egypt fragmented and entered its third intermediate period. More ‘sea peoples’ established settlements in the Levant – the ‘Sikils’ at Dor and the ‘Sherden’ at Ugarit.<sup>53</sup> – destroying the previous Canaanite cities and displacing their people in the process. The ‘Philistines’ may have penetrated as far as Shiloh and

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<sup>48</sup>Israel could be contraction of *ysrh’l* which comes from the root *srh*. There is an archaic meaning of the root, preserved in the Arabic, which is ‘to be high, elevated, etc.’ (Kamal Salibi: ‘The bible came from Arabia’ pp 124 – 125). Another possibility is a contraction of *ish-har-el* meaning the ‘men of the mountain of El’. Here the reference is to ‘the men’ not to ‘state’ or ‘land’ – an interpretation that agrees with the Egyptian derivative. Either seem more plausible than the awkward folkloric “struggle with god”.

<sup>49</sup> Oxford. pp 159-164

<sup>50</sup> Oxford p 153

<sup>51</sup> Oxford p 153

<sup>52</sup> W.G. Diver “What did the biblical writers know and when did they know it?”

<sup>53</sup> Oxford p 157. These tribes of the sea peoples may be connected with Sicily and Sardinia respectively.

destroyed it. Radio carbon dating techniques provide evidence of a destruction event in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>54</sup>

Whilst the Sea People were creating havoc on the Levantine coast, another group, the Arameans, began to exert outward pressure from their base in inland Syria. The Arameans first appear in ancient documents in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076) ‘crossed the Euphrates 28 times, twice in one year, in pursuit of the Arameans. The Arameans were probably raiding the caravan routes that Tiglath-Pileser wanted to control. There is a fragment of an Assyrian chronicle that appears to suggest that the Arameans even captured Nineveh, albeit briefly<sup>55</sup>. The Arameans, like the earlier Amorites, had no central control. It was simply that leaders with Aramaic names came to take over the cities previously held by the Hittite and Assyrian empires. They may have been an indigenous ethnic group that chose this moment to assert themselves – or they may have been immigrants from Syria and upper Mesopotamia. Their language, Aramaic, has been their legacy to us; it was the language principally used by Jesus of Nazareth a thousand years later and is still in use in parts of Iraq to this day.

As the millennium came to a close, the Levant contained the Philistine ‘Pentapolis’ (roughly where today’s Gaza strip lies), a growing population in the hill country (some of whom perhaps were the descendants of Merenptah’s ‘Israelites’), the Canaanite survivors of the ‘sea peoples’ invasion along the central coastal area, a set of Phoenician city states (also of Canaanite origin) in the region of modern Lebanon, and numerous other small groups of migrants from the adjacent disintegrating empires. Inland from Phoenicia the Arameans were still gathering strength.

Where, in all of this, are the biblical accounts of the Exodus and the Conquest to be set? Or were they not historical events at all?

### **The Exodus**

#### **The authority of the biblical account**

Some introductions to the Bible maintain the traditional position that Moses is the author of the first five books of the Bible. This is based partly on the fact that Deuteronomy was written in the form of speeches given by Moses but more importantly on the fact that, as recorded in the New Testament, Jesus himself appears to quote from Moses. The clearest example is:

“Jesus said to them, “... And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’” (Mk 12:24-26)

This argument carries little weight with those whose faith does not require them to believe that Jesus was the incarnation of God. For those who do believe this, it still relies on the accuracy of the Gospel record, the theology of Jesus’ Perfect Knowledge<sup>56</sup> and the assumption that Jesus’ priorities in his earthly teaching would have included the correction of any misperceptions of the day with regard to the authorship of the Pentateuch. It was in any case a time when authorship did not have the importance it does today. Thus the ‘Book of Moses’ was probably simply the title given to the book, with no implication as to authorship. The technique of writing a book in the form of a speech or dictation by a distinguished historical figure was commonplace in the Ancient Near East.

Those who hold to the argument that Moses wrote all the Pentateuch have to deal with the fact that the Pentateuch included an account of Moses’ own death. Those who hold that Moses wrote most of it, including the account of the Exodus, have to deal with the anachronisms in the text that point to a later date. These anachronisms are more than just casual facts introduced by a later editor; they pervade the whole structure of the book. The author of the Exodus clearly believed that the Philistines had been around from time immemorial whereas all scholars, other than biblical fundamentalists, believe they arrived in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century or thereabouts. The author never mentions the massive deportations of Thutmose III in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. And the author treats Moab and Edom as established kingdoms – a state not reached by these regions till the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Finkelstein and Piasezky; Levant 38 2006; Pp45-61; The Iron I-IIA in the Highlands and Beyond.

<sup>55</sup> Peoples p 211

<sup>56</sup> Theological considerations must also reflect that Jesus was not only God Incarnate, but also fully human. As fully human he would not have Perfect Knowledge, but merely the knowledge of his time – a time in which it was usual to refer to the Pentateuch as the ‘Book of Moses’.

<sup>57</sup> But note that these early ‘Philistines’ may simply be people who lived in the Arabian town of *plst* (plural *plstym*) in the region of Asir. It is also possible that the biblical Moab (*me’b*) is retained in

The conventional scholarly view is that the main story may have been written down in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and that the original text was subject to 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century additions or amendments. If this view is accepted, then the story as written was distanced by several centuries of oral transmission from the events it describes. Significant circumstances concerning the events may have been lost or distorted over this time.

### **The Question of the Date**

There are a number of plausible hypotheses for the date of an Exodus from Egypt, of which the most dominant are the expulsion of the Hyksos (1535), the revolt against Akhenaten (1336), the date suggested by a literal reading of the biblical record (1450), and the Ramses hypothesis (1250).

### **The Expulsion of the Hyksos: 1535 BCE**

The biblical story could be summarised thus: -

- A Canaanite group moved into Egypt; they settled in the Delta area and became numerous.
- They remained there for several generations.
- One of them achieved high rank.
- They came to be regarded with fear by the Egyptians.
- They left in large numbers pursued by the Egyptian army.

Thus expressed there is only one match with the historical record – the Canaanite ‘Hyksos’ descent into Egypt, their sojourn there and their subsequent “exodus”. The idea that the proto-Israelites were the Hyksos implies a history that in reality was one of ‘conquest followed by expulsion’. It raises the question of how this could be transformed into the story of ‘enslavement followed by escape’, with which we have become accustomed. This, however, may result from the biblical text being formed by combining two distinct accounts, for when the story is separated into these accounts, it is possible to see in one of them the residual elements of a story that may indeed be based on the Hyksos expulsion. This account includes statements such as: -

- “Yahweh said to Moses,” I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards, he will let you go, indeed he will drive you away”
- "... and so they (the Israelites) plundered the Egyptians."
- “The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.”
- “The angel of Yahweh who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel.”

All these texts<sup>58</sup> come from material that many scholars believe to have been written by a northern author, whose continuous account of these events is obscured in today’s text by material contributed by others.<sup>59</sup> The references in this text to the plundering of the Egyptians and to an Israelite army retreating, prepared for battle against an Egyptian force that was driving them away, is consistent with what is known of Ahmose capture of Avaris and the expulsion of the Hyksos. It is this author that refers to the large numbers of men involved – 600 ‘*eleph*’. If that is interpreted to mean 600 ‘squads’ of men on foot, then the record is plausibly aligned with the retreat of the Hyksos army before the Egyptian forces.

The same author insists that the leader of the people who were driven out was a man of importance in the land of Egypt<sup>60</sup>. The Egyptian status of Moses also comes through in the extra-

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present day ‘*m yb* (Umm al-Yab) near Wadi Adam and the biblical Edom (‘*dwm*) is today’s Idimah (‘*dm*) a name retained by a Wadi Idimah in the southern part of Asir. If the story of Exodus is reset in SW Arabia, the problems with the apparent anachronisms move from issues regarding the biblical record to unresolved questions regarding the history of Arabia. (See “The Bible came from Arabia” p 171 and p 207 note 5)

<sup>58</sup> Exodus 11:1, 12:36b, 13:18b, 14:19a & 20a.

<sup>59</sup> Most of Exodus 12 and some of chapter 13 is taken up with instructions for the festival of Passover and the rules for the consecration of the firstborn. At least the first of these is thought to be the contribution of a priest of the Jerusalem temple. For the uninterrupted northern account of the Exodus see the chapter on the Northern Epic.

<sup>60</sup> Exodus 11:3b “Moses himself was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh’s officials and by the people.”

biblical traditions referred to by Josephus; he wrote that Moses was heir to the Egyptian throne and at one time led an Egyptian army in a successful campaign in the South.

The book of Jubilees indicates that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE there was a legend of a Canaanite success against Egypt, which it associated with the time of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, suggesting that the proto-Israelites in Egypt were a potential fifth column, supportive of the Canaanite aggressor.

‘The King of Egypt went out to fight the king of Canaan... and the king of Canaan overcame the king of Egypt and locked the gates of Egypt. And he [the King of Egypt] devised an evil plan to torment the children of Israel. He said to the people of Egypt, “Look, the people of the children of Israel have increased and multiplied more than we. See, we will plot against them before they become too many.”’<sup>61</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the authors of the Exodus story did not dwell on the time of bondage. They dealt with it in six short verses:

“[The king of Egypt] said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Ramses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 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 labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.”<sup>62</sup>

There is no lamentation here that approaches that of the Babylonian Exile. Indeed, it seems that it was the Egyptians that came to dread the Israelites, rather than the other way around. Surely if the Exodus had been preceded by a long period of bondage, some details of it, as opposed to just the general idea, would have been retained in the folk memory.

One would also expect that a folk memory of the historical period when a Canaanite king ruled the Northern Kingdom of Egypt would have been retained in Canaan – even if not in Egypt. This was for the most part a period of glory in Canaanite history. Following their retreat, the Hyksos returned and may have resettled anywhere in Canaan. There is a story retained in Phoenician legend of the descent of Io into Egypt, her marriage to the king, the rule of her descendants for four generations, the return North of Belos (Baal?), and a row between Belos’ son Danos and his brother Aegyptos<sup>63</sup>. Is this a Canaanite folk memory of the Hyksos in Egypt?

Under this hypothesis, it could be argued that the stories of the negotiations between Pharaoh and Moses become works of pious fiction<sup>64</sup>. Most of the events described could, however, very well have ‘plagued’ the inhabitants of the Nile Valley from time to time. Records exist that suggest that the weather in the period leading up to the expulsion of the Hyksos may have created conditions more than usually suitable for these plagues<sup>65</sup>.

The historian Diodorus<sup>66</sup> provided a short account of what he describes as the ‘main facts’ concerning the origin of the Judeans; his hope was that this would prove to be useful background information for his account of the ‘Jewish war’ –the war which resulted in Pompey’s capture of Jerusalem. The source Diodorus used for this was the Egyptian-Greek Historian Hecataeus who wrote in 315 BCE. Hecataeus stated that, at the relevant time, there were many foreigners from all over the world living in Egypt. When a pestilence broke out, this was attributed to the foreigners, and to the fact that their own Egyptian sacrificial cults had fallen into disuse under the influence of these foreigners. In order to solve their problems they determined to drive the alien peoples out. When the foreigners were driven out they split up into several bands, some settling in parts of Greece, but the largest contingent,

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<sup>61</sup> Jubilees 46:10-11

<sup>62</sup> Exodus 1:8-14

<sup>63</sup> Redford 1992 pp 413-414

<sup>64</sup> It will be argued later that the Exodus story is a combination of three sources, Northern, Southern and Priestly. The Judean contribution to the description of the Exodus did not mention any plagues. They are only mentioned in the Northern and the Priestly contributions.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid p. 420

<sup>66</sup> Austin (1981) p 274. Diodorus Siculus was a first century BCE historian from Sicily. His major work was the Bibliotheca Historica, a world history that made extensive use of the works of earlier historians.

led by Moses, settled in ‘the land now called Judea, which at that time lay completely deserted’. In this account, Moses founded many cities, including Jerusalem, built a temple, established the religious and secular laws and divided the people into twelve tribes. Moses did not fashion any images of the gods, since he did not believe that God existed in human shape, ‘but thought that only the heaven that surrounded the earth was divine.’ He introduced a way of life that was unsociable and hostile to foreigners. Moses appointed the most able people as priests and judges and trained the youth in the arts of war. Military expeditions against neighbouring peoples resulted in the acquisition of land which was divided amongst the people by lot, with the priests receiving double so they could devote themselves without interruption to the worship of God.

This account was presumably prevalent in Alexandria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE – a time when there was a substantial Judean community there. It supports the idea that the proto-Israelites did not escape but were driven out. Although the Moses of this account was credited with actions that are better attributed to his successors, much of the rest of the story was not otherwise inconsistent with the Biblical texts. It is interesting that this story recognises the emptiness of the land of Canaan, something that the Egyptians sought to sustain following their successful expulsion of the Hyksos.

### **The Biblical Tradition: 1450 BCE**

The biblical text is traditionally held to support a date of around 1450 BCE. The basis of this is a literal reading of the bible, which dates the Exodus 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon’s reign, which is traditionally supposed to have started around 970 BCE. This dating casts Thutmose III as the Pharaoh of the Exodus according to the conventional Egyptian Chronology.

One of Thutmose III military successes was the suppression of a Canaanite/Syrian revolt against Egyptian rule; he drove the 119 princes into Megiddo and forced their capitulation, extracting much wealth and booty in the process<sup>67</sup>. He was scarcely a man to allow a group of ex-slaves to form a new nation on his territory. Nor would his successors have done so; it was they who continued the confrontation with the powerful Hittite empire – a confrontation that required control of the routes through Canaan up to the Megiddo pass. It kept the highlands effectively empty.

The 1450 date, based on counting backwards from an assumed date, strikes the problem that biblical time is symbolic rather than precise. The number 40, a quarantine, seems to have been used to mean a long time, whilst 12 (the traditional number of the tribes of Israel) also has symbolic resonances. Hence 12 times 40, 480 years, may simply mean ‘a very long time indeed’. Tradition required that important people were given great ages. Moses, for example, was alleged to have lived 120 years. Perhaps therefore the real ‘biblical’ date for the Exodus should be later than this. The list of descendants of Abraham in Chronicles<sup>68</sup> and the note appended to the book of Ruth both suggest that there were 11 generations between Jacob/Israel and Solomon, which at between 20 and 25 years per generation suggests that Jacob went down to Egypt in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, therefore placing the Exodus in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries at the earliest.

Confirmation of this later date can be found in the names of the towns mentioned in the biblical story. There it states that Pithom and Ramses are the supply cities built by the Israelite slaves before the Exodus<sup>69</sup> and that Succoth was part of the Exodus route. Ramses has been identified as Pi-Ramses, built near Avaris by Ramses II, and thus built at some time after 1280 BCE. Pithom is the name of a city only known from around 550 BCE and is therefore treated by some as an anachronism that points to the late editing of this account. However, Pithom may be an English transliteration of a Hebrew transliteration of the Egyptian *pr atm* – the house or estates of the god Atum. Atum was one of the oldest of the Egyptian gods and foreign slaves would have been found working in the temples or estates controlled by his priesthood at more or less any time in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. The biblical author may have been wrong in lumping it in with Ramses as a supply city, but correct in asserting that Israelite slaves worked at places the Egyptians called ‘*pr atm*’. Succoth has been identified as the town of Tjeku, near Pi-Ramses, which is mentioned in 13<sup>th</sup> century texts.

Thus if we allow for a symbolic rather than a literal interpretation of the 480 years, then we can also allow that the biblical texts points to a date closer to 1200 BCE than 1450 BCE.

### **The Akhenaten Hypothesis: 1336 BCE**

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<sup>67</sup> Oxford p 109

<sup>68</sup> I Chron 2:1-15

<sup>69</sup> Exodus 1:11

Redford has pointed out that there is a pair of Egyptian legends, linked together, that may relate to the Exodus story<sup>70</sup>. In the first, the king is told that he may see the gods provided he first cleanses the land of ‘lepers’; so he enslaves the lepers and sends them to the quarries; an invasion of 13 years is predicted; the lepers ask if they can live in Avaris, where they choose as their leader the priest Osarsiph who makes monotheistic and racially exclusive laws. In the second story Osarsiph invites the ‘Shepherds’ to come back to Avaris; they come; the king escapes to Ethiopia leaving the country exposed to the Shepherds who lay Egypt waste; the Shepherds are driven out. The references to Shepherds may be references to the Hyksos since Manetho mistakenly translated Hyksos as ‘Shepherd Kings’.<sup>71</sup> These stories may contain the mixed folk memories of two events – the Hyksos (Manetho’s ‘Shepherds’) and Akhenaten and his ‘unclean’ (because heretical) cult. The despised group, the so-called ‘lepers’, is enslaved, given permission to live in Avaris/Pa Ramses, and is led by a Moses-like character who promulgates monotheistic laws. The stories may thus form a sort of Egyptian parallel to the biblical Exodus story. Akhenaten was the Pharaoh who came to believe that there was only one god and attempted to spread, indeed enforce, monotheism throughout his land. One of his senior officials, Aher-El, was Semitic.

Thus there are some modern authors who hypothesise that Akhenaten was Moses<sup>72</sup>, and that he survived the revolt that ended his reign and led a group of true believers into the wilderness. Another variation on this theme gives the Moses role to Thutmose, Akhenaten’s older brother, whose career has parallels with the Egyptian career of Moses as reported by Josephus, and whose tomb in Egypt was built but never occupied.

Whether or not there is any truth in this, many people have been struck by the similarity between his hymn to Aten, Akhenaten’s god, and the content and feeling of Psalm 104 – the common wording is in bold in the texts that follows:

#### The hymn to Aten

**When you set in the western horizon of heaven.  
The world is in darkness like the dead.**

...

**Every lion comes forth from his den,  
All serpents, they sting. Darkness reigns.  
The world is in silence.**

**He that made them has gone to rest in his horizon.**

...

[But with the dawn]

**The ships go upstream and downstream alike.  
Every highway has opened because you have dawned.**

...

**How manifest are your works!  
They are hidden from before us.  
O thou sole god, whose power no other possesses.**

**You created the earth according to your wish -  
While you were alone -**

Men, all cattle large and small,  
All that go upon the earth,  
That go upon their feet;  
All that are on high,  
That fly with their wings.

#### Psalm 104

<sup>70</sup> See Redford 1992 (p 414) for these legends and their interpretation; the stories are included in the excerpts of Manetho’s history quoted by Josephus in *Against Apion* 1.26-33 (227-303). It is by no means clear that the reference to lepers should be taken as other than the literal. Manetho worked in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. In these instances, Josephus accuses Manetho of retelling rumours and incredible stories, but Manetho had elsewhere confirmed to Josephus’ satisfaction and approval that the Hyksos who had conquered Egypt were ‘his people’

<sup>71</sup> Josephus. *Against Apion* 1 (82)

<sup>72</sup> Ahmed Osman (1998), “Out of Egypt”

Bless Yahweh, O my soul.  
 O, Lord my God, you are very great.  
 You are clothed with honour and majesty,  
 Wrapped in light as with a garment.  
 You stretch out the heavens like a tent,  
 ...  
**You make the darkness and it is night,**  
 When all the animals of the forest come creeping out  
**The young lions roar for their prey,** seeking their food from God.  
**When the sun rises they withdraw and lie down in their dens.**  
 People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening.

O Lord,  
**How manifold are thy works!**  
**In wisdom you have made them all;**  
**The earth is full of your creatures.**  
 Yonder is the sea, great and wide,  
 Creeping things innumerable are there,  
 Living things both small and great.  
**There go the ships** and the Leviathan that you made to sport in it.  
 ...

The psalm also contains references to gods revered in some Phoenician cities when it mentions the minor deities Fire and Flame and the monster called the Leviathan; some suggest that the Egyptian influences in the psalm reached the Israelites via Phoenicia. But whatever the route, the psalm indicates that a few Egyptian images percolated into Israelite worship.

#### **The Ramses Hypothesis: 1250 BCE**

This is the most popular theory amongst biblical scholars today. It is based on the archaeological evidence for a gradual proliferation of small settlements in the hill country of Canaan around the beginning of the Iron Age, which is conventionally accepted to be around 1200 BCE. These may have been incoming neo-Israelites. It also means that the biblical record of an Exodus starting from a place called Pa-Ramses need not have been an anachronism – although Pithom remains an issue.

The Pharaoh of the Exodus becomes Ramses II – known as Rameses the Great... He was the courageous Pharaoh of the battle of Kadesh and the scourge of rebellious Canaanite towns. He even claims to have raided the town of Shalem – probably Jerusalem - in his eighth year, no doubt as a part of his campaign to re-assert control over Canaan. Was this the man to allow a mass exodus of slaves? Were his subsequent actions in any way inhibited by the consequential economic catastrophe that such an exodus would have created? He raided in the Levant on several occasions and his long reign is crowned by massive building projects throughout the land – including the temple at Abu-Simbel and the Ramesseum. He is often regarded as the greatest, most celebrated, and most powerful pharaoh of the Egyptian Empire. His achievements are on a scale and of a nature that are incompatible with the loss of the majority of his work-force.

The archaeology of Canaan a generation or two later provides evidence of a repopulation of the highlands, but it is only evidence of an arrival; it is not evidence of an Exodus. The archaeological evidence of the repopulation of the highlands does not include any pottery or other artefacts that might suggest an Egyptian origin; indeed, such limited indicators as exist suggest that the new hill-dwellers came mainly from elsewhere in Canaan.

There is a record of the escape of two slaves that can be dated to the reign of Ramses great grandson Seti II (see below). It was not a mass exodus, but such small escapes were regular enough for the text to be used as a writing exercise in schools. This escape occurred at a time when the great empires were breaking up and the re-settlement of the lands of Israel and Judah was commencing.

#### **Other Ideas**

There is a suggestion that Bay, the Canaanite Vizier who virtually ruled Egypt at the time of Tausert (1188 BCE – 1186 BCE), the female last Pharaoh of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, is to be identified with Moses. Is it possible that Bay lost his post and was forced into exile when Setnakt then Ramses III initiated the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty? Did he lead a group of fellow Canaanites into the wilderness?

Some scholars hold that only the Levites came from Egypt. They point to the Egyptian names of Eli's sons, Phinehas and Hophni, the priests of Shiloh. If the Levites emerged from a nomadic wilderness existence in the desert after the majority of the hill country had been settled by Merenptah's Israelites, it would account for the fact they were never allotted a tribal territory. If they, as priests, became the record-keepers of Israel, it would also explain why the Merenptah raid was not in that record. Perhaps they brought their belief in Yahweh from the wilderness and became priests to the settled tribes. Further evidence for this comes from the Egyptian words used for the clothing of the priests – the sash and the ephod – and the Egyptian precedents for the tabernacle and the ark.

It could well be that the traditions of the Exodus were taken over by larger Israel from the experience of one small group. The experience of a small group can be absorbed into the traditions of a much larger one.<sup>73</sup>

### **Escaped Slaves and the People of the Exodus**

Slavery was a well-established institution in Egypt throughout the millennium. Under the empire it was well regulated and carefully controlled by a department of state, with slaves being branded and registered.

Although Asiatics may well have provided the majority of slaves – as a result of capture by raiding Egyptian armies – slaves were not always Asiatic; certainly not always Canaanite. A mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century text lists 80 slaves of a Theban household of whom 40 were Asiatic<sup>74</sup>. Most have both Egyptian and Asiatic names, although the children are only listed with Egyptian names. From the time of the war against the Hyksos we have the account of the naval captain who secured 19 slaves as booty following the liberation of Avaris. Most had Egyptian names but 3 may have been Asiatic. He did not liberate those with Egyptian names but kept them as slaves<sup>75</sup>. Equally Canaanites in Egypt were not always lowly slaves; some achieved high office such as the vizier Aber-El under Akhenaten, or Bay who became the effective ruler of Egypt at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty; others were royal heralds, butlers, priests, heads of government departments, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, shipwrights, supervisors of the kings building projects, chief draughtsmen, treasury officials, physicians and the like. Slaves were simply people with a specific limited legal status; they were neither confined to a particular social class, nor to a single ethnic group. Slaves in Egypt were not always Canaanite, and Canaanites in Egypt were not always slaves.

Although it was difficult, slaves did escape. There is an Egyptian papyrus that describes a troop commander's pursuit of two escaped slaves. He fails to recapture them: -

*I was sent forth from the broad halls of the palace in the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of the third season, day 9, in pursuit of these two slaves. Now when I reached the enclosure wall of Tjeku on ...day 10, they told me they were saying in the south that they had passed by ... 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 of the Migdol of Seti. When my letter reaches you, write to me about all that has happened to them. Who found their tracks? What people are after them?*<sup>76</sup>

During the days of the Empire, the towns and villages of the Levant would not have been a healthy place for escaped slaves. The towns had vassal kings, Egyptian resident officers and an Egyptian run Nubian police force.

The wildernesses of the Sinai Peninsula would have been a more attractive destination. But to survive, escapees would have needed to limit their numbers to those who could be supported by the oases and waterholes of these wildernesses; this means they would have needed to travel in small groups of just a few families. Whilst cliff art of the Nabatean period (500 BCE to 500 CE) suggests that the wilderness could have been less arid than it is today – as is shown by the antelopes in the picture, the literature of earlier times suggests that crossing this desert required significant numbers of water

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<sup>73</sup> A good example is the American tradition of Thanksgiving. Very few of today's Americans have ancestors that came over on the Mayflower or took part in that first harvest and thanksgiving. Nevertheless, Thanksgiving is celebrated with a ritual meal in millions of households whose immigrant ancestors came at different times and in different ways from other nations

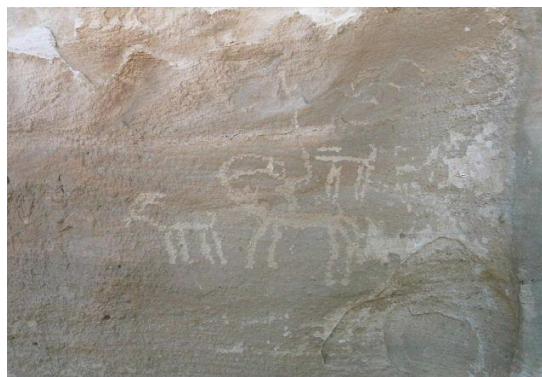
<sup>74</sup> ANET p 553,554.

<sup>75</sup> ANET p 233-234. See especially note 10.

<sup>76</sup> Oxford p 103 & ANET p 259. The text is superscripted in honour of 'our good lord' Seti II, who reigned whose dates are 1222 – 1212 BCE or possibly 1200 – 1194 BCE. The text is a model letter used for teaching students to write. Its use as such indicates that the event it describes was reasonably common.

carrying camels, something that escaped slaves would have been unlikely to have been able to organise. (Today the Sinai Peninsular cannot support more than a total of around 20,000 people without the use of imported food and desalination plants.)

The idea that only the Levites came from Egypt is one hypothesis that would limit the scale of the Exodus. Other scholars suggest that only the Southern tribes took part in the Exodus – the tribes of Judah and Simeon – thereby accounting for the division between the southern and northern tribal groups. But the tradition of a past slavery is not one that is just retained by southerners; authors connected with the northern tribes also refer to this tradition. In any case, as was noted earlier, the division between the northern and southern groupings can be traced back at least to the Amarna period.



There were probably several escapes, with individual families or groups taking the opportunities as they arose. Perhaps a disease struck their oppressors, or internal dissension created the chaos within which departure became possible. The groups would all have their own stories to tell of the events of their escape and their route into and out of the wilderness. In many places in the Bible, editors have combined all versions of an event into one narrative even if this creates logical difficulties, and that may have happened here. No-one has been able to take the biblical descriptions of the Exodus route and make them into a single logical journey from the Nile delta to the river Jordan. But each element of the description could have been true for one group or another. Some might have escaped by the coastal route where a narrow strip of land divides the sea from an inner lake. There are records that chariots on this road have been washed away by storms. Or they might have gone by the ‘sea of reeds’ and crossed on foot whilst the pursuing chariots got bogged down in the mud when a change of wind blew water back across the shallows. The lakes of the delta have indeed witnessed similar phenomena in recent times, as the engineer Aly Bey Shafei discovered when his automobile got stuck in the returning waters while crossing such a lake bed<sup>77</sup>.

The Egyptian account of the pursuit of a few slaves that was quoted above comes from the time of Seti II (who reigned around 1200 BCE) and therefore relates to a time just after Merenptah had come across the people of ‘Israel’ for the first time in his manoeuvres in the Levant around 1207. It is interesting that two of the priests of Shiloh at the time of its destruction around 1025, Hophni and Phinehas, both had Egyptian names<sup>78</sup>.

It is possible that small groups escaped from Egypt and arrived in Israel after the main re-settlement of the Israelite highlands had taken place. Perhaps some of them had spent time in Midian or Seir and were converted to the faith of Yahweh there. It is also possible that this group was influential in attempting to convert Israel and Judah to their faith, and that their descendants incorporated their family traditions into the scriptures they wrote.

### **In The Wilderness**

Successful escapees may have ended up residing in the land of the nomadic Shasu, in Se’ir or Midian or, perhaps central Sinai. In these remote places, amongst a nomadic people, they would have been safer from Egyptian authority than in the towns and villages of Canaan. It is interesting that the writers of the Exodus story had accurate information about conditions in the Sinai including an event that is unique to the area. Sinai is on a migration path for quails; although this would have offered only a short-lived food supply, the annual arrival of the birds must have seemed like a miracle.

The wilderness has always been a special place for those seeking a close relation to God. It was used in this way by the early Christian church. The wilderness provided the setting for Moses’ encounters with Yahweh. The biblical authors tell us that Moses married a Midianite wife and they credit his priestly father-in-law with some authority in guiding Moses’ early decisions. The Midianites, or more particularly a subgroup, the Kenites, are thus credited by some biblical scholars as being the originators of Yahwism.<sup>79</sup> They argue that, since the biblical authors report a sharp deterioration in relations with Midian in the time of Judges, any credit they gave to the Midianites when they came to write this story down must be based on unavoidable fact.

<sup>77</sup> See ABD on Exodus (para D:3:c)

<sup>78</sup> I Samuel 1:3

<sup>79</sup> Edward Meyer, Frank Cross; see Oxford p 142.’

Historians point to neighbouring Se'ir where a Shasu tribe may have been called – or lived at a place called – ‘*Yhwh*<sup>80</sup>. They also point to the use amongst some Arab Bedouin tribes of the ‘*qubbah*’, a tent shrine that existed even in pre-Islamic times. The ‘*qubbah*’ was carried from place to place by the nomads; it led the tribes in their search for water and campsites, was used for divination, and was carried into battle. It was made of red leather and contained two sacred stones.<sup>81</sup> Around 30 km north of the Gulf of Aqaba, from Timna in Midian, comes evidence of a wood-framed curtained tabernacle used for worship. The curtain material was a heavy red and yellow fabric of mixed wool and flax. Also in the same location was a copper snake, reminiscent of Moses iconic snake which has become a symbol of medicine.<sup>82</sup>The shrine in Timna ceased being used around the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE – at about the same time as the highland areas of the future Judah and Israel started to be re-settled.

Some biblical texts also hint at this origin for the belief in Yahweh: texts such as

“Yahweh came from Sinai  
He beamed forth from Se'ir upon us,  
He shone forth from mount Paran”<sup>83</sup>

A distinctive element in Israelite theology – at least by the time these early texts were written – was that Yahweh had chosen them from out of all the nations and had chosen to enter into a special Covenant with them. The Covenant incorporated the idea that they would inherit the Land which is most commonly defined as Canaan.

### **The Conquest**

There was no conquest. There was no conquest not least because the hill country that was settled by the early Israelites (the ones that Merenptah refers to) was almost empty at the time. The observed destruction layers in the archaeological sites of the coastal Levant can be accounted for by other known historical events: -

- Hurrian expansionism caused the destruction of many towns in Syria and the future Palestine in the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Some scholars argue that the establishment of the Egyptian empire under the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty may also have caused some of the observed destruction. But others argue against this, pointing to the Egyptian lack of knowledge in the use of siege tactics. The Egyptians had not really mastered the siege even by the 15<sup>th</sup> Century when Thutmose III took seven months to bring Megiddo to heel after he had trapped the Canaanite kings there.
- Ramses II in the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century needed to re-establish Egyptian power following the battle of Kadesh. He had learnt how to deal with rebellious towns and effectively punished the insurgent towns of Midol, Beth-Anath, Qana, Merom, Shalem, Acco and Apeh – towns in the future Israel.
- The Philistines and the other Sea Peoples invaded Syria/Palestine around 1200 BCE, and were ruthless in their attacks, burning many coastal cities to the ground.
- Many of the towns that are supposed to have been destroyed in the conquest – such as Jericho, Ai, Hormath, Arad and Jarmuth – were all unoccupied during the late Bronze Age (1550 – 1200 BCE). Others, such as Kadesh-Barnea, Heshbon, and Gibeon were not settled until later.
- The Egyptian grip on Canaan throughout the period of their Empire precludes any concept of conquest of their land by another power (15<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries). It will be remembered that the Egyptians emptied this land by the deportations of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and kept it as empty as they could by a deliberate act of policy.

The map shows Egyptian military and administrative bases and towns with other evidence of Egyptian presence in comparison to the presumed early Israelite settlement areas<sup>84</sup>.The Egyptian

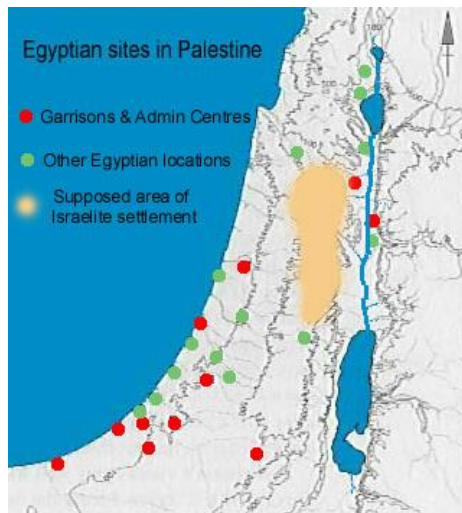
<sup>80</sup> Redford (1992) p 418

<sup>81</sup> ABD on the Ark of the Covenant.

<sup>82</sup> Dale W Manor's article on Timna in ABD, quoting entries by Ruthenberg (1972) in Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land.

<sup>83</sup> Deut 33:2. Se'ir when transliterated from the consonantal Hebrew is syr. This is the same as the transliteration of the Arabic 'Asir', the name of the Saudi Arabian province south of Mecca. They may be the same place. Certainly modern Asir has villages with Arabic versions of most biblical place names normally associated with the Promised Land.

<sup>84</sup> Isserlin (1998) p 61



presence was maintained until around 1150 BCE. Egyptian bases surround the supposedly ‘conquered’ areas. And yet there is no mention of an Egyptian presence in the area in any of the biblical conquest stories. Other nations are dealt with but not Egypt, the strongest and most powerful. Nor is there any mention of Israelites by other nations until Merenptah refers to tribal Israelites around 1207.

So clear is the evidence against any type of conquest, that scholars have developed a number of other hypotheses to account for the origin of Israel – taking that to have occurred before 1200 BCE in accordance with the evidence of Merenptah’s stele, but not much before in the light of the earlier emptiness of hill country. These hypotheses include a peasant’s revolt, ruralisation, and the settlement of nomadic tribes.

The idea behind the peasant’s revolt hypothesis<sup>85</sup> is that a segment of lowland society felt so oppressed by the taxation, governmental or religious policies of the lowland cities that they left to form a new life in the highlands. This hypothesis is incapable of proof or disproof but does rely rather heavily on the idea that the headmen of the lowland villages were capable of concerted oppression. Whilst, in the north, the ‘kings’ of the city states may have possessed such power, the headmen of the smaller southern towns may often have been as destitute as their citizens. In the Armarna letters they often describe themselves as unable to put together a force of even 50 men to defend their homesteads.

The ruralisation hypothesis relies on the change in economic circumstances that may have resulted from the collapse of trade during the unsettled period of the invasion by the Sea Peoples. The economies of the towns collapsed. People left to become semi-nomads<sup>86 & 87</sup>.

The third hypothesis involves settlement by pastoral nomads, the Shasu, from the surrounding area<sup>88</sup>. Once it became possible to settle the highlands (since the Egyptians no longer chose to prevent it), the neighbouring nomadic groups could have decided to settle there in order to gain the economic benefits of a broader-based economy. It is sometimes argued that nomads are reluctant to settle and abandon the freedom of their way of life. More recent studies have tended to repudiate this idea. Nomads may choose to settle if they can sustain their population better by doing so. Modern studies show that the nomadic way of life tends to be practised in its pure form only when a settled agricultural community with which to trade also exists. In these circumstances the nomadic herds will visit the settled communities after the harvest when the flocks can graze the stubble and fertilise the fields whilst meat and hide can be traded for the recently harvested grain. When there is no such settled agricultural community with which to trade, then the pastoralists may partially settle themselves in order to obtain supplies of agricultural products. Such a situation can be observed today amongst the Bedouin. The photograph (taken near Mt Sinai in 1999 by the author) shows a set of small walled enclosures which capture enough water to enable some fruit trees to survive. In this way local micro-climates enable fruit to be grown in valley gardens which are cultivated by a portion of the tribe that remains behind to preserve their investment when the time comes to move the flocks and herds away.



<sup>85</sup> Due to Mendenhall, Gottwald and others

<sup>86</sup> Evsey Domar in ‘Capitalism, Socialism and Serfdom’; 2008.

<sup>87</sup> To some extent this process can be observed in recent times in Mongolia. The herding of sheep and horses has always provided a self-sustaining economy for Mongolian nomads; the collapse of the Mongolian economy following Russian withdrawal in the early 1990’s caused an increase in the nomadic groups and a reduction in the number of people able to live in permanent settlements.

<sup>88</sup> Alt, Finkelstein and Donald Redford. See Redford 1992 pp 269 - 280. Also ‘The Bible Unearthed’; Finkelstein and Silberman; pp 72-145

Partial settlement can evolve into complete settlement if changes in the climatic and political situation mean that this becomes the better way to sustain the population. The process reverses itself if climate or political changes force people off the land. As noted earlier, recent surveys of the hill country that became Judah and Israel shows the Iron Age settlement of the land to be but the last of three similar waves of settlement. This final wave began around 1200 BCE and formed many of the sites that would be continuously occupied throughout the period of monarchic Israel. The settlement patterns were the same on each occasion, with the denser, richer and more hierarchic settlements being in the north, the future Israel, whilst the future Judah, with its more difficult terrain, was more sparsely settled.

These hypotheses must be considered against the political background of the late 13<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. The Philistines were invading, taking many of the coastal towns and disrupting economic output. The Egyptians were fully stretched dealing with the direct threat to the Delta and no longer able to maintain an empty buffer zone in the Southern highlands of Canaan. The economic and trading networks which had enabled the nomadic groups to practice pure pastoralism broke down.

In order to find grain and fruit the nomadic groups were forced to allocate some of their resources to producing it for themselves. The archaeological record shows the rapid establishment of a series of undefended hilltop settlements – in many cases they were built on the easternmost slopes overlooking the wilderness and good pastureland for sheep and goats. They were small settlements – often for no more than fifty adults. At first these settlements took the same oval form of the traditional nomadic tented encampment. The herds would be driven into the interior of the oval at night and driven out again to the pasturelands by day. In these settlements, archaeologists have found a few silos, sickle blades and grinding stones indicating that the pastoralism was associated with some agricultural production. Later on, the settlements spread westward to lands more suitable for orchards and the cultivation of grapes.<sup>89</sup>

In later developments, the original nomadic oval formation was replaced with a more typical sedentary village layout. The highland settlements reveal archaeological remains – collared-rim jars, three and four roomed houses, storage pits and lined cisterns – that can also be found in towns such as Jerusalem, Gibeon, and Megiddo<sup>90</sup>. The intensity with which artefacts such as cisterns were used reflected the needs of highland-living in a dry area. Cisterns were relatively lightly used elsewhere in Canaan, but examples of all these artefacts can be found there as well. Some scholars have called the style of house found in the highlands an ‘Israelite’ house, but examples of a similar design can be found even in Philistine territory.

Whether the neighbouring examples of the house design preceded, were contemporary with, or followed the hill country examples can still be disputed, but what is clear is that the houses, and indeed the other artefacts found, owe nothing to Egyptian culture. If it is legitimate to deduce anything from the absence of Egyptian artefacts, then that deduction must be that very few, if any, of the people who moved into the hill country had come recently from Egypt.

A reasonable conclusion is that the highlands came to be filled mainly by nomadic ‘Shasu’ groups who were forced to settle in the vacant land by the collapse of trading opportunities with the coastal towns and villages. They settled there peaceably; their settlements were undefended and yet there is no evidence of any destruction layers. The settlements show no evidence of a hierarchy; no particularly buildings that were markedly more luxurious than others.

If there was no conquest, then why are there so many stories about it in the bible? The texts in Numbers, Joshua and Judges dealing with the conquest are undoubtedly confused. Some cities are destroyed twice and Hebron, Debir and Hormah are taken three times. Taking Hebron as an example, it is first taken by Joshua:

“Then Joshua went up with all Israel from Eglon to Hebron; they assaulted it, and took it, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and its king and its towns, and every person in it. He utterly destroyed it and person in it leaving no-one - just as he had done to Eglon.”<sup>91</sup>

Then it is taken by Joshua’s son Caleb before the death of Joshua:

“According to the commandment of Yahweh to Joshua, Joshua gave to Caleb son of Jephunneh a portion among the people of Judah, Kiriath-arba, that is, Hebron (Arba

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<sup>89</sup> Finkelstein and Silberman; “The Bible Unearthed”; pp 105-118

<sup>90</sup> Oxford p 134-137; see also ‘Israelites in History and Tradition’ by N.P. Lemche p 72

<sup>91</sup> Joshua 10: 36-37

was the father of Anak). And Caleb drove out from there the three sons of Anak: Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak.”<sup>92</sup>

Finally, it is captured by the tribe of Judah, after the death of Joshua:

“After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of Yahweh, “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?” Yahweh said, “Judah shall go up. I hereby give the land into his hand.”

Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba); and they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai”<sup>93</sup>

It is arguable that the last story (from Judges 1) is simply a different version of the previous one (from Joshua 15), but the point remains. Different groups and traditions seem to be staking their claim to this territory. Perhaps there was a series of raids and counter-attacks with control ebbing to and fro. Perhaps the finality of these raids – everyone is destroyed – is an exaggeration. Such exaggerations are a common characteristic of the inscriptions and other writings in the Ancient Near East (as indeed they are elsewhere). Comparisons can be made with the Merenptah stele where Israel’s seed is said to be ‘no more’, or with the Moabite Stele which claims that Israel has ‘perished forever’ or with any number of similar Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts. That this is probably the way these stories should be read is illustrated in Joshua 10:20 where the author, having dealt with Joshua’s defeat of the five kings by saying that all their forces were ‘wiped out’, continues immediately to state that the ‘survivors’ returned to their towns!

One story at least is different. Jericho was one of the cities that were ‘conquered’ even though unoccupied from about 1550 to 700 BCE (except briefly in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century primarily as a burial site). But a literal reading of the story shows it not to be a physical conquest at all, but rather a liturgy. Joshua worships; he removes his shoes because the ground is holy: seven priests with trumpets process in front of the Ark; they process around the city once each day for six days; on the seventh day they process around the city seven times; all the people shout; and the city and all that is in it is devoted to Yahweh as a sacrifice. The author is using this mythical story as a metaphor to make several theological points including the idea that the first fruits of all endeavour should be given to Yahweh and that all success comes from Yahweh. Some of the other stories may also have been included with the intention of pointing to a theological truth rather than recording a historical one. Perhaps the Israelite story-tellers found an unoccupied ruin and speculated about the cause with the limited facts they had at their disposal. (If so, they were behaving in a manner very similar to some biblical historians today.) It is possible that the story of the conquest of Ai had such an origin; the word Ai simply means the ‘ruin’ and the theological point being made in this story is that any military adventure, to be successful, must be undertaken with Yahweh, and not by men acting alone.

Taking these points into account, a critical reading of the texts tends to reduce the military significance of the conquest stories. What remains is a picture of ongoing inter-tribal struggle in which there was rarely a decisive victory. Take Jerusalem as an example. The biblical texts make the following statements:

1. Joshua killed the king of Jerusalem and destroyed his army, but the survivors return to the city (Joshua 10).
2. The tribe of Judah were unable to drive the Jebusites out of Jerusalem, so they remain there ‘to this day’. (Joshua 15).
3. The people of Judah took Jerusalem, put its people to the sword and burnt the city (Judges 1:8).
4. But the Benjamites did not drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem, who therefore live in Jerusalem amongst the Benjamites ‘to this day’ (Judges 1:21)
5. David takes Jerusalem by a ruse and makes it his capital (2 Samuel 5)

Nor does the bible claim that the Israelites put much effort into driving out the other inhabitants of the land - the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Indeed, David is said to have had a significant number of non-Israelites in his personal guard. They included a

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<sup>92</sup> Joshua 15: 13-14

<sup>93</sup> Judges 1:1,2 & 10

Hittite, an Ammonite, several men from south Syrian tribes and some Moabites<sup>94</sup>. He himself had a Moabite great-grandmother, Ruth. These Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites remained in the land throughout its monarchic period. They were still there after the exile into Babylon, for Ezra complains of the Israelites intermarrying with them during his mission to the returnees. (Ezra 9).

During the period of Judges, the bible makes clear that Israel was not always the conqueror; there are several periods when the Israel served other tribes. In the Book of Judges, we may read that Israel served Moab for eighteen years; Aram-Naharaim for eight years; Hazor for twenty years; Philistia for forty years, and that the trans-Jordanian Israelites served Ammon for eighteen years.

Most towns that were raided or taken were probably left intact since the victors wished to live there and exploit the vineyards, houses and fields that they had acquired. In fact, the bible claims that only three towns were burnt down – Jericho, Ai and Hazor. Archaeology has shown that Jericho was destroyed long before the Israelites arrived – probably by an earthquake. The location of Ai – the ruin – is uncertain, but that too could well have been found as a ruin as its name suggests. Only Hazor to the North of Galilee was destroyed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; possibly by the Israelites as the bible suggests – but probably by the incoming ‘Sea Peoples’.

Thus the biblical and the archaeological evidence points to a process whereby general peace, cooperation and co-existence was periodically interrupted by a low-level village by village struggle for territory between rival tribes over a prolonged period of time, with no tribal grouping being wiped out, and few villages actually destroyed. On occasions there may have been larger scale activities – particularly against the incoming ‘Sea Peoples’, some of who were the biblical Philistines.

But this still leaves the problem created by the stories of the conquests of towns that were yet to be founded at the time of Merenptah’s raid. This tends to support the idea that the major tradition recorded in the bible comes from a people who arrived in the land after Merenptah’s raid, and therefore did not take part in the expansion of hill country settlements that are widely believed to be Israelite. If so, this may account not only for the absence of any recollection of Merenptah’s raid in that tradition but also for their implicit belief that the Philistines had been in the area from the beginning. Historians believe that the regional struggle involving the ‘Sea Peoples’ in Canaan started around 1175 BCE. The stories of conflict therefore probably had their origin with a people who arrived in the land after this date.

### **The Question of Place – The Western Arabia Hypothesis**

There is one other hypothesis. Perhaps there is no evidence of an Israelite conquest in the Levant, because the conquest took place elsewhere. Perhaps there are stories of the conquest of towns yet to be built in Israel, because towns of similar names built elsewhere were the ones that were conquered.

It is interesting to note that one definition of the ‘Promised Land’ is identical with the Egyptian province of Canaan as held under the empire and confirmed in the treaty following the battle of Kadesh (1285). But according to the standard translation of Numbers 34:1-12, the Land was much larger, extending from Egypt to the Euphrates and from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel never occupied this territory. But they did occupy territory east of the Jordan, never included in any territory that they were offered by their god. Since this text was written after the Israelites were actually living in the Land, it is interesting that the record appears to offer different borders to those that were actually achieved.

A possible resolution of this problem was offered by Kamal Salibi in 1985. He recognised that the place names included in the Promise can all be found in Western Arabia in the hinterland of the Eastern Red Sea coast from Jizan northward for 400 miles – the territory known today as Asir. Furthermore, the present place names found in this area include references to all the tribes listed in Genesis 15.

The normal translation of Numbers interprets *msrym* as Egypt, but it could also be read as the area around today’s Misramah in the Asir highlands. Further, the word *prt*, normally read as Euphrates, could refer to the main valley of the Lith region where the original name is preserved to this day in the villages of Firt and Farat. Both Arabic names, when written consonantly can be transliterated as *prt*.

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<sup>94</sup> David’s champions included Uriah the Hittite; Eliphelet, the son of Ahasbai of Maacah (in S Syria), Igal, the son of Nathan of Zobah (also in S Syria), and Zelek the Ammonite (see 2 Sam 10:1–2 for David’s early ties to the Ammonite court). From 1 Chronicles 11 come Hanan, son of Maacah, Shama and Jeiel, the sons of Hotham the Aroerite (from Aroer in Moab), Ithmah the Moabite (note David’s ties to the royal house of Moab during his exile from Saul’s court: 1 Sam 22:3–4), and Eliel, Obed, and Jaasiel from Zobah (RSV ‘Mezobaite’, which simply means “the one from Zobah”).

The word generally translated as Pharaoh, *pr'h*, may also be read as the name of the god of that region, whose name survives in the name of a tribe, the Fara, *pr'*, still to be found there. In this reading it is the local god, or those who worship him, who hold the Israelites in servitude and will not let them go to worship Yahweh.

The land of the conquest then becomes the land the far side of the *yrdn*, usually translated as the Jordan. In fact, the word *yrdn* could also be translated as 'the ridge'. It therefore may not always be the name of the river, but simply a geographical term. If so, then the conquered land could be the far side of the Arabian escarpment from Misramah. This seemingly unlikely hypothesis is given support by the fact that, amongst the 182 references to Jordan in the Hebrew bible, nowhere is it called a river. Other rivers are so designated; when the Euphrates is mentioned, for example, it is called the river Euphrates 13 times out of 19 mentions<sup>95</sup>. Phrases such as *jrđn yrhw* are usually translated as the 'Jordan near Jericho' with the 'near' being inserted by the translators: an alternative and less forced understanding is that the phrase means the 'Jericho ridge'. Furthermore, there are several instances of the phrase *h-yrđn hzh*, which could mean either 'this ridge' or 'this Jordan.' As there are many ridges but only one river Jordan, the necessity to say 'this *yrđn*' makes more sense if it is a feature rather than a name.<sup>96</sup>

Before they crossed the *yrđn*, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness following a route described in Numbers 33, which is difficult to follow in the Levant, but which can be tracked in western Arabia. This route leads to the crossing of the western Arabian escarpment near Taif.<sup>97</sup> From this point, the details of the journey described in Joshua 3 to 5 can be followed in place names still extant today.<sup>98</sup>

The translations of certain passages can be reviewed replacing 'Jordan' by 'ridge' or 'escarpment'. Thus "the waters of the Jordan are full above their banks all the days of harvest." now reads "the waters of the escarpment are full above their banks all the days of harvest.", as indeed they are in that part of the world. Further on we may now read that "The waters coming down from al-Malah stood – they rose up behind a dam extending from Wadd at Adam, the city that is beside Raznah. And those flowing down west of Ghurabah, west of Al-Milhal, were wholly cut off. And the people passed over opposite Rakhyah. (*ryh*)."<sup>99</sup> This translation is only possible because of knowledge of the local geography. Thus *m-l-m'lh*, literally 'from to above', does not have to be forced to mean 'from above' (the normal translation) if we know there is a local place called *l-m'lh*, Al-Malah.<sup>100</sup>

As a memorial of the crossing, Joshua took twelve stones and erected them at *glgl* (biblical Gilgal). The rocky hillock at *glgl* (Arabian Juljul) stands out from the plain beyond the escarpment to this day.

It has long been agreed that Midian, where Moses met and married his first wife Zipporah, was in western Arabia. Locating the wanderings in south western Arabia solves a puzzle with regard to his second wife who, the bible says, came from the land of *kws*, translated Kush. Kush is sometimes regarded as Ethiopia in the bible, but it could be more logical that she came from the area around modern Kuthah, *kwith*. This lies in the Wadi Bisnah area, in the Khamis Mushait highlands near the escarpment. This definition of Kush fits with the campaign of Zerah the Kushite who fought king Asa of Judah according to II Chronicles 14. The victorious army of Asa ravaged the town of biblical Gerar, possibly present day Qararah, close to Kuthah. Having a land of Kush near to the 'Promised Land' also solves the problem of how a Kushite army could possibly have been operating in the Levant in Asa's

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<sup>95</sup> Actually the river *přt* could perhaps be interpreted as the river which flows past the towns of Firt and Farat, both of which are consonantly transcribed as *přt*. These places lie on the Wadi Adam, which flows down the main valley of the Lith region (about 100 miles south of Mecca).

<sup>96</sup> Jeremiah's references to the *g'wn h-yrđn*, sometimes translated as 'the jungle of the Jordan' or the 'thickets of the Jordan' (NRSV) or the 'swelling of the Jordan' (SJV) can be more readily translated as 'Ghawan of the ridge' to distinguish this Ghawan from a coastal place with the same name. The *jrđn* in which Naaman took his cure is clearly water, the one exception in which *jrđn* cannot be understood as 'ridge'. Clearly the river Jordan acquired its name at some point.

<sup>97</sup> The Bible came from Arabia; p. 207 n. 5

<sup>98</sup> The Bible came from Arabia, p. 86

<sup>99</sup> Joshua 3:15-16

<sup>100</sup> The NRSV translation reads "The waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off." The Hebrew *ym* can mean 'west' as well as 'sea'. Thus the phrase *ym 'rbh*, translated as 'sea of Arabah' could mean 'west of Ghurabah' a local village. The 'Dead sea' is a gloss inserted by the translator possibly because *rbh* could mean 'desert'; it is not in the Hebrew text.

time. It was not.

Thus it is possible that both Moses' wives were western Arabians and that this area may have been the setting for the stories of the Exodus, the Wilderness and the Conquest. The hypothesis is only capable of verification when the ruins in the area are archeologically investigated – a thought which may have been behind King Fahd's decision to bulldoze some of them shortly after the publication of Salibi's book.

### **Towards a synthesis**

The key elements of the story of Israel in Egypt are present in the historical record, although they are not all arranged in quite the way that the bible story presents them. There were indeed significant numbers of Canaanites settled in the Delta area in the period before the Egyptian Empire. There were periods of plenty alternating with lean years. Several Canaanites reached high office under the Egyptians, at least one of whom lived in Avaris, the centre of the Delta area. The Canaanites did multiply and become a threat to Egypt – indeed their numbers probably enabled northern Egypt to fall into the power of the Hyksos, an ethnically related Canaanite group. There were both Egyptian and Canaanite slaves in Egypt; some of the latter being given Egyptian names. There were disasters in Egypt similar to the 'plagues' described in the Bible story. Later a significant group of Canaanites was driven out by the Egyptian army. It is quite possible for chariotry to be bogged down in the sea of Reeds. Quails do fly into the wilderness of Sinai. Slaves did escape and were pursued by Egyptian forces and nevertheless got away. Canaanite princes were educated in the Egyptian court under the Empire. Egyptian records do refer to place names incorporating the consonants of *Yahweh*, which are located in the wilderness land of Shasu. Egyptians did carry their gods on arks – depicted as very to the descriptions of the Ark of the Covenant found in the Bible.

It is quite possible that the biblical authors, writing many centuries after these events took place and relying heavily on folk-memory and traditional stories, conflated a number of separate events to create the stories we now have. It is also possible that they chose to omit other stories known to them – such as the story of Moses in Ethiopia.

The evidence has enabled a wide number of alternative ideas to evolve concerning the Israelite's sojourn in '*msrym*', the Exodus and their entry into the Land of their fathers. What follows is just one such attempted synthesis: -

A Hurrian tribe known as *rhm* (Raham) migrated south and settled amongst the Canaanites living around Beth-Shean in the early part of the second Millennium. Their stories would form a part of the Abraham tradition. They were absorbed by the Canaanite culture and lost conscious awareness of their Hurrian background. Later some Canaanites migrated to the area around Avaris and this assisted the conquest of the Delta by an ethnically related group known as the Hyksos.

The major Exodus event was the forced departure of the Canaanite Hyksos at the time of Ahmose's conquest of Avaris in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Elements of the army and the ruling class escaped to Canaan, probably along the coastal route, hotly pursued by the Egyptian army. Most of those that did not escape with the army were either enslaved or killed, although a few could have left hurriedly by a different route carrying such snatched provisions and treasure as they could lay their hands on. This group may have included the slaves of the Hyksos, who would have taken with them memories of harsh treatment under the Hyksos where life expectancy was low; and slave-servants so cheap that they could be sacrificed in the entrance of their master's graves.

Those who survived the escape into the desert either joined or formed nomadic groups operating on the fringes of the Arabian wilderness. Some of these may have become 'Habiru' - groups of refugees or outlaws living on the fringes of society. Others may have joined the nomadic 'Shasu' living by pastoralism and occasionally trading with settled agricultural communities.

It is probable that there were several groups who escaped Egypt and several occasions when they did so. Thus the Pharaoh of the Exodus could not be named in the surviving composite story because in reality there was more than one Pharaoh. These small-scale escapes took place during the 300 years of the Egyptian Empire when Egypt administered and policed the area of the future Israel and Judah. There were certainly escapes of slaves as late as 1200, one of which is documented in Egyptian records. The escapees had little choice other than to live a nomadic life amongst the Shasu in the wilderness just outside the range of Egyptian control. The biblical writing that captured their traditions did not provide a single traceable route for their travels, since there was no single exodus. As well as slaves, it is also possible that Egyptian fugitives needed to escape the reach of their authorities as a result of internal dissension and power struggles within the ruling class. The religious revolution during Akhenaten's time may have been the occasion of one such event. The idea that Akhenaten's

older brother Tutmose left or was forced out of the country is an interesting speculation in the light both of his name and of the monotheistic religion that the royal family adopted.

It was in the Arabian wilderness that Yahwism was born; in Midian or Se'ir – or perhaps even further south. The biblical authors point to this general region. Egyptian records of the time refer to places in the wilderness apparently named in honour of Yahweh. This then is where one or more of the groups probably discovered Yahweh. They may have been converted to the new monotheistic faith by contact with Shasu groups who had held it from earlier times. The groups that escaped would have been familiar with the Baalist religion whose father god was El, for a Baalist temple has been found in Avaris that continued in use after the recapture of that city by Ahmose. But they may have come to believe that the El they knew and the monotheistic Yahweh they came to believe in were the same. That precise identity is made in one of the earliest known poems:

*Yah is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation;  
This is my El, and I will praise him,  
my father's Elohim, and I will exalt him.  
Yahweh is a warrior;  
Yahweh is his name.*<sup>101</sup>

It is plausible that one group was led by an Egyptian called Something-moses, who as plain Moses became the first great prophet of Yahwism. Surely the biblical authors would never have given their greatest prophet an Egyptian name, if he had not actually been an Egyptian.

The period of 'forty years', when used in the bible can be legitimately interpreted to mean 'a very long time'. The exiles and escaped slaves were not able to settle in Canaan in the lifetimes of even the most recent escapees. Nor had they any pressing need to. Whilst there were settled communities in the coastal plains of Canaan, they could satisfy all their needs for grain and other agricultural produce through trade. The religion they developed was a nomadic religion; their god 'tented' with them; their god received sacrifices of lambs from the herd, killed in the camp before their sacred tent. When they moved, they believed their god moved with them – accompanied by ritual chants such as these: -

*"Arise, Yahweh, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee at your approach."*

and

*"Come back, Yahweh, to Israel's thronging army!"*<sup>102</sup>

As time passed, the nomadic groups probably traded with settled communities in the coastal cities and northern hills, some of which may have been inhabited by the descendants of the Hyksos – with their account of their own mass Exodus from Egypt, but with their continued faith in their Baalist gods.

But all this began to change after 1200. The sea peoples invaded coastal Canaan, seizing the urban centres and perhaps forcing some of the settled Canaanites inland. However there does not seem to have been a mass departure from the principal Canaanite areas (the coastal lowlands and the Jezreel and Jordan Valleys) since many of the villages survived the invasion and continued to be occupied much as before.<sup>103</sup> The agricultural output of those old Canaanite coastal villages and the trading networks that connected them to the nomadic groups operating on the eastern fringes were dislocated. The nomadic groups still needed some grain and fruit to supplement their diet so, with trading opportunities depressed and with the climatic and political situations favourable for settlement, they produced it themselves. Spreading from the fringes of the pastoral land east of the highlands, the groups developed independent small settlements to provide themselves with agricultural produce. Settlement was possible since the Egyptian authorities had lost their tight grip on the highlands. These quasi-nomadic groups were the 'Isra-el' that Merenptah found. They may have worshipped El, although the evidence suggests that they were not particularly religious. Although Merenptah claimed that their 'seed was no more' it is unlikely that hill-dwellers would have been stupid enough to meet an Egyptian expedition in open warfare. It is more probable that they melted into the countryside and allowed the Egyptians to seize what they wanted from the deserted settlements. As the Egyptian army fed off the land, they would have taken any stored grain they found – so perhaps the sign for 'seed' in Merenptah's inscription should be taken literally.

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<sup>101</sup> Exodus 15:2-3. This is part of the Song of the Sea – Gen 15:1b - 18

<sup>102</sup> Numbers 10:35.

<sup>103</sup> Finkelstein and Silberman, "The Bible Unearthed"; p 105

Similar settlement patterns have also been found in Moab, Ammon and Edom but with the interesting distinction that pork bones have been found in these areas and in Philistia, but not in the highlands of Israel and Judah.

Later nomadic groups who had a memory of Egypt, who had established a culture that relied on herding sheep and goats and who had adopted Yahwism as their religion settled progressively from the east. They converted a proportion of the hill-dwellers to Yahwism – in part by creating an identity between El and Yahweh – an identity that became so firmly stuck in popular religion that El's traditional consort Asherah was often worshipped alongside Yahweh. The nomadic missionaries for Yahweh became accepted as the priests by the other clans. They probably had more success in the south than in the north where Baal was more firmly entrenched. As priests it fell to their descendants to write the story of these times many centuries later. It was their traditions that formed the main basis of the story that they wrote, although they incorporated the mass Exodus story from the Canaanites that was the tradition of the some of those who had been there before them.

For two or three centuries, the clans lived amongst each other, occasionally forming temporary alliances when threatened. During these years, there was nothing approaching an organised state in the area that would become the future Israel and Judah. But it was during these years that the traditions that would define the new states would be formed from the many influences to which they were exposed.