

THE ISRAELITES IN EGYPT:
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL OUTLOOK ON THE BIBLICAL EXODUS TRADITION

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of

The Archaeological Studies Program
Department of Sociology and Archaeology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

University of Wisconsin La Crosse

2011

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ABSTRACT

During the past few decades the reliability of historical texts, especially the Bible, has been questioned by scholars and archaeologists. This paper analyzes indirect archaeological and historical evidence from Egypt and Syro-Palestine in an attempt to determine if an Israelite presence in Egypt, as described in Exodus, is a plausible theory.

Results of this study suggest that though there may not be any direct evidence showing the Exodus to be true; the idea of an Israelite sojourn in Egypt is indeed plausible based upon indirect archaeological and historical evidence. This paper uses archaeological evidence to make a case in support of the idea of ancient Israelites living in Egypt, while still acknowledging opposing theories.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I should thank the faculty and staff of the Archaeological Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse for providing me with the resources and knowledge needed to conduct this project and get me to where I am today. I would especially like to thank Dr. David Anderson and Dr. Mark Chavalas for guiding me in my research and painstakingly reviewing my work.

I would also like to thank Jennifer Lorge and Eliana De La Rosa for their punctilious reading of my thesis with the utmost attention to detail, correcting grammar, formatting, and providing input on content all while they were busy writing their own theses. Great appreciation also goes out to Dr. James K. Hoffmeier, for taking the time out of his busy schedule to meet with me over brunch to discuss his previous work on the subject and to assist in channeling my methodology.

Gratitude is deserved to all the staff and cadre of the Eagle Battalion Army Reserve Officer Training Corps, especially Lieutenant Colonel Mark W. Johnson and Master Sergeant Scott Heise for meticulously working with me to ensure I was able to give professional and effective briefings and presentations, which has come to be useful in so many areas of my life.

Most of all, I would like to thank my family, especially my mom, and Major James McKnight, Major Jay Hansen, and Colonel Lance Kittleson for keeping me on track with the remembrance of the true purpose of my studies. Also, I would like to thank my fiancée, Elizabeth Fusilier, for her constant loving prodding to ensure I got this project done in a timely manner.

INTRODUCTION

The image of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, through the desert and across the parted Red Sea, is familiar to many people. Whether it is a story known from Sunday school, or from the 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*, it is a story known worldwide. But were the Israelites really a people out of Egypt, as recorded in the book of Exodus? This has been a heated topic in the past few decades, largely because it brings to question the authenticity of an account believed to be true by three of the major world religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. However, it is also an important topic for the archaeologist. The amount of archaeological evidence that has come out of Egypt in support of Israelite presence in the area has been quite minimal. On the other hand, there has been little evidence to *disprove* the validity of the Exodus story (Hoffmeier 1996:53). And so, the question lies in whether the archaeologist is to approach the biblical sources, or any historical texts, with skepticism or reliability. Those who approach the texts with skepticism have been known as historical minimalists and have been described by Dr. James Hoffmeier as seeing the texts as “guilty until proven innocent,” whereas those on the other side, known as historical maximalists, approach the texts as “innocent until proven guilty.” (Hoffmeier 1996:10-11)

This study intends to show that the historical sources should be treated “critically, but without condensation,” to use the words of Yale University Assyriologist William Hallo (Hallo 1990). This is accomplished by examining archaeological evidence to see if it supports the historical plausibility of an Israelite presence in Egypt. In particular, artifacts discovered at sites

within the Nile Delta region are examined in an attempt to see if artifacts with Israelite cultural traditions exist from the area. Further, the relationship between the locations of these sites and the proposed route taken by the Israelites on their plight from Egypt is discussed. Finally, to not discount textual importance, the biblical Exodus story is compared with Egyptian texts and stories. The reader should find that though the biblical writers were not writing with historical intentions, we can still use what they wrote to gain a better understanding of the past.

BACKGROUND

The area of interest for this study involves the land of Lower Egypt, specifically the Nile Delta region, and the Sinai Desert, located on the large peninsula in the V-shaped notch created by the Red Sea (Figure A1). The pertinent time period for this study ranges from thirteenth to nineteenth Dynasty Egypt. These dynasties take place during the Second Intermediate Period and part of New Kingdom Egypt (Table 1). This time period in Egypt roughly correlates with the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and Early Iron Age of Syro-Palestinian archaeology (Table 2). Therefore, the time period of interest dates to roughly 1795 – 1186 B.C.

The Second Intermediate Period marks a period of chaos for ancient Egypt. This period is known for the invasion of foreign Semitic peoples from Syria-Palestine into the Nile Delta, who eventually become strong enough to set up their own rulers as pharaohs and overpower the native Egyptian kings. These Semites, called Hyksos, first enter Egypt during the thirteenth dynasty and set up their capitol at Avaris (modern Tel el-Dab'a). In Upper Egypt, however, the power of the Hyksos is limited because the Egyptian princes retain control of Thebes. The Hyksos comprise the fifteenth and sixteenth dynasties of Egypt and are opposed by the Theban

seventeenth dynasty, one of whose princes, Ahmose, eventually expels the Hyksos from Egypt around 1567 B.C., thus ending the Second Intermediate Period, and founding the eighteenth dynasty (Bietak 1999:54-56).

New Kingdom Egypt, beginning with the eighteenth dynasty, is the most prosperous period of Egypt and sees the peak of Egypt's power. The eighteenth dynasty contains some of Egypt's most famous pharaohs, including Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Ankhenaten, and Tutankhamen, to name a few. The terminal eighteenth dynasty of Egypt consists of the Amarna period, a time noted for Ankhenaten's unsuccessful attempt to turn Egypt to monotheism and Tutankhamen's luxuriant tomb. The nineteenth and twentieth dynasties of Egypt are known as the Ramesside Period after the eleven pharaohs who reign during the time, all with the name of Ramesses (Redford 1999:57-58).

The people known as the Israelites came to power in Syro-Palestine beginning in the Syro-Palestinian Iron Age (*circa* 1200 B.C.), where they settled mostly in the hill country, as the Canaanites and, eventually, the Philistines remained in control of the eastern Mediterranean coast (Mazar 2009). Much of what we know about the Israelites comes from the biblical Old Testament. However, where the Israelites came from has recently been a topic of debate. It has been long believed that the Israelites came out of Egypt, in accordance with the biblical Exodus account. Due to a lack of archaeological evidence supporting Israelite presence in Egypt or a full-scale military conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, most scholars argue that the Israelite's historical narratives are nothing more than legends placing themselves into "...a supposed Egyptian context that greatly exaggerates any real role that Egypt could have played in the formulation of the Israelite people and state." (Dever 1999:383). However, this lack of direct evidence can be attributed to many factors, such as the popularity of Upper and Middle Egyptian

archaeology over archaeological investigations of Lower Egypt, the problem of parts of the Middle Kingdom strata being stuck beneath the Nile Delta water table, and the minority status of the Israelites among their Canaanite contemporaries during the Middle Bronze Age (Hoffmeier 1996:62).

The Israelites described their own origin in the book of Exodus. The book of Exodus begins by speaking of a time when the extended family of Jacob (or the nation of Israel) lived peacefully in Egypt and were “fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous.” (Exodus 1:7)¹. However, the situation for the Israelites eventually became unfavorable under the reign of a new pharaoh. To deal with the numerous and threatening Israelites this pharaoh decreed that all male Hebrew newborns were to be killed. In order to save her son, the mother of Moses constructed a papyrus basket and set her baby afloat on the Nile River (Exodus 2:3). Pharaoh’s daughter discovered baby Moses and raised him as an Egyptian (Exodus 2:5-6). Moses, however, became aware of his Hebrew background as he grew up. One day, Moses observed an Egyptian beating an Israelite worker, so he killed the Egyptian man (Exodus 2:11-12). When the pharaoh discovered what happened Moses fled to Midian, where he lived for forty years as a shepherd (Acts 7:29-30). One day, Moses spoke with the God of the Hebrews on top of mount Horeb. God chose Moses as the man to deliver the Israelites from slavery. Moses then traveled back to Egypt where, with the power of God, ten plagues were sent upon Egypt. Finally, after the tenth plague, which takes the life of Pharaoh’s first-born son, Pharaoh agreed to let the Israelites go. Eventually, the Israelites came to the Red Sea. God “hardened the heart of Pharaoh” so that Pharaoh and his army pursue the Israelites to the Red Sea (Exodus 14:8). God then “drove back the sea with a strong east wind and turned it into dry

¹ All biblical citations are in reference to the New International Version translation of the Bible. All biblical citations are given in parentheses with the name of the book, followed by the chapter and verse(s) cited.

land” for the Israelites, but it closed upon the Egyptian army when they attempted to pass through (Exodus 14:21). The rest of the book of Exodus involves Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai and the Israelites wandering through the Sinai Desert for forty years before coming to their Promised Land.

Figuring the date of the exodus is a debate in itself. Doing this would be much easier if the Israelites gave a name to the pharaoh they were oppressed under, but, unfortunately, they did not. The book of Kings claims the construction of God’s temple began in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign (conventionally dated to *circa* 965 B.C.), which is also specified as being 480 years after Israel’s exodus from Egypt (1 Kings 6:1). Forty years is generally used by biblical writers to designate one generation, which would make the 480 years a possible representation of twelve generations. This would place the exodus as occurring around 1445 B.C., within a range of about two hundred years or so. Three likely pharaoh candidates have been proposed that fit within this time frame.

The book of Exodus claims that “...[Egypt] put slave masters over them [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.” (Exodus 1:11). Many biblical archaeologists have related this Rameses reference to the Pi-Rameses capitol of Rameses II, thus making Rameses II the pharaoh of the oppression. Though Rameses II still remains a popular candidate among many, he can be ruled unlikely due to finds such as the Merneptah Stele (Figure 1) and the Soleb Hieroglyph. The Merneptah Stele is an Egyptian monument describing the nation of Israel as a people defeated by Merneptah. Merneptah was the successor of Rameses II, and, although Israel could have been a well-established nation in the land of Israel after escaping Rameses II, the plausibility of Israel being this well-developed in that short amount of time is not as great as if they had been oppressed

under the reign of Thutmose III or Amenhotep II, two other possible candidates. Due to this reason and because of complications caused by the Soleb Hieroglyph (which is discussed in great detail later in this study), the reference to Rameses is most likely anachronistic and only used in the biblical source because that is what the city was known as at the time of writing, not the time of the oppression.



Figure 1. *JE 31408, The Merneptah Stele (from the Cairo Museum).*

Thutmose III's reign fits well with the approximate 1445 B.C. date for the exodus. However, some argue that Thutmose III was the pharaoh of the oppression and that his successor, Amenhotep II was the pharaoh of the exodus. This is because Amenhotep II's successor, Thutmose IV, implies in his Dream Stele that the firstborn son of Amenhotep II died before ascending to the throne. Some have speculated that this son died of the tenth plague described in Exodus 11:4-5. Also, others attribute Amenhotep's lack of military activity during the latter part of his reign to the military catastrophe of losing his army in the Red Sea during the

exodus (Archaeological Study Bible:98). Whether any of these speculations are true or not, Rameses II, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II still remain the most likely pharaohs of the exodus.

The foreign Hyksos rulers of the Second Intermediate Period and the Israelites were both of Semitic background. Making this connection, some have theorized that the expulsion of the Hyksos and the Israelite Exodus are a single event simply told as separate stories (i.e., the Hyksos expulsion portrays Egypt as the victor and the exodus portrays Israel as the victor), or that the Israelite Exodus is simply a surviving oral myth based upon the true Hyksos expulsion event (Dever 1999:383). However, before looking into this study, we can assume that neither of these speculations is true due to the fact that the two stories have nothing in common, except that each involves a large number of foreigners leaving Egypt. The Egyptians drove out the Hyksos during a lengthy military campaign (Bietak 1999) while the Israelite Exodus took a matter of weeks, involving no military activity except at the very end, when the Israelites had already left Egypt (Exodus 14:8).

METHODOLOGY

My methodology consists of studying and interpreting Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian artifacts and exhibits that I primarily viewed in the Haas and Schwartz Megiddo Gallery and the Joseph and Mary Grimshaw Egyptian Gallery at the Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago, Illinois. I also accessed site reports from Tell el-Borg in the Oriental Institute Library to analyze and interpret artifacts discovered at the site in addition to what I was able to gather from Hoffmeier's interpretations in *Israel in Egypt* and *Ancient Israel in Sinai*. Articles from the *Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt* (Bard 1999) were also helpful in supplying

data, as I was able to search most Egyptian sites and receive a brief report of artifacts found at each location. I also used other sources gathered from libraries which are referenced in my bibliography.

DATA ANALYSIS

Semites in Egypt

The question of the presence of ancient Semitic peoples in Egypt is an indisputable one. The entire focus of the Second Intermediate Period is about foreign Semites overtaking Lower Egypt. The Hyksos capitol of Avaris (or Tell el-Daba) is the richest example of Semitic presence in Egypt from the archaeological record. The finds show an Egyptianized Semitic presence. Tombs are Egyptian in design, but with Levantine elements. Burials are located within the settlement, something characteristic of Syria-Palestine, and fifty percent of all male burials include Middle Bronze Age IIA type copper weapons and grave goods, also items indicative of Syria-Palestine. These include duckbill-shaped axes and copper belts with engravings. Also, donkey burials were discovered at the site, which is a tradition of Syria-Palestine (Bietak 1999:779).

Bietak reports a seemingly gradual assimilation of Semites into Tell el-Daba. He writes, “The people who lived in this village were employed by the Egyptian crown as soldiers and possibly in other specialized professions, such as caravan leaders and traders.” (Bietak 1999:779). An amethyst scarab from the site “...demonstrates that its owner was probably an ‘overseer(?) of the foreign countries’ and a ‘caravan leader’ (*metjen?*).” (Bietak 1999:779). This

shows that as early as the thirteenth dynasty there were Semitic workers in Egypt, some of which could very well have been Israelites.

However, the material culture discovered in the next stratum at Tell el-Daba is less Egyptianized and more Syro-Palestinian in character than earlier (Bietak 1999:780). The construction of Egyptian temples ceased and Middle Bronze Age style temples were built instead. Tombs adopted a more Syro-Palestinian style, and deep pits were discovered containing offering remains (Bietak 1999:780). These two different strata show that there was a period of time when Semitic peoples immigrated into Egypt and worked as laborers prior to the Hyksos military invasion.

At first glance this seems to be contrary to what the ancient Egyptian historian Manetho describes as a swift military invasion by the Hyksos. In book two of his *History of Egypt* Manetho says:

Tutimaheus. In his reign, for what cause I know not, a blast of God smote us; and unexpectedly, from the regions of the East, invaders of obscure race marched in confidence of victory against our land. By main force they easily seized it without striking a blow; and having overpowered the rulers of the land, they then burned our cities ruthlessly, razed to the ground the temples of the gods, and treated all the natives with a cruel hostility, massacring some and leading into slavery the wives and children of others. Finally, they appointed as king one of their number whose name was Salitis. He had his seat at Memphis, levying tribute from Upper and Lower Egypt, and always leaving garrisons behind in the most advantageous positions. Above all, he fortified the district to the east, foreseeing that the Assyrians, as they grew stronger, would one day covet and attack his kingdom. In the Saïte [Sethroïte] nome he found a city very favourably situated on the east of the Bubastite branch of the Nile, and called Auaris after an ancient religious tradition. This palace he rebuilt and fortified with massive walls, planting there a garrison of as many as 240,000 heavy-armed men to guard his frontier (Josephus quoting Manetho, *Contra Apionem*, book I., chapter 14, parts 73-92).

Although this seems to be an altogether military invasion of Egypt, this is not necessarily so. Manetho describes the walls of Avaris being “rebuilt and fortified” by the invading Hyksos

king Salitis, as opposed to the city being founded by Salitis (Hoffmeier 1996:64-65). The important piece of information being that Semitic presence in Egypt did not arise with the invasion of the Hyksos kings. Rather, Semitic nomads existed in Egypt prior to this.

Tell el-Yehudiyeh, also located in the Nile Delta, is another example of Semitic presence prior to Hyksos military invasion. The modern Arabic name “Tell el-Yehudiyeh” translates as “mound of the Jew.” This seems to suggest some sort of faint memory of ancient Hebrew presence in the area, but it is not known for sure how the site got its name (Hoffmeier 1996:67). It is here that Tell el-Yehudiyeh ware (Figure 2) was first discovered (Hoffmeier 1996:67).

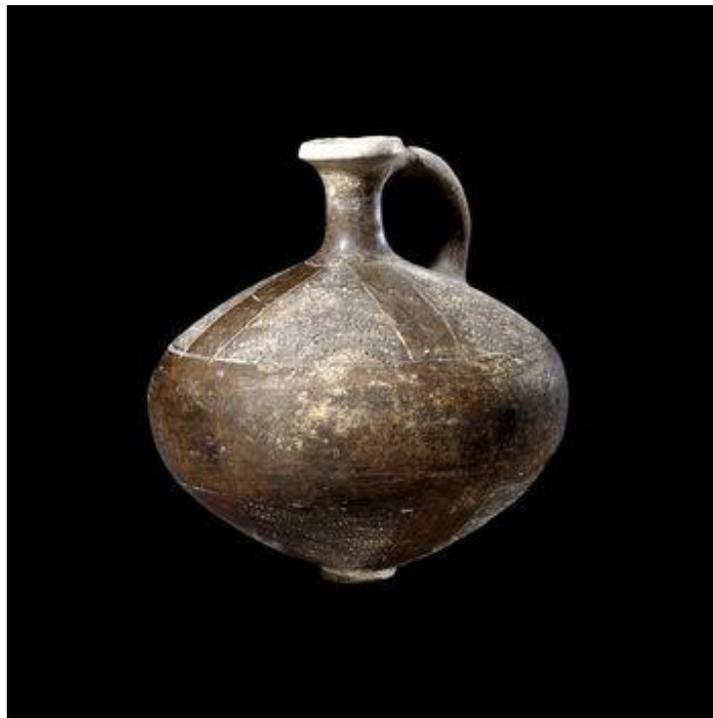


Figure 2. *Tell el-Yehudiyeh Ware from Lachish, Israel. Excavated by J.L. Starky, Wellcome Marston Research Expedition. British Museum ANE 1980-12-14, 10881 (accessed at Wikipedia <http://www.archaeowiki.org/Tell_el-Yahudiyeh_Ware>).*

This ceramic type consists of black pottery incised with geometric patterns that has become one of the material remains most characteristic of the Semitic Hyksos. Approximately one kilometer east of the tell is a cemetery. The cemetery's mud-brick vaulted tombs are strikingly similar to those at Tell el-Daba, and the ceramic remains are Palestinian in design. Archaeologist Olga Tuffnel suggests a horizon of 1700 – 1600 B.C. “She also thought that the people in these tombs were ‘a poor community of shepherds.’” (Hoffmeier 1996:67)

Working Conditions



Figure 3. *OIM 1347, Mud-brick stamped with the name of Ramesses II (from Oriental Institute Museum, photo by author)*

According to Exodus, the Israelites were forced to work under harsh conditions making bricks (Figures 3 and 4) and building temples for the Egyptians. In Exodus, Pharaoh becomes frustrated with Moses when he requests that the Hebrews be given time off to worship God. In his rage, Pharaoh orders the drivers and foremen in charge of the people, “You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw.” (Exodus 5:7)



Figure 4. *OIM 18812, Model of a brick mold from a foundation deposit of King Thutmose III (from Oriental Institute Museum, photo by author).*

Depictions of laborers making bricks can be seen in the tomb of Rekhmire (Figure 5), vizier of Thutmose III (1479-1425 B.C.). Some have theorized that these could be depicting prisoners of war from Canaan, since brick-making was a common use of Asiatics during the reign of Thutmose III (Chavalas 2002). In his annals, Thutmose III records taking thousands of prisoners from Palestine during his reign and these exploits continue on until the reign of Ramesses II (Chavalas 2002). This means that by the end of this period there were thousands of Asiatics in the Delta region, most likely working on Egyptian building projects (Chavalas 2002). However, others have argued that these depictions are nothing more than Egyptian workers.

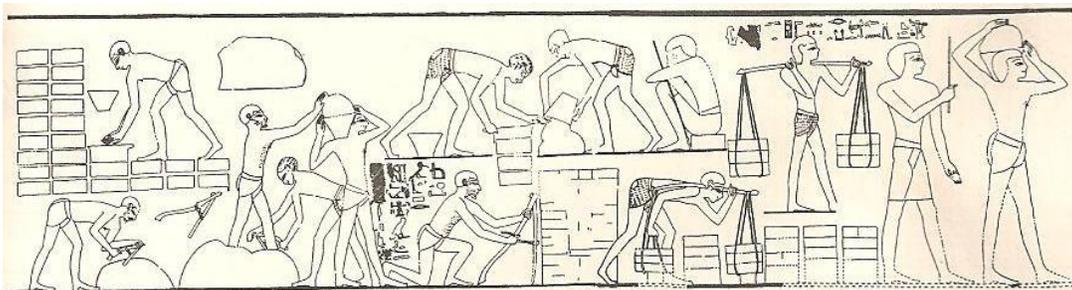


Figure 5. *Brick makers depicted in the Tomb of Rekhmire, Thebes (from Hoffmeier 1996, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1943).*

In their collection, the Oriental Institute Museum has a complaint written by a scribe on a piece of limestone regarding the harsh working conditions of some of the tomb builders (Figure 6). The complaint reads, “We are exceedingly impoverished. All supplies for us... have been allowed to be exhausted. Let our lord make for us a means of keeping us alive!” (Oriental Institute Museum 16991). This complaint was given regarding the construction of the tombs in the Valley of the Queens for the sons of Ramesses III and would culminate in the first recorded labor strike in the twenty-ninth year of Ramesses III (1153 B.C.).

Although this was recorded long after the proposed period of the exodus, it is still evidence of the harsh working conditions and lack of supplies workers in Egypt sometimes had to face, suggesting that the angry demands made by the pharaoh of the exodus were not just an exaggeration added to a legendary story for dramatic effect.

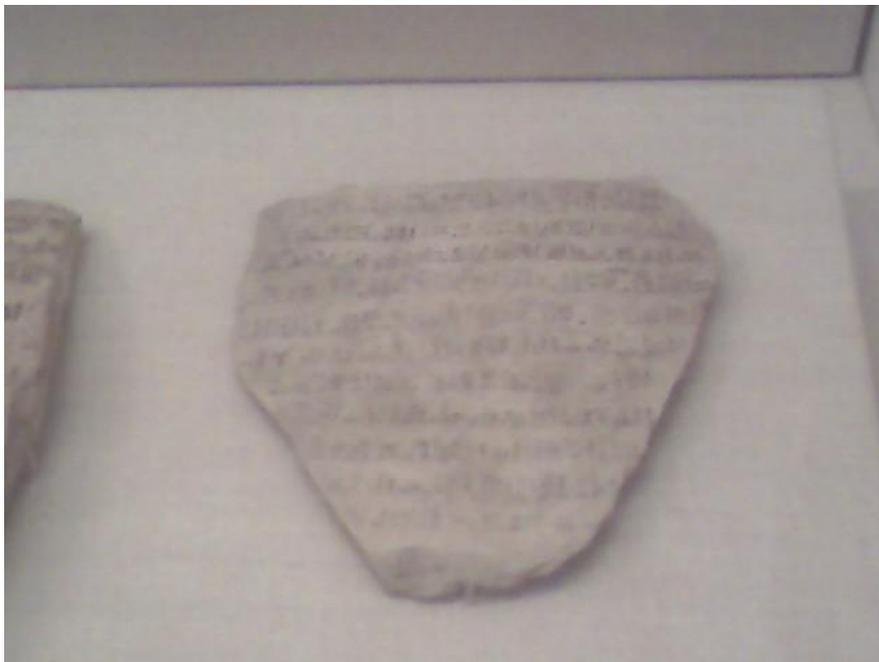


Figure 6. *OIM 16991, Tomb Builder's Complaint, Hieratic*
(from Oriental Institute Museum, photo by author).

Yahweh in Egyptian Texts

Interestingly, the oldest extra-biblical account of Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, is found in Egyptian hieroglyphic texts. This reference to Yahweh (Figure 7) dates to the eighteenth dynasty and was discovered at Soleb, a temple built by Amenhotep III *circa* 1400 B.C. and dedicated to Amon-Re (Aling and Billington 2009). This temple is located in Sudan and contains a group of texts which read “*t3 Sh3sw* of X” or “Land of the Shasu of X,” where “X” is normally a place (Aling and Billington 2009). These texts are dedicated to recounting Amenhotep III’s domination of foreign peoples. One of these texts reads “*t3 sh3sw ya-h-wa*” or “Land of the Shasu of Yahweh.” A similar list also containing the name Yahweh has been found at Amarah-West in Sudan dating to the thirteenth century B.C. This list is most likely a copy of the one at Soleb (Aling and Billington 2009).



Figure 7. *The Soleb Hieroglyph.*
(from <http://www.thebookblog.co.uk/2010/03/yahweh/>)

The term “Shasu” is used abundantly in New Kingdom texts to refer to semi-nomadic Semitic herders living in parts of Lebanon, Syria, Canaan, and Transjordan (Aling and Billington

2009). It is possible that the “Yahweh” in these texts is referring to a place rather than Israel’s god. However, if this is true, it would be far too coincidental for this to not be a place named after the “Yahweh” of the Israelites (Aling and Billington 2009). Of course, this evidence only works well with the eighteenth dynasty date of the Exodus, since it predates Rameses II and assumes Israel to be an established nation.

The verbal form of Yahweh has also been revealed in the Mesha stele, the Lachish letters, and in ostraca at Tell Arad (Chavalas 2002). Additionally, the holy name has been known outside of Israel long before the time of Moses. It has been found in Old Babylonian Period (1800 – 1600 B.C.) texts and possibly in Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamara (Chavalas 2002).

The Eastern Frontier Canal and Tell el-Borg

Recent archaeological excavations in the eastern Nile Delta region have uncovered what used to be an ancient canal system that has been compared to a relief of Seti I at Karnak depicting a similar canal (Hoffmeier 1996). Egyptian military fortifications have also been excavated along the canal system, one of which, Tell el-Borg, is believed to be the second fortification in the Seti I relief, known as “The Dwelling of the Lion” (Hoffmeier 2004). Artifacts found at the sites show that the Eastern Frontier Canal flourished during the nineteenth dynasty. In spite of this, Hoffmeier maintains that the canal can be dated to as early as the twelfth dynasty because there are a number of historical references to a canal stretching from Lake Timsah to the military fortifications on the “Ways-of-Horus,” most of which predate the nineteenth dynasty (Hoffmeier 1996:166-169).

Some of the many artifacts discovered at Tell el-Borg include depictions of New Kingdom pharaohs smiting Semitic enemies as they flee away, a violently destructed main gate,

and a domestic area with some tombs of Egyptian individuals (Hoffmeier 2004). Yet, possibly the most captivating find at Tell el-Borg was a unique defensive moat, made from nine courses of high quality, red fired brick (Hoffmeier 2004).

The excavations at Tell el-Borg and other sites along the Eastern Frontier Canal show that New Kingdom Egypt had a heavily fortified military front along the Eastern Nile Delta. The purpose of which was likely to prevent another Hyksos invasion (Hoffmeier 1996). This could also be an explanation for why God prohibited the Israelites from taking a northern route out of Egypt (Exodus 13:12). Hoffmeier also believes the biblical Pi Hahiroth (Exodus 14:2) to be located at the mouth of the Eastern Frontier Canal (Hoffmeier 1996), which is discussed more in-depth in the “Route of the Exodus” section below.

The Miracles and Plagues

Throughout the course of the Exodus narrative, God uses Moses and Aaron as His agents to work miracles and bring plagues upon Egypt. It is important to keep in mind the divine role of the pharaoh when reading about the plagues. In ancient Egypt, it was the role of the pharaoh to maintain order, or *ma'at*, and rid the country of anything related to chaos, or *isfet* (Hoffmeier 1996:144-153). The ancient Egyptians were so obsessed with this *ma'at/isfet* dichotomy that it dominated their artwork and literature. The plagues brought upon Egypt by Moses would have severely challenged the pharaoh's divine authority and ability to maintain *ma'at* within his country. At the very least, this is suggestive that the author of Exodus had an intimate knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture (Hoffmeier 1996:144-153).

In addition, many of the same plagues can also be found in Egyptian folklore. For example, the Prophecy of Neferti describes the sun-disk, which becomes covered over and will

not shine, much like the ninth Exodus plague (Chavalas 2002). The story of the serpent changed into a staff and the story of water transformed into blood are also found in Egyptian myths. This is yet another indicator of the domain knowledge held by the Exodus source concerning the Egyptian context of these matters (Chavalas 2002).

Many scholars have attempted to explain the miracles and plagues by natural means. Hoffmeier follows Greta Hort in making an argument for the plagues as being a chronological concurrence of natural phenomena (Hoffmeier 1996:146-149). He believes that the first plague of the Exodus, in which Moses turns the Nile River into blood (Exodus 7:19) is a result of severely fluctuating Nile seasonal tides (Hoffmeier 1996:146). The Nile, which reaches its peak height in September, is usually reddish in appearance due to the presence of *Roterde*, particles of soil in the water (Hoffmeier 1996:146). In Exodus, the Nile is described by its blood-red color, the death of its fish, its foul smell, and its undrinkable state (Exodus 7:20-21), all of which could have been caused by millions of flagellates in the water (Hoffmeier 1996:146). Frogs often invade Egypt toward the end of the Nile's inundation in September and October. This could have been the cause of the second plague (Hoffmeier 1996:146). The sudden death of the frogs (Exodus 8:13) could have been the result of bacteria from the decomposing fish (Hoffmeier 1996:146). The "gnats" of the third plague (Exodus 8:16) have been interpreted as mosquitoes that generally invade Egypt during the Nile flooding season (Hoffmeier 1996:146). The fifth plague, the death of livestock (Exodus 9:3), could have been a result of anthrax spread inland by the dead frogs of the second plague, and the sixth plague, the plague of boils (Exodus 9:9) could have been a result of the flies of the fourth plague (Exodus 8:21) spreading infections after coming in contact with the dead animals of the fifth plague (Hoffmeier 1996:146-147).

The hail, thunder, and lightening of the seventh plague (Exodus 9:23) not only caused damage to crops (Exodus 9:25, 31-32), but would have been a cause of great terror to the Egyptians, since hail is something that occurs very rarely in Egypt. Also, when recounting the seventh plague, the author of Exodus takes the extra effort to note that, “The flax and barley were destroyed, since the barley had headed and the flax was in bloom. The wheat and spelt, however, were not destroyed, because they ripen later.” (Exodus 9:31-32) This comment in Exodus is indeed consistent with the Egyptian agricultural calendar and shows a profound knowledge of Egyptian affairs that would have been difficult to acquire had the author been removed by a great amount of time and space from the events (Hoffmeier 1996:148). The eighth plague (Exodus 10:4) is highly acceptable from a naturalistic standpoint considering locust plagues have been a common nuisance to all living in the Near East and Africa, even in modern times (Hoffmeier 1996:148). The ninth plague, the plague of darkness (Exodus 10:21), can be attributed to desert sandstorms, called *khamsins* (Hoffmeier 1996:148). The sands from these sandstorms would have blotted out the sun enough to put Egypt in total darkness. The final plague, due to its selective nature, cannot be attributed to natural phenomena. The tenth plague says, “Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.” (Exodus 11:5) From a theological perspective, the purpose of this was probably to show that there was no doubt this was a supernatural event and thus undermines the authority of Yahweh (Hoffmeier 1996:149). Furthermore, as was mentioned earlier, the Dream Stele records that Amenhotep II’s firstborn son died mysteriously before ascending to the throne.

The miracle of the parting of the Red Sea is arguably the greatest miracle in the Old Testament. When Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, “the Lord drove the sea back with a

strong east wind and turned it into dry land...” (Exodus 14:21) making a “...wall of water on their right and on their left.” (Exodus 14:22). However, when Pharaoh’s army attempted to cross the sea, “the water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen.” (Exodus 14:28). Though intriguing, many consider this a myth or a child’s tale. However, physicist Colin Humphreys maintains that a natural phenomenon known as “wind set-down” satisfies this story. This rare occurrence happens when a strong, steady wind blows across a lengthy body of water that is fairly long relative to its width, making the water level drop significantly on the windward side while a wall of water is pushed up on the opposite side (Humphreys 2004). If wind continues to blow across the length of the sea, the drag of water causes a gap to open up and expose the sea floor. Though rare, this phenomenon is observed today in places where the wind conditions and the layout of the water are just right (Humphreys 2004). Exodus 14:21 describes a “strong east wind” as the cause for the parting of the sea. Because ancient Hebrew only has specific words for the four cardinal directions, “east” could represent a northeast wind, which would have caused this phenomenon to take place on the Gulf of Aqaba (Humphreys 2004). Unfortunately, this theory only satisfies the Central (or Arabian) Exodus Route Theory, as the lakes north of the Gulf of Suez are too small for a large wind set-down phenomenon and the Gulf of Suez itself would require a northwest wind rather than a northeast wind (Archaeological Study Bible:111).

However, natural explanations of these events in Exodus do not make them any less miraculous. “The ancient Israelites believed that their God worked in, with, and through natural events.” (Humphreys 2004). What made these events miraculous was their timing: for example, the Red Sea was parted just in time for the Israelites to escape Pharaoh’s army and was closed

right as the Egyptians tried to pass through. Therefore, these natural explanations can serve to make the miracles more, not less, believable.

Ankhenaten and Egyptian Monotheism

Amenhotep IV, or Ankhenaten as he called himself, father of the ever-famous “King Tut,” attempted to turn all of Egypt to monotheism during his reign. Egyptian art changed drastically during this time, as the Aten, a sun-disc god, became the focus of all religious artistic depictions with all other gods being purged from the religious illustrations (Redford 1999:57). Akhenaten also rejected the old royal residences of Memphis and Thebes, and built a new capitol, Akhetaten (“Horizon-of-the-sun-disc”), in Middle Egypt where he could focus the entire economy of Egypt on the cult of his sole god (Redford 1999:57). However, Akhetaten’s monotheistic cult was not accepted by the majority of Egyptians and collapsed with the end of his reign (Redford 1999:57).

Many scholars have attempted to make a connection between Akhenaten’s religion and the religion of the Israelites, with some even suggesting that Moses was a protégé of Akhenaten. However, the two religions had little in common besides the fact that they were both monotheistic (Chavalas 2002). The god of Akhenaten was a solar deity associated with light and the sun, unlike the Hebrew god, Yahweh. The name of the deity was not new, and had few recognizable attributes (Chavalas 2002). Also, there were many depictions of the Aten, unlike the prohibitions against portrayals of Yahweh. Furthermore, there was no covenant relationship between the Egyptians and the Aten, like there was with Israel and Yahweh (Chavalas 2002). Many scholars have argued that the Hymn to the Aten and Psalm 104 are strikingly similar, suggesting a dependence of Hebrew theology on Akhenaten’s monotheism. Though they do

indeed have many similarities, this is based primarily on Egyptian literary influence, not religious influence, as shown by the comparisons above (Chavalas 2002).

The Route of the Exodus

There are various different theories about which route the Israelites may have taken on their exodus from Egypt, but, for the most part, these theories can all be classified as variations that fall under three separate categories: the Northern Route Theory, the Southern Route Theory, and the Central (or Arabian) Route Theory. The itinerary of Israel's travels from Egypt to Mount Sinai is little more than a list of obscure place-names (Archaeological Study Bible:108). According to the Bible, we know the Israelites moved from Rameses to Succoth (Exodus 12:37), and that "after leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert" (Exodus 13:20) before proceeding to Pi Hahiroth, located near Migdol, Baal Zephon, and the sea (Exodus 14:2). After this, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21-22), and wandered in the Desert of Shur for three days (Exodus 15:22) before coming to Marah (Exodus 15:23) and Elim (Exodus 15:27). From here, they proceeded through the Desert of Sin, on to Rephidim (Exodus 17:1), and eventually came to the region of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1-2). As detailed as this seems, scholars are unsure of a majority of these place-names. Not to mention, there is confusion about the point at which the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, as well as the identity of the sea itself (Archaeological Study Bible:108). In this section, I present each of the theories mentioned above and give reasons for why each is or is not plausible.

The most popular theory of the Exodus route is the Southern Route Theory (Figure A2). Most proponents of this theory assume that Rameses is positioned at the generally accepted location of Qantir, located in the eastern Nile Delta (Archaeological Study Bible:109). From

there, the Israelites would have made their first stop at Succoth, located at the eastern end of the Wadi Tumilat, near modern Tell el-Maskhuta (Archaeological Study Bible:109). Due to Pi Hahiroth's translation as "mouth of the canals," this site has been suggested by Hoffmeier to be located on the northern edge of Lake Timsah (Figure A3) where it would have joined the Egyptian canal system (Hoffmeier 1996:169-171). From here the Egyptian armies stationed at the highly fortified northeastern frontier would have chased the Israelites either across Lake Timsah or the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, where the Egyptian army drowned. After crossing the Red Sea² the Israelites would have traveled to Mount Sinai, which in this scenario would most likely be located at modern Jebel Musa ("Mountain of Moses") in southern Sinai (Archaeological Study Bible:109).

The Northern Route Theory suggests that the Israelites crossed Lake Sirbonis on the Mediterranean coast and that Mount Sinai was actually located in northern Sinai (Archaeological Study Bible:108). However, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'" (Exodus 13:17). Thus, this theory is not very widely accepted because it has the Israelites taking a route that God specifically forbade. Also, the Israelites would have had to pass through the Egyptian's highly fortified northeastern garrison to do so.

The Central (or Arabian) Route Theory is based on two presuppositions: that Mount Sinai was actually located in Arabia and that the only body of water clearly identified as the Red Sea, or *yam suph*, is the Gulf of Aqaba (Archaeological Study Bible:112). Like the Southern Route Theory, this theory also has Qantir as Rameses and relates Succoth to Tell el-Maskhuta, but after

² The Hebrew word *yam suph* translates "Reed Sea" (Hoffmeier 1996). The only other part of the Bible where *yam suph* is used to designate a specific place is in 1 Kings 9:26, where the term refers to the Gulf of Aqaba. However, some scholars have interpreted *yam suph* to refer to the Red Sea as a whole (Archaeological Study Bible:110).

that point, the theories are entirely different (Archaeological Study Bible:112). This theory overlooks the fortifications in the Suez area because it assumes that the Egyptian pursuit did not begin until the Israelites were well into the Sinai Peninsula (Archaeological Study Bible:112). This theory suggests that the Israelites would have followed the Darb el-Hajj, a trade route linking Arabia to Egypt that follows a nearly straight line from just north of the Gulf of Suez to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba (Archaeological Study Bible:112). The next stop would have been Etham. There is a mountain at the northeastern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba called Mount Itm (also written as Ithem or Yitm) which could be related to this location (Archaeological Study Bible:112). From here the Israelites would have made an about face and followed back along the western side of the gulf to give the Egyptians the impression that the Israelites were “wandering around the land in confusion,” (Exodus 14:3), after which, they would have crossed the Gulf of Aqaba. Because of the Gulf of Aqaba crossing location, this theory coincides nicely with Humphreys’ “wind set-down” hypothesis. From here, the Israelites would have traveled along the eastern edge of the gulf to Marah, which could have been the oasis at modern al-Malha (Archaeological Study Bible:112). After this, they would have traveled to Elim, where there were “twelve springs and seventy palm trees” (Exodus 15:27), which could have been Ainuna, a place where similar conditions existed (Archaeological Study Bible:112). Eventually, the Israelites would have arrived at Mount Sinai, which, according to this theory, was most likely the volcanic Mount Bedr (Archaeological Study Bible:112). Though this theory offers a fascinating interpretation of the exodus itinerary, little serious archaeological work has been conducted to back it up (Archaeological Study Bible:112).

CONCLUSIONS

We entered this study questioning if biblical sources, specifically the Exodus account, are trustworthy stories when taken from an historical perspective, so let us take a moment to sum up what has been shown by this reading. First, it was demonstrated that there is a plethora of archaeological evidence supporting the notion of Semitic presence in Egypt, and that it is plausible that the Israelites, who would have been a minority amongst their Canaanite contemporaries at this time, could have been amid these Semitic peoples. Second, it was shown that Egyptian builders experienced similar working conditions to what was recorded by the Israelites. Also, it has been shown that the Hebrew god, Yahweh, was known to the Egyptians following the proposed early date of the Exodus. The Eastern Frontier Canal and excavations at Tell el-Borg have revealed that Egypt had a heavily fortified eastern front following the expulsion of the Hyksos, which makes credible the Israelites' decision to take a longer route out of Egypt to Canaan and also provides a possible location for the biblical Pi Hahiroth. Natural explanations were also given for the plagues and miracles recorded in Exodus, showing that the story was not entirely "mythological," yet, nonetheless miraculous. This study also put forward at least two plausible routes for the Exodus, based on the amalgamation of biblical place-names, archaeological evidence, and similarities of modern sites.

Though this study gave no direct archaeological evidence proving that the Exodus actually happened, I feel there is an overabundance of indirect evidence, which is often overlooked, supporting the Exodus account. To leave the reader with a closing thought, what would become of "having faith" if there was a direct proof for God?

APPENDIX A – MAPS



Figure A1. *Map of Egypt and Sinai (from Google Earth).*



Figure A2. *Southern Exodus Route and the Conquest of Canaan* (from NIV Archaeological Study Bible).

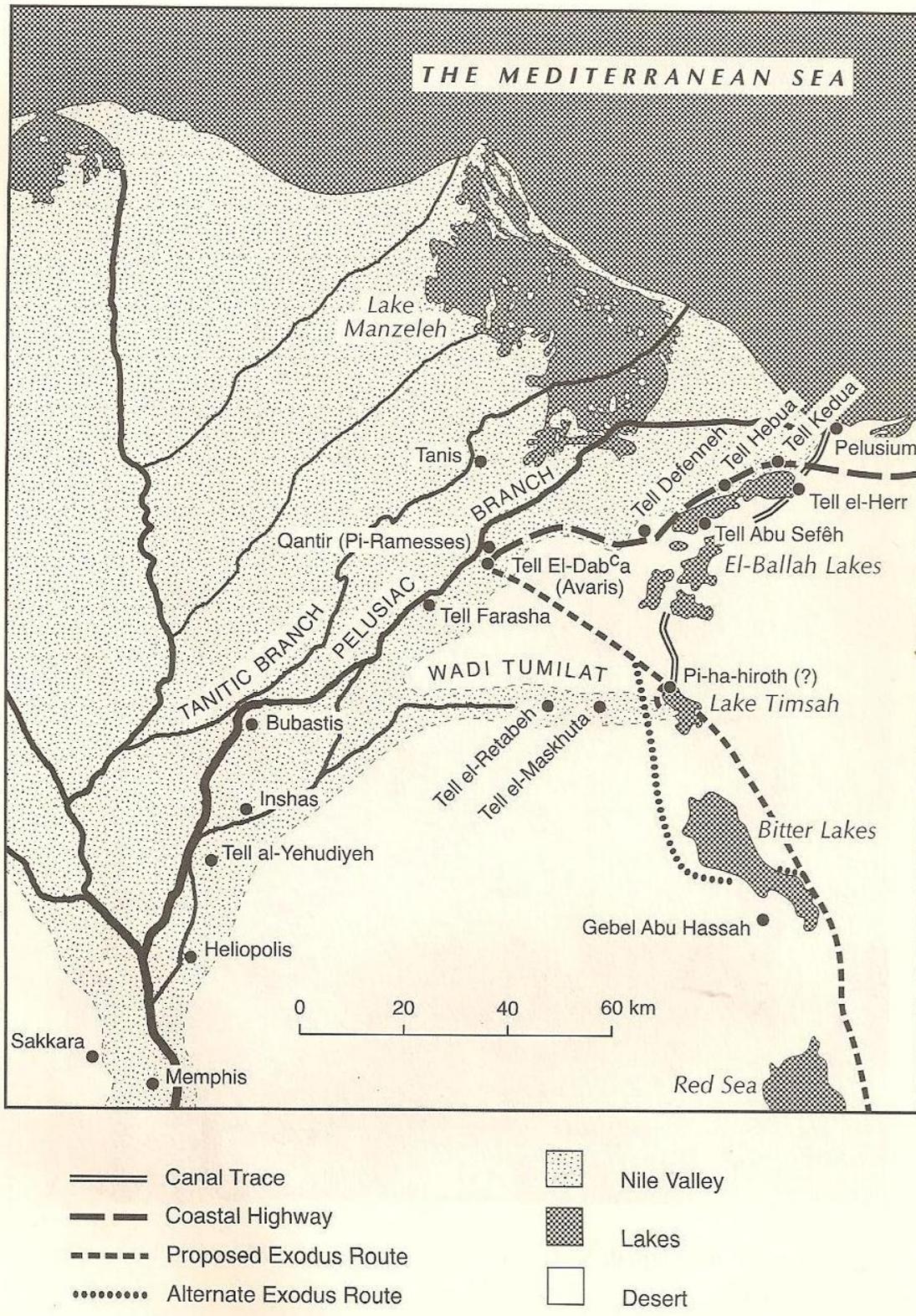


Figure A3. Map of Southern Exodus Route showing Eastern Frontier Canal and Pi Hahiroth (from Hoffmeier 1996)

APPENDIX B – CHRONOLOGICAL CHARTS

Table 1. *Ancient Egypt Chronology*
(adapted from Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt)

PERIOD	DATES	DYNASTIES
Paleolithic	700,000 B.P. – 8,000 B.P.	N/A
Neolithic	5200 B.C. – 4000 B.C.	N/A
Predynastic	4000 B.C. – 3050 B.C.	Predynastic Dynasties
Early Dynastic	3050 B.C. – 2686 B.C.	1 – 2
Old Kingdom	2686 B.C. – 2181 B.C.	3 – 6
First Intermediate Period	2181 B.C. – 2055 B.C.	7 – 11
Middle Kingdom	2055 B.C. – 1795 B.C.	11 – 12
Second Intermediate Period	1795 B.C. – 1550 B.C.	13 – 17
New Kingdom	1550 B.C. – 1069 B.C.	18 – 20
Third Intermediate Period	1069 B.C. – 664 B.C.	21 – 25
Late Period	664 B.C. – 332 B.C.	26 -31
Ptolemaic Period	332 B.C. – 32 B.C.	Ptolemaic Dynasties I – IX
Roman Period	31 B.C. – A.D. 312	N/A
Coptic Period	A.D. 312 – A.D. 639	N/A

Table 2. *Ancient Syria-Palestine Chronology*
 (adapted from *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*)

PERIOD	DATES
Pre-Pottery Neolithic A	8500 B.C. – 7500 B.C.
Pre-Pottery Neolithic B	7500 B.C. – 6000 B.C.
Pottery Neolithic A	6000 B.C. – 5000 B.C.
Pottery Neolithic B	5000 B.C. – 4300 B.C.
Chalcolithic	4300 B.C. – 3300 B.C.
Early Bronze I	3300 B.C. – 3050 B.C.
Early Bronze II – III	3050 B.C. – 2300 B.C.
Early Bronze IV/Middle Bronze I	2300 B.C. – 2000 B.C.
Middle Bronze IIA	2000 B.C. – 1750 B.C.
Middle Bronze IIB – C	1750 B.C. – 1550 B.C.
Late Bronze I	1550 B.C. – 1400 B.C.
Late Bronze IIA – B	1400 B.C. – 1200 B.C.
Iron IA	1200 B.C. – 1150 B.C.
Iron IB	1150 B.C. – 1000 B.C.
Iron IIA	1000 B.C. – 925 B.C.
Iron IIB	925 B.C. – 720 B.C.
Iron IIC	720 B.C. – 586 B.C.

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