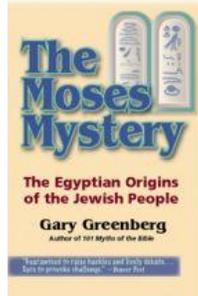


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Chapter 1

The Problem of Israel's Origins

Who were the earliest Israelites? Where did they come from and under what circumstances did they rise to power in Canaan? These questions, which bear on the intellectual origins of western civilization, engage the finest minds in biblical studies, but the answers, like Tantalus's fruit, remain just out of reach.

The bible tells us that the Hebrew nation originated with Abraham, in Mesopotamia, Ur of the Chaldees to be specific.¹ From Ur, he and his family traveled to Haran, and from there to Canaan, where God promised him that his descendants would rule over the land. This covenant passed on to his son Isaac, and then to Isaac's son Jacob (later called Israel.) Jacob had twelve sons, and one of them, Joseph, became Prime Minister of Egypt. At Joseph's invitation Jacob and his family, less than seventy males in all, left Canaan and moved to Egypt. At first, they were warmly received, but as their number rapidly swelled the good will turned to fear and anger. Israel soon found itself condemned to forced labor. Eventually, a hero named Moses arose from the enslaved ranks, and challenged the mighty Pharaoh to a duel of gods. Egypt's multitude of false idols were no match for the one true god of Moses, and the Israelite hero triumphantly led his people out of that country and towards the promised land of Canaan. Just forty years later, the Israelites marched into their new homeland and, by force of arms, imposed their territorial claims on the native population.

Unfortunately, there is not a shred of evidence outside the bible to corroborate these claims.

What Scholars Believe

Currently, biblical scholars recognize three possible scenarios explaining Israel's rise to power in Canaan: 1) the "conquest" theory—that Israel came in from the outside and conquered the land; 2) the "peaceful settlement" theory—in which it is argued that Israelites entered gradually, settling in the sparsely populated areas of the central highlands; and 3) the "peasant revolt" or "social revolution" theory—that Canaanites rose up against their overlords.²

Despite this wide range of disagreement, there are certain related matters, consistent with the biblical account, upon which there is virtual unanimity. The consensus holds that prior to the Hebrew monarchy, Israel was bound together in a confederation of Semitic tribes. This political arrangement supposedly evolved over several centuries from associations of Semite-speaking groups of pastoral nomads. Scholars also believe that before Israel became a power in Canaan at least some portion of the Hebrew population (if not all) journeyed into Egypt and lived there under hostile circumstances. Additionally, historians accept that the crucial stages occurred in the twelfth or eleventh century BC, when hundreds of new settlements were founded in the hill country of central Canaan (although there is no specific evidence connecting any of these settlements to Israel.) But certain questions persist.

Where is the Evidence?

How do we know, independent of the bible, that Israel's presence in Egypt was preceded by an earlier presence in Palestine? Why is there no archaeological record of Israel or the Hebrew people prior to the thirteenth century BC? Why is there no extra-biblical evidence linking any specific Semitic tribes to the Hebrew people? And, why did the so-called "ten lost tribes" disappear from history without an archaeological trace of their prior existence?

For Israel's history before the thirteenth century we have only the biblical account, but that account rests upon a shaky foundation. Modern scholars now recognize that the early books of the bible weren't fully edited until after the seventh century BC, and perhaps centuries later. (There is no extant portion of biblical text dated earlier than the third century BC.) The final version attempted to weave a seamless narrative out of a diverse collection of contradictory historical claims that reflected clashing political philosophies and opposing religious doctrines. The resulting compilation indicates numerous compromises with the truth.

Even if we assume that the bible derives from earlier sources yet to be discovered, it still describes events that occurred more than a thousand years before its completion. In those ancient times few peoples had a strong tradition of historical writing and perspective. Much of what passed for history consisted of myth, legend, and rumor, elements of which are pervasive throughout the biblical text. (Herodotus, widely considered the father of historical writing, dates to the fifth century BC--approximately the same time that the early books of the bible were edited into their final form--and draws substantially on myths and rumors for much of what he records.) Though several nations had written records in the second, third and fourth millennia from which modern historians can draw conclusions, there is no evidence that Israel was among them.

Quite simply, where a group of people lived in the sixth century BC, and what language it spoke, and what it believed about its historical roots a thousand years earlier, does not, absent independent corroboration, prove where it lived a thousand years earlier, what language it originally spoke, and what took place in its formative years. Certainly, little in the biblical text would be outside the knowledge of learned Hebrew scribes in the sixth century BC. Furthermore, the many anachronistic phrases in the early books of the bible point to a very late editing. This is not to say that in this later time the Hebrews did not speak a Semitic language or strongly identify with Semitic culture. We just do not know that this was always so.

A New Model for Israel's Origins

In this book I offer a radical new solution to the puzzle of Israel's origins, one that places its earliest roots in fourteenth century Egypt during the reign of the monotheistic Pharaoh Akhenaten. I call this the "Ateist" theory, after the unique deity that he worshipped. It holds that the refugees departing Egypt during what later became known as the Exodus were native Egyptians, devoted followers of the pharaoh Akhenaten.

This king's monotheistic religious reforms triggered massive resentment throughout the country. Less than two decades after Akhenaten's death Pharaoh Horemheb launched an aggressive counter-revolution aimed at suppressing all memory of the hated predecessor. Akhenaten's loyal followers suffered greatly. They were removed from office, stripped of honor and property, and in many instances banished from the country. These persecuted Egyptians united together, rose in rebellion and formed the House of Israel.

Akhenaten

The pharaoh Akhenaten, ninth king of the Eighteenth Dynasty ruled Egypt for seventeen years in the middle of the fourteenth century.³ A monotheist, militantly devoted to the worship of Re-Herakhty, the sun-god whom he believed manifest in the form of Aten, the solar disc, his revolutionary religious doctrine allowed for no competition. Especially offensive to him was the worship of Amen, chief deity of Thebes and widely celebrated as the king of the gods. So strong was his animosity that in an act of theological intolerance never before experienced in that nation's millennia-long history, he dispatched agents throughout the land to shut down the god's temples and excise the offensive name from walls, tombs, statues, and inscriptions.

Another target of the king's wrath was the popular god Osiris, Judge of the Afterlife. Under Akhenaten, the Osirian funerary practices so central to the Egyptian way of life were purged of all polytheistic symbolism. After Year 5 of his reign, the plural form for "god" no longer appeared in any writing of that time. In keeping with his proscription against graven images, the scribes substituted phonetic spelling for those anthropomorphic and theriomorphic signs used in script.⁴

Akhenaten's monotheism did not take root and Egypt did not remember him kindly. In fact, they did not remember him at all. Pharaoh Horemheb systematically destroyed all public evidence of the heretic's existence. Workers chiseled out Akhenaten's identifying hieroglyphs wherever they were found. They demolished his newly built capital city and quarried the stones for new building projects in other parts of the country. They even omitted his name from the king-lists. He had become a nonperson, the nation doing all it could to forget he ever lived. Today, he is one of the best known of all pharaohs.

Modern Egyptologists learned of Akhenaten's existence only in the late nineteenth century, when teams of archaeologists visited the ruins of an unidentified city in an area now known as Amarna. These remains were what was left of the king's demolished capital city. On some of the walls, portrayed in an artistic style considered an unusual departure from traditional Egyptian portraiture, they found the deformed image of an unknown pharaoh and his beautiful queen. The hieroglyphs indicated that this strange monarch was named Akhenaten, a pharaoh of whom they had no prior knowledge.

Continued exploration of this city produced a number of informative discoveries. These included the famous Amarna letters, stone tablets containing vivid reports of the turbulent state of foreign relations in the time of both Akhenaten and his father, Amenhotep III. In other Egyptian cities excavators discovered not only other structures attributed to this reign but also

many of the stones transported from Akhenaten's capital city, some with fragments of revealing text. Before long, a sketchy profile of this monotheistic revolutionary took shape.

At first, his reputation soared. Historians hailed him as “the first individual,” a religious reformer, a great thinker, witness to the truth, a magnificent poet, an artistic revolutionary, even the forerunner to Moses. But, even the most aggressive advocates of a link between Moses and Akhenaten still adhered to the Semitic model of Israel’s roots.

Sigmund Freud, in Moses and Monotheism, argued that Moses was an Egyptian noble who followed the Atenist beliefs of the heretic pharaoh. He even identified Aten with Adonai, a name Hebrews use for God. On the issue of the Hebrew people, however, he could only speculate as to how Moses came to be the leader of Semitic tribes. He suggested that Moses must have served as an Egyptian governor who became sympathetic to the Hebrew plight.

Thomas Mann, in his novel Joseph the Provider, reflected much of the speculation in the early years of Akhenaten’s discovery. He made Akhenaten the pharaoh who elevated Joseph to the position of Prime Minister of Egypt. In all other respects, though, he adopted the traditional biblical account.

In recent years Akhenaten’s luster has worn thin. Today, Egyptologists dismiss him as a voluptuary, an intellectual lightweight, an atheist, ultimately a maniac.⁵ They sharply reject any connection between Akhenaten and Moses. Summing up the view of most Egyptologists, Donald B. Redford, Director of the Akhenaten Temple Project and one of the chief students of the Amarna Age (as Akhenaten’s reign is known), writes: “A vast gulf is fixed between the rigid, coercive, rarified monotheism of the pharaoh and Hebrew henotheism; which in any case we see through the distorted prism of texts written 700 years after Akhenaten’s death”⁶ One historian after another, when reciting the history of Akhenaten’s monotheism, adds similar disclaimers.

This sentiment, so widely endorsed, raises, at least to me, a question. If the view we have of early Hebrew religion is distorted through the prism of texts written seven hundred years after the death of Akhenaten (i.e., the bible, which received its present written form no earlier than the sixth century BC) how can it easily be concluded that the original religious views of Moses were any less a rigid, coercive, rarefied monotheism than that of Akhenaten’s?

Horemheb

The pharaoh responsible for waging the campaign against Akhenaten’s memory was Horemheb, who came to the throne about fourteen years after Akhenaten’s death. He demolished Akhenaten's buildings, erased the heretic’s name from monuments and persecuted the remnant of Akhenaten’s following. Those holding any form of public office or important position were denounced as corrupt and ineffective. He removed them from office, punished many of them and, in some cases, banished them from Egypt. The destruction of Akhenaten’s capital city must have displaced tens of thousands of inhabitants, many of them priests, soldiers, and members of aristocratic families.

Horemheb had no royal blood. A popular general, he came to the throne when the royal blood line ended. He also left no blood heirs. In the year before he died, he appointed Ramesses I, another military figure, as his coregent. Ramesses outlived Horemheb by less than three years and during his brief reign he appointed his son, Sethos I, as coregent. Egyptologists mark the death of Horemheb as the dividing line between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties of Egypt.

Moses

In this book I will argue that Moses was the chief priest of the Aten cult and that at the time of Akhenaten's death Moses fled from Egypt to avoid execution. Upon Horemheb's death he returned to Egypt and attempted a military coup, the purpose of which was to restore the Aten cult to the throne. His allies included the persecuted remnant of Akhenaten's following, large numbers of badly treated sick and diseased Egyptians, assorted opponents of Ramesses I, and an army belonging to the Canaanite kingdom of Shechem, whose rulers were openly hostile to Egypt's demands for submission.

Moses' actions brought the nation to the brink of civil war. The confrontation ended with a negotiated truce that guaranteed the insurgent army safe passage out of the country. This negotiated truce and safe passage out of Egypt was the Exodus.

As the centuries passed, like most immigrant groups, the refugees identified increasingly with the language, culture, and traditions of their new neighbors. At the same time they lost touch with their own roots. As the biblical authors wrote repeatedly, Canaanite culture had a powerful pull on the Israelites and they frequently succumbed to its enticements. Despite unrelenting apostasy, however, one truth remained with them. In Egypt they were oppressed and a god like no other delivered them from bondage.

Corollaries

This new model of Israel's origins has several corollaries. 1) Israel's appearance in Canaan occurred suddenly in the late fourteenth-early thirteenth century BC, and not after several centuries of evolution from tribes of Semite-speaking nomads; 2) the first Israelites spoke Egyptian and adhered to Egyptian cultural practices and beliefs; 3) no confederation of Semitic tribes preceded the Hebrew monarchy; and 4) the "ten lost tribes" disappeared not because of the Assyrian conquest but because they never existed.

Dating the Exodus

When did Israel leave Egypt and under what circumstances did it do so? These are the central questions that we must answer before the Atenist theory can be validated, but testimony is lacking. Outside the bible there is no evidence that the Exodus even occurred. It is only because of the fervency with which ancient Israel proclaimed such a demeaning origin that historians give any credit at all to the biblical account.

Within academic circles these questions provoke heated argument. There is nothing inherently implausible about dating the Exodus to just after the end of Horemheb's reign. Doing so, though, raises a host of problems for those who would deny a connection between Moses and Akhenaten, and most modern scholars do deny such a connection. Consequently, all popular solutions to the Exodus problem carefully place a chronological wall between these two innovative thinkers.

The Majority View

The majority view dates the Exodus to the middle of the reign of Ramesses II, at least seventy to eighty years after Akhenaten's death and outside the range acceptable for the "Atenist" model. In support of this position proponents argue that the Exodus must have occurred close in time to the onset of the previously mentioned Canaanite settlements in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC

In the previous century most scholars believed that the Exodus occurred sometime during the reign of Merneptah, successor to Ramesses II, but an archaeological find attributed to that pharaoh's reign (see below) necessitated that the Exodus precede him. Also in favor of Ramesses II being the pharaoh of the Exodus is that there were many years of peace in the latter part of his sixty-seven years of rule. Such a condition suggested a likely time frame in which to allow the Hebrews to wander in the wilderness without Egyptian retribution.

Pi-Ramesse

Perhaps the most important piece of evidence cited in favor of Ramesses II as the pharaoh of the Exodus is the biblical claim that when the Pharaoh ordered the enslavement of the Hebrew people he set them to work at the city of "Raamses".⁷ Scholars uniformly accept that the biblical city of "Raamses" corresponds to the Egyptian city of Pi-Ramesse, the royal residence of Ramesses II.

What makes Pi-Ramesse intriguing is that the city didn't receive that name until the reign of Ramesses II. Prior to that time it was known as Avaris, which had been the capital city and stronghold of the earlier Hyksos kings. Biblical scholars argue that if the Hebrews worked in the city of "Raamses" and that name first came into existence during the reign of Ramesses II, then the Exodus must have come no earlier than the reign of this pharaoh. Additionally, based on the Merneptah victory stele (see below) scholars recognize that the Exodus had to occur prior to the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah, the immediate successor to Ramesses II. Such a sequence of events, say the scholars, indicates that the Exodus could only have happened in the reign of Ramesses II.

That argument has a number of flaws. First, according to the bible, the pharaoh who set the Hebrews to work on "Raamses" could not have been the pharaoh of the Exodus. His actions occurred before the birth of Moses. The Exodus occurred in Moses' eightieth year. Ramesses II only ruled for 67 years. His reign wasn't long enough to encompass both the birth of Moses and the Exodus.

Second, again according to the bible, while Moses was in exile from Egypt, the pharaoh on the throne died and a new pharaoh came to power.⁸ This new pharaoh was the pharaoh of the Exodus. So if Ramesses II had to be on the throne for the work order at "Raamses" then one of his successors had to be the pharaoh of the Exodus. But, because of the aforementioned problem with the Merneptah victory stele an Exodus in the reign of a successor to Ramesses II has been almost universally rejected.

Third and most important, the bible connects the city of "Raamses" with Joseph, who placed his father and his brethren, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded.⁹

Following the logic of the biblical scholars, Joseph would have had to have lived in the reign of Ramesses II. Since the pharaoh of the enslavement acted after Joseph died both the pharaoh of the enslavement and the pharaoh of the Exodus would have to have been successors to Ramesses II, even more objectionable.

What these conflicts show is that the author of the biblical passages referring to "Raamses" wrote at a time when the city of Avaris had become known by the name Pi-Ramesse. This could have been anytime after the reign of Ramesses II. The events described as happening there could have occurred before the name change in the reign of Ramesses II but the author could have substituted the name he knew at the time for the original name of Avaris. Later,

when we consider Egyptian accounts of the Exodus we will see that the Egyptian historians placed the people involved in the Exodus in the city of Avaris rather than Pi-Ramesse.

Other Objections to Ramesses II

Against the idea of placing the Exodus in the reign of Ramesses II, critics note that Ramesses II was a strong military leader who had a significant presence in Palestine. (He engaged the powerful Hittites in a major military battle as far north as Syria.) How could Israel have successfully resisted such a powerful emperor and there be no record of the confrontation? Even if the Egyptians had suffered some sort of military defeat, we know from historical records that the Egyptians were not adverse to lying about what occurred and claiming victory. “An expulsion of alien forces” is how the Egyptians might have put it, if the Israelites were a non-Egyptian people.

For the Hebrews to have avoided an Egyptian reprisal so soon after the Exodus would have required a much weaker Egypt. Such a situation was evident in the reign of Horemheb, whose final days on the throne preceded Ramesses II by less than fifteen years. Under his predecessors, beginning with Akhenaten about a quarter of a century earlier, Egyptian hegemony in Canaan and Syria had been severely eroded by the expanding influence of the Hittites and the rebelliousness of many subject kings. Little is known about Horemheb’s activities in foreign policy, but no evidence indicates that he significantly reinstated Egyptian authority. Furthermore, other evidence suggests that he abandoned a series of Palestinian fortresses, indicating a weak Egyptian presence during his reign.

Interestingly, if the Exodus represented a rebellion by the remnants of Akhenaten’s following, it would explain why there are no public Egyptian records of the confrontation between the two sides. The pharaohs meant to wipe out any record of Akhenaten’s existence. To memorialize any such confrontation in public displays, even those claiming victory over the heretic, would only help perpetuate memories of the hated king. This does not mean that private reports or disguised accounts didn’t exist, and in later chapters we will examine evidence of what these other records had to say about this affair.

Minority Views

There are also some strong minority opinions about the date of the Exodus, all of which place it well before the reign of Akhenaten. One such theory, partially based on powerful volcanic eruptions in nearby Crete, dates the Exodus to about 1450. These powerful explosions, some scholars suggest, caused the parting of the sea and the pillars of fire and smoke described in the biblical account. Until recently, most archaeologists thought this eruption took place around 1450, but new evidence now indicates that they took place about 1645 BC, well before any acceptable date for the Exodus.¹⁰

The year 1450 is also troublesome for other reasons. Egypt was then at the height of its power, its authority extending deep into Syria and lasting almost another hundred years. It is hard to believe that a rebel nation could successfully resist Egypt’s superior military resources, or that records of the time, in Egypt and elsewhere, would omit any mention of such a notable achievement.

Another theory, once widely held but now much less so, holds that the Exodus corresponded to the expulsion of the Hyksos kings at the start of the Eighteenth Dynasty, a date in the mid sixteenth century BC. The Hyksos were Asian chieftains, probably of Semitic background, who, between the eighteenth and sixteenth centuries, ruled considerable portions of Egyptian territory. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century AD, was the first to identify the expulsion of the Hyksos with the Exodus and for much of later history his argument

was influential. The problem with such an early date, though, is that it creates a post-Exodus period of over three hundred years in which Israel does not appear in the historical record.

Contradictory Biblical Evidence

Dating the Exodus is problematic because evidence of its occurrence appears exclusively in the bible, and what little it tells is contradictory. Exodus 12:40-41, for example, places the Exodus 430 years after the start of Israel's sojourn in Egypt (i.e., from Jacob's arrival) whereas Genesis 15:13-14 indicates that four hundred years transpired from the birth of Isaac to the end of the bondage. Both claims can not be true. Jacob was born in Isaac's sixtieth year.¹¹ He didn't arrive in Egypt until his one hundred and thirtieth year.¹² If the sojourn lasted 430 years, then the Exodus would have to have occurred 620 years after Isaac's birth.¹³ On the other hand, if the Exodus occurred 400 years after Isaac was born, then the sojourn could only have been 210 years long.¹⁴ Other biblical passages raise additional problems.

Even if we favored one biblical claim against another, what historical event would permit us to anchor that claim to a specific date? There is the assertion in 1 Kings 6:1 that the Exodus occurred 480 years before Solomon started work on the temple. This is somewhat corroborated by Judges 11:26, which suggests that Jephthah judged Israel three hundred years after the Exodus. Since historians date Solomon's ascension to c.970-950, that claim would yield a potential Exodus date of 1450-1430.

However, because of the aforementioned problems with such a date, most scholars maintain that the expression "480 years" derives from a misunderstanding. According to this view, the biblical author meant to describe twelve generations of Israelites (since 1 Chronicles 6 shows twelve generations from the Exodus to Solomon) and assigned forty years to each generation. But, the argument continues, forty years are too many for a generation. A more realistic twenty-five years, say proponents of this argument, would make a better fit, giving a total span of three hundred years. Such a procedure would date the Exodus to 1270-1250, during the reign of Ramesses II, right where the majority would like it.

That there is no reference to a generation lasting forty years, twenty-five years, or any other number of years, does not dissuade proponents of this surgical reconstruction. Nor can we find any convincing proof that the biblical author meant "twelve generations" instead of "480 years." In fact, the number of years assigned to a generation is wholly arbitrary. In this case, scholars chose "twenty-five years" because it conveniently places the Exodus exactly where the majority would have it.

This solution also ignores another problem. There is no extrabiblical evidence that David, Solomon, or the vast and glorious empire over which they ruled ever existed. That a Hebrew nation existed cannot be denied, and most certainly it had a king. The name "Solomon", however, is simply an adopted title meaning "peaceable."¹⁵ It could be a title adopted by many Hebrew kings.

If a King Solomon ever had such an extensive kingdom as described in the bible, it seems to have escaped the notice of both its subjects and its neighbors--the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Amorites, Canaanites, Edomites, Moabites. All of these nations, so far, remain mute on the subject of this Hebrew kingdom. History contains many rumors about mighty kingdoms that never existed, but rarely does one never hear of a great kingdom that did exist. Such an ephemeral kingdom can not serve as an anchor for biblical dating.

Additionally, the date proposed by scholars for Solomon's reign conflicts with biblical chronology. As commentators have noted, if you add up the length of reign for each of

Solomon's successors as king of Judea, the total time from the year he began building the temple to the destruction of the temple is 430 years. Since independent sources permit us to date the destruction of the temple to 587 BC, the biblical account would require that Solomon's initial building program begin in 1017, about sixty years earlier than scholars would allow.¹⁶

In opposition to this earlier date, historians argue that the 430 years from the beginning of the temple to the destruction of the temple is the same duration as the Hebrew sojourn in Egypt, and that the numbers have been juggled to create a parallel history in post-Exodus times. This may be a legitimate attack on the post-Exodus chronology, but it simply cuts Solomon loose from any chronological anchor. Since we can't accurately date the start of Solomon's reign, we can't use that event in order to date the Exodus.

The Earliest Archaeological Evidence for Israel

The Merneptah Stele

Although history does not tell us of the Exodus, it does supply some help in setting the latest possible date. The earliest nonbiblical reference to the name Israel appears on an Egyptian stele dating to the latter half of the thirteenth century BC, about 100-125 years after Akhenaten's death. It is unique in that Egypt never used the name again.¹⁷ One has to skip forward almost four hundred years, completely bypassing the reigns of David and Solomon, before its next appearance outside the bible.¹⁸

Commemorating Pharaoh Merneptah's victory over the combined forces of Libya and the Sea Peoples, the monument preserves an effusive hymn full of national joy and enemy disgrace. Tucked away near the very end, is this poem:

The princes are prostrate, saying: "Mercy!"
Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.
Desolation is for Tehenu; Hatti is pacified;
Plundered is the Canaan with every evil;
Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer;
Yanoam is made as that which does not exist;
Israel is laid waste, his seed is not;
Hurru is become a widow for Egypt!
All lands together, they are pacified;
Everyone who was restless, he has been bound.¹⁹

The conquests claimed have no connection to the Libyan war. They depict no historical truth.²⁰ Their inclusion serves only as a poetic attempt to portray Merneptah as a grand warrior.

A curious feature of this inscription is that Israel is the only name with a grammatical determinative signifying people instead of land. The grammar suggests to almost all biblical scholars that we have here a picture of ancient Israel in its post-Exodus pre-Conquest stage.²¹

This discovery caused quite a shock to the academic world of 1896, the year in which the monument was discovered. At that time most biblical and Egyptological scholars identified Merneptah as the pharaoh of the Exodus. On this new evidence historians had to date the event to an earlier time.²² But when?

If the Exodus happened not much earlier than the start of Ramesses II, then Moses and Akhenaten would become childhood pals, educated together and receiving their religious training in the great Egyptian temple of Annu (the Greek Heliopolis, the biblical On). If scholars wanted

to separate these two revolutionaries, and they did, they had to date the Exodus either late in the reign of Ramesses II or set it at least two centuries earlier.

The Merneptah inscription also lends support to my claim that Israel emerged suddenly in the fourteenth century BC, as opposed to the current view that Israel evolved over several centuries from nomadic tribes of Semite-speaking peoples. Prior to this inscription, no record exists of either Israel or any of the tribes that made up the Israelite tribal confederation. Where did this Israel come from? What territory did it occupy? Why doesn't it have any history before this point? The absence of answers suggests that this Israel was a newcomer to the political scene?

The inscription does not tell us what language Israel spoke but it does imply that Israel, despite its lack of identification with a specific territory, stood as a powerful military force. The text places it among several major political entities. (Hatti is the Hittite kingdom, Hurru is the Hurrian kingdom, Ashkelon and Gezer are two of the most substantial city-states in Canaan.) The context suggests that it wouldn't have been listed if it weren't thought to have been worthy of mention as a defeated force. Its presence as a large powerful force without a territory of its own suggests that this Israel came from somewhere else.²³

It should not have arrived there much earlier than the middle of the reign of Ramesses II. Otherwise it would have likely been identified with the territory where it was found. This suggests a time frame for its arrival within forty years of the death of Horemheb. That time frame would be consistent with both the biblical claim that it was about forty years after the Exodus that Israel entered Canaan and the Atenist theory that holds that the Exodus occurred shortly after the death of Horemheb.

It is also interesting that the very first mention of the name Israel occurs in Egyptian writing. That name does not appear again in the historical record for almost four hundred years afterward.

The evidence, then, suggests that at a time consistent with both biblical chronology and the "Atenist" model, Israel, previously unknown in the historical record, suddenly appeared in Canaan or in its neighboring territories with a powerful military force. What we do not have is evidence that this Israel, at that time, was a Semite-speaking people or ever inhabited Asia prior to its departure from Egypt.

Jacob-Her

Concerning this last point, some comments about certain archaeological finds are in order. As early as the seventeenth century BC, Semite-speaking tribes and groups moved into the region of the Nile delta. It is these groups from which the Hyksos chieftains probably emerged and which formed the base of their subsequent political power.

Scarabs from this era show many of the chieftains with Semitic names, two of whom were Jacob-Her and Anat-Her. Linguists do not know what the her element stands for, but Anat is a well known Palestinian goddess.²⁴ Scholars are quick to see the name Jacob on the other scarab, speculating about its connection to the biblical Jacob. That the names are similar is true, but by analogy to the Anat-her inscription, Jacob could have been the name of a Palestinian god. At most, it only proves that the name Jacob existed in ancient times. No evidence connects this Jacob-her in any way to the biblical Jacob.

Habiru

In these early times the archaeological records make frequent reference to a class of people known as Habiru or 'Apiru, many of whom were enslaved in Egypt. The term seems to

be a classification or slang expression for mercenaries, servants and outlaws, a term of derogation often translated as “people of the dust.” Many scholars see in Habiru a source for the name Hebrew and opinion shifts about on this from time to time. On the basis of complicated philological issues scholars generally reject the connection.

In any event, the Habiru were not an ethnic group. Studies of Habiru names show that they contained both Semitic and Indo-European elements. If Hebrew is derived from Habiru it would most certainly be a post-Exodus derivation, being used to describe the Israelites at a time when they were not yet settled in a territory and therefore exhibiting characteristics associated with the Habiru class. The name Hebrew, as a term for the Israelites, is not attested to until late in the first millennium.

The Patriarchal History

If ancient Israel originated in the aftermath of Akhenaten's religious revolution, we must also account for the patriarchal history, the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These stories not only take place centuries before Akhenaten, they also place the Hebrew ancestors in Canaan, not Egypt. These accounts present vivid portraits of colorful characters. They exhibit wide ranges of emotion and personality, display virtues and flaws, describe many highly interesting activities and tell of exciting events. They seem to have few if any counterparts in Canaanite/Mesopotamian mythology.

Where do such fully developed histories come from? Does this vast amount of narrative detail suggest that the biblical authors drew upon folk histories of real characters? There is so much personality in these stories that many scholars find it hard to believe that these patriarchal families were made up out of whole cloth. One need not believe all the events occurred to be tempted by such a view.

Nevertheless, the patriarchal history is false. Consider, for example, this problem. The Book of Genesis ends with the death of Joseph. The story picks up in the Book of Exodus with the birth of Moses. This transition period encompasses several generations and, allegedly, several centuries. In this time Israel grew from a handful of people to over six hundred thousand males and their families. All we are told about this transition is that the Pharaoh feared Israel and reduced them to slavery in order to eliminate any threat.

It is precisely this gap in the history of Israel that is responsible for all the debates about the date of the Exodus. Why does the bible have such a detailed history of Israel's ancestors from Creation to the death of Joseph and such a detailed history of Israel from the birth of Moses to the end years of biblical history, and have such a minimalist description of what occurred in the centuries in between?

One feels compelled to ask: in the several hundred years during which Israel allegedly grew from a small family to a mighty kingdom to an enslaved nation, did nothing of interest happen? Were there no tales worth remembering, no accounts of heroism, no stories of inspiration, no tales of faith challenged and/or lost, no good or bad deeds of note?

Furthermore, at the end of the Patriarchal history, Jacob set the stage for massive conflict and intrigue in this period of missing history.²⁵ He denied the birthright to his three oldest sons, accusing them of dastardly deeds. He appointed the tribe of Joseph, eleventh in sequence of birth, as his heir designate, but, to Joseph's dismay, the inheritance went to his younger son Ephraim rather than his oldest son Manasseh. And to top it all off, after giving the crown to Ephraim, Jacob then announced that the scepter shall not depart from Judah, his fourth oldest son. Who was supposed to rule Israel, Ephraim or Judah?

How did these events affect the children of Israel and their descendants? How did the sons and the families handle these decisions? Was there anger, joy, resistance, rebellion, acceptance? What went on in those centuries? Why should there be a biblical dark ages in the eyes of the scribal redactors when everything else before and after is so clearly illuminated?

The answer is that what preceded the dark ages never existed. True biblical history begins with the Exodus and the patriarchal history is myth, pure and simple. And, in the some of the following chapters we shall set forth the exact mythological sources from which most of the patriarchal history derives.

By way of preview, however, let me briefly outline the argument. Patriarchal history draws upon Egyptian mythology. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their key family members correspond to a family of popular Egyptian deities associated with the Egyptian god Osiris. Most of the events depicted in the patriarchal accounts come directly from Egyptian literary sources and themes, and we will examine the precise mythological incidents that gave rise to the biblical sources.

If this evidence is as obvious as I suggest, the reader may well be tempted to ask why biblical scholars and Egyptologists failed to uncover these connections. There are a number of reasons for such oversights.

When Israel came out of Egypt, its people brought with them the many stories about Egyptian gods and goddesses, stories that they believed to be true histories of their country. But, because the Israelites were militantly monotheistic, with a strong prejudice against the god Osiris, the deities were transformed into human ancestors. As with any immigrant group, after centuries of immersion in new cultures and surroundings, the settlers adopted the traditions and beliefs of their new neighbors, often integrating their old beliefs with the newly learned traditions. And as the biblical prophets make clear over and over, Canaanite culture exerted a mighty force over the Israelites.

The Egyptian deities, already transformed from gods to heroic human ancestors, came to look less and less like Egyptians and more and more like Canaanites. Atenist religious views melded with local traditions. Over the centuries numerous political and religious feuds developed. Old stories were retold in order to favor one group over another. Then came conquest and destruction. Most of Israel disappeared from history after the Assyrian conquests. Those remaining were captured by Babylon and force fed Babylonian culture and history. Shortly thereafter, the Hebrews were liberated from Babylon by the Persians and close cultural contact existed between these two nations.²⁶

In the morass of conflict Israel lost touch with its Egyptian roots. By the time modern scholars came to review the history, the long orthodox religious image of Israel as firmly rooted among Semitic tribes wandering in Canaan and Mesopotamia was fixed in the western mind. Biblical scholars saw no need to apply to Egypt the scholarly intensity of research reserved for the Semitic world. Israel was Canaanite. Biblical history was assumed true, at least in its outline. That the biblical scribes and redactors could have committed such a major error in location never entered the biblical mind.

The Twelve Tribes

Closely associated with the problem of the Patriarchal history is that of the Twelve Tribes. They also originate, biblically, in the pre-Egyptian period of Genesis, but their story carries forward from the patriarchal period to the post-Exodus period. However, no

archaeological evidence demonstrates that this tribal coalition ever existed nor, given the alleged history of Israel in Egypt, should we have expected there to be.

Israel allegedly came into Egypt with just about seventy males. They lived, according to the bible, mostly in the small territorial area of Goshen. They left Egypt with over six hundred thousand males and their families.

It seems inconceivable that over this time, in a narrow territory, that such a large number of people could have maintained anything such as a tribal structure. Certainly by that time, intermarriage alone, which practice was common in biblical genealogy, would have obviously wiped out anything resembling clear linear family divisions. The biblical Israel emerging out of Egypt would have been divided along class, religious and political lines, not the artificial tribal structure that implies small isolated family clans. How does it happen, then, that this fictional tribal history spans both the mythological and historical portions of Israel's history?

Several factors influenced this development. As the evidence in the following chapters develops, we will see that the original idea of twelve tribes, or more specifically, twelve political entities, originated in Egyptian traditions. After leaving Egypt, other factors came into play.

At first the Egyptian emigrants dwelled peacefully in southern Jordan. Then they moved north into central Jordan and west into central Canaan, settling into what was then unoccupied territories. While the bible alleges that Israel conquered Canaan at this time (although elsewhere the bible casts doubt on this proposition), the territory was already in the throes of a military invasion by powerful outside forces known as the Sea Peoples. Mostly a coalition of Greek warriors seeking a new homeland, the invaders established themselves in several city-states along the Canaanite coast and in the north Canaan territories. Their aggressiveness led to several direct confrontations with the Egyptians, fighting with them on Egyptian territory. (One such engagement is described in the previously mentioned Merneptah stele.)

The most powerful and famous of these invaders was the Philistines and they soon threatened all of Canaan, including their former Greek allies settled into other city-states. In order to halt the Philistine advance, I propose that the Israelites formed a confederation with the other Sea Peoples states and local Canaanites and out of this confederation came a new nation of Israel.

At this time, I will argue, Judah did not yet exist. The Judaeans only entered the picture at the time of David, a Hebrew mercenary who worked with and was trained by the Philistine war lords. David used his newly learned military skills to form an effective military force and seized control of much of the territory belonging to the Israelite alliance. David declared himself king and established the House of Judah. It was in the time of David that many of the stories pitting Judah against Ephraim and other tribes came into being.

The Canaanite conquest served mostly as a Davidic myth to justify Judaeans control over the alliance. It relied more on tales of the Sea Peoples invasion than it did on any Israelite actions. These conquest stories found their way into the biblical corpus, and several verses indicate that only Judah succeeded in conquering its designated territories. The other tribes allegedly floundered in their efforts, indicating that only Judah was justified in serving as head of the federation.

Outline of the Argument to be Presented

It is one thing to point out that there is no evidence corroborating the biblical account of Israel's early years. It is quite another to say that because of this lack of corroboration one can simply dismiss the biblical claims and substitute whatever theory one wants. After all, absent

evidence to the contrary, it is possible that the broad outlines of the biblical history are correct. To argue that Moses and Akhenaten were theological comrades-in-arms and that the first Hebrews were Akhenaten's persecuted followers simply because it is theoretically possible does not make it so. Such coincidences provide no solid proof for challenging what almost all biblical scholars believe to be true. We need hard evidence, irrefutable arguments that prove the case. I provide that evidence in the following chapters.

Chapter Two examines the famous and puzzling birth-death chronology in Genesis 5 and 11. These passages, which provide a continuous chronological link between the births and deaths of twenty-three generations, beginning with Adam at the dawn of Creation and ending with the birth of Abraham in the early part of the second millennium BC, generate much controversy. Scholars casually dismiss this chronology as worthless but in later chapters we will show that this chronology provides a highly accurate record of Egyptian dynastic history.

Chapter Three provides the background material necessary to understand Egyptian chronology and the problems associated with establishing an accurate history of Egyptian dynasties and kings.

Chapters Four through Seven cross reference Genesis chronology with Egyptian dynastic history. The evidence shows that the Genesis birth/death dates derive from Egyptian king-lists and provide an exact one-to-one correlation with the starting dates for Egyptian dynasties and for several important Egyptian kings. The correlations begin with the foundation of the First Dynasty (c. 3,100 BC) and end with the start of the Eighteenth Dynasty over fifteen hundred years later. This chronological record enables us to place the mysterious events surrounding the Exodus in their proper historical context.

Chapter Eight reviews the various problems associated with dating the Exodus from biblical data. Then using the evidence of Genesis-Egyptian date correspondences it places the biblical data into chronological context and resolves the many contradictions. The analysis places the Exodus in 1315 BC, during the coregency of Ramesses I and Sethos I. Such a date means that Moses and Akhenaten were children together, raised and educated at the same time in the royal household of King Amenhotep III.

Chapter Nine provides an overview of historical matters associated with pharaoh Akhenaten, including the nature of his revolution, the deterioration of Egypt's foreign empire under his reign, and the counter-revolution undertaken by Horemheb.

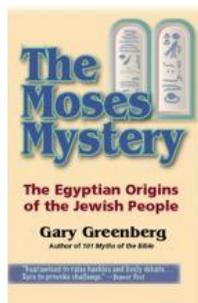
Chapter Ten moves from the biblical accounts of the Exodus and looks at the event through Egyptian eyes, examining ancient Egyptian texts and the writings of other classical historians. The Egyptian materials parallel the biblical story in many areas but reverse the roles of Moses and the pharaoh, making Moses the cruel ruler and Pharaoh the young child who was hidden away and later returned to liberate his people. Reducing the parallel themes to their essential elements we learn how Egyptian mythological and literary motifs helped shape the biblical story of Moses. Placing the Egyptian and classical histories alongside the biblical accounts, we learn that upon Horemheb's death Moses launched a military campaign aimed at restoring the Atenists to the throne but that he failed in the effort and led his followers out of Egypt.

Chapters Eleven through Thirteen place the Patriarchal history in mythological perspective. The evidence shows how the early Israelites adapted Egyptian myths about the god Osiris and his family and transformed them into stories about distant human ancestors, removing them from the magical realm of Egyptian religion and placing them in the hands of the one and only god of Israel. The chapters trace most of the major events in the lives of the Hebrew

Patriarchs and set forth many of the Egyptian myths and stories upon which the biblical accounts were based.

Chapter Fourteen examines the matter of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. There we find that even the biblical writers were unsure about how many tribes existed or whether or not they conquered Canaan. The evidence shows that the Exodus group originally included only the two Rachel tribes of Joseph and Benjamin and that at a later time the Rachel group united with remnants of the Greek Sea Peoples and other non-Hebrew Canaanites to form an alliance against Philistine encroachment. This new alliance became the House of Israel but it still did not include the Twelve Tribes. At least three alleged tribes, including Judah, Manasseh and Gad, and perhaps more did not yet exist at this time. We also examine some Egyptian stories that may have been responsible for the idea that Jacob had twelve sons and that these sons formed a political alliance.

Chapter Fifteen summarizes the evidence presented in the preceding chapters.



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End Notes for Chapter 1

The Problem of Israel's Origins

¹ The term “of the Chaldees” refers to either Chaldaeia, a province of Babylon, or Babylon itself. The Chaldeans rose to prominence in 614 BC, when they defeated the Assyrians and made Babylon the capitol of their empire. The claim that Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees is anachronistic, suggesting that it was inserted into the biblical text by the Redactor sometime after the Babylonian conquest of Israel in the sixth century BC.

² Hershel Shanks, “Israel’s Emergence in Canaan; BR interviews Norman Gottwald,” Bible Review (October 1989): 26.

³ The starting date for Akhenaten’s reign falls somewhere between 1379 and 1350. The chronological issues dividing Egyptologists on this question will be more fully explored in later chapters, at which time 1374/3 will be offered as the correct solution.

⁴ Donald B. Redford, Akhenaten; The Heretic King (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 176.

⁵ Cyril Aldred, Akhenaten; King of Egypt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 7.

⁶ Redford, Akhenaten, 232.

⁷ Exodus 1:11.

⁸ Exodus 3:23.

⁹ Genesis 47:11. While the English transliteration varies slightly from that in Exodus 1:11, the Hebrew spelling is the same and scholars treat both names as identical.

¹⁰ Walter Sullivan, "Ice Data Upset Timetable on Ancient Disaster," New York Times (August 6 1989).

¹¹ Genesis 25:26.

¹² Genesis 47:9.

¹³ $60 + 130 + 430 = 620$.

¹⁴ $400 - 130 - 60 = 210$.

¹⁵ Solomon was also called Jedidiah. II Samuel 12:24-25.

¹⁶ James Barr, Biblical Chronology: Legend or Science (London: University of London, 1987), 7.

¹⁷ Sir Alan Gardiner, Egypt of the Pharaohs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 273.

¹⁸ This second occurrence of the name Israel appears on what archaeologists dub the "Moabite Stone." Discovered in 1868, it is attributed to King Mesha of Moab and details conflicts between his kingdom and Israel. Mesha is mentioned in 2 Kings 3:4.

¹⁹ James P. Pritchard, ed., The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:231.

²⁰ Pritchard, 1:231.

²¹ Pritchard, 1:231.

²² Gardiner, 273.

²³ It should be noted that the non-Semitic Sea Peoples, whose defeat is celebrated in this stele, were a large immigrant population that suddenly appeared in the region and raised a military challenge to the Egyptians. Theoretically, Israel's status in the inscription is consistent with being one of these immigrant groups. However, the name is not recorded among those of the Sea Peoples. Its listing in a separate portion of the text from that dealing with the Sea Peoples enables us to reject the idea that Israel's status, as depicted in the inscription, was due to its participation in the Sea People's immigration. A subsequent connection between Israel and the Sea Peoples will be explored in Chapter 14.

²⁴ Gardiner, 157.

²⁵ See generally Genesis 49 for Jacob's blessings on his children.

²⁶ Some scholars have suggested that in the story of Esther, which takes place in the Persian court, Esther and her uncle Mordecai, represent the important Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk, and that the two villains in the story, Vashti and Haman represent two other important Babylonian gods, Vashti and Hammon. At about the time of the Esther story, Marduk and Ishtar

may have displaced Vashti and Hammon as chief deities in the Babylonian capitol of Susa, then under Persian control.