

Dating the Exodus: Another View

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Omar Zuhdi's article on dating the Exodus (*KMT*, Summer 1993) was interesting, informative and well argued. Unfortunately, relying on particular biblical passages to the exclusion of other contradictory biblical claims is fraught with pitfalls and Mr. Zuhdi's argument rests upon some fatally flawed assumptions. These assumptions are that

1. we can rely on the biblical claim that there were 480 years from the Exodus to the fourth year of King Solomon's reign, (1)
2. we can rely on the biblical claim that Israel's sojourn in Egypt lasted 430 years, (2) and
3. that the fourth year of Solomon's reign can be anchored to 966 B.C.

From these assumptions Zuhdi argues that the Exodus occurred in 1446 B.C., during the reign of Amenhotep II, and that Joseph served under Senusret III (1878-1841 B.C.). While Zuhdi devotes his article to demonstrating why such conclusions are consistent with Egyptian history, he simply asserts that his three main assumptions are correct, without any evidence that they are so. Let's take a closer look at the chronological problems associated with biblical chronology and the dating of the Exodus.

THE START OF SOLOMON'S REIGN

Assuming *arguendo* that the year 480-year period is a legitimate chronological calculation, there is still a major problem in anchoring that period to the year 966 B.C. as Solomon's fourth year on the throne. First of all, biblical chronology dates Solomon's fourth year to 1017, (3) and, if we are going to accept the legitimacy of earlier chronological calculations, we must *a fortiori* accept the legitimacy of the later chronology. This gives us respective dates of 1497 B.C. for the Exodus and 1927 for the start of the sojourn, which time frames are specifically rejected by Zuhdi in the course of his argument.

Second, there is not a shred of archaeological evidence corroborating this date. (In fact, there is not a single piece of archaeological evidence corroborating even the *existence* of David or Solomon.) Independent of biblical chronology, we just don't know when King Solomon reigned.

Third, the date of 966 B.C. is arbitrarily chosen by advocates of an Exodus during the reign of Rameses II, and it is based upon the assumption that the 480-year period is erroneously calculated. The argument of these scholars, who represent the majority viewpoint on this question, is as follows:

1. Since the Merenptah “Israel” stele (ca. 1240 B.C.) depicts Israel as a nation without a territory, it shows Israel in a pre-Conquest stage and the Exodus must have occurred within a reasonably short time prior to that date; (4)

2. 1 Chronicles 6 shows that there were twelve generations from the Exodus to King Solomon, and, therefore, the biblical Redactor must have mistakenly assumed that there were forty years to a generation (“forty years” being a popular biblical duration);

3. Forty years per generation, however, is too long, and twenty-five years is a more-reasonable estimate, giving a gap of 300 years (12 x 25) for the period between the Exodus and the fourth year of Solomon.

Unfortunately for Egyptologists and biblical scholars, if we follow the biblical chronology for the start of Solomon’s reign, the Exodus date would be 1317 B.C. (5) The problem with that is that it make Moses and the “monotheistic” King Akhenaten childhood pals and bosom buddies, jointly raised in the royal court and corevolutionaries in religious reform. (6) Since biblical scholars and Egyptologists are absolutely close-minded about accepting any connection between these two monotheistic thinkers, regardless of the evidence, a date of 1317 B.C. proved most embarrassing.

Therefore, because the goal was to place the Exodus in the reign of Rameses II, the biblical chronology for the start of Solomon’s reign was discarded, and scholars arbitrarily pushed his starting date forward by about fifty years. (7) It is from this process that a date of 966 was established for the fourth year of Solomon’s reign. If the date 966 is chosen on the basis that the 480-year claim is in error, then it seems reasonable to anchor that 480-year period to the date of 966 B.C.

THE 430-YEAR SOJOURN

The next major problem with Omar Zuhdi’s thesis concerns the reliability of the 430-year claim for Israel’s sojourn. The biblical text is unclear as to whether the sojourn began when Joseph arrived in Egypt, at about his seventeenth year, or when Jacob arrived in Egypt in Joseph’s thirty-ninth year. Putting that problem aside, though, there is a more-difficult barrier to overcome.

The 430-year period encompasses only four generations. The line of descent from Jacob to Moses is: Levi, Kohath, Amram and Moses. According to Exodus 6:16-20, Levi lived to the age of 137 years, Kohath to the age of 133 years and Amram to the age of 137 years. But Levi and Kohath were among those who entered Egypt with Jacob. (8) Assuming that Kohath was an infant when he arrived in Egypt, and that he fathered Amram in his final year, and that Amram fathered Moses in his own final year, there would be a maximum-possible sojourn of 350 years from Jacob’s arrival? (9) If we begin twenty-two years earlier, with Joseph’s entry, we still only reach a maximum period of 372 years. We must also note the highly improbable likelihood that Kohath and Amram both waited until their final year of life to father their respective sons, indicating that the sojourn was considerably shorter than either the 372 or 350 years allowed as a maximum duration.

THE 400-YEAR BONDAGE OF ISRAEL

The problem of the length of the sojourn leads us to a related matter, the length of the Hebrew bondage. The enslavement must of necessity be shorter than the sojourn. It began sometime after the death of Joseph, in the reign of a king “who knew not Joseph.” (10)

Joseph entered Egypt in his seventeenth year and Jacob arrived there in his son’s thirty-ninth year. Since Joseph lived to be 110, the period of bondage must have started either ninety-three or seventy-one years after the start of the sojourn, depending on whether we start the sojourn with Joseph or Jacob.

If the sojourn lasted 430 years, then the enslavement couldn’t have lasted more than 359 years. (11) And if the sojourn lasted at most 372 years, as argued above, then the bondage of Israel couldn’t have been more than 270 years in duration. But Genesis 15:13-16 indicates that the period of bondage lasted 400 years. Do we follow the Genesis chronology or the Exodus chronology?

THE GENESIS CHRONOLOGY

Next, we come to a number of problems associated with the Genesis chronology. The Book of Genesis contains a chronology of birth and death that begins with the creation of Adam and ends with the death of Joseph. Counting from the date of Creation, one can determine in what year each generation was born and in what year each died.

Although the bible doesn’t explicitly give the date of Creation, Jewish tradition— supposedly celebrated since Moses gave the Genesis chronology to Israel — dates Creation to 3761 B.C. Counting from that date establishes Joseph’s birth and death dates as 1564 and 1454 B.C. (plus or minus two years.) (12) These dates place Joseph’s birth after the historical time-frame for the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt, and his death in the final years of Thutmose III. Since the king of the enslavement “knew not Joseph,” we must assume that it could be neither Thutmose III nor his successor, Amenhotep II, both of whom would have known Joseph. Since we must also allow for an eighty-year period from the birth of Moses (after Joseph’s death) to the Exodus, we cannot date the Exodus any earlier than about 1374 B.C. This brings us to either the tail end of the reign of Amenhotep III or the early years of his son, Akhenaten, depending upon which Egyptian chronology one follows.

It might be argued that the Genesis chronology is unreliable because it begins with Creation and the Flood, and those events are mythical at best. However, Egyptian and Babylonian king-lists also merged together historical dates with mythological ones, and no scholars object to using the historical portions of those lists for their chronological purposes. Furthermore, however unreliable the Genesis chronology may be, it is unlikely the author would have dated Joseph’s death to a time after the Exodus occurred.

THE GENESIS DATE FOR THE EXODUS

Finally, we come to the date of the Exodus established by the Genesis chronology. Genesis 15:13-16, which indicates that the bondage would last for 400 years, is somewhat ambiguous about when the 400 years begin. The text implies that it began with the birth of Abraham's son, Isaac. But Isaac's birth preceded Joseph's by over a century, and the enslavement had to occur well after Joseph was born.

This contradiction was already recognized as early as the First Century A.D., when the Jewish historian Josephus wrote that the alleged 430-year sojourn began when Abraham arrived in Canaan, and that the Egyptian sojourn lasted only 215 years. (13) As a member of a priestly Jewish family, Josephus's remarks can be understood as representing traditional biblical scholarship of his time. The Josephus view, however, is not as illogical as it may seem. Canaan, for the most part, was frequently thought of as part of the Egyptian sphere of influence. Also, the year Abraham arrived in Canaan, he also traveled to Egypt, and perhaps the reference to a 430-year sojourn originally referred to Abraham's arrival in Egypt.

Recognizing that the enslavement was nowhere near 400 years in duration, we can date the Exodus to 400 years from the birth of Isaac, which, according to the Genesis chronology, took place at about 1715 B.C. (plus or minus two years). This gives us an Exodus date of about 1315-1313 B.C., a date that is traditionally accepted among orthodox Jews as when the Exodus took place.

CONCLUSIONS

A Genesis date of ca. 1315 B.C. for the Exodus brings us full circle to the problem of the 480-year period with which this discussion began. Following the scholarly tradition of converting the 480-year period into twelve generations of twenty-five years each, or 300 years, and adding those 300 years to the biblical date for Solomon's fourth year, gives an Exodus date of 1317 B.C. Allowing for the two-year margin of error gives us a near-perfect fit between the two dating mechanisms. We will have to leave it to biblical scholars and Egyptologists to wrestle with the problem of how this Exodus date affects the relationship between Moses and Akhenaten.

Notes

1.1 Kings 6:1.

2.. Exodus 12:40.

3. The dating of Solomon's fourth year to 1017 B.C. is based on the chronology of the Judean kings from Solomon to the destruction of the Temple. Based on the lengths of reign for each of the successive kings (as chronicled in I and 2 Kings), the period in question is 430 years long, and there is abundant evidence that the destruction of the Temple occurred at about 587 B.C.

4. On the "Israel" stele, Israel is the only nation mentioned that has a determinative signifying "people," as opposed to "land."

5. $1017+300=1317$.

6. Although there are a number of differences of opinion among Egyptologists as to the precise dating of the latter part of the Eighteenth Dynasty (falling during the last years of the Fourteenth Century B.C.), all acceptable chronologies place Akhenaten's seventeen-year reign in the middle

of the Fourteenth Century.

7. To get around the problem of biblical chronology, it is often argued that portions of the reigns of some of the Judean kings must have been coregencies.

8. Genesis 46:11

9. $137 + 133 + 80 = 350$. There are eighty years from the birth of Moses to the Exodus.

10. Exodus 1:8

11. $430 - 71 = 359$.

12. The bulk of the Genesis birth-death chronology is in Genesis 5 and 11, but there is a contradiction in the text concerning the birth of Shem's son that creates a two-year margin of error.

13. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 11:318.

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