

EXODUS AND CONQUEST

The biblical Exodus and the preceding story of the ten plagues have been regularly challenged by critical scholars due to the alleged nonexistence of archaeological and historical evidence. When approaching this subject it is important to remind ourselves that a major regional event like the Exodus as described in the Bible would leave massive amounts of historical and archaeological evidence. This is in contrast to the customary apologetic approach that sees little or no evidence for the Exodus event and therefore tries to find reasons to explain why none would be found. Regrettably, some apologists underestimate the size, impact, and circumstances of the Exodus and think of it as a “minor” event. This appears to be used often as an excuse for why the Egyptians would make no record of it—but in the process these apologists also diminish or eliminate the miraculous nature of the Exodus (more on this faulty apologetic below).

If this was the greatest destruction of an ancient civilization in historical times, as the Bible seems to describe, then we should expect the discovery of hieroglyphic documents and archaeological evidence consistent with the plagues and Exodus event, and not just some evidence but a lot of it. That the Bible describes a mass destruction event in Egypt in association with the Exodus is clear from the following passages:

- The Pharaoh’s officials pleaded with him, “Do you not realize that Egypt is *destroyed?*” (Exodus 10:7; see also NIV, KJV).
- There was “not a house without someone dead” (Exodus 12:30b NIV); “all the livestock of Egypt [left in the fields] died” (Exodus 9:6).
- “Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt” (Exodus 10:15b NIV).
- “All the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood. . .so that the Egyptians could not drink water” (Exodus 7:20-21; see also 7:24).
- Later, Moses reminded the Israelites about what the Lord “did to the army of Egypt. . .and how the Lord has destroyed [the army] to this day”

(Deuteronomy 11:4 *esv*; compare RSV, NASB, NIV) and therefore for nearly 40 years—“to this day” (Hebrew *'ad yom*)—the Israelites had no fear from any Egyptian forces.

- Pharaoh drowned with the army (Psalm 136:15).

It is regularly asserted by some well-meaning apologists that slaves always remained invisible in the background of Egyptian life, not dominating the royal archives of Pharaoh. But the Exodus consisted of more than a mere escape of slaves, since the entire nation was “destroyed” (Exodus 10:7). Instead it is very reasonable to expect that much material, especially documentary writings as well as indirect events relating to the Exodus, will be visible. It is often said that those who write their own country’s history will disregard embarrassing and traumatic details, choosing rather to develop themes that depict strength and wealth. Though this does occur in lesser events on occasion, it is not convincing when this way of thinking is applied to the mass destruction of an entire country. Such an event cannot be covered up by some palace conspiracy or missed through some scribal oversight. Despite the idiosyncrasies of ancient ways of recording history, and no matter how good a nation is in keeping things secret, there is bound to be someone who records such major events in some fashion.

In view of this, our present section will address several literary and historical aspects of the Exodus that support its historical nature, in an attempt to narrow the gap between what some suppose to be myth and historicity.

Egyptian Documentary Evidence for the Exodus

Though the evidence for the Exodus has been slow to be gathered, there is good reason to believe that it actually occurred as described in the Bible. This thinking is based on the biblical testimony, Egyptian extrabiblical sources, and archaeological excavation in Egypt and neighboring regions.

For example, one of the most well-known documents in Egyptology is the Ipuwer papyrus (officially known as Papyrus Leiden 344), which records an account remarkably similar to the plagues described in the book of Exodus. The papyrus was obtained by Swedish diplomat, Giovanni Anastasi, and sold to the Leiden Museum in Holland in 1828. No one realized the exact significance of the contents of the document until the first full translation was done in 1909 by a British Egyptologist, Alan H. Gardiner, under the title *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage from a Hieratic Papyrus in Leiden*. In addition, there have been many later full translations made, including an Oxford edition (2009).

Currently, the document is stored at the National Museum of Antiquities in the



The Ipuwer Papyrus.

Netherlands. Its contents are widely regarded by Egyptologists as a lamentation over the catastrophic conditions in Egypt written by a high Egyptian official named Ipuwer sometime prior to the thirteenth century BC (which is consistent with either an early or late chronology for the Exodus).^{*} Ipuwer was known as one of the great wise sages in Egyptian history. His astonishing description of the conditions, to the surprise of Egyptologists, appeared remarkably similar to the biblical account of the ten plagues recorded in the book of Exodus.

The date of the Ipuwer manuscript approximately fits the Exodus date. The hieratic script style was in use at that time period, the events described are remarkably similar to the plagues, the location of the events (Egypt) matches the setting of the Exodus, and the odds of all these calamities occurring at the same time make them more than coincidental. There is no scientific, linguistic, or historical fact that Egyptologists can point to that would decisively preclude the content of the papyrus being a lament over the Exodus plagues. A simple comparison of the content in both the book of Exodus and the Ipuwer papyrus leaves little doubt to their similarities (see table below):

The Book of Exodus and the Ipuwer Papyrus: Comparison	
Exodus [*]	Ipuwer Papyrus (P. Leiden 344r) [†]
Events occurred fifteenth century BC	Copied in thirteenth century BC
Ten plagues in Egypt	Lament over catastrophe in Egypt
The Nile river was turned to blood...Blood is throughout the land (7:20-21).	The Nile river is blood... (2:10). Blood is everywhere (2:6).
All the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile (7:24).	Men shrink from the (Nile) water...and thirst after water (2:10).
The LORD sent hail mingled with fire, and fire walked along the ground (9:22-26).	Behold, the fire has gone up on high, and its burning should go forth against the enemies of the land (7:1).
Hail struck down every plant of the field and stripped every tree (9:25).	Trees are destroyed and branches stripped off... There is no food (4:14-5:2).

^{*} This papyrus copy can be dated to the thirteenth century BC, even though the vast majority of Egyptologists believe that the original composition (autograph) was written to record the chaotic times in Egypt sometime between the end of the 6th Dynasty and the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1800-1550 BC). Of course, this chronology would make the Ipuwer account rather early for the Exodus event (though some advocates of the Thera volcanic explosion theory would date the Exodus to c. 1600 BC). However, there appears to be no good reason to doubt that its descriptions reflect the plagues upon Egypt. There is nothing in the document itself that has been conclusively shown to necessitate a pre-Exodus date before the 1500s or 1400s BC. There are no dates at all in what we have of this damaged document (about one quarter of it is missing). The Egyptians had no chronological eras such as we do, namely BC and AD. Nor do any chronological markers, such as names of established pharaohs, appear in the portion of the papyrus that we have (the missing portions may have named the pharaoh).

Exodus*	Ipuwer Papyrus (P. Leiden 344r)†
Locusts covered the land of Egypt and ate all the plants and fruit of the trees left by the hail. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt (10:15).	Grain has perished on every side (6:3).
A severe plague on the livestock in the field (9:3).	The cattle weep and moan (5:5).
There was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt (10:22-23).	The day does not dawn...and there is terror because of it [darkness] (9:11; 10:1).
The LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of livestock (12:29). There was not a house without one dead... There was a great cry (loud wailing) throughout Egypt (12:30).	The children of princes are dashed against the walls. The chosen [firstborn?] children are laid out dead...(4:3-4; 5:6-7). He who places his brother in the ground is everywhere (2:13-14). It is groaning throughout the land mingled with lamentations (3:13-14).
The women of Israel...asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing...Thus they plundered the Egyptians (3:22; 12:35-36)	Gold, lapis lazuli, silver, malachite, carnelian, (bronze), and our finest stones are fastened to the necks of female slaves (3:2-3).
The Israelites left Egypt headed for the eastern desert then the Sinai (chapters 12–17).	Poor people [slaves] flee into the desert like nomads who live in tents (9:14–10:2).

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* Composite of several leading translations (NASB, NIV, KJV, RSV, ASV) checked against interlinear Hebrew translations.

† Composite of Gardiner 1909, Faulkner 1965, and Oxford 2009 translations and commentaries (in-depth technical commentaries often add nuances of meaning to the formal translation).

Both the biblical account of the Exodus and the Ipuwer papyrus are consistent with the Exodus-like themes and parallels contained in other Egyptian literature, including tomb inscriptions, emerging from Egypt's New Kingdom period (c. 1550–1100 BC).

For example, as recently pointed out by archaeological researcher Brad C. Sparks, eminent Egyptologists have found an early Egyptian document from c. 1300 BC, called the *Destruction of Mankind*. It contains reference to the full Hebrew divine name, I AM THAT I AM, in the Egyptian root word *YWY* (or *Yawi*). These Egyptologists specifically cite Exodus 3:14—when the name I AM THAT I AM was revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush.¹ Sparks further notes that the *Destruction of Mankind* tells of a non-Egyptian people who flee from the eastern Nile Delta, the biblical Land of Goshen, only to be pursued by the Egyptian army. Respected Egyptologists have already identified *dozens* of Egyptian texts with what *they* call Exodus parallels, describing Exodus-like events and themes, which Sparks has compiled and which will soon be published.²

The National Trauma of the Exodus

The presence of Exodus-like events and parallels in a wide array of Egyptian documents should not be surprising. It was a traumatic event for the nation, and it haunted succeeding pharaohs. Just think of it—Egypt’s pharaoh, a “god” with powers of the sun-god in human form, had drowned (Psalm 136:15). The army was destroyed, the labor force (slaves) had escaped; the nation was plundered of its wealth, its water supply poisoned, its agriculture and livestock wiped out, with ensuing mass famine. Death, darkness, destruction, and despair must have filled the land.

This national catastrophe would surely have left an indelible mark on the soul and religious life of the country for centuries. Future Egyptian pharaohs would have been highly motivated to record these events in some manner so they too would never forget, and so they would also know the deepest secrets of the catastrophe. The accounts of the Exodus were recorded not because the pharaohs wanted to advertise the humiliation of their gods and the past pharaoh to succeeding generations and foreign nations, but because they wanted to remember—so they could try to avoid such a terrifying series of events like this again.

Nor, it would seem, would these pharaohs have wanted to reopen old wounds from the Exodus trauma through the public reopening of records. This could tear apart the fabric of society since it was the Egyptians’ central belief that it was the “great” pharaoh and their “strong” gods that held the heart and soul of Egypt together. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that great care was taken to preserve the records of the Exodus in a way that cloaked the event in secrecy, as a carefully guarded state secret. Nobody in Egypt except the pharaohs would have been allowed to read these sacred books during the New Kingdom period. The Exodus was also often dressed in mythological or religious clothing, which carried great significance to the Egyptians’ polytheistic mindset, just as we might expect.

Naturalistic Explanations for the Egyptian Plagues

Though the similarities between the biblical Exodus account of the plagues and the Egyptian sources appear to be more than coincidence, there are some who continue to offer naturalistic explanations. For example, one such argument says that the Nile could have overflowed its banks and carried red earth from the highlands of Ethiopia, thus turning the Nile red in color.³ But such silt is brown, not red, and it cannot poison the water; the Egyptians normally let the silt settle out or used filters to remove it before drinking. The Nile is brown, not red, in color; it never turns red naturally; no one has ever taken photos of the Nile made red from natural occurrences. Every Egyptian tourist guidebook and brochure in the world would be plastered with photos of the “Red Nile” to induce tourists to come see the “Biblical Plagues” for themselves if this were an annual “natural” occurrence!

An even more popular idea holds that a form of red algae poisoned the Nile and triggered a domino effect of subsequent plagues. This notion continues to be espoused despite the complete lack of any scientific evidence of any red algae ever occurring in

the Nile or anywhere in Egypt or East Africa.⁴ This idea claims further that, as a result of the red algae killing the fish, the fish contracted anthrax; an infestation of frogs then swarmed the banks of the river in search of a better life. (Except anthrax cannot infect fish or frogs, only land animals such as sheep, and rarely cattle.) Moreover, the story goes, the overflow of the Nile would bring about the perfect conditions for an insect epidemic that could spread the anthrax from the frogs to the livestock (except, as we just noted, anthrax cannot attack frogs). The locusts, hail, fire, and darkness that covered the land are said to be merely natural occurrences, though more severe than usual due to the alleged chain reaction kicked off by the excessively high Nile flood and the red algae (which do not naturally occur in Egypt and, as Sparks observes, would be killed by the torrential Nile floodwaters as the normal algae are killed every year).

Again, no one can show photos of the Nile made red from any natural causes, so there is no “naturally occurring” phenomenon of silt or algae that turns the river red. And these naturalistic explanations are not convincing for several circumstantial and theological reasons in addition to the scientific contradictions and impossibilities pointed out above (see the table below).

Scientific and Factual Errors in the Red Algae/Red Mud Theory of the Exodus Plague of Blood and Ensuing Plagues

Scientific Facts Showing Errors	Comments
No photos of a “naturally” occurring “red” Nile	“Natural” occurrences of “red” algae or “red” mud in the Nile must <i>naturally occur sometime</i> in order for anyone to know that they “naturally occur.” They thus must be seen and be able to be photographed—but that never happens.
Nile is brown not red at flood season	Scientists say the river is <i>brown</i> during the annual summer flood season, not red, and their photos prove it.
Wrong season of the year	Popular theories claim that the red algae must come at flood season to add redness to the alleged “red” mud, but that is when the Nile <i>kills all algae</i> due to turbulence smashing algal cells, disrupted habitats, and darkness of the waters.
Nile kills algae as they stick to mud particles	Algae stick to mud particles and sink, thus removing them from the water and killing them (death by flocculation).
Nile blocks sunlight, killing the algae by stopping photosynthesis	The same alleged “red” mud often theorized to enhance the redness of the water containing “red” algae will <i>block sunlight and thus block plant photosynthesis</i> , killing any algae of any color—red, green, blue, or something else.
Wrong habitat	Red algae are never found by scientists occurring naturally anywhere in the Nile, or Egypt or East Africa. In fact the usually named species (<i>Haematococcus pluvialis</i> and <i>Euglena sanguinea</i>) are fragile cold-climate or ice-water species unsuited for the tropical heat of the equatorial Nile.

Scientific Facts Showing Errors	Comments
Supposed “red” algae are actually green	The usually named species of supposedly “red” algae (<i>H. pluvialis</i> and <i>E. sanguinea</i>) causing the Exodus plague of blood are in fact <i>green</i> , not red.
“Red” algae are nontoxic, nonpolluting	The usually named species of supposedly “red” algae (<i>H. pluvialis</i> and <i>E. sanguinea</i>) are not toxic, are nonpolluting, are not on water-pollution lists; they actually help clean the water, and in fact are used for human and animal food supplements.
Supposed “red” algae never cause “red tides” and never kill fish	The usually named species of supposedly “red” algae (<i>H. pluvialis</i> and <i>E. sanguinea</i>) never cause harmful (or harmless) “red tides,” never kill fish, and are in fact used as food for fish (as well as food for animals and humans).
“Red tides” occur in salt-water oceans not fresh-water rivers	Red tides almost always occur in salt-water oceans, not freshwater rivers, and only <i>extremely rarely</i> in <i>stagnant</i> lakes and <i>stagnant</i> rivers—and <i>never</i> in the very nonstagnant, high-volume, turbulent Nile, the second-longest river system in the world.
Anthrax does not infect frogs or fish	The “domino theory” of “red” algae/mud blood plague claims that anthrax first infected fish and frogs, then cattle. But in fact anthrax infects only <i>land mammals</i> like sheep and rarely cattle. Anthrax does not infect in the water, does not infect <i>non-mammals</i> like frogs or fish in water (or on land), and must be dry to form infectious spores. The Israelites would have been the hardest hit by anthrax sheep-disease (from their blood sacrifices of sheep in the Passover), not the Egyptians.
Biting flies cannot breed in winter when they hibernate	The popular “domino theory” of the plagues claims that when the Nile floodwaters receded in the winter, biting stable flies bred and spread anthrax, thus causing the plague of boils. But flies hibernate in the winter and cannot breed then.

Brad C. Sparks, “Red Algae Theories of the Ten Plagues” [Parts 1, 2, 3], *Bible and Spade*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Summer 2003), 66-77; vol. 17, no. 1 (Winter 2004), 17-27; vol. 17, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 71-82.

It is highly unlikely that all these natural factors described above converged on Egypt at the same time. In fact some cannot occur at the same time as they would nullify the alleged effect. For example, natural high floodwaters also kill natural algae; red mud or mud of any color brought by floodwaters kills algae too; receding floodwater cannot breed flies because it is winter (a regular seasonal occurrence) and flies would be in hibernation then; excess floodwater would prevent the hypothesized extra silt from drying out quickly and being drawn into the air by wind to cause darkness; and so on.

It may be believable that two or three conditions came together by random chance—but nine or ten in the same setting and in just the right sequence? It is utterly unlikely. Clever attempts to link the alleged natural plagues in a “chain” so as to avoid the extreme improbability of all happening by random natural chance at exactly the same time frame have failed. This is acknowledged even by the authors of such theories (several plagues always remain unaccounted for in the “domino” chain); and, as just noted, some such plagues would actually nullify or prevent other “natural” plagues.

Naturalistic explanations do not account for how the Hebrew slaves were spared from the catastrophic conditions but the Egyptians who lived among or near them were not. Moreover, sandstorms and Nile floods do not discriminate based on whether you are an Egyptian (ethnic origin) or a slave (social status)! Unfortunately for the critics’ view, this type of selectivity is necessary to make the scenario believable.

Besides, none of these natural causes satisfactorily address the death of Egypt’s first-born. Natural forces do not discriminate based on the *order* of one’s birth. The theory also leaves unaddressed the historical narrative of Moses calling down these plagues at precisely the same time as these “natural” conditions are appearing in Egypt. That is to say, the presence of a moral and theological dimension with a clearly defined purpose and timing within the Exodus passages demonstrates that the plagues were more than simply a *natural* phenomenon; rather, they meet the criteria of a miraculous event.

The real problem here seems to be the critics’ antisupernatural presupposition, and unfortunately even some apologists follow suit for different reasons (as we noted previously). Why can’t we simply read the text in a straightforward way? Critics assume what they are supposed to prove. They *assume* supernatural events cannot possibly occur, and then dismiss any account of a supernatural event they may find, deeming it noncredible since it describes a supernatural occurrence—then they turn around and complain there is no evidence for the supernatural event! This is a classic circular argument and a fallacy. Similarly, the critics *assume* that God does not exist, since if He does exist, then miracles (which are acts of God) are possible.

Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus and Conquest

Evidence from the Nile Delta

Archaeological excavations carried out since 1966 in the northeastern Nile Delta region have suggested the presence of western Semites. Manfred Bietak of the University of Vienna has investigated the area known as Tell el-Dab’a (originally called Avaris, which became the Hyksos capital during the Hyksos period in the 1700s to 1500s BC). Here, as well as in surrounding territories, Bietak has discovered dwellings built in Syro-Palestinian fashion (also used by the Israelites) dating to the time when the Hebrews are believed to have been in Egypt prior to the Exodus.⁵ According to Bietak, those who settled at Tell el-Dab’a (which is near the Land of Goshen) were people from Canaan, though these individuals became highly Egyptianized. Bietak has concluded that beginning under Pharaoh Sensusret (Sesostris) III (c. 1800 BC), the settlements at Tell el-Dab’a went through a massive expansion during the late twelfth and thirteenth Egyptian

dynasties, which would be consistent with Exodus 1:12 that says the more Egypt afflicted their Hebrew slaves the more they multiplied.

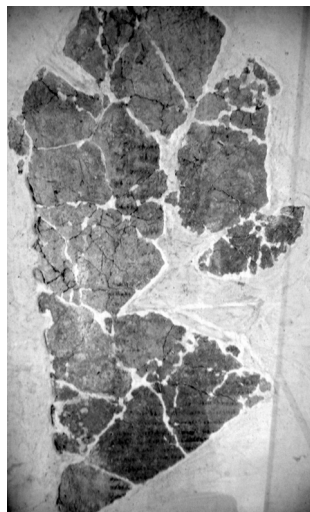
What is most striking about the excavation is the evidence that work on the palace in the Eastern Nile Delta was suddenly stopped. Bietak says that pots of paint, plumb lines, and instruments were simply dropped to the floor! The palace was suddenly abandoned. This is what one would expect to see if a Hebrew Exodus abruptly occurred in the eastern Nile Delta (Goshen) in this time frame.

Though archaeological evidence for the Exodus has been slow in its development, what we do possess is consistent with an Israelite presence in Egypt immediately prior to the time of the Exodus. There still remain problems with reconciling the archaeological material with commonly accepted Egyptian chronology, though some have argued that this chronology should be revised downward by some 200 to 300 years or even more. The physical evidence unearthed at Tell el-Dab'a fits nicely with the Exodus account, but the interpretation of the evidence itself is colored by the dating and the philosophical presuppositions of the interpreter. The details from Tell el-Dab'a are very promising but need further research with additional data from surrounding regions.

The Balaam Inscription

In addition to excavations by Bietak and the Egyptian documentary parallels, the discovery of the Balaam inscription adds an important historical support for the Exodus and its ensuing events. In the text of Numbers 22:22-40, the Balaam story appears in direct connection with the historical events of the Exodus and the Conquest. There is no reason here to discriminate and take Balaam as historical or semi-legendary but the Exodus and Conquest as pure myth. Though critical scholars have long dismissed Balaam and his talking donkey as sheer fiction, this view began to shift after 1967 when a crumbled plaster Aramaic text was discovered within the rubble of an ancient building in Deir 'Alla (Jordan). The c. 800 BC inscription is contained within 119 fragments written with 50 lines of text in faded red and black ink. It is written in red ink for emphasis, and reads,

Warnings [Sayings] from the Book of Balaam
the son of Beor. He was a seer of the gods [line
1a; see lines, 2-4; see similarly Numbers 22:5;
Josephus 24:9].



The fragments of the Balaam inscription reflect the earliest archaeological data of any biblical prophet or his prophecies. The inscription is currently on display at the Citadel Museum in Amman, Jordan.

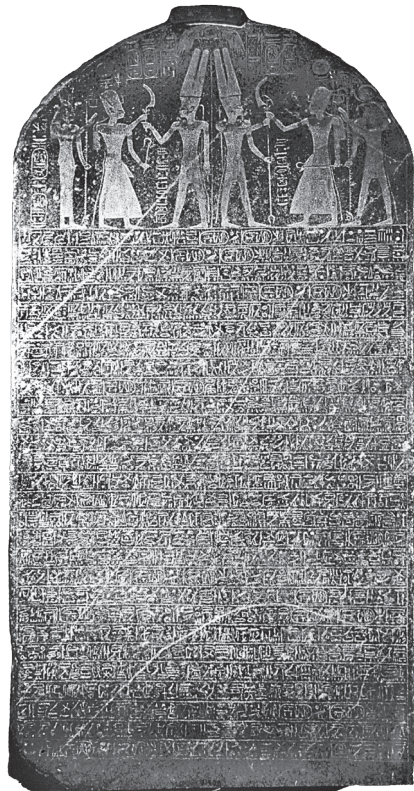
Balaam's reputation as a prophet is consistent with the biblical account that has Balak the king calling upon Balaam to pronounce curses on the Israelites (Numbers 22:6).

Though the building in which the text was found was most likely destroyed in the great earthquake around the time Uzziah reigned as king (Isaiah 6:1), the plaster text appears much older due to the extremely worn and faded color condition of the ink, and it is believed that it was part of an already circulating text. It appears that people in Deir 'Alla admired Balaam, who later became a sort of icon to the inhabitants of the area. The time required for such reverence to grow adds support to a much earlier dating of the original text, thus placing it closer to the time of the Exodus. Moreover, the building in which the text was found is located less than 30 miles from the area Balaam is said to have engaged Israel prior to their crossing the Jordan River, in the plains of Moab (Numbers 22–24). The find has posed a problem for Exodus skeptics and revisionists since the text apparently places a historical Balaam in the same geographical area as the Israelites during the Exodus and Conquest.

The Merneptah Stele

Attempts to date the Exodus forward to the thirteenth century BC appear to contradict Egyptian records indicating that Israel had already been established in Canaan by that century. If the Exodus had occurred much later, then the Egyptian Exodus-parallels mentioned above would be much too early to refer to an Exodus-like event. The hieroglyphic stele found by Sir William Flinders Petrie in Pharaoh Merneptah's funerary temple in western Thebes is the earliest known mention of Israel from any ancient document outside the Bible, and it dates to c. 1210 BC, based on the generally accepted date of Merneptah. It is also the only known mention of "Israel" in ancient Egyptian writing (a possible second and earlier example has turned up in a Berlin museum but is still under study).⁶ The stele's contribution comes in the form of a eulogy to a victorious Merneptah:

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;⁷



Merneptah Stele (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

There is no doubt that Israel was in the land by the thirteenth century BC, though not established as a nation with a king or kingdom as yet. “Israel” is written with an Egyptian *determinative symbol* in the Merneptah Stele, which indicates Israel was a *people* at this time and not a *land*.⁸ Apparently, this refers to a time when Israel was without rulers, such as during the four-century-long time of the judges prior to the establishment of a national infrastructure and the united monarchy under David and Solomon in the tenth century BC. Israel’s listing along with the other established cities and biblical lands (Ashkelon, Gezer, and so on) implies that Israel was comparable in importance and not an insignificant wandering tribe of Bedouins. The dating for Israel’s presence in the land supplied by the Merneptah Stele fits well with the timing of the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent conquest of Canaan in about 1400 BC.

Indirect Support for the Exodus

Archaeology has also provided us with discoveries that indirectly support the Exodus narrative.

The Writer’s Familiarity with Egypt’s Language and Culture

First, a linguistic and cultural knowledge of Egyptian life is reflected in the Hebrew language used to pen the book of Exodus. The one individual who had the knowledge, experience, and education necessary to account for these details is Moses who “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22 esv). (See chapter 4 for arguments about the Mosaic authorship of Exodus and the other books of the Pentateuch.) Many scholars recognize that these Egyptian features must have come from an author intimately acquainted with Egyptian slave-labor practice and who had an understanding of the Egyptian royal court, was familiar with the Egyptian flora and fauna (Genesis 13:10; Exodus 9:31-32),* and possessed a command of Egyptian language and geography.† In fact, the name “Moses” seems to be an Egyptian name much like the Pharaohs’ dynastic name *Thutmose*. This extensive familiarity with Egypt in the book of Exodus, rather than with Babylonia,‡ thus supports the belief that the writer could have been an eyewitness of the Exodus and the plagues, not an individual far-removed from the actual events. The critical scholars who postulate anonymous Jewish authors of the Pentateuch say that they allegedly wrote or compiled the book of Exodus in exile in Babylonia a thousand years after the Exodus—a very great distance in space and time from Egypt in the second millennium BC.

* Note that the crop sequence, trees, and animals in these passages are indigenous to Egypt rather than the Palestinian region.

† The Pentateuch has more Egyptian loan words than any other section of the Bible.

‡ The exception might be the Pentateuch author’s seeming familiarity with Mesopotamian law codes such as the Code of Hammurabi (Hammurapi)—which, however, may have been widely known throughout the ancient Middle East, unlike the details of Babylonian geography and culture. But Mesopotamian geography and culture are not reflected in the book of Exodus, which is, as one might expect, heavily Egyptian, not Babylonian, in coloring. Mesopotamian language does not appear in the book of Exodus either. An exception to the expected lack of knowledge of Mesopotamian culture in distant Egypt would be that the cuneiform Amarna tablets in Egypt prove the Egyptian fluency in the Mesopotamian language (*Akkadian*—that is, “Babylonian”) as a diplomatic language, in the *fourteenth* century BC. However, the early date of the Exodus in the *fifteenth* century BC would predate the development of this diplomatic language, so there is no discrepancy.

The Law-Code Question

Second, the law code described in the book of Exodus displays a comfortable fit with the form and structure of law codes dated to earlier periods. Previous to recognizing this fit, critics had argued that Moses could not write at all, let alone have written a sophisticated law code such as seen in Exodus and Leviticus, and that the Hebrews did not learn the art of writing until after they settled in Canaan.

However, the discovery of a diorite stele containing a much earlier law code (now known as the Hammurabi Code) created by the Babylonian king Hammurabi (or Hammurapi, c. 1700 BC), all but silenced the critics.

Archaeologists have since unearthed thousands of cuneiform clay tablets in central Mesopotamia, known as the Nuzi letters, that date to the fifteenth century BC. These letters reflect societal laws and codes relating to norms, private contracts, adoption, and inheritance, laws and codes that were in place for centuries prior to their writing. For instance, the law permitted a man to remarry if his wife could not bear children, or the wife could provide a surrogate mother to give birth, such as a slave woman (see the example of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, Genesis 16:1-3). If a couple could not have a child, adoption of another individual to carry on the family name and inherit the wealth was acceptable according to the Nuzi tablets. However, if the couple had a son born to them, then the son would take priority over the former adoptee (see Isaac's position over Eliezer, Genesis 15:4). What is more, after the child was born of surrogacy, that child could not be expelled from the family or sent away (see Sarah's request to send Hagar and Ishmael away, Genesis 21:10).

Based on these finds and their consistency with laws and customs found in Exodus and the other books of Moses, it seems reasonable to believe the author of Exodus was well-acquainted with Egyptian culture and Mesopotamian law in the second millennium BC. Despite these helpful parallels supporting the context of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, some evangelical scholars have recognized the limitations inherent in these examples and some defects in these parallels. Thus they caution against excessive reliance on indirect evidences such as parallels of customs, laws, societal norms, and so on.



This seven-foot stele known as the Code of Hammurabi contains 282 law codes dealing with various situations. The picture on top depicts Hammurabi facing the seated god Marduk. Beneath them are the written codes themselves. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Issues with Historical Investigation of the Exodus

Historians must *investigate* ancient literature, not prejudge it, to try to objectively assess whether it is credible and reliable or composed of fabrication, myth, and legend, or is otherwise untrustworthy. If the ancient document “passes the test” or survives the investigation, then its credibility will be high and one can rely on it as telling the truth to the degree that depends on how extensively it was tested.

Historical investigation is not a 100 percent certain procedure with absolutely guaranteed results. Nevertheless, the Bible remains the one outstanding piece of ancient literature that excels in passing historical investigations mounted by even its harshest critics. This does not mean we have given the Bible a free pass regarding its trustworthiness. The free-pass approach uses the faulty logic that declares, for example, “We don’t know what the ancients knew, so who are we to criticize the eyewitness or author of the book?” In other words, the free-pass approach maintains that critics cannot criticize because they are looking back in time some 3,500 years; supposedly, our day cannot provide a superior vantage point in any way to that of the one who experienced the events at the actual time.

But this tired truism, which may not be true, cannot answer factual questions! Yes, as a general rule, we normally prefer contemporaneous eyewitness evidence over that of later material. But in some cases we today might well know more than what an ancient author knew about his own time. Rapid electronic communications did not exist 3,500 years ago. It is possible that someone in one town might not know what had occurred in a neighboring town or surrounding geographical area, given the isolation imposed by older methods of communication. By excavating a library of clay tablets covering a thousand years of history, we might well know more than an average person living back then or even the average temple scholar, who did not have access to or could not read the language used in the tablets (for example, the Sumerian language used in some tablets in later Babylonia, which was a language not known to the general population or to any but the inner circle of scribes and specially-trained priests).

On the other hand, it is also possible that an ancient scholar or eyewitness 3,500 years ago could indeed have had a clearer view of his own history than we do today, in spite of technological limitations. We just cannot prejudge the question one way or the other and then use the prejudgment to entirely sweep away critical objections to the Bible’s historicity. We need to address the fundamental issues straight on. And in the case of the Exodus we have an abundance of evidence.

The Argument from Silence

There are times when critical scholars appear to argue from silence—that is, they dismiss the historicity of the Exodus because no supporting material has been discovered. It is also asserted by some well-intentioned apologists that critics cannot argue that the “absence of evidence is evidence of absence.” If there is no evidence discovered for the Exodus, it is argued, this “absence of evidence” doesn’t prove the absence of the Exodus event from history.

One must guard against two extremes when approaching the argument from silence.

One should recognize that the absence of evidence—when there has been a diligent search for it—is evidence of the absence of the event in the area searched. How could it be otherwise? How else does one establish that an alleged event or fact is “absent”? How does one come to this conclusion *except by searching for the event diligently and not finding it*? It certainly is not positive proof that the event did not occur, but it is evidence (of absence) that is as strong as the thoroughness of the search that was designed to look for it.

For instance, if search teams looking for a child missing in the forest cannot find him in one area, they don’t tell themselves this “absence of evidence” of the child proves nothing and they must keep futilely searching the same area over and over again instead of expanding the search to a wider area. No, they say they *do* indeed have evidence of absence of the child in that one area, and then they *continue* the search in the *next* area, and the next area after that, until hopefully searchers find him or her. This is just common sense.

On the other hand, the finding of “no evidence” does *not* automatically carry the same weight as its exact opposite (hard evidence)—in this case the total *contradiction* of the Exodus event. The “no evidence” finding may warrant a merely *neutral* or ambiguous conclusion, or even the more preferred approach of giving the historical details surrounding the Exodus event the benefit of the doubt as the search continues.

In the case of the Exodus, there has never been a diligent search for Egyptian documentary evidence for it until now. The scattered hieroglyphic text evidences known so far have been uncovered by Egyptologists by accident in the normal course of their work, not because of a special search for Egyptian records of the Exodus, and even the accidentally uncovered evidences have never been collected together in one place until now.⁹ Even Christian scholars have failed to conduct a diligent search for Egyptian records of the Exodus, and no such exhaustive search is known from any published source, secular or not.

In modern history there has never been a full-time scholar dedicated to investigating the Egyptian records for evidence of the Exodus, at least until now. No professorship of Exodus studies is known of anywhere in the world, in any Christian or Jewish seminary, Bible college, or secular university at any time, past or present. No “Department of Exodus Studies” exists in any university or college or seminary anywhere in the world, now or in the past. (And even if such an Exodus professorship or department did exist, it might not be dedicated to searching for Egyptian documents on the Exodus—documents that so many believe do not exist.) No archaeological excavation along the shores of the Red Sea has ever looked for signs of the



Stone and mud-brick dwelling foundations unearthed in Jericho at Tell es-Sultan. (Photo by Abraham Sobkowski, PD.)

Exodus. Simple due diligence would call for these minimal efforts to be made before any scholar declares the Exodus either disproven or “unnecessary to be proven” (“unnecessary” because the alleged lack of Egyptian records is supported only by tenuous arguments or excuses, such as reducing the Exodus to a minor event that is easily overlooked).

Jericho as Evidence of the Exodus and Conquest

Modern excavations conducted at Jericho (Tel es-Sultan) have been offered by some as archaeological evidence supporting the conquest of Canaan and therefore, by implication, the Exodus event some 40 years before the conquest. These excavations are purported to demonstrate that the city was destroyed around the time of the Exodus (c. 1440 to 1400 BC) *if the archaeological data are reinterpreted to fit the Bible*, which creates some problems and raises some issues.

Archaeological data have demonstrated that Jericho is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, dating back thousands of years before Christ. It is located nine miles north of the Dead Sea and five miles west of the Jordan River, adjacent to the arid Judean wilderness. Teams of archaeologists have excavated Jericho in four major campaigns since the early twentieth century and they continue to do so to the present day. Except for the first campaign, these efforts were unable to match the archaeological data to the biblical chronology of the conquest of Canaan by Joshua (Joshua 6).

A Questionable Attempt to Reconcile Evidence and Dates

In 1990, Bryant Wood of the Associates for Biblical Research revisited much of the previous data collected by Kathleen Kenyon in the 1950s and others, including the pottery data. By reinterpreting the data, Wood concluded that the destruction of the city must have occurred c. 1400 BC, thus appearing to bring the archaeological data at Jericho more in line with the biblical text and supporting an early chronology for the Exodus and conquest. Despite the chronological issues, by redating certain c. 1600 BC Middle Bronze pottery remains found at Jericho to c. 1400 BC, the end of the first period of the Late Bronze Age (LB I), Wood claims to have identified several archaeological features that confirm biblical descriptions of the city at the time of its conquest by Joshua. (See the chart “Archaeological Ages and Israel” in chapter 15.) These include the collapse of fortification walls (Joshua 6:20); grain storage indicating that the conquest was in the spring (Joshua 2:6; 3:15; 5:10); the city being destroyed by fire (Joshua 6:24); the grain stored in the city not being consumed by its inhabitants, thus indicating a short siege (Joshua 6:15,20); and the grain never being used by the attackers (the Hebrews were not to take anything from the city: Joshua 6:17-18).¹⁰

Attempts to lower the date of the end of the Middle Bronze age throughout the entire Israel region (by John Bimson of the University of Sheffield, Great Britain) or on a localized basis at Jericho only (Wood) have been met with criticism. Some believe this reinterpretation of the earlier data, which claims errors in the original excavators’ archaeological analysis, is unnecessary. This is because the first Jericho excavation actually matched the biblical chronology of the Conquest with the archaeological data found, without having to reinterpret the data or attribute errors to the original archaeological

analysis in order to create a match. Subsequent studies that have ignored those results did so mainly because the *dates* of the archaeological periods (Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Iron Age) had been radically changed in the interim so that there was no longer a match with the Bible. The *analyses* of the archaeological *artifacts* and the archaeological periods to which they were assigned remain valid and unchanged today—only the dates of the periods have changed.

Critics of Wood's efforts to redate some of the Jericho pottery unearthed by Kenyon have questioned his attempts to reinterpret the data and to claim that Kenyon misinterpreted and hence "misdated" Jericho's archaeology. Wood claims that the Middle Bronze Age destruction of the city must have actually occurred c. 1400 BC in the Late Bronze Age, which brings the archaeological data at Jericho in line with the biblical text. Thus Wood redates the Middle Bronze Age destruction of Jericho to the Late Bronze Age.

Problems with the Jericho Pottery Redating

Unfortunately, as appealing as Wood's redating of *pottery* may seem to be at first glance, it is very unclear whether he has succeeded in redating the Jericho *wall destruction* to c. 1400 BC and thus the time of Joshua's conquest. His "detailed study of the pottery of the Middle Bronze–Late Bronze I period at Jericho"—which is crucially important to his argument—as of 1990 admittedly "has not yet been published." And over 20 years later it apparently still had not been published (no mention of its publication in the 2008 online edition of his original article, for example, or in 2010 postings).¹¹ In 2009, Wood's research update on Jericho still insisted that Kenyon had "erred," but nevertheless admitted, "It remains for me to publish a critique of Kenyon's theories and an in-depth study of the pottery from the various expeditions, to demonstrate that Kenyon's conclusions were incorrect. . . ."¹²

When Wood's initial publication was severely criticized by another archaeologist, Wood softened his argument somewhat from his original claims. In his original article, Wood stressed how several types of pottery found by earlier excavators at Jericho, in what is normally considered to be the Middle Bronze Age walled city (which was destroyed by fire), were absolutely unique to the Late Bronze Age period. Thus the Middle Bronze Age dating by Kenyon was wrong because of her "methodologically unsound and, indeed, unacceptable" errors, and work that was "especially poorly founded." He claimed she "inexplicably . . . ignored" supposedly "obvious" Late Bronze Age pottery from the walled city.

So in the original article, this supposedly "obvious" and uniquely Late Bronze Age-dated pottery, it was confidently asserted, could be "found only" in the Late Bronze Age, "confined to" the last part of the Late Bronze I period, and "all characteristic" of (unique to) the Late Bronze Age.

But *after* the published criticism, Wood responded by painting a rather different picture. He conceded that Late Bronze Age pottery is so similar to Middle Bronze Age pottery that the "subtle differences" are difficult to distinguish and require "careful study":

It is important to recognize that the pottery of the Late Bronze I period is *very similar* to that of the final phase of the Middle Bronze period. In fact, the material culture of the Late Bronze I period is *simply a continuation* of that of the Middle Bronze period. As a result, many Middle Bronze forms *continue* into Late Bronze I. There are *subtle* differences in a number of types, however, and several new forms are introduced. With careful study of the pottery evidence, therefore, it is possible to distinguish the Late Bronze I period from the terminal phase of the Middle Bronze period.¹³

However, the first example of pottery, which Wood for some reason chose to extensively discuss, is not a conclusively “uniquely” dated item. It is called the “flaring carinated bowl” and was found in the city mound by Kenyon. Wood was forced to admit that the “subtle differences” in the “slight crimp” in the bowl require a “discerning eye” to see and “*One could argue this point, however, since the difference is slight*” (emphasis added). The change in this “slight crimp” over time from Middle Bronze Age to Late Bronze Age is undocumented by any drawings illustrating the change. This Late Bronze Age dating has of course been vigorously disputed.¹⁴

Where Is the Evidence?

All this inspires little confidence in what is supposed to be a revolutionary redating of Jericho. With several other bowl and pot types, Wood claims “strong” indicators for a “unique” (or “diagnostic”) Late Bronze Age date. This should be Wood’s crucial evidence, the clincher, but he had already warned in advance (see quote above) that these are all “subtle” differences that may be arguable. And then he goes on with weak examples (instead of the strongest evidence) of other pottery that are merely “*more in the Late Bronze tradition*” (emphasis added) than in the Middle Bronze tradition, but not absolutely unique to Late Bronze Age. This pottery should be more or less irrelevant if it does not uniquely determine the date. In still other examples he is nebulous about whether the Late Bronze Age date carries uniqueness or not. Although everything hinges on this pottery evidence, these examples evidently all remain *undocumented and unpublished* by Wood to this day.

In short, none of Bryant Wood’s equivocal, unpublished evidence convincingly proves that a biblical-style conquest of a formidable walled city—as famously depicted in the book of Joshua—occurred in the Late Bronze Age period. Wood might still be right, and we hope he publishes the evidence to prove it in the near future. As mentioned before, though, there are other alternatives.*

* Brad C. Sparks, forthcoming manuscript on Exodus-like parallels in Egyptian literature. Proponents of the redating of Jericho pottery from the Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age like to cite several archaeological features as confirming the biblical descriptions of the city at the time of its conquest by Joshua (destruction by fire in the spring, collapse of the walls, abandonment of the city afterward, and so on). But these are not unique to the supposed “Late Bronze Age” destruction of Jericho (actually the Middle Bronze Age destruction) nor are they unique to the biblical conquest of Jericho (Ai was also destroyed by fire and left abandoned). The Early Bronze Age city of Jericho was also heavily fortified with walls and was destroyed by fire, with total wall destruction on the east side, and was left abandoned for centuries. Moreover,

Biblical Significance

We do not need to rely on weak evidence or faulty arguments to support the Exodus event or the subsequent conquest of Canaan. We do not have to make excuses for the Bible or rewrite the miraculous out of it so that what remains will somehow withstand scientific and historical scrutiny better. We can argue from a position of strength, not weakness. The archaeological and documentary data powerfully corroborate the Exodus account as described by Moses. The intimate knowledge of Egyptian life, language, slave labor, and customs recorded in the book of Exodus reflect firsthand knowledge of Egyptian society by the author. The interweaving of miracles with various historical figures and geography throughout the Pentateuch makes it difficult to separate them—showing that the author intended them to be understood as historical and literal.

The difficulties that still remain in aligning archaeological data with biblical chronology may yet be resolved. It appears that scholars are associating the archaeological data with the right archaeological periods but assigning the wrong dates to those periods (or to the Egyptian dynasties usually used to date the archaeological periods). This is seen in, among other things, the fact that those period dates continue to shift around (as shown by, for example, the long-running debate between Amihai Mazar and Israel Finkelstein over Iron Age dates and the continual slide toward later dates for Egyptian dynasties).

The evidence for the Exodus is strong and extensive, as we would expect from the mass destruction event recounted in the Bible, the destruction of the nation of Egypt. In the end, faith supplies the final measure of certainty for those seeking God. But the powerful Egyptian evidences for the Exodus in its most miraculous aspects go a long way toward supporting the historicity and credibility of the Bible.

unlike the alleged Late Bronze Age destruction, the Early Bronze Age city was destroyed by invaders crossing the Jordan River from the east who were organized in at least eight distinguishable “tribes”—no such “tribal” attack occurred with the Late Bronze Age (Middle Bronze Age) destruction.

Some reputable archaeologists have argued that it was in fact the Early Bronze Age city of Jericho that was destroyed in the Israelite conquest, despite the apparent six- or eight-century dating problem (Rudolph Cohen, Emmanuel Anati, et al.). Cohen and Anati point to the very early date of the Ipuwer papyrus as supporting Egyptian evidence that links up precisely with this archaeological evidence of the tribal destruction of Early Bronze Age Jericho.