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Freedom from the Egyptian Empire

Exodus as cultural memory of the demise of Egypt’s 400-year rule over Canaan.

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Pharaoh Tutankhamun destroying his enemies, ca. 1327 B.C.E, painting on wood (detail). Egyptian Museum of Cairo

Archaeologists and Egyptologists tell us that there is no evidence for the Exodus.[1] This presents different problems for various types of biblical scholars. How do we make sense of the central narrative in the Bible if there is no evidence for it? If the Exodus didn’t happen, where did the story come from? Why would the ancient Israelites accept this as the story of their origins?

I think it unlikely that such a central story would come from nothing. I will argue that the Exodus is a cultural memory of a historical era that really happened and for which there is (literally) tons of evidence.[2]

A Response to Defenders of the Exodus Account as History

First, I will address three arguments often marshaled by defenders of the historicity of the exodus.

1. *Absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence.*

This is true. The absence of evidence for the Exodus is not proof that it didn’t happen. But the absence of evidence is significant. If one can find an abundance of evidence, this is clearly preferable.

1. *It is implausible that a people would make up a story of ignominious origins.*

I agree. Ancestry from slaves conveys a low status. In the ancient world, it’s better to be descended from high-status figures, like kings or gods. Thus, we must understand why ancient Israelites would have derived their origin from slaves.

1. *Egyptian motifs in the exodus stories (as elsewhere in the Bible) lend plausibility to the Egyptian background of the story.*

This is true too, but doesn’t really address the issue of the historicity of the exodus, only its literary background.[3]

Slaves “to Egypt” (not just “in Egypt”)

I have proposed that the memory of the Egyptian oppression and Israel’s liberation from slavery is a cultural memory of the Egyptian Empire, when Egypt ruled Canaan for roughly 400 years (1500-1150 B.C.E.).[4] During the Egyptian Empire, thousands of Canaanite slaves served in Egypt and – just as important – *all of Canaan* was regarded as the property of Pharaoh. He regarded *all the people in it* as his slaves.

Pharaoh proclaims this in his letter to a Canaanite vassal:

“Amun has indeed put the Upper Land, the Lower Land, where the sun rises, where the sun sets, under the feet of the king.”[5]

The Upper Land is the land of Canaan, which was enslaved and trampled under the foot of Pharaoh. Abundant material and epigraphic evidence supports the presence of the Egyptian Empire in Canaan, including large Egyptian garrison forts, where the heavy hand of Pharaonic rule (particularly in the latter years of the Empire) was enforced.

The decline of the Egyptian Empire overlapped with the period of the emergence of Israel. The earliest mention of Israel is in the Merneptah stele (ca. 1205 B.C.E.), when Pharaoh Merneptah states: “Israel is destroyed; its seed is not.” Fortunately, Merneptah exaggerated—Israel survived, but this does reflect a conquest of part of Israel late in the thirteenth century. Over the next few decades Egypt’s imperial rule declined and finally disappeared. Before long, the Egyptian Empire was not.

Stretching our Cultural Memories

The earliest biblical text about the Exodus – the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 – describes Yahweh’s great victory over Pharaoh’s troops at the Red (or Reed) Sea. Henceforth the boundary of Egyptian rule was limited to Egypt. Now Yahweh ruled over Israel, whom he planted in his “holy mountain.” The demise of Egypt is the occasion for the birth of Israel as a new people. With Yahweh’s great victory, the people were redeemed from the Egyptian house of bondage. The fall of Egypt is the rise of Israel.

All of these motifs make sense against the backdrop of the decline and fall of the Egyptian Empire in Canaan.

Uniting the Former Slaves and Subjects

It is likely that many Canaanite slaves who were taken to Egypt during the era of imperial rule returned home in the wake of the economic and political collapse in Egypt. These former slaves from Egypt joined the former “slaves” who had never been in Egypt, but who remembered the heavy hand of Pharaoh during the harsh years of the Empire in Canaan. Together, this “mixed multitude (ערב רב)” became the people of Israel.[6] The story of the exodus was arguably a key agent in crystallizing early Israelite identity around the shared memory of Egyptian oppression and liberation.

From the perspective of the early Israelites, theirs was a new polity founded by God’s victory over the dark chaos of Pharaoh’s rule. Israel had undergone a decisive transition from slavery to freedom, from the House of Bondage to the Promised Land. These events and perceptions are woven into the cultural memory of the Exodus. The rest, as they say, is history.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/freedom-from-the-egyptian-empire)

1. See E. S. Frerichs and L. H. Lesko, eds. *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*(Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997); Graham Davies, “Was There an Exodus?” *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel,* ed. John Day (London: Clark, 2004), 23-40; and many other studies.
2. For another approach to the exodus story utilizing cultural memory studies, see Carl Ehrlich, [“The Exodus Story as Jewish Mnemohistory,”](http://thetorah.com/the-exodus-story-as-jewish-mnemohistory/) *TheTorah* (2015)
3. For another response to defenders of the historicity of the exodus narrative, see Zev Farber, [“The Torah’s Exodus,”](http://thetorah.com/the-torahs-exodus/) *TheTorah* (2015).
4. See “The Exodus as Cultural Memory: Egyptian Bondage and the Song of the Sea,” in *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, eds. T. E. Levy, T. Schneider, and W. H. C. Propp (New York: Springer, 2015), forthcoming.
5. El Amarna Letter 369; see William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 366.
6. For the role of the Levites in these developments, see Richard Elliott Friedman, [“The Historical Exodus,”](http://thetorah.com/the-historical-exodus/) *TheTorah* (2015).