BOOK PROPOSAL

*The Historical Origins of Ancient Israel:*

*The Bible and the Archaeological Evidence Reconciled*

*-or-*

*The Israelite Exodus and Conquest of Canaan in the 12th Century BC:*

*The Bible and the Archaeological Evidence of Ancient Israel’s Origins Reconciled*

*-or-*

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7/6/22

SUBMITTED TO

Katya Covrett, Acquisitions Editor, Zondervan Academic

AUTHOR

Larry D. Bruce, PhD; archaeological field training at Tel Batash (Timnah). Independent researcher and former adjunct professor of biblical and archaeological studies at the Baptist College of Florida. The book proposed here is based on my 1988 doctoral dissertation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) titled *The Israelite Exodus and Conquest of Canaan in the Early Iron Age, a Synthesis of the Archaeological and Literary Evidence in the Light of Ethnographic Studies.* I have published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS).*

SYNOPSIS

This study presents evidence for an Israelite Exodus dated to ca. 1175 BC. A biblical chronology based upon this date consistently aligns datable biblical events with archaeological and other extrabiblical evidence from the time of Abraham to the time of Saul (Gen 12–1 Sam 10). In contrast, the projected dates of biblical events in existing chronologies (specifically the 13th and 15th century BC) are contradicted by the archaeological evidence at almost every relevant site throughout this period—a fact that has led to widespread loss of confidence in biblical historicity. Objections to a 12th century chronology are addressed in this study and resolved leading to a potentially paradigm-changing conclusion: The Bible’s account of ancient Israel’s origins in Canaan may be historically accurate in its present form.

ABSTRACT

Since the discovery of the Merenptah Stele in 1896 scholars have generally agreed that the stele’s reference to Israel intends to locate the Israelites in Canaan *before* Merenptah’s reign (ca. 1213–1203 BC). If true, the Exodus had already occurred in the 13th century BC (or earlier) and a biblically unrecorded defeat of Israel by the Egyptians had taken place in Canaan.

Major problems in biblical and archaeological studies have arisen because of this assumption. By the 1970s it was clear that existing chronologies (that date the Exodus/Conquest to the 13th century or earlier) were incompatible with archaeological findings; many of the Conquest sites in the Transjordan and Canaan did not exist or were not occupied until the early 12th century BC. This discovery led to a crisis of confidence in the Bible’s historical merit.

The cause of the incompatibility between the biblical text and the archaeology, however, may not lie with the Scripture but with chronological assumptions that have dated the Exodus to the wrong century. This study will demonstrate that a 12th century BC chronology (based on an Exodus of ca. 1175 BC) results in consistent alignment of the text events and the archaeological and other extrabiblical evidence at all biblical sites with data from the time of Abraham to the time of Saul.

Objections to the 12th century dating are examined and accounted for in favor of the chronology. This dating model also resolves formerly insoluble problems in the Bible’s account of Israel’s origins (such as the Israelite encounter with Edom during the journey to the Transjordan). A 12th century dating explains why the Bible does not mention any encounter with Egyptian forces after the Exodus: the Egyptians had abandoned their last garrison in Canaan (at Beth-Shean) a decade or more before the Israelites arrived ca. 1135 BC.

The harmonization of the dating of biblical events with the extrabiblical sources—illustrated by dozens of synchronisms, provides an empirical basis for concluding that the Bible’s account of Israel’s origins may be historically accurate in its present form.

TARGET AUDIENCE

I submitted several early versions of chapters from this work to ResearchGate.com in 2017. Chapter one, titled “The Biblical Origins of Israel: Fact or Fiction,” now has more than 9,000 reads. Several other chapters, combined with chapter 1, have approximately 20,000 reads. I also uploaded a reprint of a *JETS* article (on the Merenptah Stele) to Academia.edu in 2020. That submission now has 1,350 reads with the same readership analytics. These readers are either academics (faculty and students) or highly educated professionals in unrelated fields; they are located worldwide.

These numbers indicate wide and continuing interest in Israel’s origins among scholars and educated professionals—the primary audience. An untested but likely audience for this work will be those interested in apologetics since this study presents the case for biblical historicity in the early books of the Old Testament.

In my own experience in seminary, I would have profited immensely from the insights in this book. I could have been spared decades of conflict and uncertainty about the biblical foundation of my faith. I can visualize this book as a standard text in Old Testament studies in conservative Bible colleges and seminaries.

LENGTH AND DATE

The study is complete. It has 176,000 words; the bibliography is an additional 34,000 words. With 35 chapters the average length per chapter is 5,000 words.

Concerning length: It is possible to begin the timeline several hundred years into the Israelite enslavement in Egypt (chapter 10). This would reduce the word count to 138,000.

COMPARABLE TITLES

*Five Views of the Exodus* (Zondervan Academic, 2021), edited by Mark Janzen.

This book addresses chronologies of Israel’s biblical origins, as does my book. In the chapter on the 12th century BC Exodus, Gary Rendsburg presents reasons for dating the event to ca. 1175 BC. While he and I agree on this our methodologies are different, particularly in the way we deal with the text as a credible source. He does not lean heavily on archaeological evidence for his position—whereas I do.

In the same work, James Hoffmeier argues for a 13th century BC Exodus. He establishes that Ramesses II was the pharaoh of the oppression (citing Exod 1:11), but he departs from the biblical text to argue that Ramesses was also the pharaoh of the Exodus (which is not consistent with Exod 2:23 and 4:19). He does this because he believes the Merenptah Stele places the Israelites in Canaan before the reign of Ramesses’s son Merenptah. His interpretation of the Merenptah Stele requires marginalization of the biblical record in favor of the stele and scholarly consensus—one of the central problems addressed in my book. *(Incidentally, Professor Hoffmeier addresses my position on pp. 216, 218; he is mistaken about my dependence on Rendsburg/Bietak and has missed my point in another instance.)*

*Israel in Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 1996), by James Hoffmeier.

*Israel in Sinai* (Oxford University Press, 2005), also by James Hoffmeier.

These two influential studies are closest to the methodology and tone of my book. Hoffmeier establishes a solid basis for locating biblical Israel in Egypt during the time of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC). He does this by citing archaeological and extrabiblical textual evidence—an approach that contrasts with other reconstructions that are speculative. Readers of these two books by Hoffmeier should find my book of interest because it also focuses on empirical evidence supportive of biblical events.

*A Biblical History of Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), by I. Provan, V. P. Long, and T. Longman, III.

The potential value of my book as a textbook for the historical study of Israel’s origins in Canaan may be compared with this work.

Edited Works:

* T. E. Levy, R. Schneider, and W. H. C. Propp (*Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective* [Springer, 2015]).
* J. Hoffmeier, A. Millard, and G. Rendsburg, eds. (*Did I Not Bring Israel out of Egypt?* [Eisenbrauns, 2015]).
* J. Merrill and H. Shanks, eds. (*Ancient Israel, From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* [Biblical Archaeology Society, 2021].
* Daniel Block, ed. (*Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?* [Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2008]).

Essays in these (and other books in the same vein) contain articles mostly by conservative authors seeking redemption for the historicity of the Old Testament. Daniel Block’s introductory comments in his text characterize these efforts: “The[se] essays represent an evangelical response to a tendency in some circles to dismiss the Old Testament as virtually worthless for reconstructing the history of early Israel.” A large scholarly audience is looking for support of their confidence in the historical integrity of the Old Testament, which my book offers.

*The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman.

This popular book (though dated) has no doubt discouraged many readers disposed to a high view of Scripture. My text challenges the writers’ iconoclastic approach that enlists archaeology in an inappropriate way to develop a narrative that it cannot create. There may be a marketing niche for my book that can reach the general audience that read Finkelstein’s and Silberman’s book.

PROSPECTIVE ENDORSERS

Robert Mullins: Professor/chair department of biblical and archaeological studies at Azuza Pacific University; co-director of excavations at Abel Beth Maacah in Israel. He is aware of my thesis and strongly supports its publication.

Bruce Waltke: Eminent Old Testament scholar and prolific author. He wrote me several years ago commending my dissertation and suggesting I rewrite it—which prompted me to do so.

Andreas Köstenberger: Research Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. A prolific scholar and author; former editor of the journal *JETS.* As editor of that journal, he overrode objections to publish my controversial paper on the Merenptah Stele.

Robert Bergen: Distinguished Professor of Old Testament Emeritus at Hannibal-LaGrange University. A former colleague of mine in doctoral studies at SWBTS; some years ago, he provided me with feedback on my 12th century BC chronology. He told me this thesis will pose a threat to the heritage of many published scholars and to expect resistance to its publication.

Gary Rendsburg: Professor of biblical studies, Hebrew language, and ancient Judaism at Rutgers University. We have corresponded several times on the Merenptah Stele issue. We agree the Exodus occurred in the early 12th century BC.

Steven Collins: Dean of the College of Archaeology and Biblical History. Director of excavations at Tall el-Hammam (apparently biblical Sodom). He is an acquaintance who remembers reading my doctoral dissertation.

Thomas Brisco: Provost and Chief Academic Officer at Hardin-Simmons University; former professor in the archaeology department at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS); he was on my doctoral orals committee. (Now retired.)

Daniel Block: Professor at Wheaton College Graduate School; his concern to interpret the Old Testament as an ancient Near Eastern document will probably dispose him to agree with the perspective of my work.

David Falk: Egyptologist and Research Associate at the Vancouver School of Theology. We have engaged in long discussions on the Merenptah Stele. (He does not agree with me but has not provided a convincing argument for why my interpretation is wrong.)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. “Biblical Origins of Israel, Fact or Fiction”   
   Defines a 12th century BC Exodus and why it works; explains why other chronologies fail; identifies challenges to this chronology; defines methodology.
2. “Abraham and the Amorites (18th century BC)”   
   Presents reasons for dating Abraham to the 18th century BC. Explains why Abram and his family were in the vicinity of Ur; introduces the contrasting cultures of the desert and the sown. Introduces the Amorites, the ancient nemesis of Israel.
3. “Abraham Enters Canaan (18th century BC)”   
   Develops the picture of Abraham’s life in the desert employing ethnographies of the Bedouin and other nomadic pastoralists; traces the archaeological route Abraham followed to the Negev in southern Canaan. Establishes dating synchronisms at Shechem, Bethel, Jerusalem, Hebron, and the era of uncontested grazing in the Negev—which fits the 18th century BC.
4. “Abraham in Egypt (mid-18th century BC)”   
   The Egyptian capital existed at Avaris after ca. 1795 BC, a short distance from where Abraham sojourned with his animals along the Wadi Tumilat in the eastern Delta. The location of the capital establishes a “no earlier than” synchronism for Abraham’s sojourn. The Egyptian “Walls of the Ruler” controlled the arrival and departure of pastoralists who were permitted access this fertile region during times of drought in Canaan and the Transjordan—thus previewing the conditions that will bring the Israelites in Jacob’s time to Egypt and into slavery.
5. “Abraham Returns to Canaan (latter 1700s BC)”  
   Lot went down to Sodom a short time before the city was destroyed by an apparent meteoric airburst carbon dated to between ca. 1750 and 1650 BC. This event establishes a ballpark synchronism for Isaac’s birth (which occurred within one year of the cataclysmic event). The chapter also describes Abraham’s sojourn near Gerar in the “land of the Philistines” (a possible authorial anachronism that may date the Mosaic composition of the account to the 12th century BC).
6. “Isaac and Jacob in Canaan in the Middle Bronze Age IIB/C (ca. 1750–1550 BC)” Discusses the archaeology and geography of Canaan in Jacob’s time at Shechem, Hebron, and other towns.
7. “When Israel Entered Egypt (ca. 1615–1575 BC)”   
   Traces biblical events in the life of Joseph that likely date to the time of the Hyksos Dynasty’s control of the Egyptian Delta with a capital at Avaris. Reasons for this dating are explained.
8. “Israel Enslaved and the Expulsion of the Hyksos (ca.1570–1550 BC)”   
   Follows the acts of 17th and 18th Dynasty pharaohs Kamose and Ahmose as they progressively captured Hyksos holdings south of Avaris—including (presumably) the Wadi Tumilat resulting in the enslavement of the small group of Israelites some decades before the Hyksos were driven out of the Delta. Ahmose may have been the pharaoh who knew not Joseph; the Israelites were likely enslaved in the latter lifetime of Joseph.
9. “The Early 18th Dynasty: The Aegean Connection and Forays into Canaan (16th–15th Centuries BC)”  
   Explores the dating of the volcanic eruption of Thera and theories connecting this event with the Israelite Exodus. Early pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty, with the capital at Thebes, no doubt controlled the trade routes through Canaan but had little apparent interest in exploitation and occupation of the region; that is, until the reign of Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) who launched the empire through repeated military actions in Canaan and points north.
10. “The New Kingdom Path to Empire (1550-1425 BC)”   
    Explores the Egyptian domination of Canaan in this era illustrating why the Exodus/Conquest could not have happened in this period as required by the 15th century BC Exodus/Conquest chronology. Israel was necessarily in Egypt.
11. “Israel in the Age of Amarna (1353–1337 BC)”   
    The Amarna Letters describe conditions in Canaan in this period in which the 15th century BC Exodus/Conquest chronology places the period of the judges; given the geopolitical realities of Egypt’s domination of the Highlands in the 14th century BC, explains why Israel’s proposed presence in Canaan’s Highlands is irreconcilable with the biblical text.
12. “The Rise of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC)”   
    Describes the collapse of the 18th Dynasty and the rise of the 19th Dynasty and its greatest pharaoh, Ramesses II. Traces Egyptian presence in Canaan and military actions there and further north to establish why the Israelite presence in Canaan in the reign of Ramesses II is incompatible with the biblical account.
13. “The Israelites and the Pharaoh of the Oppression (ca. 1279–1213 BC)”   
    Describes the reasons for the oppression of the Israelites assuredly under the reign of Ramesses II (and Merenptah); adds additional dating evidence for the founding of cities the Israelites built (Pithom and Raamses) and the date for the abandonment of the city of Raamses, thus bracketing the time of the Israelite biblical oppression (and Exodus) within Egypt.
14. “Moses in the House of Ramesses II (ca. 1240 BC)”   
    Describes the repressive policies of Ramesses II as the context for the appearance of Moses in the biblical text. Describes his education and the privileges he would have enjoyed as an obscure member of the royal household. Debunks non-biblical stories of Moses. Describes his flight to Midian.
15. “Israel in the Merenptah Stele (ca. 1213–1203 BC)”   
    Examines the deeply entrenched arguments that locate Israel in Canaan in the reign of Merenptah based on the Merenptah Stele’s reference to Israel; offers an alternate interpretation accommodating an Israel-in-Egypt interpretation.
16. “Israel in the Time of Merenptah (ca. 1213–1203 BC): A Biblical Reconstruction”  
    Interprets the Merenptah Stele to accommodate the biblical perspective. Explains the absence of any biblical mention of Merenptah’s actions against Israel (because the point of view in this period was that of Moses residing in Midian). This reconstruction postulates an Israelite attempt to escape bondage while Merenptah was engaged in his war against Libya in ca. 1209 BC (a prophetic fulfillment of Exod 1:9–10).
17. The Pharaoh of the Exodus (ca. 1175 BC)”   
    Presents the case for Ramesses III (1185–1154 BC) as pharaoh of the Exodus. Describes the challenges he faced during and after his war against the Sea Peoples in 1177 BC, the event that spelled the end of the Egyptian Empire and accelerated Egypt’s withdrawal from Canaan.
18. “The Vast Numbers of the Israelites (ca 1175/1135 BC)”   
    An aside that explains the impossibly large numbers of the Exodus Israelites. Examines the early definition and use of the term “eleph” (“thousand”) and concludes that the actual number of Israelites in the Exodus/wandering period was approximately 20,000. Explores an evident editorial harmonization of several texts that may be evidence of a deliberate alteration of the original wording of certain texts by a later editor.
19. “Yahweh vs. Ramesses III (ca. 1175 BC)”   
    Presents the Bible’s account of the plagues and the release of the Israelites in the light of details of Ramesses III’s reign.
20. “The Israelite Trek to the Sea (ca. 1175 BC)”  
    Traces the route and distance from the Egyptian capital (Raamses) to the *yam suf* (the “Red Sea”); examines Egyptian references to this body of water reinforcing the view that the *yam suf* must have been the now-defunct Ballah Lakes (drained in the 1850s).
21. “Through the Sea (ca. 1175 BC)”   
    Explores the possible physical forces that opened the sea in the apparent hypernatural miracle at the Ballah Lakes.
22. “The Location of Mt. Sinai (ca. 1175 BC)”   
    Traces two distance markers that establish the location of Mt. Sinai at the traditional site; debunks several popular theories that locate Mt. Sinai in Arabia.
23. “The Trek to Mt. Sinai (ca. 1175 BC)”   
    Identifies toponyms defining the specific route the Israelites followed to the holy mountain, a distance of approximately 220 miles from the “Red Sea” crossing.
24. “At the Mountain (ca. 1175 BC)”   
    Reviews the geography of the final leg of the trek to the mountain and the encampment that must have occurred on the er-Rahah Plain at the base of the Gebel Safsafah/Gebel Musa massif.
25. “The Wandering (ca. 1175–1137 BC)”   
    Traces the geographical route the Israelites followed from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barnea; examines arguments for/against the Israelite presence at Kadesh Barnea in the northern Sinai and vicinity during the early 12th century BC. Examines ethnographic studies of Bedouin life that model the Israelite circumstances. Describes the mission to spy out the land of Canaan; identifies several 12th century BC archaeological synchronisms.
26. “To the Transjordan (ca. 1130s BC)”   
    Identifies synchronisms between the archaeological evidence and the 12th century BC dating of the Israelite encounter with Amalekites in the Negev (not before the early 12th century) and the Edomite encounter in the Arabah (a polity that did not exist before the 12th century BC.) Identifies the route *requested* by Moses through the Edomite mining operation to the Wadi Dana, the Egyptian route up onto the Transjordan plateau. Explains the obvious reason why passage through this area was denied by the Edomite king.
27. “Conquest of the Transjordan (ca.1137–1135 BC)”   
    Describes the Israelite encounter with the Amorite warlords Sihon and Og and the Israelite capture/destruction of sites that did not exist before the early 12th century BC. Several dating synchronisms are identified.
28. “The Pre-Israelite Settlement of Canaan (late 13th–mid 12th centuries BC)”   
    An aside that attributes the tripling of the population of Canaan’s Highlands to refugees fleeing south in the aftermath of widespread destruction and drought along the eastern Levant at the end of the Late Bronze Age. These refugees destroyed many towns in Canaan and built new ones that the Israelites would encounter when they arrived one or more generations later (ca. 1135 BC). This chapter explains why this demographic phenomenon could not have been the Israelite arrival described in Joshua.
29. “The Conquest of Jericho (ca. 1135 BC)”   
    Presents overlooked archaeological evidence that may accommodate a late 12th century BC Conquest of Jericho (Tell es-Sultan). Also presents the case for a period of abandonment of the site until the 8th century BC, consistent with the biblical occupational sequence of the mound of Jericho).
30. “Conquest of the Highlands (ca. 1135–1130 BC)”   
    Examines evidence at sites such as Ai, Bethel, the altar at Mt. Ebal, the Hivite towns (especially Gibeon), Jerusalem, Hebron, Lachish, and others, all with strong evidence demonstrating that a biblical Conquest could not have occurred before the latter 12th century BC.
31. “Joshua’s Northern Campaign (ca. 1130 BC)”   
    Examines archaeological evidence that supports a latter 12th century BC campaign against the northern Canaanite coalition. Accounts for why the Israelites could not have been responsible for the destruction of Greater Hazor ca. 1230 BC.
32. “The End of Conquest (ca. 1130 BC)”   
    Surveys the land that “yet remains” and tribal allotments. The establishment of a religious temenos at Shiloh (dated to the latter 12th century BC by the excavator Israel Finkelstein) establishes the beginning of the period of the Judges ca. 1130 BC. At that time the Israelites moved up from Gilgal to the Highlands to begin settlement of the land as the period of the Judges began. The rise of the Philistines in the lifetime of Joshua chronologically brackets the dates for the Conquest and the beginning of the period of the judges.
33. “The Judges (ca. 1130–1032 BC)”   
    Examines the literary nature of the book of Judges as an anthology/theological treatise/sermon, not a sequenced historical narrative. Presents textual and archaeological evidence that dates the period of the Judges to between ca. 1130 and 1032 BC (the latter being the arguable date of Saul’s coronation).
34. “The Coming of the King (ca. 1120–1032 BC)”   
    Briefly covers the time of Ruth, Samuel, and Saul.
35. “The Historical Origins of Ancient Israel: The Weight of the Evidence”   
    The Bible as history; a review of the reasons for claiming the biblical account of Israel’s origins may be historically accurate.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Chapters 1 and 32 are attached. Chapter 1 defines the thesis, the methodology, and the content of the book. Chapter 32 is a typical chapter illustrating the nature of the evidence supportive of a 12th century BC dating thesis. It also explores the argument for the historical accuracy of the biblical texts of Joshua and Judges.