CHAPTER 1

The Biblical Origins of Israel:

Fact or Fiction?

The Bible’s story of ancient Israel’s origins as a kingdom begins with Yahweh’s call for Abram to go to Canaan (Gen 12) and ends with the inauguration of the monarchy in that very land (1 Sam 10). The present study examines datable events in this story through the lens of extrabiblical evidence and reaches the following conclusion: A chronology of Israel’s origins—based on an Exodus date of ca. 1175 BC, consistently harmonizes projected dates of biblical events with archaeological evidence at sites throughout this period. This may mean that the Bible’s account of Israel’s origins in Canaan is historically accurate.

To the average person who reads the Bible this study may seem a puzzling and unnecessary undertaking since the Bible’s story of Israel’s origins seems credible enough at face value. This reader may believe that the archaeological evidence agrees with the Bible’s story; he/she may think that archaeology proves the Bible. But that is not what scholars believe.

The public generally does not know that from the 1970s it has been evident to academics that the accepted chronologies that date the arrival of the Israelites in Canaan to the 13th century BC or earlier are irreconcilable with the archaeological evidence. Emerging evidence by 1970s showed that towns the Israelites supposedly encountered, defeated, or destroyed during the Conquest did not yet exist.

The discovery of this contradiction between the presumed dating of the Israelite arrival in Canaan (in the 13th century BC or before) and the hard evidence led to the unsettling conclusion among many scholars that the Bible’s account of Israel’s origins was historically unreliable. Skepticism has persisted since then even among conservative biblical scholars—a fact not openly shared with the public.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The loss of confidence in the historical reliability of the Bible’s account of Israel’s origins has also affected the archaeological community. Again, according to William Dever, there is not one “reputable” archaeologist in the world today who espouses the Conquest Model—the belief that the Israelites (as a discrete population) entered Canaan and established themselves in the land through force of arms as described in the book of Joshua.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Some scholars believe the Bible’s record of early Israel’s history is a late composition describing events that never happened; or, if there is a basis for some events the memory thereof is beyond reconstruction. Contributing to this view, until recently, was the belief that literacy was a late development such that the events described in the early texts of the Bible must have arisen from questionable oral traditions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

While it is tempting to argue these issues in detail, the limited objective here is to find out whether the Bible’s story of Israel’s origins (Gen 12 to 1 Sam 10) *could* be historically accurate. If so, it provides a narrative that other reconstructions cannot provide. Non-biblical scenarios accounting for how Israel might have emerged in Canaan have no narrative.

The conclusion that the Bible’s account of Israel’s origins in Canaan is historically unreliable has arisen from the discovery that projected dates of biblical events in currently accepted chronologies are contradicted by the archaeological evidence. But if projected dates of biblical events in a corrected chronology *do agree* with the archaeological evidence, does it follow by this standard that the Bible’s account *is* historically reliable?

In this study I argue that the disconnect between the text and the hard evidence does not arise from historical inaccuracies or inconsistencies in the Scripture but from the scholarship that has insisted on dating the Exodus to the wrong century. To appreciate the magnitude of the problem this has created, a survey of some background issues is helpful.

# The Impasse in the Search for Israel’s Origins

Before the 1970s biblical scholars typically relied on the testimony of the Old Testament to reconstruct Israel’s history. The relentless question was, when did this or that event happen? The only source of absolute dates for Israel’s early origins exists in Egyptian dynastic history, with the nexus being the Bible’s mention of pharaohs of the oppression and the Exodus. The identification of likely candidates has provided the only basis for placing the Bible’s story in the larger world of the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages in the ancient Near East.

The earliest theory (1849) identified the pharaohs of the oppression and the Exodus as Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC) and Merenptah (1213–1203 BC), respectively. The next oldest theory (1896) proposed Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) as the oppressor and Amenhotep II (1427–1401 BC) as the pharaoh of the Exodus.[[4]](#footnote-4) With variations (including a short-lived theory of a double Exodus), the dynastic dates from these two theories have survived as the core of the 13th and the 15th century BC chronologies of Israel’s origins.[[5]](#footnote-5)

From the proposed dates for the Exodus in these two theories (mid-13th century BC and 1446 BC), the Bible’s internal relative chronology has been used to project dates for Abraham and other personalities and events through the period of the Judges to the first king of Israel. But, as noted above, both chronologies (and other lesser-known reconstructions) have proven irreconcilable with the archaeological evidence. The recognition of this fact has had far reaching effects in the biblical and archaeological communities of scholars.

Friedhelm Hartenstein believes a main reason for the “hermeneutic of suspicion” among scholars has been the rise of Syro-Palestinian archaeology that has produced a history that does not correspond with the Bible’s supposed “ancient Israel,” its history and its religion. [[6]](#footnote-6) Kenneth Matthews agrees; he speaks for many conservatives in describing the “tyranny of archaeological evidence” over textual (biblical evidence).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Conservative biblical scholars hanging on to a fragmented 15th or 13th century BC reconstruction (for lack of any other historical framework) are forced to ignore or marginalize the findings of archaeology where those findings contradict a presumed dating of biblical events of Israel’s origins. [[8]](#footnote-8) The treatment of the evidence at the town of Ai (assuming et-Tell) by I. Provan, V. P. Long, and T. Longman, III, illustrates how the archaeological evidence is sometimes handled (when it is even addressed) by conservative scholars.

The excavator of the biblical site of Ai (assuming “et Tell”) determined that the site was abandoned between ca. 2400 and 1200 BC. It was reoccupied as a small village ca. 1200 BC and suffered destruction in the latter 12th century BC.[[9]](#footnote-9) According to the 15th century reconstruction Joshua’s destruction of Ai should date to ca. 1406 BC; the 13th century chronology would date this event to ca. 1220/30 BC. How, then, could the Israelites have destroyed this town that was not inhabited until ca. 1200 BC?

In addressing this question, Provan, Long, and Longman suggest several possible explanations: The biblical site may be elsewhere; the areas excavated may not have been completely representative; or the biblical account may have been incorrectly read/transmitted. The final possibility is that the biblical account is fictional (which, in principle, is unacceptable). These scholars conclude that “this uncertain state of affairs, far from commending sweeping conclusions, invites caution and a withholding of judgment until more evidence comes to light.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The evidence at Ai illustrates the radical contradiction between dates of current chronologies and the archaeological evidence; the example at Ai is one of many that will be examined in this study and the stress this has placed on the arguments for a high view of Scripture.

The present crisis of confidence in biblical historicity can be traced to the time of William Albright (d. 1971). He believed that the widespread evidence of destruction in the wake of newcomers arriving in the Highlands of Canaan at the end of the 13th century BC was proof of Joshua’s Conquest. He was confident continuing excavations would prove a direct correlation between Joshua’s account of the Conquest and the hard evidence. But he was wrong. [[11]](#footnote-11)

It became evident toward the end of Albright’s career that there was no scenario yet conceived in which the biblical Israelites could have arrived in Canaan consistent with the archaeological evidence.[[12]](#footnote-12) “Biblical Archaeology” (as envisioned by William Albright) was abandoned and the inexorable drift between biblical and archaeological studies began.

Walter Rast says biblical studies and Palestinian archaeology now have distinctive methodologies that no longer engage.[[13]](#footnote-13) The literature shows increasing insulation of biblical scholarship from contributions of archaeology—trending toward “story” and away from history. At the same time archaeologists no longer reference the biblical account of Israel’s origins as a credible source of information when assessing evidence of occupation in Canaan that dates to the end of the Late Bronze Age through the early Iron Age.

If the Bible’s record of Israel’s origins is *not* a historical record, then who wrote it and when? More importantly, why did they write it? If the Bible’s story of Israel’s origins is fiction or a garbled collection of scattered traditions of questionable merit how can the Bible serve as the theological core of Judeo-Christian faith? And how did the Bible come to be?

# Higher Critical Studies: A Fading Light

Since the Bible has been widely judged to be a historically unreliable record of the early events in Israel’s life (in the view its harsher critics both before and after the time of Albright), scholars of many persuasions have sought to account for its content and origins. Many have relied upon one form or another of higher critical scholarship to explain how the Bible came to exist. An early approach to accounting for the Bible’s origins is the 19th century documentary hypothesis which imagined different ancient traditions merged or blended by later editors.

A more popular theory of biblical authorship postulates an elusive Deuteronomistic writer who lived in the time of King Josiah (640–609 BC), or later. This theory (introduced in 1943) was a major development in critical studies. Subscribers to this view believe an unknown theologian-historian (or school of such individuals), reflecting on the history of Israel and Judah from a vantage as late as the Babylonian captivity, produced the “Deuteronomistic History” that includes the biblical books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Evident anachronisms in the biblical text have been cited by some supporters of this latter theory as evidence of late authorship. On the contrary, it seems more likely to me that anachronisms (as will be successively identified in this study) are not evidence of late compositionbut represent the contributions of a later *copyist* updating archaic geographic references for the benefit of his contemporary readers.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Archaeologist Israel Finkelstein believes the stories of Israel’s origins were composed no earlier than the time of King Josiah (late 7th century BC) with clear motivation on the part of the human author to justify and glorify Josiah’s political and ideological objectives. Finkelstein believes that the events of Israel’s origins were invented long after the time they were supposed to have happened.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Amihai Mazar who wrote a still-standard text on biblical archaeology,says, “Many of the [biblical] stories must be explained as folk stories and traditions compiled, edited, and rewritten by later authors with exceptional literary talent and ideological and theological motivation . . . Archaeology has the ability to render improbable the historicity of some biblical stories, such as most of the Conquest narratives.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The views of these scholars regarding the nature of the biblical text seem representative of the archaeological community—particularly among the Israelis.

While higher criticism has held sway since the 19th century in the biblical community there is a growing dissatisfaction with the subjective approach of the classically formulated Wellhausen hypothesis. This approach appears to be giving way to empirical methods and insights from diverse disciplines that bring *objective* light to the biblical text.[[18]](#footnote-18) There is a growing conviction on the part of some scholars that the present Old Testament text is a generally faithful reproduction of the original autographs.[[19]](#footnote-19) The looming problem is how to reconcile the existing narrative, date-wise, with hard facts coming out of the ground.

# The Biblical Narrative of Israel’s Origins and the Extrabiblical Evidence Reconciled: A Personal Journey

Few images are as vivid in my memory as the brilliant crisp autumn morning in the fall of 1981 when I walked into the conference room on the second floor of the library at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. There I joined a dozen colleagues for my first doctoral seminar on the Pentateuch under Professor Boo Heflin. What imprinted the memory of that day so vividly was that it marked the beginning of a 40-year search to resolve a crisis of faith. On that day I chose to do a paper on the Exodus for my seminar paper.

The results of my 80-page study showed that the Exodus (and Conquest) could not have happened as the Bible claimed. This was the inescapable conclusion of the paper based on the available scholarship. My personal convictions about the Bible as the basis of my faith were challenged to the core. Though I sought some spiritual means of reconciling my confidence in the Bible with contradictory empirical facts none were forthcoming; nor was there any comfort to be had from others who had already encountered this dilemma. During my six years in the doctoral program, I struggled continually with this issue until I committed to reexamine the problem in depth in my doctoral dissertation.

There are some ideas so pervasive that one assumes they must be true; but they may not be. What I finally recognized in my study was that for decades scholars citing other scholars had been trying to force the hard evidence to agree with preconceived dates for biblical events (based on several unyielding assumptions). It occurred to me to reverse the process, to ignore everything but the hard evidence and adjust the biblical events to fit the archaeological dates—not the other way around. I discovered that a single date, an Exodus in the early 12th century BC (ca. 1175 BC), brought the text and the evidence into uniform alignment throughout the period of Israel’s biblical origins.

When I finished the manuscript, the reconciliation seemed possible; but there remained several gaping holes and inadequate arguments. There was the ongoing problem of the Merenptah Stele’s mention of Israel (supposedly placing the Israelites in Canaan in the 13th century BC); this was not convincingly argued in my thesis. There was the problem of Israel’s encounter with Edom during the wandering period—available evidence claimed Edom did not exist until the 7th century BC. There was the lack of evidence at Jericho supportive of a biblical Conquest. There was the necessary compression of the era of the Judges. And there was the problem of who destroyed Greater Hazor in the latter 13th century BC, if not the Israelites.

Since the time of the dissertation (1988) new discoveries and insights have come to light. These former problems have now been resolved and are presented in this present study that represents a comprehensive account of Israel’s historical origins that is compatible with all the extrabiblical evidence.

As noted above, I examine successive biblical events (dated by the 12th century BC chronology) against the hard evidence to determine coherence between the two. The following table lists some examples of biblical events that are *synchronous*\* with the extrabiblical evidence. It covers a short period in the study (including the wandering, the Conquest, and the period of the Judges). It compares the 15th, the 13th, and the 12th century BC chronologies to see if the evidence supports the date predicted in the chronology. (Details and justification for identifying these events as synchronous are covered in the following chapters.)

The examples in this list are not cherry-picked. They are typical instances where dating evidence is available at biblical sites or can be deduced from the biblical text. The table asks of each chronology whether the biblical event could have occurred, given the extrabiblical evidence.

*From the Wandering to the Period of the Judges Chronologies*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| REGION/PERIOD | BIBLICAL EVENT | 15TH | 13TH | 12TH |
| NEGEV/ARABAH | Israel encounters Amalekites in the Negev | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel opposed by the king of Edom | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israelite spies observe Hebron | No | No | Yes |
| TRANSJORDAN | Israel destroys Heshbon | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel’s battle at Jahaz (if Khirbet Medeineh) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel captures Dibon | No | No | Yes |
|  | Arrival of Sihon and Og in the Transjordan | No | No | Yes |
| CANAAN | The pre-Israelite “Settlement” occurs in Canaan | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua defeats Jericho | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel camps at Gilgal (Kh. el-Mefjir: Iron Age pottery) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel destroys Ai (et-Tell) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel bypasses walled Bethel [Beitan] | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua builds the Mt Ebal altar | No | No | Yes |
|  | Israel encounters fortified Gibeon | No | No | Yes |
|  | Hivite Beeroth (if el-Bireh) founding date | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua defeats Hebron | No | No | Yes |
|  | Lachish (destroyed ca. 1130 BC) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua defeats the king of Taanach | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua defeats the king of Jokneam | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua defeats the king of Tirzah | No | No | Yes |
|  | Joshua destroys Hazor (the “*former*” head of kingdoms) | No | No | Yes |
| ERA OF THE JUDGES | Philistines (appearance/rise in Joshua’s lifetime) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Shiloh (founded as an Israelite temenos) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Judges (evidence for duration of 100 years) | No | No | Yes |
|  | Jonathan priest of Dan | No | No | Yes |
|  | Phineas, High Priest before the ark | No | No | Yes |
| EGYPTIAN FORCES | Inevitable conflict | Yes | Yes | No |

*Is the biblical event compatible with the evidence?*

\*The concept of a synchronism is different from compatibility. The evidence at a long-inhabited site might be compatible with all three chronologies. But a synchronism as defined here establishes whether a biblical event could have occurred “no earlier than,” “no later than,” or within a “narrow window of time.” Most of the above events are of the “no earlier than” class. An example of a “narrow window time” synchronism occurs at the Egyptian capital of Raamses. The Israelites helped build this city (Exod 1:11) and departed from the same city in the Exodus. Since the site existed only from ca. 1270 BC to ca. 1120 BC (when it was abandoned due to the silting up of the Pelusiac Nile) the period of the Israelite Oppression and the Exodus both had to have occurred during this 150-year “narrow window of time.”

# Contradictory Assumptions and Perspectives

The thesis of this study is facing some strong challenges. There are at least a dozen contradictory perspectives or beliefs that are examined directly or indirectly in this study. None of them are definitive; none disprove the 12th century BC dating chronology. Objections to a 12th century BC chronology include the belief that . . .

* The Bible’s evolutionary composition is too complex to isolate historical kernels
* The Merenptah Stele locates the Israelites in Canaan in the time of Pharaoh Merenptah (ca. 1209 BC)
* The biblical account of Israel’s encounter with the king of the Edomites during the journey to the Transjordan is fictional
* The Israelites emerged from the *Settlement* (defined here as the population influx occurring in the Highlands of Canaan in the late 13th and early 12th centuries BC)
* 1 Kings 6:1 accurately dates the Exodus 479 years before Solomon’s fourth year (i.e., ca. 1446 BC)
* Egyptian sovereignty over Canaan in the New Kingdom period (prior to the latter 12th century BC) was not a significant impediment to Joshua’s Conquest of the Highlands and his raids along the coast/Jezreel
* Evidence of a 13th century BC Exodus is sufficiently compelling in the Egyptian Delta (referencing Exod 1:11 and the Merenptah Stele) to marginalize contradictory texts and archaeological evidence in the Negev, the Arabah, the Transjordan, and Canaan
* There is no time when the archaeological evidence at Jericho can accommodate the biblical account of the fall of that town
* The Israelites destroyed Greater Hazor ca. 1230 BC (when Ramesses II was overlord of Canaan)
* Joshua and Judges are two different and incompatible accounts of Israel’s appearance in the land of Canaan
* The era of the Judges lasted four-hundred years; or at least it cannot be compressed into a one-hundred-year window required by a 12th century BC Conquest
* The Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges were first compiled/composed late in the monarchial or exilic period with a political agenda thus (presumptively) mitigating the historical merit of their narratives

Of these, I give most attention to the Merenptah Stele, the conquest of Jericho, the destruction of Hazor, and the period of the Judges.

# Assumptions and Methodology of this Study

This study relies on the Masoretic Text (MT) of the Old Testament for the narrative of Israel’s origins. There will be no effort to evaluate the text’s reliability nor to explore the process of its compositional and editorial history. However, anachronisms, harmonizations, and apparent alterations of or additions to an original text by copyists/editors will be addressed in several cases.

The test of the chronology is empirical. If the Bible records that the Israelites encountered a town (archaeologically identified and assessed) at a certain time in the proposed chronology, the archaeological evidence must confirm that the town was inhabited in that period. In this way the archaeological evidence serves as the arbiter of the chronological reconstruction. This method exposes numerous instances in other chronologies where the dating is contradicted by the archaeological evidence.

Consistent alignment of the text and the evidence in the 12th century BC chronology, while extraordinary, cannot prove that the biblical events happened—no historical record can do that. But it does demonstrate the events could have happened.

## The Role of Archaeology

Archaeological evidence is generally reliable in establishing dates or ranges of dates. Archaeology’s contributions cannot be discounted because findings at a particular site do not support a favored reconstruction. A large typological database of datable artifacts has been accumulating in Israel for more than a century; this database has served as a reliable catalog for dating artifacts of a site’s material culture. Most archaeological reports have proven to be accurate in terms of dating.

A synthesis of findings at one site with other sites suggests a physical and chronological range of a material culture that allows the archaeologist to contextualize the background of a regional history. An archaeologist can often narrowly date when a wall was built or when a house was burned; and he or she can sometimes estimate how long a stratum was occupied and with whom the people traded.

A second issue to consider regarding archaeology’s place in the search for Israel’s origins has to do with its limitations. The discipline is a vital tool in constraining any chronology of Israel’s origins, but the claims of some archaeologists go far beyond what their investigations can demonstrate. Assemblages of artifacts cannot generate a narrative for the people who produced them. A “new history of ancient Israel” cannot be written from raw archaeological data (or the absence thereof).[[20]](#footnote-20)

## The Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document

The extrabiblical sources that will be used to evaluate the 12th century BC chronology include archaeological findings, Egyptian and Mesopotamian historical records, insights from geography, ethnographies, scientific observations, identification of ancient literary genre characteristics, and other datable aspects of the ancient context. All of these serve as background materials for the exegesis of the biblical story.

I assume the Bible’s narrative of Israel’s origins is historically accurate—unless there is a reason not to believe it. This assumption gives due consideration to the writers’ use of hyperbole and anachronisms and employment of ancient genre terminology. I also recognize that in several cases editors/copyists have introduced changes to the original text during transmission.

Some conservative scholars advocate a fair hearing for the biblical text as a credible source on a par with other ancient Near Eastern texts. However, given entrenched dating assumptions they often cannot sustain support for a literal reading of the text beyond isolated instances. Two examples illustrate the dilemma for these scholars who continue in their commitment to traditional chronologies.

### The 13th century BC Exodus

In a recent study on the several dating theories of the Exodus, the 13th century BC advocate James Hoffmeier argues persuasively on the basis of Exod 1:11, Egyptian documents, and archaeological evidence that the pharaoh of the oppression could have been no other than Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC).[[21]](#footnote-21) But because of his commitment to the traditional interpretation of the Merenptah Stele that [presumably] places Israel in Canaan in the 13th century BC or before, he must claim that Ramesses II was *also* the pharaoh of the Exodus so that the Israelites could be in Canaan during the reign of Merenptah.

To make this claim Hoffmeier must set aside Exod 2:23 and 4:19, passages that state Moses did not return to Egypt to lead the Exodus until the pharaoh of the oppression had died. According to these texts the Exodus could not have occurred in the time of Ramesses II.

Even more challenging for this dating of the Exodus are subsequent events in Israel’s experience in the Negev, the Arabah, the Transjordan, and in Canaan. None of the dates for these events (based on an Exodus in the time or Ramesses II) are compatible with the archaeological evidence.

### The Conquest of Jericho

The Bible provides possible interpretive information for the period of abandonment of Jericho (Tell es-Sultan) after its destruction by Joshua. According to Josh 6:26, the Israelites burned the site, and Joshua cursed it and whoever might rebuild it. Joshua 6:26 and 1 Kgs 16:34 claim the site lay fallow until Hiel of Bethel rebuilt it in the time of Ahab.[[22]](#footnote-22) Though ignored by scholars, this occupation sequence makes sense of certain archaeological evidence.

A deep fallow stratum in Kathleen Kenyon’s Trench I at Tell es-Sultan (Jericho) is sandwiched between an arguable late 12th century BC destruction (a collapsed wall) and a later Iron II reoccupation of the mound.[[23]](#footnote-23) This archaeological sequence agrees with the biblical details.

## The Missing Discipline: Egyptology

In addition to biblical studies and archaeology, familiarity with Egypt’s dynastic history is necessary to envision Israel’s place in the larger history of the ancient Near East. Three major fields of study—biblical, archaeological, and ancient Egyptian, *should* be synthesized in scholarly reconstructions of Israel’s origins but usually are not. Biblical and archaeological studies are mostly insular now, and some Egyptologists confess ignorance of biblical studies

But insights from each of these disciplines must be merged to develop a comprehensive chronology of biblical Israel’s ancient origins. Without knowing the history of Egypt’s policies and presence in Canaan throughout the Late Bronze Age no reconstruction of Israel’s origins can be coherent within the larger historical context.

If the biblical narrative describing the Exodus through the period of the Judges is historically accurate, theologically consistent, and generationally continuous (as it appears to be), Egyptian presence and influence in Canaan during certain periods would have made the Israelite presence there geopolitically impossible. An often repeated and necessary observation in this study is that the Bible makes no mention of Israelite contact with Egyptian forces at any time after the Exodus.

Again, the best explanation for why the Egyptians are not mentioned in the biblical text after the Exodus is because the Egyptians had abandoned their last base in Canaan a few years before the Israelites arrived in Canaan in the latter 12th century BC (ca. 1135 BC).

# Proposed Dates of the Key Events in Israel’s Origins

The chronology under examination here utilizes the Bible’s internal dates projected on either side of an Exodus dated to ca. 1175 BC. This results in the following dates:

* Abraham flourished in the 18th century BC
* Isaac was born within one year of Sodom’s cataclysmic destruction (ca. 1750–1650 BC, 14C)
* The Israelites entered Egypt ca. 1600 BC—in the time of the Hyksos (15th Dynasty)
* The Israelites were enslaved ca. 1570 BC in the Wadi Tumilat (Land of Goshen) under the emerging 18th Dynasty
* The Israelites endured the period of oppression under Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC) of the 19th Dynasty
* The Israelites escaped Egypt ca. 1175 BC in the time of Ramesses III of the 20th Dynasty
* The Conquest of Canaan commenced ca. 1135 BC—after Egypt’s withdrawn from Canaan
* The era of the Judges began ca 1130 BC—lasting one hundred years
* The United Monarchy began (arguably) ca. 1032 BC—in the time of Saul

The probabilities seem remote that the hard facts and the many events of the text dated by this chronology would align in every case by chance, but they do. The best explanation for the harmonization of the text’s events and the extrabiblical evidence is that the Bible’s account of this period is historically accurate. [[24]](#footnote-24)

# The Bible in the Human Tribunal

The early life of Israel is no small or insignificant development in human history. The Bible purports to reveal the person and purposes of the creator by selecting the people Israel to receive the revelation of himself and to preserve that record for the benefit of all mankind. Such a profound claim cannot be considered seriously unless the events of Israel’s origins happened.

The methodology of this study and the conclusions it reaches depend heavily on archaeological findings. The discord between biblical and archaeological studies that has developed over the last half-century can be traced to a projected date for the Exodus that places it in the wrong century.

Biblical and archaeological studies are not ultimately at odds but potentially two approaches converging to one objective: the discovery of how the Israelites came to exist in Canaan. By blending their insights Bible scholars and archaeologists may discover a new and profound appreciation for the story of the Bible, a document many claim is the greatest tangible treasure of humanity.

The Bible begins the long story of God’s redemption of man with Abraham in Mesopotamia in the 18th century BC.

1. William Dever (2003: 224) says many biblical scholars, theologians, seminary professors, and clergy are culpable in what amounts to public deception. Many of these scholars proceed by ignoring skeptical voices (and possibly even their own doubts) in the interests of doing business as usual. He says they cannot, surely, be unaware of the contradictions between the biblical narrative and the extrabiblical evidence, contradictions seldom addressed and never credibly reconciled. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. W. G. Dever (1992a, Kindle Edition loc. 458). In addition to the Conquest Model (W. F. Albright, 1932), four other Israelite/proto-Israelite “settlement” models have been proposed in the literature: the Peaceful Infiltration Model (Y. Aharoni, 1970; A. Alt; 1925), the Peasant Revolt Model (N. Gottwald, 1979), the Symbiosis Model (V. Fritz, 1987), and the Ethnogenesis Model (T. Levy and A. Holl, 2002). These are summarized by T. Levy, R. Adams, and A. Muniz (2004: 63–64). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I. Finkelstein and N. Silberman (2001: 3, 14, 280–81). These writers claim (p. 3) that archaeology has “revolutionized the study of early Israel and [has] cast serious doubt on the historical basis of such famous biblical stories as the wanderings of the patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt and Conquest of Canaan, and the glorious empire of David and Solomon.” This present writer does not agree that archaeology can establish such things. See the topic “The Role of Archaeology” below in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. Bimson (1981: 14–17). Egyptian dynastic dates have been in flux since the beginning of modern Egyptology. Dates in this study are those of K. A. Kitchen (2000a: 39–52); his chronology has been adopted by E. Stern, ed., (2008: 2126–27). Stern is the source for the dates of archaeological eras used throughout this study unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Supporters of the 15th century BC chronology date the Exodus to ca. 1446 BC (based on a literal reading of 1 Kgs 6:1). They have identified Thutmose III and Amenhotep II as the pharaohs of the oppression and Exodus. To do so they have adopted a “High Chronology” for these pharaohs; this dating is at odds with Kitchen’s accepted chronology. See J. Hoffmeier’s critique (2021: 56-57). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. F. Hartenstein (2003: 2–28), cited by K. Matthews (2005: 24–25). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. K. Matthews (2005: 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Conservative” here refers to scholars with a methodological commitment to Scripture as the word of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J. Callaway (1968; 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I. Provan, V. Long, and T. Longman, III (2003: 177). In a similar way (p. 132) they list possibly qualifying considerations regarding the Exod 1:11 reference to the 13th century BC store city of Raamses (since these writers favor a 15th century BC Exodus). W. Dever (2003: 224) says ‘new’ histories of ancient Israel [such as this one] continue to be published that are no more than rational paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As this study will show, these newcomers could not have been the biblical Israelites; instead, they were the founders of the sites the Israelites would destroy or conquer one or more generations later, ca. 1135 BC. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. That is, based on the conviction that the Israelites arrived in Canaan in the 13th century BC or before. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Walter Rast (2012a: 48–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nathan Lovell (2020: 36–37) illustrates how complex this seemingly simple interpretation has become. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. An example of an anachronism (in Genesis 21:32–34; 26:1, 8, 14–15) describes the town and king of Gerar in Abraham’s and Isaac’s time as “Philistine.” The Philistines (by most accounts) did not arrive in this area for another five hundred years (early 12th century BC). In my view this anachronism may reflect the date of the original author of the account (arguably Moses) writing in the 12th century BC when that area was identified with the emerging Philistines. A reader from the 12th century onward would thus know where the Gerar of Abraham’s day was located. Locating ancient sites lost to memory seems to be the purpose of most anachronisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I. Finkelstein (2002: 131–32; 2007: 183–88; and 1998: 351). Cf. his recent slightly moderated views (2015). See also I. Finkelstein and N. Silberman (2001: 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A. Mazar (2007b: 190–92). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The presentations of scholars attending an international conference in Riehen, Switzerland, in March 2017, resulted in a collection of papers appearing in *Paradigm Change in Pentateuchal Research*, ed. M. Armgardt, B. Kilchör, and M. Zehnder (2019). These studies “convincingly demonstrate that most of the Pentateuch can be solidly rooted in the pre-exilic period” (p. xxii). Matthias Armgardt says that after two hundred years of work based on de Wette [1805 dissertation] and the modified Wellhausen-paradigm, Pentateuchal research has reached a dead end (p. xi). The methodology has been based on circular reasoning and the failure to recognize that the sources (J, E, D, and P) are not and have never been tenable (according to Hendrik Koorevaar, p. xviii). The contributors agree that the old paradigm can no longer command a dominant position in scholarly debate surrounding the Pentateuch (p. vii). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. E. Brotzman and E. Tully (2016: 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See I. Finkelstein and N. Silberman (2001: 3). A chief argument in their study is that the absence of archeological evidence is proof that the Bible’s claims are untrue—for example, that the kingdoms of David and Solomon existed. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. J. Hoffmeier (2021a). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Some will argue that these texts were likely harmonized by a later editor. But why would this be necessary if not to account for the long abandonment of such a strategic site? [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See the chapter on the conquest of Jericho for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See D. Howard, Jr. (2003: 25–53) for a conservative statement of the Bible as history and why this is important. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)