

The Historical Study of Scripture:

The Date of the Exodus

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Fixing the date of the exodus has proven to be one of those contentious areas of biblical study that has produced two opposing views. As in many biblical historical issues, the two views are more a clash of how people view Scripture and differing methods of study based on those views than they are a result of conflicting interpretation of the historical evidence.

Historical questions about the Bible first came to the forefront of biblical study as a distinct field for research in the 19th century as part of the development of modern historical investigation. That historical study focused on two distinct aspects, the study of ancient documents and the study of actual historical artifacts such as the ruins of ancient cities. It is not that people had failed to ask historical questions before the 19th century, only that specific methods of research emerged then as the primary tools of historians. The particular ways of examining ancient documents that came to be called historical-critical investigation and the emergence of archaeology and related fields shifted the historical questions into a new arena. In terms of the Bible, prior to the 19th century, Scripture was basically accepted for what it appeared to say without careful examination of the details of *how* things were said, or how the biblical recounting of history related to historical sources outside the Bible. The new methods of historical investigation forced Scripture to be viewed from a new a perspective.

Historians are primarily concerned with objective data, with determining “what really happened.” The idea of objectivity, that history needs to be viewed in terms of verifiable data apart from perceptions, later interpretations of events, or even manufactured history or legend, is a basic assumption of doing historical investigation. However, historians are quick to point out that total objectivity is not really possible since everyone brings certain perceptions and points of view to such tasks. So, there is the recognition that all history writing is a matter of interpretation within certain assumptions. However, the historian works to identify and understand the perspectives and points of view that lie within historical documents, at the same time that they try to identify and understand their own point of view that allows them to see the evidence in certain ways.

This concern with objectivity leads historians to focus on data that can be verified, and not simply to assume that whatever is said in ancient texts, including Scripture, is exactly what happened from some supposed objective point of view. It is this approach in dealing with ancient texts as only *possible* sources of historical information awaiting verification from other sources that has led to some of the conflict over historical questions in Scriptures. Certain perspectives on the nature of Scripture contend that the Bible is simply an exact unbiased account of what happened, the essence of historical reporting, and is to be believed as totally accurate in all historical details simply because it is Scripture. And yet historians do not start with this assumption, since they are trying to be objective in looking at the data. And that data from a variety of sources does not always lead them to conclude that the Bible is that kind of totally unbiased and always absolutely reliable historical reporting.

With the new spirit of critical investigation came an emphasis on analyzing the documents themselves as resources for historical data. This also involved careful study of the process of producing those documents from the oral traditions of a culture and from the compilations of previous documents, as well as the role of the compilers and editors, and the influence those factors had on the reliability of those sources and documents for reconstructing history. This concern with sources built on the understanding that ancient documents were not just the recording of data, but were also the interpretation of history from the perspectives of a later community that saw the past not in terms of facts but in terms of meaning and ongoing significance for that community. By the end of the 19th century, this led historical investigation of the Bible to focus on the source documents and traditions that lay behind the written text, the social and cultural communities that produced the texts, and the complexity and diversity of the Bible. This simply meant that historical questions could no longer be answered by simply quoting a passage from Scripture.

Also, a great deal of extra-biblical historical information in the form of ancient documents and inscriptions, as well as a whole range of artifacts and other physical remains of ancient civilizations began to be available during the 19th century as archaeology emerged as a tool of historical investigation. For the first time, there was available a great deal of information that could be used by historians to verify and crosscheck the biblical accounts. While historical evidence cannot “prove” most of the biblical material, simply because it is largely theological in nature and cannot be proven empirically, it can provide the kind of objective verification for which historians seek.

The results in many cases were mixed. That is, in some cases the new historical evidence tended to support in a general sense the biblical accounts when those accounts touched on historical matters. For example, there had been considerable doubt from some historians during the 19th century about the existence of a people called the Hittites simply because they had no evidence about them. Yet in the early 20th century, the ancient empire of the Hittites was discovered in central Turkey revealing a well-established civilization in the late second millennium BC. However, in other cases the biblical accounts simply could not be reconciled with the historical evidence that came to light, as we shall see later concerning the exodus.

Some still contend that the Bible is absolutely inerrant in all matters, and therefore must be absolutely accurate in all aspects of historical accounts (see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)). They argue that if we could just find more evidence we would be able to prove the biblical accounts. Others conclude that the Bible is simply not always a totally reliable account of “what really happened” from the perspective of modern historical criteria since that was never its intent. There is also consideration of differing worldviews, of different cultural perspectives, and of different ways of describing the world that may not correspond to our modern assumptions and categories. It is this difference in perspectives that continues to mark the two opposing poles in several historical questions in Scripture, including the date of the exodus.

What has emerged from these sometimes conflicting perspectives applied to the historical question of dating the exodus are two dates for the exodus that really represent more periods of time than exact dates. The early date is usually placed in the middle 15th century around 1440 BC, while the late date is usually assigned to the close of the 13th century around 1290 BC. The early date relies most heavily on two specific biblical passages understood literally, while the late date relies on a more general view of the nature of Scripture combined with archaeological evidence. Both views depend heavily on assumptions concerning both the nature of Scripture and the methods of study used, as well as rational deduction based on those assumptions. It is for this reason that a brief survey of the debate may help illustrate how such opposing views can arise from conflicting assumptions and methods of historical research.

The Early Date

Biblical Support for a 15th century date (1440 BC)

For many, the primary evidence in establishing a date for the exodus, or for any historical question relating to the biblical accounts, is simply the Bible itself. While certainly recognizing the need to be faithful to the biblical text, this approach is not as simple as it might sound, and raises a series of questions and difficulties in how it is actually practiced.

1) While Scripture is certainly to be seen as recounting Israel’s encounters with God in history, as opposed to being nothing more than a mythical portrayal of a culture’s conception of the cosmos, is the Bible history? That is, while acknowledging that the Bible is historical and not mythical, is that the same thing as saying that the Bible is the same kind of history writing that we encounter, for example, in Sandberg’s *Lincoln*? Does the Bible intend primarily to communicate to us the data of history?

2) This raises a second set of questions. Can we automatically assume that the Bible directly answers the kind of historical questions that we want to ask of the biblical text? This moves to questions about the nature of Scripture. The very fact that many historical questions relating to the Bible have been debated for centuries suggests that there are not definitive answers to the historical questions in Scripture. That is, the

historical evidence to answer the kinds of questions that we pose to Scripture is often very meager. Is it possible that this is because the Bible was never intending to answer those questions? Is the Bible really intended to be a book of data from which to reconstruct precise history, or is its primary purpose something different? If the Bible's primary purpose is not to tell us the data of history, can we reliably use the Bible to make decisions about historical data when there is no other evidence, or where the other evidence suggests something different?

3) What do we do with apparently conflicting evidence even from within the biblical narratives? If we are going to use the Bible to answer historical data questions, then how are we going to deal with the great number of instances in which the biblical perspectives do not agree? While it serves no real purpose simply to list discrepancies as if that somehow discounts what the Bible says or teaches, when we ask historical questions those discrepancies force themselves to the foreground. We are often then left with making decisions about the Bible as a source of historical evidence. Some choose to assume that the Bible is always correct in everything it says, and so approach historical investigation from the perspective of trying to prove that even conflicting perspectives are both correct in some way, or even that there are no real discrepancies at all. But this raises problems for historians who want to follow evidence and interpret that evidence, not be forced to fit the evidence to a preconceived idea about what the evidence ought to say.

These and other questions suggest that trying to use the Bible to answer historical questions, or even of using historical evidence to "prove" the validity of the Bible is a very complicated task that goes far beyond simply assuming that the Bible tells us everything we want to know about history. The fact is, the Bible has very little that can be used to address the historical question of the date of the exodus, which leads to differing opinions.

1) 1 Kings 6:1

6:1 In the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the LORD.

This verse gives a time period of 480 years between the exodus and the beginning of Solomon's work on the Jerusalem temple. From John Bright's chronology, Solomon ascended the throne around 961 BC, which would make the fourth year of his reign and the beginning of temple construction about 959-957 BC (see [Israelite Kings](#)). If we assume that the number 480 is to be taken as a precise number of years much as we would count years on a calendar today, working backward from this date we arrive at a date around 1440 BC for the exodus. This is the primary origin of the 1440 BC date for the exodus.

Difficulties Raised: While we might expect that the number here is precise and intended to tell us exactly how many years, that is largely an assumption from our modern perspective of data-based thinking and history writing. But we have no indication that the ancient Israelites viewed timekeeping in the same way that we do in a modern scientific age. In fact, both our own history and even modern experience of tribal cultures tells us that scientific approaches to history keeping are a relatively modern invention.

Also, this assumption does not consider the fact that numbers were used for other purposes in ancient Israel than just precise counting. A great many numbers in both Testaments are used symbolically, are stylized for other purposes than simple counting, or are approximate numbers based on different cultural ways of reckoning time than just counting years. There are several groups of numbers that specifically function in such roles, for example the number three (often used simply to mark the passage of a short period of time or extent without intending specifics; Jon 3:3, 1:17), seven (symbolizing completion; Gen 2:2, Gen 29, Matt 15:35), twelve (symbolizing wholeness and community; Gen 35:22, Jud 19:29), and forty (a schematized number used for a generation or simply an unspecified long period of time; Gen 7:4, Ex 16:35). Some of these numbers are then used in multiples for much the same purposes, such as 70 or 77 (10 x 7, or double 7s; note Gen 4:24, Mat 18:22), 120, 144, and 144,000 (10 x 12 and 12 x 12; Gen 6:3, Deut 34:7, Rev 14:1), and multiples of 40 (400, Gen 15:13; 4,000 1 Sam 4:2; 40,000, Josh 4:13; 1 Kng 4:26; 400,000, Josh 20:2).

This has led many scholars to conclude that the number 480 in 1 Kings 6:1 is not a precise number but is intended to be an approximate period of time expressed in ways consistent with Israelite culture. This suggests that the numbers used are not accidental or random since the number symbolizing community (12) is combined with a number used to signify a generation (40). That is, the verse says that between the exodus and the construction of the Temple there were approximately twelve generations, enough time for the community that needed the temple to emerge. That is not a specific period of time but an approximation based on how ancient Israelites tended to mark the passing of time, that is, according to generations of people.

To attempt to translate that into specific years is a precarious undertaking since we can only guess based on modern analogy. But if we use the approximate period of 25 years for a generation between a father and a son, then we end up with about 300 “clock time” years. Working backward from 959 BC, this suggests a date of around 1260 for the exodus. But this is probably too speculative to be of any real use, since this tries to translate numbers that are used for one purpose into the service of questions that force them to be used for another purpose.

2) Judges 11:26

11:26 While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the towns that are along the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?

This occurs in a message from Jephthah the Judge to the king of the Ammonites trying to persuade him to stop campaigns against the Israelites in the Transjordan territory. The king of Ammon was attempting to retake some of the Ammonite territory that had been lost to Israel in the time of Moses. Jephthah had sent an envoy asking the King of Ammon’s withdrawal, to which he had responded by asking that the Israelites return all the territory they had taken in the Transjordan area. Jephthah’s argument was that the Israelites had controlled that territory since Moses led the people through the land (Num 21), and if they had not been able to take back the land in the 300 years since then, he saw no reason to return it willingly now.

The time period of the Judges is notoriously difficult to define, simply because there are few details that can be cross-referenced for precise dating. If we follow the generally accepted chronology of John Bright, the period of the Judges was between 1200 and 1020 BC. If we allow for the activity of the other Judges, we can roughly place the time period of Jephthah around 1100 BC. Counting back from this date, we arrive at a date around 1400 BC for the time of Moses’ conquest of Heshbon. By adding another 40 years for the wilderness wandering, this leaves a date approximately 1440 BC for the exodus.

Difficulties Raised: This conclusion is based on several broad assumptions about the text that renders it less than useful as evidence for any date. First, the very nature of the context of Jephthah’s speech suggests that the number is not intended to be precise but only a general reference to a long time. The focus of the text is not on the number of years, but simply on the fact of Israel’s possession of the land for a long time.

Second, even in the context of the narrative, Jephthah is not portrayed as one who would necessarily have any information as to the exact extent of time. He would have had no access to historical records in order to speak with precision. It could be argued that we are not really listening to Jephthah here but the narrator who would have had access to that information. But again, if that is the case and the narrator wanted the dates to be significant and precise, then it seems logical to assume that other details of the narrative that relate to dating would be more evident. In either case, whether the narrator or Jephthah, it does not appear that precision in dating is a concern of the narrative.

Finally, the lack of precision of dates in the entire period of the Judges hampers trying to construct a logical deduction such as this. Even the dates posited by historians are only general time frames based on meager evidence. That suggests that any such logical deduction about exact dates is already compromised by the lack of adequate chronology and datable historical records for the period.

Historical Support for a 15th century date (1440 BC)

A second kind of argument for a 15th century date appeals primarily to archaeological evidence, since there are virtually no historical documents from this era that can be used as evidence to confirm or challenge the biblical account. The archaeological evidence primarily consists of excavations in those cities that are mentioned in the biblical accounts as captured and destroyed by the invading Israelites. There is no archaeological evidence of the exodus itself, so we are left with making deductions based on the evidence from the later presence of Israel in Canaan.

Archeological excavations are sometimes complicated, with a great deal depending on the interpretative skill of the excavator as well as how carefully the excavations themselves have been conducted. There are two principles of archaeological excavations that are important here in reference to dating. First is the fact that ancient cities were built and rebuilt on the same site over many hundreds or thousands of years. The ruins of one city would simply be leveled and filled, and then the next city would be built on top of the old one. This produced levels of occupation or strata. Archeologists use these occupation levels to guide them in dating a site, as well as in establishing the relationship of different levels of occupation.

A second major factor is the use of pottery to establish dates. Different types and styles of pottery, the materials used, and even the level of workmanship can be a very reliable guide to dating. Since pottery was the most common household item in the ancient world, it occurs in all ancient city sites. The enormous amount of pottery available, much of which can be traced to precise localities and time periods, has allowed historians to date a certain occupation level fairly precisely within a range of time.

Both of these provide “hard” historical evidence. Still, we should not assume that such evidence is absolute since there is still the factor of a human interpreter who is collecting and evaluating this evidence. There are sharp disagreements among respected archaeologists and historians about the dating of some sites.

1) Excavations at Jericho

Jericho was the first city taken by the Israelites after they crossed the Jordan. It was an important commercial center at an oasis in the Jordan Valley east of Jerusalem. Archaeological excavations at Jericho by J. Garstang widely reported in the 1920s revealed that a fortified city on the site was destroyed about 1400 BC. If we assume that this destruction was by the invading Israelites as recounted in Joshua 6, by adding the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness we could conclude that the exodus would have occurred about 1440 BC.

Difficulties Raised: This evidence is almost totally rejected today and rarely appears in print, although it is still heard occasionally. Later excavations by K. Kenyon revealed that the tell, the mound of earth that contains the various levels of city ruins, had suffered severe erosion and therefore had disturbed the levels of deposits on the mound. That had skewed early attempts to date part of the excavations. The main evidence used by Garstang to establish a 1400 BC date was, on closer examination, dated to the Early Bronze Age (2400-2000 BC). There was little evidence left that could be dated to the 15th century, and therefore no evidence that could be used to establish when the Israelite destruction of the city occurred.

2) Excavations at Hazor

Hazor was a strategic fortified Canaanite city located in far northern Israel about 10 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was the only fortified city that the Israelites captured in battle and destroyed in the early campaigns of their entry into Canaan (Josh 11:13; they had earlier taken Jericho, but had not fought to take the city). While there is confusion or discrepancies in the reports of other cities taken (see [Conquest or Settlement](#)), there is consistency in the biblical accounts that Hazor was taken and burned by the Israelites (Josh 11). An early survey at Hazor by J. Garstang in the 1920s revealed signs of destruction by fire that could be dated to about 1400 BC. Again, by adding the 40 years of the wilderness wandering the date of the exodus would be around 1440 BC.

Difficulties Raised: While there was evidence of some destruction that could be dated to the 15th century BC, there was absolutely no evidence that this destruction was part of a wholesale invasion or could be associated with the Israelites. Much more extensive excavations by Y. Yadin in the 1950s revealed that a

major destruction of the city had occurred in the 13th century BC. The city was only lightly occupied until around the 11th century when it was heavily fortified, was destroyed again in the 8th century, and again rebuilt. According to Yadin's interpretation, the archaeological evidence of the excavation could fit within the broad outlines of the biblical narratives, with the city destroyed by the invading Israelites, rebuilt and fortified by Solomon, destroyed by the Assyrians, and then rebuilt under Assyrian control. However, this evidence could not support a 15th century date for the exodus but would tend to support a date in the early 13th century.

Both of these sites reveal problems with attempting to correlate archaeological evidence too easily with biblical accounts. Much of the archaeological excavation in the first quarter of the 20th century was aimed at supporting the Biblical accounts rather than obtaining solid historical evidence. As a result, often assumptions were made about what was found that later proved to be inaccurate or unsubstantiated. In the case of Jericho, most of the initial claims about the archaeological evidence in relation to the biblical accounts proved to be incorrect. In the case of Hazor, the archaeological evidence rather closely parallels the biblical references to the city, but supports a later chronology than had been accepted from a literal reading of the biblical text.

Logical Support for a 15th century date (1440 BC)

Since both evidence from the biblical accounts as well as historical data is so meager, much of the support for dating of the exodus arises from logical deduction based on a few starting points in either the biblical accounts or archaeological data. As with any logically built system or set of conclusions, a great deal depends on the basic assumptions from which the argument unfolds as well as the way in which the logical steps are taken in order to reach a conclusion. While a particular argument may be sound in terms of how it has been constructed, the validity of the conclusion depends to a great extent on the validity of the basic assumption as well as the validity of associations made in each step of the process.

1) Moses in Midian

The biblical account tells us that after Moses' first abortive attempt to free the Israelites he fled into the desert area and settled with the Midianites. He remained there until that Pharaoh died, and then received his call from God to return to Egypt (Ex 2:23ff). Deuteronomy (34:7) notes that Moses was 120 years old when he died, so allowing for the 40 years in the wilderness with the Israelites, he would have been about 80 years old at the time of the exodus (Ex 7:7). In Stephen's sermon in Acts (7:30) he says that Moses spent 40 years in Midian. This means that the Pharaoh who first oppressed the Israelites must have reigned for at least forty years to allow Moses to remain in Midian that length of time before he died. According to what we know of Egyptian chronology, the only possibilities for this length of reign in this period are Thutmose III (ca. 1504-1450) and Rameses II (ca. 1290-1224). Since the reference in 1 Kings 6:1 would not allow enough time after the exodus using Rameses, the Pharaoh of the oppression must have been Thutmose III, which would leave a 15th century date for the exodus.

Difficulties Raised: There are several difficulties with this logical reconstruction. First, the three periods of time into which Moses' life are divided, 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in Midian, and 40 years in the wilderness, sounds suspiciously like a schematized chronology rather than exact numbers of years. This combined with the fact that the number 40 is often used metaphorically for a generation or simply an unspecified long period of time leaves these numbers as an unreliable base upon which to build such a logical conclusion.

Second, it is not sound historical methodology to take at face value numbers from three different biblical books spanning a time period of almost a thousand years and assume that they can be used interchangeably to determine dates. While some would want to appeal to a certain view of the nature of Scripture here (inerrancy; see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)), that is not a sound methodology by which to answer historical questions; it appeals to doctrine to try to prove historical data.

Finally, given the problems already noted with the number of years given in 1 Kings 6:1, even if we accept this line of reasoning, Rameses II could as easily be the Pharaoh of the oppression. In fact, there seems to be more evidence to support that conclusion (see below).

2) The Merneptah Stele

A stele is a stone column usually depicting the exploits of a ruler or chronicling the history or laws of a people. Merneptah was the son of the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II and succeeded his father as ruler of Egypt in the late 13th century BC. He erected a stele commemorating his victorious campaign against Canaan and Syria around 1212 to 1209 BC. On this stele is the earliest historical mention of the nation of Israel, which Merneptah claims to have totally annihilated. The logical deduction from this reference is that the Israelites must have been in the land for a considerable length of time for them to be recognized as a nation by an Egyptian pharaoh. This would support a 15th century date for the exodus.

Difficulties Raised: This is really based on little more than speculation in assuming how long it would take for the Israelites to have emerged as a nation. Even allowing for some exaggeration, the biblical accounts recall more than once that the miraculous nature of Israel's escape from Egypt, survival in the wilderness, and initial battles had gained them considerable reputation among the surrounding peoples (Num 22:3, Josh 2:9, 9:9-10, etc.). That suggests that the time period required to be recognized by Pharaoh as a people may not be as long as some posit. And even if we take the later date of 1290 BC suggested by many for the exodus and allowing for the 40 years in the wilderness, they would still have been in the land around 50 years by the time of Merneptah's campaign. That could have been a sufficient amount of time for the Israelites to emerge as a nation.

3) The Amarna Tablets

Amarna is the modern name of the ancient Egyptian city of Akhetaten. It was established briefly as the capitol of Egypt around 1400-1350 BC by pharaoh Akhetaten, who attempted to reform Egypt's religious system and inaugurate the worship of a single deity represented by the sun disk (Aten). That experiment was a failure and the city only existed for 15 to 20 years before being abandoned. Archaeologists discovered a cache of letters at the site written on clay tablets from various city officials throughout the area including Canaan. Some of these letters are appeals to Akhetaten for help in defending against the 'Apiru (Hapiru, Khapiru) who were threatening the cities of Canaan. This could have been the Hebrews who were invading the land and challenging the Canaanite city-states. If the 'Apiru were the Hebrews, the date of the Amarna letters would suggest a date for the exodus from Egypt sometime in the mid to latter 15th century.

Difficulties Raised: While it was common in the period immediately following the discovery of the Amarna tablets to identify the 'Apiru with the Hebrews, further investigation has raised serious doubts about that identification. The identification was originally made largely on the assumption that the word 'Apiru was actually the linguistic root for the word Hebrew. However, scholars concluded that the term is actually Sumerian (the area of later Babylonian) in origin and dates much earlier than the Hebrews. The term was used throughout the Middle East to refer to groups who lived on the margins of civilized society, outcasts who were often hired as mercenaries. While the term is not linguistically related to the term Hebrew, it is possible that it could have been applied to the Israelites. However, since the term was simply descriptive of a range of people without reference to any national or ethnic origins, there is absolutely no evidence that the references in the Amarna letters can be identified specifically with the Israelites. That eliminates any use of the Amarna letters in trying to date the exodus.

4) The period of the Judges

After Israel's entry into the land under Joshua, there was a protracted period of struggle against the native Canaanites. Various warrior chieftains called *shophetim* or judges led this struggle (see [Judges of Israel](#)). The periods of time assigned to these judges in Scripture seems to require a total span of time between entry into the land and the emergence of the monarchy under Saul around 1020 BC of at least 306 years (Othneil, 40; Ehud, 80; Shamgar, 10; Deborah, 40; Gideon, 40; Tola, 23; Jair, 22; Jephthah, 6; Ibzan 8; Elon, 10; Abdon, 7; Samson, 20). The traditions tell us that the Judges were not active until after the death of Joshua (Jud 1:1) and that Joshua was 110 year old when he died (Josh 24:29). We also know that Joshua was a young man when he began to serve as an assistant to Moses (Ex 33:11). If we assume that he was in his 20s then (cf. Ex 14:29), and that he spent all 40 years in the wilderness, he would have been about 60 when the Israelites

entered the land. That would mean he led Israel for 50 years before the Judges arose. If we add about 30 years for the ministry of Samuel, allow for the fact that the judges were not active in strict succession, and add to this the 40 years in the wilderness and the early years of settlement, this would give a date of sometime in the middle to late 15th century for the exodus.

Difficulties Raised: This deduction rests on two faulty assumptions. First, it assumes that the judges were active in separate time periods and did not overlap in their activities. However, a quick perusal of Judges shows that the judges were not leaders of a unified Israel, but were active in very localized areas. For example, Ehud was from the tribe of Benjamin and fought the Moabites at Jericho, while Jephthah was an outcast from the territory of Gilead in the north and fought the Ammonites on the eastern side of the Jordan. The judges of Ibzan, Elon and Abdon also fought the Ammonites from the tribes of Judah, Zebulun, and Ephraim (Jud 12). This suggests that rather than being separate engagements, many of the Judges may have been active at the same time and simply leading different contingents from different tribes against a common threat (see [Conquest or Settlement?](#)).

Second, it assumes that the numbers of years can be taken as exact numbers. But as we have already noted, numbers do not always mean a precise system of counting. That is especially evident when we note that over half of the time periods given are 40 years (Othniel, Deborah, Gideon), multiples of 40 (Ehud, 80) or factors of 40 (Samson, 20; Shamgar and Elon, 10). This suggests that the numbers are schematized and are not intended to be precise spans of time.

Given the likelihood that the judges overlapped in their activity and that the numbers are not precise, the span of time is probably not nearly as long as it appears on the surface. Rather than a 300+ span of time, it is more likely that the period of the Judges was a century or a century and a half.

The Late Date

Some of the evidence for a later date of the exodus has been presented in countering the arguments for the early date. In addition, advocates for the later 13th century date rely heavily on the archaeological discoveries of the past century.

Biblical Support for a 13th century date (1290 BC)

Even though biblical scholars have found significant problems with the 15th century date for the exodus, there is very little direct biblical evidence for a later 13th century date. Most of the support comes from archaeological and historical evidence. Historians would argue that this presents no problem since the biblical text was not written to provide us with the kind of data that we require in order to answer our modern historical questions. The very reasons offered above concerning the cultural use of numbers and the lack of concern with precision in dating suggests that the search for a biblical “proof” of a date may be fruitless. Still, to those who are used to looking at Scripture to answer such questions, the answer of “not enough evidence” is not at all satisfying. It is this assumption that the Bible should be able to address any question they want to pose it that has tended to fuel considerable acrimony in various issues of biblical history.

Historical Support for a 13th century date (1290 BC)

1) Edom and Moab

Archaeology surveys and excavations on the eastern side of the Jordan river (Transjordan), pioneered by N. Gleuck, reveal that there was no settled civilization in the Edomite and Moabite areas of the southern Transjordan until about the late 14th or early 13th century BC. Also, the earliest record referring to the Edomites is an Egyptian letter dating to the 13th century. There is scarcely any evidence of settlement in these areas in the 15th century BC. Since we know from the traditions that Israel encountered settled people in this area (*e.g.*, Num 20:14), it seems that a 13th century date for the exodus is more likely and less problematic than a 15th century date. Also, the Moabite city of Heshbon was the first city taken by the Israelites in the Transjordan area, becoming a part of the tribal territory of Reuben (Num 21:21-24, 32:37).

Thorough excavations at what has been identified as this site reveal that the city was not occupied until around 1250 to 1200 BC. Allowing for the 40 years in the desert, this suggests a date for the exodus at the beginning of the 13th century.

Difficulties Raised: There have been a few limited excavations that suggest at least some settled population as early as the 14th century, for example at a temple complex at Timnah in the northern Negev. There is also substantial evidence that there were nomadic tribes who inhabited the area earlier than the 14th century. These could have been the people that the Israelites encountered. Also, it is not at all certain that the site identified as Heshbon is, in fact, the city that the Israelites conquered.

2) Lachish, Debir, and Bethel

Excavations at three key cities taken by Joshua and the invading Israelites, Lachish (Josh 10:31-32), Debir (Josh 10:38-39), and Bethel (Jud 1:23-25) reveal a level of ash marking the burning of the cities that dates to the late 13th or early 12th century. This appears to correspond to the destruction of these cities by the invading Israelites. This would place the exodus sometime in the mid to late 13th century.

Difficulties Raised: There is no direct evidence to link the destruction of these cities to the Israelites. The biblical accounts do not say that the Israelites burned these cities, only that they destroyed the inhabitants. The destruction levels could as easily have been from later Egyptian raids into the area.

Logical Support for a 13th century date (1290 BC)

1) The Hyksos

The Hyksos were an Asiatic people who captured and ruled Egypt from around 1667 to 1546 BC (other dates for the Hyksos range from 1720 to 1580 BC). They were sometimes called the “Shepherd Kings” because of their assumed origins among the nomadic peoples of the Fertile Crescent, but that association is by no means certain. They were generally Semitic people like the Israelites, a term that simply refers to shared cultural and linguistic roots. Since this time period of the Hyksos roughly corresponds to the era of the Patriarchs, it seems logical to conclude that the migration of the Israelites to Egypt and the rise of Joseph to power corresponded to the Hyksos’ control of Egypt. Semitic rulers would be more favorable to allowing a Semitic “foreigner” to be second in command of Egypt and to allow large migrations of other Semitic people into the land. The “new king who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8) would be a description of the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt, which led the return of control to Egyptians and the enslavement of the Israelites as retaliation for foreign rule.

In Exodus 12:40-41, there is a reference to the span of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt.

40. The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years. 41. At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.

If we take the earliest date proposed for the Hyksos’ control of Egypt (1720 BC) and assume that this is roughly the time of the Israelites’ move into Egypt, adding 430 years would give us a date of about 1290 BC for the exodus. Using the 15th century date for the exodus (1440) would place the patriarchal migration into Egypt long before the Hyksos took control of Egypt.

Difficulties Raised: This perspective also builds on several assumptions that may not be sound. First, there is no necessity that the Hyksos be related to the Israelites since there is no biblical evidence for this, nor is there any historical evidence beyond logical deduction.

Second, the Septuagint, the second century BC translation of the Old Testament into Greek, has a slightly different version of Exodus 12:40, adding “and in the land of Canaan.” That is, the 430 years covers not only the period of time the Israelites spent in Egypt but also includes the time the Patriarchs lived in Canaan before they went to Egypt. If we add up the various times given for the patriarchs, we end up with about 215 years that they lived in Canaan (Gen 12:4, 21:5, 25:26, 47:9). This leaves only the other 215 years for the

stay in Egypt. This appears to be a problem with either system of dating, and suggests that the traditions at this point cannot be used as a reliable guide for constructing dates.

Third, the time frame of the Patriarchs is not known well enough to assume that the migration to Egypt was in the 18th century. It could have been as much as 100 to 150 years earlier than that.

2) The cities of Pithom and Rameses

The biblical narratives report that the enslaved Israelites were building the store or treasury cities of Pithom and Rameses (Ex .1:11). While neither site has been positively identified, it seems fairly certain that the cities were constructed by or in honor of one of the pharaohs that went by the name Rameses. The first pharaoh who reigned as Rameses I ruled Egypt from around 1293-1291 BC (some date his reign to 1314-1312). Rameses II (1279-1212 or 1290-1224 BC) was a prolific builder during his long reign, so it seems logical to assume that this was the pharaoh who constructed the city of Rameses. This would suggest that the exodus happened sometime during the reign of one of these pharaohs near the beginning of the 13th century.

Difficulties Raised: It is not necessary that the city of Rameses built by the Israelites was constructed by a pharaoh. The name Rameses was in use before the 13th century, and could have been associated with someone else. The name means “Ra is born,” referring to the sun-god Ra, and could have been associated with a temple complex.

3) Egyptian incursions into Canaan

Since the area of Palestine occupies a narrow strip of land connecting Egypt with the great empires to the north, it was frequently the victim of wars and raids between these empires seeking to establish spheres of influence. We know from extra-biblical historical records that during the 15th century BC, Egypt had extended her influence through Northern Palestine westward into Asia Minor and eastward to the Euphrates and into the territory of Mittani. However, by the 14th century, Egyptian power had diminished considerably both because of internal dissension and because of a resurgence of the Hittites in Asia Minor. In the late 14th to mid-13th century there was a protracted series of wars between Egypt, led by pharaohs Sethos I (Seti, 1305-1290 BC) and Rameses II (1290-1224), and the Hittites. There were battles and incursions that ranged back and forth through Palestine. A peace treaty finally led to a long era of peace between the two empires, and allowed the reign of Rameses II to be one of the most peaceful and prosperous of all the pharaohs.

If the Israelites were already well established in the land, as the 1440 BC date of the exodus would suggest, they would have been continually battered by the incursions of these two pharaohs as they marched north to engage the Hittites in Syria and eastern Asian Minor. Yet the biblical record is totally silent about any such incursions. Given this protracted warfare between the Hittites and Egypt with Palestine at its center, it is inconceivable that there would be no biblical records of the incursions of Sethos or Rameses into Israelite territory. This suggests that the Israelites were not yet in the land, and therefore the exodus must have been later in the early 13th century. This would correspond to the other evidence in Palestine as well as the mention of the city of Rameses in Exodus.

Difficulties Raised:

This is really an argument from silence that is difficult to prove. There is no need to conclude a 13th century date from the lack of biblical reference to the Egyptian incursions since there are other explanations possible for that silence. The incursions into Palestine by Sethos I and Rameses II were not against the Israelites but against the Canaanites, specifically the Hittites and their allies. The Egyptians were not concerned at this time with fighting the Israelites since they posed no threat to Egypt. They were seeking to reestablish their position in the region against the Hittites, so they would have no need to engage the Israelites. Therefore, there would be no need for the Israelites to mention the Egyptian incursions through their territory.

Also, it is entirely possible that the periods of “rest” mentioned in the book of Judges (*e.g.*, 3:11, 30, 5:31, etc.) were times of increased Egyptian control of the area that would restrict raids from surrounding

Canaanites. When the Egyptians withdrew or were forced back, the Canaanites surrounding the Israelites were freer to raid the Israelite settlements.

Conclusion

This quick survey of the two positions on the date of the exodus demonstrates the tenuous nature of either position, whether working primarily from a literal reading of Scripture (the early date) or working primarily from the evidence of archaeological excavations (the late date). While historical evidence can often contribute to a better understanding of Scripture from a variety of perspectives, it is also obvious that historical evidence cannot solve every historical question that we can raise from the biblical text. This suggests that historical methodology, especially when that methodology is shaped by the assumptions of modern critical investigation, can be a useful tool, but cannot really serve to “prove” doctrinal positions about the nature of Scripture. As a tool, it has value. But just as with any tool when it is used in a manner or task for which it was not designed, we are left with less than acceptable results.

Historical context

There is simply no solid historical or biblical evidence that will definitely establish a date for the exodus. In fact, there is no direct extra-biblical historical evidence of the exodus itself. This should not be surprising even from a historical point of view. On the one hand, we could hardly expect slaves fleeing for their lives to stop and leave monuments and inscriptions describing their escape. And we know from other historical records, for example where there are two accounts from different countries about a battle, that Egyptian pharaohs did not erect monuments to their failures and tended to describe defeats as victories, much like modern political parties still tend to do. So, if we are looking for external verification of the exodus, historians are not able to help us much. Rather than disproving anything, this simply says that we do not have the historical evidence to affirm or deny the event or to establish its date by the criteria of historical critical methodology. Historically, we simply do not know beyond probability.

However, this does not mean that historical investigation is of no value to us in the exodus narratives, or that the narratives do not provide any historical evidence. We may not be able to answer all of our specific questions. But there are some features of the exodus story that generally provide a context for the biblical narratives. For example, from a sociological perspective the biblical traditions bear a clear memory of Egyptian ancestry. The tradition remembered that Moses had an Egyptian name, in spite of the fact that the traditions try to give it a Hebrew meaning (Exod 2:10). In fact, several of the pharaohs bear the name “mose” in various forms meaning “is born” (Thutmose, Ahmosis, Rameses). Moses is even mistaken for an Egyptian (Ex 2:19).

This places the narrative in an Egyptian context that then allows us to draw from our historical knowledge about ancient Egypt in helping us understand features of the narrative. For example, we do know that there was a precedent for a Semitic “outsider” to govern Egypt, which makes Joseph’s position in Egypt credible. We know of massive building projects built by slave labor such as described in Exodus. And there is good evidence from Egyptian documents that many of the plagues would have corresponded to Egyptian deities, providing not simply threatening miracles but a sustained challenge to Egypt’s religious system. Even the final plague struck at a core Egyptian religious belief in which the heir of pharaoh became an incarnation of the sun-god Re when he ascended the throne. The historical and cultural background forces us to engage the text on a far deeper level than reading the story as either straightforward history on the one side or doctrine on the other (for an example of how this might work in a specific biblical text, see [Genesis Bible Study: The Cultural Context of Israel](#)).

Of course, none of this “proves” the Bible, nor does it tell us “what really happened.” But it does render the biblical narratives more understandable in a historical context. And if we understand that context, we will likely be in a better position to understand the impact of the biblical narrative, not for what it tells us about history, but for what it tells us about God. Finally, the historical issues and the methods used to research them cannot really stand alone. We still do not have Scripture after we have “proven” something happened or did not happen. We only have history. And that is not really our goal in the study of Scripture. We have

Scripture when people who have experienced God and his self-revelation in human history, and who have come to understand the significance of that revelation, bear witness to God. We study the historical dimensions of Scripture in order that we might better hear and understand that witness to God.

Our temptation is to assume that the Bible was written for us directly. Historical investigation helps us realize that while Scripture has ongoing relevance, it is not timeless (outside of time) any more than God's revelation in that history is timeless. God's actions are and have always been time conditioned for us, because he has chosen to reveal himself **in** human history, not apart from it. Since that is true, historical investigation will always be necessary, not to prove that something happened, or when it happened, or how, but rather to help us hear the confession about God from the midst of God's historically conditioned self-revelation and the people's historically conditioned witness. In that sense, while historical investigation cannot *prove* much about the Faith, it is a crucial tool of biblical study.