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The Date of the Exodus

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Biblical events fit within a distinct historical framework. In fact, it's often this historical framework, verified through non-biblical records, that demonstrates the veracity of the scriptures. Understandably, however, there are debates about the historical links to some of the events recorded in the Bible simply because they happened so long ago and because secular records from ancient times are rarely complete. One such event is the Exodus of God's people from Egypt. Scholars have for many years debated the date of the Exodus. The debate falls basically into two camps—those who hold to an early date and those who hold to a late date for the Exodus.¹

The Late Date for the Exodus

The majority of scholars assign a late date for the Exodus, placing this event roughly in the thirteenth century B.C. “The most widely accepted date for the exodus places it in Nineteenth-Dynasty Egypt, or approximately 1280 B.C.”² There are two primary lines of reason for dating the Exodus in this period. The first is found in Exodus 1:11, where the Bible states that the Israelites were tasked with building the cities of Pithom and Rameses. The city of Rameses was presumably named after the famous Egyptian pharaoh, Ramses II, who reigned for over sixty-six years, from about 1279-1212 B.C.³ Ramses II, according to this chronology, would have been the pharaoh of the Exodus.

A second reason for adopting a late date for the Exodus rests on archaeological conclusions. For example, there seems to have been no sizable population in Edom and Moab until the thirteenth century B.C., two nations that slowed the Israelites' progress after the Exodus. “Glueck's surveys show a renewed density of occupation from about 1300 BC, after a lapse of five centuries since the Patriarchal age”⁴ Likewise, archaeology has identified destruction layers of various cities in Palestine such as Lachish, Bethel, and Hazor as having taken place late in the thirteenth century B.C. that may be associated with Joshua's conquest after the Exodus.⁵ Based on this biblical and archaeological evidence, a late date for the Exodus seems preferable to many.

The Early Date for the Exodus

There are many scholars, however, who prefer an early date for the Exodus, assigning this event to the middle of the fifteenth century B.C., that is, about 1446 B.C. This date is based on two biblical statements. The first is found in 1 Kings 6:1, which states that Solomon began to build the Temple in Jerusalem 480 years after the Exodus. Since Solomon's reign began about 970 B.C., and he began building the Temple in the fourth year of his reign, a date for the Exodus of 1446 B.C. seems accurate.⁶ This date would point to Amenhotep II as the pharaoh of the Exodus.

The second Bible passage that supports an early date for the Exodus is Judges 11:26 in which Jephthah states that the Israelites in his day had occupied the region east of the Jordan River for three hundred years. “Jephthah's defeat of the Ammonites occurred at the end of the twelfth century (i.e., ca. 1100 B.C.), a date which is widely acknowledged. So, then, he is referring to events which came to pass around 1400 B.C.”⁷ The addition of forty years for the period of Israel's wandering in the wilderness would date the Exodus in the middle of the fifteenth century B.C. This biblical evidence makes an early date for the exodus preferable to a late date.

Counter Arguments for the Late Date

Those who hold to a late date for the Exodus explain the chronological notes in 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 as expanded

figures that reflect shorter time periods. Kitchner states that these time periods may include synchronisms of reigns of various rulers that add up to higher numbers but, because of overlaps in reigns, really reflect a shorter period.⁸ He, like others, suggests that the 480 years in 1 Kings 6:1 may be an extrapolation of twelve forty-year generations, but since a generation is usually about twenty-five years long, the real timeframe would equal about three hundred years between the Exodus and the building of the Temple.⁹ Merrill rightly objects, “If it could be demonstrated that ancient Israelite (or any other) chronological computation took this approach and that 1 Kings 6:1 is an example of the application of such a method, the case would appear to be settled. Unfortunately there is no proof.”¹⁰

In regard to the Judges 11:26 notation, Kitchner goes so far as to suggest that Jephthah’s statement simply contains a chronological error, albeit innocent. “What we have is nothing more than the report of a brave but ignorant man’s bold bluster in favor of his people, not a mathematically precise chronological datum.”¹¹ This approach to the clear statements of the Bible falls short of satisfying. There is no legitimate reason to simply disregard Jephthah’s statement as inaccurate.

Counter Arguments for the Early Date

The late date for the Exodus is based primarily on the reference to the city of Ramses in Exodus 1:11 and on archaeological evidence of populations and destruction layers relating to Israel’s conquest. Regarding the reference to the city of Ramses, we know that the personal name Ramses was used much earlier than the time of Ramses II and therefore the city name did not depend on the reign of that particular pharaoh.¹² “Could it not be that the Israelites rebuilt a city called Rameses long before the kingship of Rameses II?”¹³ An alternative explanation would see the reference to Ramses in Exodus 1:11 as an anachronism. “Accordingly, the name Raamses is to be construed as a modernization of an archaic place name like Dan (for Laish in Genesis 14:14).”¹⁴ Therefore, the name Ramses in Exodus 1:11 does not necessitate a late date for the Exodus.¹⁵

The archaeological evidence for a late date for the Exodus is likewise unconvincing. In fact, there is archaeological evidence for

strong settlements east of the Jordan River in the fifteenth century B.C.¹⁶ Furthermore, the late destruction of certain cities in Palestine could as easily be attributed to the period of the Judges as to the Exodus.¹⁷

Conclusions

While most scholars settle on a late date for the Exodus, the clear chronological statements in the Bible support an early date for this event, in the middle of the fifteenth century B.C. Either conclusion, however, underscores the fact that the Bible describes trustworthy historical events and, concomitantly, reveals trustworthy spiritual truth.

¹ Finegan, Jack. *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*. Revised Edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998, p. 225.

² Davis, John J. *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*. Second Edition. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986, p. 22.

³ Finegan, pp. 234-235.

⁴ Kitchen, Kenneth A. *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*. London: The Tyndale Press, 1966, p. 61.

⁵ Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, p. 65.

⁶ Merrill, Eugene H. *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987, p. 58.

⁷ Merrill, p. 68.

⁸ Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. 73-75.

⁹ Kitchen, Kenneth A. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 307-308.

¹⁰ Merrill, p. 67.

¹¹ Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, p. 209.

¹² Davis, p. 23.

¹³ Merrill, p. 70.

¹⁴ Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 149.

¹⁵ Finegan, p. 232.

¹⁶ Merrill, p. 70.

¹⁷ Merrill, pp. 74-75.