

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT THE EXODUS AND ITS DATING

By Roger Waite

One of the most vexing problems for Biblical scholars and archaeologists is the great mismatch between where the Bible places the exodus and the archaeological finds in both Egypt and Israel in the Late Bronze Age where most believe that the Bible places the time of the Exodus.

Virtually all the theories that have been presented to reconcile the exodus and conquest with the Late Bronze Age could be likened to trying to place a square peg into a round hole. That said, there has been ample evidence for decades now that there has been a round peg available that fits nicely into that round hole.

Before I go any further let me state here that I am offering not just one but two possible solutions for our dating quandry.

One of the solutions is a simple but elegant solution for those who see no justification for changing the standard chronology used by Egyptologists.

The other is for those adventurous souls who are open to the possibility of revising the standard chronology used by Egyptologists.

Let's look at the archaeological data for Egypt and Israel and compare the data between the Late Bronze Age with the data for the Middle Bronze Age.

LATE BRONZE AGE		MIDDLE BRONZE AGE	
• No great presence of Semites in Egypt	✗	• Semites recorded as entering Egypt (Tomb of Beni Hassan) and Semitic enclave at Tell el Daba (Avaris). The population greatly expanded, became impoverished and later left at end of MK.	✓
• Pi-Rameses (Exodus 1:11) built during 19th Dynasty.	✓	• Pi-Rameses (Exodus 1:11) not built yet BUT earlier adjacent city of Avaris used from the 12th to the 18th Dynasties.	✓
• NO catastrophe in Egypt. Great prosperity and expansion instead.	✗	• Ipuwer Papyrus recalls a GREAT catastrophe with striking similarities to the biblical plagues that struck Egypt.	✓
• We have the mummies of the 18th and 19th Dynasty pharaohs despite pharaoh drowning in Red Sea (Psalm 136:13-15, Exodus 14:28).	✗	• Mummies missing for several 13th Dynasty pharaohs who could have been contenders for pharaoh drowned in the Red Sea (Psalm 136:13-15, Exodus 14:28).	✓
• Berlin Pedestal dated to mid 18th Dynasty states pharaoh conquered Canaan, Ashkelon and ISRAEL. Merneptah Stela states "ISRAEL is defeated, his seed is no more."	✗		
• No evidence of a LBA city at Arad, Hormah or Heshbon.	✗	• Evidence of MBA cities at Arad, Hormah or Heshbon.	✓
• Most LBA cities were unwalled, particularly in the hill country.	✗	• Most MBA cities were walled as per conquest account (Numbers 13:28).	✓
• No evidence of a walled city at Jericho during LBA.	✗	• Evidence of a MBA city at Jericho that was destroyed by earthquake, then burned at harvest time with full jars of grain left by attackers exactly as described in Joshua 6.	✓
• Candidate found with good match to Ai (Khirbet el-Maqatir) but pottery dating to burn layer disputed between LBA & MBA.	?	• Candidate found with good match to Ai (Khirbet el-Maqatir) but pottery dating to burn layer disputed between LBA & MBA.	?
• Little or no LBA finds at Gibeon, Eglon, Hebron and Debir.	✗	• MBA destruction levels at Eglon, Hebron and Debir. Gibeon abandoned after MBA.	✓
• Debir and Lachish destroyed around LB II.	✓	• Debir and Lachish destroyed in the MBA.	✓
• LBA II destruction layer found at Hazor but no further Canaanite occupation as per Judges 4.	?	• MBA burning destruction layer found at Hazor with brief Canaanite city rebuilt afterwards as per Judges 4.	✓

The above table shows how one period is a hopeless mismatch for the biblical account and the other time period is an ideal fit for the pattern of the Biblical account.

The round hole I referred to before is the scriptural account of the Exodus and the Conquest.

The square peg is the archaeology in Egypt and Israel for the Late Bronze Age.

The round peg is the archaeology in Egypt and Israel for the Middle Bronze Age.

There are a couple of ways by which we can put the round peg into the round hole. One requires no change to the standard chronology of Egypt. The other requires a change to the accepted chronology.

That said, there are three general approaches to deal with the mismatch between the biblical date for the Exodus and Conquest and the archaeological data of the Late Bronze Age.

The first approach is to maintain the view that the biblical historical data is 100% correct and maintain the view that there is no need to revise the standard chronology of Egypt.

This is the approach of many christian evangelicals such as those who are behind the Associates of Biblical Research (ABR). Bryant Wood has redated Kathleen Kenyon's MBA destruction level at Jericho to the LB I period in an attempt to reconcile the data with the scriptural account and without appealing to chronological revisionism.

At the ABR excavation of Khirbet el-Maqatir proposed as the Biblical Ai, there is a geographical match, the city is smaller than Gibeon, it had walls and a gate as required in the biblical account and they have found a burn layer. Using the local pottery found there they have dated this burn layer to the Late Bronze I period.

Their Late Bronze dating at both sites is very much questioned as the local pottery being used to date the levels in question is generally not viewed by most archaeologists as being diagnostic of the Late Bronze like similar imported Cypriot ware is.

Even if ABR have got it right with the pottery dating, as one can see in the above table, they still have a long list of other mismatches between the Late Bronze and the biblical account to deal with. There is far more mismatched data to reconcile or explain away than there is in favour of this approach.

In my humble opinion, this is an impossible situation. Something has to give! Either there are some mistakes in the biblical data OR there is a problem with the chronological framework that scholars have built up for the standard chronology of Egypt! There is too much of a mismatch to claim that BOTH the Bible and the standard chronology are without fault.

The second approach is the view that the biblical historical data is not 100% correct and maintain the view that there is no need to revise the standard chronology of Egypt.

This approach sees the Bible's history as not correct in every detail and that it is only generally correct or not correct at all. Most of the articles featured in BAR on the exodus and the conquest take this approach.

Based on Exodus 1:6, the chief theory promoted in particular by such renowned names as William Albright and Kenneth Kitchen has been the 13th century BC exodus which reduces the period of Judges from 400 years down to a mere 200 years. To make a 13th century BC exodus work it was necessary to reject or re-interpret the biblical data found in 1 Kings 6:1 that the Exodus occurred 480 years before the time of Solomon.

The number 480 was seen as symbolically too round (40 years x 12 generations of priests - 1 Chronicles 6:1-8) and 40 years for a generation was seen as too long. A more realistic 25 years put 12 generations in the 13th century BC. This, though, put it in conflict with Jephthah's statement of occupying the land for 300 years (Judges 11:26). Even those who believe in a mid 15th century BC exodus have quite the task fitting all the judges into 400 years (having to partly resort to parallelism) let alone attempting to fit it all into 200 years.

Exodus 1:11 is the singular biblical statement that has given rise to the 13th century BC exodus theory which refers to Raamses as one of the store cities built by the Israelites. This is believed to have been Pi-Rameses built in the time of Ramses II who is made out to be the pharaoh of the Exodus as seen in the classic Cecil B. De Mille movie "The Ten Commandments".

Because we have the mummy of Ramses II (and virtually all the mummies of the other 18th and 19th Dynasty pharaohs for that matter) De Mille had Ramses II return back to Egypt after his army was drowned in the Red Sea despite the many biblical statements that show that the pharaoh also drowned (Psalm 106:9-11, 136:13-15, Exodus 14:28, 15:19).

Albright was promoting the 13th century BC conquest theory back in the 1930's. Some 50 years after with Manfred Beitak's excavations of Avaris (Tell el Daba) we now have a workable alternative to believing Pi-Rameses was the city that was built by the Israelites. Avaris was immediately adjacent to Pi-Rameses and was occupied from the Middle Bronze to the 18th Dynasty.

The Israelites may not have built Pi-Rameses. They may have built Avaris instead and later editors of the Old Testament may have updated Avaris with the newer name of Rameses just as they did with the city of Dan in the story of Abraham pursuing the kings of the east (Genesis 14:14). With that alternative now available there is no absolute biblical anchor for a 13th century BC exodus.

To believe in a 13th century BC exodus requires some rejection of biblical data as noted above. Other more exotic theories have since come along such as the one which makes the Israelites a combination of the Shasu exiles from Egypt who merged with

the native poorer Canaanites who rose up and rebelled at the end of the Late Bronze Age. This and other theories are mainly based on a 13th century BC exodus and make a hash of the biblical account and reject even more of the biblical data.

The first proposal I wish to put out there for those who see no need to correct the Egyptian chronology actually requires less rejection of biblical data than does the 13th century BC exodus theory.

Honest scholarship should lead us to reject ancient historical sources as little as we need to. The principle of Occam's razor says that generally speaking the most simple solution is often the most likely to be the right one.

If I were a secular archaeologist and I saw the hideous mismatch between the biblical account of the exodus and the conquest with the Late Bronze Age on the one hand and the amazing match between the biblical account with the archaeological data found in the Middle Bronze Age I would think that it is blindingly obvious that the biblical account is describing what is found in the Middle Bronze Age.

Next, I would ask how could the biblical date (c.1450 BC) be reconciled with the Middle Bronze Age assuming Exodus 1:11's reference to the store city of Raamses is an editorial redaction?

Rather than shrinking the length of time for the Judges like the 13th century BC exodus does, I would extend the period of the Judges from 400 years to the needed 700 years to make it fit the archaeological pattern and there you have a virtual perfect match between the biblical data and the archaeological pattern without having to make any changes to the standard chronology of Egypt.

As I mentioned before those who believe in a mid 15th century BC exodus have quite the task fitting all the judges into 400 years. With a longer period for the Judges one wouldn't have to resort to any parallel rule between them.

You would still have to reinterpret the 480 years of 1 Kings 6:1. One christian scholar I know, in trying to reconcile the 480 years with Kenyon's 1550 BC conquest date for Jericho, claims that the 480 year figure is artificial claiming bad kings and judges are skipped over in coming up with that figure, much as Matthew's 14 generations for Jesus Christ's genealogy between David and the Jewish Exile skips 4 kings.

One other verse that would need "re-interpretation" is Paul's statement in Acts 13:20 of the Judges ruling for about 450 years up to Samuel. This may or may not include the periods of oppression.

The final piece of biblical data to deal with is the number of generations of priests (12 up to Zadok – 1 Chronicles 6:1-8) and musicians (20 – 1 Chronicles 6:33-38) for the same general time period. There are the odd occasions where the Bible skips people in the genealogies that are recorded. The hard part in each individual case is determining whether all names are included or some are being skipped.

Those verses are all you have to deal with to reconcile the biblical account with the archaeological data. That is much less than the many more verses a 13th century BC

exodus rejects and that is before you have to deal with the hideous mismatch of Late Bronze archaeological data you have to reconcile.

That said, even if you extend the time of the Judges you still have to deal with another major mismatch further down the timeline if you accept the standard chronology of Egypt. That major mismatch is finding any evidence for Solomon's golden age.

By the standard chronology using the generally accepted synchronism of the biblical Shishak with Sheshonk I of the 22nd Dynasty Solomon's reign is placed in the early Iron Age. It has been well established that this was one of the poorest times in Palestine, especially soon after the transition from the Late Bronze Age.

This problem is dealt with by the last approach to our great mismatch with the Late Bronze Age.

The third general approach to deal with the mismatch between the biblical date for the Exodus and Conquest and the archaeological data of the Late Bronze Age is to revise the standard chronology of Egypt to bring the exodus and conquest in line with the Middle Bronze Age pattern of evidence found there.

This is the approach that is investigated in the 2014 documentary film "Patterns of Evidence: Exodus" produced by Tim Mahoney of Thinking Man Films.

Immanuel Velikovsky was the first to popularise the view of a MBA Exodus with his 1953 book "Ages in Chaos" seeing the connection between the plagues of the Exodus with the Ipuwer papyrus dated to the Middle Kingdom. His book popularising a MBA Exodus happened to co-incide with Kenyon's work at Jericho. Her conclusions about Jericho's lack of a LBA city, seemingly in contrast to the biblical account, accelerated the great move away from academic belief in the Bible's history as accurate.

There was much bias against Velikovsky that probably had more to do with his radical catastrophism views from his earlier work "Worlds in Collision".

John Bimson followed in his footsteps with his 1978 book "Redating the Exodus and the Conquest". David Rohl has further popularised a MBA Exodus but with a less radical revision of Egypt's chronology than Velikovsky.

David Rohl is no amateur. He is a trained Egyptologist and his main specialty has been on the third dark age of Egypt's history called the Third Intermediate Period when the Libyan and Ethiopian dynasties ruled.

One of his key pieces of evidence calling for a reduction of that third dark age is from the Serapeum. He states that: "One so far inexplicable aspect of the finds from the Serapeum is the complete lack of stelae for the whole of the 21st Dynasty and for the first half of the 22nd Dynasty. Of the 311 stelae found in the Lesser Vaults (including the 73 recently unearthed) not one single inscription can be attributed to the kings from Smendes to Takelot I - a period assumed to have lasted around 195 years" ("Pharaohs and Kings" aka "A Test of Time", p.56).

Based on a similarity of name, Champillion, some 150 years ago, made the link between the biblical Shishak and Sheshonk I. The link seemed to work when you added up all the reign lengths of the Libyan kings without factoring in any parallel rule.

David Rohl does a careful examination of the Palestinian places noted in the Karnak inscription of Sheshonk ("A Test of Time", p.119-128). He shows Jerusalem was absent in the listing and that he skirted north of Judah and that his prime activity was in the northern kingdom of Israel.

This is the very opposite of Shishak's campaign! Jeroboam I was living in Egypt before the split of the two kingdoms (1 Kings 12:2) and would have been allied to Egypt. Shishak, in addition to plundering the Temple in Jerusalem, conquered the fortified cities of Judah (2 Chronicles 12:4).

In his soon to be released book "Ages in Order" Canadian scholar Alan Montgomery presents the change that happened in Greek chronology (p.6-9) thanks to Sir Flinders Petrie offering the "new" Egyptian BC dates to date the Mycenaean age of the Trojans that Homer wrote about. Mycenaean pottery had been found in great abundance at the short lived 18th Dynasty capital of Ahkenaten, today called el Amarna, establishing a clear link between the Mycenaean age and the 18th Dynasty.

Prior to the discovery the Mycenaean Age had been dated between 1050 and 700 BC. With Petrie's new date for Ahkenaten that had to be revised to between 1550 and 1200 BC against the objections of Greek archaeologist Torr. Nearly 500 years was inserted into Greek history without any local Greek history to fill in the gap which became known as the Greek Dark Age.

There is written local history on either side of the Greek Dark Age with archaeologists claiming writing ceased for hundreds of years before it re-emerged with the start of the Greek alphabet around 750 BC. To deal with that embarrassing absence of written history the time period for the pottery sequence known as Geometric pottery that was produced in the early Iron Age is stretched backwards to fill that massive gap in time.

Alan Montgomery in his paper "Greek Pottery, Dark Ages and Egyptian Chronology" explains how Late Geometric pottery which is normally dated to the 700's BC showed up in the traditional site for Troy in the same level (7B) as Mycenaean pottery which, supposedly, dates to 500 years earlier. It was found underneath (earlier than) the Late Bronze destruction level. This contemporary nature of Mycenaean pottery and Late Geometric pottery is conveniently ignored to maintain the conventional paradigm that the Late Bronze Age ended around 1200 BC.

There is much more data that could be discussed that argues for a change in the conventional chronological framework.

One effect of such a revision would bring the Late Bronze Age forward in time so it matches the time of Solomon's golden age. The prosperity of the Late Bronze is a much better fit than the general poverty of the early Iron Age. David Rohl dates the Late Bronze palace at Megiddo with its fabulous finds of gold and ivory to Solomon's time ("A Test of Time", p. 176-178). Standard chronology attributes this wealthy palace to the earlier Canaanites.

In conclusion, there is a serious mismatch between the biblical account of the exodus and the conquest with the Late Bronze Age archaeology but an amazing match between the biblical account with the Middle Bronze Age.

It has been the resistance to any movement of the standard chronology of Egypt (or making a change not even coming to mind) which has led to most biblical scholars looking for very unsuccessful ways to harmonise the biblical account of the exodus and conquest with the Late Bronze Age data.

To match the biblical account with where the archaeology best matches it and not change the standard chronology, the best solution is to extend the period of the Judges back to match the Middle Bronze Age pattern.

The only way to match the archaeological data with the biblical account of the exodus and the conquest and NOT compromise the biblical data is to revise the standard chronology of Egypt so the Middle Bronze Age is brought forward in line with the biblical Exodus date of 1450 BC.

This also has the benefit of correcting the mismatch between the golden age of Solomon with the standard view that places his reign in the poor period of the early Iron Age. The revised chronology places Solomon in the much more prosperous Late Bronze Age.