

## Exodus Bible Study Resource Meeting 3

In our previous meeting we talked about using a mnemohistory rather than a historicist approach to the Book of Exodus. The historicist approach asks, “What actually happened?” The underlying assumption is that if the events described in Exodus didn’t happen, then the truth of Exodus is compromised. On the other hand, a mnemohistory approach asks two basic questions:

- First, rather than asking “what happened?” we ask, “how was it remembered?” In other words, we examine, “why, by whom, for whose sake” are these stories being told. What are they teaching about God, faith, community, witness? What practical applications are being taught to help people enact this teaching?
- Second, we ask “are there other archaeological finds that could be the source of the Exodus story?” In recent years, more and more scholars believe there are. We’ll tell that story today.

Then having laid the historical context for the Book of Exodus, we will focus in the remainder of our meetings on the text of Exodus itself.

Today our focus is on what was happening in Canaan during and just after Egypt’s New Kingdom Period, that is, from 1550 to 1100 BC. What do we see that could be the source of the Exodus story? We begin with a look at what was happening during those years in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.

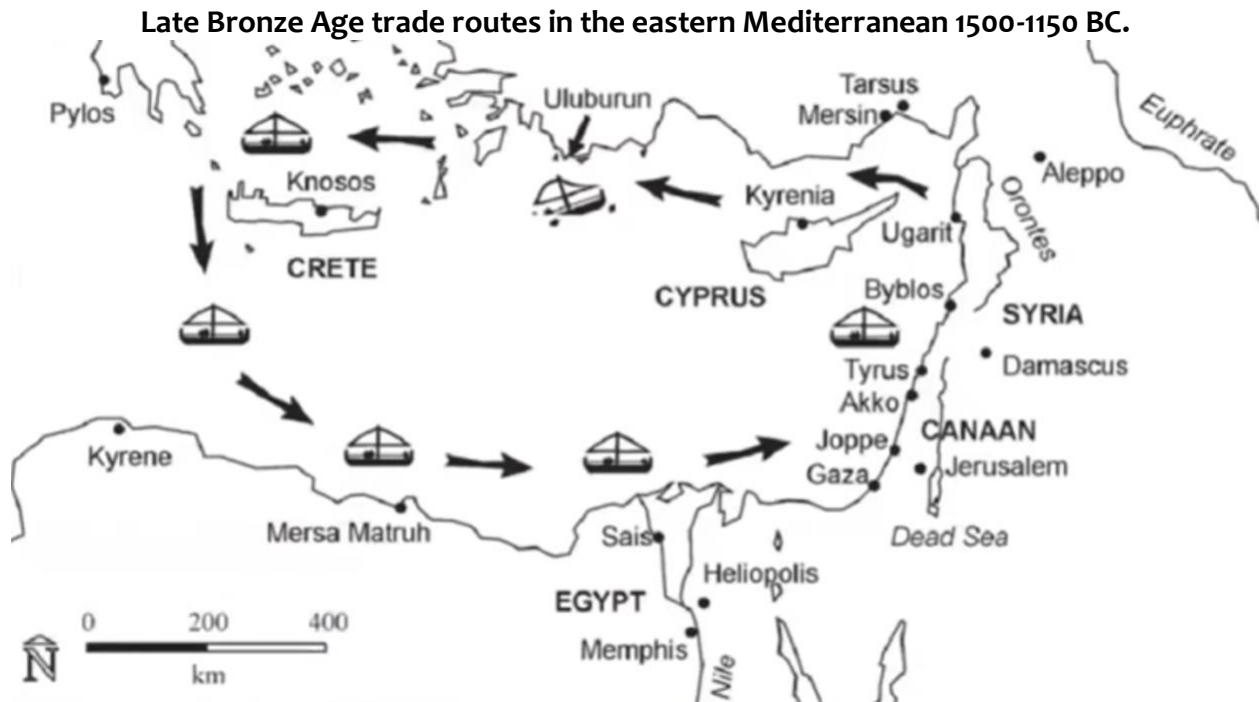
### Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean Empires in the Bronze Age An Age of Internationalism



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ancient.eu/image/11228/map-of-the-hittite-empire-and-surrounding-states/>

In his book, *1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, archaeologist Eric H. Cline (Professor of Classics and Anthropology and the current Director of the Capitol Archaeological Institute at The George Washington University) describes this era as an Age of Internationalism. He writes, “From about the time of Hatshepsut’s reign beginning about 1500 BC until the time that everything collapsed after 1200 BC—the Mediterranean region played host to a complex international world in which Minoans, Mycenaeans, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Mitanni, Canaanites, Cypriots, and Egyptians all interacted, creating a cosmopolitan and globalized world system such as has only rarely been seen before the current day.”<sup>2</sup>

As you can see, there were major empires in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze age. While there certainly was conflict between these empires. There was also thriving international trade. The following map taken from David Ilan’s lecture, *The Archeology of the Exodus*, illustrates the scope of this trade. Dr. Ilan is Director, Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology in Jerusalem.



3

Here is one story that illustrates just how vibrant the trade was and how cosmopolitan the culture was. On this map, locate Uluburun, on the coast of what we now know as Turkey. There you’ll find a ship that is engaged in this trade is sinking. Because it’s sinking off the coast of Cape Uluburun, it has become known as the Uluburun shipwreck. Between 1984

<sup>2</sup> Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, Princeton University Press, 2014, 171.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czwMkj\\_Ycgc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czwMkj_Ycgc)

and 1994, archaeologists made over 22,000 dives to salvage the contents of the ship. The ship sank sometime in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC. What archaeologists discovered provides an astonishing insight into the commercial trade taking place in the Mediterranean. Here is a picture of the display of the Uluburun Shipwreck at the Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology.



4

On the ship archaeologists found copper ingots from Cyprus and tin from Afghanistan. They found items from Canaan including 149 Canaanite jars filled with glass beads, olives, and a ton of resin (from pistachio trees) which the Egyptians used for embalming and also as varnish for painted wood. They found 175 glass ingots of cobalt blue turquoise and lavender. They also discovered logs of blackwood from Africa, ivory in the form of elephant tusks, plus tortoise shells, ostrich eggshells, Cypriot pottery and oil lamps, bronze and copper drinking vessels, gold and silver jewelry from Canaan, gold, silver and soap stone objects from Egypt, a priceless gold scarab of Queen Nefertiti (1350 BC), and lapis lazuli from Afghanistan.

Most of the cargo was the copper ingots. There were more than 300 ingots each weighing about 60 lbs. These ingots could make 10 tons of copper. The copper plus the ton of tin would make 11 tons of bronze which could outfit an army of 300 with armor and weapons.

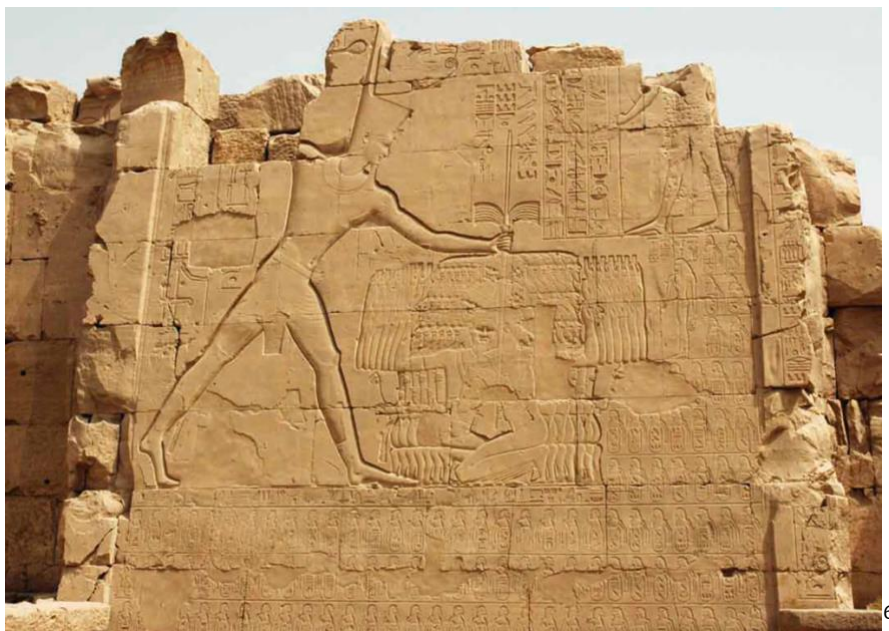
There were also weapons: arrowheads, spearheads, maces from the Balkans, daggers and swords from Italy and Greece, and a large number of tools. They also found a variety of food

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://alchetron.com/Uluburun-shipwreck>

including almonds, pine nuts, figs, olives, grapes, safflower, black cumin, sumac, coriander, whole pomegranates, wheat and barley.<sup>5</sup> Astonishing.

Seeing both this thriving age of international trade and these thriving economies sets the stage for understanding the Egyptian Empire's 400 year oppression of Canaan. In our previous meeting, we saw several reliefs of Pharaoh's celebrating military conquest in Canaan. Thutmose III (reign 1479-1425 BC), known as the "Napoleon of Egypt", engaged in 22 military campaigns, many of them into Canaan. He established the Egyptian Empire. In some of these incursions, he destroyed his enemies. In all of them he collected tribute. All of his military campaigns enforced Egypt's oppressive control over the Egyptian Empire. As we saw in our previous resource, this bas relief in the Karnak temple of the god Amun in Luxor, portrays Thutmose killing Canaanites in the battle of Megiddo.



Archaeologist Ann Killebrew is Associate Professor, Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Jewish Studies, and Anthropology at Penn State University. She writes,

New Kingdom Egypt has produced a considerable body of textual evidence and reliefs devoted to the Egyptian conquest and subjugation of western Asia. During the Eighteenth Dynasty at least two dozen campaigns to this region are recorded...

Continued military campaigns in western Asia characterize Egypt during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties. In the early thirteenth century, for example, Seti I conducted several major military campaigns to the southern Levant. These are

---

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uluburun\\_shipwreck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uluburun_shipwreck)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.magzter.com/article/Education/Ancient-Egypt/The-Siege-Of-Megiddo>

celebrated on the walls of the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak and the victory stelae recovered most notably from Beth-Shean.<sup>7</sup>

Why did the Egyptians establish oppressive military control over Canaan? Here's one answer celebrated at the temple of Karnak: The Egyptians stole silver, gold, lapis-lazuli, turquoise, red jasper and every sort of precious stone. Those items make the headlines. But Egypt was also dependent on Canaan for many resources that were unique to Canaan including copper from the Timna mines north of the Gulf of Aqaba, olive oil and wine from the Mediterranean coast, cedars from Lebanon, resin for varnish to cover painted wood and use in embalming, wheat and barley from the Negev.

But by far, the most massive export Egypt takes from Canaan, and the most strategic for its economy, were slaves. We'll return to the topic of Egypt enslaving Canaanites when we outline the characteristics of Egyptian oppression in Canaan.

Here is the expanse of the 400-year, Egyptian Empire in the New Kingdom Period.



<sup>7</sup> Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.*, Society of Biblical Literature, 2005, 55.

<sup>8</sup> [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Egypt\\_1450\\_BC.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Egypt_1450_BC.svg)

## Is Canaan Egypt's "House of Bondage"?

When the Book of Exodus begins, the people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt. Egypt is described in Exodus 20:2 as, "the House of Bondage." As we saw last time, there is no archaeological evidence of Israel's slavery in Egypt.

Our mnemohistory approach to Exodus tells us to ask, "Are there other archaeological finds that could be the source of the Exodus story?" Nadav Na'aman, Professor of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University, thinks there are. In his essay, "Out of Egypt or Out of Canaan? The Exodus Story between Memory and Historical Reality," he writes,

Over the course of the thirteenth to twelfth centuries, the Egyptians greatly expanded their grasp of Canaan, annexed large territories, and increased their pressure on the city-state rulers. They conducted campaigns, destroyed settlements and deported many local inhabitants to Egypt... **Elements of the exodus story, such as bondage, suffering and arbitrariness of the government, well reflect the experience of all the inhabitants of Canaan in their contacts with the Egyptian government** [bold-das].<sup>9</sup>

Is Canaan Egypt's House of Bondage? Let's explore this possibility as we observe the systems of oppression Egypt imposes on Canaan in the New Kingdom Period.

---

<sup>9</sup> T.E. Levy et al. (eds.), *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective*, Springer International Publishing, 2015, 529.

## Egyptian Garrisons

In between military incursions, the Egyptians maintained their dominance over Canaan with strategically placed garrisons. Local populations were forced to build the garrisons and supply all resources needed by the troops stationed there. These were large garrisons that housed a significant number of troops. From these garrisons, troops could be sent out to suppress any resistance to Egyptian control from the Canaanites. In his lecture on *The Exodus as Cultural Memory*, Ronald Hendel provides a map that locates these Egyptian garrisons. Notice they are strategically located in the major city-states of Canaan and along major trade routes.



10

In his lecture, Hendel also provided photos of two of these garrisons that have been excavated.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsOYE6tNPIQ>

## Egyptian Garrison Base at Aphek



## Egyptian Garrison Base at Beth Shean



### Egyptian Governor's Palaces

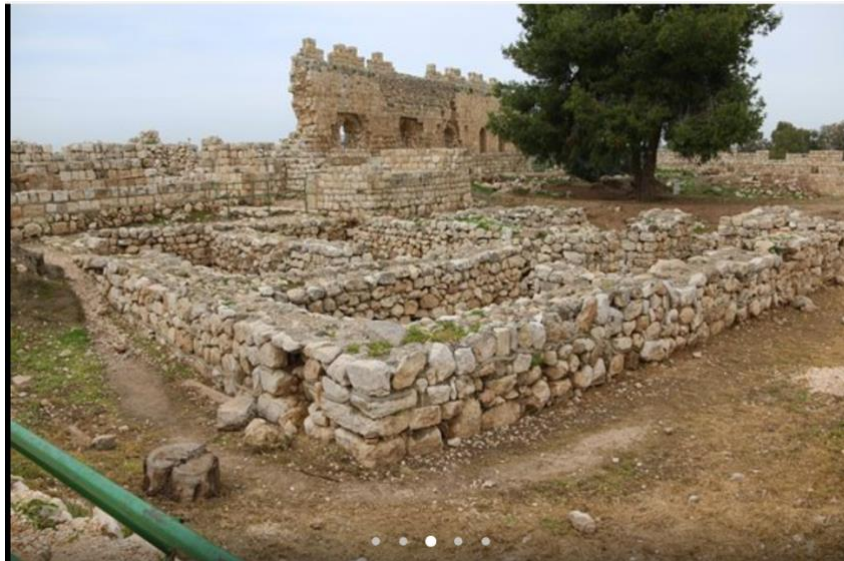
Egypt had troops on the ground in Canaan. They also had administrative leaders who would carry out Egypt's policies. Again, the local population built and provided the resources

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



needed for the governor, his residence, and his staff. Here is the excavation of the Egyptian governor's palace in Tel Aphek.



12

Here is the excavated Governor's Palace in Beth Shean



13

### **The Relationship between the Canaanite Kings and the Pharaoh: The Amarna Letters**

When Akhenaten became Pharaoh (reign ca. 1353-1335 B.C), he moved the capitol of Egypt from Thebes to Amarna. Amarna then became the center of communication between

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g6279836-d8130023-i303114654-Antipatros\\_Fort\\_Yarkon\\_National\\_Park\\_Tel\\_Afek-Rosh\\_Haayin\\_Central\\_Distr.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g6279836-d8130023-i303114654-Antipatros_Fort_Yarkon_National_Park_Tel_Afek-Rosh_Haayin_Central_Distr.html)

<sup>13</sup> <https://vici.org/vici/21790/>

Egyptian power and Egypt's vassal states across the empire. This diplomatic correspondence, written in cuneiform on clay tablets, was discovered in 1887. It gives us insight into the kind of relationship that existed between Egypt and its vassals in Canaan. In this correspondence, we certainly see the theme of Egyptian oppression. Even kings of city-states are called Pharaoh's "servants." One Canaanite king refers to himself as Pharaoh's "slave" and "the dirt at your feet."

The following is an excerpt of a letter from a king in Babylon. Apparently, in Canaan, Babylonian merchants were being killed and their money stolen. So, the Babylonian king asks Pharaoh to hold the Canaanite kings accountable because, "Canaan is your country and its kings are your servants."<sup>14</sup>

Another Amarna letter (EA 301) is written from the king of Shechem, a Canaanite city-state, to the Pharaoh Amenhotep III (reigned 1390–1353 BC). He writes, "To the king, my lord, the Sun from the sky: Message of Subandu, your slave, the dirt at your feet. I prostrate myself, on the stomach and on the back, at the feet of the king, my lord, my god, my Sun, the Sun from the sky, seven times and seven times."<sup>15</sup>

In another Amarna letter (EA 369) we read, "Amun (Egyptian god) has indeed put the Upper Land (Canaan) the Lower Land (Nubia), where the sunrises, where the sunsets, under the feet of the king."<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Pharaoh Tutankhamun's sandals picture a Nubian and a Canaanite who are literally under the king's feet. The sandals, found in King Tut's tomb, are on display at the online Egypt Museum. Here is the Museum's description, "This pair of sandals is made of leather and has depictions of enemies on the soles. Four human figures portraying Asiatic and Nubian neighbors, who were the traditional enemies of



<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amarna\\_letter\\_EA\\_8](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amarna_letter_EA_8)

<sup>15</sup> From Ronald Hendel's lecture, *The Exodus as Cultural Memory*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsOYE6tNPIQ>

<sup>16</sup> Hendel, *ibid.*

Egypt, are shown. The men are depicted as prisoners, lying prostrate with their arms bound behind their backs. The Pharaoh would symbolically trample on them when he wore his sandals. The sandals are also adorned on the top and bottom by the nine bows, symbols of the traditional enemies of Egypt.”<sup>17</sup>

These Amarna letters and Tutankhamun’s sandals illustrate Egyptian oppression in Canaan and Nubia.

### **Economic Exploitation: The Harvest Tax**

We have already seen many examples of Egypt’s economic exploitation of Canaan. We have seen reliefs in Temples in Egypt that celebrate the treasure Egypt has taken from Canaan—treasure that includes human lives. Here is one more example of Egypt’s economic exploitation. It’s called the harvest tax, and it imposes food scarcity on the people of Canaan.

This is a votive bowl found during excavations at the Canaanite city of Lachish. The hieratic script (cursive form of Egyptian hieroglyphics) on the bowl states that the harvest that fills this bowl is a “gift” given to the local Egyptian temple. In essence, it is a harvest tax.<sup>18</sup>



David Ussishkin, Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University explains, “These hieratic

inscriptions... constitute the documentation of the šmw (harvest tax) paid to an Egyptian religious institution probably associated with a local temple. According to Goldwasser, the

<sup>17</sup> <https://egypt-museum.com/post/612740907986518016/tutankhamuns-sandals>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/13/1/1>

recording of the harvest tax on votive bowls reflects the economic exploitation of southern Canaan by the Egyptian authorities.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the archaeologist who has done the most work on the harvest tax is Orly Goldwasser, Professor of Egyptology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Here is a section of her report on her discoveries:

“A token amount of grain was probably placed inside the bowl, while the quantity and purpose of the "offering" were recorded on its exterior wall.

“Bowl No. 1 mentions regnal year 22, which was most likely a year in the reign of Ramesses III (reign 1186-1155 BC), and a large amount of grain (about 33,500 litres) [approx. 27 tons-das]. Bowl No. 2 bears the phrase "that which arrived at the house," the house in this period being a religious or secular institution possessing its own land and incomes. “The inscription on bowl No. 3 was probably similar in content to that of bowl No. 1, although all that is preserved is the recording of a very large quantity (about 145,000 litres) [126 tons-das] of some material, most likely grain. This appears to constitute the documentation of the smw (harvest tax) paid by one of the city-states in the Negev to an Egyptian religious institution...

“This large quantity is not too surprising, since much of this taxed grain may have remained in Canaan, where it was transferred to the Egyptian troops and all those belonging to the administrative network...

“All these objects (votive bowls), from the Egyptian point of view, are religious ‘institutions’ that were accustomed to assess and collect regular taxes.”<sup>20</sup>

The harvest tax is a major reason why there was food scarcity in Canaan.

## **Slavery**

The oppression of slavery and God’s freeing the Hebrew slaves from that oppression is core to the Book of Exodus. Mnemohistory reminds us that the question to ask here is, “Did Canaanites experience slavery at the hands of the Egyptians?”

On the Memphis and Karnak Stele of Amenhotep II (reign 1427–1401 BC or 1427–1397 BC), the pharaoh boasts about the booty he has brought back from his recent military incursion into the Levant. His list of booty includes human beings:

---

<sup>19</sup> David Ussishkin, *Lachish and the Date of the philistine Settlement in Canaan* in Manfred Bietak, et al (eds.) *The Synchronization of Civilizations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C. III*, Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007, 602.

<sup>20</sup> Orly Goldwasser, “Hieratic Inscriptions from Tel Sera’ in Southern Canaan” from: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51c71647e4b01428fdbaff8f/t/51ca9c15e4b0814177b6686d/1372232725639/Goldwasser+Hieratic+Inscriptions+from+Tel+Sera%CA%BF+in+Southern+Canaan.pdf>

550 Maryanu [charioteers]; 240 of their wives; 640 Canaanites; 232 sons of chieftains; 323 daughters of chieftains; 270 concubines” and from another campaign, “33,600 Apiru, 15,200 live Shasu [desert dwellers], 36,000 Syrians, [and others] totaling 89,600”<sup>21</sup>

That is certainly a sizable number of people Pharaoh Amenhotep II enslaved. Educated guesses about the population of Canaan in this period indicate he enslaved around 15% of the total population. Carol Meyers continues this story of slavery:

A fourteenth-century BCE letter from the pharaoh to the ruler of Gezer [a Canaanite city-state] mentions that forty beautiful female cupbearers are to be transported to the royal court, and letters from the ruler of Jerusalem refer to people being sent as gifts to the pharaoh. Still others entered Egypt as part of commercial ventures, with special residential quarters established in port cities for these foreign traders...

Of particular interest in light of the story of Moses’ childhood is the Egyptian practice of taking children of vassal rulers as hostage and raising them in elite Egyptian households, as if they were Egyptian children. Some of the Asiatics in Egypt held important positions – as scribes, overseers of building operations, palace butlers, and heralds – in the government, and those with technical skills were valued in artisans’ workshops. But most brought into Egypt as captive or tribute, worked as menial laborers in state or temple projects.<sup>22</sup>

We conclude this section where we have asked, “Is Canaan Egypt’s ‘House of Bondage?’” with Ann Killebrew’s extended observation on that question:

Rather than attempt to identify a particular moment in history, I will seek to describe something of greater significance: the cultural setting of the exodus story. In short, numerous aspects of the account accurately reflect the archaeological and historical context in Canaan and Egypt during the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages.

One of the major themes of the exodus story is the bondage of Israel in Egypt. Significantly, the presence of foreign slaves is well documented in Egyptian New Kingdom texts. According to the Egyptian evidence, slaves fulfilled a multitude of roles in Egyptian society, from menial tasks to key service roles in the royal household to serving as members of the priesthood. Asiatic slaves included prisoners of war, uprooted peasants, exiled Canaanites, human tribute, or Canaanites sold into bondage by local slave merchants. The escape of slaves was also a common event, as recounted in the Papyrus Anastasi V, which dates to the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty. Thus, the theme of Egyptian tyranny and enslavement and the accounts of runaway slaves returning to their homeland must have resonated throughout Canaan and other regions under Egyptian imperial control...

In light of the lack of evidence in the Egyptian texts and the archaeological remains of an exodus of this magnitude, it is not surprising that scholars have

---

<sup>21</sup> Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

suggested that the exodus does not represent a specific historical moment but rather numerous “exoduses” of runaway Asiatic slaves that were “telescoped” into a single event. It is difficult if not impossible, and probably unwise, to attempt to pin this saga to a particular historical event. Rather, we should see it as reflecting a powerful collective memory of the Egyptian occupation of Canaan and the enslavement of its population, which reached its greatest impact during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E.<sup>23</sup>

### The End of the Late Bronze Age: An Interregional Transformation<sup>24</sup>

Early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, Pharaoh Ramesses III (reign 1186–1155 BC) was carrying out business as usual for the Egyptian Empire. In what is known as the Papyrus Harris, Ramesses III boasts about a recent military campaign into Canaan.

I have brought back in great numbers those that my sword has spared, with their hands tied behind their backs before my horses, and their wives and children in tens of thousands, and their livestock in hundreds of thousands. I have imprisoned their leaders in fortresses bearing my name, and I have added to them chief archer and tribal chiefs, branded and enslaved, tattooed with my name, and their wives and children have been treated in the same way.<sup>25</sup>

Yet by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Egyptian Empire had collapsed, and Egypt disappeared from Canaan. And it was not only Egypt that met this fate. The other two major empires in the Eastern Mediterranean also collapsed: Mycenaean Greece and the Hittite Empire in Mesopotamia.

On these two maps, see the number of major cities, spread across hundreds of miles, that were destroyed by 1115 BC.

As we see in the first map (<sup>26</sup>), the invaders are called “Sea People.”

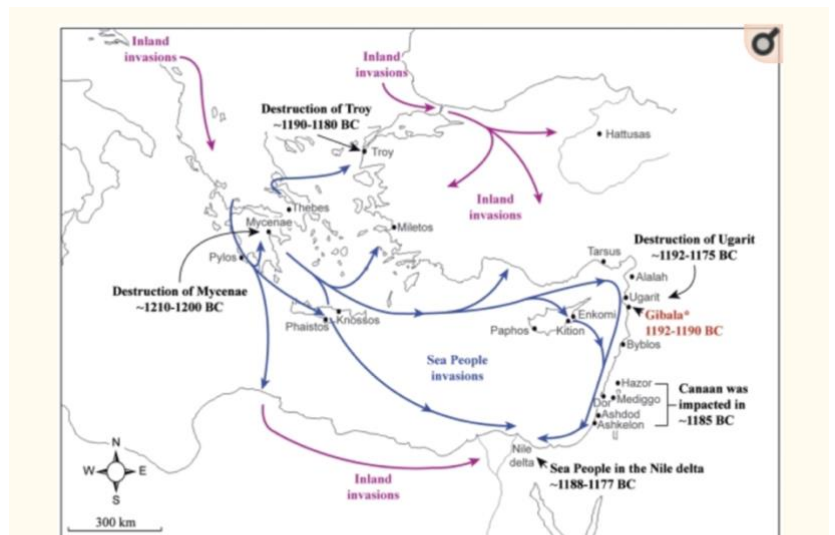


Figure 1  
Map of the Sea People invasions in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age (blue arrows).

Some of the major cities impacted by the raids are denoted with historical dates. Inland invasions are represented by purple arrows.

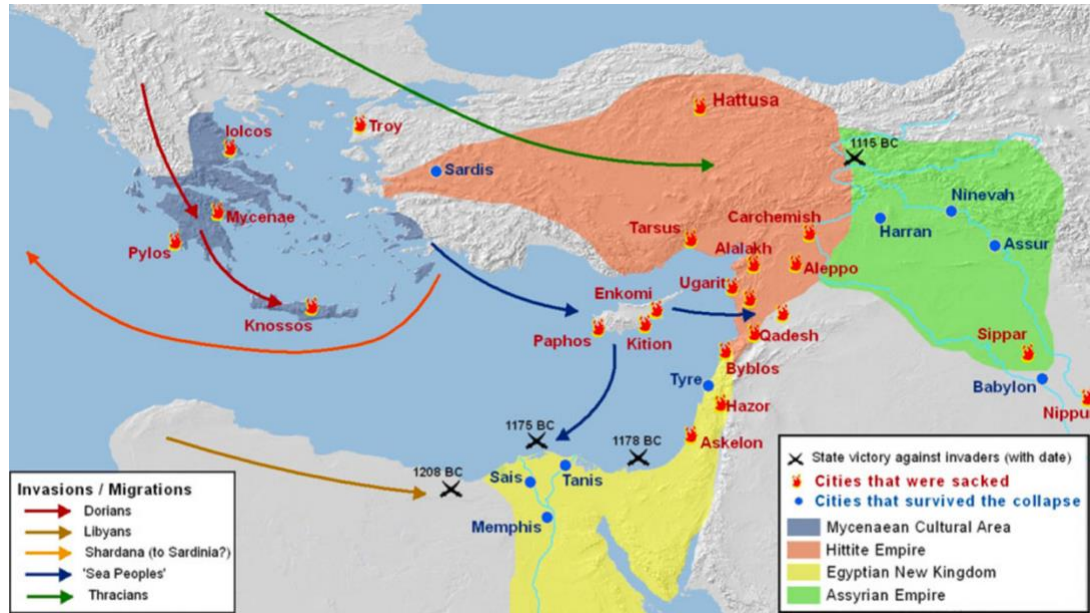
<sup>23</sup> Killebrew, *ibid.*, 151-152.

<sup>24</sup> Killebrew, *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Hendel lecture, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3110627/>

Egypt give the invaders this name since they arrived in ships. But scholars know little about them. One of the primary sources is from Ramesses III. In two major battles, the second in 1177 BC, the pharaoh defeats the Sea Peoples. But it is a pyrrhic victory. The cost of the battle launches the demise of the Egyptian Empire.



27

In his Medinet Habu mortuary temple in Luxor, Ramesses III describes the wave of destruction the Sea Peoples have created across the eastern Mediterranean. He also lists different groups that comprise the Sea Peoples:

The foreign countries made a conspiracy in their islands. All at once the lands were removed and scattered in the fray. No land could stand before their arms: from Hatti (Hittites), Quode (Kadesh-a city in Syria), Carchemish (capitol of Northern Syria), Arzawa (region of western Turkey), and Alishia (Cyprus) on, being cut off [i.e. destroyed] at one time. A camp was set up in Amurru. They desolated its people, and its land was like that which has never come into being. They were coming forward toward Egypt, while the flame was prepared before them. Their confederation was the Peleset, Tjeker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh, lands united. They laid their hands upon the land as far as the circuit of the earth, their hearts confident and trusting: 'Our plans will succeed!'

Who these people were, where they came from, and why is much debated. Mostly the Sea People appear to come from Sicily, the Aegean Sea, and Turkey. And while they are fierce warriors, they also are immigrants who travel as families with all their household goods. Their invasions appear to be forced migration—an attempt to find a new place to live. What is forcing them out of their homelands?<sup>28</sup>

Eric Cline believes the Sea People's invasions are the consequence of a whole series of catastrophes that impact the entire Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean region in the 13th

<sup>27</sup> <http://explorethemed.com/BACollapse.asp>

<sup>28</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea\\_Peoples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_Peoples)

and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. He describes these catastrophes in his book, *1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed*:

**Earthquakes:** “It is now clear that Greece, as well as much of the rest of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, was struck by a series of earthquakes, beginning about 1225 BE and lasting for as long as fifty years, until about 1175 BC.”<sup>29</sup>

**Climate Change, Drought, and Famine:** “One suggestion favored by scholars, especially those seeking to explain not only the end of the Late Bronze Age but also why the Sea Peoples may have begun their migrations, is climate change, particularly in the form of draught, resulting in famine... This type of migration is frequently referred to as ‘push-pull,’ with negative conditions in the home area pushing the inhabitants out and the positive conditions in the area of destination beckoning or pulling the new migrants in that direction.”<sup>30</sup> This dynamic certainly raises the question of whether the Sea Peoples are victims or oppressors—a question that remains unresolved among archaeologists.

**Internal Rebellion:** “Such revolts could have been triggered by famine, whether caused by drought or otherwise, or earthquakes or other natural disasters, or even a cutting of the international trade routes, any and all of which could have dramatically impacted the economy in the affected areas and led a dissatisfied lower class to rebel against the ruling class.”<sup>31</sup>

**The Collapse of International Trade:** When invaders disrupt international trade, local economics dependent on that trade are weakened.

**Arguments for a Systems Collapse:** Clines writes, “Soon after 1200 BC, the Bronze Age civilizations collapsed in the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, and Near East, exhibiting all of the classic features [of a systems collapse], from disappearance of the traditional elite class and a collapse of central administrations and centralized economies to settlement shifts, populations decline, and a transition to a lower level of sociopolitical integrations... more than the coming of the Sea Peoples in 1207 and 1177 BC, more than the series of earthquakes that rocked Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean during a fifty year span from 1225 to 1175 BC, more than the drought and climate change that may have been ravaging these areas during the period, what we see are the results of a ‘perfect storm’ that brought down the flourishing cultures and people of the Bronze Age—from the Mycenaeans and Minoans to the Hittites, Assyrians, Kassites, Cypriots, Mitanni, Canaanites, and even Egyptians.”<sup>32</sup>

Because of this systems collapse, mighty Egypt disappeared from Canaan by 1130 BC.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 147-148.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 162.



Was the end of the Bronze Age a tragedy? Certainly the catastrophes that fell on people created a great deal of suffering over long periods of time. Those in power who lost power certainly grieved that loss. But for many, it was a different story. Aaron A. Burke, Professor of the Archaeology of Ancient Israel and the Levant in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA writes, “Absent from most treatments of the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition are stories of resilience, adaptation, and the emergence of new identities and nascent states, which are undeniably the result of the erosion of earlier political and economic regimes and the paradigms of power they embodied.”<sup>33</sup>

In the Levant, we see three major groups emerge during this time of transition. Along the coast of the Northern Levant, Canaanites living in that area formed a nation that the Greeks would later name, ‘the Phoenicians.’ With their capitol in the city of Tyre on the Mediterranean Coast, they created a new massive trading system that dominated the entire Mediterranean until the Greeks took it over centuries later. They were the first to develop an alphabet rather than the image based system used in Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiform. Their alphabet formed the basis for the Hebrew alphabet as well as Greek and Latin.

A group of Sea People settled on the coast of the Southern Levant. They overtook the coastal city-states and became known as the Philistines. The other group that emerged was Israel.

### **The Transition Between the Late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age, ca. 1200-1000 BC The Birth of Israel**

We have already mentioned Pharaoh’s Merneptah stele which dates from 1208 BC. The stele celebrates Merneptah’s military conquests—conquests to reassert Egyptian hegemony over its empire. Here is one section of the stele’s text:

The Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe:  
Ashkelon has been overcome;  
Gezer has been captured;  
Yano’am is made non-existent.  
Israel is laid waste and his seed is not.<sup>34</sup>

On the Merneptah stele, the hieroglyphs used for “Israel” indicate a group of people rather than a city-state. Ronald Hendel, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, points out that it is during this time period, the last decades of the Late Bronze Age, (ending at 1200 BC) and the beginning of Iron Age I (1200-

---

<sup>33</sup> Aaron A. Burke, “Turning Points: A New project in a New Era of Archaeology in the Near East,” *Backdirt*, 2017, 41.

<sup>34</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah\\_Stele](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele)

1000 BC) that there is major growth in the population of the highlands of Canaan. He writes, “The archaeological evidence shows that beginning in the late thirteenth century BC—around the time of this [Merneptah stele] inscription—there was a significant population expansion in the central highlands of the land of Israel. This new group of highland settlers was presumably the people Merneptah called Israel.”<sup>35</sup>

Who are these people? In Exodus 12:28, Israel is called a “mixed multitude.” Aaron A Burke, Professor of the Archaeology of Ancient Israel and the Levant at UCLA, expands our understanding of this mixed multitude that formed ancient Israel. In his observations of the the major growth in the highland settlements during and after the demise of the Egyptian Empire, Burke sees a movement of refugees.

When Egypt’s control was breaking, several other factors were impacting on the Canaanites: drought, famine, and the invasion of the Sea Peoples.

Today there is a model of displacement and resettlement used in refugee studies. It’s known as the Impoverishment, Risks, and Reconstructions model. It is precisely this dynamic that Burke sees taking place in Canaan. Burke sees that the dynamic at work in the formation of the people of Israel is very similar to the dynamic described in refugee studies today. He writes, “The discussion [about the formation of Israel] is grounded in a large number of ethnographic studies of refugee displacement and resettlement, the broad outlines of which are summarized by addressing the following risk-associated variables: landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, a loss of common property, and community disarticulation.”<sup>36</sup>

Burke then proceeds to demonstrate how these characteristics taken from refugee studies today, are found in the archaeological evidence regarding these new highland settlers.<sup>37</sup>

Burke believes that the people who form Israel are united by the common experience of being refugees. He goes on to note that in the Covenant Code (the Law Code in Exodus 21-23:19), we see a law that is unusual in Ancient Near East societies: Refugees are protected from “typical forms of exploitation.”<sup>38</sup> But, he points out that we often misunderstand the meaning of that law because the Hebrew word, *ger*, which should be translated, “refugee,” is translated, “alien,” (NRSV, NIV), “stranger,” (KJV), or “foreigner” (NAS, NLT). With the correct translation, we would read, “You shall not oppress a refugee; you know the heart of a refugee, for you were refugees in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)

Burke concludes his discussion about this “mixed multitude” of refugees “that were displaced by the social, political and economic uncertainties associated with the departure

---

<sup>35</sup> Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Aaron A Burke, “The Decline of Egyptian Empire, Refugees, and Social Change in the Southern Levant, ca. 1200-1000” in Levy et al (eds.) *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective*, Springer International, 2015, 237.

<sup>37</sup> Burke, pp. 237-241.

<sup>38</sup> Burke, *ibid.*, 231.

of Egyptian rule from Canaan” and resettled in the highlands of Canaan. He writes, “An examination of the character of Iron I settlements reveals that highland settlements provide a more or less ideal fit for what would be expected were migrant and displaced groups to have sought resettlement away from lowland urban centres plagued by political volatility and violence toward the end of the Late Bronze Age.”<sup>39</sup>

Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman turn our attention to these new highland communities. They write, “In the formerly sparsely populated highlands from the Judean hills in the south to the hills of Samaria in the north, far from the Canaanite cities that were in the process of collapse and disintegration on the plains and valleys below, about 250 hilltop communities suddenly sprang up.”<sup>40</sup> So this is not the invasion and conquest of cities as described in Joshua. These are entirely new communities.

As archaeologist William Dever writes, “The new Israelite settlements... are almost all founded de novo, not on the ruins of destroyed Late Bronze Age sites, but in the sparsely populated hill country extending from Upper and Lower Galilee, into the hills of Samaria and Judah, and southward into the northern Negev.”<sup>41</sup>

These new hill country villages consisted of housing units archaeologists call, “courtyard houses.” Each courtyard house provided shelter for an entire family clan. William Dever describes these dwellings. He writes,

On either side of a central pillared courtyard were roofed and cobbled areas where animals were stabled. There were also large areas for storing both dry and liquid foodstuffs. Cisterns were dug under the floors of the houses and in the courtyards to provide a ready source of water. In fact, one of the reasons that the area was never effectively settled before the Iron Age was that the art of digging cisterns had not yet been perfected, and you cannot survive in the hill country in the summertime without some means of water catchment. In the central courtyard was also a fireplace. On the second floor of the house, you would have had the living and sleeping quarters.<sup>42</sup>

The following picture is from the *Houses of Ancient Israel* exhibition at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. It is a picture of their full-scale replica of a home in the highlands of Canaan ca. 1200-586 BC.

---

<sup>39</sup> Burke, *ibid.*, 244.

<sup>40</sup> Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed – Archaeology’s new vision on ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts*, Touchstone, 2002, 107.

<sup>41</sup> William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* William B. Eerdmans, 2006, 99.

<sup>42</sup> William G. Dever, et. al., *The Rise of Ancient Israel*, Biblical Archeological Society, 2012, 50.



As the generations of the family grew, they built rooms attached to the central pillared courtyard. The pillars support a second story where people lived and slept. The courtyard is the place where the extended family cooked and met for meals and conversation. This architecture was common to all of the hill country villages. As Dever writes, “The courtyard house is a pervasive feature of Canaanite hill-country sites and is almost certainly the type of structure referred to in the Bible by the phrase ‘the house of the father.’”<sup>44</sup>

The total population of each village was 50 to 300 people. Without a wall or an army, the villages were vulnerable to raids or to the armies of the city-states. In a time of danger, they were dependent on help from neighboring villages. Unlike the city-states, there are no buildings or valuables that indicate a hierarchical society. The material culture of highland villages reveals egalitarian communities.

It was a subsistence life. Villagers farmed on rocky soil. Rainfall was inadequate. With the advent of the Iron Age, they finally had tools to carve silos in solid rock. Silos carved into the rock enabled them to hide grain from bandits as a protection from food scarcity. One archaeologist, Israel Finkelstein, estimates that in this time of expansion, the hill country population grew from 12,000 to from 30,000 to 42,000 while another, Lawrence Stager, estimates the population grew from 50,000 to 150,000.<sup>45</sup> Clearly there was major growth. But certainly this expanding population does not reflect the 600,000 men or 2 million people including women and children poised to be freed from Egypt as mentioned in Exodus 12:37.

---

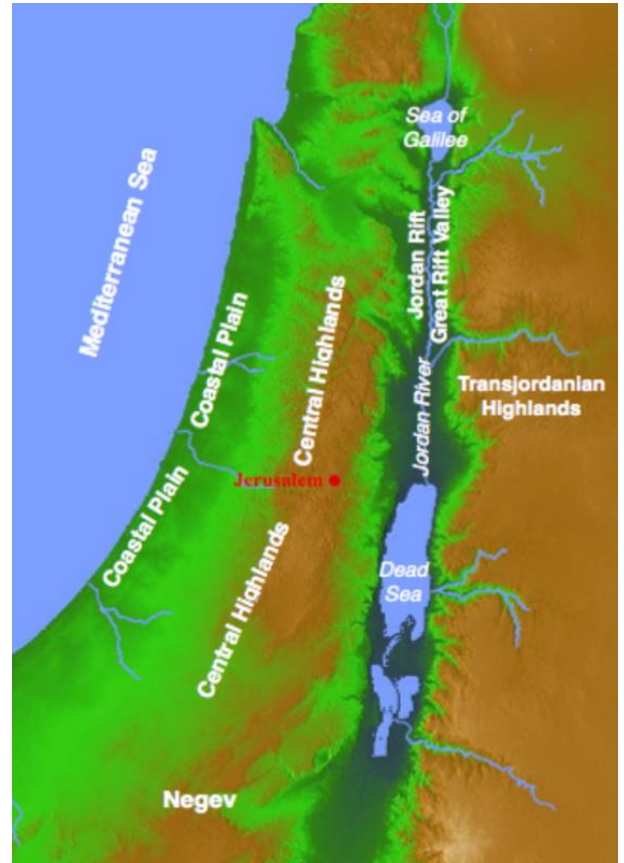
<sup>43</sup> [https://madainproject.com/content/media/collect/semetic\\_house\\_8426767.jpg](https://madainproject.com/content/media/collect/semetic_house_8426767.jpg)

<sup>44</sup> Dever, (2012) 51.

<sup>45</sup> Dever, *ibid.*, 98.

Hendel describes what these villages were like. He writes, “The settlements excavated by archaeologists share a number of similar culture features. They are small, unwalled villages, some probably no more than the dwellings of extended families. There are no signs of social stratification or permanent military establishments.”<sup>46</sup>

This map shows the main geographical regions of the Southern Levant. Notice the area called the central highlands. City-states were located primarily along the Mediterranean coast.<sup>47</sup>



Here is a picture showing what the central highlands look like today. You can see Palestinians working the land. As you can tell, it is not an easy place to grow crops.<sup>48</sup>

In this Iron Age map, new villages are marked with black dots. You can see how many new villages are in the country. These new villages mark the



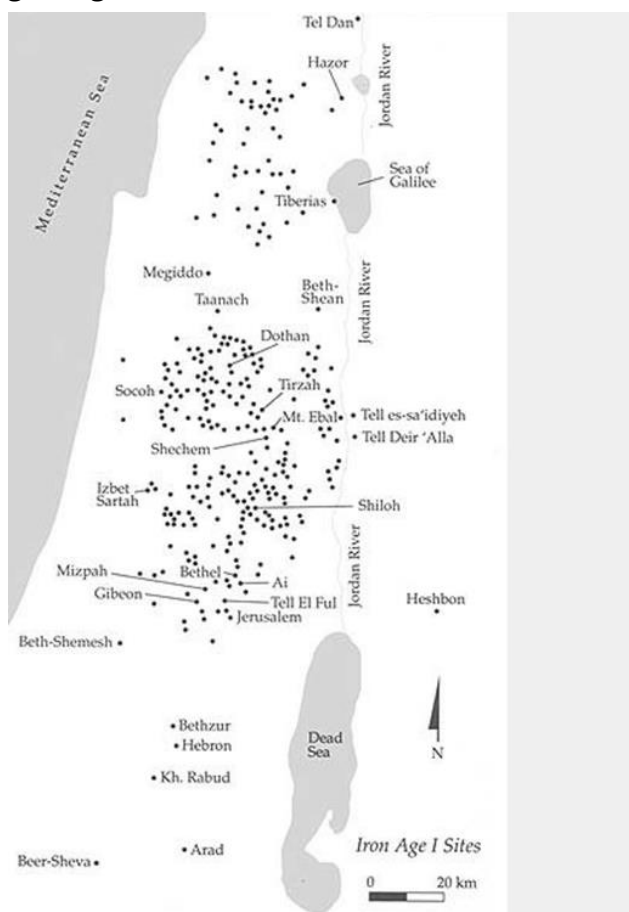
map, new villages are marked with black dots. You can see how many new villages are in the country. These new villages mark the

<sup>46</sup> Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 7.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.bibleatchurch.com/biblehistory/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/TopographyOfAncientIsrael.png>

<sup>48</sup> <https://ancientfoods.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/battir-articlelarge.jpg>

beginning of Israel.<sup>49</sup>



The question is, how did this mixed group become a community? In all likelihood, the process took generations. But the glue that transformed a mixed multitude into a community that called itself the people of Israel, was the Exodus story. In 1208 BC, when Pharaoh Merneptah named Israel on his stele, everyone in the mixed multitude had experienced the oppression of the Egyptian Empire. That was one experience they had in common. A second was that they all were experiencing freedom from that oppression. With the fall of Egypt and with their freedom from the oppression of the individual city states in Canaan (which they achieved by settling in the highlands), this mixed multitude was free—free from the enslaver, free from military oppression, free from merciless taxation.

The Exodus story was their story. Hendel writes:

How did they become incorporated into a cohesive social community? In no small part this transformation of identity was created by shared belief in a common story—the Exodus from Egypt, the revelation from Sinai, the wanderings in the wilderness, and the passage as a unified people into the Promised Land. These stories, in their aggregate, constitute a collective rite of passage for the people of Israel transforming a mixed multitude from their former identity as slaves in a foreign land into a new identity as a free people—God’s people—in a land of promise and plenty... Jewish identity, from its beginnings to the present day, is formed in no small part by the recitation of these stories... The command to tell these stories in each generation [e.g. Exod 10:2] is, in a sense, a self-fulfilling command that constructs the cultural identity of its primary audience....

It is important to note that even Israelite settlers who had never been slaves in Egypt could easily participate in this narrative memory, for Egypt had been the overlord of Canaan for several centuries previously (ca. 1500-1150 BC). Egyptian rule

<sup>49</sup> Dever, William G.; Adam Zertal; Norman Gottwald; Israel Finkelstein; P. Kyle McCarter Jr.; Bruce Halpern. *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (p. 14). Biblical Archaeology Society.

during this period had often been harsh, including regular export of Canaanites to Egypt to serve as slaves. With the waning of the Egyptian Empire in Canaan, the memory of oppression and slavery and concomitant memory of deliverance to freedom would have resonated in the drama of the Exodus story. By adopting this story as their own, the villagers in the highlands became Israelites, and a mixed multitude crystallized its collective identity as the people of Yahweh.<sup>50</sup>

Nadav Na'aman writes:

The sense of miracle that happened to the Israelites, so prominent in the Exodus tradition, well reflects the reality of mid-twelfth century Canaan. For hundreds of years, Egypt occupied Canaan and none of its inhabitants could have remembered a different reality than that of Egyptian governance of the land. Suddenly, Egypt retreated from Canaan and its inhabitants become free of foreign rule. No wonder that the withdrawal was conceived as a kind of miracle that the local inhabitants attributed to their God. My suggestion that the historical memory of release from bondage of Egypt was originally connected to Canaan fully explains the all-encompassing dimension of the memory involved the entire Israel people.<sup>51</sup>

As you see from the schedule below, for the remainder of our study of the Book of Exodus, our focus will be on the text. As we have seen, this is a text that was formed over centuries. It began after a period of hundreds of years of oppression followed by a time when the systems that stabilized society collapsed and people experienced landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, and food insecurity. It appears that the founders of Israel were refugees who had fled to a rural area and lived subsistence lives. Furthermore, the Book of Exodus as we have received it, was crafted during Israel's exile in Babylon. At that time too, Israel's society had collapsed. As we have seen, the Book of Exodus is not a history book. It is a book designed to build a community of faith—the initial community and (hundreds of years later) the exiled community in Babylon who were about to return to their homeland where there was nothing. So, as we proceed in our study, we will look for this life-giving cultural memory and the mnemohistory where cultural memory is made practical.

As we reflect on our world today, there are many systems that appear to be at risk if not collapsing. We see global warming, environmental degradation, water shortage, food insecurity, pandemics, economic crises, political turmoil, economic crises, racial discrimination. There are over 79 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, up from 43 million a decade ago, and the highest recorded since WWII. UN High Commissioner Filippo Grandi writes: “What we are seeing in these figures is further confirmation of a longer-term rising trend in the number of people needing safety from war, conflict and persecution.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> Na'aman, *ibid.*, 529.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>

We need the Book of Exodus. And we need to attempt to understand it as it is. May God's Spirit guide us as the Spirit did in ancient Israel.

Rev. Dr. David Smith

February 15 and 18

**Oppression and the Birth of a Savior: Exodus 1 and 2**

March 1 and 4

**God Reveals His Name—Moses at the Burning Bush: Exodus 2 – 4:17**

March 15 and 17

**Plagues and Passover—God Reveals His Power: Exodus 6:28 – 13**

April 5 and 8

**Freed from Slavery, Called to Servanthood: Exodus 14, 15, 19**

April 19 and 21

**Treaty and Law—The Deconstruction of Kingship: Exodus 20-23:9**

May 3 and 6

**Moses and the Violent Fate of Prophets**

A variety of texts from Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and the Prophets

May 17 and 20

**The Institutionalization of God with Us: Exodus 25-40**