

# Did the Exodus Really Happen?

## Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Vaera*, we read about the first seven plagues that befall the Egyptians for refusing to let the Israelite slaves go: Blood, frogs, lice, insects, pestilence, boils, and hail. The groundwork for the Exodus has begun. The time is ~1500 BCE.

For Jews, it is such a central event that we are commanded to remember it every day, commemorate it every year in a major holiday, and even act as if we were personally part of it.

But did the Exodus really happen? Most secular scholars say no. There is no archaeological evidence for it. How could 2-3 million people leave Egypt and travel 40 years in the desert without a trace? So it's purely a matter of faith.

## Indirect evidence

But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Besides, we do have hints, indirect evidence:

-Ancient Egypt had plenty of Semitic people who came because of famine:

- The tomb of the high priest Khnumhotep II, 20<sup>th</sup> century BCE, shows Semitic traders bringing offerings.
- A papyrus talks about a rich Egyptian who had 77 slaves, of which 48 were of Semitic origin.
- A scroll from the time of Ramses II, 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE, describes slaves from Canaan and Syria making bricks.

-The Hyksos, who ruled Egypt for a century, came from Canaan. Pharaoh Ahmose I booted them out in 1530 BCE.

- The 3<sup>rd</sup>-century BCE Egyptian historian Manetho says that after their expulsion, they wandered in the desert and established Jerusalem.

-The 1<sup>st</sup>-century CE Jewish historian Josephus says the Hyksos were the Israelites.

But the Hyksos were expelled as rulers, not slaves. But perhaps they were enslaved first?

-Ipuwer Papyrus (Ipou-Our), dated ~1500 BCE, says:

“Plague is throughout the land.”

“Blood is everywhere. The river is blood.”

“The hearts of all animals weep. Cattle moan...”

“The land is without light.”

“The children of princes are dashed against the walls.”

“He who places his brother in the ground is everywhere.”

“It is groaning throughout the land, mingled with lamentations.”

“The fire has mounted up on high.”

“The necks of female slaves are fastened with gold and lapis lazuli, silver and malachite, carnelian and bronze.”

All strongly suggestive of the biblical plagues on Egypt and their aftermath.

-Aper-El's tomb, 1350 BCE, says he was advisor to Akhenaton, the monotheistic Pharaoh. The ending “El” may indicate a Hebrew origin. Did he steer the Pharaoh towards monotheism?

-The Stele of Merneptah, 1207 BCE, says: “Israel is laid waste and his seed is no more.” (Wishful thinking!) It is the only mention of “Israel” in ancient Egyptian records.

-The Exodus was witnessed by millions of people. If the story was made up, it would mean an awful lot of people had to agree to lie to their descendants. Unlikely!

-Time may produce more evidence. It took until 1993 for extra-biblical evidence of the existence of King David to be found. (The Tel Dan Stele, 9<sup>th</sup>-century BCE, found in northern Israel, mentions in Aramaic a “king of Israel” and a “house of David”.)

## **More modern theories**

Much later, Manetho, 3<sup>rd</sup>-century BCE, speaks of an Egyptian priest who embraced monotheism and led his followers out of Egypt. He was encouraged by his monotheistic Pharaoh Akhenaton, because

Egypt was not ready for him. His name was Osarseph, but he changed it to Moses, meaning “child of”. Indeed, Ramses was Ra-Moses, son of the god Ra; Thutmose was Thoth-Moses, son of the god Thoth; etc. He may have removed the prefix to his name that indicated what god he was a son of, since he did not believe in them.

- In Thomas Mann’s novel *Joseph and His Brothers*, Osarseph is Joseph.
- Likewise, Sigmund Freud, in his *Moses and Monotheism*, theorizes that Moses was Egyptian, not Hebrew.

## **Removing traces of embarrassing stories is common**

Ancient Egypt has a long history of removing evidence of inconvenient facts:

- Pharaoh Thutmose III, 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE, worked to erase the memory of his predecessor, Queen Hatshepsut. He removed her cartouches, statues, monuments. Even her name was removed from the official records.
- Pharaoh Seti I, 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE, did the same with the memory of Akhenaton, because of his failed experiment with monotheism.

This trend continues even today:

- Modern Egypt hides the predominant role of the Jews it expelled in building the country, as well as their harassment and dispossession. (I am one of these Jews.)
- Modern Muslims try to erase evidence of Jewish past on Temple Mount.
- Turkey refuses to acknowledge it carried out the genocide of the Armenians.
- Antisemites the world over promote the fiction that the Holocaust is a myth.

The Jews have an opposite view. They expose all flaws, warts and inconvenient facts. Why would they invent a story about having been slaves? Most people prefer to connect their origins to royalty or nobility.

## **Some argue only natural phenomena took place**

Many thinkers accept the Exodus, but explain the miracles as natural phenomena. Take, for example, Immanuel Velikovsky. He was a Russian-born American psychiatrist, Jewish and Zionist. In middle age, he became interested in whether biblical events, such as the Exodus from Egypt, were due to natural phenomena rather than divine intervention. He wondered whether the unusual motions of planets, comets, stars, etc., caused these biblical events.

-He concluded that Venus was a comet ejected from Jupiter. It had several close encounters with the Earth, and one of them caused the sun to stand still, as reported in the Book of Joshua. [Joshua 10:12-13]

-In another encounter, its tail sprayed a red pigment on the Nile, causing the plague of blood, and insects that caused the plagues of lice, boils and locusts.

His theories were very well-received by the general public. He wrote such huge best-sellers as *Worlds in Collision*, in 1950, *Ages in Chaos*, in 1952, *Earth in Upheaval*, in 1955, etc. All of them were savaged by all mainline scientists.

## **Does it matter?**

For Judaism, no -- only the lessons extracted from the biblical accounts matter. For historians, yes.

## **Conclusion**

Whether the Exodus really happened is, at present, a matter of faith. Parables were frequent in olden days, and not always identified as such. All that mattered was the morals, the teachings they inspired. And we should not excise ritual and biblical history and keep only ethical teachings, either. Ritual commandments preserve Judaism and ethical commandments make Judaism worth preserving. Both are needed.

Shabbat shalom.