

EXTRA-BIBLICAL EVIDENCE OF THE EXODUS

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Ever increasingly, a plague of scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, descends on the historicity of the Exodus. They are comrades in intellectual arms, marching shoulder to shoulder to the refrain: "The Exodus never-never happened," rendered in the rousing rhythm of the song from the Passover Seder "*eelu hotzi hotzi-anu*."

They might admit that there were perhaps modest waves of Hebrew nomadic wanderers seeking a better life in the land of milk and honey. A few may have even filtered through out of Africa. But nothing like the biblical report of miraculous signs and wonders, upheaval and disaster, plagues and death, and liberation. "Never, never happened!"

One of the latest authorities numbering himself among those challenging the biblical testimony of the Exodus and rejecting the "scriptural myths" is Rabbi Burton L. Visotsky. His Passover article-of-doubt in the *Washington Jewish Week* (April 14, 2005), entitled "Pondering the Riddle of the Sphinx," assumes that the scriptural account is fabrication, and takes as self-evident that it is a myth. But do not feel that all is lost. He reassures us that

. . . some of the most important truths in life we learn from reading great fiction. The story of Exodus, the story of Israelite slavery, their redemption and their journey to Mt. Sinai, are extremely important truths whether they happened exactly the way the Bible says they did is beside the point.

Did not happen exactly as related in the Exodus account or did not happen at all? Does he take it as a dramatic story that is entirely fictional, or as an event differently perceived by those experiencing it? Who is to know? After all, there is only the testimony of the Exodus written by the Israelites. Right? Wrong!

It is one thing to have uninformed dilettantes and amateurish non-scholars with superficial acquaintance with the subject announce that there is no evidence for the Sojourn in Egypt and the seminally defining event of the Exodus. It is quite another thing when a such a personage Visotsky, who is Pro-

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fessor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, affirms and perpetuates that fancy. He writes that "Nowhere in the ubiquitous hieroglyphic records on Egyptian monuments is there any evidence of Israelites even having been captive in Egypt . . . [or of] the crossing of the Red Sea." (He uses here the outdated translation "Red Sea" for what was much more likely "Reed Sea [*Yam Suf*]" that can be identified with the Egyptian "Great Papyrus Lake," a swamp now absorbed into the Suez Canal.)

For evidence of the Sojourn in Egypt, there are the Egyptian names of some of the children of Israel of that period. Those names in themselves indicate that our ancestors were dwelling there. The name of Moses himself is a common element in Egyptian names, connoting "son" or "incarnation" and preceded by the name of a deity it honors; among the examples are the pharaohs Kamose, Ahmose, Thutmose, Ramose [Ramses]. The Hebrew name Moshe derives from the name bestowed on him by Pharaoh's Daughter when she adopted him, and it may well have had two elements, of which the first part was the name of one of the Egyptian gods – was later dropped. Other now traditionally Hebrew names such as Miriam and Phinehas are also of Egyptian origin, and evidence of a Sojourn in Egypt comparable to the Persian origins of the names Esther and Mordecai, derived from the local deities Ishtar and Marduk.

Beyond the evidence of names, there are other grounds for historical authenticity of the Sojourn and the Exodus. Among them is the argument put forth by the biblical scholar Harry Orlinsky, that a people inventing a past claims descent from gods, nobles, and heroes, not from slaves.

The biblical account of the Plagues that fell upon Egypt have striking parallels in the writings of the Egyptian Ipuwer, who laments "The river is blood . . . plague is throughout the land. Blood is everywhere," and there also references to darkness. The generally accepted date for Ipuwer places him at least several centuries before the Exodus, but the similarities are notable if only for the kinds of affliction feared by the Egyptians.

Another source for comparisons is a hieroglyphic inscription at a shrine in el-Arish, telling that ". . . the land was in great affliction. Evil fell on this earth . . . there was a great upheaval in the residence [of the pharaoh] . . . nobody could leave the palace during nine days, and during these nine days of upheaval, neither men nor gods [the royal family]." There is also a refer-

ence to a pharaoh who pursued fleeing slaves as far as Pi-ha-hirot, where he was plunged in a "whirlpool." This inscription also seems to pre-date the Exodus, but at least provides a precedent that slaves were likely to flee and be pursued by way of Pi-ha-hirot.

The significance of the findings in the early 1970s, by a team of geological survey scientists of Israel, is relevant in several ways. It discovered the remains of a canal whose embankments were confirmed by aerial photography. These images show a canal exactly where one would be expected according to the account in Exodus, and explaining why the Israelites backtracked to avoid the garrison stationed at the canal. Now we know the likely location of this partly man-made partly nature-created waterway – with near certainty but not pinpoint accuracy – given the shifting of the terrain of a canal. The precise footprint in the marshes for the location of the drowning pool may never be known with exactitude. But other methods may yet reveal, with even greater precision, the one place identified in both Egyptian and Israelite records as the location of the drowning of a pharaoh at the watery mouth of the canal Pi-ha-hirot/Pi-hiroti, the very place appearing in both the biblical Exodus and Egyptian el-Arish records. The discovery of the remains of the canal elevates the importance of the toponym Pi-ha-hirot and its location; it requires a reconsideration of the dates, now necessitating an alignment with the biblical narrative. That alignment requires Ipuwer, an eyewitness to the account from the Egyptian side, to coincide with the Exodus account. And the shrine report must refer to the same occurrence regardless of when it was inscribed in stone, perhaps as an account of a recent and still raw incident. The place name of the Egyptian king's plunge in a whirlpool, chasing evil doers refers to where only one such pursuit came to submersion. Corroborative reporting, therefore, originating from biblical and extra-biblical sources relate an account of a pharaoh's drowning on such a chase at Pi-ha-hirot/Pi-hiroti.

It can now be reasonably argued that both the ancient Hebrew and Egyptian records at Pi-hiroti/Pi-ha-hirot support the authenticity and reliability of the biblical texts. Minimalists have been insisting that the biblical text requires extra-biblical documentary corroboration and that the biblical reports are suspect without it. Pi-hiroti/Pi-ha-hirot shifts the burden again from off the back of the traditionalist/maximalists – perhaps even reproachfully according

to the extent of the particular minimalist's hidden agenda. Now minimalists and skeptics must pick up the burden to "dis-authenticate" and disprove biblical testimonies and reportage, not the other way around.

James Hoffmeier, in his excellent *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, may be too cautious in failing to cite the el-Arish/biblical parallels at Pi-ha-hirot. Another student of the Exodus/Egyptian account might view the canal, the verses in the biblical account, and the shrine reference to Pi-hiroti, as disclosures convincing enough to solve the argument of whether the Exodus is history or fiction.

According to Hoffmeier, the growing consensus concerning the place name or toponym Pi-ha-hirot, is that it derives from the Hebrew letters *het*, *resh* and *tof*. Accordingly, the word retains the same meaning to this day; namely, to cut into or engrave. Whether it is Egyptian and translated as "Canal City" or Semitic and translated as "the place at the mouth [*"peh"*] of the canal," James Hoffmeier writes that the toponym "describes a point where a canal opens or empties into a larger body of water Now that there is evidence for a canal from Pharaonic times, the reading of Pi-ha-hirot as the juncture between the canal and one of the lakes in the Isthmus of Suez takes on credibility." We might add, "regardless of its precise pin-point location," perhaps unknowable, given the shifting terrain alongside the canal. The Eastern Frontier Canal was meant primarily as a defensive safeguard against attack and to impede escape. Migdol, in close proximity, means tower, a fortress where an Egyptian garrison was stationed.

Hoffmeier does not make the connection or draw the conclusion that el-Arish's Pi-hiroti can be aligned with Exodus 14:2 and Numbers 33:7 as descriptions of the same location and the same event. But a pharaoh's death by drowning really happened at Pi-hiroti/Pi-ha-hirot.

Modern aerial photography of Lake Timsah, with its "mouth" (Pi-ha-hirot) just north of the lake, shows reed-choked swamps that would to this day qualify for the designation *Yam Suf*. That could be the very place for an event that was literally and figuratively a "watershed." We can say retrospectively that the Israelite leadership showed good intelligence gathering, a good plan of an escape route, and tactics that took advantage of the terrain and natural conditions.

If the events of the Book of Exodus and the Book of Joshua rise and fall together, as most biblical critics pro and con trustworthiness maintain, then the Joshua narrative is also to be deemed largely reliable. The "peaceful infiltration" thesis, the "indigenous immigration" hypothesis, and various other creative minimalist views are to be rejected in favor of the biblical text-based model of "conquest," in its broadest definitions – by war, treaty, take-over, absorption or any number of ways one people "conquers" another (and a region) forcefully and/or otherwise. This, in turn, supports and strengthens the moorings of the Sojourn-Exodus tradition. The Book of Joshua, principally the reports in Joshua 1-11, are – but are more than – ideological and etiologic sagas. And certain core elements in the biblical traditions, including Israel's arrival by conquest – however understood – to the land of Canaan from Egypt is likely basically a sound factual report.

Herbert Spencer said: "There is a principle, which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a person in everlasting ignorance – that principle is contempt prior to investigation." And Karl Giberson adds, "Our imaginations pose curious limitations on our search for truth. Often it seems impossible that something could be the case, not because the evidence is not there, but because the intellectual machinery to get our minds around the problem seems to be missing."

Were it only for the testimony of all the Egyptian-derived Hebrew names of the biblical participants and the many place names in the Exodus epic, it would have been *dayenu*.

Were it only for the global evidence of the Plagues or only of the reports of the universality of the blood everywhere in the waters of the world, gathered and collated by Israeli scholars such as Aharon Sharif and especially Immanuel Velikovsky – it would have been *dayenu*.

Were it only for the fact that nations create noble origins and do not invent stories of their birth pangs out of the debased conditions of servitude, slavery or bondage which Israel experienced as divinely determined, it would have been *dayenu*.

And above all, had there been only the shrine in el-Arish telling of hurricanes, darkness, the pursuit by the Egyptians of the fleeing slaves – whereupon "his majesty leaped into the place of the whirlpool . . . (and was then) lifted by a great force," it would have been *dayenu*.

And had nothing else but that drowning-pool place been identified on the shrine as Pi-hiroti corresponding to the biblical Pi-ha-hirot – it would have been more than enough. *Dayenu!*

NOTES

1. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2008

July	II Chronicles	1 – 26
August	II Chronicles	27 – 36
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 12*
September	Genesis	1 – 22
October	Genesis	23 – 50
November	Exodus	1 – 24
December	Exodus	25 – 40
	Leviticus	1 – 10

[*WITH ECCLESIASTES WHICH IS READ ON THE HOLIDAY OF SUKKOT, WE COMPLETE THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR. STARTING WITH SEPTEMBER, WE AGAIN COMMENCE THE NEW THREE-YEAR CYCLE]

