

Problems with understanding the Exodus account may be partly our own making.

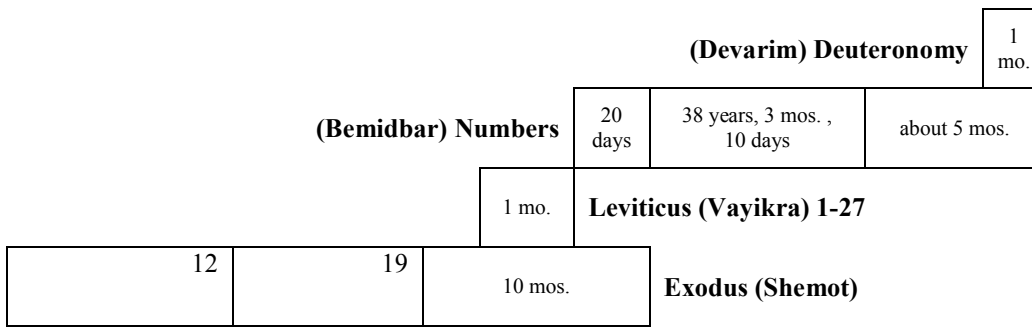
A foundational story of the Bible is the encounter of the children of Israel with their God at the “Mountain of the Law” (Exodus 19ff). Though the story is critical as a formational cornerstone for the Hebrews, and despite the fact that it is the most important event of the tiny Sinai Peninsula, the Exodus is shrouded in mystery. The timing of the events as well as the number of participants has been hotly debated.

The Bible record of the Exodus illustrates a debate in scholarly circles of the reliability of the Bible as a legitimate historical source. A great number of modern scholars have doubted the veracity of the record of the Exodus in the Bible. Critics are not difficult to find. Though they have highlighted some of the problematic aspects of the record, there are still a significant number of Bible students (like this writer) that find merit in the literal and historical approach to the story. In these academic circles there are scholars that believe the Biblical narrative be an accurate record of a real historical journey.

Problem 1: When did the Exodus occur?

Even to those of us who accept the veracity of the Bible record, problems exist in understanding the time and place of the events mentioned. Various clues to the timing of the Exodus are in the text, but their understanding still divides scholars on the specific dates of events.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that dating information is alluded to in a number of parts of the Bible, but not systematically recorded and argued in a single textual location. The Bible simply is not written in this way, and reflects the common way an ancient Near Eastern text accounts history. The chart below illustrates the way the Bible records the story, with time designations based on the deductions from the text. Note that each book contains a specific part of the journey:



In Egypt

To Sinai

At Sinai In Wilderness

In Moab

A second problem is the lack of corroboration from other contemporary writings to clarify the events. Egyptian records, which set the basis of much of the ancient chronology, were not given to recording events that were unflattering to the Pharaoh. Hence they are of little help in the process.

Another related problem is internal to the text. The dating information may be alluded to in what scholars term a “relative” chronology, and not a “fixed” chronology. The writer states “they built Ramses and Pithom”, but does not identify the locations in a fixed geography to help us set the story in a time frame. Further, the names may be anachronistic, with the earlier names long since forgotten. A simplification of one of the arguments over dating can be illustrated by looking at one of the important Bible passages:

1 Kings 6:1 places the Exodus 480 years before the founding of the Jerusalem Temple built by Solomon (First Temple, circa 966 BCE). If the number 480 intended to be a simple literal dating, this would place the event at about 1446 BCE. In this case, we could set the story in the period of Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt, after the foreign domination of the Hyksos was terminated (circa 1580-1560 BCE). The foreign usurpers may have allowed Semitic people (that arrived in the Middle Kingdom Egypt) to remain in the Egyptian territory. The Hyksos arrival in about 1730 BCE may have caused the movement to enslave the population.

In such a model, the “Pharaoh who knew not Joseph” could be Ahmose I (1570-1548) of the Eighteenth Dynasty, who felt threatened based on the recent past history of Egypt, commanded by foreigners. The command for midwives to kill Israelite males may belong to his successor Amenhotep I (1548-1528), with the setting of the birth of Moses at the time of Thutmose I (circa 1525 BCE). The “daughter of Pharaoh” (Exodus 2:5) in this scenario would have been Hatshepsut, the only surviving daughter of Thutmose I (his other daughter dies as an infant). This daughter went on to reign as queen, married to her half brother, Thutmose II (1504-1504). For twenty years after the death of her husband, she held the title rights of Pharaoh back from her stepson until her death in about 1483 BCE. In this reconstruction, Thutmose III (1483-1450 BCE) was the “Pharaoh of the Oppression”, perhaps hardened by his unfair treatment by his mother. His successor, Amenhotep II (1450-1425 BCE) would be the “Pharaoh of the Exodus”.

Another view has emerged that takes in to account the relative dating that could be in the view of the text. To understand this view, we must assume that the method of recording the story of the Exodus would fit the idiom use of some numerical values. In this model, the number 480 is a representative idiom of “twelve times forty” (forty as an idiom for a generation), it may have been a reflective idiom of “twelve generations later...” and not refer to the actual date. Assuming this idea, several scholars have reduced the date as much as 180 to 200 years.

This interpretation places the Exodus events into the frame of the building program of Ramses II (1304-1238), a more comfortable place for some to see the need for large amounts of slave builders. Though this certainly helps fit the name of the city of Ramses, directly mentioned in the Bible, there is really no significant internal Biblical necessity for accepting the later date. Some scholars simply feel the story fits better into the physical setting of supporting archaeology. Others have a defined chronology that does not allow for a date as early as the fifteenth century BCE.

History of Egypt: (Overview)

3100-2686 BCE	Early Dynastic	I-II	Menes established at Memphis (Noph of Bible); unites Egypt	UNITY
2686-2181 BCE	Old Kingdom	III-VI	Djoser – step Pyramid at Sakara; Snefru – Bent pyramid III Dynasty; Cheops (Kufu), Cephron (Kafre), and Mycerinus (Menkure) IV Dynasty	SUCCESSION
2181-2060 BCE	First Intermediate	VII-X	Civil Wars	DECLINE
2060-1786 BCE	Middle Kingdom	XI-XII	New Unity: Capital to Thebes (Biblical “No”) 2/3 of way to Aswan	CLASSICAL
1786-1567 BCE	Second Intermediate	XIII-XVII	HYKSOS invade; Capital moved to Avaris (in Nile Delta); Introduction of Horses and Chariots	FOREIGN DOMINATION
1567-1085 BCE	New Kingdom	XVIII-XX	Hyksos driven out: Building Boom: Luxor; Karnak (near Thebes); Abu-Simbel; Abydos (N. of Thebes); Memphis Revived (Biblical Noph, at Y of Delta). King Tutankhamen (1300 BCE)	REVIVAL
1085-341 BCE	Post Kingdom	XXI-XXX	From Persian to Greek Domination: Most of the time paralleling the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Shishak (920 BCE) and Necho- conquered at Megiddo (609) are remembered because of invasions.	DECLINE

Problem 2: How many traveled in the Exodus?

In addition to the timing of the events, a significant debate about the number of Israelites has developed among scholars. In fact, people who visit our reconstruction of the Tabernacle often remark at the size of the structure, trying to discern how two and one half million people could have worshipped and sacrificed at a structure so small! Though the Tabernacle was not really a traditional place of worship, in the conventional sense, still it was the central place of sacrifice for all the tribes.

Part of the problem of numbers may relate to the way we have interpreted the texts that count the Israelites on their journey. Genesis 46:26 tells us that Jacob entered Egypt with seventy family members “from his loins” in addition to the relatives by marriage. Because we do not know how many sons and grandsons were married, the exact number entering Egypt with Jacob is not known, but was likely around eighty to ninety people.

The total number of Israelites in the record is not given, but a census of men that are able to serve in the army (able to string a bow) is offered at six hundred three thousand, five hundred fifty (Exodus 38:26; Numbers 1:20-46). If the fighting force were all married, this number would double to 1.2 million people. If each family had two or three children, the number on the journey increases to 2.5 million people. A sustained 2.5% annual net growth rate of the Israelite population is required, if the total time in captivity is 400 years. If the total time in captivity was shorter, the Israelites would have reproduced at an astounding 5% net growth rate (after deaths). This would have made them one of the most dynamic populations on the planet!

A number of scholars have questioned the interpretation of the term “eleph” translated “thousand” in the English text. Though this is clearly a meaning of the term, but some have begun to question if this is the intended meaning in the text of Exodus. The term is related to the first letter of the Hebrew consonants (aleph-bet). Another related form is “aluf” a word used to designate the leader of a band of soldiers, like a “sergeant”. It is obviously an organizational and counting word. Some have suggested the proper use of the term may be “bands” of men in the context of soldiers in Exodus and Numbers.

Several internal evidences of the Torah text suggest a problem with “eleph” as thousand. As many have analyzed, the logistical situation of the Israelites would have been incredible. Consider the size of the problem:

- If each consumed a pound of food daily, they would have needed to transport on the journey 1500 tons of food for each day they journeyed, unable to grow any crops. Some of this would be in milk products of the livestock, but the other part was a significant weight.
- That much food for each day would take the modern equivalent of two freight trains, each a mile long!
- If wood were used for a fire to cook for each family, 2-3000 tons of wood would be needed for just one day.
- Water consumption at a daily average allotment of 10 liters or 2.5 gallons per person (an army minimum recommended amount), they only had enough to drink, it would take 6,250,000 gallons each day. This is without washing!
- To cross the “Sea of Reeds” (Yam Suf) at night required a space equal to 3 miles wide so that they could walk 5000 abreast to get over in one night.
- Each time they camped at the end of the day, a campground two-thirds the size of the state of Rhode Island was required.

Because of the nature and power of the God of Abraham, those who believe in Him find no real difficulty with His ability to meet any size need. The problem is not one of ability. The problem is that many events were accomplished in the text with no reference to miracle of Divine intervention. The text highlights a number of miraculous interventions, but many are not highlighted that would have been simply impossible without God’s help.

Take for example these internal problems:

- Exodus 1:15 says there were two midwives instructed to kill male Israelites, Shiphrah and Puah. Some argue they lead whole hoards of midwives, but a normal reading of the text leads the reader to conclude there were two women at the birthing stools.
- The number of Egyptian chariots named in the Exodus 14:7 pursuing the Israelites appears to be six hundred. Some argue the phrase that follows “and all of the chariots of Egypt is an additional number” but this again seems like a strained reading of the text. Why give a number if it is only a small portion of those on the journey?
- The crossing of the Sea (Exodus 14:21,22) took one night. In order to move the people across any constricted space with a wall of water on either side, it was necessary to move at very high speed. With flocks and herds, carts and tents, this would have been a challenge.
- Elim’s twelve wells of water would have needed to be pumped at a rate of 695,000 buckets full of water from each well each day to stay even to the daily need. Since it appears they arrived without reserves (Ex. 15:24; 27), they had to average 482 buckets a minute! The Bible makes no claim that God miraculously pulled out the water.
- Countless references to the places Israel encamped simply don’t afford the square mileage necessary to house 2.5 million people. Arguments can be made that the land was sculpted differently in the Sinai peninsula, but geologists do not verify any such conclusions.
- To suggest that the camp was scattered to such a size does not allow for the removal of a carcass from the Tabernacle to “outside the camp” the same day it was sacrificed in the center of the camp!

The list of difficulties goes on. Again, this is not simply a “faith” issue. The question is, does the text claim that each event is miraculous? It is clear that the writer intended some events to clearly illustrate the miraculous provision of God. At Elim, it simply says they camped, and makes no claim that God aided the necessary 482 buckets per minute to come out of the well.

Is there any internal evidence that “eleph” may actually refer to “bands” of men instead of “thousands” in some narratives of the Bible? Consider the story in Joshua 7:1-6, the defeat of Israel at Ai. The narrative reminds us that 3000 (elephim) went up to Ai, and that Israel was chased and routed when they suffered the loss of 36 of their fighting men! If the fighting force were interpreted as “three bands” and each band was of twelve to twenty fighting men, they were nearly wiped out! On the other hand, thirty six losses in three thousand was hardly a retreat situation.

There are those that interpret any attempt at explanation as a lack of faith, and allow for no exception in the interpretation of the term “eleph”. Certainly there is ample reason to believe that the God of Israel acted in miraculous ways to provide for His people. Is it not also plausible that we have caused a number of problems with the interpretation of the word “eleph”. More investigation is also being done in the understanding of the base system used for counting the numbers found within these texts. Accepting a literal

position of historicity does not preclude looking at any and all issues of the text with academic integrity and openness.