

The account of God raising up Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt is one of the most important biblical events.

- In fact it is the most frequently mentioned event in the entire Old Testament, referred to over 120 times in subsequent stories, laws, poems, Psalms, historical writings and prophecies.
- In addition, there has been 3500 years of almost unbroken Passover celebrations. The Exodus is such a seminal event in Hebrew history that it stretches credulity to suggest, as some critics do, that it did not have a historical basis.

Is there archaeological evidence for the Israelite exodus from Egypt? I believe there is, providing one recognizes the limits of archaeology and looks in the correct time period.

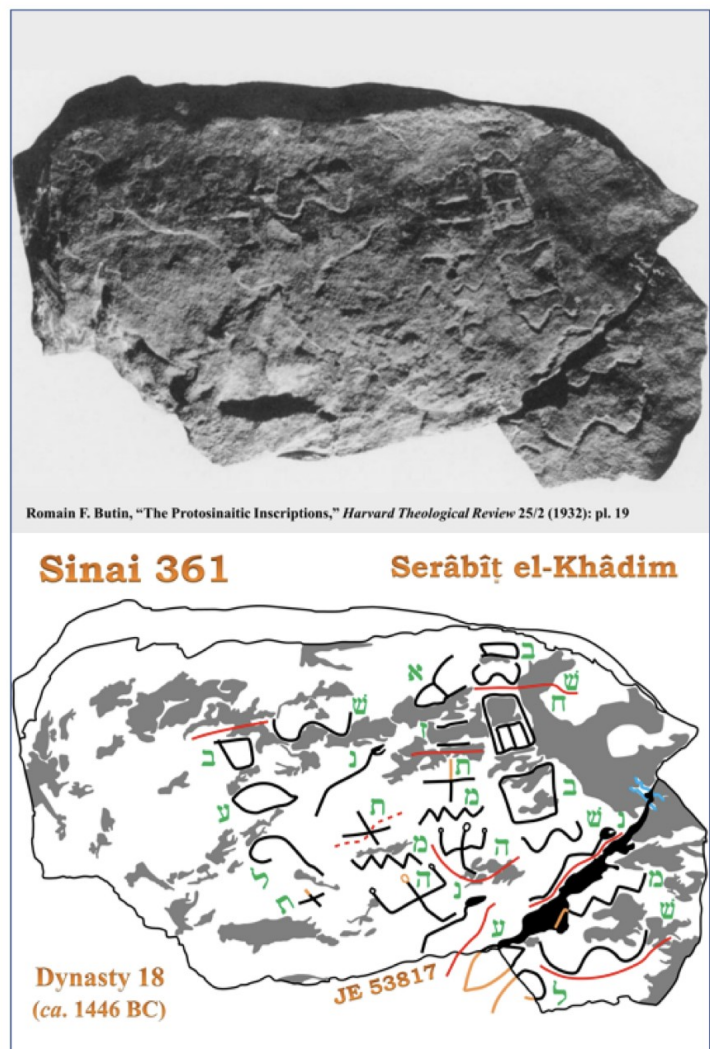
First, one would not expect to find Egyptian inscriptions directly referencing the plagues or the Exodus, as royal inscriptions never included negative reports about the Pharaoh and his armies.

Moreover, the Israelites wandered in the desert as nomads for 40 years, leaving little, if any, cultural remains due to their transient nature.

- This doesn't mean there is no evidence of the Exodus; it means one needs to look for the correct things (ie. evidence of the decline of Egyptian society) and not expect to find the remains of Hebrew campsites in the desert.
- Secondly, one needs to look in the correct time period for clues to the Exodus. Fortunately, the Bible gives ample chronological data relating to this event. 1 Kings 6:1 says that it was in the "four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt" that Solomon began building the temple." A straightforward reading of this verse places the Exodus in 1446 BC.³
- This timeframe is affirmed by numerous other passages: Judges 11:26-27, Acts 13:19-20 and the number of generations listed 1 Chron. 6:33-38.⁴
- Thus, one needs to look in the 15th century BC for evidence of the Exodus, not the 13th century BC as some scholars claim.

10. Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions

Some have suggested that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible, but rather they were written a thousand years later by a supposed group of priests living in exile (or later) who were trying to invent a glorious history for their people. When this theory was first proposed in the 19th century, there was no known alphabetic script with which Moses could have recorded such lengthy reports. We now know that there was indeed an alphabetic script Moses could have used. Remember that Moses was literate, having been educated in Pharaoh's household (Acts 7:22). In the early 20th century, examples of alphabetic writing were discovered by Sir Flinders Petrie inscribed on stones at Serabit el-Khadim, an Egyptian turquoise mine in the Sinai.⁶ They date from the 19th to



the 15th centuries BC.⁷ The Proto-Sinaitic script, as it is often called, was invented by Semites who worked at the turquoise mine and adopted Egyptian hieroglyphic symbols as pictographic letters for their language. Most scholars agree that the language behind this script is from Canaan, but which language has been a matter of debate. Douglas Petrovich has presented evidence these inscriptions were written by Israelites, and that Hebrew is the language behind the script.⁸ His translation of one inscription (Sinai 361) contains the name of Moses.⁹ Not all scholars are convinced, however,^{10 11} which has resulted in much debate.¹² It is interesting that an alphabetic script developed at the precise time the Israelites were in Egypt, and that the language behind it is from their place of origin. At the very least, we now know that there was indeed an alphabetic script Moses could have used to write the first five books of the Bible.

9. Egyptian Words in the Hebrew Text

One of the often-overlooked elements of the Exodus account in the Bible is the use of Egyptian words in the Hebrew text. After the birth of Moses, we read, “When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank” (Ex 2:3). Egyptologist, James Hoffmeier, has highlighted the numerous Egyptian words that are often missed in this verse. The Hebrew word for “basket” is tebat (nan) and derives from the Egyptian word dbjt. Similarly, the words “bulrushes” and “pitch” have Egyptian etymology and the Hebrew word “reeds,” is unquestionably the Egyptian word twfy. The word “river,” clearly referring to the Nile is not the normal Hebrew word for river (nahar), but rather a transliteration of the Egyptian word for the Nile.¹³ Even Moses’ name is Egyptian, having been named by Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex 2:10). Hoffmeier writes, “There is widespread agreement that at the root of the name of the great Hebrew leader is the Egyptian word msi,

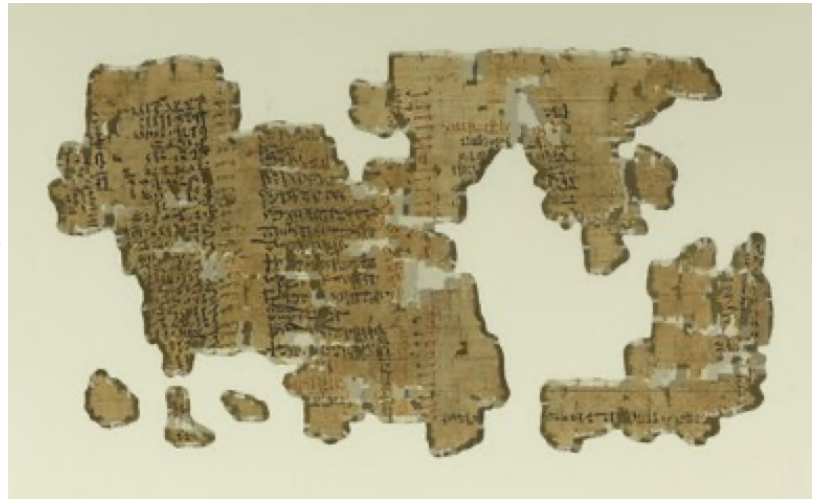
which was a very common element in theophoric names throughout the New Kingdom (e.g., Amenmose, Thutmose, Ahmose, Ptahmose, Ramose, Ramesses).¹⁴ The Egyptian loan-words in the Hebrew text are difficult to explain, unless one acknowledges Moses’ Egyptian education and authorship.

8. Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446

The Egyptian word for the Nile is “great river,” represented by these hieroglyphs, literally itrw, and ‘waters’ determinative. The word “river,” in the biblical account of baby Moses refers is not the normal Hebrew word for river (nahar), but rather a transliteration of this Egyptian word.

Central to the Exodus account is the presence of Israelites in Egypt to begin with. The Bible describes Joseph's entrance to Egypt as a slave (Gn 37:28), his rise to power (Gn 41:41), his initiative in bringing his family to Egypt (Gn 45:18), their subsequent growth (Ex 1:7) and eventual bondage (Ex 1:11). Some scholars, however, do not believe the Israelites were ever in Egypt. For example, in a 1999 article in Ha'aretz, Ze'ev Herzog boldly declared, "This is what archaeologists have learned from their excavations in the Land of Israel: the Israelites were never in Egypt, did not wander in the desert, did not conquer the land in a military campaign and did not pass it on to the 12 tribes of Israel."¹⁵

There is evidence, however, of the Israelites in Egypt. Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446 is an Egyptian document written in hieratic script, that names 95 household servants of a noblewoman named Senebtisi.¹⁶ Forty of the names are Semitic (Hebrew is a Semitic language),¹⁷ and several have been identified as Hebrew names. These include *Menahema*, a feminine form of the Hebrew name Menahem (2 Kgs 15:14), a woman whose name is a parallel to Issachar, one of Jacob's sons (Gn 30:18), and Shiprah, the name of one of the Hebrew midwives prior to the Exodus (Ex 1:15).¹⁸ To be clear, this papyrus dates to the 13th Dynasty (ca. 1809-1743 BC)¹⁹ just after the time of Joseph, and does not refer to Hebrew slaves at the time of Moses. Titus Kennedy summarizes its importance: "This list is a clear attestation of Hebrew people living in Egypt prior to the Exodus, and it is an essential piece of evidence in the argument for an historical Exodus."



7. Egyptian Records of Slaves Making Bricks

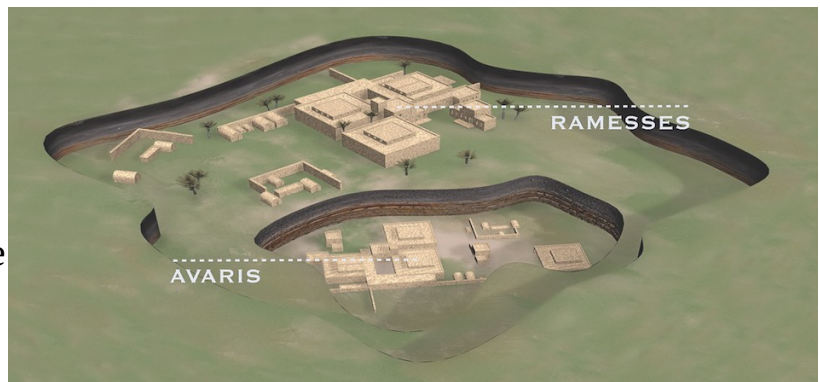
One of the tasks the Israelite slaves were pressed into was making bricks (Ex 5:7-8). When Moses petitioned Pharaoh to let God's people go, Pharaoh responded making

their labor more difficult (Ex 5:6-18). The biblical description of slaves making bricks is affirmed by a painting in the tomb of Rehmire (ca. 1470-1445 BC), the vizier of Egypt under Thutmose III and Amenhotep II. The painting depicts Nubian and Asiatic slaves (Egyptians called people from Canaan “Asiatics”) making bricks for the workshops of the Karnak Temple.²¹ Slaves are seen collecting and mixing mud and water, packing the mud in brick molds, and leaving them to dry in the sun. Nearby Egyptian officials, each with a rod, oversee the work. In addition to the Rehmire tomb painting, a leather scroll in the Louvre which dates to the time of Rameses II mentions forty stablemasters (junior officers) who each had a quota of 2000 bricks to be made by the men under them.²² Two further Egyptian papyri (Anastasi IV and V) record that “there are no men to make bricks and no straw in the district,”²³ which highlights the importance of straw as a binder in brickmaking, and the dismay the Israelites felt when Pharaoh stopped supplying it, but still required the same number of bricks to be made (Ex 5:18-21). Egyptian records affirm the biblical description of the process of making bricks.

6. Discoveries at Avaris

According to the biblical text, the Israelites settled in “the land of Rameses” (Gn 47:11) sometime in the 19th century. While they were initially free, at some point they became slaves to the native Egyptians and pressed into building the city of Rameses (Ex 1:11). When they left Egypt in 1446 BC, some 430 years later, they left from Rameses (Ex 12:37).²⁴ The use of the word “Rameses” is an update of the biblical text by later editors to replace an archaic place name with one that was more recognizable, as it is in Gn 47:11: “So Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the best part of the land, the district of Rameses, as Pharaoh directed.”

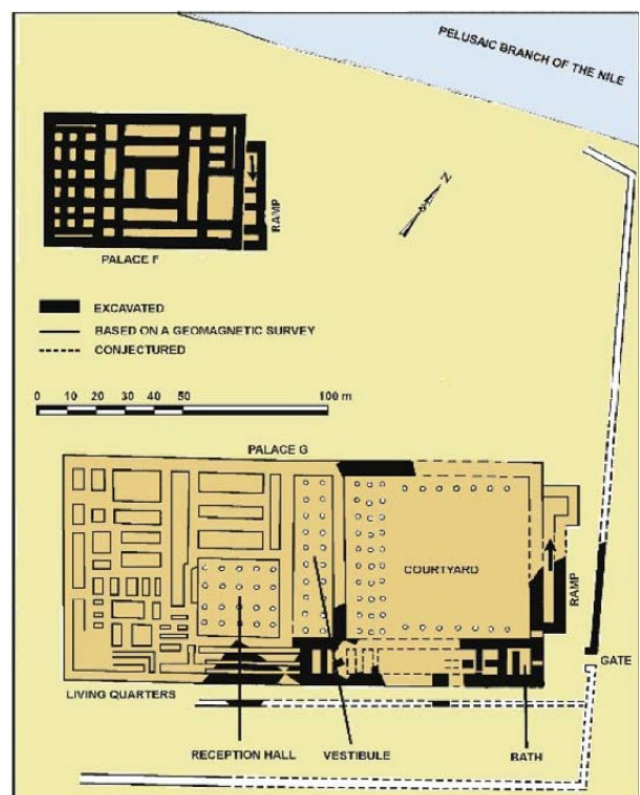
Thanks to five decades of excavations by the Austrian Archaeological Institute of Cairo at Tell el-Dab’a in the eastern Nile Delta, we now know this was the site of the city Rameses, which was itself built over a previous



city named Avaris. While the site is most famous as the Hyksos capital,²⁵ it was originally settled in the 19th century (the time of Joseph) by a group of non-Egyptians from Canaan, as evidenced by the Canaanite pottery and weapons they used.²⁶ There is even evidence of a four-roomed house in the village, the same layout as those typical of Israelite settlements in the later Iron Age, as well as a prominent tomb in which the remains of a statue of a Semitic man with a multi-coloured robe was found. The town grew and became more Egyptianized, with a mansion built atop the four-roomed house which some believe to be the residence of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons.²⁷ A palace precinct was later built at Avaris during the Hyksos period, and then expanded during the 18th Dynasty, forming a new royal citadel.²⁸ This later palatial complex dates to the time of Moses and is likely where he spent time when he was raised in Pharaoh's courts. Interestingly, the excavators at Tell el-Dab'a note the site was suddenly and mysteriously abandoned after the reign of Amenhotep II, suggesting a plague may have been the reason.²⁹ Bryant Wood summarizes the occupational history of the site: "The excavations at Tell el-Dab'a have revealed the presence of an "Asiatic" community who first settled as pastoralists, then grew in number as well-to-do entrepreneurs, became subservient to the Egyptians and finally left. This scenario exactly matches what we read in the Bible."

5. Evidence for Amenhotep II as the Pharaoh of the Exodus

Numerous scholars have identified Amenhotep II as the Pharaoh of the Exodus³¹; he was reigning in 1446 BC when the Israelites left Egypt. Amenhotep II is known to have spent considerable time in the delta region, likely in the 18th-Dynasty palace at Avaris where he would have met with Moses. According to Egyptologist, Charles Aling, "Amenhotep II was born and raised in this area [the Nile delta region], built there, had estates there, and in all probability resided there at times, at least in his early reginal years."³² Interestingly, (and in keeping with the 10th plague – the death of the



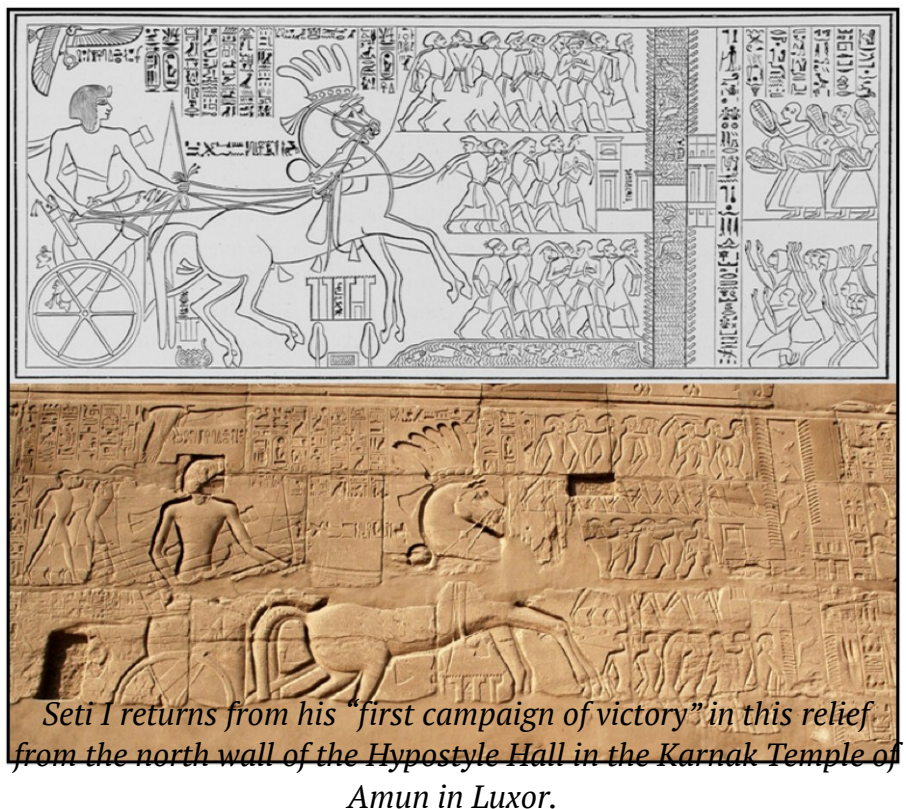
first-born), Amenhotep II was not the firstborn son of his predecessor, Thutmose III, nor was his successor, Thutmose IV his firstborn son, as implied by the Dream Stele on the Great Sphinx.³³

Another piece of evidence for identifying Amenhotep II as the pharaoh of the Exodus is found by comparing the military campaigns of Amenhotep II and those of his father. While Thutmose III led 17 known military campaigns into the Levant, Amenhotep II led only two or three.³⁴ Thutmose III boasted of having taken 5903 captives on his first campaign, while Amenhotep II claims to have taken 2214 captives on his first. However, Amenhotep II's final campaign in the ninth year of his reign (ca. 1446 BC) appears to have been a hasty and limited excursion into Palestine to take 101,128 captives. One plausible explanation for this campaign and its dramatic number of captives is that he was seeking to replace a large portion of his slave labor base that had just left Egypt.³⁵ Moreover, Amenhotep II never took another campaign into Canaan, and the 18th dynasty began to decline in power.

4. Seti War Relief

The famous relief of the campaigns of the pharaoh Seti I (ca. 1291-1279 BC) at the Karnak Temple depicts the eastern border of Egypt in pictorial form (like a map) and likely relates to the route Moses

and the Israelites took during the Exodus. In Exodus 13:17 we read, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'" The Seti Relief depicts this road, known as the Horus Way, as well a number of fortresses, including "Tjaru," the staging point for Egyptian campaigns into Canaan.³⁶ A vertical waterway lined with reeds and labeled "the dividing waters," is visible, as well as a larger body of water is at the bottom of the waterway (a feature that was seen by earlier explorers but is no longer visible).³⁷ The Seti relief is evidence that there was, at one time in



the distant past, a canal or waterway on the eastern border of Egypt, even though the area is a desert now.

This has been affirmed by geological studies, which have demonstrated there was indeed a man-made canal joining a string of lakes between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean Sea. These canals and lakes – from the el-Ballah Lakes in the north to Lake Timsah to the Bitter Lakes in the south formed a defensive barrier on the Eastern frontier of Egypt. The Bible says Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea (in Hebrew, the *yam suf*, literally, sea of reeds³⁸), which may correspond to the wetlands and lake systems on Egypt's eastern border.³⁹ Egyptologist James Hoffmeier has matched Egyptian place names with the locations mentioned in the Exodus itinerary and suggests the *yam suf* the Israelites crossed was likely in the area of the el-Ballah Lakes.

3. Soleb Inscription

At the end of the 15th century B.C., the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep III built a temple to honor the god Amun-Ra at Soleb in Nubia (modern-day northern Sudan). He left a list of the territories he claims to have

conquered on a series of columns in the temple. Each territory is depicted by a relief of a prisoner with their hands tied behind their backs over an oval “name ring” identifying the land of the conquered foe. One of the enemies is from the “the land of the Shasu (nomads) of Yahweh.” Given the other name rings nearby, the context would place this land in the Canaanite region. In addition, the prisoner is clearly portrayed as Semitic, rather than African-looking, as other prisoners in the list are portrayed.⁴¹ Two conclusions are almost universally accepted: first, this inscription clearly references Yahweh in Egyptian hieroglyphics (the oldest such reference outside of the Bible), and secondly, that around 1400 B.C. Amenhotep III knew about the god Yahweh. Moreover, it would indicate an area in Canaan in the 15th century BC inhabited by nomadic or semi-nomadic people who worship the god Yahweh. Egyptologist, Dr. Charles Aling and historian Dr. Clyde Billington summarize: “If the Pharaoh of the Exodus had never before heard of the God Yahweh, this strongly suggests that the Exodus should be dated no later than ca. 1400 BC because Pharaoh Amenhotep III had clearly heard about Yahweh in ca. 1400 BC.”⁴²

2. Berlin Pedestal

The Berlin Pedestal is an Egyptian inscription housed in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin that almost certainly refers to Israel as a

The Soleb inscription of Amenhotep III names the “land of the Shasu (Nomads) of Yahweh” as a place he claims to have conquered.

The Berlin Pedestal from the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. It has three name rings; the one on the far right has been reconstructed to read,

nation in Canaan. The inscription has three name rings, two of which clearly read “Ashkelon” and “Canaan,” and a third that has been reconstructed to read, “Ishrael.” In a recent re-examination of the inscription, Peter van der Veen, Christoffer Theis, and Manfred Gorg noted that names Ashkelon and Canaan largely were written consonantly and better reflecting examples from the reigns of Tuthmosis III and Amenhotep II (15th century BC), than those from the times of Rameses II and Merneptah (13th century BC).⁴⁴ While the inscription reads “Ishrael” instead of “Israel,” there is no other candidate near Canaan and Ashkelon, other than biblical Israel. It may be that the “sh” spelling is an older way Egyptian spelled Israel, or perhaps borrowed from the cuneiform version.⁴⁵ If this interpretation is correct, it would indicate that the Israelites had migrated to Canaan sometime in the middle of the second millennium BC,⁴⁶ exactly at the time the Bible says they did.

1. The Merneptah Stele

The most famous, and arguably the most important discovery related to Moses and the Exodus is the Merneptah Stele. In ca. 1208 B.C. Pharaoh Merneptah erected a 10-foot tall victory monument (called a stele) in a temple at Thebes to boast of his claims of victory in both Libya and Canaan. It was discovered in 1896 by Sir Flinders Petrie. On it, Merneptah boasts, “Israel is wasted, its seed is not; And Hurru (Canaan) is become a widow because of Egypt.”⁴⁷ The inscription likely refers to a small campaign into Canaan (only three cities are taken), and despite Merneptah’s boast, Israel was not destroyed.

Most scholars agree that this is the oldest definitive reference to Israel as a nation outside of the Bible, and certainly the clearest Egyptian reference to Israel. It is also important because it points towards an early date for the exodus (ca. 1446 B.C.) and not the late date that some scholars hold to (ca. 1270 B.C.). It is doubtful that there would be enough time from 1270 B.C. to 1208 B.C. to account for the exodus, the 40 years of wandering in the desert, the



seven-year conquest of Canaan, the settlement of the tribes in their territories, and the establishment of a national presence in the land, all before Merneptah claims to have conquered them. Merneptah's Canaanite campaign instead likely dates to the time of the Judges, when the nation of Israel was already settled in Canaan. The Merneptah Stele is evidence that the Exodus from Egypt, led by Moses, took place in the 15th century BC, as the biblical data indicates.

Conclusion

Take together, these ten discoveries indicate the accounts of Moses and the Exodus are based in real history. While not the “proof beyond a shadow of a doubt” many seek, they provide circumstantial evidence that can lead one to reasonably conclude the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt at the time the Bible indicates. Further, the archaeological data suggests the Israelites left suddenly, and were settled in Canaan by the end of the 15th century BC, in line with the biblical data.