

Present by Dr. Walter D. Zorn at the North American Christian Convention, Archaeological & Biblical Backgrounds Workshop  
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## THE PRINCE OF EGYPT: EXODUS OR NO EXODUS?

This is a presentation of various views on “the exodus” and its route out of Egypt. While I cannot be exhaustive in treatment, I will present four major differing views and argue briefly for the so-called “traditional” view. For a more detailed and scholarly presentation (conservative, biblical position), I encourage you to read James K. Hoffmeier’s recent book, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford, 1996). I am following his arguments in this presentation.

**“NO EXODUS” VIEW:** The cartooned movie, “The Prince of Egypt,” spoke volumes to our society-at-large: “The biblical story of the Exodus makes a good story line, full of adventure and classic confrontations, but it is only a ‘story.’” Modern negative critics of the Bible today are saying just that. William G. Dever, following the Mendenhall, Gottwald, and Coote school of thinking wrote: “[T]here is neither place nor need for an exodus from Egypt. . . . [T]he biblical study of the Exodus is not so much history as it is *haggadah*.”<sup>1</sup> In other words the “Exodus” is only a fictitious story and religious “history” at best. Robert Coote, commenting about the periods of the patriarchs, exodus, conquest, and judges, flatly states: “These periods never existed.”<sup>2</sup>

Hoffmeier suggests that the reason for present-day negative evaluations of the exodus events among certain scholars is due to several events: (1) the collapse of the Albright-Wright synthesis of the “conquest” of Canaan by Joshua and the Israelites, (2) the demise of the old 19<sup>th</sup> century documentary hypothesis, known as the Graf-Wellhausen theory, i.e., how the Pentateuch came into being. New literary and sociological approaches are questioning these “document sources,” but of course not toward a more conservative position, rather the opposite, (3) the redefining of history writing in the Bible making it near impossible to accept the Bible stories as true historically, they only have literary value, and (4) the emergence of a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” a questioning of anything in the Bible as being reliable historically with the result that now we must recognize in archaeological circles so-called “biblical minimalists.”<sup>3</sup>

Postmodern, negative critics, and “biblical minimalists” are presently attempting to “rewrite” the history of the origins of the Israelites. Because of the paucity of direct, archaeological evidence, these scholars are emboldened by a “hermeneutic of suspicion” to question anything in the Bible as being reliable historically and thus they present their alternate views.

By contrast Hoffmeier examines afresh the background materials (archaeological, geographical, textual, and pictorial) for Gen 39 through Ex 15 and answers in the “affirmative” the following questions:

Is the picture portrayed within these chapters compatible with what we know of Egyptian history? Did the peoples of Canaan go to Egypt for relief during times of

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko, eds., *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 67, 83.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffmeier, p. 4, quoting Robert B. Coote, *Early Israel: A New Horizon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). See also Michael D. Lemonick, “Are the Bible Stories True?” *Time Magazine* (Dec. 18, 1995), pp. 62-69, a popular discussion on the skepticism of postmodern scholars.

<sup>3</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford, 1996), p. 4.

drought and famine? Could a Semite like Joseph be elevated to such a position of prominence as reported in Genesis 45? Did the Egyptians press foreigners into hard labor projects as portrayed in Exodus? Could a non-Egyptian like Moses have been raised in the court? Do the plagues of Exodus 7-13 make ecological sense in an Egyptian setting? If so, what social, political, and religious implications are there for Egypt? Finally, do the geographical features and place-names in the Hebrew record accord in any way with Egyptian toponymy and geography?<sup>4</sup>

No amount of skepticism can destroy the essential “historical” character and match-up with reality (what is there!) of the biblical narrative concerning “The Exodus Events.” We move on to present three views by those who do accept the biblical record as true (to varying degrees!).

**THE NORTHERN ROUTE THEORY:** “Otto Eissfeldt’s influential work on the Israelite exodus has convinced many over the years that Baal-zephon is the shrine of Zeus Caius located on Ras Qasrun on the Mediterranean coast, with Lake Sirbonis being ‘the sea.’”<sup>5</sup> Eissfeldt sought a northern route because he thought Sinai should be close to Kadesh Barnea (Ex 15:22), possibly Jebel Hilal, 30 miles to the west. It would also be consistent with the easy catch of exhausted birds that migrate across the Mediterranean. The northern route is clearly presented in *Archaeology of the Bible: Book by Book*, ed. Gaalyah Cornfeld (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) pp. 38-40. But this route is hardly the biblical route. First, Ex 13:17,18 records: “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.’ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red [Reed] Sea.” This seems to preclude a northern route. Secondly, “the road through the Philistine country” was the coastal highway that was in essence a military road that both led to Canaan and protected Egypt from any invasion from that direction. “Based on the reliefs and inscriptions of Seti I (1294-1279 BC) from the northern wall of the hypostyle hall at Karnak temple, and the itinerary in Papyrus Anastasi I, Gardiner traced a series of military outposts between Egypt and Canaan. Beginning with the Fortress Tjaru and ending with Gaza, twenty-three sites are recorded.”<sup>6</sup> However, Gardiner had misidentified Tjaru. Hoffmeier believes that Abd El-Maksoud’s excavation of Tell Hebua has uncovered the New Kingdom frontier town of Tjaru (a major fortress guarding the coastal highway). This Tell lies on an elevated strip of land that is also part of the coastal highway system, plus the surrounding low-lying area is part of a paleolagoon, meaning that the fortress was surrounded by water while the Pelusiac branch of the Nile ran through this area. The branch began to recede in AD 25 and was totally gone by the eighth century. Hoffmeier concludes:

Based on the archaeological, historical, and environmental data now available, the identification of Hebua with ancient Tjaru seems likely. If this correlation is correct, than a number of nagging historical problems for understanding Egypt’s frontier with western Asia is clarified and new light is shed on the Exodus narratives. Tjaru (or “The Ways of Horus”) was the border town between Egypt and Asia and was the place from which the martial monarchs (e.g. Thutmose III, Seti I, and Ramesses II) of the New Kingdom launched their campaigns. Consequently, this massive military facility would

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<sup>4</sup> Hoffmeier, p. x.

<sup>5</sup> Hoffmeier, p. 183. See Otto Eissfeldt, *Baal Zaphon, Zeus Kasios und der Durchzug der Israeliten durchs Meer* (Halle: Niemeyer 1932). Example of scholars who followed him is S. Hermann, M. Noth, and Redford.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffmeier, p. 183.

have had troops stationed continuously throughout the New Kingdom. Therefore, it is most unlikely the Israelites would have taken this way out of Egypt. Should the escaping Israelites have chosen to go the northern route and try to skirt Tjaru, they would have run the danger of getting stuck in the marshy lagoon surrounding the elevated road towards the coastal highway. If they took the narrow elevated strip of land between the lagoons, they would have run into the huge fort at Hebua I.<sup>7</sup>

This explains why the Israelites did not even attempt to go by way of the coastal road, which better explains the statements in Ex 13:17,18. A final argument against a northern route is that the Israelite destination at the time was not Canaan but Mt. Sinai (Ex 3:12), which is most likely accessed by moving in a central or southerly direction, depending on where Mt. Sinai is located. “By the desert road” (Ex 13:18) is meant the road that connected the Wadi Tumilat with central Sinai and the Desert of Shur. Ex 15:22 calls the wilderness of 13:18, “Shur.” This wilderness is located on the other side of the “Reed Sea,” (Ex 15:22, 1 Sam 15:7, 27:8). Shur should be located in Sinai, east of El Ballah Lake in the north and the Bitter Lakes to the south.<sup>8</sup>

**THE MIDIAN (SAUDI ARABIA) ROUTE:** While this route follows the traditional southerly route, its final destination is in ancient Midian (northern Saudi Arabia) where presumably the true Mt. Sinai (Mt. Horeb) is located. The presupposition of this view is that the Sinai Peninsula was part of Egyptian territory. Thus, Moses had to flee out of Egypt by going to Midian. Also, according to this view, the “burning bush” incident occurred in Midian, hence Mt. Sinai should be located somewhere in Midian. This view has been made popular by Bob Cornuke and Larry Williams, two adventurers (not archaeologists!) who illegally entered northern Saudi Arabia, stumbled onto a military post and claim to have “discovered” the true Mt. Sinai at Jabal al Lawz.<sup>9</sup> They even have a video available, but the video gives little additional information than that found in the book. While we must admit that no one really knows where the “real” Mt. Sinai is, this view of Mt. Sinai in Midian must await the examination of competent archaeologists and geologists along with genuine biblical scholars. A brief encounter overnight on a possible site does not constitute proof. It should be noted that the 700 Club has presented this view and it is regularly advertised in *BAR*, though *BAR* editors do not endorse it. They just take the money!

**THE SOUTHERN “TRADITIONAL” ROUTE:** Finally, we consider the more traditional, southern route for the exodus. Its probability has been enhanced by the discovery in the early 1970s of a “border” canal between ancient Egypt and the Sinai by a group of scientists of the Geological Survey of Israel. Weissbrod and Sneh, leaders of the team, called it the “Frontier Canal.” Hoffmeier describes the two sections of the canal:

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<sup>7</sup> Hoffmeier, p. 187. James Hoffmeier informed me last week that Daniel Stanley, a geologist, has written a book that confirms the fact that the area north of Hebua I was covered with water.

<sup>8</sup> Hoffmeier, pp. 187, 188.

<sup>9</sup> See Larry Williams, *The Mount Sinai Myth*, (New York: WYNWOOD, Press, 1990). While there are some interesting and intriguing pictures in this book, there are no footnotes and no verification of any information discussed. One should be cautious: 1) It pits the NT against the OT claiming that Mt. Sinai is in Saudi Arabia (Gal 4:25 – “in Arabia”) whereas from Herodotus we know that Sinai was part of Arabia in the first century, 2) It turns the itinerary on its head, i.e., longer from Rameses to the Sea, short distance from Sea to Mt. Sinai whereas the Bible is the opposite! However, arguments against the traditional site of Mt. Sinai are well founded. Hoffmeier suggested Jebel Serbal where there was a large wadi close by, Wadi Feiran. Mt. Sinai has to be close to “Rephidim” (Ex 19:2).

Two sections of the ancient canal were found east of the Suez Canal. One section, discernible for about six kilometers, runs in an east-west line, starting about fifteen kilometers east-northeast of Qantara. The northernmost portion apparently emptied into the Mediterranean west of Pelusium (Tell Farama). This segment is seven or eight kilometers in length and begins around 31° N, 32° 30' E. A nearly twelve-kilometer section, located west of the Suez Canal, appears to have connected Lake Timsah (by present-day Ismailiya) and Lake el-Ballah to the north, was actually discovered over a century ago by the French engineer Linant de Bellefonds. A section of the ancient canal, just north of Ismailiya, is currently being used for irrigation purposes. By simply viewing this part, one can determine that a long history of excavations preceded its usage in the last 150 years (fig. 20).<sup>10</sup>

Such a canal is mentioned in “Wisdom of Merikare” (c. 2200 BC) and was interpreted by William Ward to mean, “the king was instructed to dig a canal in the area between the Ways of Horus and Lake Timsah. This could be the section of the canal discovered by de Bellefonds in the last century and mapped by the Israel Geological Survey (fig. 17).”<sup>11</sup> “If indeed a canal existed along Egypt’s border with Sinai during the New Kingdom, and the evidence does support this view, it seems logical to conclude that it would have been an impediment to the Israelites in their departure from Egypt. Thus it must be asked: Is there any reference or allusion to this canal in the Exodus narratives?”<sup>12</sup>

Hoffmeier argues persuasively that “Pi Hahiroth” (Ex 14:2) is a Semitic term and means “mouth of the canal(s).” *Pi* is the construct form for *Pe* (mouth) and *Ha* is the Hebrew definite article (the), while *Hiroth* is probably from Akkadian, *Herutu*, a noun meaning “digging work,” i.e., applied to ditches and canals.<sup>13</sup> The mention in Ex 14:2 of “Migdol” would suggest “a fortress tower” in connection with “the mouth of the canal(s)” (Pi Hahiroth) and this would represent one of the many frontier fortresses built in conjunction with a canal to form a barrier between the Sinai desert and Egypt. “The sea,” of course, would be the body of water into which the ancient canal emptied, whether it is Lake Timsah or less likely the Bitter Lakes.

The biblical sources for tracing the route of the exodus are Ex 12:37, 13:17-20, 14:2, and the itinerary in Num 33. Almost all scholars who debate the exodus agree that the starting point was Pi-Ramesses or Qantir-Avaris (Tell el-Dab?a) (Ex 12:37, Num 33:3). The first stop was “Succoth,” the Hebrew writing for Egyptian *tkw*, a military installation as mentioned in *Papyrus Anastasi 6*. “Papyrus Anastasi 5 contains the oft-cited letter reporting on the movements of two runaway servants through Tjeku that nicely correspond to the route taken by the Hebrews in Exodus 13:37 and Numbers 33:5, namely, from Raamses to Succoth.”<sup>14</sup> As Hoffmeier concluded: “Thus, the reference to Succoth in the Israelite departure from Egypt need only mean that the region of Tjeku was traversed. They surely would not have camped beside one of the fortresses in Tjeku. By traversing the eastern end of the Wadi Tumilat, the Israelites were taking one of the main routes out of Egypt, especially if the destination was central or south Sinai.”<sup>15</sup> The next stop was “Etham,” (Ex 13:20, Num 33:6). Little is known about this place located “on the edge of the desert.” Hoffmeier offers a general position, i.e., “situated at the eastern end of the

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<sup>10</sup> Hoffmeier, pp. 164,165.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Wadi Tumilat, east of Tell el-Maskhuta, perhaps in the Lake Timsah region.”<sup>16</sup> Nothing more is known.

Then the Israelites are told to “turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon” (Ex 14:2). At this point it is difficult to determine which way the Israelites went because we don’t know exactly where “Etham” was nor do we know the meaning of “turn back,” which could mean to “retrace” their route or simply to “turn.” However the “turning back” or “turn” is understood, the Israelites were to encamp near Pi Hahiroth, suggesting by its Semitic meaning, “mouth of the canal” as it empties into “the sea,” the “Sea of Reeds” (Hebrew text). “Migdol” probably refers to a fort in this area at the end of the Wadi Tumilat and Lake Timsah region as found in Papyrus Anastasi 5, 20. “This Migdol is associated with the name of Pharaoh Merneptah (reigned 1212-1205 BC) in the late Nineteenth Dynasty. If the toponym of Exodus 14:2 preserves a memory of the actual name, including the Semitic term Migdol, then this fort would be a good candidate.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately no site has as yet been identified as this fort. Obviously the purpose of the “turning or turning back” was to make Pharaoh think the Israelites under Moses’ leadership were “confused” and “hemmed in by the desert,” (Ex 14:3), which indeed they were!

“Baal-zephon,” according to Hoffmeier, is probably the name of a shrine devoted to the god of the sea and mariners and located close to this sea and canal fortress. It need not be connected only with mountains or the Mediterranean coast as Eissfeldt thought. Hoffmeier concluded:

To sum up then, the Bible portrays the Israelites leaving from Raamses, the area of Avaris/Pi-Ramesses, moving in a southeastern direction towards the Tjeku region in the eastern end of the Wadi Tumilat. At the end of this Wadi is Lake Timsah, and about twenty kilometers to its south is the northernmost of the Bitter Lakes. It is my hypothesis that somewhere around the Lake Timsah and the Bitter Lakes region is where the toponyms Etham, Pi-hahiroth, Migdol, and Baal-zephon are to be found, along with “the Sea of Reeds.”<sup>18</sup>

“The sea” (Ex 14:2,9,16,21, etc.; 15:1,4; Num 33:8) and “the Sea of Reeds” (Ex 13:18; 15:4,22) are parallel expressions (Ex 15:4). The Hebrew term, *Yam sūp*, has widely been accepted as meaning “Sea of Reeds” rather than “Red Sea.” It was the LXX (Septuagint) which rendered it “Red Sea.” The Latin Vulgate followed this mistake with *mari Rubro*, “Red Sea.” Clearly the Hebrew *yam sūp* means “reeds” or “rushes” in Ex 2:3,5 and Isa 19:6 and seems to be derived from the Egyptian *twf(y)*.<sup>19</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Finally, regardless of the exact location of Mt. Sinai from this point, the fact that “Israel” later entered Canaan and occupied at least the hill country is confirmed by the Merneptah stela (Petrie, 1896). The inscription on the stela mentions the name, “Israel,” and uses a determinative (definite article) referring to a “people” rather than to a “land.” All other names are referred to with the determinative for “land.” “This would fit the OT context, for Joshua’s campaigns were most probably conducted during the third quarter of the thirteenth century.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Hoffmeier devotes several pages to this word study, pp. 199-206.

<sup>20</sup> Hoffmeier, p. 30. This statement requires a late-date for the Exodus, i.e., c. 1290-75 BC. The bragging and hyperbolic content of the Merneptah stela is normal kingly rhetoric and is dated c. 1208 BC. This inscription would support such a date, although it does not absolutely forbid the early exodus date.

Thus, the “Israel” which left Egypt is the same “Israel” who entered Canaan and was not yet “in control” of the land, but they were there in the hill country!

I will stop where the “Prince of Egypt” stopped, on the other side of the “Sea.” The rest of the journey is less known and perhaps awaits a later study. As Paul implied about the “spiritual Rock that accompanied them” in the wilderness, Christ is the heart of it all! (1 Cor 10:4).