

# Historical Exodus



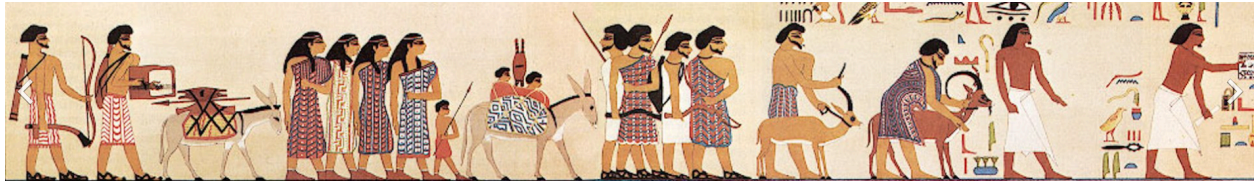
Submission of West Asiatic population on the tomb of Horemheb circa 1300 BCE

Determining the historical date of the biblical Exodus is one of the most exciting, challenging and far reaching topics of biblical history and archeology. While Egypt's chronology for the first and second millennia BCE is well established, thanks to astronomical data available to historians, the book of Exodus does not name the pharaoh of the oppression and exodus. It is not until the period of the divided monarchy, are the names of Egyptian pharaohs documented in the Tanach. There is also a lack of Egyptian records relating the story of an enslavement of Israelites and their flight, as the official archives from the East Delta centers are completely lost. Because of this, we will need to investigate many clues found in the Torah and correlate them with the historical and archaeological data.

## Relevant Chronology

Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 13-17)	1786-1550 BCE
The Hyksos Period (Dynasties 15-16)	1648-1550 BCE
The New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20)	1550-1069 BCE
The Eighteenth Dynasty	1550-1295 BCE
The Nineteenth Dynasty	1295-1186 BCE
The Twentieth Dynasty	1186-1069 BCE

## Semites in Egypt



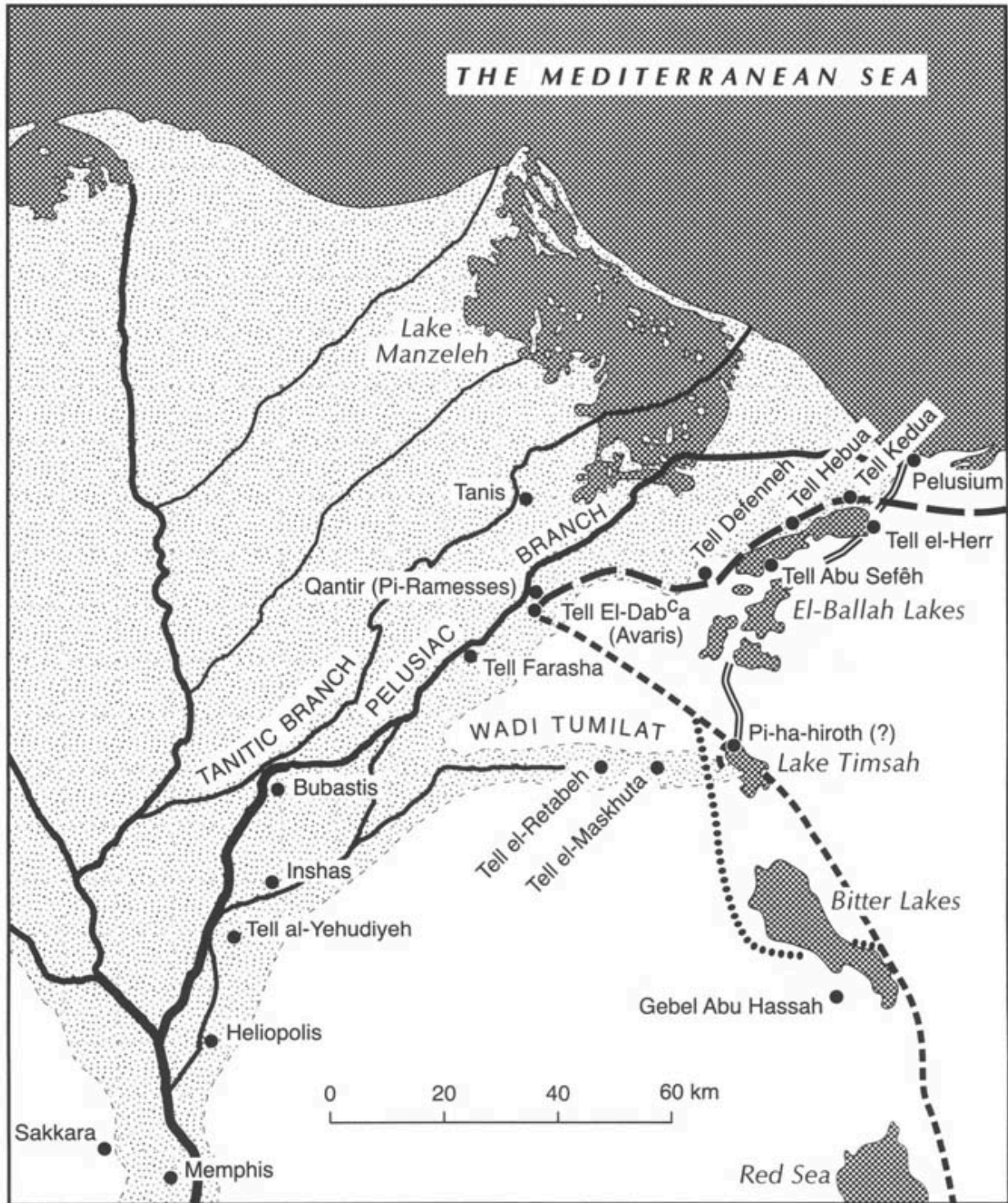
During the Second Intermediate (1760-1550 BCE) period, central authority broke down, allowing Semitic-speaking pastorals to infiltrate Egypt. During the second millennium, evidence of Levantine peoples was discovered in the northeastern delta at Tell el-Dab'a (Avaris), and at other northeastern delta sites, including Tell el-Yahudiyeh, Inshas, Tell Farasha and Tell el-Kebir as well as sites in the Wadi Tumilat - Tell el-Maskhuta (Sukkoth), Tell el-Retaba (Pithom) and Tell Kua. These discoveries demonstrate that the delta during 14th-17th Dynasties was dominated by foreigners of Syro-Canaanite ethnicity.








Prior to the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE), northern Egypt was ruled by a group of Semites known as the Hyksos, "the rulers of foreign lands", during the Second Intermediate period. Egyptologists agree that excavations in the delta reveal a strong Semitic presence during the Hyksos era (ca. 1650-1550 BCE), continuing into the New Kingdom. The most significant site excavated in the delta is Tell el-Dab'a, ancient Avaris, the Hyksos capital. There is no debate that a significant number of Semites settled in the Nile delta during these time periods.

Eventually, rulers from Thebes (Luxor) in southern Egypt defeated the Hyksos and drove them out of Egypt, uniting Egypt once more. Determined to create a buffer zone in western Asia to keep Hyksos-type invaders away, New Kingdom pharaohs aggressively campaigned in Syria-Palestine, carving out a substantial empire. Pharaohs brought back thousands of prisoners of war and other captives to work on agricultural estates and building projects. Typically, Egyptian texts refer to them with the catchall term "Asiatics" or "Aamu". Overall, this was a time of unprecedented prosperity in Egypt, and Semites continued to live in the delta in large numbers.

## Habiru and the Hebrews

The word Habiru (sometimes written as Hapiru or Apiru, meaning "dusty, dirty" in Akkadian) is a term used in 2nd-millennium BCE texts throughout the Fertile Crescent for people variously described as outsiders, nomads, rebels, outlaws, raiders, mercenaries, bowmen, servants, slaves, and laborers. It occurs in hundreds of 2nd millennium BCE documents covering a 600-year period from the 18th to the 12th centuries BCE and found at sites ranging from Egypt, Canaan and Syria, to northern Iraq and Anatolia (Turkey). Not all of the Habiru were the Hebrews, but the biblical Hebrews in Egypt were synonymous with the Habiru.

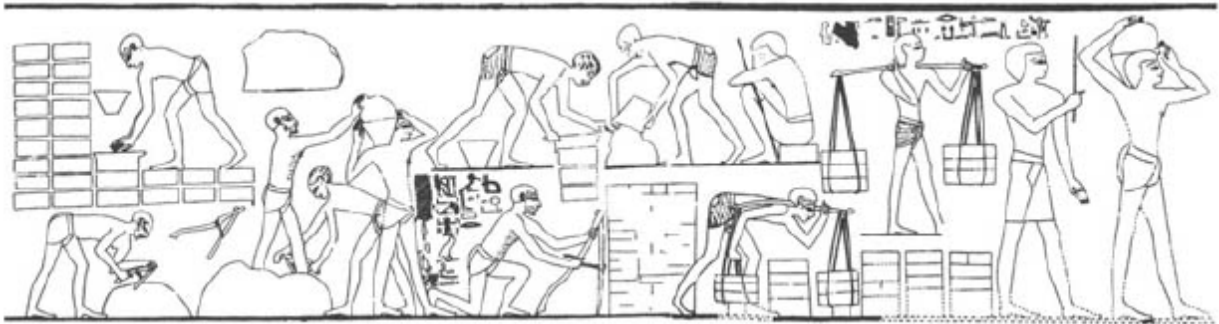


- |   |                        |   |             |
|---|------------------------|---|-------------|
|  | Canal Trace            |  | Nile Valley |
|  | Coastal Highway        |  | Lakes       |
|  | Proposed Exodus Route  |  | Desert      |
|  | Alternate Exodus Route |   |             |



## Forced Labor

In the limited 15-13th century BCE material from the Egyptian palaces and temples that has survived, there is evidence that foreign workers and captives were employed in building projects; that the supervision of the work was two-tiered; that straw was used as an ingredient in the bricks; that workers faced with brick quotas; and that workers were supervised by taskmasters threatening to beat them with rods. The classic scene from the tomb of Rekhmire (ca. 1450-1400 BCE) show Levantine and African POWs making and hauling bricks for the construction of the Akh-menu Temple at Karnak.



That the Hebrews were engaged in forced labor making bricks for royal building projects is certainly the most remembered feature of the Israelites' labor in Egypt (see Exodus 1:13-14, 2:23-24, 3:7, 5:1-23). When Ramesses the Great was making his new capital, Pi-Ramesses, adjacent to Avaris, Papyrus Leiden 348 reports that foreigners called "Habiru" were dragging stone blocks for the construction of a "great pylon" (a gateway) in the new city. Papyrus Anastasi V contains a letter that may be tied to Ramesses II's thirty third year (ca. 1246 BCE) and that reports on a military officer who pursued a pair of runaway "workers" from Pi-Ramesses. They were escaping toward Sinai via the Wadi Tumilat.

## Pithom and Rameses

Exodus 1:11 names two places where the Hebrews were engaged in brickmaking and building projects as "they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh". Pithom is Pi-Atum, the House of Atum, one of the manifestations of the sun god, Ra/Re. Pithom is equated with Tell el-Retaba in the Wadi Tumilat, the route that runs east from the delta to north-central Sinai. This identification is based on the occurrence of Pithom in Papyrus Anastasi VI within the region of Tjeku (Sukkoth). Ongoing excavations at Tell el-Retaba have proven that Pithom was the major military establishment of this frontier zone, with a large fort constructed by Ramesses II and expanded by Ramesses III.

The city of Rameses not only is associated with the building activity of the Hebrews but also was the place from which the Exodus was launched (see Exodus 12:37; Numbers 33:3,5). Rameses has long been associated with Ramesses II's (1279-1213 BCE) delta capital, located at Qantir, a few miles north of the old Hyksos capital Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a). The excavations and regional magnetometer surveys at Qantir revealed a massive city that included a vast stable complex where royal chariotry was stationed. This bustling delta capital was abandoned toward the end of 12th century as the Nile distributary near which Pi-Ramesses was built started desiccating.

Shortly thereafter, by 1070 BCE a new dynasty began with Tanis as its capital, located fifteen miles north of Qantir. The huge temple area at Tanis was constructed with inscribed stone blocks and pillars transported from Pi-Ramesses, and statues, obelisks, and stela from the old capital adorned the precinct.

References to Rameses in the Torah are crucial for dating purposes in that this metropolis had a limited history. While it was Seti I (1294-1279 BCE) who built a small residence at Qantir, it was his son Rameses the Great (1279-1213 BCE) who transformed it into a megapolis that was deserted less than a century after his death. When a later psalmist sang about the Exodus wonders, he placed them “in the field of Zoan/Tanis” (Psalms 78:12,43). The reason seems evident. The Ramesside metropolis was gone, and nearby stood the largest east delta city from 1070 BCE down to Roman times. The psalmist preferred to use the name of the current delta capital, rather than the long-departed Rameses.

### Route of the Exodus



The narratives in Exodus provide an itinerary of the travels of the Israelites from the departure at Pi-Ramesses to the famed crossing of the Sea of Reeds. With the starting point established at Pi-Ramesses, there were two routes out of Egypt to Sinai. The northerly route along the northern coast of Sinai and is known as the Way of Horus in Egyptian texts. Exodus 13:17 calls it “the road to Philistine” and the Israelites are told to avoid it. The other way is via Wadi Tumilat, which in Egyptian texts is called Tjeku, and the desert of Shur. The “tum” element in “Tumilat” preserves the name of Atum. The name Tjeku (Sukkoth) survives in the name of the village Tell el-Maskhuta, eight miles east of Tell el-Retaba (Pithom). Moving east past the area of the fortress of Tjeku, the Hebrews find themselves at the limits of Egypt, about to enter Sinai at a place called Etham, at the edge of the desert, just south of Lake Timsah. As with Pithom, Etham and Timsah also preserve the name of Atum.

Then the Israelites were told **to turn back** and to encamp near Pi Hahiroth (“Mouth of the Canal”), between Migdol and Yam Suf (the Sea of Reeds), directly opposite Baal Zephon (Exodus 14:2). In 1975, based on analysis of Egyptian texts and delta geography, archeologists connected Yam Suf with the Ballah Lakes (now defunct). Recent geological investigation of the Ballah depression reveals that the lake was thriving in New Kingdom times. The southern section of the lake is just north of the Wadi Tamulat, while its northern reach extends twelve miles toward the Mediterranean, just south of the forts of Tjaru (Tell Hebua I and II). After crossing Yam Suf into Sinai Israelites traveled for three days in the desert but did not find water. Finally, they arrived at the Bitter Lakes, but they could not drink water because it was bitter. That’s why they called that place Marah.

## Primary Candidate: the 13th century BCE

- The implication of the book of Exodus is that the Israelites, in the northeastern part of Egypt, were not far from the capital. But in the period from 1550-1295 BCE, the Egyptian capital was located in a region farther south, at Thebes. It was only beginning with Seti I (1294-1279 BCE) that an area in the northeastern part of Egypt began functioning as the Egyptian capital, when Seti I built a palace there.
- Pi-Ramesses is located at modern-day Qantir, and was built by Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE) beginning around 1270 BCE; construction likely began shortly after Ramesses II's accession in 1279 BCE. With a population of over 300,000, it was one of the largest cities of ancient Egypt. Poems were written about its splendor.
- Construction at Tell el-Dab'a (Avaris) and Qantir is also documented under the previous reigns of Horemheb (1323–1295 BCE) and Seti I (1294–1279 BCE). This means that the oppression of the Hebrews could have begun decades before the reign of Ramesses II and it culminated with the construction of Pi-Ramesses.
- This city was abandoned around 150 years later after the Bubastite branch of the Nile had meandered away isolating the city, leading to the building of a new capital, Zoan/Tanis, around fifteen miles to the north. From the mid-11th century through the end of the Judaeen monarchy, Zoan/Tanis was the principal city of Egypt's delta.
- Not only does the name Rameses in Exodus point to the 19th Dynasty, but so do the other geographical terms found in Exodus and Numbers. Investigation of the Egyptian sources reveal that the names Pithom, Migdol, and *P3 twfy* = Yam sūf are attested beginning in 19th Dynasty sources, but are not found prior to the 13th century. The closest Egyptian toponyms to Pi-hahiroth and Baal-Zaphon are also documented beginning in the 13th century.

## Relevant Chronology

### Eighteenth Dynasty

Tutankhamun	1336-1327	Capital: Thebes
Ay	1327-1323	
Horemheb	1323-1295	Construction in the delta

### Nineteenth Dynasty

Ramesses I	1295-1294	
Seti I	1294-1279	Residence in Qantir
Ramesses II (the Great)	1279-1213	Capital: Pi-Ramesses
Merneptah	1213-1203	The Merneptah Stele

## Sunset of the 18th Dynasty

The last king of the 18th dynasty of royal birth was Tutankhamun (King Tut) (r. 1336 – 1327 BCE), who ascended to the throne at the age of eight or nine, at a time of great tension between the new monotheism and the old polytheism. He was assisted in his kingly duties by his predecessor's two closest advisors: Grand Vizier Ay and General of the Armies Horemheb. Tutankhamun's nine-year reign, largely under Ay's direction, saw the return of the old gods – and, with that, the restoration of the power of the Amun priesthood, who had lost their influence over Egypt under Akhenaten. When Tutankhamun died while a teenager, Horemheb had already been officially designated as the "hereditary or crown prince".

The aged Vizier Ay sidelined Horemheb's claim to the throne and instead succeeded Tutankhamun, probably because Horemheb was in Asia with the army at the time of Tutankhamun's death. Having pushed Horemheb's claims aside, Ay proceeded to nominate the Nakhtmin, who was possibly Ay's son or adopted son, to succeed him rather than Horemheb. After Ay's reign, which lasted for a little over four years (r. 1327-1323 BCE), Horemheb managed to seize power, presumably thanks to his position as commander of the army, and to assume what he must have perceived to be his just reward for having ably served Egypt under Tutankhamun and Ay.

Under Horemheb (r. 1323-1295 BCE), Egypt's power and confidence were once again restored after the internal chaos of the Amarna period; this situation set the stage for the rise of the 19th Dynasty under such ambitious pharaohs as Seti I and Ramesses II. Since Horemheb had no surviving son, he appointed his Vizier Paramesse to succeed him upon his death, both to reward Paramesse's loyalty and because the latter had both a son and grandson to secure Egypt's royal succession. Paramesse employed the name Ramesses I (r. 1295-1294 BCE) upon assuming power and founded the 19th Dynasty of the New Kingdom. **Ramesses I was born into a noble military family from the Nile Delta region, perhaps near the former Hyksos capital of Avaris.**

## Rise of the 19th Dynasty



The Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt is classified as the second Dynasty of the Ancient Egyptian New Kingdom period, lasting from 1295 to 1189 BCE. The 19th Dynasty and the 20th Dynasty furthermore together constitute an era known as the Ramesside period.

The warrior kings of the early 18th Dynasty had encountered only little resistance from neighboring kingdoms, allowing them to expand their realm of influence easily, but the international situation had changed radically towards the end of the dynasty. The Hittites had gradually extended their influence into Syria and Canaan to become a major power in international politics, a power that both Seti I and his son Ramesses II would confront in the future.

Horemheb, Ramesses I and Seti I's main priority was to re-establish order in the kingdom and to reaffirm Egypt's sovereignty over Canaan and Syria, which had been compromised by the increasing external pressures from the Hittite state. **Seti I** (r. 1294-1279 BCE), with energy and determination, confronted the Hittites several times in battle. Without succeeding in destroying the Hittites as a potential danger to Egypt, he reconquered most of the disputed territories for Egypt and generally concluded his military campaigns with victories. He was also the one who built a summer palace at Qantir not far from Avaris, which was transformed into a megapolis under his son Ramesses II.

## Ramesses the Great



**Ramesses II** (r. 1279–1213 BCE), also known as **Ramesses the Great**, was the third pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt. He is often regarded as the greatest, most celebrated, and most powerful pharaoh of the New Kingdom, itself the most powerful period of Ancient Egypt. His successors and later Egyptians called him the "Great Ancestor". Ramesses II led several military expeditions into the Levant, reasserting Egyptian control over Canaan. The early part of his reign was focused on building cities, temples, and monuments. **He established the city of Pi-Ramesses in the Nile Delta as his new capital and used it as the main base for his campaigns in Syria.** At fourteen, he was appointed prince regent by his father, Seti I. He is believed to have taken the throne in his late teens and is known to have ruled Egypt for a stunning 66 years.

### *First Syrian campaign*

The immediate antecedents to the Battle of Kadesh were the early campaigns of Ramesses II into Canaan. His first campaign seems to have taken place in the fourth year of his reign and was commemorated by the erection of what became the first of the Commemorative stelae of Nahr el-Kalb near what is now Beirut. The inscription is almost totally illegible due to weathering.

Ramesses carried off the princes of Canaan as live prisoners to Egypt. Ramesses then plundered the chiefs of the Asiatics in their own lands, returning every year to his headquarters at Riblah to exact tribute. In the fourth year of his reign, he captured the Hittite vassal state of the Amurru during his campaign in Syria.

### *Second Syrian campaign*

The Battle of Kadesh in his fifth regnal year was the climactic engagement in a campaign that Ramesses fought in Syria, against the resurgent Hittite forces of Muwatallis. The pharaoh wanted a victory at Kadesh both to expand Egypt's frontiers into Syria, and to emulate his father Seti I's triumphal entry into the city just a decade or so earlier. **In Pi-Ramesses, he built factories to manufacture weapons, chariots, and shields, supposedly producing some 1,000 weapons in a week, about 250 chariots in two weeks, and 1,000 shields in a week and a half.** After these preparations, Ramesses moved to attack territory in the Levant, which belonged to a more substantial enemy than any he had ever faced in war: the Hittite Empire. Ramesses's forces were caught in a Hittite ambush and outnumbered at Kadesh when they counterattacked and routed the Hittites, whose survivors abandoned their chariots and swam the Orontes River to reach the safe city walls. Ramesses, logistically unable to sustain a long siege, returned to Egypt.



### ***Third Syrian campaign***

Egypt's sphere of influence was now restricted to Canaan while Syria fell into Hittite hands. Canaanite princes, seemingly encouraged by the Egyptian incapacity to impose their will and goaded on by the Hittites, began revolts against Egypt. In the seventh year of his reign, Ramesses II returned to Syria once again. This time he proved more successful against his Hittite foes. During this campaign he split his army into two forces. One force was led by his son, Amun-her-khepeshef, and it chased warriors of the Šhasu tribes across the Negev as far as the Dead Sea, capturing **Edom-Seir**. It then marched on to capture **Moab**. The other force, led by Ramesses, attacked **Jerusalem** and **Jericho**. He, too, then entered Moab, where he rejoined his son. The reunited army then marched on **Hesbon**, Damascus, on to Kumidi, and finally, recaptured Upi (the land around Damascus), reestablishing Egypt's former sphere of influence.

### ***Later campaigns in Syria***

Ramesses extended his military successes in his eighth and ninth years. He crossed the Dog River (Nahr al-Kalb) and pushed north into Amurru. His armies managed to march as far north as Dapur, where he had a statue of himself erected. The Egyptian pharaoh thus found himself in northern Amurru, well past Kadesh, in Tunip, where no Egyptian soldier had been seen since the time of Thutmose III, almost 120 years earlier. He laid siege to the city before capturing it. His victory proved to be ephemeral. In year nine, Ramesses erected a stele at Beth Shean. After having reasserted his power over Canaan, Ramesses led his army north. A mostly illegible stele near Beirut, which appears to be dated to the king's second year, was probably set up there in his tenth. The thin strip of territory pinched between Amurru and Kadesh did not make for a stable possession. Within a year, they had returned to the Hittite fold, so that Ramesses had to march against Dapur once more in his tenth year. This time he claimed to have fought the battle without even bothering to put on his corslet, until two hours after the fighting began. Six of Ramesses's youthful sons, still wearing their side locks, took part in this conquest. He took towns in Retenu, and Tunip in Naharin, later recorded on the walls of the Ramesseum. This second success at the location was equally as meaningless as his first, as neither power could decisively defeat the other in battle.

### ***Peace treaty with the Hittites***



The Egyptian-Hittite peace treaty between Ramesses II and Ḫattušili III, mid-13th century BCE. Neues Museum, Berlin

The deposed Hittite king, Mursili III, fled to Egypt, the land of his country's enemy, after the failure of his plots to oust his uncle from the throne. Ḫattušili III responded by demanding that Ramesses II extradite his nephew back to Hatti.

This demand precipitated a crisis in relations between Egypt and Hatti when Ramesses denied any knowledge of Mursili's whereabouts in his country, and the two empires came dangerously close to war. Eventually, in the twenty-first year of his reign (**1258 BCE**), Ramesses decided to conclude an agreement with the new Hittite king, Ḫattušili III, at Kadesh to end the conflict. The ensuing document is the earliest known peace treaty in world history.

The peace treaty was recorded in two versions, one in Egyptian hieroglyphs, the other in Akkadian, using cuneiform script; both versions survive. Such dual-language recording is common to many subsequent treaties. This treaty differs from others, in that the two language versions are worded differently. While the majority of the text is identical, the Hittite version says the Egyptians came suing for peace and the Egyptian version says the reverse. The treaty was given to the Egyptians in the form of a silver plaque, and this "pocket-book" version was taken back to Egypt and carved into the temple at Karnak.

No further Egyptian campaigns in Canaan are mentioned after the conclusion of the peace treaty. The northern border seems to have been safe and quiet, so the rule of the pharaoh was strong until Ramesses II's death, and the waning of the dynasty.

### ***Building activity and monuments***



Ramesses built extensively throughout Egypt and Nubia, and his cartouches are prominently displayed even in buildings that he did not construct. There are accounts of his honor hewn on stone, statues, and the remains of palaces and temples—most notably the Ramesseum in western Thebes and the rock temples of Abu Simbel. He covered the land from the Delta to Nubia with buildings in a way no monarch before him had. He also founded a new capital city in the Delta during his reign, called Pi-Ramesses. It previously had served as a summer palace during Seti I's reign.

His memorial temple, known today as the Ramesseum, was just the beginning of the pharaoh's obsession with building. When he built, he built on a scale unlike almost anything before. In the third year of his reign, Ramesses started the most ambitious building project after the pyramids, which were built almost 1,500 years earlier. **The population was put to work changing the face of Egypt.** In Thebes, the ancient temples were transformed, so that each one of them reflected honor to Ramesses as a symbol of his putative divine nature and power. Ramesses decided to eternalize himself in stone, and so he ordered changes to the methods used by his masons. The elegant but shallow reliefs of previous pharaohs were easily transformed, and so their images and words could easily be obliterated by their successors. Ramesses insisted that his carvings be deeply engraved into the stone, which made them not only less susceptible to later alteration, but also made them more prominent in the Egyptian sun, reflecting his relationship with the sun deity, Ra.

Ramesses constructed many large monuments, including the archaeological complex of Abu Simbel, and the Mortuary temple known as the Ramesseum. He built on a monumental scale to ensure that his legacy would survive the ravages of time. Ramesses used art as a means of propaganda for his victories over foreigners, which are depicted on numerous temple reliefs. Ramesses II erected more colossal statues of himself than any other pharaoh, and also usurped many existing statues by inscribing his own cartouche on them.

## Merneptah



**Merneptah** (r. 1213–1203 BCE), was the fourth pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Ancient Egypt. He ruled Egypt for almost ten years from late July or early August 1213 BCE until his death on May 2, 1203 BCE, according to contemporary historical records. He was the thirteenth son of Ramesses II and only came to power because all his older brothers had died. By the time he ascended to the throne, he was probably around seventy years old.

Merneptah had to carry out several military campaigns during his reign. In the fifth year of his rule (1208 BCE), he fought against the Libyans, who—with the assistance of the Sea Peoples (Sherden, Shekelesh, Ekwesh, Lukka, Teresh)—were threatening Egypt from the west. Merneptah led a victorious six-hour battle against a combined Libyan and Sea People force at the city of Perire, probably located on the western edge of the Nile delta. To be sure of the number of killed enemies he took the penises of all uncircumcised enemy dead and the hands of all the circumcised.

**The Merneptah Stele** (c. 1208 BCE) – also known as the Israel Stele or the Victory Stele of Merneptah – is an inscription by the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah (discovered by Flinders Petrie in 1896 at Thebes). **The stela represents the earliest textual reference to Israel and the only reference from ancient Egypt.** It is one of four known inscriptions, from the Iron Age, that date to the time of and mention ancient Israel, under this name, the others being the Mesha Stele, the Tel Dan Stele, and the Kurkh Monolith.



The text is largely an account of Merneptah's victory over the Libyans and their allies in 1208 BCE, but the last 3 of the 28 lines deal with a prior military campaign in Canaan, then part of Egypt's imperial possessions. The stela is sometimes referred to as the "Israel Stela" because a majority of scholars translate a set of hieroglyphs in line 27 as "Israel".

The princes are prostrate, saying, "Peace!"

Not one is raising his head among the Nine Bows.

Now that Tehenu (Libya) has come to ruin,

Hatti is pacified;

The Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe:

Ashkelon has been overcome;

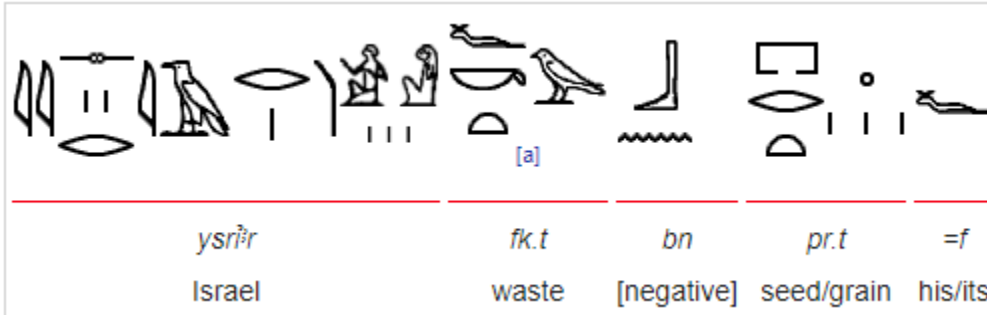
Gezer has been captured;

Yano'am is made non-existent.

Israel is laid waste and his seed is not;

Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt.

The "Nine Bows" is a term the Egyptians used to refer to their enemies; the actual enemies varied according to time and circumstance. Hatti and H̄urru are Syro-Palestine, Canaan and Israel are smaller units, and Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam are cities within the region; according to the stele, all these entities fell under the rule of the Egyptian empire at that time.



While Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam are given the determinative for a city – a throw stick plus three mountains – the hieroglyphs that refer to Israel instead employ the throw stick (the determinative for "foreign") plus a sitting man and woman (the determinative for "people") over three vertical lines (a plural marker).

According to the Oxford History of the Biblical World, this **"foreign people sign is typically used by the Egyptians to signify nomadic groups or peoples, without a fixed city-state home, thus implying a semi nomadic or rural status for 'Israel' at that time"**. The phrase "wasted, bare of seed" is formulaic, and often used of defeated nations – it implies that the grain-store of the nation in question has been destroyed, which would result in a famine the following year, incapacitating them as a military threat to Egypt.

### Identity of "Israel" in the Merneptah Stele

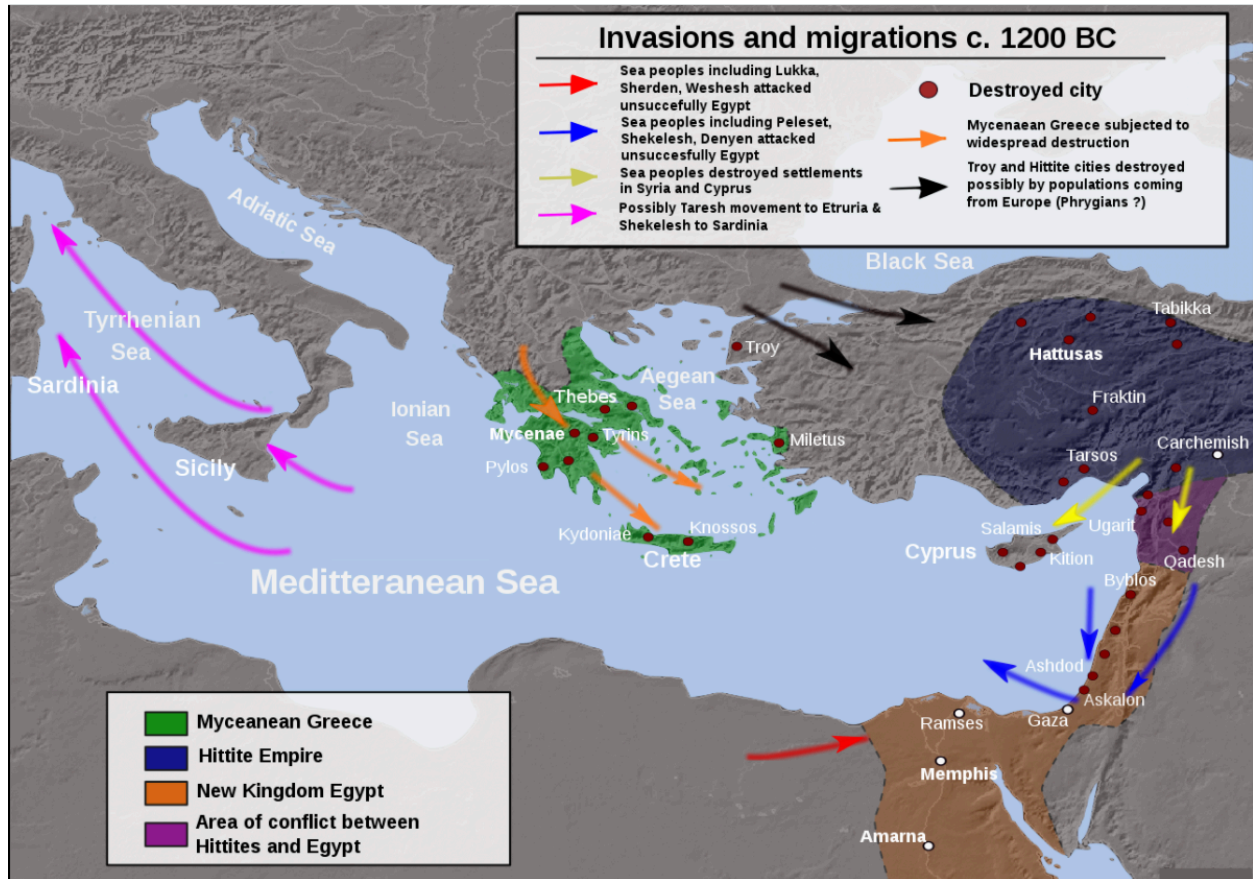
The confrontation between the Egyptians and Israelites recorded in the Merneptah Stele likely took place by the Sea of Reeds immediately after the Exodus or after their arrival to Canaan forty years later, even so the Tanach is silent about it.

Other solutions view these Israelites referred to by Merneptah as Israelites who left Egypt before the enslavement began, or who were enslaved but left Egypt in an earlier wave. Rabbi J. H. Hertz took the first of these approaches, writing in the 1930's:

"[If the reference in the Stele is to Israelites], then it refers to the settlements in Palestine by Israelites from Egypt before the Exodus... From various notices in I Chronicles we see that, during the generations preceding the Oppression, the Israelites did not remain confined to Goshen or even to Egypt proper, but spread into the southern Palestinian territory, then under Egyptian control, and even engaged in skirmishes with the Philistines. When the bulk of the nation had left Egypt and was wandering in the Wilderness, these Israelite settlers had thrown off their Egyptian allegiance. And it is these settlements which Merneptah boasts of having devastated during his Canaanite campaign. There is, therefore, no cogent reason for dissenting from the current view that the Pharaoh of the Oppression was Rameses II, with his son Merneptah as the Pharaoh of the Exodus."



## Late Bronze Age collapse



The half-century between c. 1200 and 1150 BCE saw the cultural collapse of the Mycenaean kingdoms in Greece, of the Kassites in Babylonia, of the Hittite Empire in Anatolia and the Levant, and the New Kingdom of Egypt; the destruction of Ugarit and the Amorite states in the Levant, the fragmentation of the Luwian states of western Anatolia, and a period of chaos in Canaan. The deterioration of these governments interrupted trade routes and severely reduced literacy in much of this area.

In the first phase of this period, almost every city between Pylos and Gaza was violently destroyed, and many abandoned, including Hattusa, Mycenae, and Ugarit. According to Robert Drews, "Within a period of forty to fifty years at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the twelfth century almost every significant city in the eastern Mediterranean world was destroyed, many of them never to be occupied again."

The last "great" pharaoh from the New Kingdom is widely considered to be **Ramesses III** (r. 1186–1155 BCE), a 20th Dynasty pharaoh who reigned several decades after Ramesses II.

During his long tenure in the midst of the surrounding political chaos of the Late Bronze Age collapse, Egypt was beset by foreign invaders (including the so-called Sea Peoples and the Libyans) and experienced the beginnings of increasing economic difficulties and internal strife which would eventually lead to the collapse of the Twentieth Dynasty.



In the eighth year of his reign, **c. 1178 BCE**, the Sea Peoples, including **Peleset**, Denyen, Shardana, Meshwesh of the sea, and Tjekker, invaded Egypt by land and sea. Ramesses III defeated them in two great land and sea battles (the Battle of Djahy and the Battle of the Delta). He incorporated them as subject peoples and settled them in Southern Canaan although there is evidence that they forced their way into Canaan. **Their presence in Canaan may have contributed to the formation of new states, such as Philistia, in this region**

**after the collapse of the Egyptian Empire.** He was also compelled to fight invading Libyan tribesmen in two major campaigns in Egypt's Western Delta in his sixth year and eleventh year respectively.

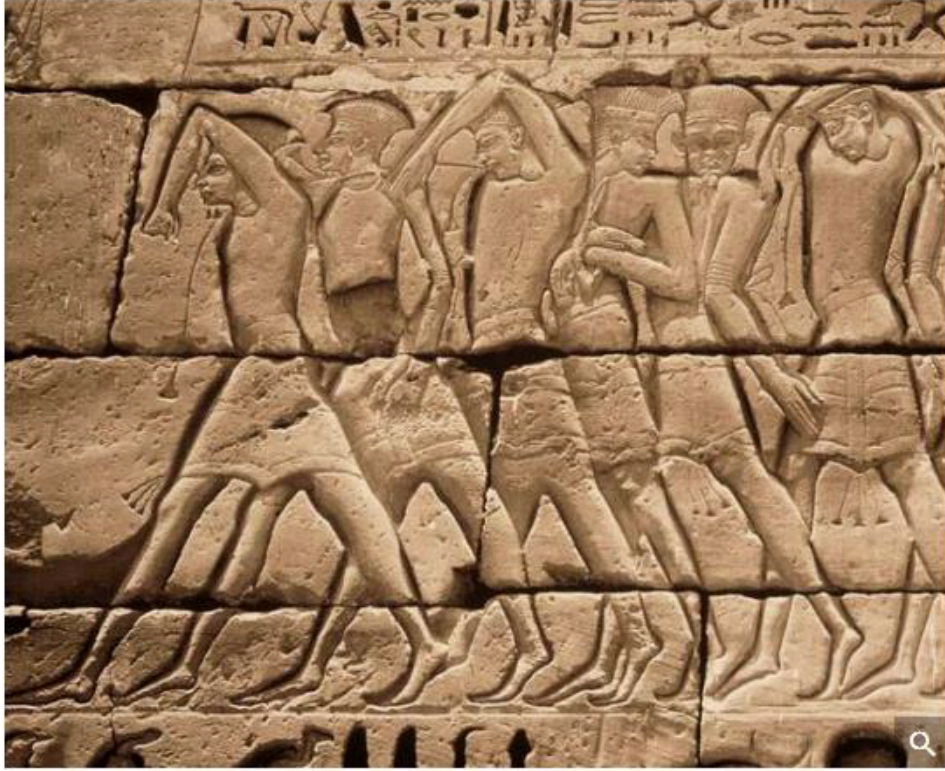
After being repulsed by the Egyptians, they settled—possibly with Egypt’s permission—on the coastal plain of Palestine from Joppa (modern Tel Aviv–Yafo) southward to Gaza. The area contained the five cities (the Pentapolis) of the Philistine confederacy (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron) and was known as Philistia, or the Land of the Philistines. It was from this designation that the whole of the country was later called Palestine by the Greeks.

The first records of the Philistines are inscriptions and reliefs in the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Madinat Habu, where they appear under the name *prst*, as one of the Sea Peoples that invaded Egypt about 1178 BCE after ravaging Anatolia, Cyprus, and Syria.

The Torah identifies Philistines as the Caphtorites, the people of Aegean and Southern European descent: "For the Lord plunders the Philistines, the remnant of the island of Caphtor" (Jeremiah 47:4) and "Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and Aram from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). Caphtor is possibly Crete, although there is no archaeological evidence of a Philistine occupation of the island.

Interestingly enough, the Torah indicates that the Philistines were already living in Canaan BEFORE the Israelites entered it: "But the Avim, who dwell in open cities, up till Gaza - the Caphtorites, who came fourth of Caphtor, exterminated them, and dwelt in their stead." (Deuteronomy 2:23)

The Talmud even explains why the Caphtorites had to arrive to Canaan BEFORE the Israelites: "The Avim are of the Philistine people, for they are listed together with them in the Book of Joshua (13:3), as it says, "The five Philistine lords. The Gazites, the Ashdodites, the Ashkelonites, the Gittites, the Ekronites, and the Avim." But because of the oath which Abraham had sworn to Abimelech, (Gen. 21:23-24), the Israelites were unable to take their land away from them; so I brought the Caphtorites against them, and they destroyed them and dwelt in their stead. Now, you are permitted to take it [the land of the Avim] from their [the Caphtorites’] possession" (Chullin 60b).



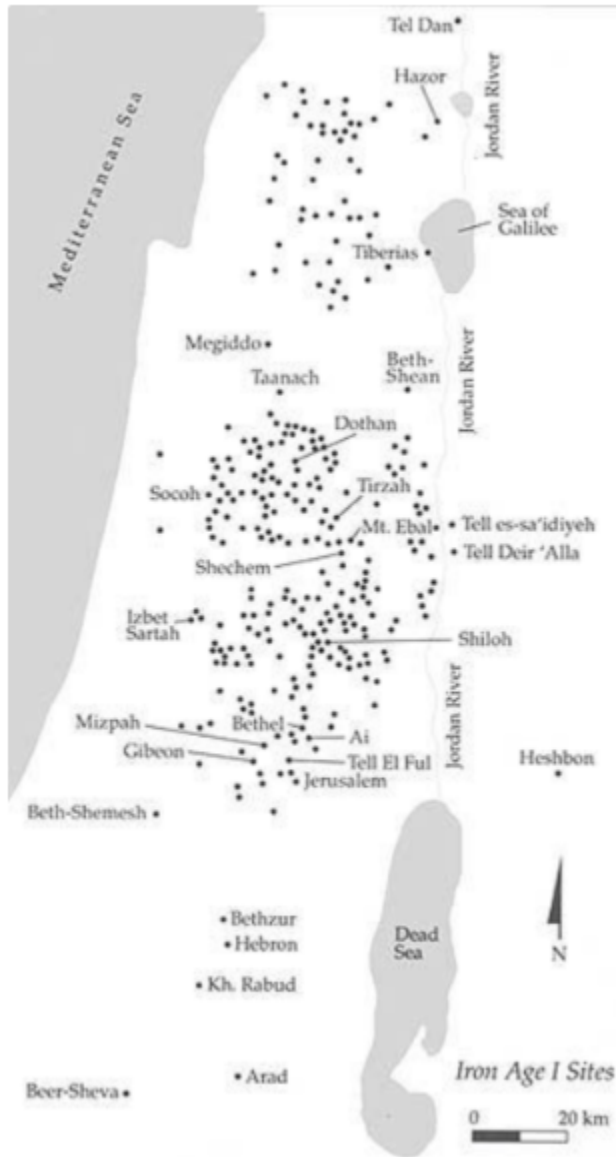
**Philistine captives**

Philistine captives being led away after their failed invasion of Egypt, from a relief at Ramses III's mortuary temple at Medinet Habu, Thebes, Egypt.

**Additional Points**

- Among the records of the warring kings of Egypt who had imperial control of Canaan and Syria from ca. 1500–1200 BCE, except for the Merneptah Stele (c. 1208 BCE), there is no reference to Israel or any of the tribes despite the fact that several hundred toponyms are known for the region. For the period 1450–1250 BCE Egypt exercised hegemony over Canaan and Syria.
- Never is Egypt mentioned as one of the oppressors against whom a judge-deliverer fought. According to the biblical account, once the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds, they never again encountered Egyptian troops.
- When one considers all the nations who oppressed Israel in the book of Judges that resulted in the emergence of a charismatic judge-deliverer, we find the enemies to be from Mesopotamia, Moab, Philistines, Canaanites/Hazor, Midianites and Ishmaelites, Amorites, Philistines, Ammonites, and Philistines, in that order.
- The Philistines appear more than any other opponent, suggesting that they are the major menace, and yet they only arrived in southern Canaan with the Sea Peoples invasion during the 8th regnal year of Ramesses III, around 1178 BCE. The Philistines are mentioned in multiple places in the Torah, suggesting that they arrived in Canaan before the Israelites did.

## Emergence of Israel in the Land of Canaan



- In the 12th century BCE, the Egyptian grip on Canaan began to loosen considerably, so the Israelites could have operated with little Egyptian interference. The Egyptians maintained some control over parts of Canaan until just after the death of Rameses III in 1155 BCE, while the imperial campaigns ceased by c. 1175 BCE. Egyptian officials were stationed at Gaza and Deir el-Balah in the south, at Megiddo and Beit Shean in the north.

- In the 12th century BCE, new people appeared in the central hill country of Canaan, extending from the Jezreel Valley in the north to the Beersheba Basin in the south. During the prior epoch of the Late Bronze Age (1500-1175 BCE), the central hill country was relatively open terrain and only about 30 settlements dating this period were identified. However, in the subsequent Iron Age I period (1175-1000 BCE), the number of settlements rose dramatically to 250.

- Among the most characteristic features of these people and their lifestyle is the near total absence of pig bones in the archeological record. At the same time period, one observes considerable pork consumption among the neighboring Philistines. The main feature of domestic architecture in the villages was the four-room house. The same basic floorplan repeats at Israelite sites throughout the region.

Gary A. Rendsburg writes in his article “The Emergence of Israel in the Land of Canaan”:

“Early Israel emerged in the central hill country of Canaan during the Iron Age I period (1175–1000), when a core group of formerly pastoral (semi-)nomads underwent the process of sedentarization. They lived in simple elliptical sites reminiscent of Bedouin encampments; eventually they concentrated themselves in villages; and their lifestyle was characterized by simple homes, simple pottery, simple burials, and an egalitarian ethos.”



## Historical Exodus

A general consensus among the biblical historians is that the Exodus took place somewhere between 1270 and 1170 BCE. The upper limit is associated with Ramesses's the Great capital Pi-Ramesses established around 1270 BCE, and the lower limit is associated with the emergence of Israel in the land of Canaan around 1170 BCE.

Depending on the identification of "Israel" in the Merneptah Stele (see the discussion above), the Exodus could take place either c. 1210 BCE with Ramesses the Great being the Pharaoh of Oppression and his son Merneptah being the Pharaoh of Exodus, or c. 1260 BCE with Ramesses the Great being both the Pharaoh of Oppression and Exodus. There are other opinions as well.

This author's preferred date of the Exodus is 1211 BCE, in the reign of Merneptah just after the death of Ramesses the Great in 1213 BCE. This date seems to be the closest to the biblical narrative and the one which also satisfies both the historical and archeological data. Also, this date is also exactly 100 years later than the traditional date of the Exodus, 1311 BCE.

## Traditional Date of the Exodus

According to Seder Olam Rabbah (SO) of the 2nd century CE, the work that forms the basis for almost all rabbinic chronology, the Exodus is dated to 1311 BCE, precisely 1,000 years before the Minyan Shetarot (see Avodah Zarah 10a). The Minyan Shetarot, also known as the Seleucid era or the Greek year, was a secular dating system that Jews accepted during the Greek rule in the Second Temple period. This count began in the spring of 311 BCE and by the 2nd century CE, the Seleucid year was considered 'sanctified'. Support for this can be found in the line at the end of SO, 'UveGolah Kotevin BiShtarot LeMinyan Yevanim - Alfa' - 'and in the exile they write on the documents [before] the Greek count - One Thousand'.



Mud brick stamped with a cartouche of Ramesses the Great in the British Museum.

## Reconstruction of the Events

Date of the Event	Description
1323–1294 BCE	The oppression of the Hebrews began in the beginning of the 19th Dynasty under “a new regime” of the paranoiac army general Horemheb and his Ramesside successors (the future 19th Dynasty), natives of the eastern Nile delta.
1294–1279 BCE	An area in the northeastern part of Egypt (eastern Nile delta) began functioning as the Egyptian capital, when Seti I built a palace in Qantir not far from Avaris. Seti I was likely the pharaoh who ordered the infanticide.
1291 BCE	Moshe was born and saved by Seti I’s daughter who appears to be residing in the same area as the Hebrews, perhaps in the Seti’s palace in Qantir.
1279–1213 BCE	Reign of Ramesses the Great. Starts a massive building campaign throughout Egypt. Establishes and moves the capital to Pi-Ramesses. Moshe escapes Egypt from the execution.
1213 BCE	Ramesses the Great died after 66 years in power. His son Merneptah becomes a pharaoh. The story of the Exodus begins.
1212 BCE	Moshe comes back from Midian to Egypt after the death of Ramesses the Great.
<b>1211 BCE</b>	The Exodus from Egypt. Moshe is 80 years old. Israel starts the 40 years of sojourn in Sinai.
1208 BCE	The Merneptah Stele mentions Israel as a foreign nomadic people for the first and the last time in the ancient history of Egypt.
1178 BCE	The Sea Peoples unsuccessfully invaded Egypt and the Peleset tribe was resettled in Southern Canaan forming the states of Philistia.
<b>1171 BCE</b>	Moshe died at the age of 120 years. The Israelites entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

## Beginning of the First Temple era



Pharaoh Shoshenq I (reigned c. 943–922 BCE)—also known as Sheshonk or Sheshonq —was a pharaoh of ancient Egypt and the founder of the Twenty-second Dynasty of Egypt. A common variant of Shoshenq's name omits 'n' glyphs, resulting in a pronunciation like, "Shoshek".

Shoshenq I is identified with the Egyptian king Shishak, referred to in the Tanach at 1 Kings 11:40, 14:25 and 2 Chronicles 12:2-9.

According to these passages, Jeroboam fled from Solomon and stayed with Shishak until Solomon died, and Shishak invaded Judah, mostly the area of Benjamin, during the fifth year of the reign of Rehoboam, c. 925 BCE, taking with him most of the treasures of the temple built by Solomon. Shoshenq I is generally attributed with the raid on Judah: this is corroborated with a stele discovered at Tel Megiddo.

### Shishak Inscription Megiddo

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The Bubastite Portal, a relief discovered at Karnak, in Upper Egypt, and similar reliefs on the walls of a small temple of Amun at el-Hibeh, shows Pharaoh Shoshenq I holding in his hand a bound group of prisoners. The names of captured towns are located primarily in the territory of the kingdom of Israel (including Megiddo), with a few listed in the Negeb, and perhaps Philistia. Some of these include a few of the towns that Rehoboam had fortified according to Chronicles.

If Shishak invaded Judah in 925 BCE during the 5th year of Rehoboam, according to an accession-year dating system, then Solomon's reign ended c. 930 BCE. This would mean that the 4th year of Solomon's reign and the beginning of the First Temple period can be dated to 966 BCE. This would also mean that King David's reign started somewhere around 1010 BCE and that he was born c. 1040 BCE.

## Notes

1. While there is a fundamental dispute how to understand a notion of foreign nomadic people 'Israel' in the Merneptah Stele, and what was the precise geographic location of these people, the author's understanding is that Merneptah suffered embarrassing loss from 'Israel' at the Sea of Reeds in 1211 BCE. Some time later he had gone on a campaign in Canaan to punish insubordinate cities. After making sure that no 'Israel' appeared in Canaan, he was able to declare the victory over 'Israel' as an afterthought in his famous Stele, dedicated to his great victory over the Libyans and Sea Peoples in 1208 BCE.
2. The lineage of King David appears as a simple list at the end of the book of Ruth (4:18-22) and in more extended form in 1 Chronicles 2:11-15. The key component of the genealogy is the line of Nachshon -> Salmon -> Boaz -> Obed -> Jesse -> David, thereby informing us that David comes five generations after Nachshon. Rashi writes (1 Chronicles 2:11), that Boaz was likely already born when Israel entered Canaan. If Israel entered Canaan in 1171 BCE and as we have learned above, king David was born c. 1040 BCE, then we can construct the following reasonable chronology: Boaz (70) -> 1100 BCE -> Obed (30) -> 1070 BCE -> Jesse (30) -> 1040 BCE -> David.
3. What we can see is that there were only 245 years between the Exodus (1211 BCE) and the First Temple (966 BCE). The same time the Tanach tells us that construction of the First Temple started 480 years after the Exodus (1 Kings 6:1). Septuagint records 440 years instead. While there is no absolute proof that this number cannot be taken literally, we can consider the following ideas:
  - a. The first epochal summary given in the Torah tells us that the Israelites dwelled in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40). The Torah repeats this number twice. There are several opinions on how long the Israelites had actually lived in Egypt: 210 years (Seder Olam Rabbah), 215 years (Josephus, Septuagint), which is basically a half of the 430 years interval. So too here, the 245 years interval is about a half of the 480 years interval given in the Tanach.
  - b. If we understand 480 years between the Exodus and the First Temple literally, it comes out that Boaz had to be **300 years old** when Obed, the grandfather of David, was born. If we follow the 245 years interval, Boaz would need to be only about 70 years old at that time, which is much more in line with a story in the Book of Ruth. Rashi writes (1 Chronicles 2:11): "Our Sages stated (Baba Bathra 91a): "Ibzan is Boaz," but it is amazing because how can this be? How did Boaz beget a child at the age of three hundred?"

## Further Readings

1. Hoffmeier, James K. "Israel in Egypt", 1997
2. Kitchen, K. A, "On the Reliability of the Old Testament", 2003
3. [Hoffmeier, James K. "What is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?", 2007](#)
4. [First, Mitchell "The Date of the Exodus: A Guide to the Orthodox Perplexed", 2012](#)
5. Janzen, Mark D., Scott Stripling, James Hoffmeier, et al, "Five Views On The Exodus", 2021



APPENDIX A. Chronology from the Exodus to the Destruction of the Second Temple

	Seder Olam		Historical	
	1311 BCE	Exodus from Egypt	1211 BCE*	
<b>480 years</b>		From Exodus to the First Temple		<b>245 years</b>
	831 BCE	First Temple period starts	966 BCE	
<b>410 years</b>		First Temple period		<b>380 years</b>
	421 BCE	Destruction of the First Temple	586 BCE	
<b>70 years</b>		Babylonian exile		<b>70 years</b>
	351 BCE	Second Temple period starts	516 BCE	
<b>420 years</b>		Second Temple period		<b>585 years</b>
	70 CE	Destruction of the Second Temple	70 CE	
<b>1380 years</b>				<b>1280 years</b>

\*The maximum likelihood date

APPENDIX B. Alternative View: Chronology of the First and Second Commonwealth

	Seder Olam		Historical	
	1311 BCE	Exodus from Egypt	1211 BCE*	
<b>40 years</b>		Sojourn in Sinai		<b>40 years</b>
	1271 BCE	Entering the land of Canaan	1171 BCE	
<b>850 years</b>		<b>First Commonwealth</b>		<b>585 years</b>
	421 BCE	Destruction of the First Temple	586 BCE	
<b>70 years</b>		Babylonian exile		<b>70 years</b>
	351 BCE	Second Temple period starts	516 BCE	
<b>420 years</b>		<b>Second Commonwealth</b>		<b>585 years</b>
	70 CE	Destruction of the Second Temple	70 CE	
<b>1380 years</b>				<b>1280 years</b>

\* The maximum likelihood date

Appendix C. Chronology of the New Kingdom

**Eighteenth Dynasty**

Ahmose	1550-1525	Capital: Thebes
Amenhotep I	1525-1504	
Thutmose I	1504-1492	
Thutmose II	1492-1479	
Queen Hatshepsut	1479-1458 (Regent)	
Thutmose III	1479-1425	
Amenhotep II	1427-1400	
Thutmose IV	1400-1390	
Amenhotep III	1390-1352	
Akhenaten	1352-1336	Capital: Akhenaten
Neferneferuaten	1338-1336 (Regent)	
Tutankhamun	1336-1327	Capital: Thebes
Ay	1327-1323	
Horemheb	1323-1295	

**Nineteenth Dynasty**

Ramesses I	1295-1294	
Seti I	1294-1279	
Ramesses II (the Great)	1279-1213	Capital: Pi-Ramesses
Merneptah	1213-1203	
Seti II	1203-1197	
Siptah	1197-1191	
Queen Tausret	1191-1189	

**Twentieth Dynasty**

Sethnakht	1189-1186	
Ramesses III	1186-1155	
Ramesses IV	1155-1149	
Ramesses V	1149-1145	
Ramesses VI	1145-1136	
Ramesses VII	1136-1130	
Ramesses VIII	1130-1129	
Ramesses IX	1129-1111	Capital: Memphis
Ramesses X	1111-1107	
Ramesses XI	1107-1078	