

***The Exodus and Historical Truth:  
A Critique of Ani Maamin by Joshua Berman,  
and the Late Date Exodus Theory***

**By: GEULA TWERSKY**

In *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith*, Joshua Berman sets out to address many of the intellectual and spiritual challenges facing those committed to both Torah and academic studies. Berman advocates for understanding the Torah within its historical context, cautioning that applying modern notions such as *history*, *fact*, and *fiction* to biblical texts, in whose milieu these terms did not exist, is anachronistic. Berman underscores the “exhortative” nature of biblical narrative texts, which although rooted in reality, are primarily intended to convey moral lessons. This approach informs Berman’s methodology for resolving both narrative and legal inconsistencies in the Torah. Berman presents a masterful refutation of biblical source criticism in *Ani Maamin* that reinforces the structural integrity of the Torah. The second half of the book is devoted to tackling challenging theological questions pertaining to Maimonides’ 13 Principles of Faith.

It is precisely because Berman is such an eloquent, prolific, and influential spokesperson for the harmonization of Torah and academic studies that it is crucial to note where his approach falls short. For this reason, I present here a critique of his extended discussion pertaining to the Exodus. Berman’s approach to the historicity of the biblical Exodus narrative

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appears in condensed form in chapters two and three of *Ani Maamin*, and more extensively in earlier academic volumes.<sup>1</sup>

To be clear, this is not a book review. This essay has a dual goal: to offer a critique of Berman's approach to the Torah's account of the Exodus and to present the case for the historicity of the Torah's account of the Exodus based on the evidence. *Ani Maamin* presents itself as a defense of the biblical Exodus narrative, reconciling the narrative with the scientific facts. The compromises offered in this book have therefore been warmly received by many leaders, teachers, and lay learners in the Orthodox Jewish community. Unfortunately, this is based on the misperception that the biblical narrative is irreconcilable with the archeological and historical record. In fact, the record lends rich support, not a challenge, to the biblical narrative, as we will see. It is only the current trends and opinions labeled as scholarly consensus that stand in opposition to the biblical narrative. The approach of *Ani Maamin* is an attempt at aligning the biblical narrative with this body of belief. For one who feels a need for such reconciliation, *Ani Maamin* does an admirable job. But for someone who is concerned exclusively with the light that the historical evidence sheds on the biblical text, it is deleterious. For such individuals, the "threat" that *Ani Maamin* saves them from is illusory, the price paid all too real. The two aspects of this article are, therefore, two sides of one coin. Clarifying the historical evidence and responding to Berman's approach are complementary tasks.

### The 13th Century Approach

In step with current trends in scholarship, Berman takes a 13th cent. BCE approach to the Exodus.<sup>2</sup> The biblical chronology, however, places the Exodus in the mid-15th cent. BCE. This is primarily based on 1Kings 6:1 which dates the beginning of the construction of the Temple of Solomon

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Joshua Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 17–62; idem, "The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II and the Exodus Sea Account (Exodus 13:17–15:19)," pp. 93–112 in *Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt? Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives* (James Hoffmeier et al. ed.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the following volumes which advocate a 13th century Exodus: "*Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt?*" *Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives* (James Hoffmeier, Alan Millard, and Alan Rendsburg eds.; Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016); James Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

to the 480th year from the Exodus (coinciding with Solomon's fourth regnal year, in the mid-10th cent. BCE).<sup>3</sup> The 13th century approach, however, is essentially grounded in the appearance of the topographic name Raamses in Exodus 1:11.<sup>4</sup> Ramesses II was the most celebrated pharaoh of Egypt's 19th Dynasty, ca. the 13th cent. BCE.<sup>5</sup> The name Ramesses was not used as a pharaonic name before the 19th Dynasty and was used intermittently only afterwards. A resolution to this challenge facing the biblical chronology will be suggested after a presentation and evaluation of Berman's approach.

Berman introduces his discussion of the Exodus with the following bold statement:<sup>6</sup> "The case against the historicity of the Exodus is straightforward, and its essence can be stated in five words: a sustained lack of evidence." To be fair, Berman then proceeds to offer a variety of plausible explanations for this apparent lacuna, however, that does not mitigate his assertion that there is no credible documentary and archaeological evidence of the Exodus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kenneth A. Kitchen, "How We Know When Solomon Ruled," *BAR* 27.4 (2001), 32–37, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Naville's 1883 excavation of Tell el-Maskhuta, one of the treasure cities of Ramesses II, and what Naville assumed to be the site of biblical Pithom, served as further basis for the Ramesses II theory. Cf. John Day, *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 29. However, if Ramesses II was the Pharaoh of the Exodus, then Moses would have had to have fled from Ramesses' father, Seti I (Ex. 2:15). Since Pithom and Raamses were built prior to these events (Ex. 1:11), the city of Raamses had to have been built well before the rise of Ramesses II and his storage city at Tell el-Maskhuta. Therefore, the fact that one of the storage cities was named Raamses cannot serve as a basis for identifying the pharaoh of the Exodus with Ramesses II. Gardiner attempted to identify biblical Raamses with Pi-Ramesses. Cf. Alan H. Gardiner, "The Delta Residence of the Ramessides," *JEA* 5 (1918), 127–138, 242–271. Redford rejects this association in part based on the omission of the *pr* prefix meaning house. Cf. Donald Redford, "The Land of Ramesses," pp. 175–177 in *Causing His Name to Live: Studies in Egyptian Epigraphy and History in Memory of William J. Murnane* (Peter Brand and Louise Cooper, eds.; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lawrence T. Geraty, "Exodus Dates and Theories," pp. 55–64 in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture and Geoscience* (Thomas E. Levy et al., eds.; Cham: Springer, 2015); Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 256, 309–310.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2020), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the following article which presents new evidence for a 15th cent. Exodus. Geula Twersky, "Redating the Mount Eval Altar: A Re-evaluation of the Evidence," *Bekhol Derakbekha Daehu* 37 (2022), forthcoming.

The expectation of finding something in the wrong location simply because it is easier to look there is commonly referred to as *the streetlight effect*. This phenomenon is dramatized in a joke featuring a man and a police officer standing beneath a streetlamp. The policeman says, “What are you doing?” The man says, “Looking for my lost keys.” The police officer asks, “Are you sure you lost them here?” To which the man replies, “No, but the light is better here.” It should come as no surprise that looking for tangible evidence of the Exodus in the wrong century is an exercise in futility. In the pages that follow, I will show that whereas the Bible is not a history book per se, it does indeed record historically accurate information that is supported by abundant corroborating evidence. However, it should be understood that the supporting data is only accessible to those who look for it in the right place. Before presenting the case for a 15th century Exodus, we need to first understand the methodological deficiencies in Berman’s approach.

### **Berman’s Approach**

Berman lays the foundation for his argument on the idea that numbers in the Tanakh are often meant to be understood qualitatively as opposed to quantitatively.<sup>8</sup> He proceeds to suggest that the number 480 cited in 1Kings 6:1 should not be taken literally. Berman claims that this number is problematic as “it is difficult to reconcile this time span with the total number of years that seem to be chronicled in the book of Judges.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if one were to insist that all the twelve recorded judges operated in strict succession, then there is indeed a surplus of ca. 100 years. It is widely accepted, however, in both Torah sources and secular scholarship, that there was some degree of overlap during the period of the judges. The limited regional sphere of influence of the individual judges would certainly support this assumption. The book of Judges itself appears to suggest that Shamgar and Deborah were contemporaries,<sup>10</sup> and that there was some degree of overlap between Jephthah and Samson, who both operated during the period of Philistine oppression.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Sages did not assume all of the judges to have been strictly consecutive.<sup>12</sup> There is therefore no reason to dogmatically assert that the number 480 recorded in the book of Kings contradicts the chronology of the book of

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<sup>8</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 29–33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Jud. 3:31; 4:1; 5:6.

<sup>11</sup> Jud. 10:7; 14–16.

<sup>12</sup> C.F. *Ruth Rabba* 1:1.

Judges. The same cannot be said, however, concerning the 13th century theory, which openly contradicts Jephthah's statement that 300 years had elapsed since the Israelite occupation of Moabite lands, allowing for an impossibly short amount of time for the judges period.<sup>13</sup> Late date Exodus supporters are at a loss to account for the length of the judges period.<sup>14</sup> Kitchen's assertion that Jephthah's statement was a propagandistic bluster nonetheless fails to explain how the entire judges period might be condensed into ca. 150 years.<sup>15</sup>

In attempting to bolster the figurative interpretation of the number 480, Berman cites the theory that the number 480 represents the idea of the passage of twelve generations since the Exodus, with the number 40 standing as a trope for a generation.<sup>16</sup> Berman cites a twelve-generation priestly genealogy from 1Chr. 5:30–36 as proof. However, 1Chr. 6:18–22 lists eighteen generations between the Temple musician Heman who lived in the time of King David, and his Levite ancestor Korah, thereby placing Solomon's Temple in the 19th generation from the Exodus. In an attempt to buttress the twelve-generation theory, Berman cites the Septuagint, which records the number 440 as the Temple's foundational year. Berman suggests that this chronological discrepancy arose because the Septuagint counted eleven generations between the Temple and the Exodus.

To begin with, it is accepted in the scholarship that the Septuagint altered the traditional chronology.<sup>17</sup> Specifically regarding Kings, Gooding showed that the Septuagint tends to pedantically "correct" Masoretic

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<sup>13</sup> Jud. 11:26.

<sup>14</sup> Kitchen, *Reliability*, 209.

<sup>15</sup> Jephthah ruled for 6 years, approximately a century before the monarchic period, ca. 1100 BCE [cf. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 170]. The following leaders are known to have preceded the 18-year Ammonite oppression and subsequent 6-year rule of Jephthah: Joshua (40 yrs. wandering in the wilderness + ? yrs. conquest), Othniel (40 yrs. + 8 yrs. Aram Naharaim oppression), Ehud (80 yrs. + 18 yrs. Moabite oppression), Barak and Deborah (40 yrs. + 20 yrs. Canaanite oppression), Gideon (40 yrs. + 7 yrs. Midianite oppression), Abimelech (3 yrs.), Tola (23 yrs.), Yair (22 yrs.). The following events followed the period of Jephthah: Ibzan (7 yrs.), Elon (10 yrs.), Abdon (8 yrs.), Samson (20 yrs. + 40 yrs. Philistine oppression, although those two figures were probably concurrent, as indicated in Jud.16:31), Eli (40 yrs.).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. David H. van Daalen, "Number Symbolism," pp. 561–63 in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gerhard Larsson, "The Chronology of the Pentateuch: A Comparison of the MT and LXX," *JBL* 102.3 (1983), 401–409.

chronologies that it perceived to be problematic.<sup>18</sup> Northcote proposed that the schematic nature of the Septuagint's chronological alterations become apparent when we view its overall Temple related records:

First Temple foundation	4277
Temple destruction	4707
Second Temple completion	4777

“It is the 777 aspect of this final dating that seems to have been the main consideration in the LXX [Septuagint] chronographer's reckoning.”<sup>19</sup> Whereas I chose to bring the opinion of Northcote to the discussion, a variety of suggestions have been put forth to explain the systematic chronological discrepancies in the Septuagint.<sup>20</sup> Whatever the overriding considerations of the Septuagint chronologer, it certainly was not to allow for eleven generations between the Exodus and Solomon's Temple. This is evidenced by the Septuagint's failure to “correct” the 18-generation genealogy cited above, linking Heman, the Temple musician, to his Levite ancestors.

There is not a hint in the verse in Kings that the number 480 implies the passage of twelve generations. What is clear, however, is that the verse was formulated to convey calendrical precision. Cassuto notes that ascending number order, as in “eighty years and four hundred years” is a biblical device for conveying numerical precision.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, when the very same verse states “in the fourth year of King Solomon” and “in the month of Ziv, that is the second month” we understand the verse to be authenticating an occasion of great significance. This plethora of calendric detail marks the historic fulfillment of the telos of the Exodus: “You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance, the place, O Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established.”<sup>22</sup> In like fashion, the completion of the Temple is again reported with abundant calendric detail: “In the eleventh year in the month of Bul, the eighth month, the Temple was finished in

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<sup>18</sup> D. W. Gooding, “Pedantic Timetabling in the 3rd Book of Reigns,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15.2 (1965), 153–166.

<sup>19</sup> J. Northcote, “The schematic development of Old Testament Chronography: Towards an integrated model,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29. 1 (2004), 3–36, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Gerhard Larsson, “The Chronology of the Pentateuch: A Comparison of the MT and LXX,” *JBL* 102.3 (1983), 401–409.

<sup>21</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ex. 15:17.

all its details according to its specifications. He had spent seven years building it.”<sup>23</sup>

Berman’s figurative approach to the number 480 in Kings is in line with his sustained approach to the entire biblical Exodus narrative, in which he chooses to interpret much of the text exhortatively as opposed to literally, thereby obfuscating the plain sense of the text. That is not to say that it is illegitimate to suggest that the Torah speaks in the language of metaphor. It certainly does. It is imperative, however, to first put forth a methodology for when a non-literal interpretation is indeed called for, and when it is not. Whereas Berman explains why the Garden of Eden story and other instances of biblical metaphor ought not be interpreted literally, at no point does he present a clear methodology for interpreting the story of the Exodus as hortatory.<sup>24</sup>

Maimonides, in his discussion on the primacy of creationism over belief in an eternal universe, states “a mere argument in favor of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a biblical text and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Saadia Gaon, whose remarks likely served as the model for Maimonides, writes in his introductory remarks to his commentary on the Torah, “It is appropriate to explain the Torah according to the plain sense of the words... except if it contradicts either the senses or rational thinking, or if the plain sense of the words under discussion contradicts another clear verse or a received tradition of the prophets.”<sup>26</sup>

It is important to understand the spurious nature of the all too prevalent “scholarly” argument regarding the lack of evidence. The claim is often made that there are no reflections of the Exodus in the historical record. This is the result of the following circle: Whenever something that seems to reflect the events of the Exodus is noted, it is dismissed because it could not reflect the Exodus, as we know that the Exodus did not take place. Some other explanation must be advanced, even if we must attribute it to some fabricated event for which there is no evidence. And what is the basis for the assertion that the Exodus did not take place and therefore cannot be reflected in any given piece of evidence? The “fact” that there is no reflection of it in the historical record! The academic a priori rejection of the possibility of the Exodus having occurred is cloaked in

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<sup>23</sup> 1Kings 6:38.

<sup>24</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 39–40.

<sup>25</sup> Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, II:25.

<sup>26</sup> Saadia Gaon, *Commentary on the Torah* (trans. Yosef Kapach; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1976), 162 (Heb.).

the guise of the argument that it could not have occurred as there is no evidence for its historicity. Again, it is crucial to understand the distinction between *fact* and *opinion*. The former, and not the latter, must be considered in interpreting the biblical text. This is the essence of the approach of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides.

In his approach to the Exodus material Berman implements a circular methodology. He begins by establishing that the number 480 in Kings is figurative, even though it does not contradict the senses, rational thinking, or another received prophetic tradition. From there Berman goes on to adopt the consensus of current trends in scholarship, which go against the plain sense of the text, and bear no correlation to the facts. Berman's unfortunate assertion that the case for the historicity of the Exodus is plagued by "a sustained lack of evidence," will be shown to go against the historical and archaeological record.<sup>27</sup>

## Support for a 15th Century Exodus, and 14th Century Conquest

- **The Archaeological Record**

In this section, archaeological evidence supporting a 14th century conquest will be presented. The discussion begins with a look at the pottery evidence from Israel's highlands. From there the discussion moves to the epigraphic evidence from ancient cultures spanning the Levant, most notably, the Tetragrammaton's appearance at a temple from the Reign of Amenhotep III. Archaeological evidence is then presented from cities in Israel that play a prominent role in the biblical conquest story. The analysis begins in Jericho, which exhibits a plethora of harmonizing features with the biblical text. Evidence of the well-fortified city having suffered a devastating earthquake, and its subsequent wholesale burning together with abundant unlooted stores of post-harvest grain, correlates seamlessly with the biblical narrative. Jericho's centuries-long period of abandonment also correlates well with the biblical account. The discussion then turns to the cities of Bethel, Lachish, Debir, Ai, Hazor and Khirbet el-Ahwat, which has been identified by Adam Zertal as Haroseth Haggoyim.

### a. The Pottery

The Israeli archeological record provides rich support for the biblical chronology.<sup>28</sup> Aharoni's surveys of the Upper Galilee yielded pottery evidence that led him to date the beginnings of Israelite infiltration to the

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<sup>27</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bryant Wood, "The Rise and Fall of the 13th Century Exodus Conquest



14th century.<sup>29</sup> Meitlis observes that Mycenaean and Cypriot vessels, considered to be the main chronological anchors for the Late Bronze Age, have been found at central highlands sites assigned to the Iron Age. His examination of the chronology of the Israeli highlands and the concurrence of different pottery types led him to the conclusion that the beginning of the Iron Age, and the Israelite conquest, should be dated to the 14th cent. BCE.<sup>30</sup> Meitlis bases his conclusions on the pottery assemblages of the following highland sites: Mount Eval, Tell en-Nasbeh, Beth Zur, Tel Sasa, Shiloh, and Tel Qiri.<sup>31</sup>

### b. Epigraphic Evidence

Whereas the Merenptah stela is commonly referenced in demonstration of Israel's firmly established presence in Canaan by at least 1210 BCE,<sup>32</sup> a column base fragment from the 18th Dynasty housed in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin has posed a challenge to the widely accepted 13th century Exodus theory.<sup>33</sup> Updated deciphering methods have shown the inscription, like the Merenptah stela, to list Israel together with Ashkelon and Canaan, in support of a 15th century Exodus.<sup>34</sup>

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Theory," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.3 (2005), 475–489.

<sup>29</sup> Yohanan Aharoni, "The Israelite Occupation of Canaan: An Account of the Archaeological Evidence," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 8.3 (1982), 14–23; idem, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (trans. and ed. A. F. Rainey; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> Itzhak Meitlis, "A Re-analysis of the Archaeological Evidence for the Beginning of the Iron Age," p. 105–111 in *Bene Israel: Studies in the Archaeology of Israel and the Levant During the Bronze and Iron Ages, in Honour of Israel Finkelstein* (A. Fantalkin and A. Yasur-Landau, eds.; Leiden: Brill, 2008). These findings are supported by 14C tests of carbonized wood from Strata V and VI at Tel Dan, idem, 109–110.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, *Excavating the Bible: New Archaeological Evidence for the Historic Reliability of Scripture* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2012), 136–150 (Heb.).

<sup>32</sup> Michael G. Hasel, "Israel in the Merneptah Stela," *BAZOR* 296 (1994), 45–61.

<sup>33</sup> Manfred Görg, "Israel in Hieroglyphen," *Biblische Notizen* 106 (2001), 24.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Peter van der Veen, Christopher Theis, Manfred Görg, "Israel in Canaan (long) before Merenptah? A Fresh Look at Berlin Statue Pedestal Relief 21687," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 2:4 (2010), 1–11. Not all scholars agree with the reading suggested by these scholars due to a slight variation in the spelling from the Merneptah stela. The authors attribute this discrepancy to the earlier orthography of 18th Dynasty spelling. Thomas Römer's objection to Görg's reading in idem, *The Invention of God* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015), 75, fails to take into account that the hieroglyphic "r" can also sound like an "l", as it does in Chinese. The preference of the "Israel" reading is further indicated by the word's grouping together with Ashkelon and Canaan, as in the Merneptah stela.

Further epigraphic evidence favoring the biblical chronology includes a victory stele erected by Pharaoh Seti in Beth-shean that reports battles fought in the Lower Western Galilee against a tribe bearing what appears to be the Hebrew name Asher,<sup>35</sup> Assyrian records reporting battles fought against a tribe named Yairi (son of Menashe?) on the banks of the Euphrates,<sup>36</sup> and two Late Bronze tablets from the city of Ugarit containing the name “ysril,” Israel, within a list of names.<sup>37</sup>

### c. The Tetragrammaton’s Appearance at a Temple from the Reign of Amenhotep III

The temple of Amun-Ra at Soleb, located in Soleb, Nubia, is dedicated to the 14th cent. 18th Dynasty pharaoh, Amenhotep III.<sup>38</sup> One of the temple’s inscribed columns references an ethnic group, *šsw* (Shasu), associated with the name *yhwš* (Yahweh).<sup>39</sup> In addition to the pillar inscription, a fragmentary wall list from the same temple features a similar inscription.<sup>40</sup> Egyptians used the term *šsw* to refer to nomadic peoples located in the southern Levant, especially the areas of Sinai, Edom, Moab, Transjordan, and Canaan.<sup>41</sup> Kennedy explains that “Since the word order infers that the construct is being used, the phrase translates as the ‘land of

<sup>35</sup> Sh. Yeivin, *The Israelite Conquest of Canaan* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch Archaeologisch Instituut in Nabije Oosten, 1971), 23; Abraham Malamat, Hayim Tadmor, *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), 23.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Mazar, “Yair, Yairi,” *Encyclopedia Biblica*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1965), 415–416 (Heb.).

<sup>37</sup> Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook: Grammar, Texts in Transliteration, Cuneiform Selections, Glossary, Indices* (vol. 38 of *Analecta Orientalia*; Rome: Pontificio Instituto, 1998), 1.2. (UT 2069, 00-4.623:3; UT 328, R1-4.50:6).

<sup>38</sup> James H. Breasted, “Second Preliminary Report of the Egyptian Expedition,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 25 (1908), 1–110, 84.

<sup>39</sup> J. Leclant, “Le ‘Tétragramme’ à l’Époque d’Aménophis III,” pp. 215–219 in *Near Eastern Studies dedicated to H. I. H. Prince Takabito Mikasa on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (M. Mori et al, eds.; Wiesbaden, 1991); E. Edel, “Die Ortsnamenlisten in den Tempeln von Aksha, Amarah und Soleb im Sudan,” *Biblische Notizen* 11 (1980), 63–79, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Titus Kennedy, “The Land of the *šsw* (Nomads) of *yhwš* at Soleb,” p. 175–192 in *Dotavo: A Journal of Nubian Studies* 6.1 (2019), 178. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07x6659z>.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Levy, Russel Adams and Adolfo Muniz, “Archaeology and the Shasu Nomads: Recent Excavations in the Jabal Hamrat Fidan, Jordan,” pp. 63–89 in *Le David Maskil: A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Freedman* (William Henry Propp and Richard Elliott Friedman, eds; Ann Arbor: Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 63–89, 65–66; David Hopkins, “Pastoralists in Late Bronze Age Palestine: Which Way Did They Go?” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 56. 4 (1993), 200–211, 210.

the nomads of *yhm3*.”<sup>42</sup> Kennedy further explains that since the inscription does not feature a land determinative, *yhm3* must therefore be understood as a proper name as opposed to a toponym. Furthermore, the lack of the *ntr* “god” determinative indicates that *yhm3* was not an Egyptian deity. Kennedy concludes, “Since the only ancient people known to have worshipped a deity named *yhm3* (Yahweh) in ancient times were the Hebrews or Israelites, it also logically follows that these particular *ššw* nomads associated with *yhm3* could be identified with the early Israelites before they became a sedentary population in Canaan, and that the Egyptians had familiarity with this group and this deity during the 18th Dynasty at the end of the 15th century BCE.”<sup>43</sup>

#### d. Jericho

The Jericho excavations have generated numerous correlations with the details of the story recounted in Joshua. John Garstang’s excavations at Jericho yielded an array of 18th Dynasty royal scarabs, amulet seals fashioned in the form of the dung beetle and bearing pharaonic throne names from Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III through Amenhotep III (early 15th cent. – early/mid-14th cent. BCE).<sup>44</sup> Garstang noted the conspicuous absence from this rich collection of any fragments relating to Akhenaton’s distinctive rule (early 14th century BCE).<sup>45</sup> He further buttressed his 15th century assessment for the fall of Jericho by citing Jericho’s glaring absence from the 14th century BCE Amarna Letters.<sup>46</sup>

Kathleen Kenyon’s re-assessment of the data, dating the destruction of Jericho to no later than the mid-16th century BCE, was primarily based on the absence of pottery imported from Cyprus and common to the Late Bronze I period.<sup>47</sup> Bryant Wood’s re-examination of both excavation reports led him to the conclusion that whereas Kenyon had correctly dated a collapsed wall that Garstang mistakenly assumed to be Late Bronze, her

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<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, “The Land of the *ššw* (Nomads),” 184.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>44</sup> J. Garstang and J. B. E. Garstang, *The Story of Jericho* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940).

<sup>45</sup> Piotr Bienkowski argues that the scarabs could have been re-makes or heirlooms. Cf. Piotr Bienkowski, “Jericho Was Destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, Not the Late Bronze Age,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16.5 (1990), 45; idem, *Jericho in the Late Bronze Age* (Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1986), 68.

<sup>46</sup> J. Garstang and J. B. E. Garstang, *The Story of Jericho*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1948), 126–127.

<sup>47</sup> K. Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (London: Ernest Benn, 1957), 262; idem, *The Bible in Recent Archaeology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 33–37.

primary argument, which was based on the absence of distinctive period pottery, was fundamentally flawed.<sup>48</sup> Wood points to the abundant imitation bichrome “Cypriot” pottery uncovered by Garstang and referred to by him as “red-ware,” as having been overlooked by Kenyon. Wood further argues that given Hatshepsut’s detested place in the Egyptian pantheon of Pharaohs, the scarab found by Garstang bearing her inscription could not be a re-issue and should be viewed as authentic, lending credence to the authenticity of the rest of the scarab collection.<sup>49</sup> The combined evidence of the wide assortment of 18th Dynasty scarabs found at Jericho together with its abundant imitation bichrome “Cypriot” pottery support Garstang’s original ca. 1400 BCE conquest date.

#### e. Bethel, Lachish, Debir, Ai and Hazor

Proponents of the 13th cent. Exodus-conquest theory cite Albright’s excavations at Bethel, Lachish, Debir and Ai,<sup>50</sup> and Yadin’s excavations at Hazor.<sup>51</sup> Re-evaluation of the data, however, by Wood and Ussishkin, has shown that Beitin/ Bethel was destroyed in the early 12th century, likely by the Philistines,<sup>52</sup> and that inscriptions unearthed at Lachish indicate an even later destruction.<sup>53</sup> It has further been demonstrated that Albright’s identification of Ai was mistaken, as the proposed site lacks critical topographical features presented by the text.<sup>54</sup> Wood identifies Khirbet el-Maqtar as biblical Ai, based on its Late Bronze occupation/ destruction and its topographical agreement with the narrative specifications of the story told in Joshua. Moshe Kochavi’s excavations at Khirbet Rabud have

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<sup>48</sup> Bryant Wood, “Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16.2 (1990), 44–59.

<sup>49</sup> Bryant Wood, “Dating Jericho’s Destruction: Bienkowski Is Wrong on All Counts,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16.5 (1990), 45, 47–49, 68.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. John J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1981), 30–73; William F. Albright, “Ai and Beth-Aven,” p. 141–149 in *Excavations and Results at Tell el-Fûl (Gibeah of Saul)* (Benjamin W. Bacon ed.; AASOR 4; New Haven, American Schools of Oriental Research, 1924).

<sup>51</sup> William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 27–28.

<sup>52</sup> Bryant G. Wood, *Palestinian Pottery of the Late Bronze Age: An Investigation of the Terminal LB IIB Phase* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1985), 353–355, 447–448, 471–472.

<sup>53</sup> David Ussishkin, “Lachish,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (1997), 3:317–323, 319.

<sup>54</sup> Bryant Wood, “Locating ‘Ai: Excavations at Kh. El-Maqtar 1995–2000 and 2009–2014,” *In the Highland’s Depth: Journal for the Study of Archaeology and History of the Highland’s Region* 6 (2016), 17–49.

likewise presented a far more likely candidate for biblical Debir.<sup>55</sup> Regarding Hazor, it remains undetermined if its 13th cent. destruction layer should be attributed to Joshua or to Deborah. Bruce Waltke makes a strong case for an even earlier Late Bronze destruction layer.<sup>56</sup> Adam Zertal's identification of Khirbet el-Ahwat with Haroseth Haggoyim (a single occupation site, which was populated only briefly between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and which closely resembles unique Late Bronze Age sites in Sardinia) correlates with a contemporary timeframe for the Deborah-Barak battle at Hazor.<sup>57</sup>

- **The Historical Record**

In this section, the period of time spanning the 15<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Egypt is examined. The overriding question is: Given the geopolitical climate, at what point in time is it at all reasonable to consider an Israelite conquest? There were very few periods in the Late Bronze Age during which Canaan was not firmly under Egyptian control.<sup>58</sup> It will be shown that the only window of time that might have reasonably allowed for the conquest of Canaan was sometime between the 18th Dynasty's sharp decline and its ultimate dissolution. The discussion presented here begins with the 15th cent. pharaoh, Thutmose III, the "Napoleon" of Egypt's 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and concludes with the legendary 13th cent., 19th Dynasty pharaoh, Ramesses II.

During the reigns of the great warrior pharaohs Thutmose III and his son/coregent Amenhotep II, Egypt's 18th Dynasty reached its military, territorial and economic apex.<sup>59</sup> Thutmose III led yearly expeditions to

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<sup>55</sup> Moshe Kochavi, "Khirbet Rabud," *Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 1 (1974), 2–23.

<sup>56</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, "Palestinian Artifactual Evidence Supporting the Early Date of the Exodus," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (1972), 33–47.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Adam Zertal, *Sisera's Secret* (Or Yehuda, Israel: Dvir Pub., 2010); Baruch Brandl, "Nine Scarabs, a Scaraboid, a Cylinder Seal and a Bifacial Plaque from el-Ahwat," p. 233–263 in A. Zertal, *El-Ahwat, A Fortified Site of the Early Iron Age near Nabal 'Iron, Israel* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Lester Grabbe, "Reflections on the Discussion," p.179–188 in *The Land of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age* (Lester Grabbe, ed.; London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>59</sup> Ann Rosalie David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 230.

the Levant,<sup>60</sup> and like his grandfather Thutmose I,<sup>61</sup> erected a monumental stela on the bank of the Euphrates River celebrating his victories.<sup>62</sup> Amenhotep II, a revered warrior in his own right as well as a legendary archer, also embarked on northern campaigns, although only early on in his career.<sup>63</sup> Suspicion that the demise of the 18th Dynasty stemmed from events occurring sometime during the early years of Amenhotep II's reign will be elaborated upon below.

Thutmose IV, the successor of Amenhotep II, whose court consisted almost entirely of a bureaucratic as opposed to a military administration,<sup>64</sup> began his reign with the appellation "conqueror of Syria." This is especially ironic considering the fact that there are no records of Thutmose IV conducting any military campaigns!<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, neither Thutmose IV, who ruled for only a decade, nor Amenhotep III, who succeeded him, are believed to have conducted any northern expeditions.<sup>66</sup> Despite Amenhotep III's lack of military forays, he seems to have found alternative ways of inflating his stature; he erected more statues of himself throughout Egypt than any other Pharaoh.<sup>67</sup> Whereas Amenhotep III's

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<sup>60</sup> Betsy Bryan, "Antecedents to Amenhotep III," p. 27–62 in *Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign* (David O'Connor, Eric H. Cline, eds.; Ann Arbor: Michigan Univ. Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Colleen Manassa, *The Great Karnak Inscription of Merneptah: Grand Strategy in the 13th Century BC* (Bristol: ISD LLC, 2004), 75.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Gabriel, *Thutmose III: A Military Biography of Egypt's Greatest Warrior King* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2009).

<sup>63</sup> William Stiebing Jr. and Susan Helft, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017), 180.

<sup>64</sup> Bryan, "Antecedents to Amenhotep III," 61. It is noteworthy that Thutmose IV had probably not always been the crown prince. This suspicion is based on a stela Thutmose IV erected between the paws of the Great Sphinx at Giza, propagandizing his accession. The text of the stela asserts that Thutmose IV ascended the throne following a dream in which the sun god represented by the Sphinx informed him of his future ascendancy contingent on his removing the sand covering its body. Cf. William Stiebing Jr. and Susan Helft, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017), 181.

<sup>65</sup> Thutmose IV is twice referred to as "conqueror of Syria" on the Stele of Semen (*Smm*) in the Louvre (C 202). Cf. P. Pierret: *Recueil d'inscriptions inédites du Musée Égyptien du Louvre*, II partie (Paris, 1878), 35; R. O. Faulkner, "Egyptian Military Standards," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 27 (1941), 12–18, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "Canaan Under the Rule of the Egyptian New Kingdom: From the Hyksos to the Sea Peoples," in idem, *The Land of Canaan*, 90–101, 93.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. William Stiebing Jr. and Susan Helft, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017), 182.

reliance on foreign diplomatic alliances as opposed to military confrontation has been interpreted by some as a sign of security and prosperity,<sup>68</sup> the Amarna Letters, which document the last years of Amenhotep III through the reign of Tutankhamun, provide ample evidence of what can be best be described as Amenhotep III's and Akhenaton's wholesale neglect of the greater Egyptian empire.<sup>69</sup> These letters report lavish gifts being sent to Egypt's allies and vassals who often brazenly protested that the amount sent was insufficient. Egypt's presence abroad continued to deteriorate during the reign of Akhenaton, the religious reformer.<sup>70</sup>

The death knell of the 18th Dynasty may be detected in the bizarre behavior of the widowed queen (perhaps Nefertiti or possibly Tutankhamun's widow), who for all intents and purposes offered the throne of Egypt to a foreigner and rival, with her request for a marriage alliance with Egypt's erstwhile arch nemesis, Hittite king Suppililiumas.<sup>71</sup> The extinction of the royal line of the 18th Dynasty culminates with the ascension of a succession of army officers.<sup>72</sup>

It was mentioned above that the demise of the 18th Dynasty is suspected to have stemmed from events occurring sometime during the reign of Amenhotep II. This supposition is reinforced by Amenhotep II's uncharacteristic "retirement" from war during the prime of his life (especially in light of his well-documented tendencies to savage violence),<sup>73</sup> following his second campaign (or possibly third) early on in his military career, that took him no further than the Canaanite territories,<sup>74</sup> and from which he returned with what appears to be an astronomical number of

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<sup>68</sup> Trevor Bryce, *Letters of the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East: The Royal Correspondence of the Late Bronze Age* (London: Routledge, 2004), 19.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>70</sup> Akhenaton's drastic monotheistic-like religious reform and defamation of other gods in other temples are especially interesting considering the events surrounding the Exodus. Cf. Jan Assman, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 198–221.

<sup>71</sup> Carlos Ramirez-Faria, *Concise Encyclopedia of World History* (Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2007), 192. The Hittite groom (Zananza), was summarily assassinated. Cf. Trevor Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 194.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Aidan Dodson, *Amarna Sunset: Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, Ay, Horemheb, and the Egyptian Counter-reformation* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Note especially the sacrifice of the seven Asiatic princes. Cf. James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest, Vol. II: The Eighteenth Dynasty* (William Rainey Harper ed.; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1906), 313.

<sup>74</sup> Sh. Yeivin, "Amenophis II's Asiatic Campaigns," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 6 (1967), 119–128.

human booty.<sup>75</sup> The unusual timing of the launching of this campaign in the winter season adds to the suspicion that it was undertaken to recoup the loss of slave labor sustained in the Exodus.<sup>76</sup> Shea comments, “While some have questioned the very high number given here, if one looks at the need for slave labor right after the Exodus, the number does not look so high after all.”<sup>77</sup> We may add another suspicious event concurrent with Amenhotep II’s early retirement from military forays: the dramatic decline in domestic turquoise mining activity at Serabit el-Khadem, in southwest Sinai. Expeditions to the turquoise mines at Serabit el-Khadem were conducted regularly for a period of c. 800 years (spanning the Late Middle and New Kingdoms).<sup>78</sup> These mining expeditions inexplicably seem to have come to a near standstill during the reigns of Amenhotep II and his successor, Thutmose IV.<sup>79</sup> The same circumstances which would explain the lack of military adventure and the attempt at replenishing the depleted slave supply can also account for the paucity of mining activity. A shortage of slave labor would have surely rendered mining impractical.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the mysterious desertion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty’s royal complex and vital port city at Peru-nefer/Avaris, while Amenhotep II still sat on the throne, adds to the suspicion that unprecedented catastrophic events were behind the abandonment of this palatial complex and vital port city.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Cf. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 239, 246; “The Memphis and Karnak Stelae of Amenhotep II,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions and Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 2 (William Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds.; James K. Hoffmeier, trans.; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 19–23, 22; Hoffmeier, “The Annals of Thutmose III,” *ibid*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, 246; Claude Vandersleyen, *L’Égypte et la Vallée du Nil*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 321.

<sup>77</sup> William Shea, “Amenhotep II as Pharaoh of the Exodus,” *Bible and Spade* 16:2 (2003), 42–52, 47.

<sup>78</sup> William Flinders Petrie, *Researches in Sinai* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906).

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Alan Gardiner and T. E. Peet, *The Inscriptions of Sinai*, vol. II (Jaroslav Cerny ed.; 45th Memoir of the Egypt Exploration Society; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), 150–169.

<sup>80</sup> It is agreed that the miners in Serabit el-Khadem were of Asiatic origin. Cf. Petrie, *Researches in Sinai*; Alan Gardiner, “The Egyptian Origin of the Semitic Alphabet,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 3 (1916), 1–16; Orly Goldwasser, “Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus Is Hathor? The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai,” *Ägypten und Levante* 16 (2006), 121–160.

<sup>81</sup> Manfred Bietak, “A Thutmosid Palace Precinct at Peru-nefer (Tell El-Dab’a),” p. 223–250 in *Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Palaces: Proceedings of the Conference of Palaces in Ancient Egypt, held in London 12th–14th June 2013, organized by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the University of Würzburg and the Egypt Exploration*



It is critical to stress here that whereas the unusual events documented to have occurred during the reign of Amenhotep II do not constitute *proof* of an Exodus during the days of Amenhotep II, they do constitute *evidence* that bears looking into. If this evidence can be shown to work in concert with the larger biblical, historical, archaeological, and epigraphic record, then the evidence may cautiously be understood to corroborate the biblical story.<sup>82</sup>

Egypt's waning foreign influence was restored during the 19th Dynasty under Pharaohs Sety and Ramesses II who embarked on campaigns to reinstate the territories lost during the Amarna period.<sup>83</sup> Sety led an expedition to Southern Canaan, and Ramesses II, the renowned military leader, pursued numerous campaigns up the Mediterranean coast, plundering towns in his path.<sup>84</sup> Considering Ramesses II's multiple forays in Canaan, he certainly appears to be, to quote Grabbe, "an unlikely ruler for the exodus!"<sup>85</sup> Even if we assume, based on the Hittite archives, that Ramesses II exaggerated his performance on the battlefield, he nevertheless succeeded in preventing further Hittite incursions into Egyptian territory.<sup>86</sup> Skepticism of Ramesses II having been the pharaoh of the Exodus is reinforced by the tremendous increase in the archaeological record of the remains of 19th Dynasty Egyptian buildings, municipal and military, found within Israel.<sup>87</sup>

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*Society*, vol. I (Manfred Bietak and Silvia Prell, eds.; Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2018), 224, 241; idem, "Nomads or mnmn.t-shepherds in the eastern Nile delta in the New Kingdom," p. 123–136 in "I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times": *Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, vol. 1 (Amihai Mazar, ed.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 123.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Geula Twersky's analysis of the inner political intrigues of the court of Amenhotep II, which provides a broader glimpse at the aftershocks of the Exodus in idem, "'Where Have all the Viziers Gone?' Footprints of the Exodus in the Historical Record," *Bekhol Derakbekha Daehu* 38 (2023), forthcoming.

<sup>83</sup> Charlotte Booth, *Horemheb: The Forgotten Pharaoh* (Gloucestershire: Amberley, 2009).

<sup>84</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "Canaan Under the Rule of the Egyptian New Kingdom: From the Hyksos to the Sea Peoples," p. 90–101 in Grabbe, ed., *The Land of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age*.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>86</sup> Gérard Chaliand, *A Global History of War: From Assyria to the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014), 20.

<sup>87</sup> Alan Millard, "Ramesses Was Here . . . and Others, Too!" pp. 305–312 in *Rameside Studies in Honour of K. A. Kitchen* (M. Collier and S. Snape, eds.; Bolton: Rutherford, 2011); the biblical silence on relations between Israel and Egypt, essentially until the reign of Solomon, is explained by Wood to reflect Israel's settlement in the highlands, while Egypt concentrated on preserving its access

- **The Geopolitical Climate of the Judges/Amarna Period**

In this subsection, we will examine the geopolitical climate and topography of the land of Canaan/Israel during the period of the judges and the Amarna period, respectively. Evidence related to the major players on the world stage at the time, and the general climate of anarchy presented in the Amarna Letters, will be shown to resonate with the biblical chronology, specifically as described in the book of Judges.

- a. **Cushan Rishathaim and Othniel**

The book of Judges opens with the story of Israel's oppression and salvation from Cushan Rishathaim, King of Aram Naharaim, by Othniel, the first of the judges.<sup>88</sup> Aram Naharaim (also the home of Abraham's brother Nahor,<sup>89</sup> and Bil'am ben Be'or)<sup>90</sup> has been identified by many scholars as Mittani, a major Near Eastern power from upper Mesopotamia between the 16th and 14th centuries, and referred to in ancient Egyptian texts as Nahrma/Naharin.<sup>91</sup> Mittani disappears from the world stage shortly after the 13th century when it was defeated by Hatti and Assyria.<sup>92</sup> Hansler

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to the Canaanite lowland fertile lands and trade routes. Cf. Bryant Wood, "The Biblical Date for the Exodus Is 1446 BC: A Response to James Hoffmeier 2007," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007), 249–258.

<sup>88</sup> Jud. 3: 8–11.

<sup>89</sup> Gen. 24:10.

<sup>90</sup> Deut. 23:5.

<sup>91</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *A History of Egypt, vol. II, The XVIIIth and XVIIIth Dynasties* (London: Methuen & Co., 1896), 285; Hugo Winckler, "Die Volker Vorderasiens," *Der Alte Orient* 1 (1900), 1–36, 21 ff; Maurice Bloomfield, "On Some Alleged Indo-European Languages in Cuneiform Character," *The American Journal of Philology* 25.1 (1904), 1–14, 7; H. Hänsler, "Der Historische Hintergrund von Richter 3, 8–10," *Biblica* 12.4 (1931), 395–410; idem, "Der Untergang Mittannis im Kampfe um Syrien und Palästina," *Biblica* 12.3 (1931), 271–296; Clyde E. Billington, "Othniel, Cushan-Rishathaim, and the Date of the Exodus," pp. 117–132 in *Beyond the Jordan: Studies in Honor of W. Harold Mare* (Glenn A. Carnagey, Sr., et al., eds.; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005). Cf. A. Malamat, "Cushan Rishathaim and the Decline of the Near East around 1200 B. C.," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13.4 (1954), 231–242. Malamat identifies Cushan Rishathaim with a Syrian ruler named Irsu, who briefly seized the Egyptian throne between the 19th and 20th Dynasties, during the early 12th century. The prophet Samuel is dated to the mid-11th century. Malamat's approach not only disregards the role of Aram Naharaim in the story, but it also reduces the entire period of the Judges, including the reign of Eli, into a mere 150 years!

<sup>92</sup> Gernot Wilhelm, "The Kingdom of Mittani in Second-Millennium Upper Mesopotamia," pp.1243–1254 in *Civilization of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2 (Jack Sasson, ed.; New York: Scribner, 1995).

identifies Cushan Rishathaim with Tusratta, the King of Mitanni, a contemporary of Amenhotep IV, who is mentioned in the Amarna Letters. Hansler notes that the letters *Kaph* and *Thaw* are often transposed in Moabite inscriptions. He assumes the name Rishathaim to be a play on the word “*rasha*,” wicked, and points to further instances of antonomasia in the book of Ruth.

Billington believes the name Rishathaim to be an actual name. He emphasizes that the text does not say that Cushan was an Aramean, but rather a member of a people named Rishathaim. Billington explains that the Rishathaim are one and the same as the “Country of Reshet” from 16th–15th century Egyptian inscriptions, who were located far north of Egypt.<sup>93</sup> He cites Der Manuelian’s interpretation of the Karnak Stella (ca. 1450 BCE) in which Amenhotep II appears to equate Naharin with the Mitanni,<sup>94</sup> and explains the “im” ending in Rishathaim to be the Hebrew plural suffix.<sup>95</sup>

Whether we accept Hansler’s antonomastic identification of Cushan Rishathaim with Tusratta, or Billington’s literal identification of the Mitanni king, the fact is that Aram Naharaim ceases to threaten the nascent Israel following the story of Othniel. The sudden disappearance of this foreign menace accords well with the historical data relating to the fall of the Mittani no later than the 13th cent. BCE, which is of course incompatible with the 13th cent. BCE Exodus theory.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 135, listing no. 321.

<sup>94</sup> P. der Manuelian, *Studies in the Reign of Amenophis II* (Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge 26; Hildesheim, 1987), 67–68.

<sup>95</sup> Billington further points to Ugaritic texts dating before 1200 BCE that mention a people called Rishim and a city called Rish, north of Ugarit, in northwest Syria. Cf. Freuke Gondahls, *Die Personennamen Der Texte Aus Ugarit* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1967), 178. Billington also suggests that the Rish people are synonymous with the Urshu, an ancient northern Mesopotamia people mentioned in Ebla and Hittite texts. Cf. Harvey Weiss, “Conflict and Conquest Among the Amorite Kingdoms,” pp. 186–193, 204–212 in *Ebla to Damascus: Art and Archaeology of Ancient Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1985), 191; O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), 191.

<sup>96</sup> Hittite King Suppiluliumas overthrew the Mitanni in the late 14th cent. but left a small portion of the former empire beyond the Euphrates as a vassal kingdom to serve as a buffer state against Assyria, into which it was eventually absorbed. A diminished Aram Naharaim reappears later as part of a larger Armenian confederation in the days of King David. Cf. Ps. 60:2, 1 Chron. 19:6.

### b. The Amarna Letters

The Amarna Letters, which document the last years of Amenhotep III through the reign of Tutankhamun, provide ample evidence of what can be best described as Amenhotep III's and Akhenaton's wholesale neglect of the greater Egyptian empire.<sup>97</sup> The letters reveal the Land of Canaan, while still presumably a province of the Egyptian empire, to be in a state of utter anarchy. Vassal kings sent frantic appeals to the Pharaohs for help against marauding invaders, which went unanswered. The 18th Dynasty's bizarre abandonment of the northern territories documented in the Amarna Letters,<sup>98</sup> despite the threat of the *Apiru* (a term suggested by some to describe the Hebrews,<sup>99</sup> or more broadly understood to include other Semitic tribes as well,<sup>100</sup> or perhaps landless marauders and mercenaries) matches the political climate described in the book of Judges.<sup>101</sup> Whichever definition one prefers, the biblical book that best typifies that state of affairs is the book of Judges.<sup>102</sup> Doak points to Abimelek, Gaal and kinsmen, Jephthah and his band of outlaws, and the landless Danite mob, to be broadly indicative of the book of Judges as "the most sustained literary product in the ancient Near East depicting a world of Habiru-like actors generating political transformation."<sup>103</sup> Meitlis further observes that "The main list of city states from the Amarna Letters almost perfectly matches the names of the cities pointed out by the biblical text as Canaanite cities that survived during the period of the judges."<sup>104</sup> This stands in

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<sup>97</sup> Trevor Bryce, *Letters of the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East: The Royal Correspondence of the Late Bronze Age* (London: Routledge, 2004), 187.

<sup>98</sup> Neither Thutmose IV nor Amenhotep III are believed to have conducted any northern expeditions. Cf. Lester L. Grabbe, "Canaan Under the Rule of the Egyptian New Kingdom: From the Hyksos to the Sea Peoples," in idem, *The Land of Canaan*, 90–101, 93.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. S. Brooks, "The Habiru/'Apiru and 'Ibrim and the connection with I Samuel," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 19–20 (2001–2002), 65–70, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Yehuda Elitzur, *Israel and the Bible: Studies in Geography, History and Biblical Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 1999), 53 (Heb.).

<sup>101</sup> The term is also explained more broadly as a social stratum between tribal and urban society, cf. M. B. Rowton, "Dimorphic structure and the problem of 'Apiru-'Ibrim," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35 (1976), 13–20. The term may also connote military mercenaries, cf. Ronald Youngblood, "The Amarna Letters and the Habiru," pp. 133–145 in Carnagey et al., eds., *Beyond the Jordan*, 137.

<sup>102</sup> Meitlis, *Excavating the Bible: New Archaeological Evidence for the Historic Reliability of Scripture* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2012), 167–172 (Heb.).

<sup>103</sup> Brian Doak, "'Some Worthless and Reckless Fellows': Landless and Parasocial Leadership in Judges," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 11.2 (2011), 2–29, 6.

<sup>104</sup> Meitlis, *Excavating the Bible*, 170.

stark contrast to the absolute silence in the Amarna record concerning cities known to have been captured by Joshua, such as Jericho, Bethel, Gibeon, Shiloh, Mizpeh and Debir.<sup>105</sup> Of particular interest is the city of Shechem, regarding which, curiously, no battle is recorded in the Bible, and which the Amarna Letters confirm to have been given over without the use of force.<sup>106</sup> Elitzur further notes the failure of the Amarna Letters, as well as the New Kingdom annals, to mention any cities in the mountain region of Samaria, the center of Canaan.<sup>107</sup> This accords seamlessly with the densely forested early topography of the area, described in Joshua 17.<sup>108</sup>

The 15th cent. Exodus has been shown in this exceedingly brief survey to be supported by extensive epigraphic and archaeological evidence spanning the Levant. Furthermore, the historical record documenting the decline and dissolution of Egypt's 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the contemporary geopolitical climate of Canaan, and the unique topographic conditions of the land ca. the period of the judges resonate seamlessly with the biblical chronology; hardly a "sustained lack of evidence."

### **Berman's Numeric Argument**

Berman sets out to prove that the numbers documented in the Exodus material, most specifically the figure 600,000 adult males, is not meant to be taken literally, but rather as a reflection of status. Berman bases his revisionist interpretation of the numerical data on the secondary meaning of *elef* as clan or troop.<sup>109</sup>

Berman develops this argument in response to the problem of the absence of any Egyptian record of the Exodus. Berman's initial answer to this question relates to the fact that the Egyptians did not differentiate between Asiatic ethnic groups, nor did they recount their own failures. In an attempt to nonetheless account for this lacuna in the Egyptian record, Berman goes on to offer a numeric argument.<sup>110</sup> Berman suggests that the

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<sup>105</sup> Edward F. Campbell, Jr., "The Amarna Letters and the Amarna Period," *Biblical Archaeologist* 23 (1960), 11; Theophile James Meek, *Hebrew Origins* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 21.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. EA 289, the letter of Abdi-Heba of Jerusalem, *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 3, 238; Bryant G. Wood, "The Role of Shechem in the Conquest of Canaan," pp. 245–256 in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea* (David Merling, ed.; Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archaeology, Andrews U, 1997).

<sup>107</sup> Y. Elitzur, *Israel and the Bible*, 340.

<sup>108</sup> Yehuda Kiel quotes Yehuda Elitzur in his introduction to the book of Joshua. Cf. Y. Kiel, *Joshua* (Daat Mikra; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1976), 34 (Heb.).

<sup>109</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 50.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 44 ff.

answer essentially lies in the relatively small number of Israelites involved. In other words (mine): The inconsequential number of Israelites who left Egypt simply did not warrant appearance on the front pages of the Egyptian news cycle. Berman states, “Despite the Torah’s apparent declaration that the Israelite men numbered 600,000 when they left Egypt, a wealth of material *from within the Torah itself* (the italics are Berman’s) points to a number dramatically and perhaps even exponentially lower.” My refutation of Berman’s approach to the numbers in the Exodus narrative will follow the summary of his argument.

Berman poses three questions relating to numbers in the Exodus narrative which he then cites as proof that the numbers were “manipulated by the text of the Torah.”<sup>111</sup>

- **Questions Relating to the Numbers in the Exodus Narrative**<sup>112</sup>

- 1 The Two Census Figures:

If the two census figures presented in the Torah (Num. 1 and 26) are meant to be accurate, then why are both totals nearly identical? Furthermore, how may we account for the disparity between the seemingly rounded tribal figures, and the ostensibly precise final total figures?

2. An Unusual Rounding Pattern:

None of the tribal tallies are rounded off to the nearest thousand. Whereas they often seem to be rounded to the nearest hundred, they never present a remainder of 100, 800 or 900, displaying a clear tendency to cluster towards the middle, with most tribes tallying a remainder of either 400 or 500.

3. The Firstborn Males:

The Torah reports in Numbers 3:43 that there was a surprisingly if not impossibly low number of firstborn males (22,273), which poses a serious statistical anomaly for a nation numbering upwards of 2,000,000 people.

Berman’s response to these questions is to insist that the census figures do not represent factual figures, but rather “a reflection of status”... “the Torah seems to suggest that the total figure to leave Egypt was not

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>112</sup> The first to formulate the numeric argument and approach adopted by Berman was Flinders Petrie. Cf. Idem, *Researches in Sinai*, 209–216.

600,000 men, but much fewer.”<sup>113</sup> Berman suggests that the actual number of Israelites involved in the Exodus was more likely to have been “enough people to fill a stadium.”<sup>114</sup>

### A Response to Berman’s Numeric Argument

Berman’s argument presupposed two basic assumptions:

- 1 The numbers of Israelites recorded in the Torah are figurative and not literal.
- 2 The actual number of Israelites that left Egypt were relatively few; certainly few enough to explain their having been overlooked by the annals of ancient Egypt.

I will begin by addressing the latter assumption. The discussion of Israel’s relative size at the time of the Exodus will be followed by an inquiry into the possibility of the census numbers as tropes, and the term *elep* as “clan” or “troop.”

- **Israel, Relatively Few in Number?**

Berman cites a verse in Deuteronomy as proof of Israel’s underwhelmingly small size at the time of the Exodus: “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.”<sup>115</sup> This is of course a *relative* statement. In other words, Israel was indeed *smaller* than other nations, but that is not to say “small” in *absolute* terms. Berman adds, “It goes without saying that there is no archaeological evidence that the Land of Israel contained tens of millions of inhabitants at this time (or indeed ever), as would be necessitated by a literal reading of Deuteronomy 7:7 and the figure of 600,000 men of fighting age in the dessert.”<sup>116</sup> To begin with, the stated inequality between the two respective populations in no way necessitates a hyperbolic “tens of millions” inhabitants of the land. Furthermore, the archaeological record indeed shows there to have been a *five hundred percent increase* in Early Iron Age settlement activity in the Israeli highlands.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 50–51.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 51, nt.4.

<sup>115</sup> Deut. 7:7.

<sup>116</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 49, nt. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. William Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 110.

Berman presents further “proof” that the Torah itself depicted Israel as “incapable of populating the land they were destined to enter”:<sup>118</sup> “But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.”<sup>119</sup> A brief look at the preceding verse puts the message of these verses into context: “I will send the hornet, *הַצִּרְעָה*, ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way.”<sup>120</sup> At the height of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egypt held a firm grip on the Canaanite territories, which they referred to as *Retjenu*. Garstang, Jericho’s original excavator, offers a highly insightful explanation of the hornet metaphor. The hornet was the Egyptian hieroglyph for itself. Garstang explains that at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> cent. the Egyptian northern expeditions came to a sudden halt, paving the way for the Israelite conquest.<sup>121</sup> Garstang’s interpretation was accepted, albeit modified by Bodenheimer, who added that the symbol represented “the ruler of Lower Egypt since the first dynasty... spreading fear before the powerful King.”<sup>122</sup> Neufeld adds that “The Egyptian king, in his role of King of Lower Egypt (the Delta) was literally ‘He-who-belongs-to-the-Bee’ or rather ‘He-of-the-Bee.’ This dates back almost to the beginning of history.”<sup>123</sup> In these verses, the Torah may be understood to be framing the Egyptian policy of domination and subjugation in the Canaanite territories prior to Israel’s entry as having unwittingly played a providential role in paving the way for Israel’s subsequent entry into the land.<sup>124</sup> Even those who interpret the hornet metaphor differently would agree that these verses refer not to the *effects* of the Israelite conquest, but rather to events that gradually *preceded* it. In other words, the land’s emptying out over time *prior* to the Israelite conquest prevented the formation of a void and the infiltration of wild animals, thus laying the foundation for an unfettered entry. To sum up, the above cited verses in no way indicate a paucity in Israel’s numbers.

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<sup>118</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 48.

<sup>119</sup> Ex. 23:29–30.

<sup>120</sup> Ex. 23: 31.

<sup>121</sup> John Garstang, *Foundations of Bible History: Joshua, Judges* (London: Constable & Co., 1931), 112ff., 258ff.

<sup>122</sup> Friedrich S. Bodenheimer, *Animal and Man in Bible Lands* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 74.

<sup>123</sup> Edward Neufeld, “Insects as Warfare Agents in the Ancient Near East (Ex. 23:28; Deut. 7:20; Josh. 24:12; Isa. 7:18–20),” *Orientalia* 49.1 (1980), 30–57, 40–41.

<sup>124</sup> For a rich discussion of the various interpretations of the role of the hornet in these verses cf. idem and Yehuda Feliks, *Nature and Man in the Bible: Chapters in Biblical Ecology* (London, Jerusalem, New York: Soncino, 1981), 32–38.



Contrary to Berman's claim of low population size at the time of the Exodus, time and time again we find the Torah confirming Israel's prodigious size. Egypt's horror at the prospect of Israel's burgeoning population certainly does not reflect a paucity of numbers.<sup>125</sup> Following Israel's escape, Egypt sends 600 chariots and its elite troops to give chase.<sup>126</sup> The absolute largest number of chariots mentioned in the Annals of Thutmose III, "the Napoleon of Ancient Egypt," is the 924 taken at Megiddo, and in all other cases the figures are far lower,<sup>127</sup> giving us a yardstick by which to evaluate the significance of the 600-chariot fleet in the Exodus narrative. Moshe's introductory words in *Devarim*, "You are today as numerous as the stars in the sky," hardly convey low population density.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, Balak, king of Moab, experiences a fit of terror at the prospect of "the approaching horde,"<sup>129</sup> and twice describes Israel to be "covering the face of the land," "כסה את עין הארץ".<sup>130</sup> This unusual expression appears only once more in the Tanakh, to describe the descent of millions of locusts upon Egypt.<sup>131</sup> Later, in the book of Joshua we read that the substantial land allotment of the tribe of Ephraim, which encompassed the entire middle swath of Canaan, was contested by the tribe in Joshua 17, on account of the allotment being *too small*. Even taking into account the forested areas that required clearing, this story depicts an enormous tribal population. The list goes on and on, belying Berman's characterization of the Jewish nation as "a tiny populace."<sup>132</sup>

- **Numbers in the Exodus Narrative**

Our attention now returns to the meaning of the numbers in the Exodus narrative, specifically as they relate to the census material. To recap, how can it be that both census figures are nearly identical? And how is it possible to account for the disparity between the seemingly rounded tribal figures, and the ostensibly precise final total figures? Furthermore, whereas the tribal tallies often seem to be rounded to the nearest hundred, they never present a remainder of 100, 800 or 900, displaying a clear tendency to cluster towards the middle.

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<sup>125</sup> Ex. 1.

<sup>126</sup> Ex. 14:7.

<sup>127</sup> Arne Furumark, "The Settlement at Ialysos and Aegean History c. 1550–1400 BC," *Opuscula Archaeologica* 6 (1951), 150–271, 260.

<sup>128</sup> Deut. 1:10.

<sup>129</sup> Num. 22:4.

<sup>130</sup> Num. 22:5, 11.

<sup>131</sup> Ex. 10:5.

<sup>132</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 48.

Eli Merzbach, a distinguished mathematician, explains that when the number obtained was in tens (with no units), then it was registered as is and the Torah did not round it. However, when the number obtained was not in complete tens, it was rounded to the nearest hundred. Merzbach explains the logic as follows:<sup>133</sup>

“If you round a number that ends in units, then it is rounded to hundreds (the error being less than a hundredth), but a number that ends in tens is left as is. It should be noted that the simple notion which we understand of rounding numbers to the nearest hundred was totally foreign to science until the end of the Middle Ages... [regarding the Torah] numbers were rounded according to the two rules I mentioned above. If we look at the figures in the Torah, this is patently clear. In each of the two censuses of the Israelites in the wilderness, 11 out of 12 figures are multiples of hundreds, whereas one (in the first census the tribe of Gad, and in the second census the tribe of Reuben) is a multiple of ten. The probability of any number ending in zero but not being a multiple of one hundred is  $9/100$ , therefore if one takes any 12 numbers, the expectancy of such a number appearing is equal to  $12 \times 9/100 = 1.08$ . In other words, on the average, out of 12 numbers, one will be a multiple of ten (but not of a hundred). Moreover, if we compute the different probabilities (according to binomial distribution), it turns out that the greatest probability is obtained when exactly one out of twelve numbers has this form. The probability of this equals  $12 \times (1-9/100)^{11} \times 9/100$ , and all the other probabilities are smaller. Examining both censuses together also yields the same results: out of 24 figures, the average number of occurrences of the specifically desired form is close to 2, and the maximal probability is obtained when  $k=2$ , which is indeed what happened.”

Merzbach further explains why the Torah had to write down the total sums of Israelites in both censuses:

“Since all the numbers were rounded, one could have had a situation where the grand total obtained would be far off from the actual number in the census... there is a mathematical theorem stating that as the number of figures being summed increases, the deviations resulting from rounding are more likely to offset one another. Actually that is precisely what happened with the census of the Israelites. All the deviations, both upwards and downwards, counterbalanced so that the sum matched the total census.”

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<sup>133</sup> Eli Merzbach, “The Census of the Israelites in the Wilderness,” <https://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/bamidbar/mer.html>

Regarding the problem of the firstborn males, and the Torah's report of a surprisingly if not impossibly low number of firstborn males (22,273), R. Elchanan Samet cites R. Yochanan in *Bekhorot*,<sup>134</sup> who understood the commandment in Ex. 13:1–2, to sanctify every firstborn, to refer only to those male children born *after* the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>135</sup> This opinion is again suggested (although ultimately rejected) by Nachmanides.<sup>136</sup> Berman's sweeping assertion that classical rabbinic literature did not entertain questions arising from mathematic calculations ("it did not cross their minds that these were the types of questions that one would ask of the text") is without support.<sup>137</sup>

Samet further cites mathematics Prof. Eliyahu Beller, who presents a demographic model confirming the relationship between the 22,273 firstborn of Israel and the 300 firstborn Leviim.<sup>138</sup> His statistical calculations take into account the relevant data from the Torah as well as *Seder Olam Raba*, which assumes Israel's sojourn in Egypt to have lasted for 210 years,<sup>139</sup> as this number most accurately reflects the genealogy of the tribe of Levy.<sup>140</sup> Beller's model, which assumes the average lifespan to have been 50 years, projects approximately 23,000 firstborn male children in the final year, and 395,000 firstborn men in the general population. Regarding the Leviim, Beller's model anticipates the birth of approximately 140 newborn males in the final year and 5,600 first-born males in the general tribal population.

Berman's minimalist interpretation of the demographic material presupposes the term *elef* in the Exodus material to mean "clan" or "troop" as opposed to "thousand." Although this is indeed one of the legitimate interpretations of the term, this understanding is counter-indicated by the Exodus material.<sup>141</sup> The census tax collection of one half-shekel, incumbent upon every adult male, recorded in Exodus 38:25–26, unequivocally

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<sup>134</sup> TB *Bekhorot* 4b.

<sup>135</sup> Elchanan Samet, "The Census of the Leviim and the Number of Firstborn," <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/census-leviim-and-number-firstborn>

<sup>136</sup> Nachmanides, Ex. 33:45.

<sup>137</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 52.

<sup>138</sup> Eliyahu Beller, "The Problem of the Firstborn," *Higgayon* 2 (1993), 103–117 (Heb.).

<sup>139</sup> *Seder Olam Raba* edition Leiner, ch.3.

<sup>140</sup> Ex. 6.

<sup>141</sup> The inflated military figures recorded in Chronicles, which Berman posits as proof of the inaccuracy, or exhortative nature of numbers in general in the Tanakh, may indeed be best understood as referring to troops, and not thousands. Berman, however, selectively chose to apply this definition solely to the Pentateuchal material and not to the Chronicles material. Cf. Idem, *Ani Maamin*, 29–30.

demonstrates this. The sum collected amounted to 100 talents and 1,775 shekels. A single talent is equivalent here to 3,000 shekels.<sup>142</sup> This brings the amount collected to 301,775 shekels, approximately half of the stated number, 603,550, in Numbers 1:46. Unless one assumes the Bible to have deliberately skewed the data with a non-typological figure, the half-shekel tax data leaves no room for a minimalist interpretation.

### **The Exodus and the Egyptian Reality**

Berman introduces two 13th cent. Ramesside monuments into the discussion, the Kadesh bas-reliefs and the Kadesh Poem. Berman presents the multiple points of contact between these monuments and the Torah's account of the Exodus. Berman contends that the similarities between these monuments and Torah texts indicate interdependence. A presentation of each of these monuments together with Berman's interpretation of their significance will be followed by an analysis of the data in light of relevant 15th century Egyptian material that Berman does not relate to.

- **The Kadesh Bas-Reliefs**

Berman presents the bas-reliefs illustrating Ramesses II's military camp at Kadesh, from the wall of the Great Hall of Abu Simbel and the pylon at the temple at Luxor, pointing out the striking correlations between the layout of the ancient Egyptian military camp and the desert Tabernacle.<sup>143</sup> Berman concludes that this data substantiates the late date approach for the Exodus, ca. the reign of Ramesses II. The fundamental problem with this approach is in its underlying assumption that Ramesses II was necessarily the first pharaoh to adopt this military camp formation. Ramesses II embarked on a campaign to regain Egypt's lost territorial domination, the likes of which it had formerly enjoyed at its apex under Thutmose III. This is clearly demonstrated by his appropriation of the prenomen (the pharaonic throne name) of Thutmose III, Menkhepere, for use on his own royal seals.<sup>144</sup> Military culture, contemporary and ancient, is well

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<sup>142</sup> The Torah's system of dividing the talent into 3,000 shekels was the same as the Ugaritic system where the talent was also divided into 3,000 shekels. Cf. Carlo Zaccagnini, "Notes on the Weight System at Alalah VII," *Orientalia* 48 (1979), 472–475, 472; J. D. Douglas, Merrill Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 1524.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1913), 240–242, who was the first to make this observation.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. H. R. Hall, *Catalogue of Egyptian Scarabs in the British Museum, vol. I: Royal Scarabs* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1913), XXXV–XXXVI.

known for being deeply rooted in tradition. It is highly unlikely that Ramesses II was the original architect of the Egyptian military camp formation. Ramesses II is known to have scrupulously followed the military patterns of Thutmose III.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, many scholars presume the military camp formation of Ramesses II to have been modeled on that of his 18th cent. predecessor and namesake, Thutmose III.<sup>146</sup> Hoffmeier and Schulman point out that the annals of Thutmose III provide unique terminology related to his military camp that suggests a similar configuration.<sup>147</sup> To quote Hoffmeier, “The verbal description provided by the annals accords well with the military camp of Ramesses II as portrayed in his temples, suggesting that this had been used in the previous dynasty as well.”<sup>148</sup> The evidence suggests the 15th cent. Exodus approach to be equally, if not better aligned with the biblical data.

- **The Kadesh Poem and the Account of the Splitting of the Sea**

Berman devotes ten pages in *Ani Maamin* to exploring literary links between The Song at the Sea (*Az Yashir*) and the Kadesh Poem of Ramesses II. These are but a condensed form of his scholarly article on the topic.<sup>149</sup> In my assessment of the material I will relate to both the book and the article. Berman asserts, “I believe it reasonable to claim that the narrative account of the splitting of the sea (Exodus 14) and the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15) may reflect a deliberate act of cultural appropriation.”<sup>150</sup> The following list summarizing the links that Berman proposes will be followed by a refutation of his claim of interdependence.

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Anthony Spalinger, *Leadership Under Fire: The Pressures of Warfare in Ancient Egypt* (vol. 20 of *Études d'égyptologie*; Paris: Soleb, 2020), 45.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Richard A. Gabriel, *Thutmose III: A Military Biography of Egypt's Greatest Warrior King* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 215 nt. 75; Anthony Spalinger, “The Organization of the Pharaonic Army (Old to New Kingdom),” pp. 393–478 in *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (Juan Carlos Moreno García ed.; Leiden Boston: Brill, 2013), 414.

<sup>147</sup> A. R. Schulman, “The N’rn at Kadesh Once Again,” *Journal for the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 11 (1981), 7–19, 19.

<sup>148</sup> Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 206.

<sup>149</sup> Berman, “The Kadesh Inscriptions,” 93–112.

<sup>150</sup> Idem, *Ani Maamin*, 60.

• **Berman's Proposed Correlations Between the Kadesh Poem and the Song at the Sea**

- 1 Numerous phrases relate to Pharaoh's/God's "strong" or "mighty hand/arm."<sup>151</sup>
- 2 The protagonist army is on the march, though unprepared for battle, when they find themselves attacked by a large force of chariots.<sup>152</sup>
- 3 The protagonist army breaks ranks in fear.<sup>153</sup>
- 4 Pharaoh/God confronts the enemy on his/His own.<sup>154</sup>
- 5 The protagonist makes an appeal for divine intervention.<sup>155</sup>
- 6 The enemy himself confirms the potency of the god/God.<sup>156</sup>
- 7 The enemy perishes in a body of water.<sup>157</sup>
- 8 There are no survivors.<sup>158</sup>
- 9 The protagonist offers praise for the mighty salvation.<sup>159</sup>
- 10 The defeated enemy is described as chaff/straw.<sup>160</sup>
- 11 The protagonists declare Pharaoh/God to be without peer in battle.<sup>161</sup>
- 12 Neighboring peoples are intimidated.<sup>162</sup>
- 13 Blessings are uttered for the eternal rule of Pharaoh/God in their respective palace/Temple.<sup>163</sup>

Berman recognizes that many of these parallels may be commonly found motifs in victory hymns; however, he stresses that a number of them are distinct to "only" these two works and appear largely in common sequence.<sup>164</sup> Berman asserts that the unusual depiction of the enemy as chaff/straw substantiates the assumption of textual interdependence.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Idem, "The Kadesh Inscriptions," 94, 95.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. 94, 106.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 107; idem, *Ani Maamin*, 65.

### The Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III

The Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III offers an overview of the military accomplishments of Thutmose III, ca. 15th century BCE.<sup>166</sup> This Stela is understood by scholars to have served as a template for the victory stelae of later pharaohs.<sup>167</sup> Our assessment of the merits of Berman's thesis relating to the Kadesh Poem of Ramesses II should therefore include a reflection on the possible relevance of the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III.

The Kadesh Poem uses a remarkably unusual phrase to describe the strength of Ramesses II: "a rampart of iron."<sup>168</sup> The only earlier Egyptian text to use this phraseology is the stela from Gebel Barkal, in which Thutmose III is thusly described.<sup>169</sup> Hart points out that both texts feature the unusual description of the king's Uraeus as a flaming serpent that overthrows enemies.<sup>170</sup> These unique textual correlations reinforce the need to consider the possible relevance of the Gebel Barkal Stela to the above-cited Kadesh Poem data.

- **Correlations Between the Kadesh Poem and the Gebel Barkal Stela**

- 1 **The mighty hand/arm of Thutmose III** is described no fewer than 25 times, as in "who captures with his *powerful arm*... the *strong-armed* one who tramples his enemies."<sup>171</sup>
- 2 **The Egyptians are met along their forward march by enemy chariots** (which are mentioned four times): "they came in order to engage (in battle) with my majesty with a myriad of men, hundreds

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<sup>166</sup> Cf. the rendering of James Hoffmeier in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. II, 14–18.

<sup>167</sup> Roberto Gozzoli, "Piye Imitates Thutmose III: Trends in a Nubian Historical Text of the Early Phase," p. 204–212 in *Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Language, Conservation, Museology, vol. 3 of Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists* (Zahi A. Hawass, ed.; Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2000).

<sup>168</sup> *The Context of Scripture*, vol. II, 37.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. 15. Cf. Carsten Vang, "Israel in the Iron-Smelting Furnace? Towards a New Understanding of the כור הברזל in Deut. 4:20," *HIPHIL Novum* 1(2014), 25–34, 31.

<sup>170</sup> George Hart, *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses* (East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2005), 161. The only other pharaoh to use this description was Queen Hatshepsut, who was coregent with Thutmose III. Cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, 231.

<sup>171</sup> *The Context of Scripture*, vol. II, 14.

- of thousands with the headmen of all foreign lands, *standing on their chariots...*"<sup>172</sup>
- 3 **The Egyptian soldiers fail to rise and defend themselves and their king**, "*without a multitude to back him up.*"<sup>173</sup>
  - 4 **Thutmose III faces the enemy alone, without the assistance of his troops**: "He is a king who  *fights alone*, without a multitude to back him up... who slaughters everyone,  *by himself alone.*"<sup>174</sup>
  - 5 Whereas there is no  *appeal* for salvation, **divine intervention** arrives in the form of an astronomical miracle, "Pay attention... then you will know  *the miracle* of [Amun-Re] in the presence of the Two Lands... There were two astronomers (present).  *A star approached*, coming to the south of them. The like had not happened before. It shot straight toward them (the enemy)."<sup>175</sup>
  - 6 **The enemy confirms the potency of the pharaoh**, "Give us your breath O our Lord... Never again will we do evil against Menkheperre, may he live forever, our lord in our lifetime since we have seen his awe. It was because of his love that he gave us breath. It was his father [Amun-Re, lord of the thrones of the two lands?] who performed it,  *it was indeed not a human hand.*"<sup>176</sup>
  - 7 **Thutmose III chases the enemy across the Euphrates**: "who  *crossed the Euphrates* after the one who had attacked him."<sup>177</sup>
  - 8 **There are no survivors**: "numerous armies of Mitanni were overthrown in the space of an hour,  *annihilated completely* like those who had not existed... He caused me to smite all foreigners  *without there being one to challenge him... not one of them could stand.*"<sup>178</sup>  
(Admittedly, no one drowns in the water, but neither is there any claim of the enemy drowning in the Poem of Kadesh.)
  - 9 **The protagonist offers praise for the mighty salvation**: "He is Horus, the strong-armed one, an excellent fortress for his armies, a refuge for the people, one who subdues all lands when they invade, one who rescues Egypt on the field of battle, a defender who is not afraid of ravenous ones."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 14, 15.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 15, 16, 17.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. 15.



- 10 To be fair, there is no mention in the Gebel Barkal Stela of chaff/straw, although that is hardly significant. One could just as easily cite one of several common motifs with the Song at the Sea, such as the Gebel Barkal Stela's description of Thutmose III "shattering" the enemy,<sup>180</sup> and the enemy being *dashed to pieces*, "תרעץ אויב",<sup>181</sup> in the Song at the Sea.<sup>182</sup>
- 11 **The protagonist declares Thutmose III to be without peer in battle:** "He is a king who is valorous like Montu, who captures but *no one captures from his band.*"<sup>183</sup>
- 12 **Neighboring peoples are filled with dread:** "What the people said [...]. Foreigners [...] your awe. *Your battle-cry reaches to the Horns of the Earth, respect of you makes their hearts quiver*, reaching [...] the people [...] all [Nubians who would transgress your plans]."<sup>184</sup>
- 13 **Thutmose III is installed at his palace amid blessings:** "All of the chieftains of Lebanon [made ?] the royal boats in order that their workers sail south in order to bring all the wonderful things [...] belonging to the [...] land to the *Palace* (life, prosperity, and health)."<sup>185</sup>

Berman rightly points out that the Kadesh Poem contains many elements that are not paralleled in the Song at the Sea, such as the Prayer of Ramesses to his god, and his rebuke of his own troops.<sup>186</sup> It is salient to note that these added elements are not present in the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III.

Another critical piece of Berman's argument of interdependence between the Song at the Sea and the Kadesh Poem of Ramesses II revolves around the theme of boasting. Berman draws a parallel between Pharaoh's boasts in the Song at the Sea and enemy boasts in the literature of Seti, a 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty pharaoh preceding Ramesses II.<sup>187</sup> Berman writes, "The concern with silencing the enemy's boasting is distinctly Egyptian and is not found in any other cognate military literature."<sup>188</sup> That may or may not be the case; however, it is irrelevant to the question at hand. The

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>181</sup> Ex. 15:6.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. Ludwig Koehler, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Leiden, PA: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. "רעץ", 1285–1286.

<sup>183</sup> *The Context of Scripture*, vol. II, 15.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. 17, 18.

<sup>186</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 66.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>188</sup> Idem, "The Kadesh Inscriptions," 107.

Kadesh Poem does not make any mention whatsoever of enemy boasting. It *is* salient however to note that both the Kadesh Poem and the Gebel Barkal Stela emphasize that the self-aggrandizing of the pharaoh is not boastful. The Kadesh Poem describes Ramesses II, “Going forth bravely, returning after triumphing personally, without speaking *boastfully*,”<sup>189</sup> “You are great in victory in front of your army, in the presence of the entire land, without *boastful* claims.”<sup>190</sup> Similarly, the Gebel Barkal Stela quotes Thutmose III, “It is *without exaggeration* and without falsehood that I have said this.”<sup>191</sup> This significant correlating feature once again points to the interdependence of these two Egyptian texts.

The correlation between the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III and the Kadesh Poem of Ramesses II is further supported in the ancient Egyptian story “Thutmose III in Asia.” Although composed during the 19th Dynasty, the story presents a fictional version of the battle of Thutmose III at Megiddo. Manassa relates to the insertion of sections of the Kadesh Poem in the tale. “The quotation of part of the Kadesh Battle poem in the story suggests that the author intended to equate the two warrior pharaohs Ramesses II and Thutmose III and their military achievements in the Battle of Kadesh and Battle of Megiddo respectively.”<sup>192</sup> This points to a clear 19th Dynasty agenda of linking the military exploits of Ramesses II with those of Thutmose III, and hence to a fundamental interdependence between the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III and the Kadesh Poem of Ramesses II.

Berman argues that “the large number of highly distinctive motifs that appear in these two works alone” suggests an interdependence between the Kadesh Poem and the Song at the Sea. “No other battle account known to us either from the Tanakh or from the epigraphic remains of the ancient Near East provide even half the number of shared narrative motifs exhibited here.”<sup>193</sup> These sweeping assertions are indeed surprising in light of the fact that virtually all of Berman’s examples apply equally well, if not better, to the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III. Furthermore, whereas the Gebel Barkal Stela tells of divine miraculous intercession, the likes of which could easily be compared with Israel’s miraculous deliverance in the Song at the Sea, the Kadesh Poem does not.

For the sake of clarity, **I am not claiming interdependence between the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III and the Song at the**

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<sup>189</sup> *The Context of Scripture*, vol. II, 33.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>192</sup> Colleen Manassa, *Imagining the Past: Historical Fiction in New Kingdom Egypt* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 146.

<sup>193</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 67.

**Sea.** Rather, Berman's claim that the said parallels are "distinct to only these two works" is simply not supported by the facts. One feeling the need to assume interdependence between the Song at the Sea and an ancient Egyptian text need look no further than the 15th century Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III.

### **Ramesses**

In the beginning of this essay the question was raised regarding the appearance of the topographic name Raamses in Exodus 1:11. In light of the fact that the pharaonic name Ramesses was never used before the 19th Dynasty, the appearance of this topographical name in the Exodus narrative presents a difficulty that cannot be ignored.

It is not uncommon in the Bible to find the editorial updating of names.<sup>194</sup> Two such examples in the Torah are Bethel<sup>195</sup> and Dan.<sup>196</sup> Berman himself, in the second section of *Ani Maamin*, devotes considerable attention to the subject of post-Mosaic addenda to the Torah.<sup>197</sup> Given Berman's rich and comprehensive presentation of this very topic in the same book, it is most surprising that he does not even suggest this as a possible answer.

Bietak has excavated the palatial complex and port at Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a), biblical Raamses.<sup>198</sup> Today, we know that Ramesses built his royal city on the very site that had functioned as the palatial district and port city during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, known then as Peru-nefer, until sometime during the reign of Amenhotep II (who reigned after Thutmose III), at which point it was mysteriously abandoned. Bietak's excavations point to the epicenter of Israel's affliction during Egypt's 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty as one and the same with what later became the capital city of Ramesses II.

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<sup>194</sup> Kitchen, *Reliability*, 335, 348, 354, 493.

<sup>195</sup> Cf. Gen. 12:8; 13:3; 28:19.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. Gen. 14:14; Judg. 18:29.

<sup>197</sup> For more on this topic see Amnon Bazak, *Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot Books and Chemed Books, 2013), 49–80 (Heb.).

<sup>198</sup> Manfred Bietak and Irene Forster-Müller, "Ausgrabung eines Palastbezirkes der Tuthmosidenzeit bei 'Ezbet Helmi/Tell el-Dab'a, Vorbericht für Herbst 2004 und Frühjahr 2005," *Ägypten und Levante/ Egypt and the Levant* 15 (2005), 65–100; Manfred Bietak, "The Aftermath of the Hyksos in Avaris," p. 26–32 in *Culture Contacts and the Making of Cultures: Papers in Homage to Itamar Even-Zohar* (Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gordon Toury, eds.; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Unit of Culture Research, 2011), 25.

## Conclusion

I see no more fitting way to conclude this essay than to quote from Berman's introduction to his analysis of the Exodus material in *Ani Maamin*.<sup>199</sup>

Excising the Exodus from Judaism would seem to undercut Judaism itself. After all, the biblical rationale for Israel's obligation to God is premised not on His identity as Creator, or on His supreme moral authority, but on the fact that the Israelite slaves in Egypt cried out to Him from their bondage and He saved them. This is the sole driving force behind the opening line of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, *Who took you out of Egypt, the house of bondage.*"


The Bible is consistently clear about the awesome magnitude of the Exodus.

Has any god ever tried to take for himself *one nation out of another nation*, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4:34)

Insisting that the Torah inflated the numbers of people who witnessed God's revelation at Sinai runs counter to the sine-qua-non of the Mosaic faith. Even if one were to assume the number 600,000 to be symbolic (which it was shown not to be), it nonetheless clearly represents a mass multitude. The biblical message is unequivocal and consistent. The Exodus was a major national event, both for Egypt and the Jewish people. Reducing Israel's size at the time to "a tiny populace," or "enough people to fill a stadium," too small to merit attention in the historical record, dilutes and warps the text beyond recognition. The Bible is consistently clear on the magnitude and significance of the Exodus and its being the foundation of the Bible and Judaism. Ignoring this for the sake of resolving an imaginary problem not only damages the biblical text and narrative, and undermines Judaism itself; it accomplishes nothing. It is impossible to reconcile the biblical account of a monumental Exodus with a perceived lack of evidence by diluting it to the point where it becomes a non-event. Attempting to "rescue" the Exodus narrative in this way renders it not worth saving. Berman's solution to a nonexistent problem is neither necessitated by the evidence nor does it promote Jewish faith.

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<sup>199</sup> Berman, *Ani Maamin*, 43.

Berman writes in *Ani Maamin* about the *seder* meal at which sit not only a child who knows not how to ask but a father who knows not how to answer. To the father I would say, as Berman rightly notes, that history is for telling and not for proving.<sup>200</sup> The Torah concerned itself with *telling* the story of the Exodus as opposed to *proving* it. *History* may indeed be an anachronistic term when applied to the Torah; however, *truth* and *falsehood* are not. Do we not repeat twice daily? “I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God...*Emet*.”<sup>201</sup> 

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>201</sup> Num. 15:41, BT *Berakbot* 14a.