

Theories of the date of exodus



The date of exodus is specifically referring to the time when Israelites came out of Egypt. When determining the date of exodus, controversy happened among the archaeologists and historians and the biblical scholars. In the ancient time, people passed down their history and information orally to the next generation and written document was rare at that time.[1]Therefore, part of the history is lost. In order to reconstruct the history and find the date of exodus, scholars were trying to use the bible to recalculate the time. Also, since there were no historical documents and no archaeological evidence of exodus during the time of exodus, historians had a hard time to confirm or even challenge the biblical account. However, we can still be able to get an estimated date of exodus through making deduction based on the evidence that scholars found in the later period of time.

Even though we can use a mathematic way to estimate the date of exodus, it still came up with two approximated results due to different views of Scripture and method of study. Most people called these two approximated results as early date and late date of exodus. Scholars suggest that the early date of exodus is around 1446 BC (15th century), while the late date is around 1290 BC (13th century). Here, we will examine both biblical and historical support for both early date and late date of exodus and understand how the scholars came up with these two dates.

Early Date

First, the scholars examined 1 Kings 6: 1 “ In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, he began to build

the temple of the Lord.”[2]According to A Biblical History of Israel, Solomon’s fourth year is generally referred to 966 BC. And this verse gives 480 years between the Israelites came out of Egypt and the building of the temple in Solomon’s period.[3]By doing the math, $480 \text{ years} + 966\text{BC} = 1446 \text{ BC}$.[4]

Besides, in 1 Chronicles 6: 33-37, it shows that there were nineteen generations between Solomon and Moses. Assume each generation is about 25 years and by doing the math $19 \times 25 = 475$ years. The result is very closed to 480 years in 1 Kings 6: 1. Thus, some scholars believe that the number 480 should be taken as a scientifically precise number instead of a number with symbolic meaning.[5]

Second, Judges 11: 26 also supports the early date of exodus. In Judges 11: 26, “ For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn’t you retake them during that time?”[6]During Jephthah’s time, the king of Ammonites was trying to dispute and get back the Transjordan area, which was lost to Israel during Moses’ time. And Jephthah replied to him that this place had been taken over for 300 years and he has no point to return back to the Ammonites now. According to The History of Israel, the period of the Judges was from 1200 BC to 1020BC.[7]“ Since Jephthah lived about 1100 BC, the 300 years would refer back to 1400BC, the approximate time of the conquest according to the early date hypothesis. And adding another 40 years for the time in wilderness, thus, the early date would be around 1440BC.[8]

Third, Jericho was the first stronghold that taken by the Israelites after crossing the Jordan. “ John Garstang, who excavated Jericho between 1930 and 1936, thought the evidence favoured the early date.”[9]Garstang’s main argument lay in the interpretation of the pottery that found on the mound, which could reveal Jericho was destroyed about 1400BC. However, such interpretation was not widely accepted since Jericho was suffered severe erosion, it disturbed the level of deposits on the mound, which would have a huge influence for the interpretation.[10]An archaeologist, Miss Kenyon mention that the interpretation of the pottery may not support the early date, however, her study of pottery change in Palestine indicates there is a major change in Palestinian culture occurred about 1400BC, precisely at the time when Joshua and the Israelites would have reached Canaan if exodus happened around 1446BC.[11]

Fourth, Hazor was taken and burned by Joshua and it is recorded in Joshua 11: 13. “ This site has been extensively excavated by Yigael Yadin.”[12]And he believes the destruction of Hazor would take place during the Late Bronze II period around 1400BC to 1200BC. However, the range is too big, which is included both early date and late date of exodus. Some scholars claim that the bible proofed that the destruction of Hazor and it was happened in the early date.[13]Judges 4: 2-3 indicates that the king of Hazor oppressed the Israelites during the time of Judges for twenty years and Deborah and Barak then delivered Israel. Whitcomb places the defeat of the king of Hazor about 165 years after Joshua’s destruction of Hazor. Therefore, it is strongly against the late date destruction since the city was uninhabited between 1230BC and the time of Solomon. Thus, the destruction at Hazor actually

favors the early date. And the data from excavation are harmonized with the biblical text.[14]

Fifth, certainty for the date of exodus is impossible, as we need to face our limitation of knowledge and lack of extra-biblical evidence. However, we can suggest that the time Israel left Egypt was during the reign of Ramesses II and was ready in Canaan by the date of Merneptah Stele, which was about 1220 BC.[15] Egyptian monarchs were never given to recording defeats and disasters, and certainly not the loss of a chariot brigade during the pursuit of runaway Israelite slaves. Because of the silence of Egyptian record, we do not have an external reference to proof the date of exodus. However, we could make a possible cross reference with “ Merneptah’s Stele” in 1220 BC. [16]“ The stela was originally inscribed by Amenophis III, but was recycled by Merneptah to celebrate his victory over Libya and Syria Palestine.”[17]“ The annals of Merneptah contain the only mention of Israel during the New Kingdom (1550-1070 BC) recovered in Egypt. The annals refer to Israel as a people rather than as a state. The Stela is used to date the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt to the reign of Ramesses II (1290-1224BC) and the appearance of Israel in Syria-Palestine to 1250 BC.”[18]Some scholars see the Merneptah’s Stele as a distorted reference to pharaoh’s vain attempt to cut Israel off at the Sea of Reeds, with defeat turned into victory for propaganda purpose.[19]Even though the content of Merneptah’s Stele may not reflect the truth, the date could help us to approximate the date of exodus. Since the Merneptah’s Stele is inscribed during Amenophis III period, the actual date of exodus should happen couple generation before Amenophis III, which indicates that early date is possible.

Sixth, 350 Amarna tablet was found at the Egyptian city of Tell el-Amarna. The tablets were the letters from the Canaanites kings to the pharaohs Amunhotep III and Akhenaton complaining about a group of people "Apiru" who had invaded the land around 1400-1350BC. "Apiru" is used to describe soldiers, mercenaries and slaves in several countries during the Ancient Near East period. Some scholars doubt that whether Apiru refers to the Hebrews. If it were so, the date of Amarna tablets would suggest the early date of exodus occurred around 15 century.[20]

Seventh, Petrovich suggests that there is a compelling argument for choosing 1446BC as the date of exodus. He said the Jubilee cycles actually agree exactly with 1446BC, yet are completely independent of the 479 years of 1 King 6: 1. "The Jubilee dates are precise only if the priests began counting years when they entered the land in 1406BC. The Talmud lists seventeen cycles from Israel's entry until the last Jubilee in 574BC, fourteen years after Jerusalem's destruction." [21]

There are some disagreements of the early date of exodus. Some scholars think the 480 years from the exodus to the building of temple is just an approximation and it is not an actual number of day. It could have a symbolic meaning instead.[22]480 might be a symbolic number that derives from twelve time forty, thus, the author was trying to emphasize that twelve generation had elapsed between Solomon's fourth year and the exodus. [23]Same situation happened in the time of Jephthah, Jephthah's speech is only a general reference to state that Israelite took over the land long time ago and the number is not intended to be precise. Also, the text does not focus on number. Also, since he would hardly have access to reliable

historical records at that time, the number 300 may represent Jephthah's rough guess.[24]

Besides, Scholars believes that the lack of Egyptian record to Israel being in Canaan prior to the period of Merneptah is a big problem for determining the early date of exodus.[25]

Late Date

First, there is another view of 1 King 6: 1. Some scholars suggest that the 480 years is a round number for twelve generations and each generation is for forty years. John Bright mentioned that the number forty is a well-known round number to represent one generation in the Bible.[26]However, a generation from birth of father to birth of son in the real world is likely to be about 25 years instead. By calculating it again, 25 years x 12 generations = 300 years. The result gives 300 years instead of 480 years. Therefore, the date of exodus would be around the mid 13th century.[27]Even though this number is not an exact number, it gives a good approximation of the late date of exodus.

Second, in Exodus 1: 11, “ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.”[28]The city of Rameses was one of two store cities built by the Israelites. And it is recorded in the Egyptian record and archaeological excavation. And many have equated the city of Rameses with the city of Pi-Ramesses. Betts mentioned “ Pi-Ramesses was located at modern-day Qantir near Faqus and is called Tell el-Dabva.”[29]The scholars are very certain that these two cities were built by one of the pharaohs that bore the name

Rameses. Hoffmeier mentioned that the name Ramesses documented first in the thirteenth century, which was around Ramesses II's period in 1270BC.

[30]And it was common to name a city after him in the Egyptian culture.

Ramesses II reigned around 1303BC to 1213BC.[31]And he was a prolific builder and engaged in great building operations. He had numerous Apiru working as labourers for him. Apiru could mean slaves, which could refer to the Israelite who were enslaved under the Egyptian authority in Moses' time.

John Rea mentioned, "Raamses hardly can be other Per Ramesese, the "House of Ramesses (II)," which has been identified with Avaris-

Tanis." [32] Thus, it seems logical for scholars to make the connection and believe Ramesses II was the pharaoh who was in charge of the construction of the city of Rameses. Therefore, this historical evidence would suggest that exodus could happen during the reign of Rameses II in 13th century, which was around 1290 BC.[33][34]

Third, there were a group of foreigner known as the Hyksos in Egyptian history around 1700BC to 1550BC. Hyksos were an Asiatic group who ruled over Egypt and their capital was in Tanis in the same northeastern delta region where the Israelites lived.[35] Thus, scholars thought it would make sense to say the Israelites were the Hyksos group who migrated to Egypt. In Exodus 12: 40-41, "Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt." [36] Let say we take the earliest date 1700BC for the Hyksos control over Egypt and subtract 430 years stayed in Egypt, then it gives 1270BC. It does align with the proposed late date of exodus.[37]

Fourth, during Joshua's period, Israelites had invaded three cities. Those cities are Lachish in Josh 10: 31, Debir in Josh 10: 38 and Bethel in Judges 1: 23. According to the archaeological data, these three cities were destroyed and burnt. Through the ash, archaeologists suggest that the data of the demise seems to support 1290BC as the date of exodus.

Fifth, Nelson Glueck undertook the excavation in Transjordan area in late 1930s. He concluded that Transjordan was largely uninhabited from 1800BC to 1300 BC. Thus, no civilization in southern Transjordan indicates the strong nation such as Edom and Moab were not existed before 1300BC. It means if Moses and Joshua had come to Transjordan before 1300BC, there would be no enemy to oppose them.[38]. J. Bimson came up with a conclusion that Transjordan was in fact inhabited during the late Bronze period, which was around 1250 BC.[39]

There are some disagreements of the late date of exodus. The archaeology record of the Lachish, Debir and Bethel does not fully align with the biblical text. In Joshua 11: 13 mentioned that Hazor was the only city burned by Joshua, therefore, the evidence of destruction may not link to Israelites. Some scholars suggest that the Egyptian could contribute the destruction instead. Moreover, Rendsburg mentioned that many of the sites that have fallen into the hand of Israelite in the Bible such as Jericho, Ai, Arad and Heshbon did not exist during the 13th century. Thus, it suggests that the late date may not be possible since there are not cities for the Israelites to conquer.[40]

In conclusion, the early date of exodus is around 1446 BC during the reign of Amenhotep II and the late date of exodus is around 1290 BC during the reign of Rameses II. Both dates are supported by impressive arguments and evangelicals basically accept both of them. But at this point, the late date 1446 BC appears to be the strongest one and more convincing.

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