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Chapter 1 - Searching for the Patriarchs

…. we arrive at a biblical date of around 2100 BCE for Abraham's original departure for Canaan.

Of course, there were some clear problems with accepting this dating for precise historical reconstruction, not the least of which were the extraordinarily long life spans of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which all far exceeded a hundred years. In addition, the later genealogies that traced Jacob's descendants were confusing, if not plainly contradictory. Moses and Aaron, for example, were identified as fourth-generation descendants of Jacob's son Levi, while Joshua, a contemporary of Moses and Aaron, was declared to be a twelfth generation descendant of Joseph, another of Jacob's sons. This was hardly a minor discrepancy.

Some Telltale Anachronisms

…. The German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen argued that the stories of the patriarchs …. reflected the concerns of the later Israelite monarchy, which were projected onto the lives of legendary fathers in a largely mythical past. The biblical stories should thus be regarded as a national mythology with no more historical basis than the Homeric saga of Odysseus's travels or Virgil's saga of Aeneas's founding of Rome.

…. So the combination of camels, Arabian goods, Philistines, and Gerar—as well as other places and nations mentioned in the patriarchal stories in Genesis—are highly significant. All the clues point to a time of composition many centuries after the time [circa 2100 BCE] in which the Bible reports the lives of the patriarchs took place. These and other anachronisms suggest an intensive period of writing the patriarchal narratives in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. [800 – 600 BCE]

Chapter 2 - Did the Exodus Happen

The Lure of Egypt

One thing is certain. The basic situation described in the Exodus saga—the phenomenon of immigrants coming down to Egypt from Canaan and settling in the eastern border regions of the delta—is abundantly verified in the archaeological finds and historical texts. From earliest recorded times throughout antiquity, Egypt beckoned as a place of shelter and security for the people of Canaan at times when drought, famine, or warfare made life unbearable or even difficult.

A Conflict of Dates and Kings

…. The Merneptah stele contains the first appearance of the name Israel in any surviving ancient text. [A victory stele erected by Pharaoh Merneptah in 1207 BCE] This again raises the basic questions: Who were the Semites in Egypt? Can they be regarded as Israelite in any meaningful sense? No mention of the name Israel has been found in any of the inscriptions or documents connected with the Hyksos period. Nor is it mentioned in later Egyptian inscriptions, or in an extensive fourteenth century BCE cuneiform archive found at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt, whose nearly four hundred letters describe in detail the social, political, and demographic conditions in Canaan at that time.

…. the Israelites emerged only gradually as a distinct group in Canaan, beginning at the end of the thirteenth century BCE [1200 BCE]. There is no recognizable archaeological evidence of Israelite presence in Egypt immediately before that time.

Was a Mass Exodus Even Possible in the Time of Ramesses II?

…. The border between Canaan and Egypt was thus closely controlled. If a great mass of fleeing Israelites had passed through the border fortifications of the pharaonic regime, a record should exist. Yet in the abundant Egyptian sources describing the time of the New Kingdom in general and the thirteenth century in particular, there is no reference to the Israelites, not even a single clue.

The Merneptah stele refers to Israel as a group of people already living in Canaan. But we have no clue, not even a single word, about early Israelites in Egypt: neither in monumental inscriptions on walls of temples, nor in tomb inscriptions, nor in papyri. Israel is absent—as a possible foe of Egypt, as a friend, or as an enslaved nation.

And there are simply no finds in Egypt that can be directly associated with the notion of a distinct foreign ethnic group (as opposed to a concentration of migrant workers from many places) living in a distinct area of the eastern delta, as implied by the biblical account of the children of Israel living together in the Land of Goshen (Genesis 47:27).

…. Putting aside the possibility of divinely inspired miracles, one can hardly accept the idea of a flight of a large group of slaves from Egypt through the heavily guarded border fortifications into the desert and then into Canaan in the time of such a formidable Egyptian presence.

Any group escaping Egypt against the will of the pharaoh would have easily been tracked down not only by an Egyptian army chasing it from the delta but also by the Egyptian soldiers in the forts in northern Sinai and in Canaan. Indeed, the biblical narrative hints at the danger of attempting to flee by the coastal route. Thus the only alternative would be to turn into the desolate wastes of the Sinai peninsula. But the possibility of a large group of people wandering in the Sinai peninsula is also contradicted by archaeology.

Phantom Wanderers?

…. except for the Egyptian forts along the northern coast, not a single campsite or sign of occupation from the time of Ramesses II and his immediate predecessors and successors has ever been identified in Sinai. And it has not been for lack of trying.

Repeated archaeological surveys in all regions of the peninsula, including the mountainous area around the traditional site of Mount Sinai, near Saint Catherine's Monastery, have yielded only negative evidence: not even a single sherd, no structure, not a single house, no trace of an ancient encampment.

One may argue that a relatively small band of wandering Israelites cannot be expected to leave material remains behind. But modern archaeological techniques are quite capable of tracing even the very meager remains of hunter-gatherers and pastoral nomads all over the world.

Indeed, the archaeological record from the Sinai peninsula discloses evidence for pastoral activity in such eras as the third millennium BCE and the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. There is simply no such evidence at the supposed time of the Exodus in the thirteenth century BCE.

The conclusion—that the Exodus did not happen at the time and in the manner described in the Bible—seems irrefutable when we examine the evidence at specific sites where the children of Israel were said to have camped for extended periods during their wandering in the desert (Numbers 33) and where some archaeological indication—if present—would almost certainly be found.

According to the biblical narrative, the children of Israel camped at Kadesh-barnea for thirty eight of the forty years of the wanderings. The general location of this place is clear from the description of the southern border of the land of Israel in Numbers 34. It has been identified by archaeologists with the large and well-watered oasis of Ein el-Qudeirat in eastern Sinai, on the border between modern Israel and Egypt. The name Kadesh was probably preserved over the centuries in the name of a nearby smaller spring called Ein Qadis. A small mound with the remains of a Late Iron Age fort stands at the center of this oasis. Yet repeated excavations and surveys throughout the entire area have not provided even the slightest evidence for activity in the Late Bronze Age, not even a single sherd left by a tiny fleeing band of frightened refugees.

Back to the Future: The Clues to the Seventh Century BCE

The Bible describes how Moses sent emissaries from Kadesh-barnea to the king of Edom to ask permission to pass through his territory on the way to Canaan. The king of Edom refused to grant the permission and the Israelites had to bypass his land. According to the biblical narrative, then, there was a kingdom in Edom at that time.

Archaeological investigations indicate that Edom reached statehood only under Assyrian auspices in the seventh century BCE. Before that period it was a sparsely settled fringe area inhabited mainly by pastoral nomads. No less important, Edom was destroyed by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE, and sedentary activity there recovered only in Hellenistic times.

All these indications suggest that the Exodus narrative reached its final form … in the second half of the seventh and the first half of the sixth century BCE. [650 – 550 BCE] Its many references to specific places and events in this period quite clearly suggest that the author or authors integrated many contemporary details into the story.

Chapter 3 - The Conquest of Canaan

Yet if, as we have seen, the Israelite Exodus did not take place in the manner described in the Bible, what of the conquest itself? The problems are even greater. How could an army in rags, traveling with women, children, and the aged, emerging after decades from the desert, possibly mount an effective invasion? How could such a disorganized rabble overcome the great fortresses of Canaan, with their professional armies and well-trained corps of chariots?

Did the conquest of Canaan really happen? Is this central saga of the Bible—and of the subsequent history of Israel—history, or myth?

…. Here too, archaeological evidence can help disentangle the events of history from the powerful images of an enduring biblical tale.

A Different Kind of Canaan

As with the Exodus story, archaeology has uncovered a dramatic discrepancy between the Bible and the situation within Canaan at the suggested date of the conquest, between 1230 and 1220 BCE. Although we know that a group named Israel was already present somewhere in Canaan by 1207 BCE, the evidence on the general political and military landscape of Canaan suggests that a lightning invasion by this group would have been impractical and unlikely in the extreme.

There is abundant evidence from Egyptian texts of the Late Bronze Age (1550–1150 BCE) on affairs in Canaan, in the form of diplomatic letters, lists of conquered cities, scenes of sieges engraved on the walls of temples in Egypt, annals of Egyptian kings, literary works, and hymns. Perhaps the most detailed source of information on Canaan in this period is provided by the Tell el-Amarna letters. These texts represent part of the diplomatic and military correspondence of the powerful pharaohs Amenhotep III and his son Akhenaten, who ruled Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE.

…. Most important, the Amarna letters reveal that Canaan was an Egyptian province, closely controlled by Egyptian administration. The provincial capital was located in Gaza, but Egyptian garrisons were stationed at key sites throughout the country, like Beth-shean south of the Sea of Galilee and at the port of Jaffa (today part of the city of Tel Aviv).

In the Bible, no Egyptians are reported outside the borders of Egypt and none are mentioned in any of the battles within Canaan. Yet contemporary texts and archaeological finds indicate that they managed and carefully watched over the affairs of the country. The princes of the Canaanite cities (described in the book of Joshua as powerful enemies) were, in actuality, pathetically weak.

Excavations have shown that the cities of Canaan in this period were not regular cities of the kind we know in later history. They were mainly administrative strongholds for the elite, housing the king, his family, and his small entourage of bureaucrats, with the peasants living scattered throughout the surrounding countryside in small villages. The typical city had only a palace, a temple compound, and a few other public edifices—probably residences for high officials, inns, and other administrative buildings. But there were no city walls. The formidable Canaanite cities described in the conquest narrative were not protected by fortifications!

…. It is highly unlikely that the Egyptian garrisons throughout the country would have remained on the sidelines as a group of refugees (from Egypt) wreaked havoc throughout the province of Canaan. And it is inconceivable that the destruction of so many loyal vassal cities by the invaders would have left absolutely no trace in the extensive records of the Egyptian empire.

The only independent mention of the name Israel in this period—the victory stele of Merneptah—announces only that this otherwise obscure people, living in Canaan, had suffered a crushing defeat. Something clearly doesn't add up when the biblical account, the archaeological evidence, and the Egyptian records are placed side by side.

In the Footsteps of Joshua?

There are, however—or at least there have been—counterarguments to the Egyptian evidence. First of all, it was clear that the book of Joshua was not a completely imaginary fable. It accurately reflected the geography of the land of Israel. The course of Joshua's campaign followed a logical geographical order. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of scholars selected sites that could be confidently identified with the progress of the Israelite conquest and began digging—to see if any evidence of fallen walls, burnt beams, and wholesale destruction could be found.

…. The excavations revealed a small and relatively poor unwalled town that was destroyed by a sudden catastrophic fire toward the end of the Late Bronze Age—around 1230 BCE.

…. The evidence seemed proof of the historicity of the biblical narratives: a Canaanite city (mentioned in the Bible) was set ablaze by the Israelites, who then inherited it and settled on its ruins.

…. At the ancient mound at the Arab village of Beitin, identified with the biblical city of Bethel, about nine miles north of Jerusalem, excavations revealed a Canaanite city inhabited in the Late Bronze. It was destroyed by fire in the late thirteenth century BCE and apparently resettled by a different group in the Iron Age I. It matched the biblical story of the Canaanite city of Luz, which was taken by members of the house of Joseph, who resettled it and changed its name to Bethel (Judges 1:22–26).

…. The Hazor excavations showed that the splendor of the Canaanite city, like that of so many other cities in various parts of the country, came to a brutal end

in the thirteenth century BCE. Suddenly, with no apparent alarm and little sign of decline, Hazor was attacked, destroyed, and set ablaze.

…. Thus, for much of the twentieth century, archaeology seemed to confirm the Bible's account. Unfortunately the scholarly consensus would eventually dissolve.

Did the Trumpets Really Blast?

…. Even as the world press was reporting that Joshua's conquest had been confirmed, many of the most important pieces of the archaeological puzzle simply did not fit.

Jericho was among the most important. As we have noted, the cities of Canaan were unfortified and there were no walls that could have come tumbling down. In the case of Jericho, there was no trace of a settlement of any kind in the thirteenth century BCE, and the earlier Late Bronze settlement, dating to the fourteenth century BCE, was small and poor, almost insignificant, and unfortified. There was also no sign of a destruction.

Thus the famous scene of the Israelite forces marching around the walled town with the Ark of the Covenant, causing Jericho's mighty walls to collapse by the blowing of their war trumpets was, to put it simply, a romantic mirage.

…. Only recently has the consensus finally abandoned the conquest story. As for the destruction of Bethel, Lachish, Hazor, and other Canaanite cities, evidence from other parts of the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean suggests that the destroyers were not necessarily Israelites.

The Mediterranean World of the Thirteenth Century BCE [1299 – 1200 BCE]

…. In other parts of the country, the Late Bronze Age order was disrupted by spreading violence whose source is not entirely clear. Because of the long period of time—nearly a century—during which the Canaanite city-state system collapsed, it is possible that the intensifying crisis led to conflicts between neighboring Canaanite cities over control of vital agricultural land and peasant villages.

…. The kings of each of these four cities—Hazor, Aphek, Lachish, and Megiddo—are reported to have been defeated by the Israelites under Joshua. But the archaeological evidence shows that the destruction of those cities took place over a span of more than a century. The possible causes include invasion, social breakdown, and civil strife. No single military force did it, and certainly not in one military campaign.

…. Thus there is no reason to suppose that the burning of Hazor by hostile forces, for example, never took place. But what was in actuality a chaotic series of upheavals caused by many different factors and carried out by many different groups became—many centuries later—a brilliantly crafted saga of territorial conquest under God's blessing and direct command.

Chapter 4 - Who Were the Israelites?

If, as archaeology suggests, the sagas of the patriarchs and the Exodus were legends, compiled in later periods, and if there is no convincing evidence of a unified invasion of Canaan under Joshua, what are we to make of the Israelites' claims for ancient nationhood?

Who were these people who traced their traditions back to shared historical and cultic events? Once again archaeology can provide some surprising answers. Excavations of early Israelite villages, with their pottery, houses, and grain silos, can help us reconstruct their day-to-day life and cultural connections. And archaeology surprisingly reveals that the people who lived in those villages were indigenous inhabitants of Canaan who only gradually developed an ethnic identity that could be termed Israelite.

A Sudden Archaeological Breakthrough

In the years since 1967, the heartland of the Israelite settlement—the traditional territories of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh—have been covered by intensive surveys. Teams of archaeologists and students have combed virtually every valley, ridge, and slope, looking for traces of walls and scatters of pottery sherds.

…. These surveys revolutionized the study of early Israel. The discovery of the remains of a dense network of highland villages—all apparently established within the span of a few generations—indicated that a dramatic social transformation had taken place in the central hill country of Canaan around 1200 BCE.

There was no sign of violent invasion or even the infiltration of a clearly defined ethnic group. Instead, it seemed to be a revolution in lifestyle. In the formerly sparsely populated highlands from the Judean hills in the south to the hills of Samaria in the north, far from the Canaanite cities that were in the process of collapse and disintegration, about two-hundred fifty hilltop communities suddenly sprang up. Here were the first Israelites.

… It is also noteworthy—in contrast to the Bible's accounts of almost continual warfare between the Israelites and their neighbors—that the villages were not fortified. Either the inhabitants felt secure in their remote settlements and did not need to invest in defenses or they did not have the means or proper organization to undertake such work. No weapons, such as swords or lances, were uncovered—although such finds are typical of the cities in the lowlands. Nor were there signs of burning or sudden destruction that might indicate a violent attack.

…. The early Israelites appeared around 1200 BCE, as herders and farmers in the hills. Their culture was a simple one of subsistence. This much we know. But where did they come from?

New Clues to Israelite Origins

As it turned out, the answer to the question of Israelite origins lay in the remains of their earliest settlements. Most of the villages excavated in the highlands offered evidence about Israelite life several decades or even a century after they were founded. Houses and courtyards had been expanded and remodeled over those years. In only a very few cases were the remains of the initial settlement preserved intact beneath the later buildings.

…. The people living in these sites—both past and present—were pastoralists primarily concerned with protecting their flocks. All this indicates that a large proportion of the first Israelites were once pastoral nomads.

But they were pastoral nomads undergoing a profound transformation. The presumed shift from the earlier tent encampments to villages of similar layout in stone construction, and, later, to more permanent, rectangular pillared houses indicates that they abandoned their migratory lifestyle, gave up most of their animals, and shifted to permanent agriculture.

…. Many of the early Israelites were thus apparently nomads who gradually became farmers. Still, nomads have to come from somewhere. Here too, recently uncovered archaeological evidence has something to say.

Canaan's Hidden Cycles

The extensive highland surveys of recent decades have collected data on the nature of human occupation in this region over many millennia. One of the biggest surprises was that the dramatic wave of pastoralists settling down and becoming permanent farmers in the twelfth century BCE was not a unique event.

In fact, the archaeological evidence indicated that before the twelfth century BCE there were two previous waves of similar highland settlement, both of which were followed by an eventual return of the inhabitants to a dispersed, pastoral way of life.

We now know that the first occupation of the highlands took place in the Early Bronze Age, beginning over two thousand years before the rise of early Israel, in around 3500 BCE. At the peak of this wave of settlement, there were almost a hundred villages and larger towns scattered throughout the central ridge. More than a thousand years later, around 2200 BCE, most of the highland settlements were abandoned and the highlands became a frontier area again. Yet a second wave of settlement, stronger than the first, began to gain momentum in the Middle Bronze Age, shortly after 2000 BCE.

…. Yet the second wave of highland settlement came to an end sometime in the sixteenth century BCE. And this time, the highlands would remain a sparsely populated frontier zone for four centuries.

Finally—as a third major wave—the early Israelite settlement began around 1200 BCE. Like its predecessors, it commenced with mainly small, rural communities with an initial population of approximately 45,000 in 250 sites. It gradually developed into a mature system with large cities, medium-sized regional market centers, and small villages. By the highpoint of this settlement wave in the

eighth century BCE, after the establishment of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, it encompassed over five hundred sites, with a population of about 160,000.

…. In the periods between the peaks of highland settlement, when the cities, towns, and even most of the villages were abandoned, the highlands were far from deserted.

…. in the periods of intense highland settlement, more people were engaged in farming; in the crisis years, people practiced sheep and goat herding.

…. The process that we describe here is, in fact, the opposite of what we have in the Bible: the emergence of early Israel was an outcome of the collapse of the Canaanite culture, not its cause. And most of the Israelites did not come from outside Canaan—they emerged from within it.

There was no mass Exodus from Egypt. There was no violent conquest of Canaan. Most of the people who formed early Israel were local people—the same people whom we see in the highlands throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. The early Israelites were—irony of ironies—themselves originally Canaanites!

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