

THE DATE OF THE EXODUS AND THE  
CONQUEST/SETTLEMENT:  
THE CASE FOR THE 1100S

by

GARY A. RENDSBURG

Ithaca, New York

The most persistent problem facing the field of biblical archaeology is the date of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and the subsequent conquest/settlement of the land of Canaan. Before we progress to the main matter at hand, namely, the date of these events, a few words are needed to clarify the term "conquest/settlement" used herein. As is well known, there are essentially three models that have been proposed to account for the emergence of the Israelite nation in Canaan. They are (1) the conquest model associated mainly with W. F. Albright and his followers; (2) the peaceful infiltration developed by A. Alt and M. Noth; and (3) the peasant revolt theory originated by G. E. Mendenhall and expounded lately by N. K. Gottwald.<sup>1</sup> This is not the place to reopen the debate concerning these three schools, but a few general comments are appropriate, especially in the light of the publication of I. Finkelstein's important book.<sup>2</sup>

This volume, which systematically presents all the archaeological evidence concerning the period of the settlement, comes to several crucial conclusions. One is that there could not have been a peasant revolt in which Israelites and congeners rebelled against the overlords of Canaanite city-states. The archaeological data clearly demonstrate that (a) the earliest Israelite settlement occurred in areas where Canaanites did not dwell; (b) Canaanite cities con-

---

<sup>1</sup> I refrain from all the bibliographic particulars. For a convenient summary and discussion of these views, see M. Weippert, *Die Landnahme der israelitischen Stämme* (Göttingen, 1967) = E. tr. *The Settlement of the Israelite Tribes in Palestine* (London, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> *Ha-ʿArcheologiya shel Tequfat ha-Hitnahlut ve-ha-Shoftim* (Tel-Aviv, 1986) = E. tr. *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem, 1988).

tinued to flourish in regions alongside the area of Israelite settlement; and (c) the material culture of the earliest Israelites indicates a pastoral background.

A second point made by Finkelstein is that there is also little archaeological evidence to substantiate the conquest model. However, here I draw attention to the stimulating article of B. S. J. Isserlin, who noted that in the same vein there is also little archaeological evidence for known historical events such as the Norman conquest of England, the Anglo-Saxon invasion of England, and the Muslim Arab conquest of the Levant.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the evidence amassed by Finkelstein and others notwithstanding, one will agree with Isserlin that the Israelite conquest of Canaan "must be regarded as at least a strong possibility".<sup>4</sup>

Having eliminated the peasant revolt theory and the conquest model, Finkelstein opted for the peaceful infiltration approach as the most closely fitting the currently available archaeological evidence. A final conclusion of Finkelstein's research—and this point will be most important for the main concern of the present article—is that Israelite settlement can most clearly be seen as occurring in the 12th century B.C.E.

In sum, I conclude that either a military conquest or a peaceful settlement of the land is within reason, and I content myself with the cumbersome term "conquest/settlement". There is an additional benefit in using this term, namely, it is possible that a combination theory may be the most historically accurate. That is to say, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Israelites conquered those areas where military means were necessary and settled peacefully those areas where military action was unnecessary. The biblical tradition recalls mainly the former (in Numbers, Joshua, and Judges) because military heroics lends itself to national epic storytelling more so than peaceful infiltration. I am quick to admit that in many ways I base this reconstruction of Israelite history on

---

<sup>3</sup> "The Israelites Conquest of Canaan: A Comparative Review of the Arguments Applicable", *PEQ* 115 (1983), pp. 85-94.

<sup>4</sup> p. 92. Of further import in this regard is the view of A. Malamat, "Israelite Conduct of War in the Conquest of Canaan", in F. M. Cross (ed.), *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900-1975)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 35-56, that the military strategies reflected in the descriptions of the battles in the book of Joshua support the reliability of the conquest tradition.

my own experience as an American. As every American child learns, "the west was won" through both processes. In certain areas, pioneers simply settled, in some cases living harmoniously alongside native populations. In other areas, military action was necessary. But in the folklore of Americana, it is mainly the fighting which is recalled, both victories such as the battle of Tippecanoe (1811) and defeats such as those at the Alamo (1836) and the Little Bighorn (1876).

In any event, since I am concerned here mainly with the date of the conquest/settlement, the exact nature of the Israelite emergence in Canaan is only a side affair. Nevertheless, I trust that these few thoughts on the matter will be helpful in placing the events under consideration in a larger framework.

By way of introduction, I also need to say a word about the exodus as an historical event. Suffice it to say that I agree with those who take a positive approach to the biblical account, though naturally one would not accept each and every detail recorded there. Thus, for example, I concur that there exists sufficient evidence on the Egyptological side to substantiate the basic picture portrayed in the book of Exodus. On the other hand, I agree that the Bible relates an idealized history; one can hardly reconstruct Israel's history based on the view of the entire nation descending from one man and experiencing both eisodus and exodus *en masse*. So, yes, there was an exodus,<sup>5</sup> and it can be dated, but the narrative presented by the biblical author is filled with epic qualities.<sup>6</sup>

We turn to the issue at hand. After decades of debate, two proposals for the date of the exodus and the conquest/settlement remain popular. The first theory holds that these events occurred

---

<sup>5</sup> In accepting the basic historicity of the exodus, I follow the lead of, for example, R. Giveon, "Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus", *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* (1983-84), pp. 42-4, in particular his conclusion: "We therefore believe that the Exodus was an historical event, although there is little to prove it outside the literary tradition of the Bible" (p. 43). Even those who are less willing to reconstruct history on the basis of the biblical record have admitted that "there is an indeterminate measure of historical plausibility in the biblical report that Israelites migrated from Egypt to Canaan"; thus N. K. Gottwald, "The Israelite Settlement as a Social Revolutionary Movement", in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, April 1984* (Jerusalem, 1985), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> On the biblical account as the combination of history and epic, see C. H. Gordon, *The Ancient Near East* (New York, 1965), p. 144, n. 9.

in the 1400s B.C.E. Although any number of scholars have suggested this date, its most eloquent spokesman in recent years has been J. J. Bimson.<sup>7</sup> The second hypothesis claims that the exodus and the conquest/settlement occurred in the 1200s B.C.E. With the support of such scholars as Albright, Y. Yadin, R. de Vaux, and others, this opinion is the more standard of the two.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear, however, that there are faults with both of these dates. This is especially true of the 15th century date, whose proponents must either ignore or explain away such items as the biblical reference to the city of Raamses (Exod. i 11) and the mention of Israel in the Merneptah Stele (c. 1207 B.C.E.). Perhaps more seriously, they must account for several hundred years' hiatus until identifiably Israelite sites become archaeologically attested in the 12th century.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, one gains the impression that the entire 15th century date is based on the statement in 1 Kgs vi 1 that the construction of Solomon's temple followed the exodus from Egypt by 480 years. But since this number is clearly one of the stylized figures used by biblical chronologists,<sup>10</sup> it should not be used for establishing the date of the exodus.

The fact that Israelite sites are not archaeologically attested until the 12th century is also a problem for proponents of a 13th century exodus, though certainly it is not as severe an obstacle to overcome. A serious difficulty for this theory, however, is that many of the sites mentioned in the Bible as having fallen into Israelite hands, such as Jericho, Ai, Heshbon, and Arad, did not exist during the 13th century B.C.E.

Accordingly, the time may be ripe for still another theory to be proposed, especially as it is based in part on recent archaeological evidence which until now has not been brought to bear on the subject in a systematic fashion. The date here proposed for the crucial events of the Israelite exodus and conquest/settlement is the 1100s B.C.E., or in archaeological terms the Iron Age I period.

<sup>7</sup> *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (Sheffield, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Again, I refrain from citing the many sources which could be mentioned. For a clear statement see R. de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne d'Israël: des Origines à l'Installation en Canaan* (Paris, 1971), pp. 365-8 = E. tr. *The Early History of Israel* (London and Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 388-92.

<sup>9</sup> See Finkelstein (n. 2) for details.

<sup>10</sup> See C. F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Kings* (Oxford, 1903), pp. 59-61; and J. Gray, *I & II Kings* (2nd edn, London and Philadelphia, 1970), pp. 159-60.

Excavations during the past decade or so, at various sites in Canaan, point in this direction. The most instructive of these is undoubtedly Tell ed-Duweir, or Lachish. The results of earlier excavations at this site indicated a destruction in the 13th century and this became a basis for the second of the theories mentioned above. Now scholars must contend with David Ussishkin's more recent excavations of the tell. The relevant findings of his field-work are as follows:

<i>Stratum</i>	<i>Date</i>
VII	13th century
Destruction by fire	
VI	First half of 12th century
Total destruction by fire:	c. 1150
site practically abandoned	

On the basis of this information alone, Ussishkin suggested a 12th century date for the conquest.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as we shall see, there is much more evidence to corroborate this opinion.

A second site which is germane is Tell Hesban, the location of biblical Heshbon in Transjordan. The recently concluded excavations of the tell revealed that the earliest level of occupation, Stratum XXIV, began c. 1200.<sup>12</sup> Now, according to Num. xxi 25, the Israelites engaged the Amorites at Heshbon, defeated them, and captured the city. If we dovetail the findings of the archaeological work at Tel Hesban with the biblical record, we are led to conclude that the Israelite encounter at Heshbon occurred during the 1100s.

In the central hill country, recent archaeological work has revealed a number of settlements dated to the 12th century that were built on previously unoccupied sites or on sites which long had been deserted. The evidence from places such as 'Izbet Sartah, Giloh, Shiloh, Ai, Khirbet Raddana, and others points to the

<sup>11</sup> "Level VII and VI at Tel Lachish and the End of the Late Bronze Age in Canaan", in J. N. Tubb (ed.), *Palestine in the Bronze and Iron Ages: Papers in Honour of Olga Tufnell* (London, 1985), pp. 213-30. See also A. Lemaire, "Recherches actuelles sur les origines de l'ancien Israël", *Journal asiatique* 270 (1982), pp. 5-24.

<sup>12</sup> R. S. Borass and L. T. Geraty, *Hesbon 1976: The Fifth Campaign at Tell Hesban: A Preliminary Report* (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1978), pp. 15-6; and L. T. Geraty, "The 1976 Season of Excavations at Tell Hesban", *ADAJ* 21 (1976), pp. 41-2.

arrival of the Israelites in this region only in the 12th century.<sup>13</sup> These sites are particularly important because it is specifically the central hill country which the Bible suggests is the area of earliest Israelite occupation. In the Negev region, both Tell es-Seba<sup>c</sup> and Tel Masos also were settled in the 12th century. Moreover, the pattern of settlement indicates the arrival of a semi-nomadic people and its transition to a sedentary lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

The field work at the sites mentioned above provides only the most recent archaeological data in support of a 12th century date for the exodus and the conquest/settlement. Older excavations such as those at Megiddo, Taanach, and Gibeon, also produced findings that point in this direction. In the case of Megiddo and Tanaach, excavations at both sites uncovered levels which suffered destructions in the 12th century.

Y. Yadin's summation of the Megiddo excavations is as follows: "The settlement of stratum VII-A was brought to an end by a sudden and total destruction ... dated approximately 1130 B.C. ... Building remains of stratum VII-B ... were of poor construction, and the city seems to have been unfortified. The sacred area which had an almost uninterrupted tradition of temples and bamahs through the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age now showed no trace whatsoever of a temple. This demonstrates that the settlement of Megiddo suffered a sharp decline in stratum VII-B and that a new and different group of people occupied the site."<sup>15</sup> This "new and different" people, I would argue, were the Israelites expanding their control of northern Canaan.

A. E. Glock's statement about Taanach is similar: "Substantial houses with numerous installations on both of the south ... and west

---

<sup>13</sup> The relevant data are gathered by Finkelstein (n. 2). J. A. Callaway, "New Evidence on the Conquest of 'Ai'", *JBL* 87 (1968), pp. 312-20, went so far as to state that his excavations at Ai confirm the story in Josh. vii-viii, and that the Israelite conquest is to be dated to the 12th century. Although I am sympathetic to this position, he may have overstated the case, especially as it is based on meager evidence. To be fair, in J. A. Callaway, "Was My Excavation at Ai Worthwhile?", *BAR* 11/2 (1985), pp. 68-9, he retreated from this position, mostly in response to Z. Zevit, "The Problem of Ai", *BAR* 11/2 (1985), pp. 58-69. For a more detailed treatment see Z. Zevit, "Archaeological and Literary Stratigraphy in Joshua 7-8", *BASOR* 251 (1983), pp. 23-35.

<sup>14</sup> V. Fritz, "Conquest or Settlement? The Early Iron Age in Palestine", *BA* 50 (1987), pp. 94-5.

<sup>15</sup> "Megiddo, The Iron Age", in M. Avi-Yonah and E. Stern (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* 3 (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 850.

edges date to the twelfth century and were completely destroyed in about 1125 B.C.”<sup>16</sup> The destruction of these two sites *c.* 1130-1125 B.C.E. concurs nicely with the statements in Josh. xvii 11-13; Judg. i 27-8, that the tribe of Manasseh did not dispossess the Canaanites in these two cities during the career of Joshua. However, from Judg. v 19 it is inferred that at least Megiddo no longer was inhabited at the time of Deborah and Barak, and indeed their victory over Sisera may be connected with the fall of Taanach.<sup>17</sup> Both cities, of course, had become important Israelite centers by Solomon’s reign (see 1 Kgs iv 12, ix 15). We may conclude, then, that Joshua earlier in the 1100s did not conquer Megiddo and Taanach, but that later in the same century the Israelites managed to destroy both cities.

As far as Gibeon is concerned, the only Late Bronze remains discovered there are some pottery found only in tombs. On the other hand, the Iron Age I and Iron Age II levels reveal a sizable city on the site.<sup>18</sup> If the story in Josh. ix-x about the Israelites’ treaty with the Gibeonites and their subsequent defense of the city has any veracity whatsoever, then again we have to presume the 1100s as the general time-frame for these events. In sum, the picture which emerges from the relevant archaeological data is an Israelite conquest/settlement of Canaan in the 12th century B.C.E.<sup>19</sup>

A 12th-century date for the conquest/settlement implies as well a 12th-century date for the exodus. The most likely candidate for the pharaoh of the exodus is Ramesses III (1195-1164 B.C.E.). This king had more important problems to worry about, namely, the attack of the Sea Peoples coalition which included the Philistines. This would have been a most propitious time for the Israelites to leave. With the very independence of Egypt at stake, and Ramesses III’s own records attest to what extent the nation’s

<sup>16</sup> “Taanach”, in M. Avi-Yonah and E. Stern (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* 4 (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 1147.

<sup>17</sup> P. W. Lapp, “Taanach by the Waters of Megiddo”, *BA* 30 (1967), pp. 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> J. B. Pritchard, “Gibeon”, in M. Avi-Yonah (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* 2 (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 449-50.

<sup>19</sup> A brief, though popular, survey pointing towards an Iron I conquest/settlement is to be found in W. H. Stiebing, *Out of the Desert?: Archaeology and the Exodus/Conquest Narratives* (Buffalo, 1989), pp. 145-8. There is some common ground between this volume and my approach, though all my conclusions were reached independently and before the book was published.

forces were needed to defend against the invasion,<sup>20</sup> the exodus of the Israelites would not have been difficult at this time.

In proposing Ramesses III as the pharaoh of the exodus, I am led to a new interpretation of the Merneptah Stele. I understand the line about Israel as a reference to the slavery period. This will explain the use of the people-determinative; they are not a foreign country but are a people living in Egypt.<sup>21</sup> (On the exact nature of the determinative, see further below). The hymn's author knew that Israel originated in Canaan and therefore included mention of them between Canaan and Hurru.<sup>22</sup> If the Merneptah Stele refers to an Egyptian victory over the Israelites after the exodus, as the 15th-century dating presupposes and as many varieties of the 13th-century dating assume, one would expect some mention of this encounter in the Bible. As many scholars have recognized, the biblical writers did not shy away from including material about Israel's defeats. In short, the Merneptah Stele refers to the Israelites while still in Egypt. (I do not mean to imply that it was Merneptah who instituted the slavery. I believe this was accomplished by Ramesses II [1279-1212 B.C.E.] and that the slavery continued under Merneptah. In any case, this point has no direct effect on the issue under discussion.)

Evidence in support of this interpretation is forthcoming from the unique determinative used to indicate the Israelites. Scholar after scholar has noted that whereas Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam, etc. are referred to with the foreign-land determinative (N25), Israel is followed by the people-determinative consisting of man (A1), woman (B1), and plural sign (Z2).<sup>23</sup> F. J. Yurco and L. E.

---

<sup>20</sup> See W. F. Edgerton and J. A. Wilson, *Historical Records of Ramses III* (Chicago, 1936), pp. 35-58.

<sup>21</sup> As H. Engel, "Die Siegestele des Merneptah", *Biblica* 60 (1979), pp. 346-7, pointed out, this opinion was held by some scholars in the years immediately following W. M. F. Petrie's discovery of the stele. It is mentioned again, as one of several options, in the recent work of H. Sourouzian, *Monuments du Roi Merneptah* (Mainz, 1989), p. 215 (reference courtesy of J. A. Emerton; I have not been able to consult this work).

<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, note the view of G. W. Ahlström and D. Edelman, "Merneptah's Israel", *JNES* 44 (1985), pp. 59-61, that Israel is paired with Canaan in the text's ring structure. If this is accepted, then again the scribe included Israel at this place in the inscription because he knew they hailed specifically from the geographic region known as Canaan.

<sup>23</sup> The sigla used here follow the system of A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3rd edn, Oxford, 1957), pp. 438-548 (Sign-list).

Stager attempted to show that this determinative was not unique, since other peoples mentioned in the Merneptah Stele are also so indicated.<sup>24</sup> But this is not correct. True, a distinction is made between the place Libya and the people Libyans, by using N25 (with Z2) for the former and N25 and A1 (with Z2) for the latter. The Sea Peoples are similarly referred to. In the case of the Aqawasha, the same combination of N25 and A1 (with Z2) is used. In the case of the Tursha, Shardana, and Shekelsha, only N25 (with Z2) is used, and in the case of the Luka only N25 (without Z2) is used.

What are we to make of this employment of different determinatives to represent foreign people and lands? On the one hand, Israel is akin to the Sea Peoples (except for the Aqawasha) in that they are a people without a land. This would be true of the Sea Peoples during their invasion of Egypt; they had already departed from their Mediterranean homes and were in search of a new land. (The Libyans, by contrast, are indicated by both foreign-land determinative and people-determinative, because they were a people who resided in a foreign land.) Israel is likewise a people without a land; they do not actually live in Canaan, or in any foreign land for that matter, so no foreign-land determinative is used in connection with them. On the other hand, the determinative used for Israel is different from the one used to indicate the Sea Peoples because the woman-sign (B2) is included. This is an important clue. It means that the entire nation, women (and by extension children) included, is homeless. The situation which best fits this description of Israel is, of course, the slavery period. As the book of Exodus makes clear, Israelite women were also present in Egypt at this time (in fact, they figure prominently in Exod. i-xv).

Alternatively, Israel in the Merneptah Stele could refer to Israelite elements in Canaan who never experienced the eisodus, slavery, and exodus. This will especially be the case if Yurco is correct that the fourth battle scene on the outer western wall of the Cour de la Cachette at Karnak is Merneptah's army against Israel.<sup>25</sup> One such group of Israelites would be the tribe of Asher,

<sup>24</sup> F. J. Yurco *apud* L. E. Stager, "Merneptah, Israel and Sea Peoples: New Light on an Old Relief", *Eretz-Israel* 18 (1985) (Nahman Avigad Volume), pp. 60\*-1\*.

<sup>25</sup> "Merneptah's Palestinian Campaign", *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 8 (1978), p. 70; and more recently F. J. Yurco, "3,200-Year-

especially if we accept the view that this name appears as *isr* in Papyrus Anastasi I, column 23, line 6.<sup>26</sup> This text dates probably to the time of Ramesses II,<sup>27</sup> according to most varieties of the 13th-century dating of the exodus and according to my 12th-century dating of the exodus, the Israelites were in Egypt during the reign of this king. However, since, as I have just shown above, the unique determinative used for Israel suggests the slavery, I prefer to understand the mention of Israel in the Merneptah Stele as referring to elements in Egypt, not in Canaan.

An additional piece of evidence may also be germane here. One of the locales which marks the border between Judah and Benjamin is *maʕyan mē neptōah*, literally “the spring of the waters of Nephtoah” (modern Lifta, three miles from Jerusalem), mentioned in Josh. xv 9, xviii 15. As I have discussed elsewhere, this name actually means “the spring of Merneptah”.<sup>28</sup> In the light of I. Singer’s excellent survey of the evidence, there can no longer be any doubt that Merneptah actually campaigned in Canaan.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the existence of a toponym bearing the pharaoh’s name is virtual proof that indeed his armies did march there. It would be

---

Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt”, *BAR* 16/5 (1990), pp. 20-38. See also Stager (n. 24), pp. 56\*-64\*.

<sup>26</sup> A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Hieratic Texts* (Leipzig, 1911), p. 25\*. There are, of course, numerous alternative interpretations of *isr* in this passage; see H.-W. Fischer-Elfert, *Die satirische Streitschrift des Papyrus Anastasi I* (Wiesbaden, 1986), pp. 199-200. My thanks to Professor G. E. Kadish of the State University of New York at Binghamton for bringing this book to my attention.

<sup>27</sup> Gardiner (n. 26), p. 4\*; Fischer-Elfert (n. 26), pp. 261-7; and H. Brunner, “Papyrus Anastasi I”, in W. Helck and W. Westendorf (ed.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 4 (Wiesbaden, 1982), cols 674-9. The latter two sources prefer a period slightly later than Ramesses II for the production of Papyrus Anastasi I itself (Brunner mentions the reign of Seti II specifically), but all agree that the original text dates to the reign of Ramesses II (who is mentioned in the text in four passages).

<sup>28</sup> “Merneptah in Canaan”, *JSSEA* 11 (1981), pp. 171-2, with corrigenda published as Supplement to *JSSEA* 12 (1982).

<sup>29</sup> “Merneptah’s Campaign to Canaan and the Egyptian Occupation of the Southern Coastal Plain of Palestine in the Ramesside Period”, *BASOR* 269 (1988), pp. 1-10. For a contrary view, see D. B. Redford, “The Ashkelon Relief at Karnak and the Israel Stela”, *IEJ* 36 (1986), pp. 188-200. Concerning the germane lines of the Merneptah Stele, Redford wrote, “The sort of triumphal sweep of arms which the above snippet of poetry conjures up is quite unhistorical, and the passage must be rejected as a reliable source” (p. 199), but this approach is far too negative. The evidence put forward by Singer and my point about “the spring of Merneptah” combine to render Redford’s position untenable.

incomprehensible that “the spring of Merneptah” should be so named if this king never visited the place or his armies never campaigned there. Thus, we may assume that Merneptah’s army served in the area near Jerusalem, as well as in Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yenoam (as stated in the famous stele). If this point be granted, those scholars who would place Israel in the land of Canaan before Merneptah’s reign have an additional question to answer. How is it that an Egyptian royal army came so close to the very area settled by Israel without the Bible making reference to such a presence?<sup>30</sup> This question is similar to the issue addressed above concerning the view that the Merneptah Stele refers to an Egyptian victory over Israel in the land of Canaan. In short, the simplest solution to this difficulty is to erase the difficulty altogether by assuming, as I do, that Israel reached Canaan after, not before or during, the reign of Merneptah.

Having considered the data both from the archaeological excavations in Canaan and from Egyptian records, we turn to the Bible where I believe confirmation for a 12th-century exodus and conquest/settlement may be found. An important verse is Exod. xiii 17: “God did not lead them the way of the land of the Philistines though it was near, for God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see the fighting and then return to Egypt.’” The mention of the Philistines here is often thought to be an anachronism,<sup>31</sup> but such need not be the case. If indeed the Israelites were leaving Egypt at the very time when the Philistines were attacking the realm of Ramesses III, we have a much clearer understanding of Exod. xiii 17. The Israelites chose another, more southern, route to escape the fighting along the coast to the north. This is what the verse plainly states, and this is how it should be understood.<sup>32</sup>

Another biblical passage which is pertinent in this regard is Josh. xiii 2, where the districts of the Philistines are reckoned among “the great amount of land remaining to be taken” (*v.* 1). Those who

---

<sup>30</sup> That such a battle occurred in Canaan, with Egypt defeating Israel, is assumed by many scholars. See, e.g., Stager (n. 24), p. 61\*; Singer (n. 29), p. 4; etc.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (2nd edn, Grand Rapids, Mich., and London, 1980), p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> The contemporaneity of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and the Philistine movement from the Aegean may be hinted at in Amos ix 7.

propose a 15th-century exodus or even a 13th-century exodus find difficulty in this statement.<sup>33</sup> But the testimony of this passage (see also Josh. xiii 3) may be accepted if we simply assume that the Philistines arrived in Canaan by sea shortly before or at the same time as the Israelites reached the country by land. In short, the other datings of the Israelite exodus propose their respective hypotheses and then must claim that two biblical verses, Exod. xiii 17 and Josh. xiii 2, are anachronistic. I prefer to begin with the biblical evidence, which in this case points to the arrival of the Philistines at a time approximately coeval with the Israelite exodus and conquest/settlement, and build a hypothesis on it.

Next we turn to the evidence of the biblical genealogies. Research in this area usually has led to the conclusion that the genealogies recorded in the Bible are untrustworthy as a historical guide. R. R. Wilson, for example, stated that in the Bible and in the ancient Near East generally "genealogies seem to have been created and preserved for domestic, politico-jural, and religious purposes"; yet he also admitted that they "may contain accurate information" and that for a given genealogy we often "have no reason to question its accuracy".<sup>34</sup> In a recent study in this journal, I adduced considerable evidence demonstrating the internal consistency of the biblical genealogies, which in turn points towards their historical reliability.<sup>35</sup> My concluding statement was as follows: "the inner consistency of the biblical genealogies points to their general veracity and ... they may act as a reliable guide for historical research" (p. 204). In the present article I would like to apply this conclusion to practical use.

The historian who wishes to use the biblical genealogies to fix the date of the exodus and the conquest/settlement, must seek a lineage which links a figure whose dating is uncontested with a figure from the exodus itself. Such a genealogy is that of King David recorded

---

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., R. G. Boling and G. E. Wright, *Joshua* (Garden City, N. Y., 1982), pp. 337-8.

<sup>34</sup> *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven, Conn., 1977), pp. 199-200. The accuracy of genealogies among the Semites in general is discussed, however briefly, by W. G. Oxtoby, *Some Inscriptions of the Safaitic Bedouin* (New Haven, Conn., 1968), p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> "The internal consistency and historical reliability of the biblical genealogies", *VT* 40 (1990), pp. 185-206. On pp. 204-5 there is a brief adumbration of some of the views set forth in the present article.

in Ruth iv 18-22 and again in 1 Chr. ii 5-15.<sup>36</sup> The line of Nahshon-Salmon-Boaz-Obed-Jesse-David informs us that David comes five generations after Nahshon. David, as all scholars agree, reigned c. 1010-970 B.C.E. His ancestor Nahshon is mentioned in two places, in Exod. vi 23 as the brother-in-law of Aaron and in Num. i 7 as the prince of Judah during the wandering period.

In order to calculate the time span separating David and Nahshon, one must estimate the number of years per generation. Scholars of the Bible and the ancient Near East usually have worked with rather low figures such as 20-25 years per generation.<sup>37</sup> But this range is incorrect; instead, the average generation should be calculated at 30 years.<sup>38</sup> In a moment I will justify the use

<sup>36</sup> This is in fact the only such reliable genealogy in the Bible. The others which link people of the Davidic period to an earlier epoch in Israelite history are untrustworthy. The genealogies of Samuel in 1 Chr. vi 18-23 (see also 1 Chr. vi 7-13) and Zadok in 1 Chr. v 30-4 (see also 1 Chr. vi 35-8; Ezra vii 2-5) are post-exilic inventions to present both of them as Levites. The former is an Ephraimite however (see 1 Sam. i 1), and the latter is almost certainly a holdover Jebusite priest who continued functioning in the Jerusalem shrine when David made it the center of Israelite religious life. For details, see Rendsburg (n. 35), pp. 195-7. Accordingly, Bimson (n. 7), p. 88, erred in using Samuel's (actually Heman's) genealogy to bolster his argument for a 15th century exodus and conquest.

Moreover, it is not surprising that David's lineage should be the only one linking his era with that of the exodus. As A. Malamut, "Tribal Societies: Biblical Genealogies and African Lineage Systems", *Archives européennes de sociologie* 14 (1973), p. 136, noted, both in African societies and in the Bible, "dominant tribal lineages (e.g. Judah), and royal or aristocratic pedigrees, have normally been transmitted with greater care and are thus deeper than their less important counterparts, where telescoping is more often resorted to".

<sup>37</sup> M. L. Bierbrier, *The Late New Kingdom in Egypt (c. 1300-664 B.C.): A Genealogical and Chronological Investigation* (Warminster, 1975), p. xiv (20 years); W. W. Hallo, "Zariquim", *JNES* 15 (1956), p. 221, n. 9 (21 years, if I have understood his argument correctly); B. Grdseloff, "Edom, d'après les sources égyptiennes", *Bulletin des études historiques juives* 1 (1946), p. 71 (22 years); H. H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua* (London, 1950), p. 79; G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (2nd edn, Philadelphia and London, 1962), p. 84; J. M. Meyers, *1 Chronicles* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), p. 20; and Bimson (n. 7), p. 88 (all 25 years).

<sup>38</sup> In my survey of standard works by biblical scholars, I have found only one individual who used the figure of 30 years, namely, K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London and Downers Grove, Ill., 1966), p. 72. A few others spoke of 25-30 years, e.g., A. Lods, *Israël des origines au milieu du VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1930), p. 210 = E. tr. *Israel from its Beginnings to the Middle of the Eight Century* (London, 1932), p. 185; and W. F. Albright, "The Biblical Period", in L. Finkelstein (ed.), *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion* 1 (New York, 1949), p. 65, n. 139 (reprinted as *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* [New York, 1963], pp. 113-14, n. 198). In an earlier article, W. F. Albright, "The Date and Personality of the Chronicler", *JBL* 40 (1921), p. 110, a figure of 20-25 years was proposed.

of this figure, but first let me define what I mean by “average generation”. I use this term to mean the average age at which a man fathers all his children. A true average would be reached by calculating the ages of all men at the birth of all their children. Obviously, the data available to us from ancient Israel or from any other place in the ancient world do not allow for such an exact calculation. But the figure of 30 years per generation can be substantiated via several approaches.

The first is simply to calculate the average generation of known lineages (which are in the main royal lineages) from the ancient Near East. I have made a preliminary study based on eighteen different royal lineages of at least four generations, and I have arrived at the figure of 28.8 years per generation.<sup>39</sup> This figure is exceedingly close to the average generational span calculated by D. P. Henige after an exhaustive study of over 700 royal genealogies worldwide.<sup>40</sup> But if we assume, as most scholars do, that filial succession normally passed to the first-born son,<sup>41</sup> then the figure of 28.8 years per generation arrived at solely through the use of royal lineages will in actuality be below average. In order to compensate for this factor, we should raise the figure to a slightly higher number. I have done so in proposing 30 years per generation for the purposes of historical reconstruction, though probably it should be raised even a little more.<sup>42</sup>

This figure accords nicely with the results of M. Roth’s study of age at marriage based on documentation available from the Neo-

---

<sup>39</sup>Examples are the four generations of the Ur III Dynasty which span 109 years (2112-2004 B.C.E.) or 27.3 years per generation; the ten generations of the First Dynasty of Babylon which span 286 years (1880-1595 B.C.E.) or 28.6 years per generation; the six generations of the Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty which span 195 years (1991-1797 B.C.E.) or 32.5 years per generation; and the five generations of the Persian Achaemenian Dynasty which span 165 years (522-358 B.C.E.) or 33.0 years per generation (I exclude Artaxerxes III [358-338 B.C.E.] since he was poisoned and thus died prematurely).

<sup>40</sup> *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 121-44.

<sup>41</sup> First-born royal succession is assumed in the story of Adonijah and Solomon in 1 Kgs i-ii (see especially i 5-6 and ii 15). From Egypt we have a specific reference to Amenhotep II as the eldest son of Thutmose III (in the Great Sphinx Stela, for which see J. A. Wilson in *ANET*, p. 244). On the other hand, we also know that Merneptah was but the thirteenth of Ramesses II’s many sons.

<sup>42</sup> Note that according to M. Gruber, “Breast Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia”, *JANES* 19 (1989), pp. 61-83, birth interval was about three to four years in antiquity.

Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods.<sup>43</sup> She concluded that the average age at marriage for males was 30 years old.<sup>44</sup> By extension, the average age of fathering children, or the average generation as I have defined it, must be even higher than 30; Roth suggested 35. I recognize that Roth based her research on Mesopotamian society, not on Israelite society, but in lieu of any other material, I am inclined to accept her conclusions as equally valid for ancient Israel.

Accordingly, if we allow 30 years per generation, then Nahshon lived 150 years before David, or *c.* 1150 B.C.E. Any figure higher than 30 years per generation will, of course, place Nahshon slightly earlier in the first half of the 12th century.<sup>45</sup> This dovetails with the information presented above and once again points to the 12th century as the date of the exodus and the conquest/settlement.

In sum, evidence of various types, both archaeological and literary, converges to indicate the 1100s B.C.E. as the century during which the Israelites left Egypt and conquered or settled a significant portion of the land of Canaan.<sup>46</sup> To these arguments may be added still another one, albeit one *ex silentio*, alluded to above several times. Nowhere in the books of Joshua and Judges is any contact between Israel and Egypt even hinted at.<sup>47</sup> Had the

---

<sup>43</sup> "Age at Marriage and the Household: A Study of Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Forms", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987), pp. 715-47.

<sup>44</sup> Contrast this conclusion, based on empirical evidence, with the pure speculations proffered by L. Köhler, *Der hebräische Mensch* (Tübingen, 1953), pp. 48-9 = E. tr. *Hebrew Man* (London, 1956), pp. 61-2.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., if one wishes to use 32 years per generation, then Nahshon is to be dated *c.* 1160 B.C.E.; 35 years per generation (so Roth) places Nahshon *c.* 1175 B.C.E.; etc.

<sup>46</sup> One major stumbling block to this hypothesis is the site of Jericho. As well known, the excavations there indicate that the site was not populated during Iron I. But the situation at Jericho is no less problematic for proponents of the 13th-century date, since in this century there similarly was no settlement at the site. Only proponents of the 15th-century date can use the excavations at Jericho to their benefit, though even here there is too heavy a reliance; see B. G. Wood, "Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence", *BAR* 16/2 (March-April 1990), pp. 44-58. On the entire issue of Jericho, see the convenient summary by M. D. Coogan, "Archaeology and Biblical Studies: The Book of Joshua", in W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, and D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1990), pp. 19-32, in particular pp. 19-22.

<sup>47</sup> Unless the enigmatic *šrʿá* of Josh. xxiv 12 (see also Exod. xxiii 28; Deut. vii 20) represents Egypt, as originally suggested by J. Garstang, *Joshua Judges* (London, 1931), pp. 258-60. In the light of my analysis, should we revive Garstang's proposal (with a revision of the dating)? The Egyptian military presence in Canaan during the 14th and 13th centuries (for the former see the Amarna letters;

Israelites arrived in Canaan during either the 15th or the 13th century, as the two popular theories hold, it is unimaginable that they would not have encountered Egyptians in the land. The silence concerning Egypt in the books of Joshua and Judges suggests strongly that when the Israelites arrived in Canaan, Egypt was no longer a presence in the country. Such a condition would have obtained only from c. 1150 onwards, when the Egyptian influence in Canaan was no longer felt.<sup>48</sup> A logical counter-argument might be that the Israelites did not venture near areas of Egyptian control. But this is not the case, for cities mentioned in Joshua and Judges, such as Megiddo, Lachish, Beth-shemesh, Beth-shean, and Gezer, all were under Egyptian administration in some manner.<sup>49</sup> In addition, as noted above, Merneptah's army presumably marched into the very hill country, namely, the border region between Benjamin and Judah, which Israel was settling upon its entry into Canaan.

The theory presented here for a 12th-century exodus and conquest/settlement will necessitate an even greater reduction of the timespan of the events recorded in the book of Judges. But few will object to such a rearrangement, since it already is clear that the careers of many of the individual judges overlapped. Moreover, this will explain how Moses' grandson Jonathan and Aaron's grandson Phinehas were both active at the end of the period of the judges, just before the rise of Samuel (Judg. xviii 30, xx 28). Similarly, we thus are able to explain how an individual such as Jair could be mentioned both in relation to Moses (Num. xxxii 41) and as a minor judge (Judg. x 3-5).<sup>50</sup>

---

for the latter recall the aforementioned activities of Ramesses II and Merneptah) had so weakened the local population that Israel's arrival in the 12th century was in many respects unchallenged. More recent scholars have also turned to a revival of Garstang's interpretation of *šir'ā*. See Y. Yadin, "The Transition from a Semi-Nomadic to a Sedentary Society in the Twelfth Century B.C.E.," in Cross (n. 4), pp. 67-8; and O. Borowski, "The Identity of the Biblical *šir'ā*," in C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (ed.), *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1983), pp. 315-9 (the latter scholar, in fact, suggests that *šir'ā* is a code-word for specifically Merneptah's campaign).

<sup>48</sup> J. M. Weinstein, "The Egyptian Empire in Palestine: A Reassessment", *BASOR* 241 (1981), pp. 1-28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> See R. de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne d'Israël: la Période des Juges* (Paris, 1973), p. 97 = E. tr. (n. 8), p. 787: "I wonder, however, whether it is not possible to accept the fact that both names point to the same person... In other words, is it not possible that there was only one Jair, who was made the Judge of Israel after taking

In fairness, it should be stated that my reconstruction of early Israelite history must still contend with the attested 13th-century destructions at other sites, such as Tell Beit Mirsim, Bethel, and Hazor. The explanations for these may be forthcoming from a variety of avenues. During the 1200s both Ramesses II and Merneptah campaigned in Canaan, the Sea Peoples first arrived after being repulsed from the Egyptian coast, and one must always keep in mind the possibility of warfare between individual Canaanite city-states (see Fritz [n. 14], pp. 90-1). Of course, most scholars have concurred with Yadin's interpretation that the destruction of Stratum XIII at Hazor in the 13th century was the work of the Israelites as recorded in Josh. xi 10-11. An easy solution would be to suggest that, if Yadin's view is to be retained, then the Israelites who conquered Canaanite Hazor were members of the burgeoning nation who did not participate in the slavery and exodus. Alternatively, I invite scholars more qualified than I to reassess the evidence unearthed by Yadin at Hazor to see if the data can be dovetailed with the archaeological evidence from Lachish, Heshbon, and other sites, which has pointed to my conclusion.

In this regard, one must keep in mind the following statement by Finkelstein:

But once we break free from the restraints of the various historical interpretations, we are left with no means of assigning precise dates for Israelite Settlement sites. We cannot, in fact, determine whether Bethel was destroyed in 1250 B.C.E. or, say, 1175 B.C.E. A good illustration of the problem concerns the dating of the destruction of Stratum VI at Lachish. It was long accepted that this occurred in the second half of the 13th century—until it recently became clear that Stratum VI still existed during the reign of Ramesses III, in the first half of the 12th century ... ([n. 2] p. 286 = E. tr., p. 316).

In the light of this admission, is it not possible that the date of the destruction of Hazor Stratum XIII might also be lowered? Indeed, at least one scholar recently proposed the date of 1190 B.C.E. for this event (Fritz [n. 14], p. 88).

To sum up, I present the following timeline of events:

---

of the encampments of Jair, just as Jephthah was made Judge after his victory over the Ammonites?"

mid-13th century	Israelites in Egypt enslaved by Ramesses II, <sup>51</sup> other Israelite elements present in Canaan
late 13th century and early 12th century c. 1175	Slavery continues into the reign of Merneptah and his successors Exodus from Egypt during the reign of Ramesses III, <sup>52</sup> coincident with his war against the Sea Peoples
mid-12th century	Israelites conquest/settlement of Canaan
late 12th century and 11th century	Israelite expansion in Canaan during the period of the judges <sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, I wish only to echo the words of an illustrious predecessor who covered the same territory. In presenting his synthesis of the exodus and conquest, H. H. Rowley wrote: "I offer it as one who is convinced that it yields a more probable solution that its rivals, but not as one whose mind is closed against any new light that may come" ([n. 37] p. 163).

---

<sup>51</sup> Since I adhere to the scholarly consensus that Ramesses II is the pharaoh of the slavery, but I also claim that Ramesses III is the pharaoh of the exodus, I am forced to interpret Exod. ii 23 as meaning something other than immediate royal succession. There is nothing in this verse or in any other passage that indicates that the pharaoh of the exodus is the immediate successor of the pharaoh of the slavery. In fact, the Hebrew expression *bayyāmim hārabbim hāhēm* "those many days" indicates that a goodly amount of time had passed. Many scholars, of course, views this as confirmation of the long reign of Ramesses II as the setting for the slavery, and this is quite likely. But it does not necessarily follow that his son and successor Merneptah was the pharaoh of the exodus. Lacking any proof is the conjecture of some scholars that the word *hārabbim* in this verse is a gloss of "P" to bring the account of Moses' stay in Midian into line with the chronology of this reputed source; thus, e.g., Hyatt (n. 31), p. 69.

<sup>52</sup> I hasten to add that a 12th-century date for the exodus and conquest was proposed in part by M. B. Rowton, "The Problem of the Exodus", *PEQ* 85 (1953), pp. 46-60. He held to the theory of two exoduses, which was popular earlier in this century, and he posited the second one in the 1100s. As a check of his article will indicate, most of the evidence adduced by Rowton is different from the material I have garnered, but there is also some common ground.

<sup>53</sup> On the growth of the Israelite settlement into regions such as Judah and Galilee during this period, see Finkelstein (n. 2).