

# “Why Have You Brought Us Up Out of Egypt to Die in the Wilderness?” Murmurings Against a 15th Century Date for the Exodus

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## *Introduction*

Scholars who posit an actual Exodus event might be classified for sake of discussion as “conservative.” But such conservatives are far from unified on the issue of the date of the Exodus. One component of this group insists on a fifteenth century or “early” date for the Exodus. Others find little or nothing to recommend the early date and—based on the preponderance of archaeological and historical evidence—prefer a thirteenth century or “late” date.

It is my contention that the division over the proper context for the Exodus hinders or prevents constructive dialogue between conservative biblical scholars and Near Eastern archaeologists and historians.

## *The Problem for the Conservative Scholar*

**Pressure on the Conservative Scholar.** I recently wrote an article summarizing archaeological data on the emergence of Israel as it relates (or doesn't!) to the biblical tradition found in the book of Joshua. The article appeared in a journal read primarily by conservative scholars and some pastors. In it, I attempted to put the most positive, but realistic, spin on the evidence in support of the biblical account of Israel's emergence. With a brief statement about the implausibility of other periods, I assumed the Late Bronze-Iron I horizon as the only reasonable period for Israel's emergence in Palestine. When the article appeared I was quietly chastised by another evangelical scholar for being “too hard on the early date for the Exodus.”

My experience illustrates the difficulty faced by the conservative scholar in dealing with the Exodus. There is pressure to include the Early Date as a viable option in any material written for a conservative audience. This problem is particularly noticeable in textbooks for Hebrew Bible introduction courses that present the Exodus as a historical possibility. Texts intended for an evangelical audience tend to favor the Early Date as part of an overall apologetic tone. But even in texts intended for a wider audience which acknowledge the superior evidence for the Late Date, the author usually vacillates by offering a wimpy explanation that the date of the Exodus is a “hotly debated point on which there is no certain answer.” Perhaps these authors can be excused when they are not specialists in the areas of Hebrew history or archaeology. But it is also possible that concern for textbook sales potential is responsible for this ambiguity.

In any case, the conservative scholar is stuck between the proverbial rock and the hard place. Or, if you will, stuck between the impassible Red Sea of evidence against the Early Date on the one hand and the menacing chariots of Pharaoh's evangelical army on the other. The tendency of the conservative scholar is to hold out for the possibility of a miraculous passage through the chaos of data. Is there a miracle here? None has yet appeared. Rather than drown a scholarly death, I have chosen to stand and fight against those who would force me to swim against the sea of evidence.

**Inability to defend the Early Date.** Indeed, it is impossible for the conservative scholar to make a reasonable defense of the Early Date. Time obviously prevents consideration of the many arguments involved. A single area of relatively recent research will suffice to show the weakness of the Early Date case.

Obviously the date of any Exodus must be linked to the emergence of Israel in Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Recent research has made it clear that a group began to appear in villages of the Hill Country of Palestine about 1200 BCE. This group can reasonably be called Israel, or at least can be seen as an antecedent of Israel. This is quite in line with studies of the determinatives in the Merneptah Stele, which indicate “Israel” was not yet fully established as a national entity. A fatal blow to the Early Date is the lack of any evidence for the emergence of Israel in Palestine prior to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This difficulty is usually ignored or glossed over by proponents of the Early Date. For example, Alfred Hoerth, in his recent book, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, avoids a discussion of the data and date of Israel’s emergence by reverting primarily to a rehearsal of the biblical accounts in Joshua and Judges.<sup>2</sup>

The hard facts are that an Exodus event leading to the establishment of an entity that eventually became Israel is possible in the context of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but simply cannot be reconciled with archaeological and historical data for the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Why, then, do some interpreters continue to insist on an Early Date for the Exodus event? It can only be that certain presuppositions force them to do so.

### *Presuppositions of “Early Date” Proponents*

**The Search for Presuppositions.** Some Early Date proponents may wish to claim that non-biblical data convinces them of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Exodus. The only potentially positive data for their position is the revival of Garstang’s dating of the destruction of Jericho in a reevaluation by Bryant Wood.<sup>3</sup> Wood’s reanalysis provided a shot in the arm to the flagging archaeological case for the Early Date. As such, it is the only site given any detail in Hoerth’s review of the Conquest. Wood’s case is interesting, to be sure, but hardly compelling.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Jericho does create a strong emotional appeal for evangelicals as the most famous of Joshua’s conquests and as a bit of former evidence, long lost and now perhaps found again. But Jericho alone cannot explain the Early Date phenomenon. By taking Jericho and the Early Date, one loses Hazor (which seems like a bad trade) and other evidence that makes a better case for the biblical account. No, it is not the extra-biblical evidence that creates the Early Date case.

Proponents of the Early Date invariably begin with a literal reading of 1 Kings 6:1. Hoerth provides a typical example: “the Bible seems rather clear on the matter. First Kings 6:1 puts the exodus 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon, who became king in 971, which points to a date of 1447 for the exodus.”<sup>5</sup> Hoerth and others present their case by piously granting primacy to the biblical data, against those proponents of the Late Date whom—in Hoerth’s words—“thought extrabiblical data should take precedence over biblical data for trustworthiness.” This sort of presentation amounts to mere posturing and creates a false dichotomy.

I hold to a Late Date for the Exodus. It is ludicrous to claim that I do not give primary weight to the biblical text. For without doing so, no one would ever come to the conclusion that an Exodus event occurred at all. By suggesting that proponents of the Late Date do not give the Bible its due, Hoerth and other Early Date proponents exhibit a typical characteristic of fundamentalism; that is, demonization of

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<sup>1</sup> A possible exception to or complication of this linkage emerges with a multiple Exodus theory. But multiple Exodus theories are not acceptable to Early Date proponents. Therefore, for the sake of argument, by “Exodus” I will assume a singular or at least focal event.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> Bryant G. Wood, “Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho?” *BAR* 15/2 (Nov-Dec 1990): 44-58.

<sup>4</sup> It is clear that, from the beginning, Wood has an agenda to vindicate what he believes to be the biblical interpretation, including the Early Date for the Exodus.

<sup>5</sup> Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 179.

those who do not hold their narrow presuppositions. Thus they make enemies of those who should be allies.

**Unstated Presuppositions.** In the meantime, it is apparent that the driving force behind the Early Date scheme is not simply the desire to give primacy to biblical data. Rather, when Early Date proponents insist that the Bible clearly points to a 15<sup>th</sup> century date for the Exodus, they really mean that their interpretation of the text requires it. In this case, their interpretation of the text flows from an unstated presupposition that numbers in the text must be treated literally.

**Reasons for Presupposition.** The question must be asked: “Why adopt the presupposition that 1 Kings 6:1 and other numbers should be read literally?” Western culture tends to treat numbers as representations of concrete facts. A colleague of mine refers to this phenomenon as the “Seduction of Mathematics.” It began with empirical science’s growing cultural dominance in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Empirical science’s method of mathematical or logical quantification as a tool of “proof” and “certainty” provided the credibility for the empirical description of certain objects and subjects. In other words, this period has witnessed a growing reliance on numbers as concrete representations of facts. Pragmatic successes of empirical science (the production of things like automobiles, radio, air travel, cell phones) caused and still causes a cultural seduction of the masses and scholars as well. Thus, the certainties of mathematics and formal logic appeared to present philosophers and theologians a tool and a method with which to make conclusive arguments in what they thought was scientific objectivity; i.e., the use of “real numbers” to “prove” one’s point in an irrefutable manner.<sup>6</sup> The implication that follows is that numbers *in any context* are meant to be “real,” or “literal” existents, for we assume, “Why else would anyone use a number if it is not literal?”

An extrapolation of this notion is the outright equation of literalness with truth. For fundamentalists, a corollary to this reasoning produces the deep-seated fear that if any part of their canon is demonstrated to be non-literal, they must conclude that it is also “not true.” If part of the canon is not true, the logic goes, then any or all parts of it may not be true. To avoid the certain doom of the so-called “slippery slope,” then, the evangelical is predisposed to adopt a position of “literal truth” of the biblical text as an unassailable presupposition.<sup>7</sup> And numbers (coming full circle) provide the most obvious concrete anchors for this position. This presupposition frequently creates what David Fischer calls, “the Fallacy of misplaced Literalism.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Problems with Early Date Presupposition (that Numbers Must be Literal)*

**Excesses of Literal Use of Numbers.** Nevertheless, the psychological need to treat numbers as concrete facts finds expression in a variety of conservative analyses. Hoerth’s book, for instance, expends considerable print laboring over chronological details of the Patriarchs and the census figures in the book of Numbers.<sup>9</sup> This sort of exercise seems harmless enough. But the same presuppositions assumed and used by the Early Date crowd lead to some obvious excesses. For example, the archaeological research of Bryant Wood’s organization, Associates for Biblical Research, is presented to the public on a website alongside material promoting a young earth creationist agenda.<sup>10</sup> While Wood’s research has a scholarly appearance, close inspection reveals that it not only shares with creationist pseudo-science a website and publication, but basic (though unstated) presuppositions as well.

<sup>6</sup>Bennie R. Crockett, “Science, Philosophy, and Religion: Three Discourses, Three Perspectives,” a paper presented at William Carey College, 17 November, 1999.

<sup>7</sup>This is what Joseph Campbell calls getting “stuck in the metaphor;” Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 56.

<sup>8</sup>David Fischer, . . .

<sup>9</sup>Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 177-78.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.christiananswers.net/canhome.html>, accessed 16 November, 1999.

The presupposition that numbers in the biblical text must be read literally, I contend, is inconsistent with the intent of the biblical writers on the one hand and precludes meaningful scholarly discussion on the other.

**Inconsistent with Biblical Intent.** Now, let us return to the issue at hand. In the first quote cited a moment ago, Hoerth declares that 1 Kings 6:1 “*puts* the exodus 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon” (emphasis mine). He obviously assumes that the number should be read literally; but he also assumes that the intent of the reference is to give a chronological placement of the Exodus. The seduction of Mathematics leads to a succession of errors. The number is assumed as a literal fact; this seemingly concrete fact, then, must be the most important issue in the passage; and the passage, therefore, must have as its purpose the expression of this fact. This sort of fallacy demonstrates itself occasionally in my classroom, as I teach at a denominational college deep in the Bible Belt. More than once, I have had students adamantly maintain in class that Jesus was crucified on Thursday morning, since he predicted his entombment for “three days and three nights” (Mt 12:40) and his resurrection is clearly placed on a Sunday morning (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2, 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1).

Obviously there are times when numerical references are intended to impart a sense of symmetry or symbolic meaning rather than an exact or literal calculation. In modern Western culture, numbers are assumed to be the most concrete and literal parts of written material—witness, for example, our concern for telephone numbers, departure times, stock prices, and grade averages; in all of these areas, we demand accuracy of the numbers. But in ancient texts, it is *exactly those features*—the numbers—that are most likely to serve their authors or editors as vehicles for symbolic meaning or symmetry. The Bible itself is replete with examples. The symbolic potential of the 480 in 1 Kings 6:1 is well established and does not need to be revisited here.

Shall we allow for some numbers in the biblical text to have an intended literal meaning? Certainly; but how do we tell how do we determine the intent each example? As with any other textual material, context is key. For our present case, I argue that the context includes archaeological and historical data. By ignoring context, my students allowed a number to take precedence over other evidence that more clearly places Jesus’ crucifixion. I suggest that proponents of a fifteenth century Exodus have gone and done likewise.

**Precludes Meaningful Scholarly Discussion.** The presupposition that numbers must be taken literally precludes meaningful scholarly dialogue since any archaeological or historical data that conflicts with the narrow interpretation of the biblical text will be disregarded. It also creates a defensive approach in the interpreter—they must start with the “biblically” assumed position and search for data that supports that narrow position, while ignoring data that does not. Such methodology can hardly be called scholarly. The resulting view is at such odds with the bulk of the data, that mainline scholars have no real basis for, or interest in, response. As a result, the debate on the Exodus date is frequently conducted in semi- or pseudo-scholarly venues.

The “Seduction of Mathematics” has led literalists into the false methodology of searching for data to support a pre-conceived exodus rather than searching for a niche in history when *an* exodus could possibly have occurred. To put it bluntly, they have sacrificed the chance to make a reasonable case for an exodus in order to promote—with weak evidence—the case for *their* Exodus.<sup>11</sup> Thus proponents of an Exodus event are divided. To the Early Date proponents who have brought conservative scholarship to this place, I murmur, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt only to die in the scholarly wilderness?”

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<sup>11</sup>Historical evidences cited as arguments for the historicity of the Exodus invariably come from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Such evidences do not, of course, prove the historicity of the Exodus event, but they do add to such an event’s plausibility in the context of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They are, however, specious when used as arguments for a 15<sup>th</sup> century Exodus.

*Conclusion: Challenge to Conservatives*

I have now used two metaphors that cast me in the negative light as one of the Exodus participants doubting the mighty acts of God's deliverance and sustenance. Indeed, many of my evangelical colleagues will conclude that I have "lost the faith" by refusing to hold out that "God could have made it happen in the fifteenth century if he wanted to." But—if I may shift to metaphors in which I play the righteous role—I see no point in continuing to "kick against the pricks." To the oppressors of conservative biblical scholarship, I cry out, "Let my people go!"

Can one make a case for the plausibility of an Exodus event, given what we know about the history and archaeology of the Ancient Near East? Yes, I believe there is a window of opportunity for some kind of Exodus in the thirteenth century BC. But there is no window for the Early Date. Conservative biblical scholars who wish to engage in scholarly dialogue with those doing research in the archaeology and history of the ancient Near East must forsake the Early Date and reach a defensible consensus from which constructive dialogue with archaeologists and historians may occur.