

Hyksos and Hebrews: Coexistence at Its Finest

James T. Moll

During the third and second millennia BC, according to the third century BC Egyptian priest and historian Manetho in his *Aegyptica*, Egypt underwent five distinct periods with thirty-one dynasties.¹ These can be broken down into three long and stable periods, known respectively as the Old (2686-2181 BC), Middle (2040-1782 BC), and New Kingdoms (1570-1070 BC), between which lay the First and Second Intermediate Periods of ca. 150 and 200 years each, respectively. Whereas the kingdoms were characterized by strong monarchs and long dynasties, competent bureaucracy, freedom from invasion, massive construction projects, and cultural and intellectual development, the intermediate periods were characterized by political instability marked by weak kings, invasions by foreign peoples, and internal rivalries for leadership.²

Of particular interest in this essay are the Second Intermediate Period and the New Kingdom. Although a glorious time for Egypt (considered so even now), the Middle Kingdom mysteriously ended around the mid-seventeenth century BC and was replaced around ca. 1720-1640 BC by a group of people dubbed the “Hyksos” by Egyptians, which means “princes of foreign lands.”³ Not a lot of information about these people survives, although research remains ongoing, but we do know that they were a Semitic people whose language and culture were not far from those of the ancient Israelites. Around the middle of the sixteenth century BC, these people were eventually forced out of power and compelled to leave the country by Ahmose I and his brother from Upper Egypt, who ushered in the New Kingdom. This new dynasty hated the Hyksos so much that they destroyed many of the artifacts and records from the Second Intermediate Period (the rule of the Hyksos).

This event has caused historians angst ever since. Who were the Hyksos? Foreign invaders? Hebrews? Many sources will say they were invaders from west Asia, who brought horses and composite bows to Egypt, as well as war.⁴ The Bible, though it does not give dates, says that there

¹ Manetho, *The Life of Manetho: Traditions and Conjectures*, trans. W.G. Waddell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), available online at: https://archive.org/stream/manethowithengli00maneuoft/manethowithengli00maneuoft_djvu.txt (accessed January 21, 2019).

² Howard Spodek, *The World's History*, Volume One: *Prehistory to 1500*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NH: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2014), 128-129.

³ Hyksos can also be translated as “King Shepherds,” “Foreign Rulers,” or “ruler of foreign lands.” These are noted by Ronald A. Geobey Trinity College Dublin, in “Joseph the Infiltrator, Jacob the Conqueror? Reexamining the Hyksos–Hebrew Correlation.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 136, no. 1 (January 2017): 23-37 at 24-25, available online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315063483_Joseph_the_Infiltrator_Jacob_the_Conqueror_Reexamining_the_Hyksos-Hebrew_Correlation (accessed January 21, 2019). On the dating of the Hyksos rule, see Geobey, “Joseph the Infiltrator, Jacob the Conqueror?,” 23-24, n. 1; and Ian Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 132.

⁴ Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs, *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 253. A detailed discussion of the Hyksos and their takeover and subsequent rule of Egypt may be found in

is a point in Egyptian history at which a Pharaoh allowed a Hebrew man to take control of Egypt's fortune for fourteen years or more. At this time, the Bible says, the Hebrews from Canaan were allowed to enter Egypt. This is the parallel between the Hyksos and the Hebrews. Though it may seem like they were the same people, history of their militaries and their interactions with the Egyptians tell us otherwise, marking them as separate, if also linguistically- and culturally-related, entities.

The Second Intermediate Period in Egypt was very similar to that of the Yuan Dynasty in China (r. 1279-1368 CE), when a group of outsiders came into the region and gained control. In China, it was the Mongols who took charge by force. In Egypt, it was the Hyksos, and one interpretation argues that they, too, came by force. The ancient Egyptian historian Manetho says:

[A] blast of God smote us, and unexpectedly, from the regions of the East, invaders of obscure race marched in confidence of victory against our land. By main force they easily seized it without striking a blow; and having overpowered the rulers of the land, they then burned our cities ruthlessly, razed to the ground the temples of the gods, and treated all the natives with a cruel hostility, massacring some and leading into slavery the wives and children of others.⁵

The Hyksos ruled for a short amount of time, somewhere between 70 and 160 years.⁶ They only had control over Lower Egypt, including the delta, where they built their capital. When they invaded, they brought with them chariots, horses, and composite bows. Many paintings from the New Kingdom depict Egyptians with two-wheeled chariots carrying spears and compound bows, weapons of war that are not found in earlier Egyptian art.⁷ These, it seems, entered Egypt with the coming of the Hyksos. As we have seen, the label Hyksos simply means “foreign rulers,” with no ethnic designation implied. An alternate theory among some historians, however, points to earlier Egyptian paintings portraying visitors at court, perhaps traders, with long beards, suggesting that they were Semites related to the Hebrews. This has raised the question among historians as to whether or not these people may have infiltrated Egypt, perhaps as early as 1900 BC, during the period when many refugees (such as the Hebrew founder Abraham of Ur) were also fleeing

Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 98-122 (Chapter 5: “The Hyksos in Egypt”).

⁵ Manetho, *The Life of Manetho: Traditions and Conjectures*, trans. W.G. Waddell (Harvard University Press, 1964) https://archive.org/stream/manethowithengli00maneuoft/manethowithengli00maneuoft_djvu.txt.

⁶ Howard Spodek, *The World's History*. Based on Mr. Howard Spodek's textbook, the dates of the Second Intermediate Period are 1640-1567 BC, creating a gap of 73 years. However, if Manetho's writings were misunderstood, or we pay a little more attention to biblical chronology, we find that the Hyksos were there for more than a century. Here I compromise, giving a wide range, as modern scholars generally have done.

⁷ “Hyksos,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/image/5824/egyptian-war-chariot/> (accessed October 5, 2018). This article includes a picture of one such painting. It depicts an Egyptian chariot from the New Kingdom. Chariots like the one depicted were not used by Egyptian military until after the Hyksos. It was considered the technological advance of the age, and New Kingdom Pharaohs were often depicted riding chariots, to show their military prowess. Also see Brier and Hobbs, *The Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 256.

Mesopotamia, and then somehow taken control of Egypt during a period of political weakness after residing there for as long as two or three centuries.⁸ Resolving the controversy over the Hyksos' seizing control of Egypt will likely require the discovery of more information, and Hyksos research in the Delta is indeed ongoing, though made more difficult by the marsh conditions there. Whatever the case, the Hyksos adopted Egyptian culture after they seized control: their kings called themselves Pharaohs, they incorporated Egyptian gods into their own belief system, and the Hyksos rulers even adopted the Egyptian way of dressing.⁹

The story of Joseph and how the Israelites came to reside in Egypt is well known, but merits summarizing here before consideration of the historicity of the story.¹⁰ According to the broad chronology depicted in the Genesis narrative about the Hebrew Patriarchs Jacob and Joseph, it must have been during the years of Hyksos rule that the Hebrews also came to Egypt. The Hyksos apparently did not mind, for the Hebrews posed no physical threat. The Genesis account in the Bible claims that the Israelites, or Hebrews, were descended from Abraham, a resident of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur, who was commanded by the God Yahweh to leave and seek out the land to which Yahweh would lead him. There he would found a nation as numerous as the stars. In the end, he settled in Palestine. Abraham's son was Isaac, whose own son was named Jacob, or, following a dream in which he struggled with an angel, Israel. Now Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel, the former bearing Jacob ten sons (not counting daughters), while Rachel (who died following the birth of Benjamin) gave birth to only two sons. Joseph and Benjamin incurred the enmity of their half-brothers, in part because they were Jacob's obvious favorites. Jacob gave to Joseph the "coat of many colors" (Gen. 37:3), while Benjamin means "son of my right hand," the son who sat at the father's right hand and thus enjoyed his favor.¹¹ Joseph was known not only to have dreams, but also to be able to interpret them. One of his dreams had eleven plants bowing down to him; another had eleven stars bowing down to him (Gen. 37:5-11). He was tactless enough to tell his brothers about these dreams and interpret them as meaning that his eleven brothers would one day bow down to him. His brothers hated him so much that they took Joseph's multi-colored coat and bound him and threw him in a well, intending to leave him to die, but his older brother Judah persuaded the brothers to sell Joseph to a band of Ishmaelite (or Midianite) slave traders who happened to be passing by at the time on their way to Egypt (Gen. 37:12-36). Joseph

⁸ Geobey, "Joseph the Infiltrator, Jacob the Conqueror?," 25-26. Though the culture of the Asiatics before Egypt is mostly unknown, speculation says that a culture to look at for reference would be Syria.

⁹ Joshua J. Mark, "Hyksos," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/Hyksos/> (accessed February 15, 2017).

¹⁰ Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad are among those modern historians who have questioned the historical accuracy of the Joseph narrative. See J. Alberto Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 2nd, rev. and updated ed., trans. from the Italian by John Bowden (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 113-114. Another skeptic is Donald B. Redford; see his *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 408-429, and *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

¹¹ "Benjamin," *Behind the Name*, <https://www.behindthename.com/name/benjamin> (accessed February 16, 2019).

ultimately was sold to an Egyptian official named Potiphar—in Egyptian, “Pa-di-Ra,” meaning “He-Whom-the God Ra-gives”)—by whom he was rewarded for his industrious service.¹²

Even though Joseph was still his slave, Potiphar soon recognized his skills and intelligence, and placed him in charge of all of his affairs. In time, Potiphar’s wife found Joseph attractive and even sought to have sex with him. Joseph allegedly refused, but then unwisely ran off naked in public view after she grabbed hold of his robe. This allowed her to accuse Joseph of attempted rape. Once again Joseph found himself in trouble, and this time Potiphar had him imprisoned in a dungeon (Gen. 39:1-23). This story, scholars have observed, is similar to the Egyptian “Tale of the Two Brothers,” but this should not be taken to mean that the story of Potiphar’s wife is fictitious.¹³

In prison Joseph met the Pharaoh’s cup bearer and a baker. Both of them subsequently have dreams, but neither of them knows what his dream means. Joseph, however, is gifted in that he can interpret dreams, so he proceeds to do so. The cup bearer has dreamed of three branches of grapes, the baker of three cakes which birds will eat from his head. Joseph tells the cup bearer that he will go free in three days, the baker that he will be hanged in three days and the birds will land on his head and pluck his eyes out. Everything comes to pass exactly as Joseph has foretold. He asks the cup bearer to remember him when he is set free, but of course, once he has been released, he forgets Joseph completely, at least for a time.

Meanwhile, the Pharaoh, presumably a Hyksos, also has dreams periodically. The Joseph narrative is, after all, a biblical story about dreams and the interpretation of dreams and about how God works to protect his chosen people. About two years later, Pharaoh had a dream about seven healthy cows and seven starving cows (he also dreamed of grain in the same way) (Gen. 41:17-24). The seven lean cows ate seven fat cows, and seven lean ears of corn ate seven fat ears. He could not understand what these dreams meant, but the ancients believed that the gods often communicated with humans or provided premonitions through dreams—cf. the story of Xerxes and Artabanus in Book Seven of Herodotus’s *Histories*—so Pharaoh took them very seriously. He called upon his trusted *sesperonchs*, literally, “scribes of the house of life,” but often mistranslated as “magicians,” who, however, could not decipher the dream.¹⁴ Pharaoh then heard from his cup bearer that a certain prisoner had the ability to interpret dreams and that his predictions always seemed to come true, so Pharaoh has Joseph summoned to interpret his dreams.¹⁵ After a time, Joseph tells Pharaoh that Egypt will enjoy seven years of bounty followed by seven years of famine (Gen. 41:25-27). After Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, the Pharaoh became convinced that

¹² Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 424.

¹³ H. H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua: Biblical Traditions in the Light of Archaeology* (London: Oxford University Press, and the British Academy, 1950), 120-121.

¹⁴ “Sesperonchs” were used as dream interpreters, and in English Bibles they are often referred to as magicians and wise men.

¹⁵ Bernd U. Schipper, “Joseph, Potiphar’s Wife, and the Jewish Colony in Egypt” (lecture, Harvard University, December, 3, 2013). <https://hmsc.harvard.edu/file/987105> (accessed November 18, 2018).

Joseph had special powers, confessing, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you” (Gen. 41:39). He then placed Joseph “in charge of the whole land of Egypt” (Gen. 41:41). Thus the Hyksos Pharaoh welcomed Joseph as his vizier (that is, the general administrator of Egypt, second in power to only the Pharaoh himself), which was confirmed by Pharaoh’s awarding to Joseph of his signet ring, and placed him in charge of the grain stores and public distribution for at least the next fourteen years.

What can we make of this Joseph narrative, the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, and the Exodus? Siegfried Herrmann, in his work entitled *Israel in Egypt*, boldly asserted, “A detailed investigation, carried out against the background of developments as a whole in the second millennium BC, confirms in a surprising way what the biblical evidence suggests.”¹⁶ Other modern historians, however, remain convinced that the narrative was created very late, perhaps around the time of the Babylonian Exile. Thus Donald B. Redford has argued, “We conclude that, on a judicious appraisal of the evidence, the Biblical Joseph story was a novella created sometime during the seventh or sixth century BC (the end of the Judaeen monarchy or the Exile). . . . There is no reason to believe it has any basis in fact . . . and to read it as history is quite wrongheaded.”¹⁷ Others have pointed to the geographic ambiguities in the Exodus narrative and concluded that it should be considered “mythology rather than . . . a detailed reporting of the historical facts.”¹⁸ Ian Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, in contrast, argue for a middle ground: “The Joseph narrative fits well into its putative Egyptian setting in the early second millennium, even though it occasionally betrays through anachronistic comment that . . . it has at the very best been updated from time to time as the tradition has come down through the generations.”¹⁹ Who is correct here? What can we glean from the surviving evidence?

Here is what we do know. The House of Life was a religious school that trained Egyptian priests for the temple, the house of life, so what this tell us is that the Pharaoh sent for his leading priests, the *sesperonchs*, literally “scribes of the House of Life,” to interpret his dream. How did you get dreams interpreted? You went to the temple and asked the priest, who then looked up the dream in one of the dream interpretation books that were commonly found in the temples. There is one of these books made out of papyrus in the British Museum.²⁰ So why were the Egyptian priests unable to interpret the Pharaoh’s dream? If the Egyptian dream interpretation book in the British Museum gives us any indication, this was because the dream book contained no examples

¹⁶ Siegfried Herrmann, *Israel in Egypt*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Great Britain: SCM Press Ltd; and Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1973), 19.

¹⁷ Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 408-429 at 429.

¹⁸ Gösta W. Ahlström, *Who Were the Israelites?* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 46-49.

¹⁹ Provan, Long, and Longman, in *A Biblical History of Israel*, 125.

²⁰ For more on the House of Life, see A. H. Gardiner, “The House of Life,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 24 (1938): 157-179. On *sesperonchs* and the Egyptian Dream Book, see Bob Brier, *The History of Ancient Egypt* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 1999), available online at: https://archive.org/stream/TheHistoryOfAncientEgypt_834/TheHistoryOfAncientEgypt_djvu.txt (accessed February 15, 2019).

of seven lean cows eating seven fat cows and seven lean ears of corn eating seven fat ears in the book, so the priests did not know how to interpret the dream.

As for the seven-year famine, a fascinating piece of evidence survives on Sehel Island, an island in the middle of the Nile River in the south of Egypt that is covered with big boulders of black stone. Every ancient Egyptian who wanted to record some great deed, it seems, went there and hired a scribe to inscribe light-colored hieroglyphs on these rocks. These inscriptions are still there today, and one of these boulders tells of a seven-year famine and widespread suffering in ca. 2,700 BC, during the Third Dynasty, that was caused by a failure of the Nile to rise for seven years, presumably because there had been no snow in the mountains to the south in which the Nile had its origins. Pharaoh Djoser was informed following the dream of his architect, Imhotep, that the reason for the failure of the Nile was the abandonment of the Temple of Khnum, the god of fertility, at Yebu (Aswan). Pharaoh Djoser rebuilt the temple, and the Nile once again began to flow as before.²¹ Although this clearly was not the famine described in the Joseph narrative (since it preceded it by a millennium), it nevertheless establishes that prolonged droughts along the Nile did occur on rare occasions and that their consequences were severe enough to attract the attention of the Pharaoh. The particular Pharaoh is not named in the Joseph narrative, but until the tenth century, even the Egyptians typically referred to their kings without mentioning the Pharaoh's name. There also is no record of a vizier named Joseph, but again, the list of viziers from the Hyksos period has not survived. Nonetheless, we know that a Semite named Bay was awarded the title of "Great Chancellor of the entire land" following the death of Seti II in 1194 BC.²² The naming of Joseph as the Hyksos Pharaoh's vizier marked the point in time at which the Hyksos and Hebrews joined together as one; their coexistence lasted until the Hyksos were driven out of Egypt and the Hebrews were enslaved in the mid-sixteenth century BC.

Scarabs, mostly used as symbols of good fortune and health, were prominent in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, though their use began in the Middle Kingdom.²³ Those made for Pharaohs often bore the Pharaoh's name and were then inlaid in a ring. This signet ring could then be used to represent the Pharaoh on official state documents as well as on the wax-sealed lids of storage jars containing grain and wine that were sent out or owned by him. During the Hyksos rule, the art on the scarabs was influenced by other cultures such as Crete and Syria.²⁴ These cultures also traded with the Hyksos frequently, and these trade deals were sealed with the signet rings. The markings on all scarabs found so far have been Egyptian, with design patterns from Crete and Syria. On no scarab found thus far, however, has there been Hebrew writing, a

²¹ Samar Samir, "Famine Stela: A Piece of Pharaonic Diary," *Egypt Today*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/54056/Famine-Stela-A-piece-of-Pharaonic-diary> (accessed February 15, 2019).

²² Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 124-125.

²³ John Van Seters, *The Hyksos: A New Investigation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), 64.

²⁴ Seters, *The Hyksos*, 63, "spirals, guilloches, concentric circles, rope, and other geometric designs . . . generally considered to be the Middle Minoan culture of the Aegean."

clear indication that the Hyksos that ruled during that time were not Hebrew. The Hebrews would never have given up their culture and religion for Egyptian faith and language.

In response to the approaching crisis, Joseph subsequently ordered the storage of all surplus grain during the seven years of plenty so that there would be sufficient grain during the years of famine that were to follow. The Genesis account (Gen. 41:43) adds that all cried out “Abrek” wherever Joseph went. Everything proceeded as foretold. When the seven years of famine arrived and word spread that Egypt still had plenty of grain in storage to sell, Jacob sent his ten sons by Leah to Egypt to purchase grain. He kept Benjamin who, as far as Jacob knew, was his sole offspring left from his beloved wife Rachel, at home because of the dangers of the highways. As the brothers arrived, Joseph was in the process of distributing the grain. He recognized them immediately, the Genesis account tells us, but his brothers failed to recognize him. (He has aged, of course, and he is now the vizier!). Joseph asks if they have any other brothers, and they mention Benjamin, and Joseph insists upon meeting him. Meanwhile, the brothers return home with grain, but Joseph has secretly returned all their money to them as well (in their packs). Jacob is troubled by this; it looks as if they have stolen the grain. Also he is troubled because of the vizier’s request that Benjamin travel to Egypt, but in the end he allows him to go anyway.

When Joseph meets Benjamin, he plays a trick. He plants a silver dining cup in Benjamin’s pack, and after the brothers have left, he sends soldiers out to find the thief of the cup. Benjamin is discovered with the cup, and Joseph orders him held until his father (Jacob) comes for him. When the brothers return with Jacob, all comes out and Joseph forgives his brothers, who at first had feared that Joseph would take revenge. Instead, he explains that God has sent him into bondage in Egypt in order to ensure the survival of the children of Israel (Jacob). Afterward, Jacob and his sons settled in Goshen, the eastern Delta of the Nile (near the site where the Hyksos were ruling). In fact, we know that the Egyptians commonly assigned particular sections of land to various Asiatic peoples who settled there. Moreover, a papyrus from the late thirteenth century BC about a frontier region notes that the official has “finished passing the tribes of the shepherds through the fortress . . . which is near *tkw* (probably the Succoth of Ex. 12.37) to the cisterns of *pr. ’tm* (Pithom?) which are near *tkw*, to keep them and their animals alive by means of the *ka* of the Pharaoh.”²⁵

Jacob had a vision: “I will bring you out of Egypt.” Now this actually happens when Jacob dies, for Joseph has his body embalmed and he and his brothers take him back to Palestine for burial, but this dream is also a foreshadowing of the Exodus. Meanwhile, the famine continues and Joseph distributes grain, but shrewdly (since he is working for the Pharaoh). He gives the grain in exchange for the lands of the farmers who have no crops. All of this land becomes the land of the Pharaoh, but Joseph takes care not to buy the land of the temple priests. To encourage the gods to favor them, the Pharaohs (and also others) had given land to Egyptian priests for centuries so that they would have means of support. Before Jacob died, he told his son to take his body from here back to Palestine. So when he died, Jacob was embalmed and mummified “taking a full forty days,

²⁵ Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 116.

for that was the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians mourned him for seventy days” (Gen. 50:2-3). His body was then taken to a burial ground bought from the Hittites generations before. When Joseph left to bury his father, his brothers as well as a whole parade of Egyptians, including “chariots and horsemen” (Gen. 50:9), left with him. Finally, Joseph died, but before he did, he told the Hebrews, “Be sure to take my bones from here when you leave.” Then Joseph’s body was embalmed, and they lay him in a coffin in Egypt, exactly the time frame of forty days embalming and seventy days mourning common with Egyptian mummies. Interestingly, too, in the entire Bible, Jacob and Joseph are the only ones mentioned as having been embalmed, so this was clearly exclusively an Egyptian practice.

The use of chariots and horses by the Egyptians in the Joseph Narrative also allows us to infer that the time period is after the Middle Kingdom, for horses were not introduced and used until the Second Intermediate Period and thereafter.²⁶ Horses were what the Hyksos were known for best. Horses originated from northwest Asia, just north of the Black and Caspian Seas.²⁷ The Hyksos came from northwest and west Asia, bringing their horses and bows with them. When the Hebrews came, they came from Canaan which is also west Asia. Hebrews and Canaanites did not possess horses, though; instead, they rode on donkeys. When the brothers of Joseph left Egypt the first time, “they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left” (Gen. 42:26), and donkeys are very different from a horse that can pull a chariot. The Hebrews had no need for chariots; they had no known use of them for they did not engage in wars until centuries later. The Hyksos’ use of horses explains how they moved so quickly from northwest Asia, or even the Sinai desert, and descended upon the Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom with the haste that they did.

This attack on Egypt could not have been made with the donkeys of Canaan, or any part of the Hebrew military. Egypt’s military had the most recent in technology, and they went to war all the time in order to keep up Pharaoh’s reputation with his people.²⁸ The Hebrews did not keep up an army; they were shepherds and a religious people, not warriors.²⁹ Therefore, an insignificant army such as the Hebrews could not possibly defeat the Egyptians. Even though the Egyptians had many great inventions and weapons, they didn’t have horses or chariots.³⁰ Their army was all infantry at the time.³¹ They were no match for the cavalry of the Hyksos. The chariot had never been seen by the Egyptians, and the maneuverability of the machine made it a formidable foe. A

²⁶ Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs, *The Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 253-256.

²⁷ Gus E. Cothran, “Tracing the History of Horse Evolution and Domestication,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tracing-the-History-of-Horse-Evolution-and-Domestication-1900351>.

²⁸ Brier and Hobbs, *The Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 247.

²⁹ Herrmann, *Israel in Egypt*, 21.

³⁰ Brier and Hobbs, *The Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 251

³¹ “The success of the Hyksos may have been due to superior archery and to the use of horse-drawn chariots, previously unknown in Egypt.” Manetho, *The Life of Manetho: Traditions and Conjectures*, trans. W. G. Waddell, (Harvard University Press, 1964) https://archive.org/stream/manethowithengli00maneuoft/manethowithengli00maneuoft_djvu.txt.

few Middle Kingdom civil wars in the eleventh dynasty also made toppling the twelfth dynasty easier for the Hyksos, since the army and political stability had been weakened.³² All this together made conquering Egypt a simpler task for the Hyksos. Here it is important to remember that we possess none of the names of the viziers from the 15th dynasty, because the official records and memory of the Hyksos were destroyed once Ahmose I rose to power and restored Egyptian rule at the beginning of the New Kingdom. It should therefore come as no surprise that we cannot find any mention of Joseph's name (or its Egyptian equivalent) in Egyptian documents and hieroglyphs. Joseph's signet ring of authority with the Pharaoh's name on it and his seal for documents and state-owned jars of grain, we have seen, were also typical Egyptian. "Abrek," interestingly, has no meaning in Hebrew, but is close to the Egyptian phrase: ab ("heart") + r ("to") + k (=suffix meaning "you"), suggesting a meaning similar to "my heart to you" or "may god go with you" or perhaps "grand vizier!"³³ According to the Genesis account (47:13-22), the Egyptian priests were allowed to retain and even accumulate more land while the common people gave their land to Pharaoh in return for grain to eat and plant. This system of land tenure was introduced in Egypt some time prior to the reign of Ahmose I, who drove out the Hyksos. Later, we know, the Egyptian priests owned more land than even Pharaoh himself!³⁴ So in sum, the internal evidence of the Joseph Narrative in Genesis seems to fit very well with the findings of modern Egyptology. This makes it highly unlikely that the story was later concocted by Hebrew leaders redacting the Hebrew Bible during the Babylonian Captivity or even living earlier in Palestine as some modern scholars have asserted.³⁵

The second installment of the story of Israel in Egypt comes at the beginning of Exodus (chapters 1-15). Just what do we know about Egypt during this period and what does the Biblical account in Exodus add to our knowledge of the Hebrews' existence there? Exodus records (1:8), "There arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph." This seems, once again, to fit well with the emergence of the New Kingdom.³⁶ During the Second Intermediate Period, Upper Egypt strove to retake the rest of the kingdom from the Hyksos. Two attacks were made, the first of which failed. When Kamose and his brother Ahmose made the second attack, they succeeded and ran the Hyksos out of Egypt around 1567 BC. With the Hyksos gone, the Egyptians marked the beginning of the New Kingdom. Many things changed for the Egyptians in the New Kingdom; they now had slaves, and eventually some citizens only worshipped one god. The Hebrews did not leave from their residence on the Nile River Delta when the Hyksos were run out. At first the Hebrews posed no

³² Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 72.

³³ *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Abrek," *Bible Gateway* <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Abrek> (accessed March 1, 2019).

³⁴ Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua*, 121-122.

³⁵ Joshua A. Mark, "Clergy, Priests & Priestesses in Ancient Egypt," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1026/clergy-priests--priestesses-in-ancient-egypt/> (accessed March 10, 2019).

³⁶ Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 119.

threat, but the Pharaoh became afraid of their growing numbers (Exod. 1:8-11).³⁷ The new Pharaoh worried in particular about an uprising, afraid that the Hebrews might join up with outside armies and overthrow the regime. When the New Kingdom started up, one of the first things they did was destroy the official records of Hyksos' rule in Egypt. They really did not want a repeat of Semitic rule, so the Egyptians enslaved the population of the Hebrews who dwelled in the Nile River Delta.

The Exodus account presents the children of Israel in bondage, working in mud brick, not in stone, to build Pharaoh's store cities at Pithom and Ramses (Ex. 1:11). Here the Israelites were not building pyramids, which had been constructed several centuries earlier; rather, they were working on new store cities for the Pharaoh. As noted above, the Israelites had become so numerous that they were beginning to be perceived as a problem for the Egyptians (Ex. 1:9-22), so Pharaoh decided to ensure that all male Hebrew children were killed at birth. He commanded the midwives (1:16), "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." This is likely a reference to the Egyptian birthing stool, on which Egyptian women gave birth sitting up, letting gravity help with the delivery of the baby. The midwives refused to do as commanded, however, and when questioned by the Pharaoh, they responded (1:19), "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."

When Moses, the main Biblical character in the Exodus narrative was born, he was born to a Hebrew woman. Since Pharaoh decided that was the best way to cut down the population of the Hebrews was to kill all of their newborn males, Moses's mother placed him in a basket in the river in the hope that he might be rescued by an Egyptian woman. In fact, Moses was plucked out of the river by Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son and gave him an Egyptian name, but sends him to his real mother to be nursed (Exod. 2:3-10).³⁸ Moses eventually learns of his Hebrew heritage and flees Egypt after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave.

While out in the wilderness, he encounters God near a bush which is burning but not being consumed (a natural gas leak in the soil, perhaps). God tells him that he will deliver the people of Israel from their bondage and lead them to the Promised Land of milk and honey. Moses doubts that Pharaoh will listen to him, so God gives him a staff with divine powers that it turns into a serpent when thrown onto the ground. When he uses it in Pharaoh's presence, however, the Egyptian *sesperonchs* are able to do the same thing. Moses has an audience with Pharaoh ("the one who lives in the great house"). Moses does indeed return to Egypt later to get the rest of the Hebrews, saying that he has been sent by Yahweh, and that he has been told to say to Pharaoh: "The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert." (Exod. 5:1-9). Pharaoh responds that no more straw for bricks will be given to the Hebrews. This does not mean, contrary to Cecil B. DeMille, that the Israelites will

³⁷ "[A] new king, who did not know Joseph, came to power in Egypt . . . [Pharaoh says] the Israelites have become much too numerous for us . . . we must deal shrewdly with them . . . so [Pharaoh] put slave masters over them to oppress [the Israelites] with forced labor" (Gen. 1:8-11).

³⁸ Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 109.

make bricks without straw; rather, the task master told the Israelites, the Exodus account says, that from now on they will have to gather their own straw and also make the same number of bricks as before (5:8).³⁹ Two last details of interest: God tells Moses that he will harden Pharaoh's heart (7:3-5), but that in the end, the Hebrews will not only go free, but they will also take with them the Egyptians' silver and gold (3:21-22).

In 1350 BC Amenhotep IV became Pharaoh, King Akhenaten,⁴⁰ and he decided that there was only one god that Egyptians should worship. This introduced a monotheistic ideology to the Egyptians.⁴¹ Many Egyptians did not believe in this one god propaganda. When Moses brought up a singular god, Yahweh,⁴² Pharaoh dismissed this for he had most likely heard accusations of this way of thinking before.⁴³ Moses told Pharaoh that Yahweh would send plagues down upon the people of Egypt if Pharaoh did not let his people go. According to the Bible, a great many plagues took a toll on Egypt when Pharaoh did not comply, creating a problem for those who lived there. While it was ignored at first, the plagues became unbearable after the Plague of the Firstborn.⁴⁴ Pharaoh came to Moses in the night and told him to leave (Exod. 12:31). All the Hebrews exited Egypt about 430 years after they arrived (Exod. 12:40) led by this man named Moses.

God sent plagues like the one mentioned above until Pharaoh told Moses he needed to leave. God sends ten plagues upon the Egyptians to convince the Pharaoh that it would be a good idea to let the Israelites go. These first nine plagues, all explicable as well by natural phenomena – river of blood (Egyptian topsoil) killing all the fish in the Nile, frogs, swarms of gnats and flies, the deaths of Egyptian (but not Israelite) cattle, boils on their skin, a hailstorm that ruins the crops, locusts that eat every plant (including the fruit trees) left after the hailstorm, and darkness (a blinding sandstorm for three days) – fail to convince the Egyptians, but the tenth plague, the death of the first-born sons of every Egyptian family, including the first-born son of the Pharaoh himself, forces Pharaoh to relent and let the Israelites go.

The Israelites then left Egypt, and the Egyptians gave them their silver and gold to go, just as had been foretold (Ex. 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36); they were about 600,000 strong, not counting women and children (12:37), thus likely a total of around 2 million, though some modern historians

³⁹ Here also see Provan, Long, and Longman, in *A Biblical History of Israel*, 128.

⁴⁰ Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten, and then claimed that there was only one true God, referred to as Aten or the solar disc.

⁴¹ On the tempting, but problematic, question of a possible link between Egyptian monotheism under Akhenaten and Israelite monotheism, see Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 377-382.

⁴² Yahweh, or YHWH, meaning "I am Who I am," is one of the Hebrew names for the God found in the Pentateuch.

⁴³ Though the actual name of the Pharaoh at the time is under speculation, the Bible tells us these events took place after the building of the cities Rameses and Pithom, both of which were built after King Akhenaten's reign.

⁴⁴ This is the plague that supposedly killed all firstborn children in Egypt.

have questioned the accuracy of such a large numerical count.⁴⁵ Still, the Israelites had been in Egypt, we are told, for 430 years (Ex. 12:40). Now Ramses the Great, whom many scholars assert was the Pharaoh in the account of the Hebrew Exodus, if it indeed happened, ruled from 1279-1212 BC. This would place the entry of Joseph and his brothers into Egypt sometime during the early 17th century BC, during the Second Intermediate Period when the Hyksos were ruling Egypt as the Pharaohs.⁴⁶ Working from the other end, if Joseph came to Egypt not long after the Hyksos' arrival (thus around 1680 BC), then that would put the Exodus ca. 320 years after the end of the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1250 BC), during the reign of Ramses II. The Pharaoh, we are told, chased after the Hebrews, on "horses and chariots" (Exod. 14:9) because he realized that he enjoyed their service to him. His use of chariots shows the New Kingdom's continued use of the horses that the Hyksos brought with them.

The Israelites, however, were not ignorant folk. Lacking weaponry and trained soldiers, and also anticipating that the Egyptians might change their minds and employ chariots to pursue them, the Hebrews left Egypt not by the Philistine Road, which was guarded by troops and fortresses, but rather, by the Sea of Reeds (mistranslated in the KJV as the Red Sea).⁴⁷ The Pharaoh did in fact change his mind after they left and pursued them with more than 600 chariots. The Sea of Reeds parted with the prevailing winds, allowing the Israelites to pass, but the wheels of the Egyptian chariots clogged (Ex. 14:25), and the army of the Pharaoh was lost when the wind stopped blowing and the sea closed in around them. This, of course, is a marshy area, not hard to transverse by foot, especially when the east wind blows a particular way, drying the surface a bit, and chariots would sink down and mire in the mud. After fleeing Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for some 40 years, but eventually reached the Promised Land.

Just how reliable is the evidence presented in the Exodus account? First, we know that the cities of Pithom and Ramses were indeed real. Ramses did build a capital city called Pi-Ramses in the Delta, and also he built the store cities of Pithom and Ramses. Their storehouse buildings were constructed of brick, not stone. Moreover, mud bricks in Egypt were made with straw, but not so in Palestine, where bricks were made only of baked mud, so a Canaanite author writing the story down centuries later would not have known about this detail if it had not been passed down orally (or perhaps in written form) by those who had experienced Egyptian brick making firsthand. The Leiden Museum has a papyrus dating from Ramses' reign that provides instructions for the overseers of workers. It says, "Distribute grain to the soldiers and to the *Apiru* [*Habiru*] who

⁴⁵ Provan, Long, and Longman, in *A Biblical History of Israel*, 130-131, for a summary of the scholarship on this thorny issue, and whether a smaller number may actually be consistent with the biblical account.

⁴⁶ Howard Spodek, *The World's History*. Once again, this is based on Mr. Howard Spodek's timing for the Hyksos stay in Egypt. The Hebrews were said to have been in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40). No matter how long the Hebrews and Hyksos collaborated, the Hyksos only stayed for about 70-120 years, leaving the Hebrews with the New Kingdom Egyptians for at least two and a half centuries more. For a fuller discussion, see Provan, Long, and Longman, in *A Biblical History of Israel*, 131-132.

⁴⁷ Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 124-127.

transport stones to the great pylon of Ramses.”⁴⁸ Now Ramses was building temples of stone, not just store houses of brick, and many scholars believe that the word *Habiru* refers to “Hebrew” (similar in sound), or that it at least refers to foreigners or refugees, “dependent workers who were ‘economic failures, deprived of their rights,’” living in Egypt.⁴⁹ Other Egyptian texts, in particular the 350 so-called cuneiform tablets of the late fifteenth and early fourteenth centuries BC discovered in the el-Amarna district of Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century, also refer to the *Habiru*.⁵⁰

Second, Moses and Aaron were coming daily to see the Pharaoh, so his palace had to be nearby. Moses is another Egyptian name, more commonly combined with the name of a god such as Ramses (Ra-m[o]ses), though some modern scholars point out that “the argument from nomenclature is not conclusive,” in part due to the relatively cordial relations between Egypt and Israel during the monarchies of David and Solomon, which likely would have allowed for “foreign influences on the [Hebrew] language and the names.”⁵¹ Moreover, Ramses II’s palace was in the north in the Delta as well, close to where the Israelites were working, so daily conferences between the Pharaoh and Moses and Aaron are entirely plausible. Moreover, in later years the name of Pharaoh’s city was changed to “Tanis,” yet the Exodus account retains the original name, “Ramses.”⁵² If any Israelite had written about this city later, he would have referred to it as Tanis rather than Ramses, for the latter name was used only in the thirteenth century BC.

Third, the Exodus account says that “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.” This, too, is an Egyptian concept, for Egyptians believed that you thought with your heart, and that the heart was the seat of all emotions.⁵³ In other words, Pharaoh resisted letting the Israelites go. This is a fascinating detail which biblical scholars and pastors/priests often struggle to explain. The problem for modern-day Christians, of course, is that Pharaoh can hardly be held accountable for his actions if God is making his heart hard, and that is what pastors and priests focus upon – Pharaoh’s “sin,” if you will – but in fact, this may just be an Egyptian expression to explain why Pharaoh resisted against letting the Israelites go for so long.

The Merneptah Stela (named for Ramses II’s successor, Merneptah, who reigned from 1213-1204 BC), which dates from year 5 of Merneptah’s reign, ca. 1208 BC, helps place the Exodus in time. Ramses II was succeeded by his 13th son, so clearly his first son had preceded

⁴⁸ See Abraham Malamat, “The Dawn of Israel,” in Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 28-46 at 42.

⁴⁹ Herrmann, *Israel in Egypt*, 34, quoting Klaus Koch.

⁵⁰ See Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (London: SPCK; and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 58-62; J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 65-67; and Herrmann, *Israel in Egypt*, 34-35.

⁵¹ Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 109-110.

⁵² Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 110.

⁵³ Brier, *The History of Ancient Egypt*.

him in death. The stela says, “Plundered is Canaan with every evil; carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer; Yanoam is made as that which does not exist; Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.”⁵⁴ This is the earliest non-biblical reference to Israel. We do not find anything like this in sources that date from the reign of Ramses. Now Merneptah is not talking about the Exodus. He first lists all these places he has conquered outside of Egypt. What is crucial here is the way the word Israel is written. All the other names of countries have at the end of their names a hieroglyph that shows three hills. That’s how Egyptians said “country.” When Merneptah refers to Israel, however, there is no sign for a country. What you have instead is a sign of a man and a woman. This suggests that, unlike the other places mentioned, Israel at this point is a people, and not a place. This suggests that they were still wandering when this stela was carved. As Niels Peter Lemche observed, “Israel alone is determined by the hieroglyphic sign for ‘foreign people,’ something that may be taken as an indication of a different status of Israel in comparison to the other names on the inscription. These are . . . provided with the determinative for a foreign place.”⁵⁵ The text refers to the destruction of Israel, although there is no parallel reference to this battle in Exodus. Given that the Exodus account says that the Israelites went on to wander in the wilderness for a period of some 40 years before settling in Palestine, if we count backwards, this would place the Exodus during the reign of Ramses the Great, who ruled for 67 years. Some leading scholars have suggested that it might have occurred around 1250 BC. Ramses’ first-born son died in the twenty-sixth year of his reign.⁵⁶ The death of Ramses’ first-born child might have occurred just prior to the Exodus as the biblical account suggests.

Whatever one concludes about the historical veracity of the Joseph-Exodus narrative, there are clearly kernels of truth here in the biblical and extra-biblical evidence. The Hyksos and the Hebrews lived together in Egypt. While the Hyksos forced their way in, the Hebrews were allowed into Egypt later. Then, the Hyksos were beaten out of Egypt and back into the Sinai desert over multiple Egyptian Campaigns from the South. The Hebrews left centuries after the New Kingdom began. This separates these two peoples from each other, even though at one time they resided close together. There are few primary sources for this research, the best being Manetho and the few artifacts that have been found. The best primary sources for the Hebrews are the Joseph Narrative in Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, but much of this biblical evidence fits well with our knowledge of ancient Egypt. This period in time is still very mysterious, but as historians and archaeologists uncover more artifacts and theories, the truth of this period will show itself.

⁵⁴ For more on the stela of Merneptah, see Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 68; and Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, 35-38.

⁵⁵ Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, 36-37; Lemche also refers to the interpretation of Gösta W. Ahlström in *Who Were the Israelites?*, 39, where Ahlström argues for a territorial interpretation of Israel as part of a “ring” composition, with three names forming an outer ring, and Canaan and Israel forming an inner ring. Either way, however, this text provides the first known reference to Israel in extra-biblical texts.

⁵⁶ Aidan Dodson and Dyan Hilton, *The Complete Royal Families of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 170.

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