

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

Shiur #6e: *Tanakh* and Archaeology (continued) – The Exodus

D. Slavery in Egypt and the Exodus

Let us now look at the next period in Israelite history – the period of slavery in Egypt, and the exodus.

Until recently, doubts as to the veracity of the story of the exodus were rejected out of hand by most biblical scholars in Israel. Thus, for example, in the *Encyclopedia Mikrait*,^[1] under "Exodus," we find:

"All in all, there is no doubting the slavery in Egypt and the exodus from Egypt, for no people would invent a tradition of subjugation at the very outset of their existence."

The *Olam Ha-Tanakh*^[2] series notes, in the introduction to *Sefer Shemot*:

"Reviews of the events of the past [as recorded] in the Bible recall the exodus from Egypt as a central event in the life of the nation ([Yehoshua 24](#); *Shmuel I* 12; [Tehillim 105-106](#), and elsewhere). This refutes the claim that this important event in the history of Israel is nothing but a literary creation, devoid of any kernel of historical fact."

These two weighty arguments^[3] would seem to suffice to remove any doubt in this regard. Nevertheless, let us review briefly the arguments that are raised regarding the exodus, and the responses to them.

The arguments of those who deny the servitude in Egypt and the exodus are based, *inter alia*, on the following considerations.^[4]

1. The name "Israel"^[5] has not been found on any Egyptian artifact – walls of temples, inscriptions on graves, or papyrus scrolls.
2. Likewise, there is no sign of the wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. Nowhere in this region – including in such locations as Kadesh Barne'a, where the nation encamped for lengthy periods – have there been any discoveries attesting to the ancient encampment of such a large group of people.
3. Here, too, instances of anachronism are cited: the city of Pitom, according to some scholars, was only built at the end of the 7th century B.C.E.;^[6] the description from the time of the exodus – "and God did not lead them on the way

of the land of the Philistines, although it was close by" ([Shemot 13:17](#)) cannot be reconciled with the knowledge that the Philistines arrived in the Land of Israel only at the end of the 13th century B.C.E. (as discussed in a previous *shiur*);^[7] the Torah records that Moshe sends messengers to the king of Edom ([Bamidbar 20:14](#)), but the kingdom of Edom did not exist, according to these scholars, until the 7th century.^[8]

First of all, it must be emphasized once again that theories based on an *argumentum ad ignorantiam* – "we have not found evidence supporting..." – must be treated with some reservation. Many of the central theories in the historio-archaeological world arose or were refuted on the basis of chance discoveries; had these not been stumbled upon, the research assumptions would have been quite different. Yet even if no traces were ever to be found of the exodus, would this constitute an argument that the exodus had never happened? In the words of Kitchen:

"It is silly to expect to find traces of everybody who ever passed through the various routes in that peninsula. The state of preservation of remains is very uneven... therefore the absence of possible Hebrew campsites is likewise meaningless."^[9]

As to the absence of any mention of the exodus in Egyptian records, we must take into account that kings of the ancient world, including the pharaohs, used to construct monuments glorifying their victories and achievements, not their defeats and failures.^[10]

From the opposite perspective, in the case of the exodus – just as in the case of the narratives about the forefathers – there is proof that the narrator possesses extensive knowledge about the details of the period in question, and especially the sort of details that changed in later times. Had the biblical account indeed been written only in the 7th century B.C.E, it hardly seems likely that the narrator could integrate such precise details of Egyptian reality some six hundred years prior to his or her own time. The following are some examples.^[11]

1. The phenomenon of subjugating slaves for massive building projects, such as that described in the Torah with regard to Bnei Yisrael, is corroborated in several findings. One of the most important of these is Papyrus Leiden 348, which describes the construction of the city of Ramesses by tribes "carrying stones to build the temple of Ramesses." These tribes are referred to, in this papyrus as well as in other sources, by the Accadian term "ב, ^aabiru." If we allow for the exchange of "*peh*" and "*bet*" in the Semitic languages, it is altogether possible that the "ב, ^aabiru" may be identified as the "*ivrim*" (Hebrews) – such that the papyrus is in fact providing an explicit record of the construction of Ramesses by Bnei Yisrael. However, even if they are not the actual slaves referred to,^[12] the record concerning the "ב, ^aabiru" lends much credibility to the biblical description of the slavery in Egypt:

"The biblical account of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt suggests that their socio-economic situation was remarkably similar to that of the $\text{ג,}^{\text{א}}$ abiru."^[13]

2. The Torah describes the backbreaking labor forced upon Bnei Yisrael with the words, "And they embittered their lives with hard labor, with mortar and with bricks, and all manner of labor in the fields" ([Shemot 1:14](#)), and later on the situation is further exacerbated at Pharaoh's command:

"You shall no longer give straw to the people to bake bricks, as until now; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the quantity of bricks that they made until now shall you lay upon them; you shall not diminish it" (ibid. 5:7-8).

The responsibility for making the bricks was placed upon the "officers of Bnei Yisrael":

"And the officers of Bnei Yisrael, who Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, saying, Why have you not completed your quota for making bricks, both yesterday and today, as until now?" (ibid., verse 14).

Many Egyptian papyruses discuss the brick industry at length, and they also speak of supervisors who were required to maintain production of a daily quota. For instance, in one papyrus a supervisor laments, "There are no men to make bricks or straw in the vicinity"; another notes, "they are making the daily quota of bricks."^[14]

3. The account of the subjugation in Egypt makes extensive use of words and expressions that are familiar to us from archaeological discoveries. For instance, in the description of the creation of the box for the baby Moshe, we read:

"She took for him a box of papyrus, and she coated it with tar and with pitch, and she put the child in it, and placed it in the reeds by the bank of the Nile" ([Shemot 2:3](#)).

Discoveries from Ancient Egypt indicate that sedge was used to make mats and boats, by binding it with ropes and coating it with pitch.

"The biblical author makes extensive use of words drawn from the Egyptian conceptual world – the Nile, sedge, reeds... and creates an authentic Egyptian atmosphere. Moreover, he even employs details borrowed from Egyptian social life – a wet-nurse, procedures for adoption and raising a child in Pharaoh's palace – that are suited to the period of the new kingdom."^[15]

Egyptian names such as "Moshe" are also familiar to us from other sources.^[16]

4. As to the plagues, here too there is clear evidence of a close familiarity with ancient Egyptian culture and its characteristics, such as the fear of snakes and crocodiles, the centrality of the Nile, and the responses of the magicians.^[17]

5. In the description of the exodus we read: "And it was, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them on the route of the land of the Philistines, although it was near, for God said, Perhaps the people will change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt" ([Shemot 13:17](#)).^[18] Indeed, archaeological findings indicate a route fortified with a network of fortresses, dating to the 13th century B.C.E., along the northern coast of Sinai.^[19] In addition, a number of papyruses have been found testifying to the very strict control over entry into and departure from Egypt.^[20] These sources explain quite clearly why Bnei Yisrael did not enter Eretz Yisrael via the shorter route, and also shed light on the impossibility of leaving Egypt without Pharaoh's approval.^[21]

We may therefore summarize as follows:

"Analysis of the relevant Egyptian material indicates that the story includes material from the period of Ramesses... Had the story been a fictitious creation... we would have expected to find elements from a later period mixed up in it. For example, the description of the Land of Egypt and its inhabitants would resemble that which appears in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, who lived and wrote during the Persian era; Bnei Yisrael would be engaged not in making bricks and labor in the field, but rather would be engaged in commerce; and the capital of Egypt would be Sais... Even after the minimalist fashion dies out and passes from the world, to be replaced by a different theory, the tradition of the exodus will still continue to escort us."^[22]

Appendix: The Dating of the Exodus

Our discussion in this *shiur* is essentially unrelated to the question of the date of the exodus, yet it is somewhat connected. Briefly, the issue of the date may be summarized as follows. On the one hand, in recording the construction of the Temple in the time of Shlomo, the text notes that it was completed "four hundred and eighty years after Bnei Yisrael left the land of Egypt" (*Melakhim I* 6:1), and since scholars generally agree that Shlomo built the Temple approximately in the year 960 B.C.E., the exodus would have to have taken place in the mid-15th century B.C.E. This calculation sits well with Yiftach's words to the king of Amon, recalling how "Israel dwelled in Cheshbon and its surrounding areas, and in Ar'or and its surrounding areas, and in all the cities around Arnon, for three hundred years" ([Shoftim 11:26](#)). Since Yiftach was active at the end of the period of the Judges (he seems to have been a contemporary of Shimshon, see [Shoftim 10:7](#)), i.e., the end of the 12th or beginning of the 11th century B.C.E., the settlement of Bnei Yisrael in the Gilad area would have been some three hundred years previously – around the year 1400 B.C.E., and the exodus was 40 years prior to that, in the mid-15th century B.C.E. (See Y. Elitzur, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, pp. 51-53).

However, the more widely accepted view maintains that the exodus took place during the 13th century B.C.E. The rationale behind this conclusion includes, *inter alia*, the fact that it makes sense to assume that construction of the city of Ra'amses, as mentioned in [Shemot \(1:10\)](#), would have been undertaken at the order of Ramesses II,

who ruled during the 13th century B.C.E. Egyptian documents indicate that the city of Pi-Ramesses was built at that time. In the mid-15th century, the pharaoh who ruled over Egypt was Thutmose III, who conquered the land of Canaan and brought Egypt to immense political and military strength.

In addition, some argue that the kingdoms of Edom and Moav, located on the eastern bank of the Jordan, which refused to permit Bnei Yisrael to journey through their land, did not exist prior to the 13th century (see: N. Glick, *Me'ever la-Yarden*, Tel Aviv 5720, p. 321). According to this approach, the verse from *Sefer Melakhim* concerning the construction of the Temple is viewed as a typological number which may refer to twelve generations (480 = 40 x 12), based on a calculation of forty years as a generation (as per [Tehillim 99:10](#) and elsewhere); this would then refer to the twelve generations of *kohanim* from Aharon until Achima'atz, son of Tzadok, as recorded in *Divrei Ha-yamim I* 6:35-38.

Without preferring one approach the other, it must be noted that there need not be a direct contradiction between the dates as noted in the Books of the Prophets and calculations accepted among most of the scholars. The phenomenon of symbolical numbers, which are not meant to reflect their actual value, appears in various places in the *Tanakh*. First and foremost, we might note the instance most relevant to our discussion – the length of the subjugation in Egypt. In *Sefer Shemot (12:40)* we read, "And Bnei Yisrael's dwelling which they dwelled in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years," but *Chazal* already point out that this verse cannot be meant literally, and they therefore propose that Bnei Yisrael dwelled in Egypt for only 210 years (see Rashi ad loc). In addition, in the verse introducing the rebellion of Avshalom we find, "And it was, at the end of forty years, that Avshalom said to the king: Let me go, I pray you, and fulfill my vow which I vowed to God in Chevron" ([Shmuel II 15:7](#)): here too, since the entire period of David's reign was no longer than forty years (*ibid.* 5:4-5), the verse cannot be meant literally. Similarly, the verse that repeats itself over and over in *Sefer Shoftim* – "and the land was peaceful for forty years" – indicates that the number forty is used to refer to a generation, rather than a precise figure.

For further on this subject, see Y. Meitlis's extensive discussion, "*Li-she'elat Tiarukh Yetziat Mitzrayim*," in: A. Bazak (ed.), *Be-Chag ha-Matzot*, Alon Shvut (forthcoming).

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] S.A. Levinstam, "*Yetziat Mitzrayim*," *Encyclopedia Mikra'it* 3, Jerusalem 5718, column 754.

[2] B. Oded, "Yisrael be-Mitzrayim – ha-Reka' ha-Histori," in: S. Talmon and Y. Avishur (eds.), *Olam ha-Tanakh: Shemot*, Tel Aviv 1993, p. 12.

[3] It should be noted that both arguments have been raised by many different scholars. See, for example, S. Yeivin, "Yetziat Mitzrayim," *Tarbiz* 31, 5731, pp. 1-7:

"If a nation were to invent a fable about a 'golden age' at the dawn of its consolidation, this would be perfectly understandable. However, the recounting of a legend about subjugation and oppression at the dawn of any nation is quite improbable, and the very illogic of it serves as faithful proof of the historical veracity of such an account. Moreover, the tradition concerning the forced sojourn in Egypt, and the exodus from there, from subjugation to redemption, is bound up with Jewish culture in all its shapes and forms, to such an extent that the nature and development of this culture over all the generations cannot be understood without it."

[4] See, for example, Finkelstein and Silverman, pp. 64-83, summarizing the central arguments of the supporters of this view.

[5] With the exception of the Merneptah Stele, which we shall discuss below, and which speaks of Israel as a nation already dwelling in its own land.

[6] Finkelstein and Silverman.

[7] Within the framework of the same discussion we pointed out the distinction that must be made between two different groups called Pelishtim. Here, too, the route that the Torah is referring to is named after the ancient Pelishtim, and not the sea-faring people who would later invade the land. U. Cassuto, in his *Perush al Sefer Shemot*, Jerusalem 5725, pp. 106-107, explains that the verse does not refer to the north-eastern road, "the road of the sea," which was under strict Egyptian surveillance (see below), but rather the middle road, which cut through the land of the Pelishtim (thus the term "*derekh ha-Pelishtim*" here means "through/in the midst of the Pelishtim"), which would likewise have been a shorter route, but which was rejected by God for the reason explained in verse 5.

[8] This claim is actually baseless, as argued quite passionately by Kitchen, p. 467:

"Edom **did** exist [emphasis in the original – A.B.] as a pastoral, tented kingdom... and was **not** a deserted land either then or in the 13th century, as the Edomites entering Egypt prove clearly. It was so much a land with active people that both Ramesses II and Ramesses III chose to attack it militarily. So Edom was no ghost in Moses' time. Tented kingdoms may be unknown to dumb-cluck socio-anthropologists, but they are solidly attested in the Near East from of old."

In recent years, studies have been undertaken which indicate the presence of copper mines and a fortress at Khirbat a-Nachas, dating to the 11th century B.C.E. and perhaps even earlier, and an organized entity dwelling permanently south of the Dead Sea. See Meitlis, p. 158; Resnick, pp. 330-332.

[9] Kitchen, p. 467. Nadav Na'aman agrees with this specific argument: "Since nomads do not leave remains that scholars might trace, there is no significance to the fact that no remains of nomad-shepherds have been found thus far ... archaeology is of no assistance in the argument of the historical veracity of the exodus" (N. Na'aman, "*Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim bein Zikaron Histori li-Yetzira Historiografit*," *Tarbiz* 79 3-4, 5770-5771, p. 360). In any event, Na'aman himself believes that the story of the exodus was first

committed to writing in the 7th century B.C.E. and then later redacted, and that it does not reflect the reality of Ancient Egypt.

^[10] As noted, for example, by N. Shopak, "*Ha-Chamor ha-Mitzri ke-Kli le-Libbun Sugiyat Reshit Yisrael*," *Beit Mikra* 49 1, p. 1.

^[11] In the last generation, several studies appeared that noted a very close correlation between the Torah's description of slavery in Egypt and the exodus, and what we know of Egyptian culture at the time. For a brief review of these see A. Mazar, pp. 98-99, and Shopak, pp. 71-88. Penina Galpaz-Feller discusses these points in her book *Yetziat Mitzrayim – Metziut o Dimyon*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 5763, p. 24; her concluding chapter is entitled, "Did the biblical author study Egyptian?" This sums up the essence of her argument that the precision in the description of Egyptian reality and culture must lead to the conclusion that "the exodus from Egypt did in fact take place" (ibid., p. 135).

^[12] The question of the connection between the "ג, אַבִּירֻ" and Bnei Yisrael has been addressed by many scholars; the discussion relates also to the conquest of Eretz Yisrael and to other biblical narratives. See, for example, M. Greenberg, "ג, אַבִּירֻ (ג, אַפִּירֻ) – Ivrim," in: *Ha-Historia shel Am Yisrael* 2, Jerusalem – Ramat Gan 1967, pp. 95-102; M. Greenberg, "Ivri-Ivrim," *Encyclopedia Mikrait* 6, Jerusalem 5732, column 50; Y. Bin-Nun, "*Ha-Ivrim ve-Eretz ha-Ivrim*," *Megadim* 15, 5752, pp. 9-25; Shopak, p. 73 n. 11. In contrast, see N. Na'an JNES 45 (1986), 271-288; A. F. Rainey, in: Dever & Gitin (eds.), *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past*, 2003, pp. 174-176 for a refutation of this connection.

^[13] Shopak, p. 72.

^[14] See Galpaz-Feller, p. 27.

^[15] Ibid., p. 45. With these words the author summarizes the findings that she cites on pp. 33 onwards. For more words and expressions that are unique to the story of the exodus, and which relate to the reality of the period in question, see Shopak, pp. 84-86.

^[16] Moshe's name seems to be derived from the Egyptian noun *ms*, meaning "child," or from the Egyptian verb *msy*, meaning "to give birth" or "to be born." There are at least three known individuals with this name from the period of Ramesses II. (Of course, the biblical explanation of the name – "for I drew him [*meshitihu*] from the water" [[Shemot 2:10](#)] does not negate the Egyptian meaning of the name. For a discussion of the phenomenon of biblical explanation of names, see Galpaz-Feller, p. 39; Shopak, p. 80-81.)

^[17] See Galpaz-Feller, pp. 33-45.

^[18] Above, we noted Cassuto's suggestion that this verse refers not to the north-eastern road, the "sea route," but rather the more eastern route, which passes through the ancient land of the Philistines. In any event, even according to his interpretation, it is clear that Am Yisrael could have entered Eretz Yisrael via a shorter route – the "sea route" – had this not been the most dangerous option.

^[19] See A. Malamat, "*Yetziat Mitzrayim – Makbilot Mitzriyot*," in: *Eretz Yisrael* 25, Jerusalem 5756, pp. 231-235. Malamat cites additional sources which we have not mentioned here, concerning the corroboration between archaeological findings and the biblical account of the exodus.

^[20] These papyruses are named after Anastasi, the Swedish consul who purchased them in 1839. Most of them date to the 13th century B.C.E.

[\[21\]](#) In this regard it is puzzling that Finkelstein and Silverman, pp. 73-75, try to use these findings to negate the veracity of the story of the exodus. They argue that the remnants of the fortresses indicate the difficulty of escaping from Egypt via the border fortifications, and note without any apparent recognition of the contradictory nature of their claim, that "the biblical account itself hints that the attempt to escape along the coastal route was dangerous." If this is so, where is the conflict between their version of the events and the biblical account? And how do they explain how an anonymous author in the 7th century B.C.E. (as they claim) knew of the existence of this network of fortresses, which by his own account was the reason why Bnei Yisrael did not take that route, preferring the route via the wilderness of Sinai?

In fact, Finkelstein and Silverman's argument turns on a fundamental point of conflict between their view and the view of the believing reader of the biblical story. They argue, "If we ignore miraculous intervention, it is difficult to accept the idea that a large group of slaves escaped from Egypt via the well-guarded border fortifications to the wilderness, and from there to Canaan, during a period of such impressive Egyptian presence." This is a sentence with which any religious believer can agree wholeheartedly. The whole question is whether we are to "ignore the possibility of miraculous intervention," or to believe in Divine Providence and God's guidance of His nation. This argument, of course, has nothing to do with any question of archaeology.

[\[22\]](#) Shopak, pp. 86-88. It is important to note that Shopak does not accept the biblical account as a description from the actual time of the events; she maintains that the story underwent later redactions which included "mythical and legendary elements" (p. 86). Nonetheless, this again boils down to the question of a theological world-view, rather than to archaeological data.