Exodus and History

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Much of Israel’s history as a nation had included encounters—of various sorts—with Egypt. Even modern Israel has had Egypt as a main neighbor and, for the first part of its 65-year existence, as a major foe. It is hardly surprising that the Jewish people possessed a foundation story that involved Egypt. The level of historicity of the exodus has often been discussed. In the past half century there has been a revolution in understanding of Israel’s early history, with the majority of scholarship adopting the view that Israel primarily arose from indigenous inhabitants of Canaan rather than a major influx of migrants, whether from Egypt or elsewhere. Even some conservative scholars have accepted—or at least moved toward—this view, though it is often accompanied by statements like “the Bible does not say” or “it has been wrongly assumed” or similar. They often ignore the fact that centuries of conservative and pre-critical scholars read the text as showing millions of Israelites coming out of Egypt, living for 40 years in the desert, crossing the Jordan, and driving out or killing many of the native peoples and taking their land in a unified conquest of only about five years.

Given the present skepticism toward a large-scale immigration of peoples into Canaan in the Late Bronze or Early Iron (or indeed the Middle Bronze), a basic investigation of history in the exodus tradition is warranted. The purpose of the present study is to summarize the known data, to catalogue some of the opinions about historicity, and to suggest what can be considered historical in the light of what is presently known.

1 Biblical Account

Critical scholars generally agree that the earliest references to the exodus tradition do not come from the exodus narrative in the Pentateuch but other writings, such as the early prophetic books, primarily Amos and Hosea, about the middle of the eighth century BCE: Hos 2:17; 8:3; 9:3; 11:1, 5, 11; 12:10, 14; 13:4; 5; Amos 2:10; 3:1, 9; 4:10; 8:8; 9:5, 7; also Mic 6:4; 7:15. Although we could debate some of these passages, overall the exodus tradition seems to be presupposed, though it would take us back only to the eighth century, long after the alleged event. Whatever the reality, it is clothed in a thick layer of mythical interpretation. The Pharaoh is a generic figure, without a name. A series of ten miracles is
enacted and attempts to find naturalistic explanations miss the point: the aim of the narrative is to magnify the power of YHWH and his servant Moses. Yair Hoffman has argued that the original tradition was a northern one, no older than the ninth or tenth century BCE. Stephen Russell agrees that the exodus tradition originated about the eighth century BCE, but it is not unified, with differences between the Cis-Jordanian and Transjordanian tribes.

The vast bulk of the Pentateuchal text describing the exodus and related events seems to be quite late, “exilic or early post-exilic.” It was once widely argued that the exodus was embodied in certain passages quoting an early Israelite “credo,” but subsequent study suggested that some of these passages (e.g., Deut 6:21–23; 26:5–9; Josh 24:2–13) were actually late. However, it has been argued that one section in the exodus narrative was quite early: based on a linguistic analysis of the Hebrew text, Exodus 15 was proposed as one of the earliest passages in the Hebrew Bible.

Some elements of Exodus 15 remind one of the Chaoskampf in which YHWH defeated the forces of chaos, but a number of passages also speak of interaction on the human level. This already begins in v. 1 with the casting of horse and rider into the sea. YHWH is a man of war (v. 3) who throws the chariots and the entire army of Pharaoh into the sea (v. 4). Frank Cross attempted to argue that

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