

Does Archaeology Confirm Joseph's Time in Egypt?

Rachel Hallote August 01, 2021

Of all the stories in the Hebrew Bible, the ones about Joseph and his brothers are among the most fascinating, filled with intrigue and plot twists. In fact, there are so many unusual details that these narratives read like adventure fiction or, alternately, like something that's so far-fetched it has to be true.

But are they true? Has archaeology found evidence of Joseph's time in Egypt?

To examine the problem, let's start by going over the basics of Joseph's story, which is recorded in Genesis 37-40. Young Joseph lives in southern Canaan with his father, Jacob, and his many siblings. Jacob favors Joseph above all his brothers, even giving him a special coat, and the brothers are envious. When Joseph brags about his status and glorious future one time too many, the brothers get angry and sell him into slavery, to a passing caravan heading to Egypt.

The caravaneers in turn sell him to a high-ranking officer at the Egyptian court named Potiphar. All seems calm for a while until Joseph is falsely accused of interest in Potiphar's wife and lands in jail. While in jail, he correctly interprets the dreams of two fellow inmates, and the news of his dream interpreting skills reaches the pharaoh. The pharaoh sends for Joseph to interpret his own dreams. Not only does Joseph interpret the king's dreams correctly, saying that they predict a terrible famine, but he also gives good advice on how to save the kingdom from this famine. As a reward, the pharaoh appoints Joseph to a high-ranking position—Joseph becomes the pharaoh's second in command and has authority over the entire land of Egypt (Genesis 41:40-46).

The plot thickens even more when we hear that the famine has affected Canaan as well as Egypt, and Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy food. After some complex plot points (wherein Joseph successfully takes revenge against his brothers), the whole family, including their elderly father, Jacob, relocates to join Joseph in Egypt. They all settle happily and prosperously in a region of Egypt that the biblical text calls Goshen (Genesis 47).

The family prospers and multiplies over the course of 400 years (Exodus 12:40), until it becomes a large tribal alliance. At that point, a king comes to the throne of Egypt who is unhappy about this foreign group living in his land. He perceives them as a threat and enslaves them (Exodus 1:8-14). Finally, a leader named Moses helps the enslaved people escape slavery in Egypt. They head back to Canaan, with the pharaoh's army chasing them part of the way.

In sum, this biblical story is about a group of people who originated in Canaan, then moved to Egypt, and became an elite ruling class there for several centuries. Later on, after falling from grace, they ended up back in Canaan, chased by the Egyptian army.

Now let's turn to Egyptian historical sources. Thanks to the decipherment of ancient Egyptian and extensive archaeological excavations, we now know that Egypt prospered during the period known as the Old Kingdom (c. 2600–2200 B.C.E.). This was the age of pyramid building, when the central government and economy were strong. But at the end of this period, things began to change. Most scholars believe that there was a bad drought. The writings of local rulers, such as Ankhetyf of Mo'alla, describe a famine. Other texts, such as the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, describe how the central government completely fell apart. There are also texts that tell us about wars between different regions and towns within Egypt. The government was in shambles (we call this era the First Intermediate Period) until the indigenous dynasty based in Thebes restored order and began the period called the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000–1750 B.C.E.).

From almost the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, people from Canaan were infiltrating the eastern Nile Delta. Although it's likely that these Canaanites first came to Egypt as merchants, we hear that King Amenemhet I built a wall to keep "Asiatics" out of the country.^a He clearly perceived them as a threat.

And there's even more striking evidence that the Egyptians felt threatened by these northerners. Egyptian priests ritually cursed them, hoping to eliminate them as a problem. There are several sets of curse texts directed against cities in Canaan and their rulers. Known as the Execration Texts, they were found in good archaeological contexts in many cities in Egypt. They are inscribed on small ceramic figurines or pieces of pottery and include the names of cities and kings of Canaan. These objects were ritually broken and buried, to enact the curses. Cities in Canaan that appear in the Execration Texts include Hazor, Acre, Aphek, Shechem, Ashkelon, and even Jerusalem. A slightly later set of Execration Texts cursed even more cities. The Egyptians' need to curse Canaanite cities shows a deep-seated fear of the growing strength of Canaan and Canaanites in this period.

And the Egyptians had good reason to be worried. Archaeological excavation at sites in the eastern Nile Delta show that by the end of the Middle Kingdom, in the period known as the Second Intermediate Period, Canaanites who had been living in the region had expanded and taken over much of the eastern Nile Delta, essentially conquering Egypt from within. Egyptian texts refer to them as *heqau khasut*, which means "rulers of foreign lands," a term that Greek historians such as the third-century B.C.E. priest Manetho corrupted into "Hyksos." Manetho explains that Dynasties 14, 15, and 16 were all Hyksos dynasties.

The idea of being ruled by foreigners horrified the Egyptians, who considered themselves superior to all their neighbors. Although some native Egyptian dynasties retained control over the southern parts of the country (centered in Thebes), they were nearly powerless.

But how do we know for sure that the Hyksos were Canaanites? The best way is to look at the archaeological remains of Avaris, the Hyksos capital city, in the eastern Nile Delta. The site of Avaris is called today Tell el-Dab'a.

Archaeology shows that Avaris was definitely built and settled by Canaanites. The excavations of Manfred Bietak have revealed Canaanite material culture throughout the site, including Canaanite style architecture, ceramics, and burials.^b His architectural finds include a temple that was built according to a typical Canaanite tripartite temple plan with an outer portico and a main room and either a niche or a separate room in its rear—a plan that is very different from contemporary Egyptian temples but very similar to the temples at Canaanite sites, such as Hazor. Also notable at Avaris is a distinct type of ceramics called Tell el-Yahudiah Ware, which is decorated with a punctate design and fired in such a way that the surface is reduced to black. This ware is manufactured in southern Canaan as well as locally in Egypt, and is more evidence that Canaanites were living in Egypt's Nile Delta.

The graves at Avaris were constructed from mudbrick, as was typical in Canaan, but unlike the stone tomb construction found in Egypt. And the bodies were placed directly in these tombs without any coffins or sarcophagi, also typical of Canaanite burials. Some of them contained remains of a horse or donkey alongside the human remains. Equid burials are unusual, but the two main places where they are found are southern Canaan and Egypt's eastern Delta. All these pieces of material evidence—the ceramics, the temple architecture, and the burial customs—make it clear that there were people from southern Canaan living and ruling in Egypt in the Second Intermediate Period. The Hyksos were certainly Canaanites, who brought their southern Canaanite material culture with them.

The Hyksos period ended c. 1550 B.C.E., when the local Egyptians, who still held fast to some territory around Thebes in Egypt's southern region, finally reemerged. A Theban king named Kamose marched northward and waged a war against the Hyksos by attacking their capital city of Avaris. Kamose's successor, Ahmose (who is considered the founder of Egypt's strong 18th Dynasty), continued his policies by chasing the Hyksos into Canaan itself and attacking and conquering Canaanite cities. Essentially, Ahmose and the strong kings who followed him turned the tables on the Hyksos. Rather than Canaanites ruling in Egypt, the Egyptians now conquered and ruled over the cities in Canaan, forming an empire that would eventually extend to Syria. During the 18th Dynasty, Egyptian armies completely subdued the rest of Canaan, setting up permanent bases and stationing their soldiers and governors in Canaan's cities, even northern ones like Beth Shean. The once-great cities of Canaan were turned into mere vassals of Egypt during the Late Bronze Age.

Just as we did with the biblical narratives about Joseph and his brothers, we can sum up all this Egyptian history in a sentence or two: A group of people who originated in Canaan became rulers in Egypt for a number of centuries but later ended up back in Canaan, chased by the Egyptian army. In other words, the short summary of the Egyptian material is nearly identical with the short summary of the biblical account. When one leaves off the details of the "plot" of the Bible, ignoring the personal conflicts between Joseph and his brothers, the biblical storyline aligns with the Egyptian sources. In both versions, we have people from Canaan who move down to live and rule in Egypt. In the biblical version, the people from Canaan are Joseph and his brothers. In Egyptian history, the people from Canaan are the Canaanites who trickled into Egypt, set up permanent cities, and eventually became known as Hyksos rulers. The stories are identical in their larger narratives, if not in their particulars.

Other details show that we are seeing two sides of the same narrative. In the biblical account, Joseph's family lives in the region of Goshen. The location of Goshen in the eastern Nile Delta was confirmed in the late 19th century by the Egyptologist Édouard Naville, who made the connection between the 20th Nome, known as Kesem or Gesem, and biblical Goshen.¹ This nome is located in the northeastern Nile Delta, exactly where the main Hyksos cities, including Avaris (Tell ed-Dab'a), are located.

The later parts of the larger narratives are similar as well, although here is where an inversion takes place. In the Bible, the numerous descendants of Joseph and his brothers are enslaved by a later pharaoh, until they escape and return to their original homeland of Canaan—chased by the pharaoh and his army (Exodus 14:6-9). Egyptian sources similarly indicate that when the local Egyptian kings finally became strong enough to take power (first Kamose, at the end of the 17th Dynasty, and then his successor Ahmose, first king of the New Kingdom), they forced the once-powerful Hyksos to flee Egypt and return to Canaan—and Ahmose's army chases them all the way into Canaan. While the reasons for the action are somewhat different in the two accounts—slave rebellion versus overthrowing a disliked dynasty—in both cases a large group of people of Canaanite origin leaves Egypt for Canaan with the Egyptian army at its heels.

But how do we reconcile that glaring major difference: the biblical slave rebellion with people leaving Egypt because they want to, as opposed to Egyptians chasing out an infiltrating dynasty by force? If we continue to think in a broad sense and allow for a cultural memory that morphed over several generations of retelling, the differences fade. In the biblical version, a people who originated in Canaan (descendants of Joseph and his brothers) were affiliated with the ruling class in Egypt until they were literally enslaved. But there is a type of "enslavement" in Egyptian New Kingdom history as well: During the 18th Dynasty, the former Hyksos, that is, the residents

of Canaan, were “enslaved” by Egypt in their own land—Canaanite cities were subjugated and became vassals serving the Egyptian king.

What if the descendants of some of these Hyksos, those who survived the wars and returned to live in their ancestral land of Canaan, passed down to their children and grandchildren the stories of their rise to power in Egypt? They might have also passed down the stories of Kamose’s and Ahmose’s wars against their cities, but rather than remembering their military losses, they may have conflated it with what happened next: They inverted the defeats and conquests of Canaanite cities into a narrative of personal servitude with Egyptians as slavemasters. There are scholars such as Donald Redford and Ronald Hendel who say that this is exactly what happened.^c Biblical stories about Joseph living in Egypt could actually be folk memories of the period of Hyksos rule, while the narratives about slavery and the Exodus are folk memories of the expulsion of the Hyksos and the Egyptian conquest of Canaan. Canaanites were “enslaved” in their own land, forced to serve Egypt.²

Although there is a lot of scholarship on the dating of the Exodus (see sidebar), most scholars associate the pharaoh mentioned in the Bible with Ramesses II, who ruled in the 13th century B.C.E. But the expulsion of the Hyksos took place earlier than that—the 16th-century Egyptian rulers Kamose and Ahmose, respectively, fought the Hyksos at Avaris and chased them into Canaan. Furthermore, the Egyptian empire in Canaan—Egyptians “enslaving” the peoples of Canaan in their own land—did not reach its height until the early 15th century. This is why the “folk memory” theory works so well—as the relationship between Canaanites and Egyptians evolved over the course of four centuries, the narratives about the relationship evolved as well, until it solidified into the folk memory that comes down to us via the Book of Exodus.³

These long-lived folk memories are traumatic national events turned on their sides.

While there is a lot more to say about the origins of the Exodus narrative,^d the stories of Joseph and his brothers are clearly rooted in the rise of the Hyksos in Egypt.

Rachel Hallote is Professor of History at Purchase College of the State University of New York. Her research focuses on the history of biblical archaeology.

Notes:

¹. Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

². See Donald Redford, “The Great Going Forth: The Expulsion of West Semitic Speakers from Egypt,” in Thomas Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William Propp, eds., *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), p. 438; Ronald Hendel, “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120.4 (2001), pp. 603–604; Nadav Na’aman, “The Exodus Story: Between Historical Memory and Historiographical Composition,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 11 (2011), p. 63; see also Baruch Halpern, “The Exodus from Egypt: Myth or Reality,” in Hershel Shanks, ed., *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), pp. 86–113.

³. Most scholars agree that at least a portion of the Israelites emerged locally, from Canaanite polities. For a short summary of these arguments, see Eric Cline, *From Eden to Exile* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2007), pp. 115–116.

^a. For Canaanites in Middle Kingdom Egypt, see, e.g., the Beni Hasan tomb paintings featured in Michael D. Coogan, “[10 Great Finds](#),” **BAR**, May/June 1995; see also James K. Hoffmeier, “[Out of Egypt: The Archaeological Context of the Exodus](#),” **BAR**, January/February 2007.

b. See Manfred Bietak, "[Contra Bimson, Bietak Says Late Bronze Age Cannot Begin as Late as 1400 B.C.](#)," **BAR**, July/August 1988.

c. Ronald S. Hendel, "[Exodus](#)," *Bible Review*, August 2002.

d. See, e.g., Hershel Shanks, "Exodus Evidence: An Egyptologist Looks at Biblical History," **BAR**, May/June 2016; Aharon Kempinski, "Jacob in History," **BAR**, January/February 1988; Hershel Shanks, "The Exodus and the Crossing of the Red Sea, According to Hans Goedicke," **BAR**, September/October 1981.

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