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# Theological Observer

## CRITICAL CHRONOLOGY AND THE EXODUS

The date of the Israelite exodus from Egypt is one of those watershed issues which clearly distinguish the conservative exegete from the critic. Contemporary Old Testament scholars who accept the infallibility of Scripture place the exodus in the middle of the fifteenth century before the birth of Christ. Almost all practitioners of higher criticism, on the other hand, allocate the exodus to a later point in time, namely, within the thirteenth century B.C. or at most a few years prior. Even some scholars who would call themselves conservative, or whom others would so designate, accept the late date of the exodus or else declare neutrality. Like the theory of evolution among high school science teachers, the late date of the exodus is iterated and reiterated so frequently in critical circles that it generally passes for established fact, one of those "assured results" of higher criticism. William H. Stiebing, Jr., associate professor of history at the University of New Orleans, thus refers to the mid-thirteenth century B.C. as the "G.A.D." (generally accepted date) of the exodus and takes up the cudgels to defend it against all comers in a recent article entitled "Should the Exodus and Israelite Settlement Be Redated?"<sup>1</sup>

Much of Stiebing's cannonade is directed, fairly enough, against such radical reconstructions of ancient history as those espoused by Anati and Velikovsky. Emmanuel Anati, professor of palaeoethnology at the University of Lecce in Italy, pushes the exodus back into the third millennium B.C. on the basis of his tenuous identification of Har Karkom as Mt. Sinai.<sup>2</sup> Such an early date is as impossible to reconcile with Scripture as is the usual critical chronology. It is true that Immanuel Velikovsky, followed by Donovan Courville, professor emeritus of biochemistry at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California,<sup>3</sup> assigned the exodus to a mid-fifteenth century date on the basis of biblical testimony. Unfortunately, these scholars then proceeded to subject both Egyptian and Palestinian chronology to a drastic overhaul which, in the end, still yields results at variance with the historical books of the Old Testament (particularly Kings and Chronicles). Velikovsky's interpretation of the miracles surrounding the exodus as natural phenomena produced by a cosmic disturbance is not only bizarre but also inconsistent with the biblical depiction of these events. The earth, according to Velikovsky, was passing through the tail of a comet which, ejected from Jupiter, was to become the planet Venus.<sup>4</sup> Yet, according to Moses, the various plagues imposed upon Egypt, so far from being worldwide, left the Hebrews completely unaffected.

The "generally accepted date" of the exodus defended by Stiebing is, however, an excrescence of modernist mythology, since its defiance of Scripture is apparent. Stiebing admits that "a literal reading of I Kings 6:1" would lead one to conclude that the exodus occurred in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the sixth chapter of the Book of Kings begins with these clear words: "And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord." Contemporary conservative exegetes generally commence Solomon's reign with the year 970 B.C., and few if any scholars, however critical, stray very far from this date. (Stiebing,

for example, refers to 960 as "a date that everyone can agree is at least very close to the truth.")<sup>5</sup> Adherents of biblical infallibility, therefore (assuming this initiation of Solomon's reign), place the foundation of the temple in the year 967 and, consequently, the Israelite exodus from Egypt in the year 1446 B.C.

Stiebing makes no attempt to elude the "literal reading of 1 Kings 6:1" by means of some hermeneutical quibble. The basic assumption of higher criticism is the fallibility of Scripture, and so few critics have any compunctions in labelling this verse as an example of inaccuracy. The basis of the critical rejection of biblical authority in this particular case is the supposed testimony of Palestinian archaeology; all the other depositions provided by the adherents of the late date of the exodus are adduced only as corroboration of this basic rationale. Stiebing, for instance, opens the case for the late date by stating, "Scholars have established a G.A.D. for the exodus by placing it just before the Israelite settlement in Canaan." He then alludes to "abundant evidence for a change in the material culture of Palestine in about 1200 B.C.," which he then connects with the emergence of the Israelites in Canaan.<sup>5</sup> Palestinian archaeology, however, has yet to unearth the "missing link" between the changes around 1200 B.C. and the original Israelite invasion of Canaan. After all, even some critical "scholars question whether these changes evidence the arrival of a new people."<sup>5</sup> In any case, Stiebing and most critics are bold enough to challenge Scripture openly.

Compromising theologians, on the other hand, have endeavored (like theistic evolutionists) to mediate between the "assured results" of modern science and the explicit testimony of Holy Writ by appealing from the literal reading of the text to some metaphorical interpretation. R.K. Harrison provides a choice illustration of such exegesis in his treatment of 1 Kings 6:

If this construction is to be dated about 961 B.C., the exodus would thus have taken place ca. 1441 B.C. If this sequence is meant to be taken literally, it is a powerful argument for a fifteenth-century date. However, while such a figure represents the unanimous testimony of the manuscripts, it can be questioned on other grounds, particularly when it is examined against the background of oriental symbolism. The number 480 can be resolved into units of twelve generations of forty years each. A double cycle or *motif* may be involved in consequence, having the effect of relating the concept of a generation to each of the twelve tribes. If, however, the symbol of forty years as constituting a generation is reckoned more realistically in terms of the period extending from the birth of the father to the birth of his son, a figure of twenty-five years would be a more appropriate estimate for a generation, yielding about 300 years and bringing the Exodus into the mid-thirteenth century B.C.<sup>6</sup>

Harrison's flight of imagination soars even higher in succeeding paragraphs--indeed, reaches an exegetical stratosphere from which he can survey a stream of symbolic numbers coursing through Scripture from Jacob's altar at Bethel to the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The cynosure of Harrison's vision is a supposed "pattern of twelve generations of High Priests between the erecting of the wilderness Tabernacle, which prefigured the Temple, and the actual construction of the Temple by Solomon."<sup>6</sup>

The attempts, however, of mediating theologians to squeeze Scripture into a critical mould are always vain. A number of considerations clearly expose the irreconcilable conflict of 1 Kings 6 with a dating of the exodus in the thirteenth century. (1.) In the first place, the one meaning of any assertion of Scripture intended by its par-

ticular author (*sensus literalis unus*) must be equated with the common meaning (*sensus literae*) of the words unless the context or analogy of faith compels us to accept a different meaning. In the case of 1 Kings 6:1 nothing in the context or anywhere else in Scripture would make us prescind from the everyday meaning of the words "in the four hundred and eightieth year." The text, after all, does not even use some such phraseology as "in the twelfth forty-year period," so that one might argue with less appearance, at least, of axe-grinding that the term "forty-year period" could refer metaphorically to a generation or whatever. Nor will it ever suffice to say that a figurative meaning of a word or phrase would make good sense in a particular passage; one must demonstrate the unacceptability of the basic usage. Like the Reformer in his struggle for the *estin* ("is") in the words of institution, we reject unnecessary tropes as human delusion which makes of God's Word a waxen nose to be twisted into whatever shape anyone wishes.

(2.) Another principle essential to the proper understanding of Scripture is that the interpretation of any word or assertion must accord with its context (unless the analogy of faith compels one to accept a different interpretation, an exception which, as previously stated, does not obtain in the case of 1 Kings 6:1). Now, the Book of Kings consists from first to last in sober historical prose. Chronological data (especially concerning the reigns of various kings) abound which are clearly intended as numbers of the common garden variety. To give a metaphorical meaning to numbers in a thoroughly historical context is as topsy-turvy as investing the symbolic numbers of the apocalyptic genre with a literal significance. Indeed 1 Kings 6:1 emphasizes the exact chronological intent of the 480 years between the exodus and the temple's foundation by citing as well the specific year of Solomon's reign and even the precise month of the occurrence ("in the month of Ziv, which is the second month").

(3.) In any case, the assumption of mediating scholars that the Old Testament people conceived of forty years as representing a generation has never been proven. It is true that Israel wandered about in the wilderness for forty years until the whole generation which had rebelled against the Lord perished (Num.32:13). Numbers 14:34, however, explains why the Lord specified forty as the number of years of punishment: according to the number of days which the spies despatched by Moses passed in the land of Canaan, "for every day a year," the Israelites who followed the lead of most of these spies in defying God's will were to bear their iniquity and know God's displeasure for forty years. We might deduce from Numbers 14, quite to the contrary, that the ancient Hebrews conceived of a generation as consisting, not in forty years, but in twenty, since twenty years of age was the boundary between those who were to die in the wilderness and those who were to enter the promised land (see especially verses 29, 31-33). A related line of demarcation appears in the census of Numbers 1 (vv. 3, 45, etc.). Perhaps, then, if one were to assume (erroneously) that the 480 years of 1 Kings 6 represent a certain number of generations, one would have to conclude that the reference involves, not twelve, but twenty-four generations—a deduction which would, of course, militate against a thirteenth century date of the exodus. It is difficult, moreover, to conceive of the ancient Israelites using forty years to represent a generation, as mediating scholars assume, if, as the same exegetes also suppose, the typical Hebrew generation was, in actuality, only twenty years in duration.

(4.) A fallacious method is, in the end, the root of all the exegetical evil involved in higher criticism generally and, more specifically, in the critical dating of the exodus and the figurative interpretation of 1 Kings 6 based upon it. The adherents of a thirteenth century exodus have decided its date on the basis of archaeological evidence (as interpreted by erring mortals) and have then sought to bring the Word

of God into line with their preconceived notions. Such an enterprise is, of course, doomed to failure. Even if we should allow the allegorization of 1 Kings 6, discrepancies still remain between the biblical data and the "late date" of the exodus—for example, the length of the period of the judges and the identification of the pharaoh who died while Moses was in Midian (Ex. 2:23-25). Thus, while accepting the "general reliability of biblical history beginning with the Israelite monarchy," Stiebing admits that "the generally accepted archaeological chronology presents difficulties for the Biblical account of the Exodus and the settlement in Canaan."<sup>7</sup> Stiebing offers this rationalization of his approach:

For the period before the Israelite monarchy, most Palestinian archaeologists and Biblical scholars recognize that the Biblical account cannot be accepted as we would accept a modern historical account. That is why archaeology presents problems for the pre-Monarchic Biblical account. The Biblical accounts of the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan took form over a long period of time. Aetiological, anachronistic and sometimes legendary material became imbedded in these stories. The Biblical authors of these accounts were not trying to "tell history," as we would understand this; they were making theological points.<sup>7</sup>

Such a divorce of history from theology is, in the first place, inconsistent with Stiebing's own admission of the general historical reliability of those accounts emanating from the monarchical and subsequent periods (even though these accounts too, of course, all have their own "theological points" to make). More importantly, Stiebing and other critics confuse the Old Testament with the Koran. The scriptures of every other religion (Hindu, Buddhist, Mohammedan, etc.) do, indeed, enunciate systems of theology which have no essential relation to any occurrence in history. The Christian Scriptures, on the other hand, are unique in making the validity of their theology completely dependent upon their historical truthfulness. Indeed, the occurrence of certain events such as the incarnation and the resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15) constitutes the very core of biblical theology. The first question to ask, therefore, in deciding the date of the exodus is this: "What saith the Scripture?" In the reconstruction of any event the sworn deposition of reliable witnesses must take precedence over the interpretation of circumstantial evidence. The data of Palestinian archaeology consists, by the nature of the case, almost exclusively in circumstantial evidence and often, indeed, in negative evidence (e.g., the absence of any artifacts of a certain nature in a specific space on a given level). The only reasonable procedure is to conform the interpretation of such data to the impeccable testimony of the biblical historians and, after all, of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the divine authorship of the entire Bible necessarily precludes the use of any external evidence to change the otherwise apparent understanding of any assertion of Scripture. The Book of Kings clearly places the exodus 480 years previous to the foundation of Solomon's temple, and one can, in fact, interpret the pertinent archaeological data in such a way as to support the Scripture rather than contradict it.

1. William H. Stiebing, Jr., "Should the Exodus and the Israelite Settlement Be Redated?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, IX (1985): 4 (July-August), pp. 58-69.
2. Emmanuel Anati, "Has Mt. Sinai Been Found?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, IX (1985): 4 (July-August), pp. 42-57.

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3. Donovan A. Courville, *The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications*, 2 vols. (Loma Linda: Challenge Books, 1971).
  4. Immanuel Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (Garden City: Nelson Doubleday, 1950); cf. *Ages in Chaos* (Garden City: Nelson Doubleday, 1952).
  5. Stiebing, p.61.
  6. Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p.317.
  7. Stiebing, p. 68.

Douglas MacCallum Lindsay Judisch