



Part Two

Old Testament Archaeology 2

By

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What I Learned

I used to think that Christians were ignorant to believe the “stories” in the Bible. I was taught those stories as a child, but I grew up to “know” they weren’t true. Or did I?

My investigation into the claims of theists about the existence of God and Christians about the existence of God’s Son led me into a study of archaeology in 1971. I was especially interested in archaeological expeditions from the Middle East because much of the Old Testament was written in and about that area of the world. I was a bit surprised to discover that [many archaeological findings](#) pointed to the “possibility” that people written about in the Old Testament may have actually lived at the time the writers claimed.

But what about the claim that a small family left Canaan, entered Egypt, grew to great numbers, were forced into slavery, then were freed from slavery by a man who performed great miracles that brought the mighty Egyptian government to its knees?

Here’s what I learned from archaeology.

Archaeological discoveries during the 19th and 20th centuries AD demonstrated that clans like Jacob’s did exist in Canaan during the Middle Bronze Age (MBA, 2100 – 1570 BC) and did travel to and from Egypt. The question before me in 1971 was whether Jacob was a real person who moved his family to Egypt at some point in the

middle of the MBA after one of his sons became a ruler in Egypt. Sounded a bit far fetched to me at the time, but let's see what we learn from archaeology.

Genesis 37 presents Joseph as a 17-year-old son of Jacob living in Canaan. Jacob asked Joseph to go from the "Valley of Hebron" to "Shechem." Now we have something solid to search. Did either of these places exist during the MBA?

Professor Philip C. Hammond earned his Ph.D. in archaeology at Yale University in 1957 and taught at Princeton as well as Brandeis University and the University of Utah. Dr. Hammond directed the American Expedition to Hebron (also called Tell er-Rueide, Tel Rumeida, and Tel Hebron) from 1963 – 1966. The city was dated to the Early Bronze Age (EBA, 3300 – 2100BC). The Six Day War interrupted Dr. Hammond's research in 1967 and he moved on to new expeditions in Jordan.

"So he sent him out of the Valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem." Genesis 37:14

Jacob sent his son Joseph to look for his older brothers in a place called Shechem. Did a place named Shechem exist in the Middle Bronze Age? It did. Hebron was located about 20 miles south of Jerusalem. Shechem was located about 30 miles north of Jerusalem. German archaeologist H. Tiersch and his team investigated Tell Balata in 1903 and determined it contained the ruins of the ancient city of Shechem. Other European archaeologists excavated Tell

Balata prior to and after World War I. American archaeologists G. Ernest Wright and B.W. Anderson excavated there during the 1950s and 60s.

Archaeological findings revealed that ancient Shechem of the MBA contained houses made with mudbrick walls built on stone foundations. Domestic artifacts were found that would have been used in that era. [Archaeologist John Garstang](#) (University of Liverpool) made a discovery in 1901 in Egypt of an ancient stele (Khu-Sebek) dating to the MBA that described how the army of Pharaoh Sesostri III (12th king of 12th Dynasty) fought battles in Sekmem (Shechem) and defeated the people there. The stele showed that Shechem was an important city as early as the 19th century BC. The Khu-Sebek Stele is on display at the [University of Manchester Museum in England](#).

We read in Genesis 37:15-17 that Joseph met a man along his journey north to Shechem. The man asked Joseph what he was looking for and Joseph answered, "I am seeking my brothers. Please tell me where they are feeding their flocks." The man said, "They have departed from here, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" Joseph left Shechem and found his brothers in Dothan. Did a place named Dothan exist in the MBA near Shechem?

[Archaeologist Joseph Free](#) and his team excavated [Tell Dothan](#) between 1953 and 1964. Tell Dothan is located about 13 miles north of Shechem and was found to have been occupied prior to the EBA

and for thousands of years thereafter. Dothan would have been a well-known location during the time of Jacob and Joseph.

Genesis 37 reports that Joseph's brothers saw him walking toward them and that they conspired to kill him. However, Reuben, the oldest brother, forbid them from killing Joseph, so they threw Joseph in a pit to decide what to do with him. Judah, another of the older brothers, suggested they sell Joseph to "a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead" on their way to Egypt. Genesis 37 goes on to say, "Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver."

This passage raises several questions: were there a people known as Ishmaelites during the MBA? Were Ishmaelites also known as Midianites? Did Gilead exist in the MBA? Would Dothan been on the way from Gilead to Egypt? Was there any significance to the payment of twenty shekels of silver?

Ishmaelites were distant relatives of Jacob and his sons. Ishmael was the son of Abram and his wife Sarai's Egyptian maidservant Hagar (Genesis 16). Even though Ishmael was not the "son of promise," God blessed him and promised that he would be the father of twelve "princes" (Genesis 17:20). Ishmael and his half-brother Isaac buried their father Abraham "in the cave of Machpelah, which *is* before Mamre" (Genesis 25:9), which was located near Hebron.

Iron Age (IA – 1200 – 550 BC) inscriptions from North Arabia, Assyria and Babylonia mention the King of Kedar as king of the Arabs and Ishmaelites. The tribes of the Ishmaelites included the names of some of Ishmael's sons. [Delitzsche, 1912,; Montgomery, 1934; Winnet, 1970).

Midianites were also distant relatives of Jacob. Abraham had children with three women: Ishmael with Hagar; Isaac with Sarah; and Midian, Ishbak, Zimran, Jokshan, and Shuah with Keturah. Midian, Ishmael and Isaac were all half-brothers because Abraham was their father. Before his death, Abraham gave gifts to the sons “of the concubines which Abraham had” and sent them eastward, “away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east.”

The land “east” of Hebron would have included the land of “Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt as you go toward Assyria” (Genesis 27:18). That was a description of the land Ishmael and his sons inhabited after Abraham sent Ishmael away. Egypt and Assyria were well known locations in antiquity. The Bible also mentions Havilah and Shur many times (e.g. Genesis 2:11; 16:7; 20:1; Exodus 15:22; 1 Samuel 15:7; 27:8).

The name Havilah means “sandy stretch” and was descriptive of the large area of sand to the east of Canaan and Egypt. The name Shur means “wall” and may have been used for a walled area the Egyptians built as fortification on their northeastern border. Some students of antiquity think *Shur* may refer to the mountain wall of the *Tih* plateau

in the central part of the Sinai.

Later references in the Bible to Ishmaelites and Midianites demonstrate they were viewed as being of the same people (Judges 8). The Ishmaelites and Midianites were known to live in the wilderness of Shur and possibly intermarried and worked together. That could explain why the men who purchased Joseph were called both Ishmaelites and Midianites.

Archaeologist Nelson Glueck discovered Midianite pottery (also known as Qurayya ware) during excavations in the 1930s in central and southern Jordan, northwestern Saudi Arabia, the Sinai and southern Israel. Dating of the pottery was to the Late Bronze Age (LBA – 1570 – 1200 BC).

Ancient Gilead was located east of Dothan and the Jordan River. Ancient trade routes in the Middle East included the King's Highway, the Way of the Sea, and the Ridge Route (aka Way of the Patriarchs). The King's Highway connected Damascus, Syria in the north to Ezion-geber at the Gulf of Aqaba in the south and lesser trade routes that led to the Sinai Peninsula and Egypt. Ramoth-gilead was on the King's Highway route. The Way of the Sea (aka Via Maris, International Coastal Highway) extended from the Egyptian Delta in the south to Syria and Mesopotamia.

These routes date from the Early Bronze Age (EBA) and were well established during the patriarchal times of the MBA. Dothan was along a lesser trade route that connected Gilead in the east to the

Way of the Sea in the west, which led south to the Delta region of Egypt. [The Ridge Route was a major road through Canaan, but did not connect with Egypt.]

So, what about the 20 shekels of silver that the Ishmaelites paid for Joseph? Archeological findings show that the average price of a slave during the patriarchal times increased from 10-15 shekels of silver (115 – 172.5 grams) in ancient Ur (21st century BC) to 20 shekels of silver (230 grams) during the reign of Hammurabi (18th century BC) to 30 shekels of silver (345 grams) toward the end of the 2nd millennium and 50-60 shekels of silver (575 – 690 grams) by the middle of the first millennium. [[Ancient records concerning the price of slaves.](#)]

What I discovered from the findings of archaeology and ancient mapping was that Ishmaelites/Midianites coming from Gilead to Egypt could have bought Joseph from his brothers near Dothan. That information moved the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors from the improbable world of legends and myths to the possible world of real history.

Remembering a Story

I don't remember being interested in archaeology as a child or teenager. However, as a young man searching for answers to questions about the existence of God, archaeology became of great interest to me.

It was early 1971 and writings about archaeological discoveries in the Middle East were abundant. Some of the books and articles available to me dated from the 19th century AD, but the majority were from the early to middle 20th century.

I remember asking Dr. Edward Hindson question after question about people and places in the Bible and was quite surprised to hear that archaeological evidence already existed for many of them. He was answering my questions with evidence! It is most helpful when people who say they believe something actually have evidence to support their beliefs.

In our most recent posts, we looked at some of the archaeological evidence concerning the Hebrew patriarchs including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons. We pick up the story after Jacob's sons sold their brother Joseph into slavery.

“Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. The

Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had in the house and in the field. Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate." Genesis 39:1-6

I remembered this story from when I was a kid in Sunday School class. However, as an atheist I viewed everything in the Bible as a fairy tale. There was no Joseph, no Jacob, no Isaac, no Abraham. Yet, I was seeing through the investigative process that there might be more to the Bible stories than just fairy tales. The story of Joseph in Egypt was another opportunity to test the Bible against archaeological discoveries in the region.

We've already seen that Asiatics were known to have visited Egypt during the Middle Bronze Age (MBA, 2100 – 1550 BC). Many of these people were West Semitic (including Hebrews). Renowned Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardiner wrote this about the Asiatics – “on stelae and in papyrii Asiatic slaves are increasingly often mentioned, though there is no means of telling whether they were prisoners of

war or had infiltrated into Egypt of their own accord.” (Sir Alan Gardiner, “Egypt of the Pharaohs”, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966, p. 133). Archaeologist Joseph Free wrote that “Syrian slaves were highly prized in Egypt. The word ‘Kan’amu’ or ‘Canaanites’ even became a synonym for ‘slaves’ in the Egyptian documents” (Joseph P. Free, “Archaeology and Bible History, Scripture Press, 1969, p. 74). [See also George Alexander Frank Knight’s 1921 classic, [“Nile and Jordan Being The Archaeological and Historical Inter-Relations between Egypt and Canaan”](#), James Clarke and Co. LTD, 1921]

I didn’t believe in the “supernatural” as an atheist, so I wasn’t interested in what the Bible said about God blessing Joseph during his captivity. What I was interested in knowing is if archaeological finds supported the basic physical aspects of the ancient text (e.g. names, places, events, etc).

Archaeological finds during the 19th and 20th centuries had already addressed many of my questions. For instance, what about the name Potiphar. Did it have a meaning in the Egyptian language? It meant “belonging to the sun.” The name Poti-Pherah was similar and meant “he whom Ra has given.”

What about the priest of On? On was another name for the Egyptian city of Heliopolis, which was the ancient center of worship of the sun god, Ra.

What about the “land of Goshen?” Archaeologists identified it at the end of the 19th century as the 20th nome of Egypt, located in the eastern Delta section of Egypt.

What about the prison where Joseph was held? German Egyptologist [Georg Moritz Ebers](#) identified a fortress in Memphis as the prison where Joseph would have most likely been placed. Other possible locations (prior to 1971) included a prison at Thebes and one near the Palestine frontier. Drawings and monuments gave Egyptologists a clear view of life in ancient Egypt, which included servants, slaves, butlers and bakers.

What about the “seven years of plenty” and “seven years of famine?” American Egyptologist C.E. Wilbour discovered a large granite stele (see photo above) in the late 19th century on the island of Sahel in Egypt (near Elephantine). It is often referred to as the Famine or Djoser Stele. Several Egyptologists have deciphered the writings on the stele and say it includes the story of the Pharaoh Djoser and his scribe and architect Imhotep. Egyptologists believe it was engraved during the 3rd century BC, but was based on a much older document from the Old Kingdom period. While it is not identical to the story in the Bible, it does speak of the pharaoh’s dream and seven years of famine. The writing also details building with stone.

The story of Joseph includes three dreams: chief butler, chief baker and pharaoh. Archaeologists have discovered that the ancient Egyptians believed their gods would communicate to them through

dreams and that knowing how to interpret those dreams was a key to success. The Papyrus Chester Beatty 3, also known as *The Dream Book*, was discovered by archaeologists at Deir el-Medina, an ancient Egyptian village where tomb workers and their families lived near the Valley of the Kings during the New Kingdom period.

“Papyrus No. III, as we have seen, is in its present condition incomplete at both ends, and since there are no means of ascertaining the extent of the loss in either direction, it might seem rash to choose a comprehensive title for the principal work to which it was consecrated. On a first reading the fragmentary eleventh page of the recto seems irrelevant to its surroundings, and arouses the suspicion that both at start and finish there may have been other sections of a general divinatory character. Closer study, however, points in the opposite direction, bringing to light reasons for thinking that the whole composition was constructed on a consistent and homogeneous plan, and that it truly deserves the name of Dream-book which I have given to it. It is, indeed, the earliest Dream-book in existence and may well date back to the Twelfth Dynasty (approx. 2000—1790 B.C.), though this cannot be proved with certainty. The core of the work consists of a long enumeration of dreams in clear tabular form, accompanied by their interpretations.” (Hieratic Papyri British Museum, Alan H. Gardiner, D.Litt., F.B.A. 1 Text, 1935, p. 9)

This may explain why the chief butler, chief baker and pharaoh were so concerned about finding an interpretation to their dreams and why Joseph's ability to interpret dreams was held in such high esteem. However, could a foreigner really rise to the position of second-in-command to the Pharaoh? [German Archaeologist Adolf Erman](#) wrote:

“Amongst the court officials also we often meet with foreigners who may have been slaves. For instance, the office of “ first speaker of his Majesty,” whose duty was to take charge of the intercourse between the king and his attendants, was, under King Mcrenptah, invested in the Canaanite Ben-Mat’ana, the son of Jupa’a, from D’arbarsana.* At court he of course assumed an Egyptian name ; he was called “ Ramses in the temple of Re’ ” of his colleagues, he bore the additional name of the “beloved of Heliopolis.” All barbarians were probably not so conscientious as Ben-Mat’ana in ^ 2; – An.,4, 16, 2. ‘ I’.j.T., 4, 12, 14, 15. An., 3, 8, 3 ; and as this distinguished name might also belong to some ; confessing their foreign origin, consequently we may suppose that many of the officials named after the reigning king may have been Phoenicians or Cilicians.” (Adolf Erman, [Life in Ancient Egypt](#), London: Macmillan, 1894, p. 106).*

I asked Dr. Hindson many other questions about archaeological finds concerning the possibility of Joseph and his family living in Egypt, but the most important questions may have concerned the Israelites leaving Egypt by way of a great exodus. Were my questions answered?

Answers

Did pharaoh's daughter find baby Moses in an ark of bulrushes in the reeds by the bank of the river and raise him as her son? Did Moses become the leader of the slave nation of Israel? Did Moses lead Israel out of Egypt in a great exodus after humiliating the pharaoh through miracles of God?

During my investigation into the claims of theism more than 40 years ago, specifically Christianity, I had learned that many archaeological discoveries during the 19th and 20th centuries AD supported a variety of truth claims in the Bible from the 19th and 20th centuries BC. However, no truth claim of the Old Testament may have been more of a challenge than the supposed exodus of Israel from Egypt. Anyone who had any knowledge of ancient civilizations knew there was not a shred of evidence that the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt was true – including no archaeological discovery.

Or so I thought.

I was helped to a great degree during my investigation by two men, Dr. Edward Hindson and Rev. Terry Lytle. I had interviewed Terry on my radio talk show and he introduced me to Ed Hindson. They worked together in the same office and I visited them as often as I could with the kinds of questions an atheist would ask Christians.

Both Terry and Ed were a great help to me as I researched the truth claims of the New Testament, but Ed was especially helpful as I looked at the Old Testament evidences. He was a young scholar at the time having just published *The Philistines and the Old Testament* as part of the Baker Studies in Biblical Archaeology. Ed told me he was indebted to a Professor Charles Shaw who first introduced him to the serious study of the Old Testament and archaeology. I am also indebted to Professor Shaw because of what I learned from his student.

Dr. Hindson introduced me to the archaeological expeditions of people like Dr. John Garstang, Dame Kathleen Kenyon, E.A. Wallis Budge, Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, William F. Albright, R. A. Stewart Macalister, Howard F. Vos, Joseph P. Free, Henri Édouard Naville, James Henry Breasted, Auguste Mariette and Nelson Glueck.

However, could any of these or other archaeologists shine any light on the Israelite exodus story in the Bible? Let's begin with the death of Joseph and a pharaoh who did not know him

“And Joseph died, all his brothers, and all that generation. But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them. Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we; come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and it happen, in

the event of war, that they also join our enemies and fight against us, and so go up out of the land.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh supply cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel. So the Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigor. And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage—in mortar, in brick, and in all manner of service in the field. All their service in which they made them serve was with rigor.” Exodus 1:6-14

Could this be true? If Joseph had done all the Bible claims he did for the Egyptian people, how could any pharaoh not know about him? Why would the new pharaoh fear the children of Israel? Why would he want to make them slaves of Egypt?

I was introduced to a group of pharaohs known as the Hyksos. Egyptologists like John Garstang, Percy E. Newberry and others dated the reign of the Hyksos pharaohs to Egypt’s Second Intermediate Period (between Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom). Date estimates for that period are early 18th century to middle 16th century BC. That’s the same period estimated for Joseph and his family moving to Egypt and settling into the northern Delta region.

Egyptologists believe the Hyksos were an ethnic mix of Semitic-Asiatics who immigrated to the Delta region of Egypt and settled there during the Middle Kingdom period. The Egyptian word *heqakhase* meant “rulers of foreign lands.” Egyptologists believe the first Hyksos pharaoh was able to gain control of Lower Egypt (northern part) because of weak rulers toward the end of the Middle Kingdom.

Salitis is believed to have been the first Hyksos pharaoh – beginning the 15th Egyptian Dynasty from his capital in Avaris. Native Egyptian pharaohs continued to rule Upper Egypt (southern part) at the same time from Thebes and battle with the Hyksos to the north. The Egyptian 16th and 17th Dynasties run concurrently with the Hyksos 15th Dynasty. Successful military campaigns at the end of the 17th century played a vital role in the Egyptians defeating the Hyksos. Ahmoose 1 finished the fight against the Hyksos and was able to reunite Upper and Lower Egypt in what became known as the 18th Egyptian Dynasty and beginning of the New Kingdom.

Understanding the history of Egypt during the 2nd Intermediate period could explain why Ahmoose I did not know Joseph and would have been concerned about a large group of Semitic-Asiatics (Hebrews) living in the Delta region formerly ruled by the Hyksos. There would have been more Hebrews in the Delta region than Egyptians since the Hyksos would have known Joseph and approved of the Hebrews living there. Ahmoose I may have viewed the Hebrews as a risk in case the Hyksos would try to return and fight again. He may have viewed the Hebrews as having more loyalty to the Hyksos

than to him and Egyptians from the south. What might have made the most sense to Ahmose I for the security of the reunification of Upper and Lower Egypt was to force the Hebrews into rigorous service. However, it did not accomplish all that the pharaoh wanted.

“But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel.” Exodus 1:12

The pharaoh made the lives of the Israelites “bitter with hard bondage,” but even that was not enough to control the population growth of the Hebrews. So, the pharaoh introduced a new plan for population control (or eventual extermination).

“Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of one was Shiphrah and the name of the other Puah; and he said, ‘When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstools, if it is a son, then you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.’ But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive.” Exodus 1:15-17

Archaeologists found evidence of midwives and special birthing areas, including birthing stools, to at least the New Kingdom period. Children were important to the ancient Egyptians and were called “the staff of old age” because they would help their aging parents at the end of their lives. Killing the baby boys would certainly impact the

future of the people of Israel in many ways.

Exodus 2 is the story of a Hebrew woman who gave birth to a boy. She hid the child for three months, then placed the boy in an “ark of bulrushes, daubed it with asphalt and pitch, put the child in it, and laid it in the reeds by the river’s bank.” The sister of the baby boy watch from a distance to see what would happen.

“Then the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river. And her maidens walked along the riverside; and when she saw the ark among the reeds, she sent her maid to get it. And when she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby wept. So she had compassion on him, and said, ‘This is one of the Hebrews’ children.’” Exodus 2:5-6

According to the story, pharaoh’s daughter kept the child as her son and called his name Moses. Is there any archaeological evidence that anything about this story is true?

Egyptologists discovered that the name “Moses” or “Mose” was not unusual for the 18th Dynasty. The names of pharaohs of that dynasty included Ahmose (I) and Thutmose (I – IV). In fact, the name was known in earlier dynasties. Two of the Egyptian pharaohs from the 16th Dynasty were named Dedumose (I & II) and two from the 17th Dynasty were Ahmose and Kamose. Also, using asphalt (Hebrew *chemar* – bitumin) and pitch (Hebrew *zepheth*) to make something waterproof was well known in the New Kingdom and had been used

for centuries before that. It was plentiful as were the bulrushes (Hebrew *cuph* – reeds) that grew in the shallow water at the edge of a river.

Archaeologists discovered that Ahmose I married his sister, Ahmose-Nefertiri. They had many sons and daughters. One of their daughters may have been the woman who adopted Moses and brought him into the palace – maybe.

Moses Never Existed?

Moses never existed ... or if he did, he was only a minor historical character and most of his life was expanded by legend.

When I was an atheist I believed Moses never existed. The Jews made him up to bolster their religion. However, if someone by the name of Moses really did live he wasn't anything like the stories about him in the Bible. No way he called down the wrath of God on the Egyptians. No way Moses raised his hands in the air and a sea of water split in two. No way.

I used the story of Moses leading Israel out of Egypt as a major proof that the Bible was full of myths and fairy tales. It was a favorite discussion on my radio talk shows in the late 1960s and early 70s. Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Abraham leaving Ur for Canaan, Joseph in Egypt, and Moses leading Israel out of Egypt were stories I threw at Christians whenever they called about the Bible and Christianity being true. There was absolutely no evidence for any of those stories, so why should I believe anything in the Bible. Everything in the Bible was untrue.

That worked pretty well until I met some Christian apologists. They answered my mocking and skepticism with evidence ... lots of evidence ... so much evidence that I was no longer able to say the Bible was full of myth, fairy tales and lies. I didn't know where the

investigation would lead me, but I knew there was more to the Bible than I thought.

The archaeological finds I had already seen were impressive in supporting some of the historic nature of Genesis. What would I find in archaeology to support the historic nature of the “Exodus?”

“And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. So she called his name Moses, saying, ‘Because I drew him out of the water.’ Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that way, and when he saw no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And when he went out the second day, behold, two Hebrew men were fighting, and he said to the one who did the wrong, ‘Why are you striking your companion?’ Then he said, ‘Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?’ So Moses feared and said, ‘Surely this thing is known!’ When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.” Exodus 2:10-15

The Book of Exodus doesn't include much about Moses' childhood, but what we know about him is important in being able to check the story with archaeological findings and logical reasoning.

- A man of the tribe of Levi was married to a woman who was also of the tribe of Levi.
- The woman conceived and bore a son, saw that he was a beautiful child and hid him three months.
- When the woman was no longer able to hid the child she built an ark of bulrushes and placed the child in the ark, then laid the ark in the reeds by the river's bank.
- The child's sister stood a distance away and waited to see what would happen to him.
- The daughter of Pharaoh came to bathe at the river, accompanied by her maidens.
- When the daughter of Pharaoh saw the ark among the reeds, she asked one of the maidens to get it for her.
- When the daughter of Pharaoh opened the ark, she saw the child and the baby cried.
- The daughter of Pharaoh had compassion on the child and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children."
- The child's sister, who was waiting nearby, asked Pharaoh's daughter if she should get a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for her.
- The daughter of Pharaoh told the girl to get the Hebrew nurse.
- The daughter of Pharaoh told the Hebrew nurse (who was the

- child's mother) that she would pay her wages to nurse the child.
- The Hebrew woman took the child and nursed him and the child grew.
 - The Hebrew woman brought the child to the daughter of Pharaoh and the child became her son.
 - The daughter of Pharaoh called the child's name Moses, saying, "Because I drew him out of the water."

The question I looked at in 1971 was this: was there anything about the story of Moses' conception, birth or early years that could not have happened because of archaeological findings or logical reasoning. The answer was "no." Everything recorded in the first several verses of Exodus 2 could have happened. The events were "naturally" possible.

The journalistic process is slow and methodical. It's both inductive and deductive – asking questions, getting answers, weighing evidence, hearing from all sides, waiting to draw conclusions until all the evidence is in. Part of that process is looking for anything that defied logic, anything that was impossible or improbable. That was the process I used while investigating the claims of Christianity and, so far, I had found nothing in the story of Moses that was impossible or improbable. It might not be true, but that wasn't because it 'couldn't' be true. A human being named Moses could have lived the life detailed in the Bible.

Exodus 2 said little about Moses' years growing up in Egypt other than to say, "Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown." Nothing about his childhood, his teen years, young adult years. However, the Bible does include some information about his early years in Egypt. We learn in Acts 7 that "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds." (Acts 7:22) We learn in Hebrews 11 when Moses became of age he "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin." (Hebrews 11:24-25)

That information in the New Testament is supportive of what we read in Exodus 2. Moses was adopted by one of the pharaoh's daughters, so he would have been raised with other members of Egyptian royalty and would have received the best education and training available. The New Testament also supports what Moses did when he became of age.

"Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that way, and when he saw no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And when he went out the second day, behold, two Hebrew men were fighting, and he said to the one who did the wrong, 'Why are you striking your companion?' Then he said, 'Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as

you killed the Egyptian?’ So Moses feared and said, ‘Surely this thing is known!’ When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.” Exodus 2:11-15

Moses knew about his Hebrew ethnicity and that knowledge and the feelings that knowledge gave him led Moses to stand up for his people. However, that did not go well. He killed an Egyptian, but it became known and Moses had to leave Egypt. He traveled to the land of Midian, located east of the Red Sea in the area east of the Gulf of Aqaba in the northwestern regions of the Arabian Desert.

Archaeologist Nelson Glueck discovered Midianite pottery (also known as Qurayya ware) during excavations in southern Jordan during the 1930s. He dated the pottery to the 13th century BC. (* Archaeological discoveries after May of 1971 are not included in this series since my decision to become a Christian occurred on May 10, 1971. Archeological discoveries since that date have added even more support for the Bible’s credibility, but that is for a future series of articles.)

It’s interesting to remember that a caravan of Midianites bought Joseph from his brothers centuries earlier and sold him to an Egyptian (Genesis 37), which eventually led Jacob and his family to move from Canaan to Egypt. The Midianites were distant relatives of the Hebrews through the marriage of Abraham with Keturah after the

death of his first wife Sarah. Before he died, Abraham gave gifts to the sons of Keturah and “sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east.” (Genesis 25:6) Midian was a country “east” of Canaan and Egypt.

“Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. And they came and drew water, and they filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. Then the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.”
Exodus 2:16-17

What must have been going through Moses’ mind? He was the biological son of Hebrew slaves, raised as the adopted son of a daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt. As Stephen recited in Acts 7:22 – “And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.” How quickly things changed. At the age of 40 (Acts 7:23) Moses fled Egypt for a new life in Midian. What would he do there? How would he live? What would become of him?

I had my own questions about Moses in 1971. I had been content to be an atheist until three Christians presented evidence in answer to my questions about truth claims concerning Christianity. I wasn’t used to Christians having answers to my questions, so as a journalist I was curious to see where their evidence would go.

I looked at the Bible's information about Moses from a journalistic perspective. I had investigated old stories before, but nothing this old. What was the evidence for Moses' existence? Was the evidence testable? What about extra-biblical testimony? Did the information about Moses in the Bible read like history or mythology? Lots of questions, but what were the answers? And where would those answers lead me in my investigation? Would I find enough evidence to warrant continuing or would the story of Moses end my search for the truth about the existence of God?

As an atheist I did not believe in the supernatural, so I looked at the ancient document called Exodus to see whether anything about the life of Moses was naturally possible. What the Bible described as the first 40 years of Moses' life in Egypt was possible based on a naturalistic worldview. Here's what the Bible described as the next 40 years of Moses' life in Midian.

- Moses sat next to a well.
- The seven daughters of a Midian priest came to the well to draw water and filled troughs to water their father's flock.
- Shepherds came to the well and drove away the women, but Moses stood up and helped them to water their flock.
- The daughters returned to their father and he asked them how they had finished so early
- The daughters told their father that "an Egyptian" delivered them from the hand of the shepherds and helped them draw enough water to give to their flock.

- Their father told his daughters to get the Egyptian and invite him to eat with them.
- Moses ended up living with the man and his family and eventually married one of the man's daughters and had two sons with her.

So far everything about Moses' life was possible. However ...

The next part of the story was not so easy to believe.

“Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them.” Exodus 2:23-25

In my way of thinking at the time, the story moved from possible history to mythology whenever “God” was mentioned. That's normal for an atheist. As I continued to ask questions about what was written about Moses in the Book of Exodus, I looked at the interaction between Moses, who appeared to be a normal human being of his time, and God.

“Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the

Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.' So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.' Moreover He said, 'I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.'" Exodus 3:1-6

It's not easy to be an atheist and take the Bible seriously because many of the stories in it seem so impossible. However, I was challenged to look at the stories in the Bible from the perspective of a journalist investigating whether something could be true or not. I had thought of Bible stories as fanciful tales for the uninitiated minds of children, but did my best to be objective and not bring presuppositional thinking to bear on the ancient document.

What I saw in a less biased light was a seemingly rational conversation between Moses and another being identified by the writer as "Lord" and "God." I found that to be true throughout the early chapters of Exodus. Even as Moses talked with and eventually obeyed the requests of this supernatural character, the language never became fanciful. After God identified Himself and told Moses to

take the sandals off of his feet because the place where he was standing was holy ground, Moses hid his face, “for he was afraid to look upon God.”

I thought about what I might do and say if I was in a similar situation and what Moses said and did seemed rational. Moses saw a bush on fire, but not burning up. A rational human response would be to know that what you were seeing was not naturally possible. So, Moses stopped what he was doing and walked toward the burning bush to “see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.” That’s when, according to the Exodus text, Moses heard God’s voice. The character of God seemed almost human in communicating with Moses about what He (God) wanted Moses to do.

“And the Lord said: ‘I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.’” Exodus 3:7-10

The character of God expressed a deep love and loyalty to the Hebrew people- both reasonable emotions. He wanted to free them from slavery in Egypt and return them to the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As I had seen previously from archaeological discoveries, the people groups identified as Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites and Perizzites existed at the time of Moses in regions north of Egypt (we'll learn more about them in later posts).

Moses was not the typical mythical hero who jumped at the chance to slay dragons and save the fair maiden in distress. His reaction to what God asked him to do was realistic under the circumstances. Look at Moses' side of the discussion and see if you don't agree that his reaction to what God asked him to do is anti-hero.

- “But Moses said to God, ‘Who *am* I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’ Exodus 3:11
- “Then Moses said to God, ‘Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What *is* His name?’ what shall I say to them?’ Exodus 3:13
- “Then Moses answered and said, “But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘The Lord has not appeared to you.’” Exodus 4:1
- “Then Moses said to the Lord, ‘O my Lord, I *am* not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but

I *am* slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Exodus 4:10

- “But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever *e*/se You may send.” Exodus :13

What the Bible describes about Moses’ speech and behavior in Exodus might lead the reader to think he was no mere mortal, but mere and mortal is just what he was. That certainly made Moses a more believable character because he exhibited real human traits rather than mythical/legendary traits.

“Now the Lord said to Moses in Midian, ‘Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead.’ Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord: ‘Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.’” Exodus 4:19-23

The Bible story about Moses is about to get extremely supernatural. So far, except for the burning bush incident, the story about Moses seemed plausible, but now God is sending Moses back to Egypt to do “wonders before Pharaoh”.

As an atheist, I saw this part of the story as myth/legend/fairytale. The rest of Exodus seemed false because it was a supernatural being commanding human beings how to live, where to go, what to do, what to believe.

How in the world could I investigate something like the ten plagues and parting of the sea so the children of Israel could escape from Egyptian soldiers? How could I investigate the people of Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years? How could I investigate a man named Joshua leading the wandering Israelites from the desert into Canaan to fight against foreign peoples and capture cities and land for themselves? How as an atheist who vehemently denied the existence of God and the supernatural could I possibly investigate this subject honestly and objectively?

I turned to history and archaeology to see what answers might lie there.

History

I had spent enough time investigating the Bible to see that the writing style was more historical than allegorical or fanciful. Even though I seriously doubted that the stories in the Bible were true, I could see that whoever wrote the Bible presented the information as historical fact. It was as if the author of Exodus actually believed that what he wrote was true.

The story of Moses and Israel as told in the Book of Exodus did not paint Moses and Israel in bright, fancy colors. Some of what was recorded about them was dark and ugly. Even though I didn't believe the story was true, I had to admit that the author did not try to sugarcoat the story. Moses looked weak and unsure of himself at times and the people of Israel looked to me like a bunch of losers at times. Why would someone make up a story about God and His people that made the people of God look so bad?

Journalism is a discipline of verification. Evidence is found, tested and weighed for reliability. Truth is the objective and true objectivity is the goal. It's a discipline because every journalist has personal biases, which is natural for being human. The discipline is to follow the journalistic method to the best of one's ability and commitment so that truth is discovered, verified and reported with objectivity and fairness. A journalist's first obligation is to the truth.

Journalists who follow the discipline of verification want to talk with eyewitnesses, walk "the scene" of the story and pick apart every aspect of it, look at all the available evidence, research every possible way to look at the story, cover it from all sides. However, the task of personally interviewing eyewitnesses becomes impossible when those witnesses died hundreds or thousands of years ago. Verifying available evidence is also a challenge for journalists when the evidence is centuries old.

The Bible's version of Israel and Moses is one side of the story. What about other sides, like Egypt and Canaan? Did those sides have anything to say about Israel and Moses? For that historical information and verification we must turn to archaeology.

Archaeology

Archaeology is “a science that deals with past human life and activities by studying the bones, tools, etc., of ancient people” (Merriam-Webster.com). The person who specializes in the study of the science of archaeology is known as an archaeologist. As with other scientists, archaeologists follow a scientific method that is continually evaluated and fashioned to improve the science and ensure the reliability of their findings. The archeological findings I studied in 1971 came from archaeological digs done in the 19th and 20th centuries. The scientific methods saw great improvement during the 20th century, giving journalists a better and more verifiable view inside the history of the ancient past.

The Bible's story about Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egyptian slavery presents God as the victor and Egypt as the defeated. In fact, the Bible presents the defeat of the Egyptian pharaoh as “destruction.” The Bible quotes the servants of the pharaoh pleading with him after the seventh of ten plagues in Egypt.

“Then Pharaoh’s servants said to him, ‘How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?’ Exodus 10:7

How did Egyptian historians record the great destruction described in the Bible? I looked, but didn’t find much written about it. However, that wasn’t necessarily proof the events didn’t happen. Here is one perspective available to my investigation in 1971.

*“Unfortunately for us, the Egyptians never preserved in their inscriptions anything uncomplimentary to themselves; therefore we gain no help from such sources as to when the Exodus occurred or even whether or not there was such an event. So, when seeking to solve problems of this nature, we must turn to other avenues of information.” (Dr. Howard F. Vos, *An Introduction to Bible Archaeology*, Moody Press, 1956, p. 59)*

How did ancient civilizations “report” their news? They didn’t have radio, television, magazines or newspapers. We didn’t even have the Internet and social media in 1971! The methods of “mass” communication thousands of years ago included fires, smoke signals, drums, horns, cave drawings, petroglyphs, pictograms, ideograms, writing (e.g. logograms, cuneiform, alphabet), carvings, art work and, of course, speeches and theatrical productions. The important thing was that people wanted to communicate and found lots of creative ways to do it.

The famous British Egyptologist Sir Alan Henderson Gardiner translated an ancient document in 1909 that had been in the Leiden Museum in Holland since the early part of the 19th century. The Ipuwer Papyrus (Papyrus Leiden 344) became known as *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage from a Hieratic Papyrus in Leiden*.

The following graphic comparison of the Ipuwer Papyrus and events recorded in Exodus is courtesy of Ohr Somayach Institutions www.ohr.edu.

IPUWER PAPYRUS – LEIDEN 344

TORAH – EXODUS

2:5-6 Plague is throughout the land. Blood is everywhere.2:10 The river is blood.2:10 Men shrink from tasting – human beings, and thirst after water3:10-13 That is our water! That is our happiness! What shall we do in respect thereof?
All is ruin.

7:20 ...all the waters of the river were turned to blood.7:21 ...there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt ...and the river stank.7:24 And all the Egyptians dug around the river for water to drink; for they could not drink of the water of the river.

2:10 Forsooth, gates, columns and walls are consumed by fire.10:3-6 Lower Egypt weeps... The entire palace is without its revenues. To it belong [by right] wheat and

9:23-24 ...and the fire ran along the ground... there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous.9:25 ...and the hail smote every herb of the field, and broke

barley, geese and fish6:3 Forsooth, grain has perished on every side.5:12 Forsooth, that has perished which was yesterday seen. The land is left over to its weariness like the cutting of flax.

every tree of the field.9:31-32 ...and the flax and the barley was smitten; for the barley was in season, and flax was ripe.But the wheat and the rye were not smitten; for they were not grown up.10:15 ...there remained no green things in the trees, or in the herbs of the fields, through all the land of Egypt.

5:5 All animals, their hearts weep. Cattle moan...9:2-3 Behold, cattle are left to stray, and there is none to gather them together.

9:3 ...the hand of the Lord is upon thy cattle which is in the field... and there shall be a very grievous sickness.9:19 ...gather thy cattle, and all that thou hast in the field...9:21 And he that did not fear the word of the Lord left his servants and cattle in the field.

9:11 The land is without light

10:22 And there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt.

4:3 (5:6) Forsooth, the children of princes are dashed against the walls.6:12

12:29 And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the

Forsooth, the children of princes are cast out in the streets.6:3 The prison is ruined.2:13 He who places his brother in the ground is everywhere.3:14 It is groaning throughout the land, mingled with lamentations

land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive that was in the prison.12:30 ...there was not a house where there was not one dead.12:30 ...there was a great cry in Egypt.

7:1 Behold, the fire has mounted up on high. Its burning goes forth against the enemies of the land.

13:21 ... by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.

3:2 Gold and lapis lazuli, silver and malachite, carnelian and bronze... are fastened on the neck of female slaves.

12:35-36 ...and they requested from the Egyptians, silver and gold articles and clothing. And God made the Egyptians favour them and they granted their request. [The Israelites] thus drained Egypt of its wealth.

While there are similarities between the two documents, there are also disagreements among archaeologists about which document was written first. Ipuwer has been dated between the 19th and 17th centuries B.C. (approximately), while Exodus has been dated between the 15th centuries and 14th centuries B.C.(approximately). If Exodus was written before or about the same time as the Ipuwer Papyrus, then there is the possibility of a connection between the two. However, if Ipuwer was written first, especially if by centuries, the connection seems improbable. While not a slam dunk to my investigation, I did find the evidence interesting and worthy of notation.

Nation of Slaves?

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. For with a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.’ Exodus 6:1

“Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Show a miracle for yourselves,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.’ So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the Lord commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent.” Exodus 7:8-10

Miracles. What’s an atheist going to do with miracles? I didn’t believe in the supernatural, so miracles were impossible. That’s what I believed, so how could I as an atheist deal with all of the supposed miracles Moses and Aaron performed in Egypt? Was my investigation into theism and Christianity going to end in that ancient land because of my disbelief in the supernatural?

I was an atheist, but also a journalist. So, I used my journalistic training and experience to compartmentalize my investigation. Journalists have to do that with every investigation, every story, so they can be objective and fair in their reporting. Otherwise, how could citizens ever believe anything a reporter reported?

It's not fair for a journalist to allow personal beliefs to affect a professional investigation. I knew that if I was ever going to come to the truth about theism, I needed to put my preconceived beliefs as an atheist to the side while I combed carefully through any evidence that might exist for the existence of God.

I took all of the miracles in the Bible and placed them in a special compartment for anything supernatural that I found in the Bible. I had already moved several supernatural accounts from Genesis into that compartment – including creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, and many aspects of the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers in Egypt.

As I read through and investigated the claims of the Bible, I found at least five “miracle” periods that would need to go into the “supernatural” compartment:

- Genesis miracles
- Moses miracles
- Prophet miracles
- Jesus miracles
- Apostle miracles

If an atheist is ever going to honestly investigate the truth claims of the Bible, I think they'll have to do the same thing. I found it necessary to compartmentalize my findings in order to look at all of the evidence without allowing my disbelief in the supernatural to

cloud the investigative process. Is that easy for an atheist to do? No, but it becomes easier when the real goal of the investigation is to follow the evidence to a truthful result. If my goal had been only to disprove theism and Christianity, I would not have spent the time I did to dig deeply into the evidence. Atheism was already my worldview and I was effective in opposing deists, theists, Christians and Jews on my radio program. No need to change anything, unless I really wanted to know for sure that God did not exist.

Moving all of the “miracle” references to a “supernatural” compartment allowed me to focus most of my time on history and archaeology, which I placed in the “natural” compartment. I will address the supernatural with its miracles later in this series, but my early focus was to see whether there was enough natural evidence to give any support to the truth claims of Judaism and Christianity.

History

The Old Testament writings attributed to Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy) are the official history of the Jewish people (Israel). However, many people believe Moses never existed. There’s no question that the Jewish people exist and have existed for thousands of years, but Moses as a real historical figure was in question during my investigation into the Bible’s claims in 1971. Does the fact that billions of people through the centuries have believed Moses existed mean he did exist? Most of the ancient history scholars I read at the time seemed in agreement that nothing in history supported the

actual existence of someone named Moses who led Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness toward the “promised land.”

I thought about the life Moses' allegedly lived for 120 years: 40 years as a prince in Egypt, 40 years as a shepherd in Edom, 40 years as a leader of the Hebrews in the wilderness. It seemed that historical information about Moses would probably come from only three sources: Egypt, Edom or Israel. Egypt didn't write negative historical facts about itself or its enemies. The history of Edom is very thin, except for information found in the Bible and some ancient Egyptian documents. The most vibrant and detailed history is that of the Jews.

When an investigator finds a document which has credibility in some or many areas that opens the possibility other areas in the same document may also have credibility. It's not proof of accuracy, but it is favorable within an investigation and is placed in the 'possibility' category. I didn't find absolute historical support for the Bible's story about Moses and Israel leaving Egypt, but I decided to press on in my search.

I used, and still use, four basic categories for investigative purposes:

- Untrue with certainty
- Possible
- Probable
- True with certainty

While there are 'finer' aspects on the edges of each of these, the four categories will serve an investigator well.

What about archaeology? What had archaeologists discovered about Moses?

Archaeology

Exodus 2 says that a daughter of Pharaoh's daughter named the Hebrew child Moses, saying, "Because I drew him out of the water." The Hebrew word for "draw out" is *mashah*. However, the name Moses may have also come from the Egyptian language. The chronology of the Bible places the birth of Moses in the mid-to-late 16th Century B.C., which would place his leading Israel out of Egypt (when he was 80 years old) in the mid-15th Century. Some of the pharaohs of that era included Kamose, Ahmose I, Thutmose I, Thutmose II, Thutmose III and Thutmose IV. Some Egyptologists and archaeologists (e.g. [M.G. Kyle](#), [W.F. Albright](#)) believe that the name Moses comes from an Egyptian word *mes* (*Mase*), which means "drawn out, to draw out."

"And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Go.' So the maiden went and called the child's mother. Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed him. And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. So she called his name

Moses, saying, 'Because I drew him out of the water.' Exodus 2:8-10

Atheists who know what they're talking about, especially those who grew up in Jewish or Christian homes, are well aware of the critical views of the Bible's story of Israel's 'exodus' from Egypt. One of them concerns the Jewish Passover, which many atheists and even some Christians believed came from Canaanite religious practices.

"Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted in fire—its head with its legs and its entrails. You shall let none of it remain until morning, and what remains of it until morning you shall burn with fire. And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover." Exodus 12:5-11

In 1928 a Syrian farmer accidentally found a subterranean passageway, leading to the discovery of ancient writings that became known as the Ras Shamra tablets. A French archaeological team from the Strasbourg Museum (led by Claude F.A. Schaeffer and George Chenet) excavated the 65-foot Ras Shamra mound in northern Syria over a period of many years and identified it as the ancient city of Ugarit. The tablets (dated to the late 15th Century B.C.) revealed how different the pagan Canaanite religions were from that of the Israelites of the same time period. As archaeologist W.F. Albright wrote, "Every fresh publication of Canaanite mythological texts makes the gulf between the religions of Canaan and of Israel increasingly clear." (W.F. Albright, 'Recent Progress in North-Canaanite Research,' BASOR, No. 70, April, 1938, p. 24)

Comparing the findings at Ras Shamra that included the discovery of thousands of clay jars with the remains of children sacrificed to the 'gods,' along with the sexually wicked behavior of the gods, religious prostitution by men and women and widespread idol worship, to the Hebrew God who commanded sexual purity, love of family, protection of children, and the worship of one God, demonstrates some of the major differences between the religious practices of the Israelites and the Canaanites. Even as an atheist it seemed obvious that the Hebrews did not draw on the Canaanite religions to develop their religious practices that included Passover.

True or False?

“And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord.” 1 Kings 6:1

As an atheist, I thought the Bible was a bunch of fairy tales. I grew up learning stories in the Bible about Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, Moses parting the water, Joshua knocking down the wall of Jericho, Samson and his super strength, David killing Goliath, Solomon and his wisdom; but that’s all they were to me – just stories. I didn’t think any of it was true, not even stories about Jesus of Nazareth dying and rising.

It was during my investigation into the truth claims of the Bible and Christianity in 1971 that I came face to face with a mountain of historical and archaeological evidence that challenged my long-held belief that there was ‘zero’ evidence supporting any of the claims of the Bible.

As I read through the Old Testament in early 1971 and asked Christians questions about what I was reading, I saw that the Bible included hundreds of names, numbers and events that could be verified or falsified. I found that interesting for a document that was

supposedly written by unknown writers centuries after it was reputed to have been written. If the goal of writing the Bible was to ‘fool’ people into believing it was the ‘Word of God,’ why write anything that could be investigated? Why indeed!

The reign of Israel’s King Solomon is a known quantity – sometime during the early part of the 10th Century B.C. Using the specific dates provided in 1 Kings 6 and reversing the calendar 480 years places Israel’s exodus from Egypt about the middle of the 15th Century B.C. My question was simple – did historical or archaeological evidence support that date for the Exodus, ‘if’ there ever was an Exodus of Israel from Egypt?

“So the Lord’s anger was aroused against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone.”
Numbers 32:13

This is where it got interesting for me. I was working with the Bible’s date for the Exodus of about 1460-1450 B.C. and Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years. Here’s what the Bible says God told the man who became Israel’s leader after Moses died.

“After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, it came to pass that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying: ‘Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. Every place

that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.” Joshua 1:1-6

According to the Bible Joshua did what God commanded him to do and led the children of Israel across the Jordan River and marched them to Jericho. In what might be called an unusual military tactic, Joshua and the people of Israel marched around the walled city of Jericho for seven days. This is what the Bible says happened on the seventh day.

“So the people shouted when the priests blew the trumpets. And it happened when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat. Then the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.” Joshua 6:20

Based on the Bible's own dating, Israel's defeat of Jericho would have occurred in the latter part of the 15th Century B.C. That event might be something history or archaeology could verify or falsify. As a journalist I found this interesting. If true, what a story it would have

been to cover. If not, then the story could be used to falsify many other stories in the Bible.

We first see Joshua in the Bible in Exodus 17 when Moses told him to choose some men from Israel to fight with attackers from the family of Amalek. Amalek was the grandson of Esau, the brother of Jacob (Israel). That meant the men of Amalek who attacked Israel in the wilderness were distant relatives. Joshua and his warriors defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Exodus 17:13). I did not find any archeological finds that supported the existence of the Amelekites, but did notice that the Bible claimed God told Moses He would “utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” (Exodus 17:14)

Joshua is named many other times in the Bible as serving Moses until the day Moses appointed Joshua to take his place as Israel’s leader (Deuteronomy 31:7-8). According to the Bible it was Joshua who led Israel into the “promised land” and defeated the many city-states in Canaan. Question: does any other ancient document mention Joshua’s name? It would seem that someone who led an entire nation of people out of the wilderness to destroy the armies of many ancient cities might be mentioned in documents other than the Bible.

The name “Joshua” does appear in the [Amarna Tablets](#) in Egypt from about the latter part of the 15th Century B.C., about the same time as the Bible’s claim of when Joshua would have led Israel into Canaan.

The tablets were discovered in Egypt by a peasant woman in 1888 A.D. The British archaeologist and [Egyptologist William Flinders Petrie](#) found more than 20 fragments between 1891 and 1892. The French archaeologist Emile Chassinat acquired more tablets in 1903.

Scholars who studied the tablets learned they were letters written by rulers of different cities in Canaan and Syria to Egyptian pharaohs. Hundreds of the tablets were written in Akkadian, which was the international language of the time and used for business and diplomatic communications between Egypt and Egyptian-controlled areas. Many of the letters were from city-state leaders asking Egypt for help in dealing with a conquering force known as the 'Habiru' (also spelled Hapiru) during the approximate time the Bible claims Joshua was leading Israel into Canaan.

Here are some examples of the letters concerning the Habiru:

British Museum [Number E29832](#)

[The Lady of the Lions](#)

[Rib-Hadda](#)

[Yapahu of Gezer](#)

[\(See here about controversy concerning who were the Habiru\)](#)

The name “Joshua” appears in one of the Amarna Tablets, written by Mut Baal to Yanhamu, an Egyptian official.

“As the King my Lord liveth, Job is not in Pihilim! Indeed, two months ago he broke way. As to this, ask Biennima, ask Tadia, ask Jeshuia.”

Pihilim is believed to be the ancient town of Pella, located just east of the Jordan River and north of ancient Jericho. Pella is mentioned in the Egyptian Execration Texts (mid-19th century B.C.) and in the Amarna Tablets (early 15th century B.C.). The name Biennima is believed to be the Hebrew name Benjamin and Jeshuia to be Joshua. Sir Charles Marston, President of the Shropshire Archaeological Society, partnered with British archaeologist John Garstang in digs at Jericho (1930-1936 A.D.) and wrote this about Pella:

“What was the Egyptian interest in Pella? What was the Egyptian association with Joshua? The passage is enigmatical; it suggests that Benjamin, Tadia, and Joshua were friends of Yanhamu. Although it may contain the innuendo that, since the king of Egypt was not taking effective steps to drive out the Hebrews, their leaders are assumed to be friends. Archaeological discoveries in Palestine, taken as a whole, favor the hypothesis, that if the Israelites did not actually conquer and occupy Canaan with the aid of the Egyptians, they did so with their connivance.”

No evidence had surfaced by the time of my investigation demonstrating that Egypt responded favorably to the requests from leaders of Canaan to come to their aid in repelling the Habiru.

So, what about the Bible's claim that Joshua led the children of Israel to march around ancient Jericho seven times and shout, causing the city walls to fall "down flat"? Did I find any archaeological or historical support for that event? We'll see in the next section of Convince Me There's A God.

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