

# BOOKS TO DIG INTO

## Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience



Edited by **Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp**. Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Cham: Springer, 2015. Pp. xxvii + 584. Hardcover. \$129.00. ISBN 978-3-319-04767-6.

In this volume appear forty-three essays (plus a substantial preface) centered on the myriad different facets of Israel's exodus narrative. The book has its genesis in a conference held at the University of California, San Diego, in 2013. The sixty contributors – many of whom are listed as authors on more than one article – represent a diverse array of fields and specializations, and the collection itself comprises a lively interplay of viewpoints and methods ranging from tradition-critical and reception-critical study of the Bible to cyber-archaeology, and from Egyptology to geophysics.

The editors have organized the volume into seven thematic clusters, each of which deals specifically with the narratives of Israel's exodus from Egypt: science-based approaches to the natural phenomena, "cyber-archaeological" approaches to designing museum content, the biblical account within its ancient Near Eastern context, the formation history of the biblical account, reception history of the biblical account, the importance of that account in community formation (i.e., "cultural memory"), and the emergence of Israel in Canaan. These seven sections are bookended by a lengthy opening section of the keynote papers and a conclusion. This organization is sometimes difficult to understand, since the keynote papers, written by longtime students of Israel's exodus traditions (Assmann, Bietak, Finkelstein, Geraty, and Hendel) anticipate already many of the themes that emerge in the remainder of the book. Likewise, the conclusion (by Schneider) does not reflect on the proceedings of the conference so much as it proposes a new – and quite beneficial – correlate between Israel's exodus traditions and the endemic Egyptian ones from which the biblical author apparently drew their inspiration: Schneider finds thematic consonance between Egyptian rituals for protecting the Pharaoh at night and the apotropaic smearing of blood on the lintels of Israelite houses in Exodus 12. Because this argument shares the concern to identify Egyptian origins of biblical traditions with several other essays (Hollis, Noegel, Rendsburg, Sparks), it strikes me as more appropriately included in the ANE section (along with the essay by Hays, which argues for the Egyptian intellectual roots of the descriptions of Solomon's ideal kingdom "from the wadi of Egypt to the Euphrates"). Nonetheless, the book's organization is,

overall, intelligible and my comments here indicate the degree to which the essays – or, at least, those focused on textual and iconographic data – overlap and intersect with one another. It would be difficult to imagine cherry-picking single essays from this book to read, since many of the larger themes only come to full expression through the course of multiple essays.

The volume's deliberate and productive interdisciplinarity is put on display in two sections especially – in a research university, one would designate these two sections as comprising the STEM chapters. The first of these sections contains several essays grappling with the physical geography of the exodus narratives (a chapter by Moshier and Hoffmeier; see also the keynote lectures



**Figure 1.** A depiction of laborers on the walls of the tomb of Rekhmire, Egyptian vizier in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. According to Exodus 1:13-14, the Hebrews were forced into labor in Egypt. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons via The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maerder\\_Grabkammer\\_des\\_Rechmir%C3%AA\\_002.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maerder_Grabkammer_des_Rechmir%C3%AA_002.jpg).

by Bietak and Finkelstein), or, more impressionistically, the geophysical phenomena described in Israel's exodus accounts (Dee et al., Harris, Salamon et al., and Wiener). For the most part, these scientific approaches have been adequately constrained in their summaries; in conversation with the level-headedness of most of the biblical specialists, these chapters submit data concerning the plausibility (or lack thereof) of the geophysical realia that have been so obviously magnified to mythological scope in the biblical account. In particular, I found Salamon et al.'s chapter (exploring the variety of geophysical phenomena that could have produced a large-scale tsunami) to be fascinating and, for the most part, nicely circumspect – even if still making the tacit assumption that it was one of these phenomena which is recorded in Exodus 14–15. (I am more convinced by the essays by the biblicists arguing that the cleaving – or pushing aside – of the sea has been cast literarily at the mythological scope and is

therefore not subject to historical verification; see, e.g., the essays by Hendel and Batto.) Harris's essay on the "imaginative appeal" of "Thera theories" attempts to explain why appeals to the volcanic eruption of Thera have captured popular imaginations for so long, even though there is very little decisive evidence to bolster this opinion. Despite Dee et al.'s attempts to provide corroboration of these two events, Wiener argues elegantly a few chapters later that the theory that radiocarbon dates provide an uncontrollable control on the date of the Thera eruption (and hence, on a putative date of the exodus) amounts to "nonsense science." These chapters are technical, but not overwhelming for non-scientists.

Equally stimulating, although more difficult for the non-specialist to understand, are the three chapters describing the museum experience designed for presentation at the Qualcomm Institute in conjunction with the conference (Seldess et al., Schulze et al., Srouf et al.). These essays describe in great detail the multi-media installations designed to convey information to participants; although the technical specifications are impenetrable (or very nearly so to the non-initiate), the aural cornucopia and visual tableaux they describe must have been phenomenal to experience. Modern museum curators would no doubt covet the degree of technological sophistication provided by Qualcomm's spectacular staff and formidable resources; but these essays might provide a foundational blueprint for the futuristic digital museum.

The chapters focused on the exodus traditions and their interpretive afterlife (both in early Israel and later perspectives) provide a more grounded experience for readers. The authors contemplate how the texts were composed (Bernier, Halpern, Römer, Russell, and Schmid) or how they functioned to effect a communal identity in Israel

(Assmann, Hendel, Dever, Maeir, Matthews, Propp, Redford). While biblical specialists and Levantine archaeologists will likely be accustomed to many of the debates enjoined in these chapters, the section describing Jewish, Christian, and Muslim recollections of the exodus event will probably be less familiar. I found the reception-historical essays by Allen, Bloch, Moro, Rahimi, and van der Holst informative and exciting entries into the conversation.



**Figure 2.** One of the Late Bronze Age Amarna letters (Louvre AO7093). This archive of diplomatic correspondence offers a portrait of Egyptian power in the southern Levant immediately prior to the emergence of Israel. Image © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY 2.5, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Amarna\\_letter\\_AO\\_7093#/media/File:Letter\\_Rib\\_Addi\\_Louvre\\_AO7093.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Amarna_letter_AO_7093#/media/File:Letter_Rib_Addi_Louvre_AO7093.jpg)

With few exceptions, the authors collected in this volume display a genuine interest in evaluating the biblical and archaeological data with historical sophistication and literarily-sensitive nuance. Only occasionally do qualitative disputes emerge; often these disputes are largely attributable to the scientists' apparent unfamiliarity with the literary approaches necessary for unpacking the biblical accounts of the exodus. On the balance, most of the authors seem to have reached the consensus that Israel's exodus was primarily (or even exclusively) a literary event, inspired by knowledge – but not necessarily the experience – of Egyptian culture and literature. Its mythological scope likewise may have been informed by naturally-occurring geophysical phenomena, but there is absolutely no possibility of correlating any specific event (e.g., a purported eruption of Thera) with any putative movement of a West Asian population out of Egypt – an event (or, better, congeries of events) which was *always occurring*. In a field dominated by monographs and widely-

dispersed articles, this book collects an impressive array of scholars exhibiting a plethora of approaches. It is a volume not to be missed.

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**A** RCHAEOLGY

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