

*Nili Shupak*

## USING EGYPTIAN ELEMENTS IN THE BIBLE TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF THE ORIGIN OF ISRAEL\*

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### *Introduction*

One of the most central issues in the debate over the historicity of the Bible is that of the origin of early Israel. Recently, the tone of this debate has been set by a rather radical group of scholars – whom we shall call the “minimalists” for the purposes of the present discussion – who utterly reject the credibility of the biblical stories on this theme.<sup>1</sup> As they see it, the tales of the enslavement of the Hebrews and their exodus from Egypt (Ex. 1:8–15:21) are no more than etiological legends, a national myth created at some later time – in the Saitic, Persian, or Hellenistic period.

In light of this nihilistic-skeptical approach, which dominates current scholarship in the field, I would like to take another look at the problem of Israelite

origins. The questions arising in this context include: Were the Israelites descended from the Canaanites, or did they perhaps come, at least partly, from Egypt? Were the original Israelites among the nomadic Shasu tribes that wandered the regions between Egypt and Canaan, or did they perhaps belong to the ʿApru-Ḥabiru, a group associated with the lower social class in Egypt? Does the appearance of the name “Israel” on the Merneptah stele attest the existence of an Israelite people at the end of the thirteenth century BCE?

Attempts to answer these questions have focused most recently on archaeological and epigraphic findings from Canaan and Transjordan and on certain socioeconomic features that can be inferred from these findings. The relevant

material from Egypt, apart from the Merneptah stele, has received less attention, especially among Bible scholars.

In the following lines, I shall endeavor to analyze the issue of the origin of early Israel from an Egyptological point of view. The relevant Egyptian material falls into two categories:

(1) Egyptian sources and documents. In drawing upon this material, one must bear in mind that the Pharaohs, like other ancient monarchs, left behind them only victory inscriptions; they refrained from recording events that might detract from their image as omnipotent sovereigns. We should therefore not expect to discover inscriptions bearing direct reports of the failure of an Egyptian army to thwart the escape of a subject people from Egypt.

(2) Egyptian features and elements in the biblical texts. The use of this material, too, has its limitations. It is difficult to distinguish between elements belonging to an authentic Egyptian context and a particular chronological framework, and elements detached from time and place that might have been added by a Hebrew narrator in order to give his story some local color.

The present discussion will focus on material from the second category.<sup>2</sup> Egyptian features integrated into the stories of the enslavement in and exodus from Egypt (Ex. 1:8–15:21).

#### *Egyptian Elements in the Stories of the Enslavement of the Hebrews and Their Exodus from Egypt*

Even non-expert readers who know little about ancient Egypt can discern Egyptian elements integrated into the Hebrew text of the biblical story of Israel in Egypt. These elements fall into several general areas:

Terms: Pharaoh (*pr ʿ3*); *ḥārtūmīm* (*ḥry ḥb ḥry tp*, “magicians”); *ye’ōr* (*itr*, “the Nile”); *tēbāh* (*ḏb3t*, “basket”); *sūp* (*tʷfy*, “reeds”); *gome’* (*ḳm3*, “papyrus”).

Personal names: Moses (*Ms*); Pinchas (*P3-nḥsy*); Miriam (*Mryt\**).

Place names: Ramesses (*Pr Rmss*); Pithom (*Pr-Itm*).

Daily-life customs and activities: forced labor, store-cities, construction with bricks, work in the fields, the employment of women as midwives and wet-nurses, adoption of a child, circumcision, the practice of magic, and the rise of foreigners to high positions in the Egyptian court.

To these elements should be

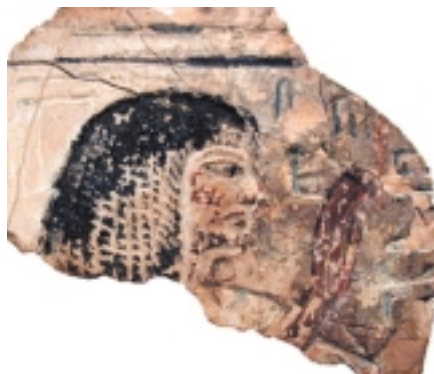


Figure 1: “Ms”, Hecht Museum, University of Haifa.

added certain typical Egyptian idioms that, rather than being transliterated in the biblical text like those in the first three groups above, were translated into Hebrew, making it difficult at times to discern their foreign origin. Examples include the expressions “a mighty hand”; “an outstretched arm”; “an abomination to the Egyptians”; and the three Hebrew terms that refer to the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart: *kbd*, *ḥzq*, and *qšh*.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, some of these elements, especially those pertaining to daily-life customs and activities, are not exclusively Egyptian, but appearing as they do alongside various definitively Egyptian elements, we may assume that they, too, can be counted among the Egyptian elements in the story.

This finding raises the following questions: Can these be considered authentically Egyptian elements, reflecting a specific milieu and attributable to a particular chronological framework? Or are they merely vague elements that cannot be linked to any specific time or place, used by the biblical author to illustrate a lately contrived, fictitious story so as to give it the flavor of ancient Egyptian culture? In other words, can these Egyptian

elements be used as a criterion in confirming the historical foundation of the tales of the Hebrews’ enslavement in Egypt and their exodus from there?<sup>4</sup> I shall endeavor to respond to this question by analyzing a few examples drawn from the body of Egyptian elements in the story.

#### 1. The Name Moses

Chap. 2 of Exodus, which tells the story of Moses’ birth, relates that after the Hebrew child was weaned, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him as her son and gave him a name: “she named him Moses [*Mošeh*], for she said: ‘Because I drew him out [*mešitihu*] of the water.’”<sup>5</sup> This etymology raises some difficulties; as the commentary of Rashi points out, a verb of causation in the *hif’il* form (*himšitihu*) would have been expected here, as in Ps. 18:16 and II Sam. 22:17: “He reached from on high, he took me, he drew me out [*yamšeni*] of many waters.”

The difficulty is resolved if we posit that “Moses” was actually an Egyptian theophoric name in which the verb *msi* (“to give birth”) originally was joined to the name of an Egyptian god. This type of name was common in Egypt in the period of the New Kingdom (the fifteenth through eleventh centuries BCE); examples include Thutmose (i.e., born of the god of wisdom, Thut) and Ramesses (i.e., born of the god Re). Until recently, proponents of this etymology explained the sobriquet “Moses” as a tendentiously shortened form of the original Egyptian name, from which the element of the foreign god’s name was expunged by the biblical author. However, this

explanation is no longer necessary, now that it has become apparent that the Egyptians themselves often shortened names of this kind by leaving out their second element. We know of at least three people called “Ms” from the Ramesside period (the thirteenth century BCE). Two of them were high officials; of one it is related that he received a reward of gold from Ramesses II as a token of gratitude for his service, while the other was involved in a legal action having to do with ownership of a tract of land. An inscription bearing the name of one such “Ms” is displayed in the Hecht Museum at the University of Haifa (exhibit no. H 72); it is broken, but it can be reconstructed from parallel texts. The full name of this “Ms” appears to have been “Ramose, son of Amenemope.” He held the post of scribe of the royal necropolis at Deir el-Medineh, a village of workmen and artisans in the Valley of Kings, and the many details known about him indicate that he was an illustrious person in the time of Ramesses II. Moses, the first leader of the Israelite people, bore an Egyptian name. Is this merely coincidental?

2. *The City of Ramesses, or Pr/Pi-Ramesses*

According to the first chapter of Exodus, the Israelites “built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Ramesses” (Ex. 1:11). They also lived in Ramesses, alongside Egyptian neighbors (according to the Priestly source, [P]), and the same city was their point of departure in their flight from Egypt: “And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramesses to Succoth”

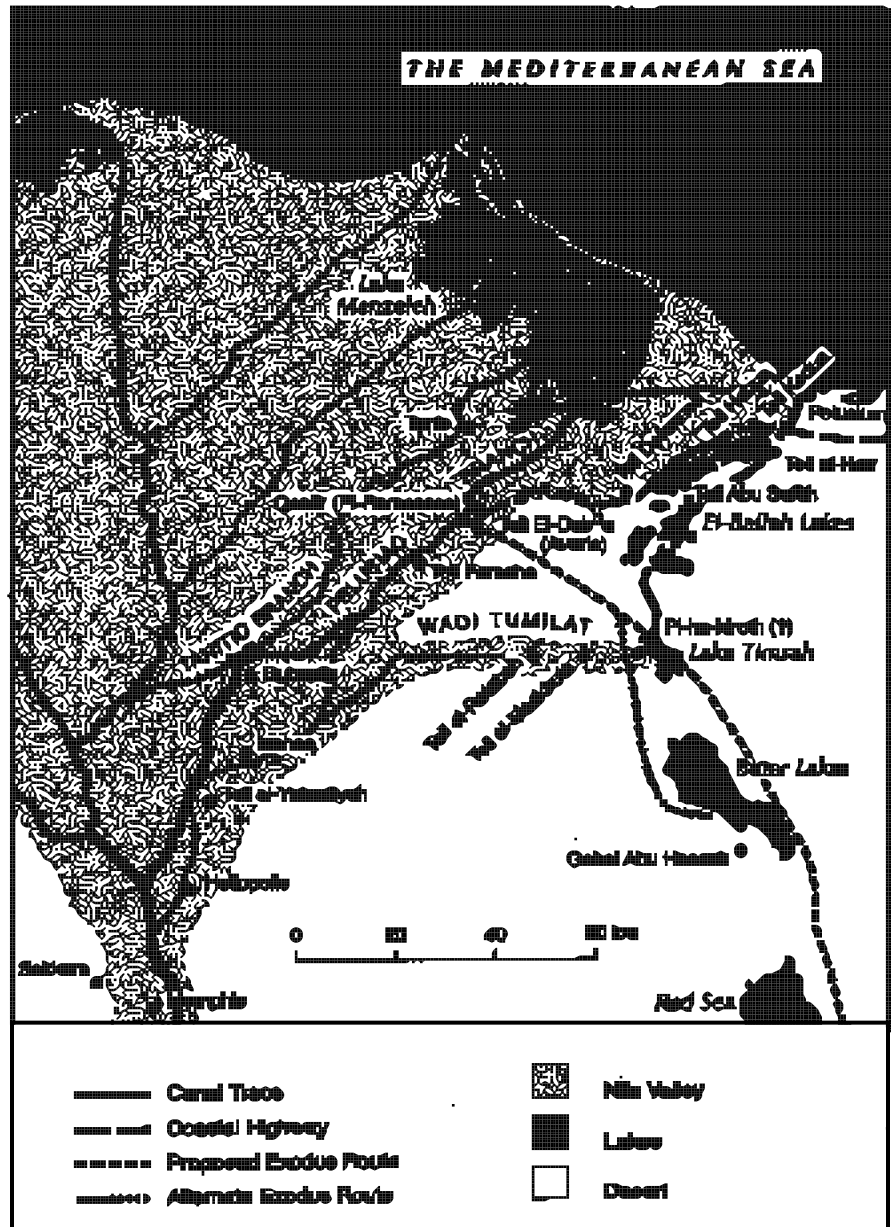


Figure 2: Map of the Delta and North Sinai (J.K. Hoffmeier).

(Ex. 12:37; Num. 33:3, 5). Following excavations conducted in the last few years by the Austrian and German expeditions directed, respectively, by Manfred Bietak and Edgar Pusch, it is now accepted that biblical Ramesses may be identified with Pi-Ramesses, the capital of Ramesses II (1279–1213

BCE), which lay in the region of Tell El-Dab'a–Qantir in the eastern delta, west of modern Ismailiya.<sup>6</sup> This identification is based on several ostraca found at the site bearing the name Pi-Ramesses.

Some three hundred years before Ramesses II's accession to the throne, the Hyksos, western

Semites who were then in control of Egypt, had established their capital, Avaris, in this region. Ramesses II, who hailed from the same area and was a devotee of the Hyksos god Seth, followed them in transferring his capital to the place where theirs had once stood, far from the former capital at Thebes, stronghold of the priests of the god Amon. Ramesses II's father, Sethi I, had already built a palace at Qantir. Ramesses joined Qantir, in the district's northern part, to the southern area of Tell El-Dab'a, the site of the old Hyksos capital of Avaris. He extended his father's palace and built additional structures, including offices for the high officials, guard posts, stables, and sheds for the royal chariots.<sup>7</sup> Warehouses for storing agricultural produce (the "store-cities" of Exodus<sup>8</sup>) and ponds for fish and water-fowl were also constructed. The city had numerous temples to the various gods: Seth, Re, Ashtoreth, Amon, Ptah, and Sekhmet-Wodjet.

Pi-Ramesses, which extended over an area of some 1,000 hectares, was one of the biggest and most prosperous cities of the Ancient Near East. Its fame spread far and wide, and hymns of praise were written to it. Here is how one of them describes the city:

It is (full) of supplies and food every day, its ponds with fish, and its lakes with birds.

Its meadows are verdant with grass; its banks bear dates; its melons are abundant on the sands ...

Its granaries are (so) full of barley and emmer (that) they come near to the sky.

Onions and leeks are for food, and lettuce of the garden, pomegranates, apples, and olives, figs

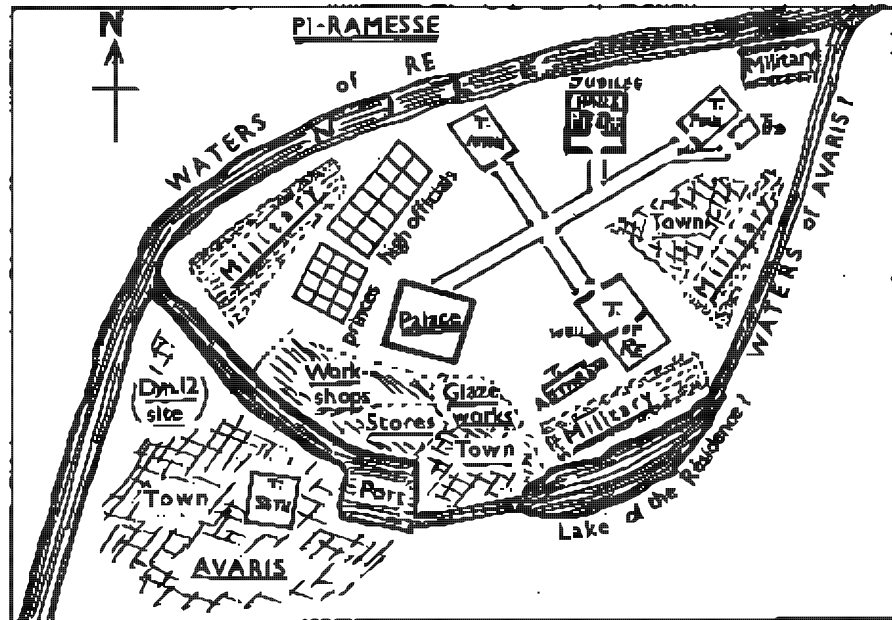


Figure 3: Imaginative reconstruction of Pi-Ramesses (K.A. Kitchen).

of the orchard, sweet wine ...  
surpassing honey ...

Its ships go out and come (back) to mooring, (so that) supplies and food are in it every day. One rejoices to dwell within it. ...<sup>9</sup>

Paeans like these honoring the great Egyptian capital may have left their mark upon the biblical text. Lines from the hymn quoted above seem to echo in the Israelites' complaint to Moses recorded in Num. 11:5: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic ...." The image of the city reflected in the Egyptian sources accords well with Pharaoh's advice to Joseph in Gen. 47:6: "The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land"; as becomes clear from the continuation of the text, these words referred to Ramesses.

Ramesses remained the capital of Egypt for some 200 years, from the time of Ramesses II until the twentieth dynasty (1279–1070 BCE). In the twenty-first dynasty, the capital was moved northward to Sht D'nt, which, rendered literally into Hebrew, is also mentioned in the Bible: "In the sight of their fathers he wrought marvels, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan" (Ps. 78:12, cf. v. 43). In this psalm, which surveys the national history of the Israelites, "the fields of Zoan" replaces the Ramesses of the earlier sources.

The biblical text thus accords remarkably with historical events that occurred in Egypt: Ramesses, the ancient capital from the thirteenth century BCE, is mentioned in the ancient version of the story appearing in Exodus, while in Ps. 78, written at least several hundred years later, it is replaced by "the fields of Zoan," Sht D'nt, which had in fact replaced Pi-Ramesses as the capital in the tenth century

BCE.<sup>10</sup> The references to the city of Ramesses in the Book of Exodus thus provide the exodus narrative with a chronological anchor, defining a historical time-frame for the events described in it: the thirteenth through eleventh centuries BCE.

### 3. Idioms

Alongside these easily discernible Egyptian features, the narrative also contains phrases and expressions that derive from the Egyptian tongue but were translated and adapted to Hebrew usage, making it difficult to recognize their foreign origin. Close analysis reveals that these are intentional borrowings of Egyptian expressions, and only after the disclosure of their Egyptian roots can their full meaning, and the intention of the biblical author, be understood correctly.

#### *kbd lēb, qšh lēb, ḥzq lēb*

The expressions *kbd lēb*, *qšh lēb*, and *ḥzq lēb*, all of which are rendered in the RSV as “harden the heart,” are a recurrent refrain in the story of the ten plagues, where they relate to the obduracy of Pharaoh in refusing to release the Israelites.<sup>11</sup> A perusal of scripture shows that the expressions *kbd lēb* and *ḥzq lēb* are far from frequent outside the Book of Exodus. *Kbd lēb* appears elsewhere only in I Sam. 6:6, where the Philistines, in an overt allusion to the exodus from Egypt, are asked rhetorically by their priests and diviners: “Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?” *Ḥzq lēb*, which appears ten times in Exodus, appears only twice outside

it. In Ezek. 2:4, the people of Israel are described as “stiff of face and hard of heart” – that is, as the RSV renders the expression, “impudent and stubborn.” Josh. 11:20 relates that “it was the Lord’s doing to harden their [i.e., the kings of the land of Canaan] hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed.” The usage resembles the notion in Exodus of God hardening the heart of Pharaoh and may well be a conscious allusion to it.<sup>12</sup>

If expressions of “hardening the heart” are almost entirely restricted in the Bible to the Book of Exodus, the parallel Egyptian expressions, *šḥm ib* and *dns ib*, occur quite frequently throughout Egyptian literature, particularly in the phraseology in use at the royal court and in wisdom and autobiographical texts. Moreover, while in the Bible these expressions generally have the negative connotation of obduracy, in the Egyptian texts they are quite often used in a positive sense, to designate a person who is stable, restrained, and in command of his emotions. Thus, for example, a high official is described as “heavy of heart” (*dns ib*), that is, level-headed and able to “conceal his intentions” (*Urk IV*,<sup>13</sup> 64:7). The scribe Amenemope cautions his son to “keep firm your heart, steady your heart” (*The Instruction of Amenemope*, 20:3), while Senmut, counsel of Queen Hatshepsut of the eighteenth dynasty, is described as “stout of heart” and showing “no weakness” (*Urk IV*, 410:5).

It may be said, then, that the biblical expressions *kbd lēb* and *ḥzq lēb* reflect the use of Egyptian idioms, but these are adapted to the Israelite worldview and given new

meanings. *Ḥzq lēb*, a hard heart, used metaphorically in Egypt to designate restrained behavior and self-control, was transformed in the Bible into the contemptible quality of obduracy or disobedience. Moreover, in the Egyptian examples a person himself may “harden” or “make heavy” his heart, or the heart itself may appear as the subject: “the heart is heavy.” However, the biblical formulation attributing the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart to an external influence, the Hebrew God – as occurs in ten of the nineteen instances in which these expressions are used in Exodus – never appears in the Egyptian texts. We may surmise that these changes in usage stemmed from a desire to adapt the Egyptian motif to the central theme of the narrative, namely, the struggle between the Hebrew God and Pharaoh, God-King of Egypt, which concludes with the victory of the former. The Hebrew author exploits this turn of phrase to convey to the reader that Pharaoh not only is not omnipotent, but even his heart – the seat of human thought and will – is an implement in God’s hands, to do with as he will.

#### *“Mouth of”*

Another example of a term that appears at first glance to belong straightforwardly to the biblical context, but almost certainly has its origin in Egyptian court phraseology, is the expression “mouth of.” When Moses tries to decline the mission imposed upon him by God by protesting that he is “slow of speech [literally: heavy of mouth] and of tongue” (Ex. 4:10), God retorts (in the Jahwist

version [J]): “He [Aaron] shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God” (*ibid.* 4:16).

“Mouth” as an expression of representing the sovereign had already appeared in an Egyptian context in the Book of Genesis, in Pharaoh’s appointment of Joseph: “You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command [על פיך ישק כל עמי]” (Gen. 41:40). The term appears in Egyptian literature as a title designating the holder of a high office, that of the king’s counsel. The full title is “Mouth of the King of Upper Egypt” or “the Mouth that quiets the whole land, to its farthest reaches.”<sup>14</sup> This designation was used frequently in the period of the New Kingdom, and it remained in use up to the Late Period (the seventh and sixth centuries BCE). The Hebrew narrator thus makes use of an expression ubiquitous in Egyptian court language in order to convey that Aaron would serve as a “mouth” to Moses in the same sense that an Egyptian high official served as the “mouth” of his sovereign. In so doing, he raised Moses to the status of Pharaoh, the Egyptian God-King.

In the Priestly version of the text, in which the word “mouth” (*peh*) is replaced by “prophet” (*navi*), Moses is raised to a status even greater than that of Pharaoh: “See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet” (Ex. 7:1). Both narrators (J and P) have the same purpose: to make a mockery of the divinization of Pharaoh – a mortal king who was soon to be defeated in the struggle between himself and the representatives of the Hebrew God, Moses and Aaron.

### Conclusion

The depiction of Egypt emerging from an examination of the Egyptian elements in the initial chapters of the Book of Exodus conforms remarkably well with what is known of actual conditions prevailing in the period of the New Kingdom. Of thirty such elements whose authenticity has the backing of Egyptian sources, twenty-three (77%!) are attested in sources from the era of the New Kingdom, ten of them in sources from the Rameside period (the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE), the putative time-frame of the exodus from Egypt.

In light of this, we may surmise that the story of the Hebrews’ enslavement and exodus from Egypt has a historical kernel. In other words, even if the story underwent reworking and redaction in later periods, and even if it has about it something of a mythical, legendary quality, it *also* incorporates ancient material going back to the Ramesside period. This supposition is buttressed, on the one hand, by the first appearance of the name “Israel” on the stage of history on the Merneptah stele, which dates from the same period (1208 BCE), and, on the other, by the depiction of Egypt and the Israelites in the first chapters of Exodus.

If this were a fictitious narrative, composed, as has been variously suggested, in the sixth, fifth, or third centuries BCE, we would expect to find in it elements drawn from the Egyptian milieu of a later period. For example, we might expect that the description of Egypt and its denizens would resemble their description in the writings of the Greek historian

Herodotus, who lived and wrote in the Persian period; or that the Israelites would be depicted as engaging in commerce, rather than in brick production and agricultural labor; or that the Egyptian capital mentioned in the narrative would be Sais, which became the capital in the sixth century BCE, rather than Ramesses.

The exodus from Egypt appears in the Bible as a central, constitutive event in the people’s history, the memory of which accompanies the people at all times, wherever it goes. It is mentioned hundreds of times in the Pentateuch, the prophetic books, the Psalms, and the Bible’s historiographical texts. It is hard to believe that such a momentous, essential point of departure in the people’s history, which cast its mark upon the entire body of Scripture, is but a product of imaginary contrivance, a literary motif coined in the Exilic, Persian, or Hellenistic period.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, even after the reversals of recent years in scholarly thinking about the origins of the Israelite people, expressed, among other things, in the doubts cast on the credibility of the tradition of the exodus from Egypt, I believe that there is truth in Jacob Liver’s argument that “No people would fabricate a tradition of having begun its existence as slaves.” After the minimalist fad has passed from the world and been replaced by some other approach, the tradition of the exodus from Egypt, so symbolic of and fundamental to the Jewish people’s historical identity, will still be with us. As we recite in the Passover Haggadah: “In every generation, each of us should feel as though we ourselves had personally gone forth from Egypt.”<sup>16</sup>

\* This article is translated from a lecture delivered at a conference on “The Origin of Early Israel from Biblical, Historical, and Archaeological Perspectives” held at Haifa University in December 2001. The proceedings of the conference, edited by N. Shupak, are forthcoming in Hebrew.

1. For a comprehensive discussion of the approach of the minimalist school see the articles by Z. Talshir and B. Oded in the forthcoming proceedings cited in the starred note, above.
2. For Egyptian documents that shed light on the background to the story of the enslavement of the Israelites and their exodus from Egypt see, e.g., A. Malamat, ‘The Exodus: Egyptian Analogies,’ in E.S. Frerichs and L.H. Lesko (eds.), *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, Winona Lake, Ind., 1997, pp. 15–26; and my forthcoming article in the conference volume cited in note 1 above.
3. For a discussion of many of these features see, e.g., J.K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, Oxford 1996, esp. pp. 107–163 and the comprehensive bibliography there.
4. For a rejection of the historical value of the Egyptian elements in the biblical stories see S. Ahituv, “The Exodus: Survey of the Theories of the Last Fifty Years,” in I. Shirun-Grumach (ed.), *Jerusalem Studies in Egyptology* (ĀAT, 40), Wiesbaden 1998, p. 132.
5. The legendary character of the narrative stands out here: The biblical author portrays Pharaoh’s daughter as speaking Hebrew!
6. M. Bietak, “Comments on the ‘Exodus,’” in A.F. Rainey (ed.), *Egypt, Israel, Sinai*, Tel Aviv 1987, pp. 166–168; idem, “Ramesesstadt,” in W. Helck and W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, V, Wiesbaden 1982, pp. 128–146.
7. According to the e-mail news transmitted by J. Sasson on 15 October 1999, the German expedition recently excavated an area of around two hectares that once held sheds for some four hundred horses and chariots.
8. According to K.A. Kitchen, “Egyptians and Hebrews, from Ra’amases to Jericho,” in Shmuel Ahituv and Eliezer D. Oren (eds.), *The Origin of Early Israel – Current Debate* (Beer-Sheva, 12), Beer Sheva 1998, pp. 67–68.
9. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (= ANET), p. 471.
10. To be sure, Ramesses continued to be mentioned in Egyptian sources even after its fall from glory and its destruction by the sovereigns of the twenty-first dynasty, who used the remains of its buildings as raw material in the construction of their new capital of Zoan. However, this does not detract from the hypothesis that the references to the city in the exodus narrative relate to the city’s era of glory and prosperity, that is, to the Ramesside period, rather than to some later time. In this I take issue with B.D. Redford’s article, “Exodus 1:11,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 13 (1963), pp. 401–408.
11. The appearance of three different expressions with the same meaning has been explained on the basis of the documentary hypothesis. Thus, *kbd lēb* is used in J (5 times) and R (the Redactional passage, once); *qšh lēb* in P (once); and *hʒq lēb* in P (8 times) and E (4 times).
12. Unlike *kbd lēb* and *hʒq lēb*, the expression *qšh lēb*, which appears only once in Exodus, is used quite frequently in other scriptural passages that are devoid of any Egyptian context. *Qšh* is often joined with other nouns – “forehead” (Ezek. 3:7), “face” (*ibid.*, 2:4), “spirit” (Deut. 2:30), and “neck” (Deut. 10:16 and *passim*) – to produce further collocations with the general sense of obduracy. It may thus be seen as the Hebrew equivalent of the Egyptian expressions with the same sense.
13. K. Sethe, *Urkunden der 18 Dynastie*, IV, Leipzig 1909.
14. See Nili Shupak, “The Joseph Story: Legend or History,” in Michael V. Fox et al. (eds.), *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, Winona Lake, Ind., 1996, p. 129\*.
15. In this context it is important to note that the tradition of the exodus from Egypt is mentioned in the prophetic books ascribed to the eighth century BCE, such as Amos and Hosea. The minimalists claim that these passages, too, were written in the exilic period or later. See, e.g., D.B. Redford, “Observations on the Sojourn of Bene Israel,” in Frerichs and Lesko, *Exodus* (above, note 2), pp. 57–66, and G. Dever, “Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus?” *ibid.*, p. 83.
16. *A Passover Haggadah*, compiled and adapted by Robert Parnes, 1985–2000, on the site: <http://www.personal.umich.edu/~bparnes/HAGGADAH/seder.htm>.