

Some Observations on the Date of the Exodus

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In recent years scholars have gravitated toward two positions regarding the date of the Biblical Exodus of Israel from Egypt, the so-called late date and early date positions.ⁱ

The early date, held mainly (but not exclusively) by conservative scholars, posits an Exodus in the mid-fifteenth century B.C., typically about 1446 B.C. The late date, which has become the majority position since the pioneering archeological work of W.F. Albright, places the Exodus during the reign of Ramses II in the thirteenth century B.C.

The early date is mainly supported from I Kings 6:1, which states that the Hebrews left Egypt 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon (ca. 966 B.C.), thus placing the departure from Egypt in the fifteenth century B.C.

The late date rests on two types of evidence, one biblical and the other archaeological. Its adherents cite the mentions in the Book of Exodus of the Hebrews working at the city of Ramses and argue that, since the city was obviously named after Ramses II in the thirteenth century, that monarch must have already reigned by the time of the Exodus, thus eliminating the fifteenth century from consideration.ⁱⁱ

Archaeologically, the late date is most importantly supported by a great deal of evidence of destruction of Canaanite cities in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries B.C. This evidence is interpreted as the Hebrew conquest.

From the 1930's to the early 1970's, there was little to challenge the seemingly strong archaeological support for the late Exodus. The only protest from holders of the early date was to argue that the Old Testament states that only three cities, Ai, Hazor, and Jericho were burned.ⁱⁱⁱ

If this is true, evidence of burning at other Palestinian sites is not necessarily evidence of the Hebrew conquest, and therefore has nothing to do with the date of the Exodus. In the late 1970's, however, the re-interpretation of the archaeological evidence from an early date perspective by John Bimson in his work Redating the Exodus and Conquest began the process of finding archeological support for an early Exodus. In the 1980's and 1990's, efforts of this kind have continued; it is our goal here to examine these efforts and to offer some modifications.

The Bimson Thesis

British scholar John J. Bimson has attempted to re-examine the archaeological evidence so often cited as proof for a late thirteenth or twelfth century conquest.^{iv} In summary, Bimson admits there was great destruction in the so-called Late Bronze Age, but he also calls attention to the comprehensive destruction of Syro-Palestinian cities at the end of Middle Bronze Age IIC.^v This widespread destruction is generally connected to the Egyptian campaigns to expel the Hyksos at the end of the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1570 B.C.), but Bimson denies any such connection through the following argument:

He rejects the commonly accepted date for the end of the Middle Bronze Age in Palestine (1550 B.C.). He would lower the date for the end of MBIIC a full century, to about 1450 B.C. The crux of his argument is the presence of a type of pottery

known as Bichrome ware in Palestinian sites at the end of the Middle Bronze Age and at the start of the Late Bronze.^{vi}

Scholars have commonly associated this style of pottery with the Hyksos, who are known to have been driven from Egypt by the founders of Dynasty Eighteen around 1570 B.C., but Bimson states that when Bichrome ware is found in Egypt, it is found in post Hyksos (Eighteenth Dynasty) contexts and that there is no good reason to connect it with the Hyksos at all.^{vii}

If, then, Bichrome ware reflects the transition from Middle to Late Bronze, and if it should be dated to the fifteenth century, it would be valid to lower the date of that transition.

If the Middle Bronze period in Syria-Palestine ended with massive destruction about 1450 rather than the generally accepted 1550, who did the destroying? Egyptian armies in pursuit of fleeing Hyksos must be eliminated from consideration. Bimson suggests the Hebrews as the conquerors of the Middle Bronze cities.^{viii}

If this is true, the violent end of the Middle bronze period would provide archaeological evidence for an early Exodus (roughly 1500 B.C. if one allows for the wilderness wanderings).

There are two apparent problems with Bimson's theory as it stands, even if one accepts his lowering of the date of Exodus to the end of the Middle Bronze. The first is that his Exodus, while early, is too early. It does not fall into the mid-fifteenth century as I Kings 6:1 would require. It would place the Exodus at the end of the

sixteenth century or very early in the fifteenth, thus demanding some kind of revision in our understanding of I Kings 6:1. While he rejects the idea that the 480 years of I Kings 6:1 are merely a multiple of generations of 40 years, Bimson does state that the Biblical figure should only be taken as a rough guide to the approximate time of the Exodus.^{ix}

Another problem with the Bimson thesis is the massive extent of the destruction at the end of the Middle Bronze. Cities all through Syria-Palestine were burned, indicating a very widespread series of catastrophes. It seems unreasonable, in light of the biblical statement of Joshua 11:13 (which states that no further cities were burned after Ai, Jericho, and Hazor) to look for evidence of burning all over Palestine.

But, even if the argument is made that the Joshua statement refers to only one phase of the campaign and not the entire war of conquest,^x it is not possible that the Hebrews conquered all of the cities which fell at the end of the Middle Bronze. Far more likely are two other possibilities: Egyptian campaigns of the New Kingdom Pharaohs and local wars between the city-states of the region.

Bimson's thesis, while perhaps needing some adjustment, should not be discarded out of hand, however. The lowering of the date for the end of MBIIC is reasonable. To connect the end of the Middle Bronze with outdated conceptions of Hyksos architectural innovations or with hypothetical far-reaching campaigns of expulsion by early Eighteenth Dynasty kings is not valid; better to examine the archaeological context of Bichrome ware, as Bimson has done.

There is seemingly no good reason to reject his date of ca. 1450 B.C. for the general end of Middle Bronze IIC. Perhaps the best answer is to remember that the two key cities under consideration, Jericho and Hazor, were strong fortresses that could have withstood the general wave of warfare that ended the Middle Bronze phase at many other Syro-Palestinian sites. If both of these cities were still standing in ca. 1400 B.C., the destroyer of the Middle Bronze phase at both cities could well be the Hebrews.

At this point, an examination of the Middle and Late Bronze phases of the two cities in question is in order. Is it possible that Middle Bronze Jericho, for example, is a better candidate for Joshua's conquest than is Late Bronze Jericho?

The most recent detailed excavations at Jericho are those of Kathleen Kenyon.^{xi} Kenyon's work has brought to light two important observations regarding the Late Bronze city, which is normally identified with the city taken and destroyed by Joshua. First, Kenyon dates the fall of Late Bronze Jericho to 1325 B.C. or even slightly later. This, by Kenyon's own admission, fits neither of the commonly held dates for the Exodus.^{xii} Second, the Late Bronze town at Jericho was quite a pitiful affair; it can in no way be equated with the description of the city given in the Book of Joshua.

If the Late Bronze city does not fit any current theory regarding the date of the Exodus, what of the middle Bronze city? If one holds to a destruction date of ca. 1550 for it, as Kenyon does, the identification of the destroyers with the Hebrews is an impossibility; but if the date is lowered to the mid-fifteenth century or later in

accord with Bimson's theory, Joshua could well have been the person who ended the Middle Bronze Age phase of habitation at Jericho. Both Bimson himself and Bryant Wood have discussed this possibility at length, presenting some interesting evidence.

Bimson states^{xiii} that the Middle Bronze city had massive fortifications and that the city was totally destroyed by fire. The stumps of the walls had burnt debris a meter thick on the top of them. All this is in accord with the Biblical statement that Joshua burned the city after its capture (Josh. 6:24). Bimson adds that there is something unusual in the Middle Bronze Age tombs just outside the city: organic material (roast meat, hair, and other human tissue) is found in a remarkable state of preservation. The best explanation (and that of Zeuner, the excavator of the tombs) is that methane or carbon dioxide was released into the tombs by an earthquake, thus retarding the normal process of decay.^{xiv} If this is so, this could have been the same earthquake used by God to bring down the walls of Jericho.

Bryant G. Wood has also examined the archaeological material from Jericho. His analysis has yielded several points for extreme interest with respect to the Middle Bronze city (Garstang's City IV) and its destruction.^{xv} On the west side of the mound, Kenyon found a quantity of red bricks that presumably fell down the outside of the mound from the walls at the top.^{xvi} Wood concludes that this confirms the Biblical account of the fall of Jericho, as Garstang had written years ago. Further, Wood points out that the modern excavators found an abnormally high amount of burned grain among the remains of City IV.^{xvii} This would have resulted from both the short duration of the Hebrew attack and the command by god to burn all the

grain instead of appropriating it. Further, grain would naturally be found in a city captured shortly after harvest, as Jericho was (Josh. 2:6).

What of Hazor, the other well-excavated city identified with certainty? Yigael Yadin, after his masterful excavations at Hazor, states that the city was destroyed a number of times.^{xviii} It was burned at the end of the Middle Bronze Age; it was destroyed fairly soon after the Amarna period, and again, by fire, in about 1230 B.C.

The post-Amarna destruction is not problematical; the Egyptian king Seti I was the destroyer, and his attack took place about 1300 B.C. It remains for the interpreter of the archaeological material to identify which of the other two destructions was the work of Joshua and the Hebrews.

Yadin, the excavator, accepts the late date of the Exodus presuppositionally and therefore feels that the 1230 burning of the city was the Hebrew conquest. The problem with this conclusion is that there was no habitation of the site for many years after the 1230 destruction. Who, then, was the king of Hazor who was opposed by Barak and Deborah during the period of the Judges? It would seem far better use of both Biblical and archaeological evidence to lower the date for the end of the Middle bronze Age from 1550-1450 B.C. in accord with Bimson's view, and to identify the attackers with Joshua and the Hebrews. The destruction of 1230, then, would be at the hands of Barak and Deborah

One last point must be discussed, however. Bimson has lowered the date for the end of the Middle Bronze to 1450, but not to 1400, a date which would fit the early date of the Exodus far better than 1450. What are we to make of this? We

need to remember that the Bible does not require that Joshua destroyed all the Middle Bronze cities, only Jericho, Hazor, and Ai. It seems reasonable to accept a date of ca. 1450 for the massive general destructions characteristic of the end of the Middle Bronze period.

The destroyers would have been the Egyptians under kings such as Thutmose III or other cities making war on their neighbors. But it is also reasonable to see two of the strongest fortresses of the age, Jericho and Hazor, resisting the general trend of destruction because of their great fortifications. The Middle Bronze cities at these two locations could well have lasted until the end of the century, when Joshua and the Hebrews left the wilderness and began the conquest. This assumption provides the best reconciliation of Biblical and archeological evidence.

ⁱ The best concise summary of the two views may be found in John J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (Sheffield: 1978).

ⁱⁱ The city, whose name is normally written in a cartouche or ring, was certainly named after the king and not after a god or private individual. See C. Aling, "The Biblical City of Ramses," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25/2, June 1982, pp. 129-137.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce K. Waltke, "Palestinian Artifactual Evidence Supporting the Early Date of the Exodus," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (1972), 33-47.

^{iv} In Bimson, *Redating*.

^v *Ibid.*, pp. 115 ff.

^{vi} See Bimson, chapter 5.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 115 ff.

^{viii} See for example his discussion of Jericho, pp. 127 ff.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 86.

^x As Bimson does, p. 277.

^{xi} The so-called "Ramp Fortifications" of tell el Yahudiyeh were in reality temple foundations. See Bimson, p. 137, for references.

^{xii} For a listing of Kenyon's key publications on Jericho see Bimson, p. 302.

^{xiii} Bimson, p. 128.

^{xiv} Ibid., p 131, and F.E. Zeuner, "Notes on the Bronze Age Tombs of Jericho,"
Palestine Exploration Quarterly 87, 1955, pp. 118-128.

^{xv} Presented in a semi-popular fashion in Biblical Archaeology Review (March/April,
1990), pp. 44 ff.

^{xvi} Ibid., p. 54.

^{xvii} Ibid., p. 56.

^{xviii} See the chart in D. Winton Thomas, Archaeology and Old Testament Study
(Oxford: c. 1967), P. 260.