

Exodus, date of

Can you summarize for me the debate over when the Exodus took place? Did it occur in the Fifteenth or Thirteenth Century B.C.E?

There is a long standing debate among conservative Biblical scholars—those who believe that a legitimate Exodus did take place in real history—as to whether or not the Israelites left Egypt in the Fifteenth Century or Thirteenth Century B.C.E. This is notably not a debate among those of the critical tradition, where the Exodus is often viewed as being some kind of historical fiction for a group of nomadic Semites (who became the Israelites) that steadily made their way into Canaan. As J.H. Walton is quite keen to note,

“In this day and age of biblical scholarship the debate no longer rages whether or not there was any exodus of biblical proportions. In fact, the consensus that there was not has become firmly entrenched in critical circles. In such a climate, the question concerning the date of the exodus might be lightly dismissed in some quarters as naive, presumptuous or quaint. Nevertheless, for those who take the biblical record seriously, debate continues concerning the most appropriate historical setting for this pivotal event in Israel’s theology and self-understanding.”¹

Even though not all conservatives are agreed on the timing of the Exodus, **all are agreed that a large group of Israelites was freed from Egyptian servitude at some point in real live history.**

Both Fifteenth and Thirteenth Century B.C.E. advocates of the Exodus have to recognize that by 1209 B.C.E., the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah, successor to Ramses II, was responsible for subduing “four entities...in Canaan: Ascalon, Gezer, Yenoam, and Israel” (*ABD*).² The Merneptah Stela includes a victory poem, remarking how “Israel is laid waste; its seed is not.”³ So, sometime by the late Thirteenth Century B.C.E., the Israelites had established themselves to some degree or another in the Promised Land—numerous enough to have been attacked and defeated in battle by an invading Egyptian force.

The **Fifteenth Century B.C.E.** timing of the Exodus comes from a straightforward reading of the Biblical text. 1 Kings 6:1 states, “Now it came about in the four hundred and eightieth year after the sons of Israel came 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” (NASU). The Exodus is placed 480 years before Solomon’s fourth year as king, which was 967 B.C.E. Counting 480 years back, then, yields a date of 1447 B.C.E. Even if some rounding off of numbers is considered, it is still thought that the Exodus occurred in the mid-to-early Fifteenth Century B.C.E.⁴ This would mean that among the candidates of the Pharaoh for the Exodus would include either Thutmose III or Amenhotep I.⁵ Around two centuries would have transpired to allow the Israelites time to settle in the Promised Land and establish themselves to a considerable degree, so much so that the later Pharaoh Merneptah would be able to attack an entrenched resident of Canaan.

Advocates of the **Thirteenth Century B.C.E.** timing of the Exodus consider it a bit lackadaisical to just take the 480 years of 1 Kings 6:1 at face value (K.A. Kitchen actually considers it the “lazy man’s solution”),⁶ and that it instead needs to be interpreted as a representative number, such as a holder for 12 generations of 40 years or something. Looking at events within Ancient Egypt, Exodus 1:11 records how the Israelites “built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses” (NASU). It is noted how the city of Pi-Ramesse (presumably named for the Pharaoh) was an east-delta city built by Ramses II (1272-1213 B.C.E.), and as Kitchen concludes, “the end of the

¹ J.H. Walton, “Exodus, Date of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 258.

² K.A. Kitchen, “Exodus, the,” in *ABD*, 2:702.

³ Walton, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 262.

⁴ Cf. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 59.

⁵ Cf. Walton, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 267.

⁶ Kitchen, in *ABD*, 2:702.

oppression and the start of the Exodus could not precede the accession of this king at the earliest, i.e., not before 1279 B.C....That is only a little more than 300 years before Solomon" (*ABD*).⁷ He also details how the Book of Judges probably also includes overlapping terms of various judges, which are not to be viewed in strict sequence.⁸ From a theological perspective, Kitchen also thinks, "it must be emphasized that the formation of the Sinai/Moab covenant (Exodus-Leviticus; Deuteronomy) in its basic framework belongs squarely within the period 1380-1200 B.C." (*ABD*).⁹

In response to the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. Exodus view, Fifteenth Century Exodus B.C.E. advocates like to present a series of archaeological sites from Canaan, conquered by Joshua, that they feel date to a much earlier period than the 1200s B.C.E.¹⁰ Of particular note is what city of Jericho was destroyed by Joshua during the Conquest, as there are various Jerichos to choose from. Walton indicates, "If Jericho city IV is the city conquered by Joshua...the exodus must have been in the fifteenth century," but then goes on to point out, "There is still much to be done before this perennial controversy can begin to find resolution."¹¹ Fifteenth Century B.C.E. advocates point to the presumed dates of archaeological locations in Israel, and move backward to the Exodus. Contrary to this, Thirteenth Century B.C.E. advocates try to place the Exodus within the history of Ancient Egypt, and then they move forward. There is no doubting that one's starting point is what determines what date of the Exodus is favored.

Even if conservative interpreters are not entirely agreed on the timing of the Exodus, this does not mean that they treat the Book of Exodus as an historical fiction. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III note in their work *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, "it appears that the archaeological evidence may be harmonized with the most natural reading of biblical texts that describe a fifteenth-century Exodus and conquest. The text, however, does not permit certainty on the subject. There are arguments for a late date for the Exodus...that treat the text with integrity."¹² One will encounter conservative resources on Exodus, and the whole of the Pentateuch today, that include edifying and relevant commentary for Believers in Messiah compiled from both a Fifteenth and Thirteenth B.C.E. Exodus viewpoint.

Most of today's Messianics probably hold to a Fifteenth Century B.C.E. Exodus, thus making the Torah approximately 3,500 years old. There are various Messianic teachers, including Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee, who lean toward a Thirteenth Century B.C.E. Exodus, making the Torah approximately 3,300 years old. He feels that it is best that we consider the role of the Ancient Israelites living under Egyptian servitude *first*, and that it is probably best for us to recognize that the later chronology of the Judges and Israelite monarchs is not at clear-cut as some may want it to be. However, the most important point is that we treat the Book of Exodus with integrity, affirming how God acted miraculously in delivering Ancient Israel out of bondage and into freedom, humiliating the Egyptian Empire. No Messianic teacher today, even those with some liberal theological leanings quite thankfully, has ever promoted that the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt was total fiction.¹³

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 2:703.

¹⁰ Cf. Walton, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 264-266.

¹¹ Ibid., 270.

¹² Dillard and Longman, 62.

¹³ For further consideration, consult Kitchen's full article, in *ABD*, 2:700-708, and Walton's full article, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 258-272.