

Exodus, Historiography, and Some Theological Reflections*

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Introduction

Christianity is a historical faith, and so evangelicals have a vested interest in defending the fundamental historical character of the Bible. I share deeply this basic conviction: the God of the Bible is one who has acted in history to deliver his people from sin and death, and the record of these events is found in Scripture, by the Spirit's unerring, infallible inspiration. The purpose of this brief article is not to call this conviction into question, nor is it to settle any particular issue, but to encourage some interface between this basic conviction, which I presume the readers of this journal share, with a perennial issue raised by the modern study of the Old Testament: how "historical" is the Old Testament? by which I mean, To what extent does an Old Testament narrative comply with notions of history writing prevalent in our world today? A brief look at the book of Exodus, which records Israel's foundational Egypt and exodus experiences, is one entry way into that larger issue.

Basic Historical Reliability

If the events surrounding Israel's entrance to and deliverance from Egypt—which includes the events at Sinai and the wilderness—can be shown to be fiction, the heart of the Old Testament's theological content is drained of its life force. In recent evangelical scholarship, a significant amount of very important and helpful work has been done in defending the Bible's basic historical reliability against the so-called historical minimalists, for whom the Old Testament narratives are largely a product of postexilic fabrication.¹ With respect to the topic of Israel and Egypt specifically, Jim Hoffmeier's *Israel in Egypt* remains an outstanding scholarly contribution.² More recent

*This article is a revised version of a paper read at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 19, 2004.

¹ A helpful summary and critique of minimalism may be found in I. W. Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *JBL* 114 (1995): 585-606.

² James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

literature includes Kenneth Kitchen's *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*³ and Provan, Long, and Longman's *A Biblical History of Israel* (hereafter *BHI*),⁴ both of which will certainly become important sources for evangelical apologetics. These scholarly evangelical responses are aimed at defending the historical reliability of Old Testament narratives by demonstrating their *plausibility*: Hoffmeier is focused on the biblical account of Israel in Egypt, whereas Kitchen and *BHI* are broader in scope. All three provide a balance to some extreme positions through scholarly debate. An evangelical defense of the Bible's basic historical character must continue to be done on the level of scholarly interaction, guided by data, rather than simply doctrinal imposition.

There is value, therefore, in demonstrating the historical plausibility of Israel in Egypt, but at the end of the day this may not address other important issues of a Christian theology of Scripture as God's Word. To say, for example, that a biblical event like the exodus is "plausible" may be a good and necessary counter-argument to historical minimalists, but it leaves unanswered how *much* of the biblical narrative comports with historical events, which is precisely the issue that many evangelicals struggle with. "Plausibility" means that there is a historical setting that can be verified by external evidence to provide a "reasonable" historical setting for the biblical narratives. The problem many evangelicals face, however, is that such an argument by no means *establishes* in and of itself the veracity of the *biblical account in its details*. It only makes the biblical account generally *possible* or *plausible*.

Again, this is a *very* important point to establish, but in actuality, there are competing models that "plausibly" explain the biblical account of Israel's presence in Egypt during the middle of the second millennium BC. For example, the Hyksos are solid evidence for Semitic presence in Egypt during the middle of the 2nd millennium BC.⁵ The presence of Semites in Egypt during this time makes plausible the biblical account of Joseph, as evangelical authors point out. But also resting comfortably within the parameters set by this historical phenomenon are other models. For example, another plausible model is the notion that the biblical narrative as it stands is 1st millennium Israelite ideology that reflects on the distant memory of some general

³ Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁴ Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁵ Hyksos is an Egyptian word meaning "rulers of foreign lands" and refers mainly to Semitic inhabitants who ruled Egypt from about 1700-1550 BC, a time period corresponding roughly to the time of Joseph and subsequent generations. See Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 53-76.

Semitic ancestry (not necessarily specifically Israelite) infiltrating and then being expelled from Egypt.

I am *not* suggesting that this model is necessarily more accurate than others, only that it is a “plausible” model in that it accounts both for the extra-biblical data and the shape of the biblical presentation. Answering the minimalists, therefore, may help establish basic historical plausibility, but it does not establish the very thing we as evangelicals are interested in, namely, the historical *character* of the Old Testament, i.e., not *whether* but the *way* in which the biblical narratives are historical. Such a discussion, if undertaken in full conversation with the available data, will of necessity take us beyond conventional apologetic agendas.

It must be admitted that the very fact that evangelical scholars feel the need to argue for the basic historical reliability of the Old Testament is an indication of how effective the modern study of the Bible has been in causing us to rethink traditional formulations. The modern study of the Bible has introduced issues that were not in view for earlier generations. As a Christian biblical scholar, I am keenly interested not only in solid historical study of the Old Testament (again, since biblical faith is a historical one) but the *implications* of such study for how we evangelicals view our Bible. Too often when historical research and Christian faith intersect, a more defensive posture is adopted. To be fair, I do not at all expect Hoffmeier, Kitchen, and *BHI* to engage this issue directly, since their struggle is on a very different front, and so their work is valuable for other reasons. But when the dust settles from their battle, regardless of how decisively the basic historical plausibility of the Old Testament has been established, the larger issue of the nature of biblical historiography remains: to what extent does the biblical description of Israel in Egypt reflect what we in the modern world might call “historical reality?”

This question is hard to avoid, and so merely to pose it should not be misunderstood as evidence of a first stride toward the slippery slope of unbelief. I want to affirm, once again, in no uncertain terms that for which Hoffmeier and others are arguing so well, that the Old Testament narrative of Israel in Egypt is plausible on an historical basis, and the issues addressed below should be understood against the larger backdrop of the work that Hoffmeier and others have done. But “plausibility” is only part of the broader theological structure that we evangelicals must construct. We must remember that it is precisely historical-criticism’s willingness to lay out the broader

implications of historical study for Christian doctrine that began causing such problems for evangelicals in the first place. The issue was forced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly with the advent of biblical archaeology and numerous ancient Near Eastern textual discoveries. This collision between older models of Scripture struggling to address the implications of new discoveries has introduced tensions that have wound their way through several generations, and that continue to come to expression today.

Of course, we cannot address this broader topic here in full, but I would like to add a word or two to this larger conversation by focusing on a few well-known factors concerning Exodus that have to come to light in the modern era, and that I think have an affect for how we think biblically about the Bible's own presentation of history. These issues do not in any way discredit the very important issue of the basic historical plausibility of Exodus, but they continue to present challenges for how we as evangelicals articulate a notion of inspiration in view of historical data, which is the very important consideration of the intersection of biblical scholarship and Christian doctrine.

Exodus and Some Modern Discoveries

To ask about the nature of Old Testament historiography in light of modern discoveries is certainly nothing new. It is fundamental to evangelical biblical scholarship that any discussion of Old Testament genres must proceed on the basis of uncovering, as best as we can and with due caution where appropriate, *ancient* literary conventions rather than assuming the universal validity of contemporary categories. Without elaborating here, I feel very strongly that such a posture is not only consistent with but demanded by a doctrine of Scripture that gives full attention to its incarnational dimension.⁶ The intersection of the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern studies, i.e., understanding the Old Testament against the backdrop of its ancient Near Eastern environment, is a *sine qua non* of evangelical Old Testament scholarship. Our focus here, however briefly, is on how this intersection affects our understanding of the kind of historicity we are to expect from the book of Exodus.

⁶ I try to lay out in my own way some of these issues in more detail in *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), esp. 13-70.

First, a few words about the tabernacle. Kenneth Kitchen recounts the arguments for the historicity of Israel's tabernacle, and concludes quite reasonably that the biblical description is fully consistent with a late 2nd millennium date.⁷ Kitchen is by no means alone in countering a prevailing critical orthodoxy that the tabernacle is "an exilic or post-exilic figment of the imagination of Jewish priests."⁸ Kitchen goes on to recount evidence from 3rd millennium Egypt, early 2nd millennium Mari, and late 2nd millennium Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia to argue for the basic historical plausibility of the Old Testament account of the tabernacle.

At one point in his discussion, Kitchen makes an interesting point that in context may be easy to overlook. I do not wish to tease more out of Kitchen's wording than I should, or be perceived as being unfair to Kitchen by augmenting what for him may simply be a throwaway line, but his comment is directly relevant for our purpose. After summarizing the compelling evidence for an early tabernacle, Kitchen writes: "*Late-period priests* might conceivably have preserved a record of an *early* structure; but *mere imagination* would not then have originated it."⁹

Again, not to over read here, but Kitchen, an articulate defender of the Old Testament's historical reliability, seems to leave open the possibility—perhaps even assuming it to be so—that there is some meaningful distinction to be made between an *early structure* and the *later description* of that structure found in Scripture. In other words, although the biblical description is not be the product of *mere imagination*, the final biblical description from a *late period* (which Kitchen leaves unspecified) seems to be something more than simply a "brute" description of the earlier tabernacle. The plausibility of a Late Bronze (1500-1200 BC) biblical tabernacle is a strongly justifiable conclusion on historical grounds, even though the *biblical description* of the tabernacle reflects a later time, i.e., the "preservation" of the record by "late-period priests," as Kitchen puts it. The composition of the tabernacle narrative by late-period priests certainly reflects authentic memory of an important, and ancient, structure (hence, not "mere imagination"), but the later priestly description of that structure is of such a nature that it is, presumably, discernable as late. To introduce the word "imagination" as Kitchen has done may prejudice the point a bit. It may be better to describe this later

⁷ Kitchen, *Reliability*, 275-83

⁸ Kitchen, *Reliability*, 275. See also Daniel E. Fleming, "Mari's Large Public Tent and the Priestly Tent Sanctuary," *VT* 50/4 (2000): 484-98.

⁹ Kitchen, *Reliability*, 276 (my emphasis).

activity as “contextualization” or more simply “updating.” It might be that a “late” description of an earlier structure was influenced by the form those structures took at the time of final composition. That is a plausible position for which Kitchen seems to leave ample room.

Now, even though Kitchen himself seems to raise the point, I recognize that it is hypothetical. One would still need to demonstrate that the biblical description of the tabernacle has certain specific elements that fit better in the 1st millennium, something neither I nor Kitchen (apparently) have done. Perhaps some aspects of the tabernacle reflect monarchic concerns, or may even be a retrojection to the exodus period of a longing for the lost glory of the temple felt in the exile. But I speculate. My general point is less ambitious: there may be more to be gleaned from the biblical description of the tabernacle than simply its Late Bronze plausibility. Hence, on the one hand a “basic historical plausibility” can certainly be determined, but that leaves untouched the question of how we today are to understand the biblical *description* of the tabernacle. How can we articulate a model of Scriptural inspiration that accounts for the Bible’s description of the tabernacle as not *simply* a description of the historical, concrete tabernacle, but a description of how that reality was understood from a much later vantage point?

If the Bible itself shows evidence of such updating, the question should rightly be raised what *kind* of historiography we are to expect of the Bible, and that should then be brought into a larger discussion of the nature of inspiration. We must be clear, once again, that what is at stake in such a conversation is not *whether* God inspired the Bible, but *how*. For those seeking a meaningful dialogue between Christian theology and the biblical studies, this question quickly come front and center.

Another theological issue raised by Kitchen’s argument for ancient Near Eastern analogs to the biblical tabernacle is what is often referred to as Israel “borrowing” from her ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Now, on one level, to label it as “borrowing” is misleading, in part because it seems to imply a conscious act on the part of the Israelites. It is perhaps better, although more cumbersome, to say that the similarity of Israel’s tabernacle to ancient Near Eastern counterparts is a function of a shared milieu (although I realize that would need a lot of unpacking as well). But regardless of how we label it, similarities between the tabernacle Israel’s institutions in general and those of her neighbors, although the very stuff of evangelical biblical scholarship, do not

always get the attention they deserve in theological discussions concerning the nature of Scripture. Yet those familiar with Old Testament studies over the past 150 years have had to engage this issue of “borrowing” on some level.

Such extrabiblical data often help establish the basic historical plausibility of the Old Testament, as in the case of the tabernacle, but it also raises another theological issue, namely the uniqueness of Israel’s religion vis-à-vis other ancient Near Eastern religions. That there are striking similarities between Israel and her neighbors is not a debatable point, but it is necessary to take the next step and ask “what affect does ‘borrowing’ have on our notion of Scripture being God’s unique revelation, and how can we express that in a way that is constructive and supportive of Christian faith?” Serious work remains to be done in this area with evangelical theologians and biblical scholars in dialog.

But leaving this broader question to the side, perhaps the most popularly known area of similarity between Israel and her ancient Near Eastern neighbors concerns specific texts which have come to light over the past several generations. It is very helpful to consider, first of all, the degree to which ancient Near Eastern literature can lend support to the historical plausibility of the biblical exodus story. For example, Hoffmeier¹⁰ refers to the Egyptian “Tale of Sinuhe” and how elements of its storyline are similar to features of the life of Moses (and Joseph): both Moses and Sinuhe flee Pharaoh’s wrath over a murder, both flee to tent-dwelling communities and marry the chief’s oldest daughter, both return to stand before Pharaoh. These parallels between an *Egyptian* story and the story of Moses are enough to convince biblical scholars, including Hoffmeier, that there is more at work here than mere coincidence: the book of Exodus has an Egyptian setting or at least stems from an Egyptian setting.

Hoffmeier is clear that there is no way of knowing whether the biblical author had the Tale of Sinuhe in mind specifically as he wrote the account of Moses,¹¹ and I think he is undoubtedly correct in this conclusion, although deciding this question would not affect one way or another the question of Egyptian provenance. In my view, moreover, the issues of literary dependency or Egyptian provenance are not the most pressing theological questions to be asking. The similarities between the biblical and Egyptian tales open up the reasonable view that the biblical report, however much it

¹⁰ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 82, 143-44.

¹¹ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 144.

might be connected to Egyptian conventions, may not be a “straight” account of history (so to speak) but a story, however plausibly rooted in historical events, whose *expression* participates in an ancient literary convention of some sort. If this is the case, our theological articulation of the nature of Old Testament historiography will need to take this factor into serious account. In other words, the early years of Moses as described in Exodus are “basically historical” and that history is “clothed” in literary conventions of the time.

This observation is, for evangelical biblical scholars, fairly obvious and hardly worth mentioning. But this should lead us to a frank and meaningful theological and doctrinal discussion of the relationship between that basic historicity and in conventional description. What I have found more often than not, however, is that these two issues are kept at a distance from each other. It is readily *acknowledged* that the Old Testament participates in ancient literary conventions, but, it is quickly added, such a thing does not affect its “basic historical reliability.” Why “but?” To phrase the issue this way is already to concede at the outset, albeit implicitly, that placing Israelite literature squarely in its ancient literary context is a *concession* that one will have to get beyond in order to *maintain* a belief in its basic historical credibility: “Sure Israelite literature looks a lot like uninspired ancient texts, *but* don’t let that bother you. We can safely and quickly by-pass this to talk about how it is the Word of God *despite* this.” I hope this isn’t too much of a caricature, but my sense is that I am not far off the mark for many. What seems to be needed, at least from my point of view, is serious theological reflection that “absorbs” more effectively the historical data (although not indiscriminately, to be sure) as *vital* to the theological task, not as an annoyance to be acknowledged and then set aside at a safe distance.

With respect to Sinuhe specifically, Hoffmeier’s main apologetic point is that the story originated in Egypt in the 12th Dynasty (around 1800 BC). This means that such a literary motif was already well in place before the biblical account of Moses would have been written, and, thus, makes plausible a 2nd millennium composition of the biblical story rather than necessitating a 1st millennium date. True, but again, the Sinuhe parallel raises in my view not so much the ever-muddy question of the direction of literary dependence or provenance, but what kind of historiography we should expect from the biblical account. To be sure, Hoffmeier reminds us of other Egyptian texts—such as Instruction for Merikari, Prophecy of Neferti, the inscription on the tomb of Aper-el (an

influential Semite living in New Kingdom Egypt)—that support with great force the plausibility argument.¹² But my theological instincts are drawn to those texts, like *Sinuhe*, that bear similarities to biblical *texts*—not simply those that speak to a generally plausible historical context for Exodus.

In addition to *Sinuhe*, we have the well known “Legend of Sargon” (ancient king of Akkad, 2300 BC), whose birth story bears striking similarities to that of Moses’ birth in Exod 2:1-10: of humble birth, Sargon was placed by his mother in a reed basket lined with pitch, set afloat on a river, was found by the king’s drawer of water who raised him as his son, and eventually became king. I think Hoffmeier is correct when he cautions against too easily identifying these stories, i.e., to argue for the biblical story’s dependence on Sargon.¹³ This is even more so the case for Hoffmeier in view of the vocabulary in Exodus. Hoffmeier detects clear examples of *Egyptian* vocabulary in Exodus, which renders suspect the argument that Exodus story is dependent on the *Akkadian* Sargon tale.¹⁴

True, but again, the issues of literary dependence and provenance are not the most pressing theological question. Does not the simple presence of the Sargon legend suggest—without impugning the basic historical reliability of the biblical account—that the *form* of Moses’ birth story is likewise a product of a literary convention? To be sure, the presence of an ancient Near Eastern birth motif (analogous, perhaps, to our “basket on the doorstep” motif¹⁵) does not render the Moses story “mythical,”¹⁶ but it does suggest a status of something other than simply an “account of what happened.” The presence of the Sargon birth story presses evangelicals to consider the question of whether and to what extent Exodus 2 participates in an ancient literary convention, and how that would inform *how* (not *whether*) God inspired the Bible. The task then is for evangelicals to articulate an understanding of Old Testament historiography that is in conversation with these data.

¹² Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 53-62, 93-95.

¹³ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 137.

¹⁴ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 138-40.

¹⁵ *BHI*, 126.

¹⁶ This is specific point Kitchen makes (*Reliability*, 296).

Concluding Comments

I share the caution expressed in *BHI* against “epistemological privileging of extrabiblical texts,”¹⁷ i.e., that ancient Near Eastern texts *determine* the degree to which biblical narratives are historical. But these texts must still enter the conversation—front and center—if we wish to discuss the genre of an *ancient* text like Exodus. Even though ancient Near Eastern texts do not *determine* the historicity of the biblical narratives, they do serve as sort of a “genre calibration” to help us understand conventions of history writing in the ancient world, which would then help move us to a clearer understanding of the *nature* of the Bible’s historical witness.

It seems, therefore, that our expectations of Exodus as historiography must be understood in conversation with some extra-biblical data. The book of Exodus participates in literary conventions of the time. This still leaves open the questions of to what extent and in what way Exodus participates in those conventions, but, again, I do not see this as affecting directly the battle with the minimalists, who themselves, according to Hoffmeier, commit the “fallacy of misplaced literalism,”¹⁸ i.e., to expect a literalness of the Old Testament narratives that is foreign to *ancient expectations*. But as evangelicals we must be very careful not to commit the same fallacy ourselves! We as evangelicals must be alert to the literary dimensions of any Old Testament historical narrative.

What effect should this literary dimension of Old Testament historiography have on how we view the nature of Old Testament historiography in general, which is to ask, “What exactly do we mean by ‘historicity,’ how much of it do we have, and how much is enough for an inspired text?” “How much of Exodus needs to be ‘rooted’ in history” to maintain a credible articulation of inspiration?” The type of evidence we would need to bring this issue to a close will likely never come to us, and so the theological dialogue between history and faith will likely not abate. It is not enough, however, simply to acknowledge the literary dimension of biblical historiography, i.e., to acknowledge that the Bible “interprets history,” only to follow with assertions that beg for explanation, such as “*but* the biblical account is *nevertheless* true...accurate...rooted in real events.” The larger questions, the ones that are forced upon us by way of extra-biblical evidence, are: “Yes, true—but in what way?” “Accurate, O.K.—but how?” “Rooted in real events,

¹⁷ *BHI*, 65

¹⁸ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 42

sure—but in what sense?” The same can be said of most historical novels—they are “rooted” in history, are “true,” but they also take substantive liberties with that history, so that its genre is properly defined as “novel,” not historical account. Is Exodus a historical novel? Is that the best model for us to use? To draw a final conclusion here is certainly premature, but these are the types of questions that require evangelical scholarly attention.

A perspective I find helpful, at least for some issues, and that both Hoffmeier and Kitchen refer to, is what may be called the “mythologizing of history”¹⁹ as opposed to the “historicizing of myth.” Both argue that Exodus, specifically that which concerns Israel’s departure from Egypt, is not a rehearsal of a mythic drama dressed in fictional historical garb, as is sometimes asserted. The opposite is the case: it is a *historical* event that is recounted in ANE mythic categories, biblical analogues for which are seen in the use of the sea monster (called Tannin in Ezek 29:3 and Rahab in Isa 30:7) to portray current political events. For the tabernacle and the early life of Moses, as discussed in this article, “myth” is not all a relevant category, but the general principle holds: historical *events* are recounted in a manner that reflects ancient literary *conventions*. This is a very helpful way of addressing both the importance of historicity for the Christian faith while also pointing out the ancient ways in which those events are expressed. But, again, this very helpful perspective can raise other questions that deserve patient evangelical discussion. How far should such a perspective be taken? For example, some scholars suggest that the plagues are really just natural phenomenon, e.g., the Nile turning to “blood” is actually sediment of red earth discoloring the water.²⁰ For my thinking, it is hard to square this position with the theological tenor of Exodus itself, but regardless, such a position cannot be articulated without serious theological dialogue regarding its implications.

It is commonly, and correctly, pointed out that no historiography is “brute.” Hence, *BHI* depicts biblical historiography as a portrait rather than a photograph.²¹ I agree that portrait is a better analogy than photograph (although any photographer will tell us that their work is highly interpretive as well). But the question before us is what *kind* of a “portrait” do we expect from OT narrative? Even the most realistic of portraits

¹⁹ The expression is Hoffmeier’s. See *Israel in Egypt*, 108-109, 213; Kitchen, *Reliability*, 262.

²⁰ See N. Sarna, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 38-39; *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 70-71

²¹ *BHI*, 84-86.

is highly interpretive. Moreover, in the Bible, are we dealing with a life-like depiction, such as that of a Norman Rockwell painting, or are we closer to the impressionism of a Monet, or even the abstract art of Picasso or Jackson Pollack? All would claim to be “rooted in history” (their paintings represent real things), but such an assertion loses its force when it tells us nothing of the quality of the paintings. Can biblicists and theologians work together to navigate difficult, but perennial, issues such as these?

That issue of Exodus and historicity will continue to be engaged as long as people of faith show attentiveness to historical data. The extrabiblical data are an impetus for a very rich, nuanced, and unavoidable theological and hermeneutical discussion among evangelicals. And this discussion will never be settled by finding more and more data, for the types of data theoretically accessible to historical research can never settle these larger questions. We must avoid the extremes of hesitancy to engage data, on the one hand, and drawing hasty conclusions by a reckless handling of the data, on the other.

It is for us, then, to provide a nuanced and adjustable theological framework within which difficult matters can be engaged in a manner that reflects both deep doctrinal commitments and intellectual integrity. In doing so, our focus would not simply be on defending positions held in the past, but on delivering an intellectual framework to encourage viable faith commitments in our children and our children’s children. It remains for us, in view of the evidence available to us today, to ask not simply whether Exodus is “basically historical,” but how its particular historical character affects how we think about Scripture, and the God who inspired it. Demonstrating the Old Testament’s “basic historical plausibility” will not settle the question of whether it is the Word of God. It will only open up the larger question “in what way?”