CHAPTER ONE

# HISTORY RECAPTURED



# FIRST: THE STORY

It is a fabulous story, one of the best we have. A kingdom overpowers a community of aliens in their country. The kingdom enslaves the aliens, and they kill their male children. But one baby survives, a princess takes him in as her own, and he grows up in royalty. As an adult, he kills a man who is assaulting one of his people, and when his manslaughter becomes known he flees to another land. There he rescues a priest's daughters, and he stays in that land, marries one of the daughters, has sons, and lives tending flocks. And then he encounters God.

Miracles occur. A mountain of God. A miraculous fire. An angel. The man's staff becomes a snake, then turns back as it was. The man's hand becomes leprous, then turns back as it was. And during all this, God speaks, telling the man that God will free the enslaved people and that the man must be the one to carry it out. He must go back. And God reveals His name to him: Yahweh.

He returns. He faces the king. The king declines to let the people leave. The man initiates divinely ordered miracles: signs and wonders, ten plagues on the kingdom, on land and water and even blacking out the sun, suffering for humans and animals and plants, and, finally, death, but only to firstborn humans and animals. The king yields. The freed people leave the

kingdom. The king has a change of heart, and he and his army pursue them to the sea. But the sea splits, they pass through it, and it closes on the pursuing army. The people then trust in God and in the man, and they sing.

More stories will follow. The people will go to the mountain of God and will all encounter God. More miracles. More struggles. Covenant with God. Laws. A journey to their ancestors' homeland. Then the man will die, and a new man will lead them there. But all of these stories depend on and flow out of what happened with the man, Moses, and the departure, the exodus, from that kingdom, Egypt.

## SECOND: THE HISTORY

Is any of this true? Is it subject to evidence and reasoning, or is it strictly a matter of each person's religious conviction? In the last couple of decades an array of scholars, archaeologists, and clergy have seriously questioned whether this happened. This is not a tiny little academic spat. This is about two million people. The text says 603,550 adult male Israelites, plus the women and children, leave Egypt.[1] If the Bible has this wrong, how did it get it *this* wrong? These scholars, clergy, and laypersons were right to question the Bible. Questioning is a healthy thing to do. But were they in fact correct in this case? Was there really no exodus?

Some will say: It does not matter if it is historical or not. What matters is what it has meant, the exodus' meaning to religion over the centuries. That is a lovely thought. I used to say it sometimes myself. But nowadays I find myself saying: Whom are we kidding? We want to know if it happened, or

if what people have been believing for millennia is an illusion, an invention. It matters plenty to people whether it happened or not. There is an anti-historical wind blowing lately. People claim that we cannot really recover what happened in the past: we do not have history. But something happened. We can recover some of it from real evidence and reasoning. There are other parts of it that we cannot exhume. We also happen to have some great stories about it, a fabulous narrative. We have both, and we can study both: history and narrative. They are both great enterprises—as long as you tell people which you are doing at the time. And let us say that we investigate the history, and we find that 20 percent of it is true, or 10 percent of it is true, or that none of it is true. Then how did we get these stories? They are not like Cinderella. They are not merely entertainments. The authors wrote the exodus account as part of their nation's history, and millions of people have taken it as history for thousands of years. What was happening in their world that made them tell the story this way?

This is the process of literary-historical method. We can read a story that we think is fiction, or even know to be fiction, and still extract historical information from it. At a meeting on the exodus in San Diego (see below), the American biblical historian Baruch Halpern stirred things up saying that the Bible's story of the exodus should be read as a fairy tale. My wife's reaction was precisely to look at a fairy tale: Cinderella. It has mice become horses, a pumpkin become a coach, and a poor oppressed girl become a princess because a glass shoe fits only her. The story is fiction. It is not history. But the element of the shoe at least reflects that shoes were a real thing in the culture that produced that story. Everyone who heard the story understood it. So eliminate much of the biblical story from the category of history if

you wish. The ten plagues may be a fairy tale. The staff that becomes a snake may be a fairy tale. But we shall see that the exodus itself is not the fairy tale. It is the shoes.

And here is the pot of gold at the end of this particular historical rainbow: we do not have to choose between recapturing the history and caring about the values we might derive from the exodus. Once we exhume the history, we shall find, more intensely, more vividly, more *really* than before, the meanings that people can derive, the fruits that those events bequeathed for all the centuries that followed since then.

It is ironic—no?—that at the same time that an upsurge of exodus movies and books were coming out, the doubts about the whole thing were rising. But those doubts have led to new research and new findings.

How did we get to this point? First we had to arrive at a mindset at which we were ready to address this. Discoveries concerning evolution in biology, discoveries about the age of the earth in geology, about the origin of the universe in astronomy and cosmology, and about the background of the Bible itself in critical biblical scholarship and archaeology: all of these unlatched the gates so people could question the history behind the Bible's stories—the patriarchs, the exodus, the kings, the priests, the miracles.

## ENTER ARCHAEOLOGY

When biblical archaeology came along, at first it appeared to be an antidote to the doubts that these questions had raised. Starting with excavations in the nineteenth century, it flourished by the 1920s and onward to the present minute. Especially in the work of the father of this field in America, William Foxwell

Albright, and his student and successor George Ernest Wright, who was my teacher, people were getting a message that archaeology was confirming much of the Bible.[2] This made people in the Christian and Jewish communities trust archaeology rather than see it as a threat. But then, in more recent years, archaeology started to reveal things about both sides, sometimes confirming and often seriously challenging people's beliefs about the Bible's reports. By then, though, conservative religious communities had proudly praised archaeology's results, so now they were bound to argue its findings, both positive and negative, in its own terms.

And then, in fairly quick succession, a series of things happened.

A new generation of archaeologists and biblical scholars disputed Albright's and others' approach and conclusions as an insufficiently critical acceptance of evidence that did not actually confirm the Bible's story.[3] And then this spilled over into the popular realm.

A distinguished Egyptologist, Donald Redford, wrote in a 1992 book that, instead of having ever made an exodus from Egypt, the Israelites had made the story up out of Canaanite folklore. He wrote:

> The Exodus was part and parcel of an array of "origin" stories to which the Hebrews fell heir upon their settlement of the land, and which, lacking traditions of their own, they appropriated from the earlier culture they were copying.[4]

A Bible professor at a Reform rabbinical seminary, David Sperling, taught his students—future rabbis—for years that the exodus did not happen, and he made his case in a 1998 book.[5] He wrote:

> The evidence from archaeology has been decisive. The traditions of servitude in Egypt, the tales of wandering in the desert, and the stories of the conquest of the promised land appear to be fictitious.

A Conservative rabbi in Los Angeles, David Wolpe, said in a sermon in 2001, on *Passover!*:

> The truth is that virtually every modern archaeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all.

This was not a shock to anybody in the field, not to scholars or to lots of clergy. But it was news to the wider community and to the media, who were intrigued by it. And those last words, "if it happened at all," especially put an exclamation mark on it even though he did not actually say that it did not happen.

That same year a historian and archaeologist, who also was a rabbi, Lee Levine, wrote an essay that was included in a new volume that was to be in the pews of practically every Conservative synagogue in America.[6] After noting some points of evidence that fit with the possible milieu of the exodus, Levine concluded:

> These few indirect pieces of evidence are far from adequate to corroborate the historicity of the biblical account, but they do suggest a contextual background for the Egyptian servitude (of at least some of the people who later became Israelites) and the appearance

> of a new population in Canaan. Nevertheless, it also has been maintained that here too, as in the patriarchal era, later writers used earlier material to present an account of what in reality was a folk tradition with little or no historical basis.

This too stirred a strong reaction and treatment in the media.

Also in that same year the archaeologist Israel Finkelstein and the writer/archaeologist Neil Silberman wrote a book for laypersons, *The Bible Unearthed,*[7] which asked, "Was a Mass Exodus even possible in the time of Ramesses II?"[8] And they concluded, "One can hardly accept the idea of a flight of a large group of slaves from Egypt."[9]

Also in 2001 the American archaeologist William Dever wrote a series of books for laypersons, starting with *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* Dever and Finkelstein were famously on opposite sides on a lot of things. But they were not far apart on the exodus. Dever wrote:

> Archaeological investigation of Moses and the Exodus has been discarded as a fruitless pursuit. Indeed, the overwhelming archaeological evidence today of largely indigenous origins for early Israel leaves no room for an exodus from Egypt or a 40-year pilgrimage through the Sinai wilderness. A Moses-like figure may have existed. . . . But archaeology can do nothing to confirm such a figure as a historical personage.[10]

No exodus, no evidence, probably no Moses.

How did this happen? How did we shift from "archaeology proves the Bible" to "archaeology disproves the exodus" in just

a few decades? What changed? We can say that it was partly the natural pattern that we see in archaeology. A new discovery gets attention and headlines. Then things slow down, and we examine the discovery and what it implies more slowly and critically. This process can lead us to refine, reaffirm, or reverse what we thought at first. And another part of this shift was just the politics of the field. Those who leaned toward archaeology got tired of seeing themselves in the service of those who leaned toward the Bible. The very phrase "Biblical Archaeology" became unwelcome. Now it was "Syro-Palestinian Archaeology" (which is not accurate since the term Syria did not come into use in place of Aram, and Palestine did not come into use in place of Israel and Judah, until the Roman period[11]) or "Archaeology of the Levant" (but most people had no idea what the Levant was) or whatever. As one who had a foot in both text and archaeology, I was sympathetic to my archaeological colleagues for wanting to carve out something of their own. But the result, in this particular case, was that archaeologists were making judgments without awareness of the evidence that we could derive scientifically from biblical research. And, ironically, Bible scholars like Sperling and rabbis like Wolpe and others, to whom the archaeology sounded persuasive, sincerely accepted what the archaeologists were claiming.

## THE WAY IT IS TOLD IN THE BIBLE

Now, while these books and sermons and other examples were in the news and in the pews, making it seem to the public like we had obviously rejected the exodus as historical, many scholars in the field still went about their work, with the evidence still

persuading them that the exodus was indeed real. The Israeli biblical historian Abraham Malamat concluded in a paper presented at Brown University in 1992 that, in the light of texts showing Egyptian analogies, the biblical event was likely.[12] A Dutch scholar, Johannes de Moor, independently came to the same conclusion based on the same texts.[13] And more conservative scholars, like Bible scholar James Hoffmeier in the United States and Egyptologist K. A. Kitchen in England, argued the case for a historical exodus as well.[14] Some archaeologists had said, "We've combed the Sinai and didn't find anything." But an Israeli archaeologist laughed at that claim and told me, "It was five jeeps." It was a survey, not an excavation of the whole Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, even if we *had* excavated the whole Sinai, what could we find that people traveling from Egypt to Israel around thirty-three hundred years ago would have left that we would dig up now? A piece of petrified wood with "Moses loves Zipporah" carved in it? An Israeli archaeologist told me that a vehicle that was lost in Sinai in the 1973 war was found recently under sixteen meters of sand. Sixteen meters down in forty years (a biblical number)! Finding objects thirty-three hundred years down presents a rather harder challenge. And, above all, our archaeological work did not turn up evidence to show that an exodus did not happen. What it turned up was *nothing,* an absence of evidence. And some archaeologists then interpreted this nothing to be proof that the event did not happen. On the other side, people who challenged such interpretations were fond of quoting the old principle: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

While the publicized brouhaha was going on, academic books and articles and conferences were treating the subject as well. When the University of California, San Diego, held a major conference on the exodus in 2013, the impressive list of forty-five

participants included men and women from several continents and all kinds of backgrounds: biblical scholars, archaeologists, Egyptologists, geologists, oceanographers.[15] Questioning the exodus had gone global. (Listening to forty-five papers in three days! Mothers, don't let your children grow up to be scholars.) Most sober of all the scholarship was William Propp's thorough treatment of the historical, archaeological, and textual evidence in his masterful two-volume commentary on the book of Exodus for the Anchor Bible series in 1998 and 2006.[16] It was remarkable as an even-handed treatment of the arguments and evidence on many sides, academically sound while written in language that both scholars and the general public can appreciate.

I was drawn in as well. I had been doing research and writing on the Bible's sources and their authors for about forty years (a biblical number).[17] I thought that I had moved on from biblical source criticism to other things, but, like Michael Corleone in *Godfather III,* just when I think I'm out, they pull me back in! First, UCSD invited me back for that conference. I had spent thirty years there in San Diego until the University of Georgia made me an offer I couldn't refuse. But I would never reject an invitation back to that Garden of Eden in Southern California. You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.

And then Harvard invited me to give a seminar back in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It had been thirty-eight years since I had left my doctoral program there and moved to San Diego for my first job. After thirty-eight years of waiting to be invited back, I could hardly decline. So I went and gave a paper on the exodus as a trial run before the San Diego forty-five.

And then, the clincher: In 2013, *Reform Judaism* magazine came out with the heading "We Were Not Slaves in Egypt" on the cover. It contained excerpts from Sperling's and Wolpe's

publications. But it came out just before Passover. I, for one, was troubled that this was informing an audience of about a million Reform Jews that the exodus was not real just before they sat down with their children on Passover eve to celebrate the holiday. I expressed my concern, and the magazine's editors kindly let me write something as well. So one year later, just before the next Passover, *Reform Judaism* magazine appeared with my article. This time the heading on the cover was "The Exodus Is Not Fiction." The next thing I knew, I was invited to debate with Sperling at Temple Emanu-El in New York. I could not say no. It is the biggest synagogue in the western hemisphere.

I had no quarrel with Sperling or Wolpe about any research or discoveries of theirs. I just felt that they had too readily accepted the authority of some archaeologists. (Wolpe cautiously said that the archaeologists agree that the exodus did not happen "the way the Bible describes" it. Sperling went the whole way and said the exodus is "fictitious.")

The question to both the archaeologists and those who followed them is: are they saying that the Bible's multi-miracle, multi-million-people, multi-year story did not happen as written? Or are they saying that *nothing* happened?

If they mean the former, that "it did not happen *the way it is told in the Bible,*" well what do they mean by that? In the Bible, staffs turn to reptiles, the sun goes dark for three days, a destroyer mysteriously kills only firstborn animals and humans in Egypt, and it halts at the homes of people who smear blood on their doorposts. And then there is the matter of the Red (not Reed[18]) Sea splitting into walls of water. Whether one believes these things or not, archaeology has nothing to do with it. Archaeology has not proven any of the miracles of the Bible's exodus story to be true or false.

The archaeologist Eric Cline summed this up well and succinctly:

> We do not have a single shred of evidence to date. There is nothing [available] archaeologically to attest to anything from the biblical story. No plagues, no parting of the Red Sea, no manna from heaven, no wandering for 40 years. However, I should add that there is also no archaeological evidence that proves it did not take place. So at this point in time, *the archaeological record can neither be used to confirm nor deny the existence of the Exodus*.[19]
>
> (emphasis added)

So what are the discoveries that made writers think that we now had proof that it did not happen *the way it is told in the Bible*? In a way, this is a variation on people who account for a biblical miracle by saying it happened, only differently:

"The Red Sea did not split into two walls of water; it was the tides." Actually, there are no tides on the Red Sea. Tides (of significant size) are only on the oceans.

"The darkening of the sun was an eclipse." Eclipses do not last for three days. Now one might say that maybe they exaggerated a normal solar eclipse and claimed that it was three days. But how does that solve anything? Solar eclipses occur in every year. Taking a normal event and turning it into something miraculous is, in effect, no different than just making up the miraculous event altogether.

"The firstborn had the richest diet, so they got illnesses and died." Outside of the fact that this argument is just plain ridiculous on the face of it, the firstborn *animals* die in the story as well.

And it all happens in one night. And firstborn people with blood on the doorposts do not die.

Some tried to account for the huge number of 603,550 males (hence two million) by asserting that the Hebrew word for "thousand" (*'eleph*) actually means "clan."[20] But in over 250 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible the word *'eleph* regularly means thousands and is joined alongside the word for hundreds in giving total numbers. And the number of *firstborn* Israelite males in the biblical census is 22,273 (Numbers 3:43). Since firstborn sons as a group do not constitute clans, this confirms that those who take the word for "thousand" in the census to mean "clan" are mistaken. Those who try to understand this term as "clan" do this presumably because they are troubled by the high numbers of Israelites in the census in Numbers. But we cannot escape the problem by redefining a term.[21]

Some move the chronology of the Pharaohs up or down by centuries to find a coordination between the exodus and various other events and references. But, as we shall see below, such recalculations are unnecessary to account for the timing of the exodus.

And then there are the Thera theories. (It has great alliteration if nothing else.) A tremendous volcanic eruption occurred at Thera on what is now the island of Santorini in around the seventeenth or sixteenth century BCE. Some have suggested that its plume of smoke could have inspired the Bible's account of a column of cloud and fire that led the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land. Some have suggested that the smoke is connected to the Bible's account of the darkening of the sun. Some have suggested that the eruption caused a tsunami that affected the Red Sea. But we could ask: where is there more proof that any of these possibilities happened than the biblical stories anyway?

Mark Harris, of the University of Edinburgh, made this point with regard to the various Thera theories. He wrote:

> One thing is clear: the Thera theories are following a trajectory towards increasingly complex naturalistic scenarios while the historical, theological and textual questions raised by critical scholarship are largely overlooked.[22]

That is, they connect possible big natural events to splitting seas and darkening skies and plagues without taking account of how those stories are composite (i.e., with no awareness of who wrote the Bible and its sources[23]), or that there is a nonmiraculous portion to those sources that is more believable than the Thera stretches of imagination. And that is not to mention that the Thera eruption, coming in the seventeenth or sixteenth century BCE, was way too early to have had anything to do with the exodus. Harris puts it mildly when he says,

> Serious difficulties are identified with the Thera theories.[24]

There is not much point in saying that *something* happened but that it was different from how the Bible tells it, unless we can figure out what that something was. So it still comes down to this: What happened? And what is the connection between what happened and the way that the Bible's authors wrote the story? That is where the historical study and the literary study of the Bible come together. And that is what has gradually been mounting up, especially in recent decades. For too long our field was made up of Bible scholars who were not trained in archaeology

or historical method. And then for too long we leaned on archaeologists who were not trained in biblical texts, their history, language, and authorship. Albright's ideal was that eventually the two would work together. My teacher George Ernest Wright was Albright's student and successor and was the leading American biblical archaeologist of his day. The interesting thing is that he was also the leading American Old Testament theologian at the same time.[25] He never saw the two—archaeology and theology—as unrelated or in competition. I think that is how I learned that both text and archaeology can go together. The two separated for a while, but their inevitable reunion has begun to happen. We can read a story closely, excavate the earth carefully, and figure out what happened that led to that story. And one of the first fruits of this high-yield merger of literary study, historical study, and archaeology is a grasp of what happened in Egypt all those years ago, the story behind the story.

The investigation of this mystery is a time machine. We can look back and see what happened some thirty-three hundred years ago. Then we can move through time and watch the story evolve. And in the end, I think we shall stand in awe at how it still informs us and has willed to us some of our most precious values. The event and the story are thousands of years old, but they can still enrich and preserve us in our precarious times.