

## Lesson 4

# The Historical Background of the Exodus

### Goals:

- Students will perform historical research and try to correlate archeological findings with biblical narratives.
- Students will be able to identify two theories for the historical period that best fits the historical setting of the Exodus and evaluate evidence for each.
- Students will appreciate specific examples of how knowledge of the historical background of the Exodus and help explain many specific details in the pesukim.

### Background:

The Torah is not primarily meant to retell history (see Rashi on Beresheet 1:1). It does, however, use historical events in order to teach lessons about Hashem's providence in human affairs, Israel's role among nations, and the need for law and ethics to overcome evil. Nevertheless, a short historical survey can be helpful for understanding parts of the biblical story, putting the narrative in context, and better appreciating the magnitude of the Torah's message. Historians have attempted to reconstruct the events of the slavery in Egypt and the exodus for centuries.

Perhaps the first such recorded attempt was by the Jewish historian in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, Josephus. Josephus identifies the Israelite slaves with a group known as the Hyksos. On the history of the Hyksos, Josephus quotes Manetho, an Egyptian historian who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE. He wrote a history of Egypt called *Aegyptiaca* and also coined the term "dynasty." In his book *Against Apion* 1.73, Josephus writes:

Manetho, in the second book of his Egyptian History, writes concerning us [the Jews] in the following manner. I will set down his very words, as if I were to bring the very man himself into a court for a witness:

"...There came, after a surprising manner, men of ignoble birth out of the eastern parts, and had boldness enough to make an expedition into our country and with ease subdued it by force, yet without our hazarding a battle with them....This whole nation was called Hyksos....These people...kept possession of Egypt five hundred and eleven years."

After these, he says, "That the kings of Thebais and the other parts of Egypt made an insurrection against the [Hyksos] shepherds, and that there a terrible and long war was made between them." He says further, "That under a king, whose name was Alisphragmuthosis, the [Hyksos] shepherds were subdued by him, and were indeed driven out of other parts of Egypt..."

"They went away with their whole families and effects, not fewer in number than two hundred and forty thousand, and took their journey from Egypt.... They built a city in that country which is now called Judea, and that large enough to contain this great number of men, and called it Jerusalem..."

This is Manetho's account. And evident it is from the number of years by him set down belonging to this interval, if they be summed up together, that these shepherds, as they are here called, who were no other than our forefathers, were delivered out of Egypt, and came thence, and inhabited this country.

Based on other historical records, we can confirm that the Hyksos, meaning "foreign rulers" in Egyptian, were a conglomeration of Semitic people who infiltrated Egypt in the

18<sup>th</sup> century BCE. They then gained supremacy and ruled Northern Egypt from 1700-1550 BCE. Finally, the Egyptian Pharaoh Ahmose I defeated them, chased most of them out of the country, and reestablished native Egyptian rule.

Most modern historians, however, do not agree with Josephus. They place the date for the Exodus and the conquest of Israel during the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The primary reason for this dating is that there is archeological evidence for a large-scale conquest of Israel during the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. Excavation of many cities, such as Hazor, show that they were destroyed during this period. No such destruction, however, is found during the 15<sup>th</sup> century when powerful Pharaohs were actually in control of Canaan, precluding the possibility of an Israelite invasion.

Rather, the Pharaoh of the Exodus is probably Ramses II (1279-1213 BCE). He moved the center of the Egyptian government from Thebes and Memphis in the South to the eastern Delta, precisely where Goshen was, the residence of the Israelites. The great building projects of Ramses II required conscripted slave labor and the Israelite foreigners made perfect candidates. The cities Ramses and Pitom, mentioned in Ex 1:11 refer to the city in this region named after Ramses II and a nearby city whose name means, “the House of the god Atum.”

Even if Josephus is wrong, however, knowledge of the Hyksos does add historical context that explains many aspects of the Torah’s story:

- This background places the migration of Jacob’s family to Egypt within the context of a larger movement of Semites moving to Egypt
- It explains how Joseph could rise to great power and marry an Egyptian noblewoman. He was a Semite just as they were.
- It further explains why Pharaoh was so paranoid about the Israelite nation increasing and joining enemies to conquer the Egyptians. Such an event had already happened with the Hyksos and the memory of their revolt would still be prominent in their minds.

**Activity:**

1. For homework or in a computer lab, have students find out as much as they can on the various dynasties of ancient Egypt and particularly the Hyksos. See if students are able to find any clues in Shemot regarding who the Pharaoh of the slavery might be.
2. Review this history using their findings and the powerpoint presentation. Then present Josephus’ claim that the Israelites are the Hyksos. Discuss whether they think Josephus is correct.
3. Present evidence for why historians think Josephus is wrong and that the Exodus occurred during the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. rather than the 16<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE.
4. Bring these findings together by identifying Ramses II as the Pharaoh of the slavery and pointing out the various aspects of the Shemot story that are illuminated by knowing of the historical context.

**Further Reading:** Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*, New York: Schocken Books, 1986, pp. 7-24.