



Research article

**THE REAL EXODUS - A HYPOTHESIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

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An attempt to find realistic, down-to-earth facts behind the Exodus texts. The Exodus story in the Torah is re-interpreted as a low-key local event in the history of the Lower Egypt, the arrival and the subsequent hasty departure of a small Canaan tribe forced by policies of two successive village administrators.

**Keywords:** *Exodus, Moses, Biblical history, Ancient Egypt*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The story of Exodus of the Jews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses is one of the central narratives in the Torah. Over the centuries, it was discussed, dissected and embellished uncountable number of times, starting with the Torah itself (Lev., Num., Deut.). This process continues up to this day.<sup>1-5</sup> A thorough review by Hoffmeier describing archaeological findings related to a possible Hebrew sojourn in the ancient Egypt, which is backed up with a large number of sources and references, shows that no direct evidence for the Exodus

has been discovered yet but that a number of indirect findings suggest that the events described in the Torah are plausible.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the general consensus in the modern literature on the subject (see a few examples in<sup>7,8</sup>) is that the Exodus story describes real events, a confrontation between two Egyptian Pharaohs and an enslaved Hebrew tribe.

This article attempts to present an alternative interpretation of the Exodus story and to find realistic, down-to-earth facts in the Exodus texts. The guiding principle behind the attempt is believability and logical truthfulness of



the story's elements. It turns out that after the "realistic" parts of the story are separated from its religious and folklore parts; a much simpler and more credible account of the Exodus events emerges.

The textual attribution of references to the sources constituting the Torah, **E**, **J**, **P**, **D** and **R** (redactor) is given below following Friedman.<sup>9</sup>

### TIMING OF THE EXODUS EVENTS

The exact timing of the Hebrew presence in Egypt is a thoroughly discussed and a highly disputed subject.<sup>6,9</sup> Although it has no direct relevance to the hypothesis presented below, it should be noted that the Exodus timing is quite clearly marked in the Torah itself. Before the Exodus, the Hebrews were employed in the construction of two Egyptian cities in the Nile Delta, which are called Pithom and Ramesses in the Torah (Exod. 1:11 **E**). Pi-Ramesses ("the house of victorious Ramses") and Pi-Thom [Pi(r)-(A)tum, "house of the god Atum"] are the two cities well known from the Egyptian history.<sup>10</sup> Recent archaeological data show that their description in the Torah as "supply cities" or "storage cities" is quite accurate. For example, Pi-Ramesses (at the present time, a small town Qantir in the Nile Delta) quartered infantry, had large stables for Pharaohs' chariots, and a bronze foundry. The city stored supplies, which were used when the Egyptian army was advancing Northward or Eastward. Construction of the cities started under Pharaoh Seti (ruled 1291-1278 B.C.E.) and was completed

during the rule of his son, Ramses II (ruled 1278-1213 B.C.E.). The only independent evidence<sup>6</sup> of the absolute Exodus timing is preserved on the Victory Stele in Thebes (1207 B.C.E.), the monument erected by Pharaoh Merneptah (ruled 1213-1203 B.C.E), a son and the successor of Ramses II. The text on the stele proclaims, among many other victorious deeds of Merneptah (such as victories in Libya and over Philistines, People of the Sea): "the princes are prostrate saying 'Shalom!'... Canaan is captive with all woe; ... Israel is wasted, his seed is destroyed ...".<sup>11</sup> Taking into account the flowery style of Egyptian priests which composed such texts and their tendency to exaggerate glorious victories of Pharaohs, the writing can be simply interpreted as the statement that the Egyptian army led by Pharaoh Merneptah fought a tribe or a conglomerate of tribes called Israel early in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B,C,E. The priests obviously distinguished Israel from other Canaanite tribes and cities. These facts suggest that the most probable time of the Exodus was in mid-1200s B,C,E, several decades before the erection of the Victory Stele.

To develop the relative time table of the Hebrews' presence in Egypt, one should take into account that ancient Hebrews were semi-nomadic herders both before the descent of the Jacob's extended family to Egypt and after the Exodus. As most such tribes, they were quite good at remembering their lineages, military victories (often greatly exaggerated), old grievances, and



herding routes, but quite bad at counting time. If one adds to this a natural desire to embellish the vigor and longevity of ones' glorious forefathers, one can understand the emergence of complex fabrications, according to which famous predecessors of the Jews could live to over 100 years in the period when the average man's lifespan was between 35 and 40 and when 50-year-old people were regarded elderly. These exaggerations have led to a great extension of the period associated with the time of the Jews' presence in Egypt, 430 years (Exod. 12:40 **P**), and the duration of the Sinai wandering following the Exodus, about 40 years. As a result, the ages of Exodus participants living during these periods were also dramatically stretched: Jacob was claimed to live 147 years (Gen. 47:28 **J**), Levi 137 years (Exod. 6:16 **P**), Joseph 110 years (Gen. 50:22 **J**), Amram, the father of Moses, 137 years (Num. 3:19 **P**), Kohath, the grandfather of Moses, 133 years (Exod. 6:18 **P**), Aaron 123 years (Num. 33:39 **P**), Moses 120 years (Deut. 31:1), etc.

However, a reasonable relative chronology can be deduced directly from two lines of evidence. The Joseph's lineage is thoroughly described in the Torah. Jacob and the families of his sons arrived in Egypt when the Jacob's son Joseph was a middle-aged man, married and the father of two teenage boys (Gen. 47:28 **P**, 48:5 **P**). Thus, the lineage of the Joseph's descendants listed in the Torah is a reliable source of the relative Exodus time table:

Manasseh (the Joseph's elder son) → Machir → Gilead → Hephher → Zelophedad

Manasseh was born in Egypt, he was a teenager when the Jacob's family arrived in Egypt (Gen. 47:28 **P**, 48:5 **P**). Zelophedad was a participant of the Exodus; he died during the Sinai journey (Num. 26:1 **P**). His daughters also were participants of the Exodus; after the Zelophedad's death they demanded a part of his inheritance (Num. 26:1 **P**).<sup>12,13</sup> If one assumes the average time span between generations, the age of reaching sexual maturity and producing the first offspring, as 18-25 years, the period between the Jacob's arrival in Egypt and the Exodus, which happened four generations later, should be in a range between 60 and 80 years.

The second line of evidence can be deduced from the Moses' genealogy:

Levi → Kohath → Amram → Moses

Levi, one of the Jacob's sons, was a middle-aged man when he arrived in Egypt together with his brothers; his second son Kotah was apparently a teenager at that time. Amram was the Kotah's first son and Moses was the third child of Amram (Exod. 6:18-20 **P**, Num. 3:19, 26:58-59 **P**). If we assume that Moses was in his thirties when the Exodus took place (see the discussion below), this sequence also suggests that the Hebrews spent about 70-80 years in Egypt.



### REALISTIC DETAILS IN THE EXODUS STORY

The Torah declares that at a certain time after the arrival of the Jacob's family in Nile Delta the Hebrews were enslaved by Egyptians (Exod. 1:11 **E**), they were forced to work in the fields and to manufacture dried-clay bricks for the construction of Pithom and Ramesses (Exod. 1:11 **E**). The Hebrews were treated very harshly by their Egyptian slave-drivers and suffered egregiously under the Egyptian yoke.<sup>14</sup>

However; a thorough reading of the Torah gives a more sanguine picture. Here small details of the everyday life should take precedent over blood-curdling descriptions of the people's suffering. The Hebrews lived in a village near the city of Ramesses (Exod. 12:37 **R**) in comfortable dwellings "with side-posts and lintels" (Exod. 12:7 **P**); they had lights in their houses (Exod. 10:23 **J**). The Hebrews had their own large flock (cattle, horses, donkeys, camels, sheep) separate from the Egyptian flock (Exod. 9:4 and 9:6 **J**, 10:24 **J**, 12:4 **P**, 12:38 **E**). The Hebrews were allowed to travel away from the village, a kind of freedom unthinkable for real slaves. For example, Aaron travelled to the Midian where he met Moses before the Moses' return to Egypt (Exod. 4:27 **J**).

When Moses appealed before the Pharaoh to ask the permission for the Hebrews to leave Egypt, one of his requests was: "We will all go, including our young and old, sons and daughters, sheep and cattle. Not a hoof of ours may stay" (Exod. 10:1-11 **J**, 10:25-26 **J**).

While preparing to depart, the Hebrews slaughtered lambs and goats and roasted its flesh for the sacrificial meal. During their journey, they had lambs to sacrifice and eat (Exod. 12:3-7 **P**); an ox was sacrificed at the Sinai (Exod. 17:3 **E**, Lev. 8:2 and 8:14 **P**). The Hebrews had valuables, gold and silver items, in their possession, which they took with them when they left Egypt (Num.7:12-26 **P**). Apparently, the Hebrews lived side by side with their Egyptian peasant neighbors, knew them well and were on a friendly basis (Exod. 12:36 **E**).

### HYPOTHESIS

It appears that the story of the Exodus can be retold quite rationally (for the present-day reader) if a single conjecture is introduced. Let us assume for a moment that the two "Pharaohs" in the Exodus story, the father and the son, have nothing to do with the real Pharaohs of Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Biographies of these real Pharaohs, Seti, Ramses II and Merneptah, are thoroughly documented and are known in detail. The Pharaohs were regarded as living gods by Egyptians, they dwelled in palaces, were served by numerous wives, the guard and servants, they were surrounded by hundreds of relatives, concubines, priests and courtiers. All three Pharaohs were outstanding military and civil leaders, all three lived long lives.

It is instructive to compare these firmly known historic facts with the minutiae of the life of the two "Pharaohs" in the Exodus story:



- Both of the Torah's "Pharaohs" lived within a short walking distance from the Hebrew village. When Moses, after returning to the village from exile, entered into heated negotiations with the "Pharaoh-son", he and Aaron *walked* to the "Pharaoh's" house (Exod. 7:10 **P**, 7:15 **J**) or met the "Pharaoh-son" halfway (Exod. 7:15 and 7:23 **J**, 8:20 **J**).
  - The "Pharaoh-father" personally discussed the issue of overpopulation of the Hebrew tribe with two Jewish midwives (Exod. 1:15 **E**).
  - When a daughter of the "Pharaoh-father" found the baby Moses in the bushes near the river, she knew very well who the baby was: "This is one of the Hebrews' children" (Exod. 2:6 **J**).
  - The daughter of the "Pharaoh-father" personally talked with "slaves", the Moses' mother and sister (Exod. 2:6 **J**).
  - The chain of command for the Hebrew slaves was very short: the "Pharaoh" → Egyptian taskmasters → Hebrew foremen appointed by the taskmasters → Hebrew workers (Exod. 1:11 **E**, 5:6 **J** and 5:10 **J**).
  - An important concern of the "Pharaoh-son" was work schedules of Hebrew laborers and the availability of straw for the brick manufacture (Exod. 5:6-12 **J**).
  - When the brick quota for the town construction was not met and the Egyptian taskmasters beat the Hebrew foremen, the latter went to the "Pharaoh-son" to complain about the harsh treatment (Exod. 5:14-18 **J**).
  - Egyptian slaves could address the "Pharaoh" directly (Exod. 10:7 **J**).
  - Some Hebrew "slaves", Moses and Aaron among them, were allowed into the presence of the "Pharaoh-son" and he argued with them regarding their circumstances and requests (Exod. 5:1 **J**).
  - The "Pharaoh-son" had a habit of walking alone by the riverbank Moses met him several times there (Exod. 7:15 and 7:23 **J**, 8:20).
  - The "Pharaoh-son" personally put horses to his chariot before starting the pursuit of the fleeing Hebrews (Exod. 14:6 **J**).
- Put all these mundane details together and a clear picture emerges: both the "Pharaohs" of the Exodus story were not the real Egyptian Pharaohs (פרעה) but low-level local administrators (ancient Egyptian h"-ty'-n, a mayor<sup>15</sup>). akin to the modern Egyptian *mukhtars*. They were similar in position and stature to village bailiffs in Medieval England, and one of their responsibilities was the supervision of the Hebrew tribe.
- As soon as this assumption is allowed, the whole story of the Jews in the ancient Egypt, the life story of Moses, and the story of the Exodus, all come into clear focus. A small Hebrew tribe migrated to the land of Goshen (Gen. 47:6 **J**, Exod. 2:1 **J**) in the Nile Delta, east from the modern Alexandria. The tribe came to Egypt from the Canaan with all their possessions and the herd escaping a severe drought (Gen. 47:4 **J**). The main occupation of the tribe in the



Goshen was herding, the same as it was in the Canaan. Conditions for living and pastures for the flock in the Goshen were superior to those in the Canaan and the tribe prospered. It abandoned the semi-nomadic way of life and settled near an Egyptian village. The Hebrews lived in permanent houses and their flock used the same pastures as those of local Egyptian peasants.

Bailiffs of the village, the father and, later, his son, took notice of the growing and prosperous foreign tribe. When the construction of Pi-Ramesses and Pi-Thom began, one of the main duties of heads of surrounding villages was providing labor and building materials. From the perspective of the village bailiffs, the Hebrews were parasites; they used the pastures but did not contribute to the burden of the local population, the sacred duty of all Egyptian peasants: to provide free labor for important national projects of Pharaohs, being it an erection of funeral pyramids or tombs, digging and dredging irrigation channels or building new towns. A clear option for the bailiffs was to force the Hebrews to work. Hence, sharp animosity gradually developed between the Hebrews and the bailiffs, especially the younger one, the animosity that was the main reason for the success of Moses in persuading his brethren to leave the Goshen and to return to the Canaan.

### MOSES

Biographical data of Moses are presented in the Torah in much detail and can be easily separated from overlapping mythical details of his story due to their

down-to-earth earnestness. Moses was born in the land of Goshen. His father, Amram ben Kohath from the house of Levi (Exod. 6:18-20 **P**, Num. 3:19, 26:58-59 **P**), was an agricultural and construction laborer (Exod. 1:14 **P**). His mother Jochebed was also from the house of Levi (Exod. 6:20 **P**). Moses had two siblings, the sister Miriam, seven years older, and the brother Aaron, three years older.

It is unclear why the Moses' parents decided to put him up for adoption (an Egyptian village bailiff could hardly issue an order to kill all the new-born Hebrew boys), but the scheme they designed is transparent. The habit of the bailiff's daughter to bath in the river was well known to them; they placed the basket with three months-old Moses next to her usual route and sent young Miriam to watch over the baby (Exod. 2:3-4 **J**). When the bailiff's daughter saw the basket and a young girl loitering nearby, the truce became transparent to her too ["this is one of the Hebrews' children" (Exod. 2:6 **J**)]. But she liked the baby and decided to adopt him. She accepted him and named him M'sheh (Exod. 2:10 **J**), "a son" in Egyptian. [One of the real Pharaohs of that period had a somewhat similar name, Rah-M'sheh (Ramses in Greek), "a son of the god Ra".] The bailiff's daughter could not nurse the baby of course but she rapidly found out who the baby's real mother was or, possibly, she recognized Miriam, and she paid the Moses' mother to nurse him (Exod. 2:8-9 **J**). Once the nursing was over, Moses was sent to the bailiff's



daughter, and she raised him as her own son.

Very little is known about the Moses' adolescent years but his position in the village bailiff's household can be guessed reasonably well. He was a "house Jew", a vigorous and intelligent boy of an unambiguous origin, who enjoyed the place of a favorite in the eyes of the bailiff's daughter (Exod. 2:10 **J**). Moses knew well who his real parents and siblings were (Exod. 4:27 **J**), as well as his station in the bailiff's household. He was also well known to the Jews who lived in the village. When Moses, enraged by the harsh treatment of a Hebrew man by an Egyptian enforcer, killed him, he apparently was 16-18 years old, mature enough to kill a man. Hebrew villagers who saw the killing recognized him and hinted that they could easily report the incident to teach the naughty youngster that he was merely "one of them" (Exod. 2:14 **J**). Killing of an Egyptian man was a capital crime and no fondness of the bailiff's daughter could save Moses from punishment. He fled the village and escaped to the Midian, a hilly territory located to the North-East of the Gulf of Aqaba (Exod. 2:15 **J**).

It appears that Moses spent about 15 years there. His occupation in the Midian, a sheep herder (Exod. 3:1 **E**), was the same as that of his compatriots in the Goshen. He worked for the patriarch of a local nomad family, married his daughter (Exod. 2:21 **J**) and had two sons by her (Exod. 2:22 **J**, 4:20 **E**, 18:3-4 **E**). One can speculate that the practical

reason for the Moses' decision to return to Egypt was the news brought by Aaron [who traveled to the Midian to meet Moses (Exod. 4:27 **J**)], that the old village bailiff has died (Exod. 4:19 **J**), that his son took his place, and that nobody remembered the Moses' crime anymore. Judging by the fact that the Moses' youngest son was merely a baby at that time, Moses was about 30-35 years old when he returned to Egypt.

### **THE EXODUS**

As soon as Moses entered the Hebrews' village in the Goshen, the contrast between his life in the Midian and the Hebrews' existence in the Nile Delta shocked him. For many years, Moses lived in the Midian as a proud free man, a master of his life. What he encountered in the village was a group of servile people straining under the ever-growing burden of forced labor imposed on them by the young bailiff (Exod. 2:23 **J**).

The Torah gives much space to supernatural phenomena which, in a zigzag fashion, either persuaded the young bailiff to promise the release of the Hebrew tribe or "hardened his heart" and made him renege on the promise. But small details in the text suggest that after Moses decided to free his people from their subjugated state, one of his main concerns was to persuade the Hebrews themselves to leave the village and substitute their difficult but familiar and generally comfortable settled life for an uncertain freedom.<sup>16</sup> The Torah contains scattered through the text echoes of this reluctance to leave Egypt and fond memories of life in the Goshen village



(Exod. 14:12 **E**, 16:3 **P**, 17:3 **E**, Num. 11:1-5, 11:18 **E**, 20:6 **P**, Deut. 1:27).

What helped Moses, apart from his obvious talent of a born leader, was his stature among the Hebrews and the local Egyptians as a rebel who was not afraid to confront the state power: "the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people" (Exod. 11:3 **J**). The strategy Moses used in his arguments with the younger bailiff, a stubborn man, was to invent a believable pretext for the Hebrews to leave the village: animal sacrifices must be made to God of Israel and the only place to do it was in the Eastern Desert. "The God of Israel met us and ordered us to go a three days' journey into the wilderness, and pray and to make sacrifice unto His name to avoid illness or death" (Exod. 3:16 **J**, 5:3 **J**, 8:1 **P**, 8:27 **J**, 10:7-11 **J**, 10:21-26 **J**).

Finally, the Hebrew tribe, much enlarged after a long period of settled life, has left their village taking all their herds and possessions with them (Exod. 12:37 **E**, 17:3 **E**, Num. 7:1-3 **P**). Some innocent details show that although the tribe departed from the village in haste, they had enough time to collect their belonging thoroughly: Miriam even took a timbrel (a drum) with her and "all the women supported her with their timbrels" (Exod. 15:19-20 **R**). Later, when regular services at the Tabernacle in the course of the tribe's movement through the Sinai were established, men and women brought their jewelry to adorn the tent (Exod. 35:22-28 **P**).

The tribe went from their village near Pi-Ramesses to Succot, a village to the North-East of Pi-Thom (Exod. 12:37 **E**), reached the edge of the Eastern Desert at Etham (Exod. 13:20 **R**), crossed the desert, and spent the night at a town Pi-Hahiroth, close to the edge of the "Sea of Grass" (Exod. 14:2,9 **P**, **E**). The Sea of Grass was a large salt-water marsh covered with reeds, directly east from the Goshen. A part of the marsh, a lake called the Great Bitter Lake, still exists to the East of the Suez Canal. The marsh was a three-day' journey away from the Pi-Ramesses; for a large tribe with a large herd it suggests a distance of about 50-60 miles.

Crossing the marsh, as it is described in the Torah, was quite a prosaic event. A strong Eastern wind blew during the night and drew away water from the shallow marsh. This fortunate circumstance allowed the tribe to walk across the field of reeds (Exod. 13:21 **P**), but the water returned later in the morning and prevented the pursuing Egyptian posse to follow the fleeing Hebrews (Exod. 14:27 **J**, **P**).

By crossing the Sea of Grass, the Hebrews severed all connections with Egypt. The geography of the tribe's movements after leaving Egypt is described in much detail in the Torah (Num. 33 **R**). The tribe entered the Sinai Peninsula and the routine of the nomadic life was rapidly established: set tents (Exod. 16:16 **P**), stay put until the herds graze all the grass in the vicinity (the Sinai was a much wetter and greener place at that time), then move to the next grazing area. The Torah names over forty locations where the tribe pitched their tents. The only exception from this age-





tested nomadic routine was a long stay at Kadesh Barnea, the oasis 50 miles from the present-day city of Beersheba; "abode in Kadesh many days" (Deut. 1:46).

The Torah contains conflicting details about the size of the departing Hebrew tribe. When the family of Jacob came to Egypt, it contained approximately 70 people (Exod. 1:5 R, 12:41 P, Deut. 10:22). However, the Torah firmly states that six hundred thousand adult men left Egypt on foot, besides women and children (Exod. 12:37-39 E). If one considers the size of an average Hebrew family, like the Moses' family, two parents and three to five children, it would bring the total number of the leaving people to about two million. Later commentators in the Talmud did the same calculation but they decided that a further embellishment would do no harm: "There were 3,500,000 people leaving Egypt; some opinions say 20,000,000"; "at least 54,000,000 donkeys carrying treasure, in addition to many other animals".<sup>17</sup> However, realities of Ancient Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula make these numbers utterly improbable. The best estimates give the total Egypt population in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E. between two and three million people spread evenly along the Nile banks.<sup>18</sup> A sudden loss of nearly all of the kingdom's population would be certainly noticed and recorded by the Egyptians.

What size of the Hebrew tribe one would expect to find after a 80-year period in the Goshen? While the tribe

was still living in the village, two midwives were sufficient to attend to women giving birth (Exod. 1:15 E). Soon after leaving the village, the whole tribe camped at a small oasis of Elim with twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees (Exod. 15:27 R, Num. 33:9 R). Such an oasis could be a suitable place to accommodate three-four hundred nomads and their herds but it was hardly sufficient for millions of people. Bitter water in the spring at Mara is mentioned in the Torah (Exod. 15:23 J);<sup>19</sup> it could be a problem for a tribe of several hundred but a single spring could not satisfy millions of people and their herds.

Another event that makes the evaluation of the Hebrew tribe possible had happened early in the voyage, the confrontation with Amalekites, the desert raiders (Exod. 17:8-14 E). "Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as you came forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were enfeebled in thy rear, when you were faint and weary..." (Deut. 25:17). A marauding desert tribe, similar in size to Bedouin tribes crisscrossing the Sinai Peninsula nowadays, could represent a great danger for a small nomadic group but it would not be even noticed if confronted by millions.

If the conjecture of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt presented here is accepted, it follows that this monumental event in the Jewish history represented an insignificant local happening in the Northern section of the ancient Lower Egypt. Naturally, it left no record in her



history. Regard the situation: a small nomadic tribe arrives from the East; it settles in the Nile Delta but abruptly departs after several decades under a false pretext leaving a bitter aftertaste and embarrassment for the local authority. A mishap - yes, but obviously not significant enough to report it to the real Pharaoh sitting in Memphis.

Textual and historic analysis shows that the four components of the Torah were written in different parts of the ancient Israel, in different time periods, and that they all were composed much later after the Exodus has really occurred.<sup>9,20,21</sup> Their usually accepted dating is: **E** ~300 years later, in Israel; **J** ~400 years later, in Judah; **P** over 500 years later and **D** ~600 years later.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, the authors of the four parts wrote their texts independently, they were interested in different aspects of the Exodus story and each presented it in a relatively consistent way.<sup>21</sup> The source analysis shows a clear pattern: although the **J**, **E**, and **P** texts all eloquently describe numerous "miraculous events" accompanying the Exodus (plagues of Egypt,<sup>22</sup> sorcery performed by Moses and by Egyptian priests, etc.), only the **J** text<sup>23</sup> and, in some instances, the **P** text which apparently followed **J** provide nearly all the pedestrian realistic details. One can speculate that the **J** author(s), living in Judea in the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. and mostly concerned with prosperity of the Judean Kingdom, felt less obliged to emphasize the dominance of Moses in the Exodus story (the principal subject in **E**) and placed in the text many mundane

details and circumstances of the Hebrews' departure from Egypt.

Over the centuries, until all the parts of the Torah were written down and combined into a single text, the Exodus story was gradually expanded into an epochal upheaval. The bailiffs were transformed into Pharaohs and horrible Plagues of Egypt were added to dramatize and embellish the relatively low-key event,<sup>22</sup> the hasty departure of a small tribe from a village in the Lower Egypt. Differences between the **E** and the **J** texts are skillfully camouflaged in the final Torah text. Nevertheless, one can clearly see that the **J** narrative is quite subdued and simply states that the main grievance of the Hebrews before their departure from Egypt was the refusal of the "Pharaoh-son" to provide a sufficient volume of straw for the brick manufacture (Exod. 5:7 **J**), whereas the **E** text transforms the hated elder village bailiff into a monster who ordered killing of all the newborn Hebrew boys (Exod. 1:15-19 **E**). If one strictly follows the **E** source, the Exodus nearly undermined the Egyptian Kingdom, it led to the death of her Pharaoh's eldest son and, possibly, to drowning of the Pharaoh himself. In reality, all the Pharaohs and their eldest sons at the probable time of the Exodus, Seti, Ramses II and Merneptah, lived long eventful lives.

Such transformation of the initially modest narrative required a great enlargement of the scope of the events and the level of grievances and horrible sufferings of the Hebrews under the Egyptian yoke.<sup>14</sup> Such a dramatization



has a tendency to expand with time. Over a millennium after the Torah has been finalized, different commentators in the Talmud kept adding and adding to the story until many of their freshly minted details became excessive even for fairy tales.<sup>14,24</sup>

All these later extravagant embellishments do not add to but rather diminish the real significance of the Exodus. The Exodus was a great cultural shock for the Hebrews, it re-established them as semi-nomadic herders and transformed them from a tribe of several families into a small nation. It imprinted onto them a unique monotheistic religion and prepared them for the return to the Canaan as a people united and strong enough for the local tribes to reckon with.

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21. J. S. Baden, *Vetus Test.* 62/2 (2012), 133.
  22. J. Grossman, *Vetus Test.* 64/4 (2014), 588.
  23. English translation of the **J** text - see *The Book of J* (Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1990).
  24. See examples in *Talmud: Bereishis* 47:28; *Shemos Rabbah* 1:34, 10:7, 42:1, 121:4, *Bechoros* 5b; *Midrash HaGadol* Bo 9:24, 10:15, 4, 17, 12:38; *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez Beshalach* 5:12, 28, 29, 39-41, 52, 53, 68,120; *Yalkut Shimon* 1:234; *Midrash Tanchuma Bo* 80.
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