TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John:

There's no one quite like legendary Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille to capture the awesome quality of the parting of the Red Sea. Enter, Charlton Heston.

Charlton:

The Lord of hosts will do battle for us. Behold His mighty hand.

John:

This is very much a visual moment. So you'll have to imagine the waters rolling back violently, the Israelites looking on in stunned disbelief, and the Egyptians shaking in their chariots.

Speaker 3:

The wind opens the sea.

Charlton:

God opens the sea with the blast of His nostrils. Lead them through the midst of the waters. His will be done.

John:

.. but was His will done? The parting of the Red Sea is legendary today, and most people treat it as just that, a legend. Like many things in the Bible, the exodus from Egypt recorded in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament is looked on with great scepticism by mainstream scholars, and some of them Christian scholars. It's understandable the existence of Moses, mighty prophet prince of Egypt but he was a Jew, the 10 plagues that devastated that ancient civilization, the blood of the Passover lamb protecting the houses of Israel from the plagues, and of course, the deliverance of the people of Israel on mess from slavery in Egypt. All of these things lack direct historical evidence outside the Bible. So it's just made up, right? Well, sort of, not really.

John:

I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

John:

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, God of All Things by Andrew Wilson. Every episode of Undeceptions we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, and today is no exception, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

Jim:

What I like to think about what archaeology does, if you think of the story of the Bible as a drama, a drama that's being played out on a stage, what archaeology provides, and Egypt certainly does this for the exodus story or the Joseph story, is that it provides the props on the stage for the drama to be acted out. So what archaeological data will do is help us visualize and see the things the Bible is describing verbally.

John:

That's professor James Hoffmeier or Jim to his friends. Jim is the professor of archaeology and Old Testament at Wheaton College, and the professor of Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He worked on the Akhenaten Temple project in Luxor in Egypt, and was the director of the excavations at Tell el-Borg in the Sinai. He's penned more than 15 books and many scholarly articles on Ancient Egypt and Middle Eastern history.

John:

Most recently he's contributed to the historical compendium, Five Views on the Exodus. He is, first and foremost, an Egyptologist, which, as we'll see, is the right discipline we need to sort out these complex issues. So Jim, can you explain to this humble Greco Roman historian what on earth is so cool about Egyptology?

Jim:

What is so cool about Egyptology? Well, who doesn't like pyramids? I had the joy of growing up in Egypt. So I'm a little bit biased in favour of Egyptology. For those who may not even think about it or be aware of it, the most important events of Old Testament history take place in Egypt, whether you're talking about Moses in the exodus or the events of the Israelites entering into a covenant relationship of God that took place in Sinai. Interestingly enough, moving forward 3,000 and more years, it's the only place that Jesus travelled other than the holy land was Egypt. So at both ends of the biblical spectrum, we find Egypt playing a significant role.

John:

For the past 40 to 50 years, biblical scholars have been pretty sceptical about the book of Exodus. That's the book that tells us how the ancient Israelites, 1500 years or so before Christ, ended up a slave nation in Egypt, the superpower of the period. They experienced profound repression and suffering until, so the story goes, God delivered the whole nation out of Egyptian tyranny. Israelites sacrificed the Passover lamb. The judgment of God fell on Egypt, but passed over the Israelites, and then they made their way out to the promised land. That's the story, but a lot of it is doubted by a lot of contemporary scholars.

Jim:

I think as in many issues, there's a pendulum that swings back and forth. Some of the earliest Egyptologists went to Egypt with quite a bit of interest in biblical questions. So as new archaeological data started accumulating in the course of time, there grew a movement that was a two-prong

movement, the biblical archaeology movement and what is also called the biblical theology movement. They were interconnected because both were stressing the role of history. From the 1930s to the 1970s, certainly in North America, the biblical archaeology was held in high esteem, very positive, and it was seen as a counterbalance to continental scholarship, which rejected much of the historicity of the Bible.

Jim:

What you had going on in the early 20th century, late 19th, early 20th century in German and continental scholarship and then making its way to the Americas was the higher critical scholarship that was very popular in Germany in the late 18th century into the 19th and 20th centuries. Much of what was going on there in terms of biblical scholarship was really developed in isolation from any interface with the world of the Bible. It was largely theoretical things thought up by scholars sitting in their office to begin or whatever famous university in Germany. Then in the 1970s, we started a swing back in the old direction.

Jim:

So right now, I would say the field is probably quite well-split between those who I would call historical minimalists, who treat the Bible as having very minimal historical value or benefit and maximalists who, like me, use the approach, and my approach is a well-known legal one in the Western tradition, and that is that you treat something as innocent until proven guilty rather than guilty until proven innocent.

Jim:

In other words, I would take a statement made by an ancient writer, be he an Egyptian writer, be it a Babylonian writer, be it a Hebrew biblical writer, that if they make a claim, that I accept that as a generally true thing unless there's evidence to contradict it.

John:

That's Indiana Jones, perhaps the best known archaeologist in cinema, but what's real archaeology like, and what's its value compared to historical texts? Some would say, "Surely, we should just give precedence to the hard evidence of archaeology rather than the whimsical religious evidence of a Bible."

Jim:

Sure. Well, the reality is that when we're talking about texts and, primarily, history is extracted from texts not pots, the important thing here is the interplay between ancient texts and artifacts, be they biblical texts or Egyptian texts or Babylonian texts. So artifacts are very important, and they tell their own story, no doubt, but we largely rely on texts.

Jim:

The problem is for the Western-minded historian or the historically minded Westerner is that we tend to think very much in Western ways of thinking about history. Whereas people in the Ancient Near East, there was no dichotomy. There was no bifurcation between history and religion. There was no separation of church and state as we would say.

Jim:

So when they, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, wrote history, it was well-integrated into their religious understanding. So you cannot separate the two and say, "We only look at historical texts," because they're integrated into their worldview, which was a theistic worldview.

John:

People would be amazed at how much religion there is in our classical Roman sources. So that bifurcation doesn't work in first century history either. Just speaking a little more-

Jim:

Yeah. That's good to hear.

John:

Speaking a little more about methodology, what are some of the other sources that we have for Egyptology? So there's stuff in the ground, yes. There's a little bit of Bible, although that's contentious. What other documents or inscriptions are there that are really important for this discipline?

Jim:

Well, Egypt, we have a lot preserved, thankfully. For those who are familiar with the Dead Sea scrolls, the reason we have the Dead Sea scrolls by the Dead Sea and not in Jerusalem is for climate reasons, reasons of the arid environment. Egypt, almost all the papyri that have been found, hundreds and hundreds of papyrus fragments and scrolls and so on are found usually in the desert regions outside of the Nile Valley. So we have a lot of texts of that sort.

John:

Texts are more than books and scrolls that retell events. A text can be any cryptic set of words engraved on stone or household objects. I first learnt that from Indiana Jones.

Speaker 5:

Can you translate the inscription?

Speaker 6:

[foreign language] "Who drinks the water, I shall give him," says the Lord, "will have a spring inside him welling up for eternal life. Let them bring me to your holy mountain in the place where you dwell across the desert and through the mountain to the canyon of the crescent moon, to the temple where the cup that holds the blood of Jesus Christ resides forever."

John:

We don't need the imaginary texts of the Hollywood period to get excited about all this stuff. We have real texts from the ancient period, and they're pretty cool.

Jim:

Now, if you want me to speak of specific texts that would be of particular relevance to the Bible, we have famously the large slab of stone. The Egyptians called them a stela. You'd know that word from the Greek word for a pillar. A stela is a slab, usually tombstone-shaped slab of stone with usually a royal inscription on it, although private inscriptions can occur. These often contain historical records of military campaigns where the king went, where he fought, what temples he built.

Jim:

One king who is certainly well-known in biblical archaeology is the king Merneptah. He was the 13th son of Ramses II. Ramses lived so long, he outlived his first 12 sons, and lucky number 13 conducted a military campaign in his fifth regnal year. We have this slab, this stela. It's now in the Cairo museum. It was discovered in 1896 by Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, who has an Australia connection, I understand. Matthew Petrie was, I think, his grandfather, but Flinders Petrie discovered this in 1896, and it contains the first known reference to Israel outside of the Bible. As far as I know, it remains the only reference to Israel in a ancient Egyptian text. So it's an important datum because it tells us that by the year 1208 BC there was a people group living in the land of Canaan called Israel.

John:

This text says, "Israel is wasted, its seed is not." What on earth does that mean?

Jim:

Wow! That's pretty good for a classical historian. Yes, yes. Again, this is where you have to look at a text like this and you weigh the statements it's making. On the one hand, it doesn't make up a people called Israel that just happens to coincide with a people that we know in that region that heretofore has not been mentioned in Egyptian texts, but as is often the case with royal inscription, they're loaded with propaganda and embellished. So obviously, Israel is no more. It's a bit excessive, but that's very typical of Ancient Near Eastern military texts where they tend to go a little bit overboard in their expressions of what happened.

John:

I think I'm right in saying it actually claims that all nine great nations around them have been destroyed and blown away.

Jim:

Right. Right, and particular cities-

John:

Which can't possibly be [inaudible]

Jim:

... particular cities and people groups. So yeah, Israel is mentioned along with Ashkelon, a known Canaanite and later Philistine city, and Yenoam. These are particular cities. Gezer, a particular city, and then there are people groups like the Hittites and the Hurrians who are the Syrians and so on.

John:

So this is an interesting stake in the ground or stone in the ground that says at the very early 1200 BC there was a thing called or a people group or some collective called Israel. So let's then wind back from that because that's a stake in the ground. Let's wind back. One of the bedrock claims of the Old Testament is that Israelites dwelt in Egypt sometime between, and I think I'm getting my Egyptology correct here, the middle kingdom and the new kingdom, somewhere in there.

Jim:

Somewhere in there.

John:

Is there any indication of Semitic peoples in Egypt in this period?

Jim:

Yeah. Egypt's history is like a roller coaster ride. I don't know if you call them roller coasters in your world. Roller coaster rides, you go up and then down, and up and then down. Egypt has three up periods, which we call the old kingdom, the middle kingdom, and the new kingdom. These are great periods of Egyptian power, strength. Then the down periods, these down times are when Egypt is politically divided, there are more than one pharaoh claiming to be king. Usually, at these times of breakdown of central government, Egypt's border forts are no longer staffed with soldiers and so on that you get foreign infiltration taking place.

Jim:

So we have in the first intermediate period between the old and the middle kingdom, such an infiltration of foreigners, and we know about these from various texts, and this happens, again, in the second intermediate period, which is between the middle kingdom and the new kingdom. So somewhere between 1700 and 1550, we have a major Semitic population in especially the Northern and Eastern part of the Delta of Egypt. These people in time become known as the Hyksos or foreign rulers who ruled Egypt for a century, 120 years. Meanwhile, the Southern part of Egypt was under Egyptian rulership.

Jim:

So there was a large Semitic population, and there always were Semites living in Egypt. Prisoners of war were brought back from military campaigns and the like. So yeah, from the middle kingdom right through into the new kingdom, you have these foreign Canaanites, Syrians, even as far north as Methoni, which is on the other side of the Euphrates River, and they stand out in release or paintings in Egyptian tombs because they have blonde hair. So they're very noticeable when you see some of these foreigners.

They're not depicted in the same way as Egyptians, and Semites typically have scruffy beards and so on. So the Egyptians not only recognize their presence, but actually depicted them.

John:

What about the notion of Israelites being enslaved in Egypt and being forced to build cities, Pithom, and Ramesses? Can anything historical be said about that because that's the great setup in the book of Exodus of what's happening, but does the history deliver us the stage and the props in which such a story could take place?

Jim:

Sure. Well, there's two parts of that question. Geographical question is the places you mentioned, Ramesses and Pithom, indeed, there is a city called Ramesses. It was built by Ramesses the Great, who became pharaoh in 1279 BC, and he ruled all the way down to 1213 into a 67th year, and he built a city named after himself, quite obviously. It would seem that that's the city the Bible is referring to when it refers to Ramesses in Exodus 1:11. It comes up again as the place where the Israelites launched their exodus. So obviously, not only did they help build it, but they lived in the vicinity.

Jim:

Pithom is very likely a site on the frontier of Egypt, where, again, remember that what the biblical text tells us is the Hebrews were making bricks. Now, there is a site that's actually was excavated by Petrie again back in the late, well, early 20th century. It's being excavated now by a Polish and Slovak team who are doing very important work, but what they've been able to prove is that, indeed, there were a series of forts. This was a frontier fort that guarded one of the entry points of Egypt. From texts, it's a place called Pithom.

Jim:

So the names of the places do jibe with 13th century locations known from Egyptian text. As from making bricks and the depiction of forced labour, this is a well-known treatment given to prisoners of war. We do have both textual evidence to point to this practice and, famously, the depiction in the tomb of the prime minister Rekhmire from the 15th century, where he has depictions of bricks being made by both prisoners of war. In fact, the inscription over top of the scene actually mentions that these were prisoners taken from the military campaigns. They were booty taken by the king on his campaigns.

Jim:

They're depicted both as Nubian, Black Africans, working side by side with Semites. Again, you could tell by their scruffy beards and so on, and then you have Egyptians as the taskmasters with sticks prodding them on in their work. So we do know that this was the treatment afforded to many prisoners of war.

Jim:

So I think the Hebrews as a people group living in Egypt were being treated much in the way that POWs were treated in Egypt. So there's no exception to there being treated that way. The difference is that the Bible only hints that they were not uniquely being treated that way. I mean, we look at this-

John:

Professor Hoffmeier says that Exodus 12 provides another opportunity to glimpse a broader history through a biblical lens. Verses 37 and 38 say, "Then the children of Israel journeyed from Ramesses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot besides children. A mixed multitude went up with them also and flocks and herds a great deal of livestock.

Jim:

When they depart Ramesses, it says a mixed multitude also went with them. Who's this mixed multitude? My suggestion would be these are other people like the Hebrews who'd been pressed into hard labour and they said, "You're leaving? We're coming with you." So they were some of the people that we know along with the Hebrews who were treated that way. So important to say, the Hebrews were not unique in being treated that way, but they seemed to be unique in a story of liberation and departure from Egypt along with some of the others who joined in, and these, I believe, become what the Bible calls the sojourners, who were dwelling with the Israelites, the non-Israelites who are defacto part of the Hebrew community.

John:

What about the leader of that community? What about Moses, played in Hollywood by everyone from Charlton Heston to Val Kilmer? What about this prince of Egypt who was apparently found floating in the Nile River by the pharaoh's daughter? Here's producer Kaley.

Kaley:

When his mother could hide her son no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. Then pharaoh's daughter went to the Nile to bathe and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. When the child grew older, he became her son. pharaoh's daughter named him Moses saying, "I drew him out of the water."

John:

A juicy question. We have to talk about Moses. There are many who would say Moses is an entirely literary and theological fiction. I know that you're not convinced that that's the case, but tell me why on historical grounds.

Jim:

Well, again, we have to go to what I would call the background material. We're never going to find an inscription that said, "Moses slept here." My guess would be that if Moses name does occur in an Egyptian text, it would probably be unrecognizable to us. Scholars debate whether the name Moses is an Egyptian name. Is it a short form of a name like Thutmose, Ramose, that sort of name, which means that God thought is born or the son God is born. Some have thought that.

Jim:

Linguistically, it's problematic, which I simply can't get into here, but he may had a totally different Egyptian name, and that Moses is actually his Hebrew name. What's ambiguous is in chapter two when it says she named him. It's ambiguous whether it's his mother who's naming him or the Egyptian princess who's naming him, and it's generally ambiguous there, but be that as it may, what we can do is clarify that a person like Moses could well have existed.

Jim:

First of all, we know there was, starting around the 15th century, so either the time of Moses or I tend to put him down in the 13th century, but from the 15th century on, BC onward, for the next 200 years, 300 years, during Egypt's empire, the pharaohs would take promising youths from their military campaigns, typically, the children of royalty. This is precisely what's going on in the book of Daniel, where Daniel and his friends are to be educated in Babylonian ways, are taken back to Babylon, and the idea is that they would then be administrators in the realm of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king.

Jim:

The Egyptians were the one who started this practice. We have texts that talk about Thutmose III in the 15th century taking back princes of vassals in Canaan and Syria, taking them to Egypt, and they would be educated in Egypt. They would be educated in an institution called, we translated the royal nursery, which to modern years sounds strange, but in a more classical or older sense, this would be an educational institution that is part of the palace.

Jim:

Starting in the 15th century for the first time, we have records mentioning these foreign princes who were studying and learning in the Egyptian in an Egyptian educational institution. So the idea that Moses who has a connection to the queen of Egypt as the biblical story describes it could well have been one of these child of the nursery as they like to call themselves. In their resumes, they always refer to ... It's like saying, "I'm a graduate of Oxford." It's a big deal to put on your biography or your resume, as I would say.

Jim:

Back in the 1980s at the great funerary complex of Saqqara, which was the necropolis for the capital city of Memphis, a tomb was discovered, discovered by sand. Sand is simply covered over the face of this outcrop, and into this outcrop of limestone were all kinds of tombs. One of the tombs was of a man who had a Semitic name. His name was Aper-El. El is the Semitic word for God. Aper-El tells us that he was a

child of the nursery. He was a graduate of the institution, and he actually came to be the prime minister of Egypt, the vizier.

Jim:

Now, interestingly, not until 1980s did we ever hear of this man before, and quite accidentally, his tomb was found. Well, it was intentional. It was dug by archaeologists, but no idea that behind the sand were tombs. So now, we have a historical figure from the 14th century. So we're within striking distance of Moses, who was educated in the royal court, who then became the prime minister.

Jim:

So I think it's the sort of thing that shows what is described of Moses and the tradition that he was trained and all the wisdom of the Egyptians is not really far fetched. This sort of thing did happen.

John:

Okay. So it's not proven. Very little from this period is proven, but it's plausible. It's clear we're in the realm of history, not legend, and this might help us with another great biblical story, the story that got the Israelites into the mess in Egypt in the first place. I'm talking about Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat.

John:

Well, that's how Andrew Lloyd Weber tells it. The biblical version is less theatrical. In brief, Joseph was a Hebrew boy sold into slavery by his brothers. He spends a while in prison before coming to the notice of the Egyptian pharaoh. Eventually, he's promoted to the political heights. Like the plainly historical Aper-El, Joseph, we're told, became prime minister of Egypt.

Jim:

We don't know the circumstances under which Aper-El came to Egypt. Maybe he was one of those princes that had been taken from Canaan and pharaoh took a liking to him and said, "Look, hey, you're my man," and he works his way up eventually becoming the prime minister. So yes, this could be very well, again, a parallel to what we're talking about with the Joseph story.

Jim:

I should add one more. Just in the last two, three years, another tomb was found maybe a half kilometre away from the tomb of Aper-El, and this man turns out to be a general, a high-ranking military leader, who is also a man with a Semitic name. So very important to see. Now, we have two such figures for the general period of Moses.

John:

Some academics still challenge Moses' credentials or even existence. It's been suggested that he was a fictional character created centuries later as a means of comforting Jewish exiles and refugees as if to say political vindication awaits. Do you think there's any reason why this whole figure of Moses couldn't have

been invented as many scholars think, say, five centuries later in, say, the Persian period and just retrojected back into Egypt? That's a lovely story to undergird the law.

Jim:

Yeah. Well, it's very, very interesting you should mention that because, oh, I don't know, maybe 10, 12 years ago when the international SBL met in Auckland, so I was down in your neighbourhood, a very famous scholar, he's Thomas Romer, actually gave a lecture in which he was trying to say that the Moses story and the exodus story is all meant to reflect on Persian period circumstances, and that's where these stories come from. So that view is certainly held by some.

Jim:

Now, I stood up and raised an objection to it, and I think what I said completely floored him and he didn't know how to answer. I said, "In the exodus story, who's the bad guy?" It's pharaoh. In the Persian period, there's no pharaoh in Egypt. You have a Persian emperor often Persepolis or Pasargadae. Well, by this time, time of Darius. Of course, he was in Persepolis. So there is no pharaoh. So how can you turn a non-existent person into your foil, into your villain? So it's like he never thought about that. It was like, "Here's this great theory and just throw out there and everybody's going to accept it," except it doesn't fit the facts of history. So that would be my first response to someone suggesting that.

Jim:

The second thing I would say is a study of the personal names of many of the Hebrews who come out of Egypt, actually include Egyptian names. So some of the very famous people who come out of them such Maryam, as universally agreed, her name is associated with the Egyptian verb Mary, which means to love or beloved, the name of Hur, Aaron and Hur, we also know the name Benhur from the wonderful story of Benhur, but the name Hur is actually the God Horus. Horus is the Greek vocalization of the god Hur, Hera. There are names like Harnefer. Horus is beautiful. In fact, there are four different names associated with the god Horus that we find amongst Israelites either in the exodus generation or subsequent generations.

Jim:

So we have these people who have pharaohnic Egyptian names among the exodus generation. Again, this is not something a Persian period writer says, "Well, let's really make this authentic and come up with these names." The fact that the name Horus pops up is also significant because Horus' main cult is in North-eastern Egypt. The road out of Egypt is called the Ways of Horus. The lagoon on the east frontier of Egypt is called the Waters of Horus, Shihor. We have that name in the Bible, both in the book of Joshua and Jeremiah.

Jim:

So Shihor is a lake, a lagoon on Egypt's frontier. That whole area was famous for the god Horus, and that's the general area where the Israelites are, North-eastern Delta. So the god Horus is dominant. So it's not surprising that some Hebrew mothers might use the name Horus and apply to their son. There's

nothing to suggest that the Hebrews in Egypt up till the time of Moses were God-fearing worshipers of the God Yahweh. That seems to have come a little bit later in the history.

Jim:

So those are the kind of things that's hard to dismiss that a writer 700, 800 years later would say, "Let's come up with some good names that would fit an Egyptian context of 800, 900 years ago." The audience simply wouldn't have got it.

John:

It turns out, though, the question of whether Moses existed is not the biggest problem people have with the book of Exodus. It's the exodus event itself that faces the strongest scepticism in some quarters today, and that's where we go after the break.

John:

This episode is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, God of All Things by Andrew Wilson. Sometimes theology can be very abstract, but in his new book, God of All Things, Andrew Wilson wants to help us rediscover God or maybe discover God for the first time through the ordinary physical things we see in the world all around us from honey to rocks, pigs, to viruses. Wilson explores glimpses of the sacred in things, finding in them illustrations of the character of God. It is a brilliant book.

John:

You'll often hear someone say, "How can you not think of God when you look at the stars or consider an awesome storm with all the lightning and the thunder and the drama?" but Andrew Wilson would reply, "You don't have to wait for the once in a year storm. We can learn metaphysical things through physical objects. We can learn about our humanity when we hold dust in our hands. We can learn about Jesus when we hold bread or wine. You can meet God in creation." That's the thesis and he sustains it beautifully.

John:

We'll be talking to Andrew Wilson about his book in an upcoming episode of Undeceptions. So check that out. It's a few weeks from now. I can't quite. I'm looking at Kaley. Three weeks? Two weeks? She's just laughing at me. Anyway, if you're looking for a book that might kick you out of a mundane view of Christianity or perhaps make you curious about the God who can be found in small things, then this is the book for you. You can get God of All Things from Amazon, of course, and there's a link in the show notes or you can just go to zondervan.com.

John:

Tens of thousands of people fled their homes after severe flooding in South Sudan last year. They're now living in tens in the new Mongalla refugee settlement. Many won't be able to return home for years. There is no access to clean water in the settlement. Refugees walk for over an hour to collect water from

the Nile River. They take the dirty water back with them in jerrycans each day, water that carries disease into the overcrowded camps.

John:

Anglican Aid is trying to change this. Through their waterworks campaign, they're trying to raise money to sink borehole in the Mongalla settlement, which will provide safe drinking and washing water for thousands of refugees. You can help make this happen. Please visit waterworks.org.au. That's waterworks.org.au to find out more.

John:

So we know that there were Semitic peoples who were slave peoples in Egypt in the right period. We know later in the very early 1200s there was an entity called Israel outside of Egypt. Okay. So that's looking okay. We've got to talk about the middle bit, how those people got there. I want to talk about the exodus, specifically. My first general question, though, is, surely, an Egyptologist or any self-respecting historian can't read a miraculous story like we find in exodus as historical. The miracles themselves tell you this happened in the real world.

Jim:

Again, what you're describing there is a radical difference between the modern scientific worldview that dominates Western thought versus an ancient theistic worldview, where everything is viewed through the lens of deity. So we can talk about the sun rising and setting, and we understand the astronomy behind that. In the ancient world, this was understood as, certainly in Egypt, that you have a particular sun god who actually pushes the sun across the sky, the goddess Newt, the mother and sky goddess swallows up the sun god, the sun, and goes through her body and then is reborn and a new day starts. So everything was explained, if you will, through a theological analogic way of understanding the world.

John:

This might help us interpret the famous 10 plagues of Egypt. When God delivered the Israelites from the hand of pharaoh, the Bible records him visiting dramatic punishments on his peoples' oppressors, including swarms of frogs, locusts, flies, the mass death of livestock, and the turning of the water of the Nile into blood. Jim reckons there are natural ways to explain these miracles if you really want it.

Jim:

Many of the plagues have been identified with things that really do happen in Egypt, in that part of the world. So I've tried to explain this to people that you don't have to believe in miracles. You don't even have to believe in God to see these as plausible historical events based on these sort of things happening. Locusts, for instance, there are present locust hoards in Somalia and Kenya that move into Arabia and so on. This is a current problem now where billions of locusts swarm and destroy things. So again, somebody of the ancient world would see that and say, "Well, that's not a miracle. Those things happen. Maybe what's the miracle is that they are removed at a time when God ordains it."

Jim:

So I think how I would see this is, and again, I'm trying to understand things from the theistic worldview of both the Egyptians and the Hebrews, things that we might today say, "Well, those are not miracles. These things happen naturally or these things don't happen." I don't think there's anything amongst the plagues that some people have not been able to find some sort of either scientific or phenomenological explanation for them.

Jim:

Now, having said that, the person of faith would look at that and say the cumulation of all these things happening at the right time at the right point in history would suggest that these are somehow being divinely orchestrated. So that's how faith might look at that differently than if I'm looking at it strictly as a historian.

John:

What about the famous parting of the Red Sea?

Speaker 3:

The wind opens the sea.

Charlton:

God opens the sea with a blast the his nostrils. Lead them through the midst of the water. His will be done.

John:

How does a historian sit with that?

Jim:

I've done field work both in the area of North-western Sinai, and I've led a geological team that has studied where there were ancient lakes and bodies of water. So as we pull all this information together, many of these things become far more plausible once you actually see the lay of the land and understand the ancient topography and where there were water sources and even the body of water that I think is the sea being referred to in the book of Exodus is actually three bodies of water in a single depression. In between, there's actual land. Certain times of the year when the Nile floods, it becomes one big gigantic lake, but the rest of the year it shrinks and it becomes three smaller lakes, and they're actually passed one could go on it.

Jim:

So we could see that maybe they're trying to go on one of these ways between these bodies of water just when the flood waters of the Nile comes. One can look at these things and say, "Yeah, this is plausible if you're looking at things in the right way."

John:

There's simply no evidence of a mass exodus of Semitic peoples out of Egypt up north into Canaan. So doesn't that settle it. The Bible is spinning a great big yarn.

Jim:

Yeah. Well, I would agree 100%. I don't believe the Bible is claiming there was millions of people. The key verse here is in Exodus 12:36-38 where it's talking about the exodus going from Ramesses and so on, and it says there were 600,000 men besides women and children. So people have taken that figure and projected-

Speaker 8:

[foreign language 00:46:40]

John:

Isn't that beautiful? That's those verses in Exodus 12 read by George Athas, director of research at Moore College and the biggest Hebrew nerd I have on speed dial.

Jim:

So people have taken that figure and projected millions. Again, I think this is a case where we have to look at the text very carefully and try to understand what it is saying. First of all, this is not a case that an ancient writer wrote too many zeros after the six because they weren't writing in numerals. So it's written out, six hundred thousand, three Hebrew words, sheish meot eleph. So the question is, how do you translate the word eleph? There's no doubt about sheish, six, meot, hundred, eleph does mean thousand, but we also find that this word is translated three different ways in our English translations.

Jim:

In some context, it's translated clan. Famously, the judge Gideon complains that he is unworthy to be a military leader because his eleph is the weakest in Israel. It's translated clan. So one possible translation is you have 600 clans, which are extended families, large extended families. This is one possibility.

Jim:

The other is that the word eleph is applied to military units. In the story of David when he goes to the battlefront to join his brothers, and we have the encounter with Goliath, in that story, we have David's father saying, "Okay. You're going to visit your brothers. Take some food to them, and here are 10 chunks of cheese for the commander of their eleph," which is always translated unit.

Jim:

Now, I happen to think that 600 eleph should be translated as 600 units because in the book of Numbers, we have a census taken of the military readiness of the Israelites, and it comes out to be 600 elephs, which I think is military units. The total comes out something like 600 elephs, 3,500. So I wonder if it is

we have 600 units totalling 3,500 men. If we have 3,500 men, then one possibility is we're dealing with somewhere under 10,000 people, not tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions.

Jim:

So I think that's a case where we have to go back and look at the text very carefully, but I think many critics of the Bible have so much fun with it as being a point where you can just mock the story as being ridiculous without really doing their homework. The irony is, of course, they accuse me of taking the text literally when, in fact, I'm trying to read it in a nuanced way, not literally, and they're the ones that's taking it literally primarily just to skewer the story.

John:

Yes, but even still, let's just say it was 10,000 or so, am I right in saying there just is no evidence in any Egyptian document of 10,000 or so Semitic peoples escaping slavery in Egypt?

Jim:

Absolutely right. We have nothing that would report on this. I think one explanation would be that if you had some military dispatch sent by pharaoh to the border forts of Egypt, be on the lookout for these people leaving or whatever or a command for sending the chariot force out, what I'm getting at is even if we had such records that were written, they would've been written on papyrus.

Jim:

In the archaeology of the Delta, in the archaeology of the sites like Ramesses and Tell el-Dab'a, the neighbouring site, which was the Hyksos capital, all these sites in the Delta, not one papyrus fragment has ever been found. They just don't survive. So even if we had dispatches written or records kept in the stables of sending the chariotry out, none of that has survived.

Jim:

So it's really not fair to say that there's no evidence for this. There's no evidence for lots of things because all the records from that region throughout ancient times, in fact, it's not until you get to Roman times, AD times, that you have the first surviving papyri found in the Delta of Egypt.

Jim:

So in any event, the reality is we don't have any records of anything from the palace, from the archives for 2,000 years of Egyptian history. So when you say nothing exists, therefore, there was no Hebrews, you'd have to use the same argument, "Well, there were no Egyptians because we don't have records of Egyptians."

John:

Let's press pause. I've got a five-minute Jesus for you. The exodus is such a big deal in-

Kaley:

Actually, producer Kaley here, John went a bit long on this and got a bit carried away. So I made the call to put this spot in the show notes instead. That's where you can find them. Don't tell.

John:

There's no shortage of scholars who doubt Israel's exodus from Egypt. Often, the confidence they expressed is pretty confronting for those who instinctively believe what's in the Bible. Here's Lester Grabbe, emeritus professor of Hebrew Bible and early Judaism at the University of Hull in England.

Lester Grabbe:

Critical scholars agree that the earliest references to the exodus tradition did not come from the exodus narrative in the Pentateuch, but other writings such as the early prophetic books, primarily Amos and Hosea, about the middle of the eighth century BCE. There's nothing in Egyptian texts that could be related to the story in the book of Exodus, no Egyptian document inscription or piece of iconography depicts, describes or refers to an exodus as described in the Bible. There is no compelling reason that the exodus has to be rooted in any events in history.

John:

So why does Professor Hoffmeier doubt these doubts? Is it just his Pius faith kicking in?

Jim:

Well, a lot of things fit together and work. Let's go back to the city of Ramesses that we talked about, Exodus 1:11. It's mentioned in Exodus 12. It's mentioned in Numbers 33 in the itinerary of the departure point for the Hebrews. The city of Ramesses that we've touched on already, construction of it began in a very preliminary stage with a small palace by Ramesses' father, Seti I, around 1300. Then his son decided, "I'm going to turn this into a full blown city," and he did, and probably over the next 20 or 30 years from probably say about 1275 for the next 20 years, he built this massive city. We know it now as probably the largest city of the ancient world. Fantastic. It hasn't been excavated, but it's been mapped by geomagnetic surveying.

Jim:

So we can tell you where there were palaces, where there were temples, where there were cramped quarters, where there were wide open streets, and work is still going on there by German colleagues. Now, why this is important is we have a beginning point for the city of Ramesses, but we also have a termination point. Unlike many cities that last forever like Rome or Athens and so on, the city of Ramesses disappeared. It disappeared for a very good reason.

Jim:

It was connected to the Mediterranean and to the Delta base of Egypt, Memphis in that area, by a branch of the Nile that during the 13th century, late 13th and into the 12th century, you begin to get a series of low discharge with the Nile flood, and as a consequence, this Nile branch started to silt up. So it's like the

main motorway that would've connected Ramesses to the political capital of Memphis was now no longer navigable.

Jim:

So the city has a very limited history. By the year 1130 BC, the royal family, Ramesses XI left the city and moved back to Memphis, and the city was largely abandoned. The city was then dismantled, and most of the blocks, statues, obelisks that made up the grand city, many of these blocks were moved to build a new city 12 miles to the north called Tanis. Everybody knows Tanis. That's where Indiana Jones went. There you can see the blocks that originally came from Ramesses.

Jim:

So the reality is the city of Ramesses has a very limited history between 1275 and about 1130 BC. After that, the city fades away and is no longer a city. Its brief stint as the capital of Egypt is over. What's interesting is later texts. Look at Psalm 78. Psalm 78, the psalmist is reflecting on the miracles of Egypt, the plagues, and all that happened for Israel to leave Egypt. What is it called the place where all this happened? It called it the fields of Tanis or the fields of Zoan, the Hebrew, not Ramesses.

Jim:

So when this later writer is reflecting on what happened, he uses the current name of the region 12 miles to the north. The name Ramesses is not mentioned. Now, interestingly, the name Ramesses only occurs in the five books of Moses or three of the five books of Moses. Once you leave the book of Deuteronomy, the name Ramesses never again appears in the Bible. Instead, we read of the name Tanis as the dominant city. So the biblical writers knew Ramesses disappeared and Tanis is the phoenix that flew up out of the ashes of the abandoned Ramesses.

Jim:

So there you have a particular window of time. It wouldn't make sense centuries later for someone to say, "Aha, this is where we had our origins, a city." No. When the psalmist does that, he uses the name Tanis. So I think that reflects what would've happened if the story had been told centuries and centuries later.

John:

Analysing the exodus, really involves two academic fields, Egyptology proper and Old Testament studies. This might be part of the problem. There aren't a lot of experts who can professionally traverse both disciplines.

Jim:

I think most Egyptologists today could care less about the Old Testament, and Egyptology was born much like biblical archaeologists, biblical Egyptology, and that there was a lot of interest in the biblical sites. Petrie, Édouard Naville were dispatched by the Egypt Exploration Society in the late 1890s to go and find sites related to the Bible. So Sir Alan Gardiner, the famous Oxford Egyptologist, while he did write

sometimes about things related to the Bible, he was rather antagonistic towards Naville who happened to be an Egyptologist and a biblical scholar, and he happened to be a believer. Gardiner was very nasty to him in a series of articles. Gardiner was such a huge influence on Egyptology for so long that I think what happened was Egyptologists feared to dabble in biblical stuff.

John:

I guess I'm trying to probe what is behind the fashion of the last, I don't know, 50 years or more of Old Testament scholarship being so critical to the point of dismissive of Old Testament text. What's going on there?

Jim:

Yeah. Well, I've heard it said and I've repeated it that if the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible were not a religious text of living religious communities today, Christian and Jewish, that it would probably be regarded as the most important source of history and culture and sociology of the Ancient Near East, but because it is a part of a living community, it is treated very differently than texts from Assyria or Egypt and so on. So I think that that's really what it boils down to.

Jim:

I've advocated a third way of approaching reading the text, what I call the phenomenological approach, which is using a particular school of philosophy and history of religions approach to studying the Bible, and the phenomenologist really tries to understand what's going on, why it's going on, and how humans respond to phenomenon. You may respond very differently to a beautiful sunset. Some might think, "Wow! This proves there's a creator." To others, they'll look at it and say, "There's nothing there. It's just sun setting."

Jim:

So the phenomenological approach I've put forward as a way to bridge the gap between enlightenment rationalist approach and postmodern everything's literary fiction. So they're very different approaches that in the end, the Bible comes out looking pretty much the same to them. What I've advocated is this middle way, and that's the road I'm on as a historian and a archaeologist.

John:

I wish Jim all the best with his third way. As a student of a much later period in history, it makes perfect sense to me to use every tool we have, Bible and extra biblical documents, text, as well as trial.

John:

Thanks for joining us on another Undeception. If you like what you hear and you want to get more of it, please consider supporting the Undeceptions Project, researching, writing, and speaking to let the truth about Christianity out. You can help our little team bust a few more myths and promote the truth and beauty of the Christian faith. I'd love your support. So head to undeceptions.com and hit the donate button. No amount is too small. Thank you so much.

John:

While you're there, feel free to send us a question. You can type it or just record it and I'll try and answer it in our upcoming Q&A episode in just a few weeks. If you're looking for another decent podcast, check out The New Testament in Its World with the brilliant, if a little quirky, Mike Bird, part of the Eternity Podcast Network.

John:

Next episode, we've got Andrew Wilson from the UK and Tish Harrison Warren from the US talking about the God of little things, including brushing your teeth. Seriously. See ya.

John:

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne, and directed by Hadley, editing by Richard Hamley. Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan for making this Undeception possible. Undeceptions is part of the Eternity Podcast Network, an audio collection showcasing the seriously good news of faith today.

Kaley:

Brought to you by the Eternity Podcast Network.

John:

Come on. Go, go, go, Joseph.

Kaley:

Are you really? (singing) I don't even know if those are the right words.

John:

What part did you have in that musical, Kaley?

Kaley:

I was a backup singer. I was senior eight.

John:

As in in the chorus, in the chorus or backup?

Kaley:

In the chorus, in the chorus.

John:

Well played, well played.