

A Historical Perspective

Contributed by [Society for Humanistic Judaism](#)

Source: Rabbi Jeffrey Falick

When earlier we recalled the story of the Exodus, we acknowledged it as a work of fiction. Yet only one hundred years ago, most scholars still believed that the tale was true in many of its details.

Then they started digging ... literally ... with shovels and pails. It eventually became clear that the story we had told ourselves for millennia did not take place. There had been no mass flight from Egypt, no conquest of the land of Israel, otherwise known as Canaan. The Israelites were natives of the land; they were Canaanites themselves!

So how did the story come to be?

In the late second millennium B.C.E., Egypt dominated Canaan. The pharaohs demanded regular tribute from vassal kings who in turn exploited their own peasant populations.

According to some scholars, in the thirteenth century B.C.E. the region experienced significant upheavals and power shifts. Taking advantage of these changes, many peasants rebelled, throwing off the yoke of their vassal kings. Archeological remains reveal that some fled to and cleared Israel's central highlands, where tribes and towns began to form. In a long, complicated and gradual process they became known as the Israelites. Did this contribute to inspiring our story?

If so, the Exodus tale may have served as an allegory about liberation from Egypt's ongoing domination and exploitation of Canaan's populace. The narrative may also reflect other ancient regional instabilities. Famines and droughts provoked repeated migrations. The Torah's stories about Abraham and Sara's journey to Canaan and their grandchildren's descent to Egypt may disclose memories of these population shifts.

Other historians suggest an alternative possibility. They propose that the Exodus story was influenced by the experience of one tribe, the Levites, that may have come to Israel from Egypt. Many Levite names, including Moses and Aaron, are Egyptian in origin. The Levites were cultic experts and possessed no territory. Were they the outsiders who circulated the original Exodus tale?

The details are buried in history, but history gives wings to legends and legends yield heroes like Moses. Over hundreds of years, our story emerged with its account of one great man, dedicated to justice and to the liberation of his people. He challenged Pharaoh and led the Israelites to freedom. For millennia he has inspired many others who have been downtrodden or enslaved to bring about their own deliverance. And that's why we told it tonight!

For more on these ideas, see S. David Sperling, *The Original Torah: The Political Intent of the Bible's Writers* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Exodus* [New York: HarperOne, 2017].

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