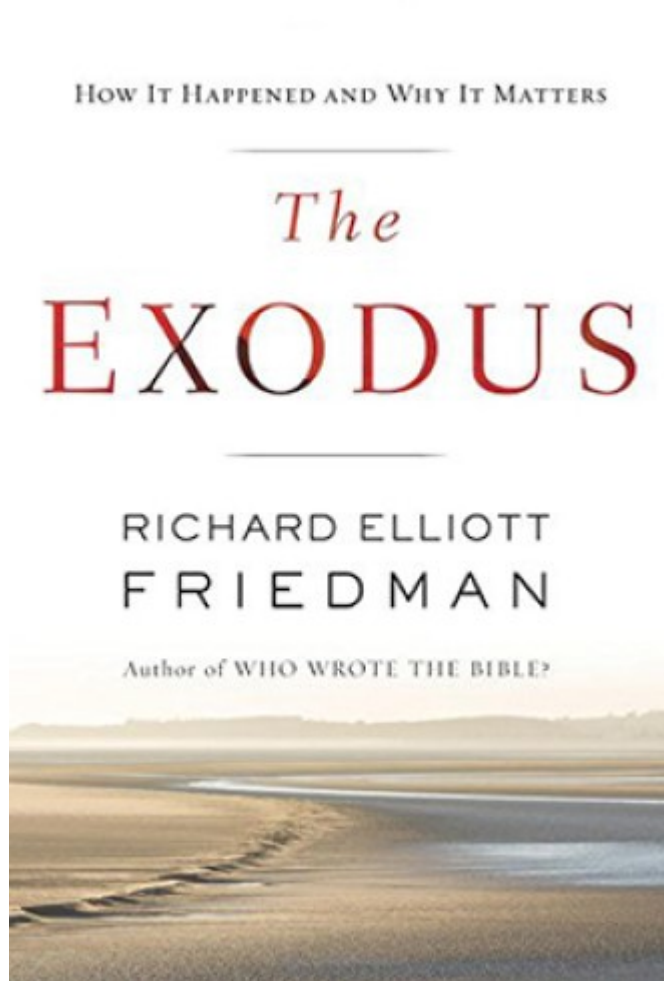


Did the exodus really happen?

A new book challenges the scholarly consensus about one of the Hebrew Bible's central stories.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue

In Review



The Exodus

How It Happened and Why It Matters

By Richard Elliott Friedman
HarperOne

For anyone interested in the Bible, Richard Elliott Friedman's new book is a game changer.

Friedman makes a credible and convincing case for the historical truth of a story that has been widely dismissed as wholly fictitious. Modern scholars see no need to posit an exodus event to explain the emergence of Israel. In this view, Israel grew organically out of Canaanite society at the end of the Bronze Age. Later literati invented that glorious national history of slavery and redemption. The loss of the exodus poses problems for Jews and Christians, since the story is so central to their theologies. But who can quarrel with scholarship?

So overwhelming is this skeptical view that at first sight it is alarming to see Friedman assert the reality of the exodus as a historical event. Yet he makes a powerful case. He admits that exodus did not involve a million or so people, as the Bible asserts, nor did it involve the whole people of Israel. It was a movement by a much smaller group who became known as the Levites, who fled Egypt and moved to join the preexisting settlement of the people of Israel in Canaan. They brought with them their god YHWH, whom they identified with the older El, the deity of the people of Israel. As the Levites wrote the nation's history, they established the idea that the mass movement had involved the whole of what later became the Hebrew people. Friedman correctly credits David Noel Freedman as the originator of this Levite argument, but he develops it impressively.

How Friedman argues his case is as important as what he concludes. Much of the skeptical view of early Israelite history stems from generations of archaeologists who have failed to validate or confirm biblical stories. Friedman pays due attention to those archaeologists, but in turn he demands proper respect for the sophisticated disciplines of literary and linguistic studies, of which he is an exemplary practitioner.

Friedman claims no single piece of evidence as a smoking gun (or burning bush), relying instead on an accumulation of data. The biblical accounts preserve strata of early sources: the songs attributed to Miriam (in Exodus) and Deborah (in Judges). Both of these songs can plausibly be traced to the early Iron Age. Miriam's song, set in Egypt, records God's mighty deeds without mentioning Israel, while Deborah's is set in Israel without mentioning the Levites. Very likely, these two stories—one

Levitical and one Israelite—originated separately, before later editors merged and reconciled them.

He makes an especially strong case for the connections between the Levites and Egypt, noting that all the main Levite characters have Egyptian-derived personal names (which is not true of any of their non-Levite contemporaries). That fact raises difficulties for a scholar who wishes to argue that these stories were all invented in a much later era. Friedman also suggests Egyptian origins for key Levite institutions. The Tabernacle bears an uncanny resemblance to the battle tent of the pharaoh Ramses II.

Friedman also argues that only some recent memory of bitter slavery could have led ancient Israel to include in its laws such vehement assertions of the rights of aliens and such unusual limitations on the extent of chattel slavery.

The most economical explanation of all these factors, Friedman concludes, is that something like the exodus occurred, although its exact date and circumstances are uncertain. He puts the burden of proof on those wishing to disprove the historicity of an exodus event, and that is a dazzling achievement.

But the book is not without flaws. It originated in separate essays, and the different components are not well integrated. In some places, the argument marches forward with real dynamism, but in other sections it gets lost in digressions and repetitions.

Friedman also overplays the contrasts between Israel and the surrounding nations and their gods. He repeatedly asserts that the Hebrew God differed radically from the pagan deities, who originated as personified forces of nature and kept that primitive identity through their history. Such a statement is odd. Throughout the Near East and Mediterranean worlds, deities originated in those natural forms, but through storytelling and myth making they evolved into much more complex characters. Even YHWH followed that trajectory. (A common theory finds YHWH's origins in natural forces, perhaps as a storm god, before he became the awe-inspiring personal figure we find throughout the Hebrew Bible.) All gods grow and mature.

Nor is it true, as Friedman claims, that those rival gods failed to intervene in human history along the lines attributed to YHWH. To take one example of many, the Moabite god Chemosh reportedly became angry with his people and allowed them to suffer defeat and degradation before helping them regain their political

independence. How does that differ from YHWH's tempestuous relationship with the people of Israel?

The additional problem is the dating of the ideas we find in the Hebrew Bible. It is not obvious that Israel's religious forms from the twelfth century BCE (the approximate time of the exodus) had much in common with those from the time of the exile, which happened some 600 years later. Even if we agree that the exodus did occur, we would need harder evidence to be convinced that its imprint is so indelibly stamped on the whole subsequent history of the faith of Israel.

Yet this is an idea-rich book that overturns many stale assumptions about Israelite origins and the world of the Old Testament. It's worth arguing with, and it offers much to provoke fruitful thought. Perhaps most important, it helps us know that when we commemorate the exodus in our most cherished liturgies, we are grounding ourselves in authentic history.