

Was There an Exodus: Joshua Berman, <http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2015/03/was-there-an-exodus/>

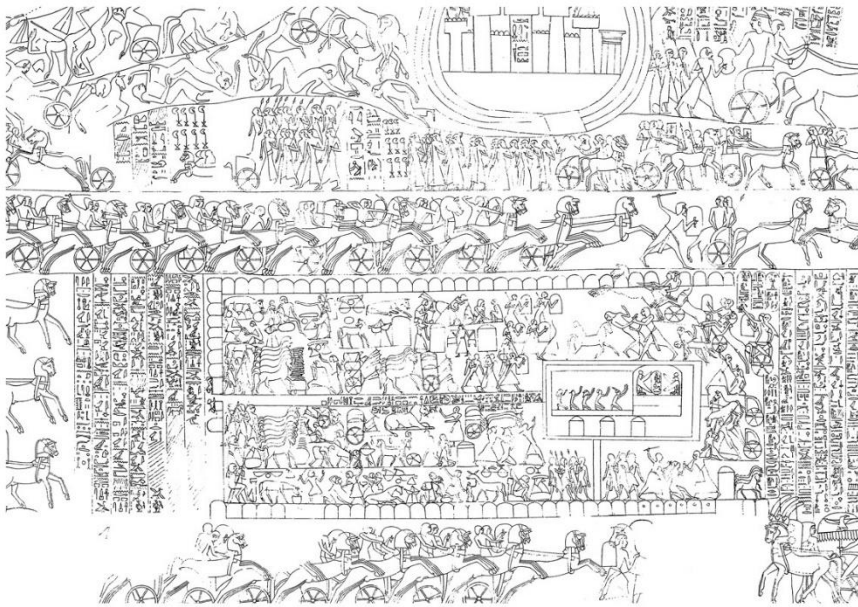
Comparative method can yield dazzling results, adding dimensions of understanding to passages that once seemed either unclear or self-evident and unexceptional. As an example, consider the familiar biblical refrain that God took Israel out of Egypt “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” **The Bible could have employed that phrase to describe a whole host of divine acts on Israel’s behalf, and yet the phrase is used *only* with reference to the exodus. This is no accident. In much of Egyptian royal literature, the phrase “mighty hand” is a synonym for the pharaoh, and many of the pharaoh’s actions are said to be performed through his “mighty hand” or his “outstretched arm.”** Nowhere else in the ancient Near East are rulers described in this way. What is more, the term is most frequently to be found in Egyptian royal propaganda during the latter part of the second millennium.

Why would the book of Exodus describe God in the same terms used by the Egyptians to exalt their pharaoh? We see here the dynamics of appropriation. During much of its history, ancient Israel was in Egypt’s shadow. For weak and oppressed peoples, one form of cultural and spiritual resistance is to appropriate the symbols of the oppressor and put them to competitive ideological purposes. I believe, and intend to show in what follows, that in its telling of the exodus the Bible appropriates far more than individual phrases and symbols—that, in brief, it adopts and adapts one of the best-known accounts of one of the greatest of all Egyptian pharaohs.

Here a few words of background are in order. Like all great ancient empires, ancient Egypt waxed and waned. The zenith of its glory was reached during the New Kingdom, roughly 1500-1200 BCE. It was then that its borders reached their farthest limits and many of the massive monuments still visible today were built. We have already met the greatest pharaoh of this period: Ramesses II, also known fittingly as Ramesses the Great, who reigned from 1279 to 1213. Ramesses’ paramount achievement, which occurred early in his reign, was his 1274 victory over Egypt’s arch-rival, the Hittite empire, at the battle of Kadesh: a town located on the Orontes River on the modern-day border between Lebanon and Syria. Upon his return to Egypt, Ramesses inscribed accounts of this battle on monuments all across the empire. Ten copies of the inscriptions exist to this day. These multiple copies make the battle of Kadesh the most publicized event anywhere in the ancient world, the events of Greece and Rome not excepted. Moreover, the texts were accompanied by a new creation: bas reliefs depicting the battle, frame by frame, so that—much as with stained-glass windows in medieval churches—viewers illiterate in hieroglyphics could learn about the pharaoh’s exploits.

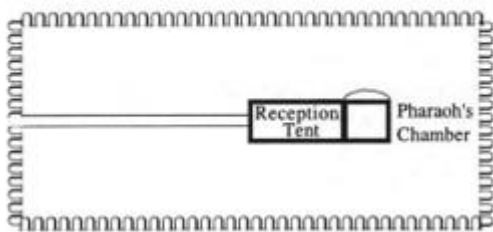
Enter now a longstanding biblical conundrum. **Scholars had long searched for a model, a precursor, that could have inspired the design of the Tabernacle** that served as the cultic center of the Israelites’ encampment in the wilderness, a design laid out in exquisite verbal detail in Exodus 25-29... In the throne tent, displayed in tighter focus below, the emblem bearing the pharaoh’s name and symbolizing his power is flanked by falcons symbolizing the god Horus, with their wings spread in protection over him... In Exodus (25: 20), the ark of the Tabernacle is similarly flanked by two winged cherubim, whose wings hover protectively over it. To complete the parallel, Egypt’s four army divisions at Kadesh would have camped on the four sides of Ramesses’ battle compound; the book of Numbers (2) states that the tribes of Israel camped on the four sides of the Tabernacle compound. The resemblance of the military camp at Kadesh to the Tabernacle goes beyond architecture; it is conceptual as well. For Egyptians, Ramesses was both a military leader and a divinity. In the Torah, God is likewise a divinity, obviously, but also Israel’s leader in battle (see Numbers 10: 35-36). The tent of God the divine warrior parallels the tent of the pharaoh, the living Egyptian god, poised for battle....

I had a different reaction. With my interest piqued by the *visual* similarities between the Tabernacle and the Ramesses throne tent, I decided to have a closer look at the *textual* components of the Kadesh inscriptions, to learn what they had to say about Ramesses, the Egyptians, and the battle of Kadesh... The more I investigated other battle accounts from the ancient Near East, the more forcefully this similarity struck me—to the point where I believe it reasonable to claim that the narrative account of the splitting of the sea (Exodus 14) and the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15) may reflect a deliberate act of cultural appropriation. If the Kadesh inscriptions bear witness to the greatest achievement of the greatest pharaoh of the greatest period in Egyptian history, then the book of Exodus claims that the God of Israel overmastered Ramesses the Great by several orders of magnitude, effectively trouncing him at his own game.

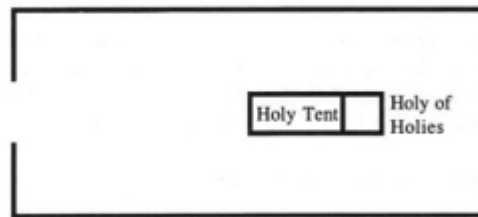


The camp is twice as long as it is wide. The entrance to it is in the middle of the eastern wall, on the left. (In Egyptian illustrations, east is left, west is right.) At the center of the camp, down a long corridor, lies the entrance to a 3:1 rectangular tent. This tent contains two sections: a 2:1 reception tent, with figures kneeling in adoration, and, leading westward (right) from it, a domed square space that is the throne tent of the pharaoh.

Battle Compound of Ramesses II



Tabernacle Compound

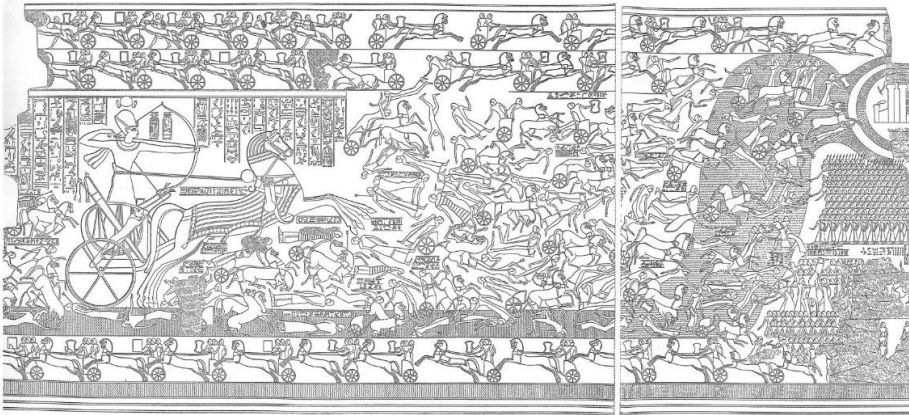


The poem and the account of Exodus 14-15, the action begins in like fashion: the protagonist army (of, respectively, the Egyptians and Israelites) is on the march and unprepared for battle when it is attacked by a large force of chariots, causing it to break ranks in fear. Thus, according to the Kadesh poem, Ramesses' troops were moving north toward the outskirts of Kadesh when they were surprised by a Hittite chariot corps and took fright. The Exodus account opens in similar fashion. As they depart Egypt, the Israelites are described as an armed force (Exodus 13: 18 and 14: 8). Stunned by the sudden charge of Pharaoh's chariots, however, they become completely dispirited (14: 10-12). In each story, the protagonist now appeals to his god for help and the god exhorts him to move forward with divine assistance. In the Kadesh poem, Ramesses prays to Amun, who responds, "Forward! I am with you, I am your father, my hand is with you!" (Throughout, translations of the poem are from Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated & Annotated*, Blackwell, Vol. 2, pp. 2-14.) In like fashion, Moses cries out to the Lord, who responds in 14: 15, "Tell the Israelites to go forward!" promising victory over Pharaoh (vv. 16-17).

From this point in the Kadesh poem, Ramesses assumes divine powers and proportions. Put differently, he shifts from human leader in distress to quasi-divine force, thus allowing us to examine his actions against the Hittites at the Orontes alongside God's actions against the Egyptians at the sea. In each account, the "king" confronts the enemy on his own, unaided by his fearful troops. Entirely abandoned by his army, Ramesses engages the Hittites single-handedly, a theme underscored throughout the poem. In Exodus 14: 14, God declares that Israel need only remain passive, and that He will fight on their behalf: "The Lord will fight for you, and you will be still." Especially noteworthy here is that this particular feature of both works—their parallel portrait of a victorious "king" who must work hard to secure the loyalty of those he saves in battle—has no like in the literature of the ancient Near East.

In each text, the enemy then gives voice to the futility of fighting against a divine force, and seeks to escape. In each, statements made earlier about the potency of the divine figure are now confirmed by the enemy himself. In the Kadesh poem, the Hittites retreat from Ramesses: "One of them called out to his fellows: Look out, beware, don't approach him! See, Sekhmet the Mighty is she who is with him!" referring to a goddess extolled earlier in the poem. In this passage, the Hittites acknowledge that they are fighting not only a divine force but a very particular divine force. We find the same trope in the Exodus narrative: confounded by God in 14: 25, the Egyptians say, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for *the Lord* is fighting for them against Egypt."

An element common to both compositions is the submergence of the enemy in water. The Kadesh poem does not assign the same degree of centrality to this event as does Exodus—it does not tell of wind-swept seas overpowering the Hittites—but Ramesses does indeed vauntingly proclaim that in their haste to escape his onslaught, the Hittites sought refuge by “plunging” into the river, whereupon he slaughtered them in the water. The reliefs depict the drowning of the Hittites in vivid fashion, displayed here in panorama and closeup (click on images to enlarge):



The corpses of the Hittite troops in the Orontes River as depicted on the second pylone at the Ramasseum.

As for survivors, both accounts assert that there were none. Says the Kadesh poem: “None looked behind him, no other turned around. Whoever of them fell, he did not rise again.” Exodus 14: 28: “The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen . . . not one of them remained.”

We come now to the most striking of the parallels between the two. In each, the timid troops see evidence of the king’s “mighty arm,” review the enemy corpses, and, amazed by the sovereign’s achievement, are impelled to sing a hymn of praise. In the Kadesh poem we read:

Then when my troops and chariotry saw me, that I was like Montu , my arm strong, . . . then they presented themselves one by one, to approach the camp at evening time. They found all the foreign lands, among which I had gone, lying overthrown in their blood . . . I had made white [with their corpses] the countryside of the land of Kadesh. Then my army came to praise me, their faces [amazed/averted] at seeing what I had done.

Exodus 14: 30-31 is remarkably similar, and in two cases identical: “Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. And when Israel saw the *great hand* which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord.” As I noted earlier, “great hand” here and “great arm” in 15: 16 are used exclusively in the Hebrew Bible with regard to the exodus, a trope found elsewhere only within Egyptian propaganda, especially during the late-second-millennium New Kingdom.

After the great conquest, in both accounts, the troops offer a paean to the king. In each, the opening stanza comprises three elements. The troops laud the king’s name as a warrior; credit him with stiffening their morale; and exalt him for securing their salvation. In the Kadesh poem we read:

My officers came to extol my strong arm and likewise my chariotry, boasting of my name thus: “What a fine warrior, who strengthens the heart/That you should rescue your troops and chariotry!”

And here are the same motifs in the opening verses of the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15: 1-3):

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. . . . “The Lord is my strength and might; He is become my salvation . . . the Lord, the Warrior—Lord is His name!”

In both the poem and in Exodus, praise of the victorious sovereign continues in a double strophe extolling his powerful hand or arm. The poem: “You are the son of Amun, achieving with his arms, you devastate the land of Hatti by your valiant arm.” The Song (Exodus 15: 6): “Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe!”

And note this: the Hebrew root for the right hand (*ymn*) is common to a variety of other ancient Near Eastern languages. Yet in those other cultures, the right hand is linked exclusively with holding or grasping. In Egyptian literature, however, we find depictions of the right hand that match those in the Song. Perhaps the most ubiquitous motif of Egyptian narrative art is the pharaoh raising his right hand to shatter the heads of enemy captives:

1. Continuing now: in the Kadesh poem, as the troops review the Hittite corpses, their enemies are likened to chaff: “Amun my father being with me instantly, turning all the foreign lands into chaff before me.” The Song similarly compares the enemy with chaff consumed by God’s wrath (15: 7): “You send forth Your fury, it consumes them like chaff.” Again, no other ancient Near Eastern military inscription uses “chaff” as a simile for the enemy.
2. More parallels: in each hymn, the troops declare their king to be without peer in battle. The Kadesh poem: “You are the fine[st] warrior, without your peer”; the Song: “Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty?” In each, the king is praised as the victorious leader of his troops, intimidating neighboring lands. The Kadesh poem: “You are great in victory in

front of your army . . . O Protector of Egypt, who curbs foreign lands”; the Song (15: 13-15): “In Your lovingkindness, You lead the people you redeemed; in Your strength, You guide them to Your holy abode. The peoples hear, they tremble.”

3. Nearing the end, the two again share main elements as the king leads his troops safely on a long journey home from victory over the enemy, intimidating neighboring lands along the way. The Kadesh poem: “His Majesty set off back to Egypt peacefully, with his troops and chariotry, all life, stability and dominion being with him, . . . subduing all lands through fear of him.” The Song (15: 16-17): “Terror and dread descend upon them, through the might of Your arm they are still as stone—Till Your people pass, O Lord, the people pass whom You have ransomed.” And the final motif is shared as well: peaceful arrival at the palace of the king, and blessings on his eternal rule. The Kadesh poem:
4. He having arrived peacefully in Egypt, at Pi-Ramesses Great in Victories, and resting in his palace of life and dominion, . . . the gods of the land [come] to him in greeting . . . according as they have granted him a million jubilees and eternity upon the throne of Re, all lands and all foreign lands being overthrown and slain beneath his sandals eternally and forever.

The Song (15: 17-18): You will bring them and plant them in Your own mountain, the place You made Your abode, O Lord, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established. The Lord will reign forever and ever!

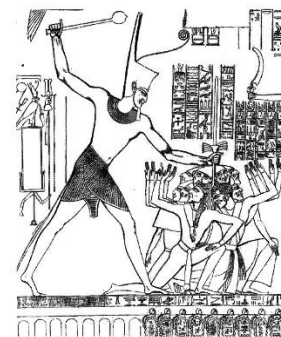
As readers may have gleaned, the Kadesh poem is a much longer composition than the Exodus account, and it contains many elements without parallels in the latter. . . . But appropriation of a text for purposes of cultural resistance or rivalry is always selective, and never a one-to-one exercise. The Exodus text focuses on precisely those elements of the Kadesh poem that extol the pharaoh’s valor, which it reworks for purposes of extolling God’s. Moreover, the main plot points—it is worth stressing again—are common to both. These are:

The protagonist army breaks ranks at the sight of the enemy chariot force; a plea for divine help is answered with encouragement to move forward, with victory assured; the enemy chariotry, recognizing by name the divine force that attacks it, seeks to flee; many meet their death in water, and there are no survivors; the king’s troops return to survey the enemy corpses; amazed at the king’s accomplishment, the troops offer a victory hymn that includes praise of his name, references to his strong arm, tribute to him as the source of their strength and their salvation; the enemy is compared to chaff, while the king is deemed without peer in battle; the king leads his troops peacefully home, intimidating foreign lands along the way; the king arrives at his palace, and is granted eternal rule.

This is the story of Ramesses II in the Kadesh poem, and this is the story of God in the account of the sea in Exodus 14-15. . . . What really suggests a relation between the two texts, however, is the *totality* of the parallels, plus the large number of highly distinctive motifs that appear in these two works alone. No other battle account known to us either from the Hebrew Bible or from the epigraphic remains of the ancient Near East provide even half the number of shared narrative motifs exhibited here.

To deepen the connection, let me adduce a further resonance between the Song at the Sea and Egyptian New Kingdom inscriptions more generally. A common literary motif of the period is the claim that the pharaoh causes enemy troops to cease their braggadocio. Thus, in a typical line, Pharaoh Seti I “causes the princes of Syria to cease all of the boasting of their mouths.” This concern with silencing the enemy’s boastings is distinctly Egyptian, not found in the military literature of any other neighboring culture. All the more noteworthy, then, that the Song at the Sea depicts not the movements or actions of the Egyptians but their boasts (15: 8-9): “The enemy said, ‘I will pursue! I will overtake! I will divide the spoil! My desire shall have its fill of them, I will bare my sword, my hand shall subdue them!’” Thereupon, at God’s command, the sea covers them, effectively stopping their mouths.

In my judgment, then, the similarities between these two texts are so salient, and so distinctive to them alone, that the claim of literary interdependence is wholly plausible. And so, a question: if, for argument’s sake, we posit that the Exodus sea account was composed with an awareness of the Kadesh poem, when could that poem have been introduced into Israelite culture? The question is important in itself, and also because the answer might help to date the Exodus text in turn. . . . we have no epigraphic evidence that *any* historical inscriptions from ancient Egypt ever reached Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah, either in the Egyptian language or in translation. And this leaves aside the puzzle of what, in a period of entente, would have motivated an Israelite scribe to pen an explicitly anti-Egyptian work in the first place.



Relief of Seti I (13th c. BCE) with raised right hand, shattering the heads of his enemies, Hypostyle Hall at Karnak. The Epigraphic Survey, The Battle Reliefs of King Seti I (Chicago, 1986), pl. 15a. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

This Egyptian royal image endured from the third millennium down into the Christian era. In no other ancient Near Eastern culture do we encounter such portrayals of the right hand, which resonate closely with the Song and particularly with 15:6: “Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.”