

TESTAMENTS

Books ponder history of Passover

There's been unending debate about whether the biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt — which Jews commemorate each year at Passover — was an actual event, a concocted national legend or a blend of both.

Some scholarly doubts about the literal history are reflected in the new Jewish



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Study Bible (Oxford University Press), the first one-volume commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures comparable with several top-notch

Christian study Bibles.

The volume will receive grateful reception from many Jews and Christians — though probably not from Jewish and Christian traditionalists who reject liberal theories.

But one expert has produced another important work that's more favorable toward the Bible's accounts: "On the Reliability of the Old Testament" (Eerdmans) by K.A. Kitchen, professor emeritus of Egyptology and archaeology at England's University of Liverpool — and a Christian conservative.

The Study Bible's commentary on the Book of Exodus was written by Jeffrey Tigay of the University of Pennsylvania, who agrees with Kitchen that at least the rough outlines fit with what we know from sources outside the Bible.

"If there is a historical kernel" to the Exodus story, Tigay cautiously concludes, the overall situation is "not inherently implausible."

Kitchen is far more affirmative. He grants that the Exodus events can never be proven absolutely from evidence outside the Bible. But he says they correspond with the "attested realities" and known culture and language of the late second millennium B.C., and that favors "acceptance of their having had a definite historical basis."

Some specifics: Experts agree that ancient Semites from the Holy Land (Canaan) often moved into Egypt for food, water and work. Some reached high office; others were enslaved. There's evidence for the biblical slave cities of Pithom and Rameses built by Pharaoh Rameses II.

Then there's a famous inscription that survived from the reign of Rameses' successor Merneptah (1213-1203 B.C.). It identifies a people called "Israel" living in Canaan just after the Exodus period (though some set an earlier Exodus date). Archaeological remains indicate many new settlers entered Canaan's highlands in this period. And the Exodus-related lands of Edom and Moab are mentioned in Egyptian records.

If the Israelites had simply invented their origin, Tigay writes, it is likely they would have portrayed themselves as the original inhabitants of the Holy Land "rather than interlopers with a humiliating background as slaves." On that, Kitchen comments, "Nobody else in Near Eastern antiquity descended to that kind of tale of community beginnings."

It's often noted that Egyptian inscriptions that survived didn't mention the Exodus. But Kitchen says the Egyptians never made inscriptions marking defeats or slave rebellions. Virtually everything written on papyrus sheets has been lost. And wandering Israelites would have left few if

would have left few if any remains behind in Sinai.

Skeptics should "cease demanding evidence that cannot exist," Kitchen contends.

Kitchen also explores considerable circumstantial evidence from outside the Bible.

For instance, he analyzes 80 treaties, law codes and covenants from ancient times that show significant variations among different epochs, and argues that the Law of Moses fits the structure of documents from the Exodus era.

He also says the writer of such material would have needed the kind of knowl-

edge someone raised in the court of Egypt would have received. In other words, someone just like Moses (whose name, everyone agrees, was Egyptian).

Though liberals say the portable tabernacle used for wilderness worship couldn't have existed that early on, Kitchen cites similar structures from before the Exodus.

Another issue is the Bible's report that "about 600,000 men" (Exodus 12:37) and their families left Egypt, thought to be too many to survive wilderness travels.

Both Kitchen and Tigay say the Hebrew word translated "thousand" also means "family" or "squad" elsewhere in the Bible, so there could have been 20,000 Israelites.