

Jeremiah's Journey to Egypt

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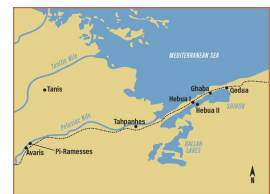
In the wake of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the prophet Jeremiah, who had long counseled his fellow Judeans to yield to Babylon's might, made the surprising decision to leave Judah with a departing caravan headed for Egypt, never to return to his homeland (*Jeremiah 43*). We know little about Jeremiah's reasons for leaving, and the Bible provides only a faint glimpse of his final years spent preaching to Judean exiles in Egypt. But thanks to new archaeological and geological evidence from Egypt's eastern Nile Delta, we are now able to identify the precise route that Jeremiah and his fellow Judean travelers took to reach Egypt.¹



Here's what we know of Jeremiah's journey from the Bible. Even though Jeremiah witnessed the invasions of Judah, culminating with the tragic happenings of 586 BC, he was personally able to avoid deportation to Babylon. As reported in *Jeremiah 40*, the prophet was apprehended in Jerusalem along with other prisoners designated for exile. Apparently aware of Jeremiah's messages encouraging Judah to submit to Babylonian rule (*Jeremiah 27*), King Nebuchadnezzar considered the Hebrew prophet to be worthy of special treatment (*Jeremiah 39:11-12*). Jeremiah was given the option to either stay in Judah or relocate to Babylon where he was promised a comfortable life (*Jeremiah 40:4*). The prophet opted to remain in Mizpah (possibly Tell en-Nasbeh), just north of Jerusalem, where Gedeliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor of Judea, had established his administration.



A short time later, a group of assassins, who opposed Babylonian hegemony and Gedeliah's compliance, ruthlessly murdered the governor, some of his supporters, and the Babylonian garrison at Mizpah (*Jeremiah 41:1-3*). Fearing reprisals, a group of Judeans, including former soldiers and officers, resolved to flee to Egypt for refuge (*Jeremiah 41:17-18*). Although Jeremiah initially counseled against going to Egypt (*Jeremiah 42:16*), the prophet, along with his trusted scribe Baruch, ultimately decided to join the caravan (*Jeremiah 43:6*).



Interestingly, Jeremiah notes several places that they visited upon entering Egypt from the east, including the east Delta town of Tahpanhes (*Jeremiah 43:7*) and the frontier fort of Migdol (*Jeremiah 44:1*). But where were these places, and can we still identify them—or the road that Jeremiah traveled—today? Remarkably, using a combination of textual, archaeological, and geological data, we can!



Throughout antiquity, travel between Judah and Egypt required traversing the deserts of northern Sinai. The main route, which the Egyptians knew as the "Way of Horus" and the biblical writers as the "Way of the Land of the Philistines" (*Exodus 13:17*), closely followed the Mediterranean coastline. Throughout the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–1200 BC), this route was guarded by a series of Egyptian garrison forts, from Gaza in the east to Tjaru (also known as Sile) in the northeastern Delta, a distance of about 140 miles.

Archaeological excavations and surveys have revealed much about the forts that protected this route. In the 1980s, Egyptian archaeologists uncovered a massive mudbrick fort at the site of Hebua, situated just 3 miles east of the Suez Canal.² Structures from as early as the Hyksos period (c. 17th century BC) were uncovered, along with fortifications from the 18th Dynasty (c. 1525–1300 BC) and the Ramesside era (13th century BC). Interestingly, less than a mile south of Hebua, across a low-lying sandy plain, is another ancient fort, termed Hebua II by the excavators.

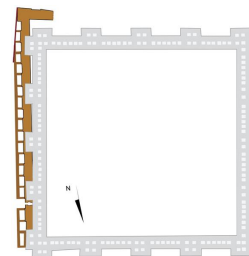
Early indications were that Hebua might be the fortress of Tjaru, but how does one prove such an identification? On the northern exterior wall of the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, Seti I's war reliefs are carved in remarkable detail. Seti I (1294–1279 BC) is depicted returning from a campaign in southern Canaan, passing by a series of 11 forts spread across north Sinai. Tjaru is shown at the western end of the route, but it is depicted as a pair of forts, separated from each other by a crocodile-infested body of water.

Trying to interpret Seti I's depiction of the paired forts, I obtained permission to use geological coring to study the soils in the flat area between Hebua I and Hebua II. Several inches below the surface, dark, shell-filled soil and clay deposits appeared. Analysis of the samples indicated they were Nilotic in nature, demonstrating that a small distributary channel of the Nile had once flowed between the two sites, just as the Karnak relief showed! Then, a few years later, an inscribed statue dedicated to the god



“Horus, Lord of Tjaru” was discovered at Hebua, confirming the site was indeed the frontier fortress of Tjaru.

In 1975, archaeologist Manfred Bietak published a study that attempted to reconstruct the landscape of Egypt’s north-eastern Delta as it would have been known in the second millennium BC. His reconstruction shows the Pelusiac Nile flowing east into a lagoon. Based on Egyptian texts, Bietak identified the lagoon as Shihor, the Egyptian term for “Lake of Horus.” Shihor was also known to the biblical writers. *Joshua 13:3* locates it “before” or “in front of” Egypt, and Jeremiah likewise references this body of water, rhetorically asking: “And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Shihor?” (*Jeremiah 2:18*).³



Thanks to recent geological investigations and satellite imagery analysis in the northeastern Nile Delta, we can now identify ancient Shihor as a substantial body of water, about 25 square miles in size and separated from the Mediterranean Sea by a narrow coastal ridge. Until about 1000 BC, this coastal ridge was largely covered by the Mediterranean, which meant Shihor was a lagoon open to the sea. Thus, throughout the second millennium, the ancient road from Egypt to Gaza had to go around the southern end of Shihor before turning east toward Canaan.

During the 12th century, however, toward the end of the Ramesside era, various Nile distributaries began to desiccate due to lower Nile discharges caused by reduced rainfall in central Africa. Among the casualties was the great Ramesside royal city of Pi-Ramesses. When the Pelusiac branch silted up and its waters diverted away from the great metropolis, it led to the city’s eventual abandonment. The northern extension of this distributary used to be one of the sources for Shihor. Lower Nile levels resulted in the decline of Shihor, which gradually became an enclosed lake in the following centuries as the Mediterranean coastal ridge was exposed, allowing travelers to journey across an area that was previously covered with water.

Indeed, the toponyms associated with Jeremiah’s entry into Egypt, along with recent archaeological discoveries, make it clear that the route to Egypt had changed by the sixth century. One no longer needed to circle around the southern end of Shihor as in the time of the New Kingdom pharaohs; rather, one could travel across the old coastal ridge, as the lagoon’s opening was by then dry land.



Excavations at Tell el-Qedua, an Egyptian military site strategically located on the northeastern side of Shihor, uncovered a large fortified compound, which some have identified with the fort of Migdol mentioned by Jeremiah (*Jeremiah 44:1; Jeremiah 46:14*).⁴ These references demonstrate that Migdol (meaning “tower” or “fort”) was now Egypt’s northern border fortress. Its mention by Jeremiah suggests that the Judean caravan entered Egypt at this location. Another toponym mentioned by Jeremiah is Tahpanhes (*Jeremiah 43:7-8; Jeremiah 44:1*). It is located at Tell Deffeneh, 12 miles farther west into the Delta. There, Pharaoh Psammetichus I (664–610 BC) established a vital military and administrative center.⁵

On the route between Migdol and Tahpanhes are two other sites not mentioned by Jeremiah, Tell el-Ghaba and Hebua, the latter already discussed above. Tell el-Ghaba (3 mi west of Migdol), constructed in the very area where the earlier lagoon opened to the sea, was established sometime in the seventh century BC, after the land had dried out. At Hebua, archaeologists also identified a flourishing settlement and fort from the time of the 26th (or Saite) Dynasty (664–525 BC).

Most remarkably, in 2011, a stela of the Saite pharaoh Apries (vocalized as Hophra in the Bible; see *Jeremiah 44:30*) was uncovered at Tell Defenneh, dating to the king’s seventh year, 582 BC.⁶ It reports that Egyptian forces marched on the “eastern road” across Sinai to confront the forces of Nebuchadnezzar, who may have intended to advance on Egypt after putting down a rebellion in Judah (*Jeremiah 52:30*). In May 2021, a farmer working adjacent to Tell Defenneh discovered another Apries stela.⁷ Though not yet published, this inscription allegedly details the same military foray across Sinai, only this time Apries’s army is said to have passed by the fort of Tjaru.



The stela’s reference to Tjaru suggests that the Egyptian campaign journeyed eastward along the new route that followed the narrow Mediterranean coastal ridge, beginning at Tahpanhes, going past Tjaru, Tell el-Ghaba, and Migdol, with the waters of Shihor to their south. In other words, Apries’s army used the same route that Jeremiah and his associates used, though going the opposite direction.

We are never told why Jeremiah decided to go to Egypt, though we do learn that once there, he prophesied to the substantial and growing Diaspora population concerning God’s impending judgment against Egypt (*Jeremiah 43:8-13*), which may have come in 568 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar invaded. Otherwise, little else can be said about the balance of Jeremiah’s life. One might imagine that since Jeremiah was with Baruch, who had recorded the prophet’s words on a

papyrus scroll when they were together in Jerusalem years before (*Jeremiah 36*), he may have further expanded and edited the biblical book that takes his name, in the land where papyrus was plentiful.

SIDEBAR

Jeremiah's Life and Times

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Jeremiah was of the priestly class. His father, Hilkiah the priest, lived in the village of Anathoth, a few miles north of Jerusalem, just into the territory of Benjamin (*Jeremiah 1:1*). According to the introduction to his eponymous biblical book, Jeremiah became a prophet in the 13th year of King Josiah, that is, around 626 BC. In that same year, the Chaldeans took control of the city of Babylon, and so began the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which in 40 years would swallow up Judah.

When Yahweh calls on him to become a prophet, Jeremiah protests that he is just a *na'ar* (a child, youth, or boy). Since that life stage spanned from 12 to 20 years of age or only slightly more, Jeremiah must have been in his early to mid-teens. Had he been closer to 20, he likely would have been married already, which he wasn't, because later in the book, God tells the young prophet not to marry (*Jeremiah 16:1-2*). If Jeremiah was about 15 in 626 BC, then he was born around 642, during the reign of the ephemeral King Amon, who was assassinated (*2 Kings 21:19-26*), or at the latest in the opening year of Josiah's kingship. When Jerusalem fell in 586 BC, Jeremiah was in his mid-50s. By

ancient Near Eastern standards, he was of old age when he embarked on his journey to Egypt.

In this oil painting by Rembrandt (1606–1669), Jeremiah reclines against a column, with a Bible and a bowl filled with jewelry (possibly the “gift” from the Babylonian commander Nebuzaradan mentioned in *Jeremiah 40:5*) as he laments the destruction of Jerusalem that eventually drove him to exile.

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