

## **"The joy of History", or "How to Get more out of your Bible with History by your side!"**

- Duff Crerar, Elder, Historian, Grandfather, husband son (and taxpayer, even in retirement.) Revised 2021

### **Chapter 1: Walk like an Egyptian, really?**

The Old Testament writings about Egypt cover about one thousand years of ancient History. Egypt remains the single civilization before Rome which lasts throughout the Old Testament, and blends into the inter-Testamental period while having continuous relationships and influence on the Holy Land. Even Before the mention of Abraham in Genesis, Egypt had undergone its first rise to greatness, the building of the Great Pyramids, and the great unification of Upper and Lower Kingdoms. The Old and Middle Kingdoms are already in the past. Then, between Abraham and Moses, at least 430 years roughly captures the period when residence becomes captivity and slavery, followed by a decisive liberation into the Wilderness for the Hebrews. The problem, from the historians' point of view, is that for hundreds of years most of this was regarded by Western Scholars as mostly mythology, in the sense that it was "made up" to back up the Bible. Even today, Wikipedia has articles by scholars who present Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David as largely "mythological" characters edited into Jewish history far after, even by a thousand years, they may have existed. Such sceptical theories have been around since the 1700s, or the age of Enlightenment. Since few documents or monuments have ever paralleled the Genesis and Exodus account in detail, we cannot say we have direct "corroboration" of these books from the historical or archaeological record. And yet....

It is unrealistic to expect much mention of the Hebrews in Egyptian monuments and records. They are truly background figures in the period between the Middle and New Kingdoms. We have paintings and drawings of Hebrews bringing goats and flocks to trade with Egyptians, which give us a good clue as to how Abraham's people dressed and made their living, but they are identified as "Abishai's people", which is fascinating in that Abishai is a Hebrew name of long standing. But no Abram or Abraham is ever "names" in the Egyptian records. During the Middle Bronze Age, Genesis tells us that Abraham visits Egypt, almost loses his wife to the Pharaoh, and is propelled in shame into the wilderness again. There is no going back, as Ur, his own civilization, is broken and destroyed within a generation or so of his departure. When his descendants, the house of Israel, sponsored by Joseph, arrive, Egypt seems to be under a culture which not only seems to have few language problems with Hebrews, and which easily propels a foreigner into high office, riding a chariot. This "new Egypt" has the trappings of the old, "wearing the golden chain of office and Pharaoh's official signet ring" but also the chariot technology of the conqueror: in other words, a regime which was a likely place for a "new man" to get ahead! It may well be that between Abraham and Joseph the Egyptian kingdom was dominated by the Hyksos, a Canaanite or Syrian conqueror who brought chariots to Egypt - the secret of their defeat of the old dynasty and temporary subjugation of Northern Egypt.

What makes this especially illuminating is what comes after Joseph's times: monuments and records of Egypt describe a cataclysmic war of liberation by the Southern Nile Egyptians led by Ahmose, which drive out the Hyksos (the

Egyptian loyalists having learned how to build faster and better chariots by then!) and establish a re-united and militant new dynasty, the New Kingdom. This clan of Pharaohs are known from their own monuments and other records as conquerors who hated and oppressed non-Egyptians, enslaving those who they could not drive out. This included population controls on subject peoples, as well as war and conquest expeditions against Canaan. This gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "a Pharaoh who did not remember Joseph".

These rulers were not afraid even to change history to maintain their values and objectives. It has been called "historic death": If you make a mistake or are considered a political challenge to whoever is in power, they simply chiseled your records off the monuments and erased you and your people from the records (those of us who remember Soviet propaganda under Stalin doing just the same thing as History was "revised" from time to time)! It is therefore highly unlikely that we will ever recover a historical record of the Hebrews and their disastrous impact on Egypt. One controversial Pharaoh, for example, was a woman who co-ruled with a younger male relative, Hatshepsut, wearing a false beard in her monuments and found on her mummy. She was a controversial figure, in that her trading expeditions made Egypt rich, but there still seemed to be complaints and discontent with her memory. Her successors seemed to have tried to remove her memory or disgrace it here and there. Among her successors were the extremely militaristic Thutmose III and Amenhotep, who may have been behind the anti-Hatshepsut censorship.

**Which brings us to the most controversial figure in both Egyptian and Old Testament History: Moses.**

Thutmose III was under the rule of Hatshepsut and was the winner of the great battle of Megiddo against the people of known as Mitanni, perhaps ancestors of the Hittites. Many captives were taken from the nobles and raised to be pro-Egyptian. This gives us an idea of the court climate when Moses was growing up and might explain why a Hebrew boy taken out of the water by a princess (could it be Hatshepsut herself?) became known as a prince. It might also explain, given how things turned out, why Thutmose III wanted her name removed from history for such a "classic" error! It also means that when Moses kills an official and flees, he is actually fleeing from one of the greatest warrior and foreigner-hating pharaohs in Egypt's history.

Thus, it makes sense that his son, Amenhotep II, would be the pharaoh of the Exodus. He, too, was a great warrior, conquering Syria and Cush (now Western Ethiopia and Sudan) and famous for shooting arrows through copper ingots several centimeters thick from his chariot. No wonder Moses was afraid (Exodus 5)! Archaeologists have also noted that Amenhotep's oldest son died before he could assume the crown of his father. Thutmose IV was not the eldest son, though he succeeded. Amenhotep also waged a whirlwind campaign in Canaan which seemed to be a triumph merely because of the huge number of slaves it brought back -- which makes sense if a huge crisis had eliminated the previous work force. How? Why? Well, Well, Well.....

It simply does not work to assume that these things "prove" the Bible correct. Just as we no longer have much support for Rameses II (sorry Charlton Heston and Yule Brynner, and Cecile B. DeMille!) being the Exodus Pharaoh, owing to new thinking and dating, so we have the possibility that more archaeological finds may require fine tuning. Yet, and this is how historians think, the probabilities for Thutmose III and Amenhotep II as our Exodus Pharaohs are far better than for Rameses, and that is how historical research progresses.

Egypt continues as a factor in the Story of Israel's children: by defeating the Sea Peoples (ancestors of the Philistines), Rameses III forces this migrating nation to settle along the coast of Palestine, cutting Israel off from the sea. A great archaeological find, the Merneptah Stele (an engraved stone pillar dating from about 1220 B.C.>) records the nation of Israel as an independent country for the first time. Solomon marries an Egyptian princess, creating a lasting peace with the power empire, but after he dies, the Pharaoh known as Shishak, founds the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty. A key new factor here is that Shishak was from Libya, not old Egypt. It is he who shelters Jeroboam (I Kings 11), while later Pharaohs, from Cush (today known as the "black Pharaohs") figure prominently (II Kings 19, Isaiah 37) as either rebels against or victims of the next imperial dominator, the Assyrians, with poor Israel and Judah, now divided, stuck in the middle. The last conquering ruler of Egypt is known as Pharaoh Neco, who defeats Judah, but is crushed by the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish. After this, while the Egyptians will hide Judean refugees such as Jeremiah, they have no further power, or military/diplomatic influence in the Old Testament.

### **How do we know all this?**

The study of Egypt - Egyptology - begins with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the 1790s. Unlike earlier invaders, he brought a large team of scientists, geographers, historians, and collectors, who brought all their modern scientific skills, and took back to Paris a tremendous collection of artefacts, mummies, monuments, etc. This looting left a remarkable piece of debris (or broken monument) in French hands: the Rosetta Stone. Carved in 196 B.C., the stone had three types of writing: the indecipherable and famous hieroglyphics, hieratic (handwritten Egyptian words) and Greek. The French scholar examining it finally realized that all three rows were of the same proclamation, in three languages. Therefore, the Greek (well-understood) could help unlock the hieratic and then the pictograms of the hieroglyphics. Eventually he worked out (much like modern codebreakers) what the symbols stood for. Tradition has it that the first word he grasped was the Egyptian word for cat: "mu". Within a few months he also had translated enough hieroglyphics that the entire language could be opened for history.

**Which brings us to the next anchor for Egyptian history.** Around 200 BC an old Egyptian priest, Manetho, set out to write a detailed and chronological list of the Pharaohs and their great deeds. His chronicle from the first great king Narmer (also known as Menes) to the end of the Egyptian kingdoms, including its Cushite, or black African dynasties, the great list has proven to be very accurate, partly because it includes eclipses, comets, and other events which have been confirmed and often dated by astronomers and historians who have cross-referenced these with other cultures. The result has been a dating system which was used extensively even before modern archaeology and which has held up well.

Add to this our growing realization that when two Pharaohs are often mentioned, they ruled together, not one after the other (sort of like one as apprentice, one as senior and master) this has helped make the chronologies and king-lists even more accurate and tie them more closely to archaeology. Popular historians such as Werner Keller, in his Bible as History series of books, have provided readers with dozens of images from old Egypt which show what many verses of the Old Testament might have looked like in Egyptian real life.

Thinking about Egypt's history and its long influence reminds me of European History: there is always an older, more ancient civilization behind every era we study. Some of our greatest institutions are now a thousand years old or more. How would a new people, either as forced guests or as captives, feel about entering a civilization begun two thousand years ago, with such great cultural power that it turns foreigners into Europeans, instead of the other way round? Our modern pluralist world can hardly grasp that kind of cultural solidity and continuity, and so the persistence of the Egyptian way seems hard to fathom, and it is even harder to empathize with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses as they encounter that most ancient, powerful, culture, and religions of the Egyptians. Already two thousand years old by their times, they must have felt the power of Egypt to be unshakeable. How hard, especially for Moses, who himself knew from the inside how aggressive, mighty, and intolerant the New Kingdom was. He knew he was facing, even with Yahweh beside him, the oldest and most persistent organized religion and power structure in the World. His dread was an honest dread. But his obedience was greater. And so, Egypt could be used by God, not the other way around, to honour the Covenant which saves us all. We should learn from that.

Oh, we will see this again, with every great power structure and religion which tries to absorb God's people and divert God's path. Perhaps we can get a better grip on our fears in our own time, by reading the Old Testament and meeting its little, yet mighty people, whose character is our model for intimidating times. I know it inspires me. I hope it inspires you, too!