

The Pharaoh of Exodus

Who Was The Pharaoh of the Exodus?

I find it rather interesting that the Exodus account in the Old Testament doesn't mention the name of the pharaoh. Since Moses was the author, he certainly could have named him. So why didn't he? In short, I believe that pharaoh's name is not mentioned on purpose. Throughout the Exodus narrative, the pharaoh either implies or asks "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go" (Ex. 5:2). The irony, perhaps intentional, is that we don't know pharaoh's name, but we do know the Lord's name (Yahweh "I AM." The book of Exodus, was not written to exalt the Egyptian pharaoh (who was considered 'the divine god-king', but rather the God of Israel.

An additional problem in ascertaining the exact pharaoh of the Exodus has to do with a debate within Egyptology itself. The debate concerns assigning correct dates to the reigns of Pharaohs. The dating of Egypt's pharaohs comes primarily (although not exclusively) from the 3rd century B.C. Egyptian priest & historian Manetho who ordered the reigns of the pharaohs into thirty dynasties or families, in his work *Aegyptiaca* (History of Egypt).[5] The ancient Egyptians themselves kept record of time according to an astronomical cycle called the Sothic cycle. One of the reasons why many scholars today argue for a revised chronology of ancient Egypt is the question of whether or not the Sothic cycle is a reliable method for dating.[6] To make a very long and complex story short, I'll state here that I hold to the revised chronology which makes minor adjustments on dates and therefore affects the identity of the pharaoh.

According to the standard chronology, most critical scholars believe that Rameses II (ca. [1304-1236](#) B.C.) was the pharaoh of the exodus. There are, however, many problems with identifying Rameses II as the pharaoh of the exodus, one of which is that he was one of the longest reigning kings in ancient Egypt. As Merrill points out, "If Rameses' death had brought Moses back to Egypt, the exodus would have taken place after 1236, a date too late to satisfy anybody." [7] But perhaps, more importantly, there is no archaeological or inscriptional evidence in Egypt or ancient Canaan which fit the biblical descriptions.

But, don't despair! With a little detective work; a starting point of around 1446 B.C.; and a knowledge of the Egyptian 18th Dynasty, it is possible to ascertain the probable identity of the pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Interestingly, there are about three pharaohs whose lives parallel and interact with the OT Exodus narrative: (1) the pharaoh who issued the decree to kill the firstborns; (2) the pharaoh of the oppression of Israel and (3) the pharaoh of the actual exodus event itself. Because of space, we'll look at the first and last one.

The Pharaoh Who Decreed to Kill the Firstborn Jewish Children

From chronological considerations found in the biblical text[8], it is very possible that Amenhotep I was the pharaoh who issued the decree in Exodus 1:15-16 to kill all male

Hebrews. As we look closer at this time frame in Egyptian history we also discover that Thutmose I ([1528-1508 B.C.](#)), the son of **Amenhotep I, had a daughter named Hatshepsut.**

Hatshepsut is fairly well known from historical and archaeological sources and has a very interesting story herself. In order to secure royal inheritance rights for herself, **Hatshepsut married her half-brother Thutmose II.** When Thutmose II died prematurely, Hatshepsut assumed the role of pharaoh along with and her younger (male) nephew (& stepson) Thutmose III.

As William Murnane observes, “Although Hatshepsut did not dethrone her nephew, she asserted a claim to royal power equal to his and, as senior coregent, took precedence over him in contemporary monuments.”[9] During her co-regency with the younger Thutmose III, Egypt enjoyed a time of prosperity and great building. One of the most well known structures which survives today is the queen’s mortuary temple (also called Deir el-Bahari) located in the Valley of the Kings.

It is very possible that when she was younger, it was this bold young queen who drew Moses from the Nile (Ex. 2:5-10). In another touch of irony, Hatshepsut is said to be one of the first women in ancient history of whom we are well informed.[10] **If she is the daughter of pharaoh who rescued Moses from the Nile against the decree of her grandfather Amenhotep I,** then it seems appropriate that she is remembered in both Egyptian and biblical history.

The Pharaoh of the Exodus

Finally, we consider the identity of the famous pharaoh of the biblical exodus. Following the conclusions of the above discussion, and if the revised chronology of Egyptian history is correct, then **Amenhotep II ([1450-1425 B.C.](#))** must be the pharaoh of the biblical exodus. Merrill elaborates:

Our identification of Amenhotep II as the pharaoh of the exodus is supported by two other considerations. First, although most of the kings of Dynasty 18 made their principle residence at Thebes, far to the south of the Israelites in the Delta, Amenhotep was at home in Memphis and apparently reigned from there most of the time. This placed him in close proximity to the land of Goshen and made him readily accessible to Moses and Aaron. Second, the best understanding suggests that Amenhotep’s power did not pass to his eldest son, but rather to Thutmose IV, a younger son. This is at least implied in the so-called dream stela found at the base of the Great Sphinx near Memphis.[11]

Other inscriptional evidence outside of the biblical record gives us a picture of what Amenhotep was like. According to Alfred J. Hoerth,

Amenhotep II was a famous sportsman in his youth and he left several stories of his physical abilities (ANET 243-45). For example, it was recorded that no one else was

strong enough to draw his bow. One day he tested two hundred stiff bows and then began riding his chariot around a series of copper targets, each about three inches thick. According to the story, every shot hit the mark, and the arrows fell through the back of the targets.[12]

In addition to these and other traits of bravado and military prowess, it is understandable why Moses was reluctant to confront the pharaoh as God had commanded him. Yet, as the story unfolded in Exodus and the Lord God sent the ten plagues to Amenhotep II, we read that he “hardened his heart” against God and against setting the Jews free. This seemingly benign statement “the hardening of pharaoh’s heart” is also an argument for the authenticity of the biblical account. If (or since) Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, and he had first-hand knowledge of Egyptian culture and religion, then he certainly would have understood that the “hardening of the heart” was not a good thing. This is according to the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Papyrus of Ani). This document was a religious text which describes what happened in the afterlife according to Egyptian religion. After death, the pharaoh’s heart was weighed in a scale balance by Anubis (the god of the underworld) against the feather of ma’at or truth.[13] To have a heavy heart or a hardened heart (i.e. a stubborn/proud heart) would have condemned the pharaoh in the afterlife. Interestingly, most ancient Egyptian mummies (especially pharaohs) have been found buried with sacred trinkets and scarabs (dung beetles)[14] made from gold or other materials, and would have been placed over the heart to protect it in the afterlife. These scarabs were inscribed with spells from the Book of the Dead.[15]

There is so much more that I could mention here, but as you can see from the above discussion, this is just the tip of the iceberg (as they say) of evidence for the biblical exodus. There is actually much more internal textual and literary evidence that the Exodus account is genuine, but space and time will not allow us to review it here. For more detailed information I would recommend two of the best sources I know of which are accessible to most people: (1) Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament by John D. Currid, and (2) Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition by James K. Hoffmeier.

I think it’s probably safe to say that many biblical skeptics demand spectacular evidence and spectacular evidence may be forthcoming. Research is continuing in this fascinating field and new discoveries are being made every year. One thing I can say confidently, is that so far, the Egyptian evidence, when properly understood is consistent with the biblical record. Even our adherence to the new chronology is within the pale of academic respectability and orthodoxy.

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