

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 11

Joseph-Moses: Archaeology and Egypt Part 2

When I was young we often played a game called “Clue.” Clue is a logical deduction game where clues unfold helping you determine who committed the murder, which weapon was used, and where the murder was committed.

“Colonel Mustard did it with a candlestick in the study” might be the answer. Or perhaps it was Professor Plum.

As you assemble the clues, you are in a race to deduce the solution before the other players. The race can sometimes make you guess the answer without all the support you need to have certainty. In other words, you might have narrowed down the possibility to two of the potential six perpetrators, or maybe know that four of the six possible weapons are eliminated from consideration, leaving a potential of two options. Of the nine rooms you may not always know the actual one involved at the time you hazard a guess to the solution.

The practical effect of the game was that guessing before a final solution was clear always left the possibility of guessing wrong, even though you were able to eliminate 90 percent of the options.

In the real world, it is rarely as simple as the game of Clue. So when we consider Israel’s exodus from Egypt, we ask questions like:

- Who was Pharaoh when Joseph went to Egypt?
- Who was the Pharaoh of the exodus?
- When did the exodus occur?

We have clues to these questions, both in the Bible and from archaeological findings, but we do not have definitive answers. The clues give indications for reasonable opinions, but they are not so definitive that the conclusions are certain and beyond any dispute.

In the first part of this lesson (two weeks ago) we analyzed the archaeological arguments lodged against the belief in an authentic exodus as given in Scripture. The analysis was not too different than what I would use in a court cross-examining experts on their opinions. This class shifts the focus from the arguments against the truth of Scripture, to those archaeological finds that support the accounts in Scripture of Israel’s time in Egypt and the exodus into the Promised Land.

We should first readily acknowledge, I am not a trained Egyptologist. I have read a number of books, enough to know that I cannot in a clear conscience claim to have “the answers” to the questions posed above. That said, I have also read enough to help me form some opinions about those questions!

So our approach will be to analyze a number of factors that coincide with my opinion. We do so, however, recognizing that other opinions carry their own sets of supports. Our encouragement is for the interested reader to seek out the many informative books on this subject and consider them in whatever depth is desired.

THE CHRONOLOGY

We should first set out the timelines relevant for our discussions. Egyptologists divide the history of Ancient Egypt into a number of divisions.¹ If we narrow these divisions down to those that involved ruling dynasties, we begin around 3000 BC. They seem easier to follow in bullet form:

- **Early Dynastic Period** (c.3000 - 2686 BC). During this time there were two dynasties (appropriately called the “First” and the “Second” Dynasties), each with a number of rulers.
- **Old Kingdom** (2686 – 2160 BC) consisting of the Third through Eighth Dynasties.
- **First Intermediate Period** (2160 – 2055 BC). This held the Ninth through Eleventh² Dynasties.
- **Middle Kingdom** (2055 – 1650 BC). The Eleventh through Fourteenth Dynasties were included in this time.
- **Second Intermediate Period** (1650 – 1550 BC). This held the Fifteenth through Seventeenth Dynasties. The Fifteenth Dynasty was the “Hyksos” dynasty about which we will speak later in this lesson.
- **New Kingdom** (1550 – 1069). This held the eighteenth Dynasty through the Twentieth Dynasty. Within this New Kingdom time was a sub-classification called the “Ramessid Period (1295 – 1069 BC) where the Rameses Pharaohs reigned in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties. This is important as we go through this lesson.

¹ There are those who object to these classifications, and the dates are subject to different opinions. Still most references use these dates and we accordingly set them out here. The dates here are those given by Shaw, Ian, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford 2000).

² The Eleventh Dynasty was in Thebes only in this time period. During the next period, the “Middle Kingdom” the Eleventh Dynasty extended to all of Egypt.

- **Third Intermediate Period** (1069 – 664 BC) with the Twenty-first through the Twenty-fifth Dynasties.
- **Late Period** (664 – 332 BC), which brought an end to the dynasties when the Persian Period brought down the Thirtieth Dynasty.

In part one of this lesson we discussed the timing issue of what the Bible tells us about the date of the Exodus. In that lesson, we considered the implications of two different dating passages. The first was 1 Kings 6:1, which reads,

In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel ... he began to build the house of the LORD.

Since most scholars consider the Bible as placing the building of the temple as around 960 BC, that would place the exodus at 1440 BC, during the New Kingdom. The Pharaoh in 1440 was the Eighteenth Dynasty’s Thutmose III, who reigned from 1479 to 1425.

Yet there are great difficulties in trying to place the exodus during the reign of Thutmose III. One notable difficulty lies in the explanation behind the slavery of Egypt found in Exodus 1:11,

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.

Raamses as a name and a ruler did not exist until the Nineteenth Dynasty (the start of the “Ramessid Period”) with Rameses I in 1295 BC.

As we explained in part one, ancient near eastern writing conventions would often count a generation as forty years for computational purposes. So the twelve generations from the exodus to Solomon’s building would be $12 \times 40 = 480$ years. In that writing sense, the 480 years of 1 Kings 6:1 is precise—it gives the right number for the reader to understand the twelve generations. Yet if viewed from the perspective of the true number of years, we know that most would likely have children somewhere around age 20 to 25. If that figure is used, then the exodus would have occurred somewhere around 1260 BC, the reign of Rameses II (1279-1213).

Famed Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen uses this date and we urge those interested to read his more thorough treatment of his analysis, reasoning, and justification.³

³ Kitchen, K. A., *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 2003) at 202f, 307ff. See also Hoffmeier, James, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford 1996) at 125 and cites therein.

We will use the Rameses II era to consider archaeological factors in favor of the Biblical exodus account. We do so recognizing that many others set out other ideas and theories.⁴

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FACTORS⁵

We have previously discussed the absence of certain evidence on the presence of Israel in Egypt, as well as the lack of evidence of a large exodus. When we look back over the time period of Ancient Egypt, we see a glaring factor we must take into account as we scour the archaeological evidence and record: we are dealing with Egyptian history that spanned *thousands* of years. While that sentence may be easy to read over, we should take a moment and digest the implications.

Archaeologists have only scratched the surface of some limited archaeological remains of events and peoples that occurred over an entire populated region/country in the world in a civilization that continued for thousands of years. To locate a certain individual or event is a bit akin to finding the proverbial needle in the haystack. This is especially true when later history showed the event to be of great importance, but the time considered it a humiliating defeat doubtlessly talked about little and certainly not desired to be memorialized or remembered. So we look for consistencies and try to understand inconsistencies, rather than hoping to find the exodus story engraved on the tomb wall of Pharaoh Rameses II!

Here we set out a number of consistencies, giving cites for further study or explanation. We start first with the Joseph story before progressing to Moses and the Exodus.

⁴ By using this date, we will see in later lessons it places Israel's conquering of Canaan in line with the dates many archaeologists favor for the destruction of certain key Canaanite cities.

⁵ As we get into these factors we should note a number of good resources available beyond those included in these footnotes. Oxford has published a large three volume *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (2001) edited by Penn State's Egyptologist Donald Redford. Various experts wrote the entries including Kenneth Kitchen and James Hoffmeier. Both Kitchen and Hoffmeier have a number of relevant books and articles including Kitchen's book noted in footnote 3 above. Kitchen has published many more relevant books including *Pharaoh Triumphant, The Life and Times of Rameses II*, (Aris & Phillips, Ltd. 1982) and many articles including those on point in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992) on "Exodus"; *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia* (Zondervan 1976) on "Goshen," "Hyksos," "Pithom," "Potiphar," Rameses, Rameses (City)," and "Zoan"; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans 1982) on "Joseph" and "Shishak" as well as many other publications. Hoffmeier's books include *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford 1996); *Ancient Israel in Sinai* (Oxford 2005); and *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Lion UK 2008).

- **Joseph as a slave** (Gen. 37:28, 36; 39:1). If we are right on dating the exodus during Rameses II in the mid-1200's, then we would back up to the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BC) for the enslavement of Joseph. To some degree it is difficult to determine the extent of slavery during this period because in Egyptian terminology, anyone with a lord (human or divine) was a servant or slave. With a common word used for both, it is necessary to look to context to determine whether there was a slavery of the sort in the Joseph story.⁶

Within the framework of a slave being “bought” and “sold” we do have evidence for that in Egypt beginning in the Middle Kingdom. Discussing those slaves mentioned along with land and cattle, the Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt (“OEAE”) notes,

In the Middle Kingdom, they could be acquired by bequest or other arrangement.⁷

Slaves not in connection with land and cattle, but assigned to individuals (like Joseph to Potiphar) have also been identified in the Middle Kingdom, but only as “identical with the king’s slaves.” These were transferred to estates of priests, nobles, and officials⁸, which was a title carried by Potiphar, “an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard” (Gen. 39:1). It might be of note here that when Joseph as a slave was imprisoned, he was put into the prison for Pharaoh’s servants (Gen. 39:20).

Both Professors Hoffmeier and Kitchen note with interest that twenty shekels, the price paid for Joseph (Gen. 37:28) was the “average price for slaves during the first half of the second millennium [2000-1500 BC].”⁹ That figure is contrasted with the price in the first millennium (when minimalists like Finkelstein and Silberman argue the exodus story was “concocted”), which was over double that given in the story, fifty to sixty shekels.¹⁰

As a purchased slave, Joseph was “overseer in his [Potiphar’s] house” and “in charge of all that he had” (Gen. 39:4). The “Papyrus Brooklyn

⁶ *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 3 at 293-293.

⁷ *Ibid.* at 294.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* at 83-84. See also Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* at 344f.

¹⁰ Hoffmeier, *ibid.* at 84; Kitchen *ibid.* 345, 639.

35.1446” is an Ancient Egyptian Papyrus dated by scholars in 1985-1773 BC time period. It has a ledger of names of servants on an Egyptian estate, over forty of which are clearly Semitic (the same language group that was from Canaan).¹¹ A number of those servants are translated by Hoffmeier to be “he who is over the house.” Hoffmeier then concludes,

The fact that Joseph, a Hebrew, is portrayed in Genesis as serving in the house of an Egyptian official, and that Asiatic men [which is the way Egyptians classified such men from Canaan] work in the capacity of [he who is over the house] on Egyptian estates in the late Middle Kingdom and beyond, suggests that the Joseph story could be set within this period.¹²

- **The personal names used.** When discussing the claims of Finkelstein and Silberman, we noted their argument that the names used in the Genesis story were consistent with names known to the Jews in the 600 BC era they believed to be the time of authorship. In fact, based on evidence we now have, the four Egyptian names used in the Joseph story date are assignable to the Middle Kingdom time, with two being exact in form as well as phonetics.

The process of dating these names includes transcribing the names from the Hebrew spelling into the Egyptian spelling equivalent. This in itself is an art and the subject of numerous publications. We refer those interested in reading the details behind these conversions to the process as laid out by Egyptologists Hoffmeier and Kitchen in their respective works.¹³

These scholars give the data and explanations for the names of Joseph’s owner **Potiphar** (Gen. 37:36; 39:1), Joseph’s wife **Asenath** (Gen. 41:45, 50), Joseph’s father-in-law **Potipherah** (Gen. 41:45, 50), as well as Joseph’s Egyptian name **Zaphenath-paneah** (Gen. 41:45).

- **The “magicians” of Egypt.** Once Pharaoh had his troubling dreams we are told, “he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt” (Gen. 41:8) to interpret the dreams. Archaeology has uncovered dream interpretation manuals, one being the “Papyrus Chester Beatty”¹⁴ stored and used by

¹¹ Hoffmeier at 61.

¹² *Ibid.* at 84.

¹³ Hoffmeier, *ibid.* at 84ff; Kitchen, *ibid.* at 345ff.

¹⁴ This manual dates to the Ramesside period and, based on the grammar, some scholars take it back to the 12th Dynasty (1985-1773 BC). See Gardiner, Alan, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, (British Museum 1937).

Egyptian court officials. Hoffmeier walks through the Hebrew word used in Genesis, shows its likely Egyptian roots, and links them to those who would have these dream manuals.¹⁵

- **Joseph’s promotion into Pharaoh’s court.** Genesis 41:42-43 records,

Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot.

There is a wealth of information to consider the accuracy of this investiture depiction. Tomb paintings were apparently quick to record the promotions and investitures of Egyptian officials. Kitchen analyzed the painting and text of an appointment of a man named “Tutu” from Amarna. It has Tut standing with a gold collar being presented to him, followed by Tut riding away in a chariot.¹⁶

Kitchen also published the inscription of “Huy’s” investiture under Pharaoh Tutankhamun (1336-1327). Like Joseph, Huy received a rolled up linen object as well as a gold signet ring.¹⁷ As Hoffmeier explains, the significance of the Genesis story on this point is the particular Hebrew word used for “linen.” Of the four words used for linen in the Old Testament, this single word is used 29 times. It is used for the gift given Joseph in Genesis 41, and of the remaining uses 26 of the 29 are in Exodus recording features of the garments and tabernacle drapes made from materials brought from Egypt in the exodus.¹⁸

Along with Joseph’s investiture came great responsibility. Genesis 41:40 explains,

You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.

Such promotions are not unheard of, including a fairly recent tomb find (1987) at Saqqara. The tomb of “Aper-el” is that of a Semitic who rose to power as High Priest and Vizier (overseeing Pharaoh’s affairs) during the

¹⁵ *Ibid.* at 88-89.

¹⁶ *Oriens Antiquus* 12 (1973) 240.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at 241.

¹⁸ Hoffmeier at 92.

reigns of Pharaohs Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BC) and Akhenaten (1352-1336 BC). This is important not only for showing the rise of a Semite into a position of high power, but also for showing that even during the Egyptian historical time when there is plenty of archaeological evidence, discoveries of important personages are still taking place. This is notable because the Israelite presence in the delta region of Goshen is one where there is relatively little exploration to date.

- **Israel's change in fortune.** As we leave the Joseph years we have a time where Biblical material is scarce. Several hundred years are told in a few verses:

Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them" (Ex. 1:6-10).

As noted earlier, archaeology gives us different dynasties in Ancient Egypt, which are then broken down into lines of Pharaohs. As the Pharaonic lineage would change, so would the dynasty. Among the changes of note in the time period that might apply to Joseph and the Israelites is that of the "Hyksos" kings.

As noted in the chronology section above, the Hyksos ruled in Egypt for over 100 years from about 1664 to 1555 BC. Kitchen believes that Joseph rose to power during this Fifteenth Dynasty of Pharaohs. Interestingly, the Hyksos were not of Egyptian origin, but were from the Near East¹⁹, making them more akin to the Israelites than the Egyptians! Even the names of the Hyksos kings have been "convincingly decoded as West Semitic"²⁰ which is the language group and the area from which the Israelites came.

The Hyksos were in power and ruled in the delta region of Upper Egypt. This same region is where the Pharaoh over Joseph granted land for the Israelites to settle.

After approximately a century, the Egyptians drove the Hyksos from power. As Egyptologist Manfred Bietak wrote,

¹⁹ OEAE, Vol. 2 at 136.

²⁰ *Ibid.* at 139.

The impact of the Hyksos on ancient Egypt should not be underestimated. They were perceived as a foreign dynasty, so their political relations and acts of power must have caused great internal irritation.²¹

After the expulsion of the Hyksos, a number of West Semites still remained in Egypt.²² Undoubtedly these foreign “relatives” of the invading Hyksos would have been placed under close scrutiny if not some kind of bondage once the military and elite fled.

With the expulsion of the Hyksos, came not only a new dynasty (the Eighteenth) but also a whole new era, called the “New Kingdom.” It certainly makes sense of the Biblical comment, “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph”! If Kitchen’s hypothesis is correct, this New Kingdom and its line of Pharaohs would have been those that subjected the Jews to great distress. Several hundred years later arose the Pharaoh Rameses II, where we plan to pick up this study in the final installment next week.

COMING

If you go to the Cairo Museum, in the mummy room, you find the unwrapped body of Rameses II lying in a glass case, his hair still visible. This is a Pharaoh that built great cities over his long reign. As one looks at the remaining wisps of hair still visible on the mummified remains one must wonder about the events in his 66 year reign. How did his first-born son “Amen-hir-khopshef” die and not take over the throne?

And what of Moses? Could a foreign child really be raised in Pharaoh’s household? Where was the place he supposedly fled to in order to escape Pharaoh’s wrath? Once Moses returned and the plagues began, is there any archaeological information to help us understand the plagues? Is there any reasonable idea why Pharaoh did not let the Israelites go after just the first plague or two?

Why do some translations call the parted sea the “Red Sea” while others call it the “Reed Sea”? What was it and where was it?

²¹ OEAE, Vol. 2 at 142.

²² Hoffmeier gives analysis of the archaeological excavations at the Hyksos capital at Tell el-Dab’a (“Avaris”) which shows that once conquered by the Egyptians, the city was not obliterated. Continued use of a temple patronized by the Semitic people indicates that a number of Semites remained behind after the expulsion. See Hoffmeier at 64-65.

Archaeology brings insight into each of these questions. They are what we need to cover to bring this area of focus to a conclusion in the coming lesson.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.”* (Ps. 75:7).

God’s hand is on history. Whether we are reading biblical history, world history, or our own personal history, God’s hand is there. God can raise up kings for his purposes, and he can take them down. No one can hide from God and his hand.

This means he knows us. The Psalmist says he knows when we sit down and when we rise up. He knows the words on our tongues before they are even there! We could not run from him if we tried! (Ask Jonah).

Stop. Acknowledge God and his sovereignty. Rest in his care and take comfort in knowing he has you engraved upon his hand.

2. *“Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD.”* (Ps. 78:11).

Psalm 78 is a psalm that grew out of the Psalmist thinking through the implications of the Exodus. Realizing that “He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and of beast,” the Psalmist asks, “Who in your midst, O Egypt, sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants?” Knowing this the Psalmist remarks “For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods.” And he is. The caring God which gave his people in the exodus period was not a temporary power surge. It was a real manifestation of God’s never ending love for his people. The LORD cares for his people. And as we live in comfort or pain, in power or servitude, at home or away, we must never forget the presence, power, and caring of God. It should move us to faithful praise, regardless of the moment!

3. *“For God so loved the world...”* (John 3:16).

We know this verse well. Yet we need to go back to it anyway. For as we get into deeper study on matters that pertain to integrity of Scripture, history of the Bible, points of merging and points of apparent discord between what we read in Scripture and what we find in secular science/archaeology, we need to remember that the gospel story is quite

simple. Through the layers and depths of study available, there is a simple truth anyone can understand. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever puts faith in him will not perish, but will have unending life.

WANT MORE?

Read about Rameses II. If you get real industrious, order the pre-eminent book on his life. It is authored by Kenneth Kitchen. Then get ready to know him a bit better in the coming lesson!