

CHAPTER TWO: EGYPT AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL

Historians have long been puzzled by the relationship between Egyptian and biblical history. The problem is that the Egyptians did not record any of their failures or setbacks, but only their victories. Other nations were mentioned only when they overcame. When a new pharaoh came to power, the name of the previous ruler might be chiseled out on public monuments, a tendency which is similar to the control of history in Orwell's *1984*. We must remind ourselves, however, that the media in our own country have powerful control over our perceptions of what is occurring--to a large degree they determine what Americans believe is happening. A good example of this is the evolution trials in Arkansas; hours of testimony by Dr. Norman Geisler in favor of a scientific creationism were ignored while a side comment on UFO's made the headlines.

Where does Joseph enter into Egyptian history? Likewise, where does the captivity, Moses, and the exodus from Egypt fit into the historical picture?

The Egyptian Public Works Program

Some have suggested that the Israelites helped build the pyramids. This is unlikely, since the age of pyramid-building was about 2500 B.C. and possibly earlier, long before Abraham was born. The Israelites did participate in some kind of building program, but not the pyramids.

The pyramids were an enormous task, and the accomplishment was truly amazing, particularly considering the fact that they had only learned to work with stone 100 years previously. Herodotusⁱ, writing in 500 B.C. tells us it took ten years and 100,000 laborers to build the causeway, and another 20 years for erecting the Great Pyramid. The cost would be many millions of dollars in today's currency. We are told that if all the blocks used were cut into

one foot sections, they would extend 2/3 of the way around the equator!

With time, pyramid building became less popular. It may have been the expense, the loss of life, or just a change in fashion. It seems that sometimes history is determined by fad and fashion.

In some respects the pyramid projects were really the first public work program. It certainly got many people employed, (they worked on the pyramids when the Nile was high, making farming impossible), and the power of government grew as a result. During the depression our government started public work programs, building dams and conservationist projects, supposedly for the purpose of helping the economy. It did not work too well, since the depression was at its worst in 1937, long after the programs had gotten under way.

We still have public work programs, in the form of government bureaucracies. This large public sector was supposed to help people such as the poor, the jobless, and so on, but the fact is that only a small proportion of the funding goes to the truly needy. Most of it goes to the government employees who “administer” the programs. The government jobs exist to provide jobs and perhaps subsidize the paper industry!

Joseph and the Hyksos

Since the Egyptians considered themselves the smartest people in the world, it came as a tremendous shock when the barbaric Hyksos conquered them. They treated their conquerors with great contempt, as is reflected in Genesis 46:34; “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.”

The Hyksos conquered using a military strategy involving speedy attack with light chariots. Hitler’s version of this was called “blitzkrieg” (lightning warfare), and collapse of the

Egyptian nation was rapid and complete.

Many have wondered if perhaps the Hyksos were in power when Joseph came to visit and eventually helped rule the country. This would make sense, since both the Hyksos and Joseph were outsiders, and a foreigner might be more willing to ask another foreigner to help rule. This viewpoint would mean the Exodus occurred later than what conservative Bible scholars usually indicate.

Actually, though, many unoccupied countries at that time had foreign slaves help in ruling. This was the case in Babylon, Persia, and Turkey, and could very well have been true in Egypt. There is a real advantage to a king having assistants who have little political interest (a slave is unlikely to gain public support and thus overthrow the king).

If we accept the date of 1446 B.C. as the date of the Exodus, as many conservative Bible scholars do, this means the Egyptians were ruling when Joseph became the administrative assistant to Pharaoh. About 140 years later the Hyksos conquered Egypt and ruled another 150 years. After the occupation the Egyptians were finally able to drive the Hyksos out of the country.

Moses and Hatshepsut

Following this chronology, which is by no means certain, Moses was born in 1527, some fifty years after the restoration of Egyptian control. If so, he was born in one of the most fascinating periods of Egyptian history.

It was only a few years after the birth of Moses that Thutmose III was the only male heir to the throne. Thutmose, the son of a harem girl, was only about ten or twelve when his father

died. Thus his stepmother, who had done much of the administrative work for the previous king, stepped in and took control of the government. This woman pharaoh, Hatshepsut, was a very capable and strong-willed administrator. While Egyptians felt that only men were capable of being the pharaoh, they accepted the rule of this capable woman (a beard was added to statues of her at the time, which probably did not fool anyone).

If this chronology is correct, then it is quite possible that Hatshepsut was the young princess who rescued baby Moses from the bulrushes. The first century historian Josephusⁱⁱ tells us that the Princess rescued baby Moses and raised him because she had no children of her own, perhaps even to become a successor to the Pharaoh. This account fits what we know about Hatshepsut, but we must remember that Josephus writes hundreds of years after the event and may have been relying upon untrustworthy sources for his account.

Regardless, Moses chose “rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Heb.11:25). In spite of his fine education in the palace and his apparently high social standing (even a possible successor to pharaoh) he stood up for his kinsmen by killing the Egyptian and at the age of forty fled the country.

While he was herding sheep in the desert, Hatshepsut was deposed and Thutmose III finally took charge. Thutmose went on to become one of the greatest pharaohs and conquered a great deal of the known world. As he conquered, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness.

Egyptian Isolationism

Before she died, Hatshepsut and Thutmose were at odds with one another regarding Egypt’s foreign policy. Hatshepsut was a strict isolationistⁱⁱⁱ, believing that one should stay at home and not get involved with the affairs of other countries. In contrast, Thutmose wanted

contact with the outside world, indeed he wanted to build an empire. Isolationism has been a recurrent issue throughout history, and remains so to this day.

A number of people in our own country are strong believers in isolationism, feeling that we should stay at home and mind our own business. Korea, Vietnam, Angola, the Middle East, and yes even Nicaragua should tend to their own affairs and we should tend to ours, they say. To be fair, we must admit that even George Washington advocated neutrality in world affairs.

There are real liabilities to such an approach, however. We need natural resources from our neighbors world-wide. In addition we have some obvious enemies who told us long ago they want to conquer us and the rest of the world. Dare we look the other way as they conquer country after country until they are so strong and we lose so many friends that we cannot defend ourselves?

Isolationism is often contrasted with our massive foreign aid programs; many ask “why give away so much money?” Perhaps we need to rethink our foreign aid programs--why not support other countries indirectly through buying their products, stimulating business activities and thus creating jobs, instead of giving them handouts that usually go to their wealthy bureaucrats? Isn't this a logical extension of the principle of loving your neighbor? I've often marveled at the inconsistency of those who say “buy American” with one breath and “help the starving overseas” with the next. Those in other countries might hate us less if they could make an honest living, instead of subsisting on handouts from Americans^{iv}. Why protect our overpaid workers, whose high wages only inflate our cost of living?

Thutmose III built an empire, it peaked under Amenhotep III, but within a century it collapsed. As Genghis Khan found many centuries later, it is sometimes easier to conquer a

country than to rule it. The communists may be discovering much the same thing in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan.

Ikhnaton's New Religion

About 1380 B.C. a new pharaoh came to power in Egypt, named Ikhnaton, who allowed the empire built by Thutmose III to decline. Ikhnaton tried to introduce a new "monotheistic" (technically monolatry--one idol) religion and moved the capital north, where opposition to his new religion was less likely. Just before total ruin ensued, he tried to compromise with the priests of the old religion, but it was too late. His successor, the famous "King Tut," was only a shadow king and little remained of the once large empire.

Some modern scholars have suggested that Moses borrowed his monotheism from Ikhnaton. Such scholars usually hold to a later date for the Exodus (1290 or 1250 B.C.). Actually this is no real issue at all since Ikhnaton's religion was vastly different from that of Moses and the Israelites.

True, Ikhnaton's religion was centered on one god; the sun was the only thing to be worshiped. However, there was no ethical content to the religion and it was only a short-lived fad. It was briefly popular, though, and the art, literature, and social life of the time were dramatically changed as a result. Everything old was considered outdated and irrelevant, while anything new and different was elevated. That almost sounds like the evening news!

As can be seen, it is difficult to make a case for Moses borrowing from Ikhnaton for his religion. Indeed, the faith of the Israelite nation can be contrasted vividly with both the traditional and the new "Ikhnaton" religious beliefs of Egypt. One need only look to the ten plagues to see the symbolic impotence of the Egyptian religion as opposed to the omnipotence of

the Israelite God^v.

For example, the Nile being turned into blood was a sacrilege to the river considered holy to the Egyptians. Their religion which emphasized cleanliness contrasts with the lice who defiled the altars and priests. The cows who were revered were killed by one of the plagues. Even the religion of Ikhnaton was shown to be inferior to the Lord God, since darkness covered the sun. In the contrast between God Almighty and anyone else, God is always superior.

The Giving of the Law

After the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites soon came to Mount Sinai where God revealed His law to Moses. As James Walker has pointed out^{vi}, God has established many laws by which nature and the universe function. It is only logical, then, to assume that God must also have laws by which nature and the universe function. It is only logical, then, to assume that God must also have laws by which mankind can best function, both governmentally and ethically. These laws can be discovered, as scientists can discover physical laws, and certainly God's moral laws win out in the long run if not immediately. Fortunately we do not have to experiment to find God's best in these areas; He has revealed His law throughout the Bible, including the Mosaic law.

Two clear alternatives exist: we can hold to the concept of higher law, to which everyone is subject, or we can accept the premise of relative law, with human thinking the only source of truth. The typical despots of Moses' day were much like the dictators of the modern totalitarian state, particularly in their reliance upon themselves as the ultimate authority.

In vivid contrast is the revealed law of God, to which even the king must be subject. The

prophet Nathan confronting king David and Elijah pronouncing judgment upon Ahab were events possible only when a nation accepts the notion of a law higher than mankind.

This concept of a higher authority was also accepted by the ancient Greek Stoics and Roman jurists many years after Moses. Still later in history the Puritans attempted to use biblical mandates as the basis for government. While they may have taken the concept too far, relying upon analogy when a specific biblical law or principle could not be found, we can commend them for attempting to follow a distinctive biblical alternative.

At its beginnings, our own country believed in a higher law to which all must submit. William Blackstone wrote of this^{vii}, which most of our founding fathers had read. God's law, Blackstone pointed out, was given for our benefit and highest good. In light of this assumption, civil government was to administer justice, yet remain a "simple, frugal affair," to quote Thomas Jefferson.

In contrast, our modern government has stronger roots in the thinking of Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who stated that "...truth is the majority vote of that nation that could lick all other." He anticipated the Supreme court decision on abortion when he stated that the sacredness of human life was a delusion. Legal experts believe that Holmes' legal philosophy has given more direction to modern jurisprudence than the concept of "higher law" held by the founding fathers and the ancient Hebrews.

Separation of Church and State

In the Mosaic law there was also a strong concept of the distinct roles of the clergy and the state. In contrast to the "god-kings" so common during the time (Egypt is a prime example), the Sinai law did not allow the king to take on priestly tasks and vice versa. This was enforced,

as exemplified by the punishment of Saul when he tried to make a sacrifice. (I Sam. 13:8-14) and Uzziah becoming leprous when he burned incense in the sanctuary (II Chron. 26:16-20).

This separation of powers allowed for the confrontations between the prophets and kings mentioned previously. The logic of separation and balance of powers gradually became a part of modern government through the influence of Judeo-Christian thought and the classical traditional, which are now represented in the governments of most Western nations. The balance between the judiciary, Congress, and the president in our own country is a good example of the balance of power.

But this is quite different from our modern concept of “separation.” Today the idea is twisted to mean that good church people should mind their own business, tend to the flock, and stay out of government affairs. If Nathan had accepted this premise, he would never have confronted David! No, separation of church and state does not rule out church people holding politicians accountable for their actions. And it certainly does not disqualify Christians from holding political office and applying Christian principles in political decisions. It might rule out a pastor running for political office and attempting to be both a preacher and a government leader at the same time, but that is an altogether different matter.

Necho Meets Josiah

Many years later, after the period of the judges, the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, and the captivity of the northern ten tribes of Israel, the Egyptian king Necho came into conflict with the Israeli king Josiah. In some translations of the Bible this appears to be a contradiction, since II Kings 23:29-30 states that Necho fought against the king of Assyria, while II Chron. 35:20-27 states that he fought for Assyria.

More recent discoveries have found that the Hebrew word translated “against” in II Kings could also be rendered “on behalf of.”^{viii} Thus Necho aided the Assyrians near the end of their era of domination.

One might wonder why Necho would aid the vicious and cruel Assyrians. Necho is quoted in II Chron. 35:21 as urging Josiah to stop meddling with God by attempting to stop the Egyptian army. It may well be that the wise king Necho was aware that the end of the horrible Assyrian civilization would only mean the oncoming of an equally terrible successor. He may have concluded that some sort of balance between the great powers of his day would be better than the obliteration of even an awful empire.

There is considerable evidence that Necho's thinking was accurate. Too often today one bloodthirsty dictator falls by assassination or coup, only to be replaced by one equally vile. The evils of right wing despots are usually no worse than their left wing successors. An adequate theistic moral basis for fair government must be laid before such a pattern can change. In absence of this, limiting the power of the despots is the best that can be hoped for.

Unfortunately, Necho's scheme did not work, and Babylon came to be the new world power. Within a short time it was replaced by the Persian empire, then Alexander and finally the Romans became the dominant force in the world.

Chapter Two

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- i. George Rawlinson, ed., *The History of Herodotus*, vol. II.
 - ii. Flavius Josephus, *History of the Jews*, book II, chapter X.
 - iii. John Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt*, p. 174.

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- iv. Noted by linguistic missionary Frank Laubach, "Seeing God at Work" (record).
 - v. James Walker, *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation*, P. 54..
 - vi. Ibid, pp. 73-75.
 - vii. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.
 - viii. Joseph Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, p. 219.