

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Exodus

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The very subject of the book prompts a reconstruction of the background. While there are many problems in fitting the account into Egyptian history, and while newer views would change the dating arrangement of the nation of Egypt itself, conservatives have traditionally linked the events to the Eighteenth dynasty of Egypt.¹

The Eighteenth Dynasty looks like this:²

Amenhotep I - Ruled from 1546-1525

Thutmose I - Succeeded and ruled from 1525-1508 Moses would have been born in this time slot, probably 1526 B.C., since he was 82 or 80 at the exodus.

Thutmose II - Ruled from 1508-1503 and was followed by the queen Hatshepsut who ruled from 1504-1482, a period in which Moses found great favor. She served as co-regent with Thutmose III, although she served as queen when he was with the armies.

Thutmose III - This powerful man, Thutmose III, became a great rival of Hatshepsut; when he reigned in his own right he killed off her court (1462 B.C.) and tried to rid the country of any memory of her. He died in 1450 B.C. In this time we would find a natural backdrop for the flight of Moses out of Egypt. Moses would have returned from the desert when he heard that the king had died.

Amenhotep II - Reigned from 1450-1425 and would be the most likely candidate for the Pharaoh of the Exodus (in 1446 B.C.).

Thutmose IV - Ruled next from 1425-1412; he was not the first-born son of Amenhotep II, but received in a dream that he would be the next king. Perhaps this can be explained by the death of the first born of Pharaoh, as the Bible says.

Many historians demonstrate some interesting features of this dynasty (some of which are not widely accepted). The woman Hatshepsut was the daughter of Thutmose I as well as the wife of Thutmose II. Her claim to the throne would have been strong. Thutmose III was declared king by an oracle of his father but came to the throne under the tutelage of his father's wife who kept him in the background for 22 years.

He was succeeded by Amenhotep II. Sir Alan Gardiner dated the reign of Amenhotep from 1436, but mentioned that for the last twelve years

¹ This is not an arbitrary choice, but one that fits the biblical chronology exactly. The view takes the ages of the people and the time of the events and discovers that they place Moses in the late 1500s for his birth, and an exodus at 1446 B.C. Critical, liberal scholars do not take the facts of Scripture in the same way, and generally come to a later date for the exodus—that is, those who actually think there was one. The standard view today, the majority view by far, is that the exodus occurred (in some measure) about 1290 B.C.

² See for the details on this information, E. W. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).



of Thutmose III's reign there was no military campaign into Syria. There is some clear evidence that there was a co-regency at the end of Thutmose III's reign and it was probable that Amenhotep II was acting in his father's stead. In the 17-20 years left in his reign, he had no military campaigns. Was this because he had no army left?

The next king, Thutmose IV, is the man of the disputed dream inscription by the Great Sphinx. The message he received told him to clear away the sand from the image and he would grant to him the rulership of the land. While this promise allegedly came from the Solar god, the crucial part of the story is that his becoming the ruler was unexpected. Could this offer a glimpse at a ruler who would suddenly inherit the throne due to the loss of the firstborn?

It makes good sense to see Amenhotep II as the Pharaoh of the Exodus who defied the God of the Hebrews and refused to let the people go. He increased his fury and was finally brought to utter disaster. Shortly after this, the so-called monotheism rebellion swept into Egypt (Akenaton and Tut). Of course, most of modern critical scholarship would put an exodus of sorts (variously explained and variously accepted) in the 13th century B.C., after the people learned monotheism from the Egyptians.

Against that background we can see more specifically how the details of Genesis and Exodus fit in the setting of Egypt and the world. What was promised in the Book of Genesis now begins to unfold in a nation in Egypt. Abram was called out of Ur to become the father of a great nation. That nation was now in Egypt, and being called out of that country. And the first thing that the mass of people needed was a constitution. That is essentially the focus of the Book of Exodus.