

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Egyptian Pharaohs in the Bible**

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The Bible records the historical and spiritual journey of God's people through the ages. As a record of real history, the Old Testament touches on the nations and rulers that impacted the ancient Israelites, including a number of Egyptian pharaohs. Whenever the Bible refers to a specific pharaoh, those references are accurate chronologically and historically. This article will review the Egyptian pharaohs mentioned in the Bible and highlight their significance from the historical records.

### ***Unnamed Pharaohs in the Bible***

The earliest references to pharaohs in the Bible do not include specific names. These references simply refer to pharaoh as a title of rulership. The word "pharaoh" in Egyptian meant "great house,"<sup>1</sup> and simply referred to the reigning monarch over the nation of Egypt at any given time. The first time the Bible refers to one of Egypt's pharaohs is in Genesis 12:15, where Abraham sojourned in Egypt. This unnamed pharaoh was probably part of Egypt's 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, several hundred years later than the pyramid builders of the Old Kingdom.

The next pharaoh to appear in the pages of the Bible reigned during the time of Joseph (Genesis 39:1). This pharaoh, too, is

unnamed in the Bible. However, Joseph probably lived and served as one of pharaoh's primary advisors during Egypt's 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.

Two or three other unnamed pharaohs in the Bible reigned during the lifetime of Moses. The pharaoh of the oppression, who ruled when Moses was born (Exodus 1:11, 22), and the pharaoh who reigned when Moses fled from Egypt (Exodus 2:15) were possibly the same individual but more likely two different pharaohs. The pharaoh of the Exodus (Exodus 3:10; 4:19) was a third pharaoh whose life Moses impacted. These pharaohs who were involved in the life of Moses ruled during Egypt's New Kingdom period. They may have been pharaohs of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and many Bible scholars consider Ramses II (1279-1213 B.C.)<sup>2</sup> to be the pharaoh of the Exodus.<sup>3</sup> However, it seems preferable to place Moses earlier in Egypt's history, during the powerful 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. In that case, Amenhotep II (1427-1400 B.C.)<sup>4</sup> would be the most likely candidate for this unnamed pharaoh.

One other pharaoh who is unnamed in the Bible was the king of Egypt during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 3:1). This pharaoh probably ruled near the end of the weakened 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty of Egypt, and may be identified as Siamun (978-959 B.C.)<sup>5</sup> "The marriage of a royal princess (perhaps a daughter of Siamun) to Solomon of Israel is a striking testimony to the reduced prestige of Egypt's rulers on the world stage. At the height of the New Kingdom, pharaohs regularly took to wife the daughters of Near Eastern princes, but refused to permit their own daughters to be married off to foreign rulers."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Pharaoh Shishak—Sheshonq I (945-924 B.C.)***

Jeroboam, who would eventually become the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel after Solomon, originally fled from Solomon and found refuge in Egypt. There, Pharaoh Shishak protected him (1 Kings 11:40). Shishak is known as Sheshonq I, the founder of Egypt's 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty. Sheshonq was an aggressive ruler, establishing renewed unity within Egypt and exerting influence outside of Egypt. Sheshonq eventually invaded Judah (1 Kings 14:25), plundering some of the riches of the Temple in Jerusalem during the reign of Judah's king Rehoboam.

After more than a century of passivity on the part of Egyptian rulers, Sheshonq I intervened aggressively in the politics of

the Levant to reassert pharaonic prestige there. His Karnak inscriptions record a major military expedition c. 925 BC against Israel and Judah and the principal towns of southern Palestine, including Gaza and Megiddo. The Old Testament records the same event, stating (1 Kgs. 14:25-6) that, in the fifth year of Rehoboam, 'Shishak, king of Egypt' seized the treasures of Jerusalem, and adding (2 Chr. 12:2-9) that he came with 1,200 chariots and an army that included Libyans and Nubians.<sup>7</sup>

The parallel account in 2 Chronicles 12:1-11 also refers to Shishak.

### ***Pharaoh Zerah?***

Zerah, mentioned in 2 Chronicles 14:9, is sometimes identified as the Egyptian Pharaoh Osorkon I (924-889 B.C.), but this identification is far from certain.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Pharaoh So?***

Second Kings 17:4 refers to So as the king of Egypt during the time of Hoshea's reign over Israel. However, no pharaoh by this name appears in the Egyptian records. "Attempts have been made to identify this 'So' with Osorkon of the Twenty-Third Dynasty or with Shabako of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, or to assign to him merely a field commander's status."<sup>9</sup> It's also possible that the name So refers to a city in Egypt rather than the name of a pharaoh.

### ***Pharaoh Tirhakah—Taharqo (690-664 B.C.)***

Second Kings 19:9 says that Tirhakah was a Cushite king who ruled over Egypt during the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah (compare 2 Kings 18:21). Tirhakah, or the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty ruler Taharqo in the Egyptian records, unsuccessfully resisted the encroaching power of Assyria in 701 B.C. before actually rising to the position of pharaoh. "Tirhakah did not ascend the throne of Egypt and Ethiopia (Kush) until 690 BC. . . . the kingly title may merely have been added by the biblical narrator writing about the events of 701 at some time after 690, in order to identify Tirhakah to his readers."<sup>10</sup> The Assyrian army under Sennacherib, while able to overcome Tirhakah's resistance, was unable to defeat Hezekiah in Jerusalem because of Hezekiah's faith in God.

### ***Pharaoh Neco—Nekau II (610-595 B.C.)***

The political climate grew more and more complex in the middle east at the end of the seventh century B.C. Assyria began to wane as a power and Babylon rose to new prominence. A collision between these two powers brought Pharaoh Neco to Assyria's side, but Judah's King Josiah attempted to stop Neco and thereby aid Babylon, but his efforts failed (2 Kings 23:29-37; 2 Chronicles 35:20-27; 36:4). Neco then exerted political influence over Judah for a time. However, Neco was eventually defeated by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon at Carchemish in 605 B.C., which prompted Jeremiah to record a prophecy against Neco (Jeremiah 46:2).

### ***Pharaoh Hophra—Apries (589-570 B.B.)***

Jeremiah also referred to Pharaoh Hophra, Apries in the Egyptian records. "Apries addressed himself vigorously to the Chaldaean problem. Initially he undertook large-scale operations against the Chaldeans in conjunction with Phoenician cities and Zedekiah of Judah."<sup>11</sup> These efforts to retaliate against Babylon (Chaldea) were unsuccessful, as Jeremiah prophesied. The pharaohs of the Bible link the biblical events with verifiable history.

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<sup>1</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 852.

<sup>2</sup> Dates for Egyptian pharaohs are those given in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 479-483 and allow for a certain margin of error.

<sup>3</sup> Kitchen, K. A. *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*. London: The Tyndale Press, 1966, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Unger, p. 853.

<sup>5</sup> Patterson, R. D. "1, 2 Kings" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4. Frank E. Gaebelien, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, John. "The Third Intermediate Period" in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Ian Shaw, editor. Oxford: University Press, 2000, p. 333.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, pp. 335-336.

<sup>8</sup> Unger, p. 1186.

<sup>9</sup> Patterson, p. 248.

<sup>10</sup> Kitchen, p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, Alan B. "The Late Period" in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Ian Shaw, editor. Oxford: University Press, 2000, p. 381.