

Jot & Tittle

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Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty

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The long history of Ancient Egypt is traditionally divided into a series of dynasties, or (generally speaking) reigns of families who filled the position of Pharaoh. The Eighteenth Dynasty holds special interest for many students of the Bible because it was likely the dynasty during which Moses came on the scene of human history and led the exodus of God's people from bondage in Egypt. This dynasty is also interesting for historians because it includes Egypt's greatest military pharaoh (Thutmose II), most colorful female leader (Hatshepsut), first monotheistic pharaoh (Akhenaten), and best known pharaoh (Tutankhamun). The Eighteenth Dynasty, the first dynasty in Egypt's New Kingdom period, ruled from 1570-1293 BC.¹ (All dates for ancient Egyptian pharaohs are approximations.) The Exodus can accurately be dated at 1446 BC (based on 1 Kings 6:1), with the birth of Moses taking place in 1526 BC and his flight from Egypt in 1486 BC.²

Beginnings

During Egypt's Second Intermediate Period eastern invaders called the Hyksos controlled the land, ruling from the Nile Delta region. One of the Hyksos kings, Apepi I, wrote to Pharaoh Seqenenre Tao to complain that he was unable to sleep due to the noise of the hippopotami in Thebes, 500 miles away, thereby picking a fight.

Seqenenre Tao attacked and was killed in battle, as his mutilated mummified skull proves.³ His son Kamose continued these battles and died young, possibly in battle like his father.⁴ Kamose's younger brother, Ahmose, was eventually able to expel the Hyksos from Egypt and became the first pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1570-1546). Ahmose may have been the pharaoh who "did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) and began the subjugation of the Israelites.⁵

Biblical Connections

Ahmose was succeeded by his son Amenhotep I (1551-1524 BC) who would have intensified the oppression of the Israelites. It's possible that Moses was born during the reign of Amenhotep I, but his birth more likely took place early in the reign of Amenhotep I's successor, Thutmose I (1524-1518). Thutmose I did not have royal blood but married the sister of Ahmose I, thereby paving the way to the throne.⁶ He would have been the pharaoh who instituted the policy of genocide, the killing of the Hebrew baby boys, to control the growing Israelite population. His reign was powerful but relatively short.

Thutmose I had a precocious daughter named Hatshepsut by one of his wives and a younger son named Thutmose II by another wife. Hatshepsut would go on to rule as a female pharaoh, but in her younger years may have been the "pharaoh's daughter" who rescued and adopted baby Moses. "Only she of all known women of the period possessed the presumption and independence to violate an ordinance of the king and under his very nose at that!"⁷

Not an uncommon practice in ancient Egypt, Thutmose II married his older half-sister Hatshepsut. Thutmose II had a son by a woman in his harem, Thutmose III. Upon the death of Thutmose II, Thutmose III would have naturally become the next pharaoh. But Thutmose III was still very young, so his stepmother (and aunt!) Hatshepsut took the throne (1504-1483 BC). She considered herself to be a legitimate pharaoh, even donning the false beard of royalty. Upon her death, Thutmose III became sole ruler of Egypt, having served in the shadow of Hatshepsut. His official rule lasted from 1504-1450 BC.

If indeed Hatshepsut was the adoptive mother of Moses, there may have been competition for the throne between Moses and Thutmose III. “That is, Moses may have been a candidate for pharaoh, only his Semitic origins standing in the way. There appears in any case to have been genuine animosity between Moses and the pharaoh.”⁸ If this scenario is accurate, it’s possible that the death of Hatshepsut coincided with Moses’ flight from Egypt.

Thutmose III was an outstanding military leader who expanded Egypt’s reach significantly. He’s been called “the Napoleon of ancient Egypt” because of his aggressive military achievements.⁹ His animosity toward the domineering Hatshepsut is evident in the defacement of her monuments during his subsequent reign. Thutmose III increased Egypt’s wealth considerably, some of which would eventually fall into the hands of the Israelites at the time of the exodus (Exodus 12:36). The tomb of the vizier under Thutmose III, Rekhmire, shows scenes that capture the opulence of that era as well as the work of brickmaking slaves, reminiscent of the oppression of the Israelites. In addition, the lengthy reign of Thutmose III fits the biblical narrative of Moses’ life. “Before leaving Thutmose III, however, it is important for us to note that the biblical narrative requires a rule of almost forty years for the pharaoh who sought Moses’ life, since the king who died at the end of Moses’ sojourn in Midian was clearly the same one who had threatened him nearly forty years earlier. Of all the rulers of Dynasty 18 only Thutmose III reigned long enough to qualify.”¹⁰ Following his lengthy reign, Thutmose III was succeeded by Amenhotep II.

Amenhotep II (1453-1419 BC) was likely the pharaoh of the exodus. A successful military leader, Amenhotep II would have resisted any efforts on the part of Moses to release the Israelites from slavery. It was at this peak of Egyptian power that God chose to redeem His people, thereby proving His supreme power. Interestingly, Amenhotep II was not succeeded by his oldest son, possibly an outcome of the death of the firstborn on the eve of the exodus. His successor was Thutmose IV (1419-1386 BC), who recorded his unusual rise to the throne on a monument at the base of the Great Sphinx.¹¹

Later Actors

The rest of the pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty had no apparent role in biblical history. These pharaohs included Amenhotep III (1386-1349 BC), Amenhotep IV (1350-1334 BC), Smenkhkare (1336-1334 BC), Tutankhamun (1334-1325 BC), Ay (1325-1321 BC), and Horemheb (1321-1293 BC). Of special historical interest are Amenhotep IV and Tutankhamun. Amenhotep IV renamed himself Akhenaten and abandoned traditional Egyptian religion to embrace a form of monotheism focused on the Aten, the sun disc. It’s tempting, with no actual historical support, to wonder if Akhenaten was impressed by the monotheism of the Israelites whose God had orchestrated their exodus a few generations earlier. Tutankhamun is famous for the discovery of his nearly intact tomb with its rich treasures of gold. The amount of wealth buried with this young and rather insignificant king reveals the kind of wealth that would have been commonplace to Moses when he grew up in the palace as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.

The Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt lends itself to portraying life in ancient Egypt during the period of Israel’s oppression and subsequent redemption under the leadership of Moses.

¹ Peter A. Clayton, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 98.

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 58.

³ Clayton, 95-96.

⁴ Joyce Tyldesley, *Hatchepsut*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 24.

⁵ Merrill, 58.

⁶ Merrill, 60.

⁷ Merrill, 60.

⁸ Merrill, 62.

⁹ Clayton, 110.

¹⁰ Merrill, 62.

¹¹ Merrill, 63.

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