

# The Biblical Chronologist

WHAT HAS BEEN IS REMOTE AND EXCEEDINGLY MYSTERIOUS. WHO CAN DISCOVER IT?  
(Ecclesiastes 7:24)

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## “Pharaohs and Kings” A Biblical Quest?

A new book about the chronology of the ancient world in relation to the Bible has recently appeared on the market. *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest*<sup>1</sup> is a well illustrated volume of 425 pages. It is not intended as a scholarly volume; its author, David Rohl, tells us plainly that it is “intended as a ‘popular book’ ”.<sup>2</sup>

The publisher has obviously aimed to capture a large number of conservative Christian sales. The thesis of the book—a major revision of ancient chronology—is presented to the lay public as a new discovery which proves the Bible is true in the face of scholarly skepticism. Unfortunately, having examined the book over the course of several months, I find that it does no such thing, and that the perspective of the book is not conservative Christian.

The front flap of the dust cover of the book states,

Ever since excavations in the Lands of the Bible began at the beginning of the last century, biblical scholars have systematically stripped out elements of the narratives—the stories of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Saul, David, and Solomon—and consigned them to the realms of myth and folklore.

This is true enough. I hope you understand by now why the scholars who have done so are wrong. (If you don’t, please read my book and the previous issues of this publication.<sup>3</sup>) The flap goes on to

<sup>1</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995). Originally published in Great Britain as *A Test of Time* by Century Ltd. in 1995.

<sup>2</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 39.

<sup>3</sup>Gerald E. Aardsma, *A New Approach to the Chronology*

inform us that the author of *Pharaohs and Kings* has made a new discovery which “reveals the true historical setting of the biblical epics”.

The wording here is rather ambiguous. To the conservative Christian, who believes the Bible is simply, historically true, it seems to say that the author will show that the Old Testament historical narratives are true, in contradiction to the skeptical scholar. But please note that this wording is equally acceptable to the liberal. The liberal believes the Bible contains some kernel of historical truth, but that it is all encrusted about with myth and unreliable tradition. To the liberal the phrase, “the true historical setting”, is a reference not to Biblical historicity, but to the kernel of truth for which he endlessly searches. And “the biblical epics” are not the moving, majestic, true stories from the past which God has preserved for our instruction in the Bible, but rather the supposed semi-mythological tales about the past found in the Old Testament.

Such wording offers clear marketing advantages—nobody gets offended, and everybody buys a copy. However, it also creates some confusion regarding the book’s true perspective and purpose.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to shrug this off as a mere marketing technique on the part of the publisher. When we open the volume and begin to read inside, we discover the author using the same basic come-on and exhibiting the same duplicity of viewpoints.

Rohl brings what is certainly the key issue today to the forefront in the second sentence of his introduction. He asks:<sup>4</sup>

Simply put, is the early Old Testament

*of Biblical History from Abraham to Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Loda IL: Aardsma Research and Publishing, 1993).

<sup>4</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 7.

real history or just legend?

This question is phrased the way a conservative Christian would ask it. For the conservative, it is an all or nothing issue whether the Old Testament is historically true. The conservative realizes that to convict the Bible of falsehood at any point, including most especially any point of historical fact, is to destroy the doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture, since God cannot lie. And accompanying the loss of inspiration will also be the loss of Biblical inerrancy. The conservative Christian is well aware that an errant, man-made book which passes itself off as a God-breathed book is hardly an intelligent place to rest one's faith. So to the conservative, the issue is all or nothing.

The issue is quite different with the liberal. He has already convinced himself that the Bible contains historical and other types of errors, and has somehow reconciled his faith to this notion. (I know of no logical way of doing so.) But since he regards Scripture as an admixture of truth and error, he would be expected to pose this question as, "Simply put, does the early Old Testament contain real history or just legend?"

The way Rohl has, in fact, worded this introductory question rings conservative, not liberal. So it is with some surprise that we find him, one page later, using the following language (I have provided the italics for emphasis):<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps I should explain, therefore, how the writing of this book came about and what it was that originally triggered off my quest to find a more promising synthesis between archaeology and *the historical kernel of the stories contained in the Bible.*

Now this "historical kernel" phrase is pure liberal parlance, as discussed above. Clearly there is a confusing duplicity evident here.

But the smoke clears as we continue to read.

According to the conservative Christian view history is a simple, single reality—it is simply what happened in the past. The author of *Pharaohs and Kings*, David Rohl, tells us something entirely different. He says, "History is not a simple, single

reality but a complex, living response to the evidence of our own past."<sup>6</sup> In other words, history, according to the author, is not what actually happened in real time and space in the past; rather, history is the perception of the past we imagine in our own heads. History is a "response" rather than a "reality".

Such notions are diagnostic of relativism and theological liberalism—they are foreign to the Bible and to conservative Christianity. Please note, for example, that it makes an enormous difference to true Christianity whether Jesus' death and resurrection are just a subjective, imaginative "response" to some misconstrued historical evidence, or a simple reality, accomplished on our behalf outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago.<sup>7</sup>

Conservative Christianity also regards the Old Testament historical narrative as simply true history. Rohl clearly regards it otherwise. Here is a sample of Rohl's approach to Scripture. In the early portion of 2 Samuel 10 we read about the shameful treatment of David's ambassadors who were sent to the court of Hanun, the Ammonite king. Verses 4 and 5 record:

So Hanun took David's servants and shaved off half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle as far as their hips, and sent them away. When they told it to David, he sent to meet them, for the men were greatly humiliated. And the king said, "Stay at Jericho until your beards grow, and then return."

Rohl wishes to identify this account with some archaeological remains—specifically, a "substantial building" found on top of the mound of ancient Jericho—to help in his effort to corroborate his revised chronology of the ancient world. Rohl feels these remains probably date (according to his reconstruction of ancient chronology) to the reign of David. He further notes that the building seems to have been abandoned shortly after it was constructed. This fits the Biblical account (after a fashion)—clearly David's ambassadors only stayed at Jericho temporarily.

<sup>5</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 8.

<sup>6</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 39.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:12–19.

But if we assume the building was abandoned shortly after it was built because David's ambassadors no longer needed it, this implies that it must have been built specially for David's ambassadors. But this doesn't fit the Biblical account very well—clearly, the ambassadors' beards would have grown out again, removing their embarrassment and enabling them to return to the court of David, long before the construction of a "substantial building" could possibly be completed.

How does Rohl get around this problem? He does so by labeling this portion of Scripture a "strange folktale".<sup>8</sup>

It is necessary for Rohl to do this to preserve his desired match between this Biblical passage and the archaeological remains at Jericho of course. If it is a "strange folktale" then Rohl is free to pick out those portions of the account which seem favorable to his desired match—these must be the kernel of truth—while rejecting as later accretions those portions which are not favorable. But by so doing Rohl clearly reveals his liberal approach to Scripture.

There is a degree of hypocrisy about all of this. Is it not obvious that Rohl has done the same sort of thing the flap of the dust cover of the book seemed to condemn? Is it not apparent that he too has "stripped out elements of the narratives... and consigned them to the realms of myth and folklore"?

Rohl apparently hopes to rally conservative Christians to his cause as he affronts every scholar of ancient history and every radiocarbon and tree-ring scientist (see below) in the world with his new chronology. But the motivation for his rebellion against the accumulated wisdom of centuries of chronological research is not that he might demonstrate to the world that the Bible is simply, historically true after all. Rather, it appears to be simply that he might be the one to tell us which parts of the Bible are false.

### Preliminary Assessment

But let me now leave this unmasking of the book's perspective and purpose and move on to the question of the merit of its proposed new synthesis of

<sup>8</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 313.

Biblical and archaeological data.

When a subscriber and friend kindly sent me a copy of Rohl's book several months ago, I did precisely what I have previously instructed you to do.<sup>9</sup> I was aware, from the letters I had received from various subscribers, that an individual whom I had never previously heard of, David Rohl, was proposing a new chronology of ancient Egypt through a large, well illustrated book and accompanying television production. These letters had informed me that Rohl claimed this new chronology harmonized some elements of the Biblical narrative with the history of ancient Egypt. I knew, in short, that Rohl was proposing a new harmonization of a portion of the Biblical and secular accounts of earth history.

Recall that in such instances I have advised:<sup>10</sup>

So before you bother to wade into yet another supposed synthesis of Biblical and secular historical data, ask yourself these simple questions:

1. Does this author have a positive and respectful attitude toward Biblical, secular historical, and physical (such as radiocarbon) chronological data?
2. Does this author give chronological data, of all sorts, precedence in his reconstruction of history (as opposed to the presentation of a mass of historical facts)?
3. Does this author exhibit knowledge of and competence in handling chronological data of all sorts?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, wade in only if you enjoy reading historical fiction.

I began my investigation of *Pharaohs and Kings* with question one above, and I decided to check Rohl's attitude toward radiocarbon first. My reason for this was that I knew the standard Egyptian chronology had been independently checked and

<sup>9</sup>Gerald E. Aardsma, "Biblical Chronology 101," *The Biblical Chronologist* 2.3 (May/June 1996): 10.

<sup>10</sup>Gerald E. Aardsma, "Biblical Chronology 101," *The Biblical Chronologist* 2.3 (May/June 1996): 10.

confirmed by radiocarbon. The only discrepancy between the two which is known at present is a three century offset during the Old Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> So Rohl would need to overturn not only the historical chronology of Egypt but also the radiocarbon chronology which derives from physical dates of Egyptian artifacts for his new chronology to succeed.

So as soon as I had a copy of Rohl's book in my hands I looked in the index under "radiocarbon" and found, somewhat surprisingly. . . nothing. I next looked under "C-14", and this time I was referred to Appendix C. There I read:<sup>12</sup>

Needless to say, in this book I have produced a chronology which is in direct conflict with modern calibrated high precision radiocarbon dates. As a result, I am obliged to give a short account of the reasons why I, and others, currently reject calibrated C-14 as a dating method.

To avoid becoming sidetracked, we must lay Rohl's concerns about radiocarbon (C-14) aside for the moment—I discuss the value of radiocarbon and its significance relative to Rohl's chronology below. The important point at present is that it is clear that this author does not have a positive attitude toward radiocarbon chronological data, and hence, question one above must be answered in the negative.

I then noticed the following note to Appendix C in the "Notes and References" section:<sup>13</sup>

This appendix is based on a *JACF* paper written by B. Newgrosh in 1992; I am grateful to Dr. Newgrosh for his kind permission to republish the arguments here in abbreviated form.

Since Appendix C is the only place any discussion of radiocarbon appears, and since not even

<sup>11</sup>Herbert Haas, James Devine, Robert Wenke, Mark Lehner, Willy Wolfli, and Georg Bonani, "Radiocarbon chronology and the historical calendar in Egypt," *Chronologies in the Near East: Relative Chronologies and Absolute Chronology 16,000–4,000 B.P.*, ed. Olivier Aurenche, Jacques Evin, and Francis Hours (B.A.R., 5, Centremead, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0DQ, England, 1987), 585–606.

<sup>12</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 384.

<sup>13</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 420.

this discussion is due to Rohl, I must conclude that Rohl does not exhibit very much knowledge of radiocarbon data or competence in handling it. Thus, question three above must also be answered in the negative.

(I should probably also add that I could find no legitimate substance to the complaints raised against radiocarbon in Appendix C; that I have never previously heard of Dr. Newgrosh; that *JACF* stands for "Journal of Ancient Chronology Forum" which I have never previously run across; and that David Rohl himself was, according to the back flap of the dust cover of *Pharaohs and Kings*, editor of this journal, in which Dr. Newgrosh's 1992 paper appeared, "from 1986 to 1992".)

Finally, *Pharaohs and Kings* is certainly dominated by a mass of historical facts, not chronological data. So the second question above must also be answered in the negative.

Having answered all three questions with a decided no, it appeared highly unlikely that Rohl's book was the marvelous new discovery it was claimed to be. Rather, it was, almost certainly, merely another example of the popular "pseudo-harmonization" phenomenon I have previously discussed.<sup>14</sup>

I have now explored *Pharaohs and Kings* from cover to cover. I have discovered nothing in it to alter my preliminary assessment, and much which confirms it. *Pharaohs and Kings* is a fine example of the historical delusions one is easily made prey to when legitimate chronological constraints are removed from any discussion of historical facts and archaeological artifacts.

## Rohl's New Chronology

Figure 1 shows the heart of Rohl's new chronology as it is unveiled for us in Part Three of *Pharaohs and Kings*. What I have shown in the "Rohl" column is admittedly a little sparse, but this results from the fact that I could not find a comprehensive, quantitative statement in Rohl's book for this portion of his new chronology.

Rohl says we should equate a military venture of Ramesses II to Jerusalem in his eighth regnal year with the military venture of the Biblical Shishak

<sup>14</sup>Gerald E. Aardsma, "Biblical Chronology 101," *The Biblical Chronologist* 2.3 (May/June 1996): 9–10.

B.C.	Bible		Egypt	
	period	details	standard	Rohl
900	MONARCHY	- Rehoboam begins to reign -		- reign of Ramesses II ends -
		- Solomon begins to reign -		- Ramesses II begins to reign -
1000		- David begins to reign -		- reign of Ay ends - - Ay begins to reign -
		- Saul begins to reign -		
1100				
1200	THEOCRACY			- reign of Ramesses II ends -
			- Ramesses II begins to reign -	
			- Sethos I begins to reign -	
1300			- Ramesses I begins to reign -	
			- Horemheb begins to reign -	
			- Ay begins to reign -	

Figure 1: A portion of Rohl’s new chronology of Egypt relative to the chronology of the Bible and standard Egyptian chronology. Dashed lines show the greater than three centuries relocation of the portion of Egyptian history displayed which Rohl’s new chronology calls for.

who, according to 2 Chronicles 12:1–9, plundered Jerusalem in Rehoboam’s fifth year. Rohl specifies the date of this event as 925 B.C.<sup>15</sup> I have used this time reference to place the beginning of the reign of Ramesses II on the time chart in the “Rohl” column. Rohl concurs with the generally accepted sixty-seven year reign for Ramesses II.<sup>16</sup> I have used this length of reign to place the end of the reign of Ramesses II on the chart.

Next, I have used the dates for Ay which Rohl specifies on page 241 to place this pharaoh on the time chart. Rohl gives the beginning of Ay’s reign as 995 B.C. Rohl has calculated forward in time from a supposed astronomical anchor point in 1012 B.C. to get this date for Ay. He gives the date for the end of Ay’s reign as 990 B.C. followed by a ‘?’ and the note “(exact length of reign unknown)”. I have used 990 B.C. on the time chart as the best visual approximation to Rohl’s thinking at present.

I have been unable to find any specific dates for Horemheb, Ramesses I, or Sethos I in Rohl’s new chronology, so I have not shown them on the time chart. Rohl does state that Horemheb and Sethos I should be regarded as contemporaries of Solomon, and Horemheb’s early reign should be regarded as overlapping with David’s reign.<sup>17</sup> So he seems to be preserving the order that scholars believe these pharaoh’s reigned in (i.e., Ay, Horemheb, Ramesses I, Sethos I, and Ramesses II).

While Figure 1 is far from a complete illustration of Rohl’s new chronology, it is sufficient to show that Rohl is calling for a reduction of some 330 to 350 years in the late second millennium B.C. chronology of Egypt. This is a very large alteration relative to accepted dating uncertainties for this portion of the Egyptian historical chronology. Scholars would probably be loath to grant even a tenth of this amount.

But rather than appeal to scholarly authority, let us make our appeal directly to the factual evidence. Can any independent, objective chronological data be brought to bear on Rohl’s new proposal? Is there any way one can tell whether

Ramesses II should be placed near 1250 B.C., as standard scholarship claims, or near 900 B.C. as Rohl claims?

Yes. Radiocarbon dating.

### Radiocarbon and Rohl’s New Chronology

Radiocarbon dating has been the target of much adverse propaganda by a few Christian groups. It has been targeted because it conflicts with their own reconstructions of earth history which they have inferred from their reading of Scripture coupled with their understanding of science.

I doubt there is anyone in the world today who has looked more seriously, carefully, and sympathetically at what these groups have said about radiocarbon than I have. And in every case I have found their complaints to be simply specious.<sup>18</sup>

In actual fact, modern, tree-ring calibrated radiocarbon dating offers some tremendous advantages to the student of earth history (which includes every true student of the Bible), not the least of which is its *independent* assessment of chronological questions. I do not wish you to suppose that radiocarbon is a panacea for all chronological conundrums, for it most certainly isn’t. It does have limitations and it must be handled competently and intelligently to yield reliable, high precision results—as is true of every tool which has ever been devised for the measurement of anything. But the important point is that radiocarbon *is* another tool for measuring elapsed time (and experience has shown we need all the help we can get in dating past events), it is *independent* of historically constructed chronologies, and it does yield *reliable* results when properly applied.

Radiocarbon cannot, so far, be used to construct its own, complete chronology of Egypt. One would need a much larger quantity of datable samples whose historical placement was precisely known than are presently available—at least one from the reign of every pharaoh of Egypt, for example. And radiocarbon lacks the precision to give a year by year chronology in any event. Radiocarbon can

<sup>15</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 149.

<sup>16</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 382.

<sup>17</sup>David M. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 175, 195.

<sup>18</sup>For a brief exposé of some recent shenanigans directed against radiocarbon see the “Spurious Claims” section of my paper: Gerald E. Aardsma, “A Search for Radiocarbon in Coal,” *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Creationism*, ed. Robert E. Walsh (Pittsburgh: Creation Science Fellowship, 1994), 1–8.

typically only pin the date of a second millennium B.C. sample down to within plus or minus about fifty years at best. So at the present time, historical records provide the only means of constructing a detailed chronology for Egypt.

But radiocarbon *can* be used very effectively to help choose between two historically derived chronologies, A and B, as in the present case. Here we are asked to choose between two historically derived chronologies of Egypt. They may both be wrong, but they cannot both be correct, since history, in fact, happened in only one way.

The design of the test in such cases is very simple. Samples are located which are known to derive from the period of history in question. They are then dated using radiocarbon. If the radiocarbon dates agree with chronology A of this period of history and disagree with chronology B then we have reasonable and objective grounds for accepting chronology A in preference to chronology B. Note that chronology A must be sufficiently different from chronology B for radiocarbon to be of any help. In the present case the separation between the two chronologies in question is 330 to 350 years, which is sufficient for radiocarbon to yield a definitive result.

The period of history involved in the present dispute involves the pharaohs from Ay to Ramesses II. Have any samples from this period of Egyptian history been radiocarbon dated? Yes. Let me elaborate.

Ramesses II is distinguished by the many buildings and monuments which have come down to the present from his reign. One such building, or complex of buildings, is the Ramesseum, the funerary temple of Ramesses II. The Ramesseum is well known today for its beautiful architecture and rich archaeological and historical remains.

A sample of reed matting was collected from the Ramesseum by G. T. Martin in the late sixties. It was subsequently radiocarbon dated in the laboratory of Rainer Berger at the University of California, Los Angeles. The sample is described as follows by Berger:<sup>19</sup>

Remains of reed matting used as bonding between mud-brick courses of stor-

age magazine in northeastern corner of Ramesseum enclosures at Thebes, the funerary temple of Ramesses II of the XIX dynasty. Martin emphasizes that the sample originated from within the Ramesseum enclosure and was archaeologically well sealed.

Reeds are a preferred sample for radiocarbon dating because they grow in a single year and are likely to be used in the year they are cut. Thus they do not pose the interpretive puzzles which sometimes attach to wood, which may have grown (and thus yield a date) centuries before its use in the structure one wishes to date.

The fact that "the sample originated from within the Ramesseum enclosure" is stressed because it is important that the sample be part of the Ramesseum to ensure that it was built during the reign of Ramesses II. It is the date of this reign, after all, and not just the date of construction of the building from which the reeds were taken, which is our ultimate goal.

The note that the sample was "archaeologically well sealed" is provided to emphasize that the reeds were part of the original building, and not some later repair. Funerary temples could be maintained and repaired over the course of many centuries, so it is important to be careful to date samples which are known to be part of the original construction if one wishes to date the reign of the pharaoh who originally had the temple built.

Berger obtained an average conventional (uncalibrated) radiocarbon age of  $3075 \pm 60$  years BP for this sample. To convert this to calendar years, one must use a tree-ring calibration procedure since "radiocarbon years" are not equal to calendar years. I will get to this in a minute.

First, however, I want to note that another piece of this same sample of reeds from the Ramesseum was independently dated by another laboratory. The British Museum obtained a conventional radiocarbon date of  $2940 \pm 100$  years BP for this sample.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>R. Berger, "Ancient Egyptian Radiocarbon Chronology," *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc. Lond. A* 269 (1970): 28; sample UCLA-1390.

<sup>20</sup>I. E. S. Edwards, "Absolute Dating from Egyptian Records and Comparison with Carbon-14 Dating," *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc. Lond. A* 269 (1970): 17; Fekri A. Hassan and Steven W. Robinson, "High-precision Radiocarbon Chronometry of Ancient Egypt, and Comparisons with Nubia, Palestine and Mesopotamia," *Antiquity* 61 (1987):

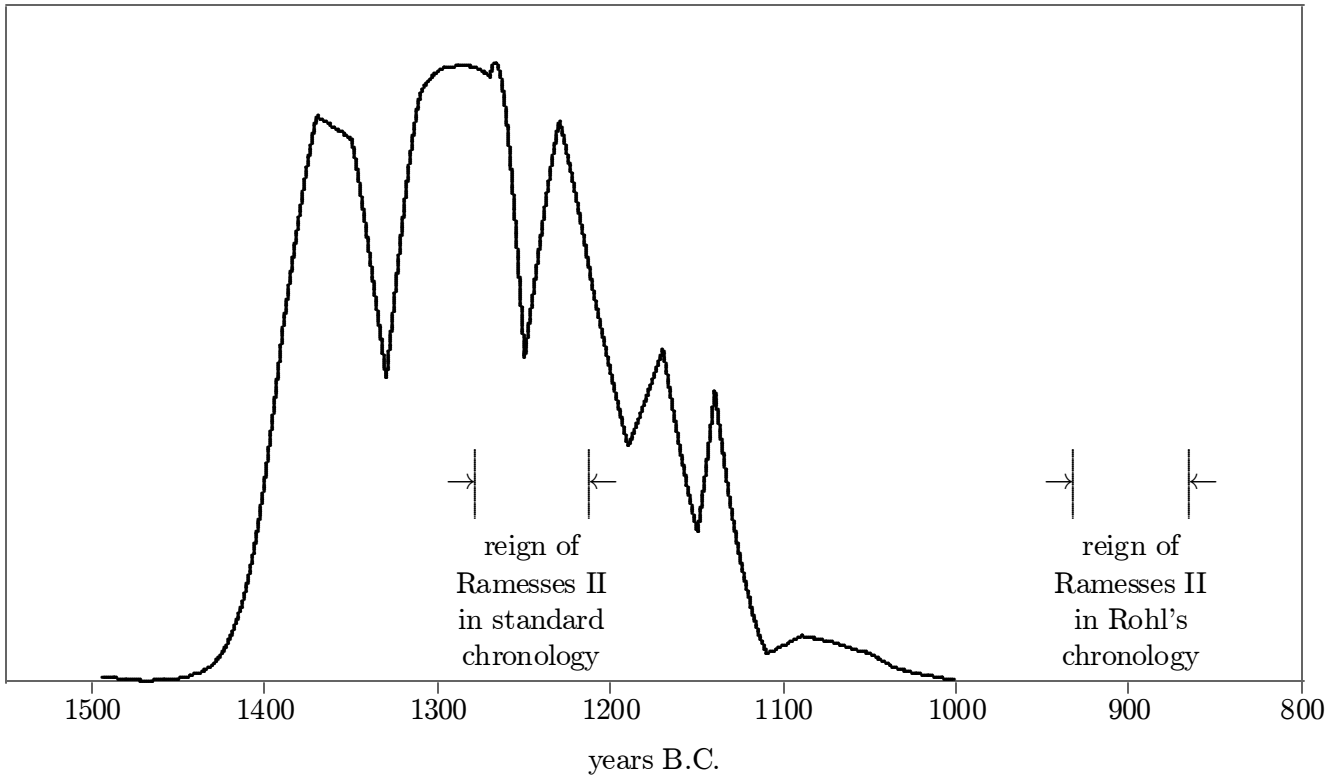


Figure 2: Probability curve (from CALIB 3.0.3) for date of reed mat samples from the Ramesseum. The higher the curve, the more probable it is that the reeds grew at that date. Two samples were radiocarbon dated by independent laboratories. The sixty-seven year reign of Ramesses II is shown between vertical lines for the standard chronology of Egypt and also for Rohl's chronology. The probability that the reeds grew (and hence that the Ramesseum was constructed) anywhere during the dates which Rohl's chronology specifies for Ramesses II is seen to be essentially zero.

Notice that the results of the two labs are in agreement within their specified measurement uncertainties. Radiocarbon obviously can (and routinely does) give reproducible results.

To convert these measurements from radiocarbon years to calendar years it is necessary to use a calibration table. This is a table which has been constructed by measuring the radiocarbon age of precisely dated tree-rings. The necessary table is available in computer compatible format today, which greatly facilitates the conversion of "radiocarbon years" to true calendar years. I have used the program called CALIB 3.0.3 to carry out the necessary calibration.

Figure 2 shows the output from this program for the two samples of the reed matting. I have averaged the two samples (CALIB 3.0.3 provides

133; Ronald D. Long, "The Bible, Radiocarbon and Ancient Egypt," *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 10 (June 1973): 24. Sample BM-333.

a convenient utility for doing this) to obtain the most accurate result. The computer has calculated a probability curve corresponding to the average radiocarbon date of the two samples. The higher this curve goes, the more probable it is that the reeds grew at that time.

For the present purpose it is not necessary to consider the details of this curve. It is only necessary to know that the area under the curve corresponds to a total probability of 1 (or 100%), and to notice that the entire curve lies within the interval from 1500 to 1000 B.C. Thus, the probability that these reeds grew at some date outside the interval from 1500 to 1000 B.C. is essentially zero.

I have plotted the date range of the reign of Ramesses II as it is given by the modern standard chronology of Egypt, and also as it is given by Rohl's new chronology, on the graph. It is clear that the calendar date range which radiocarbon yields for this sample of reeds from the Ramesseum



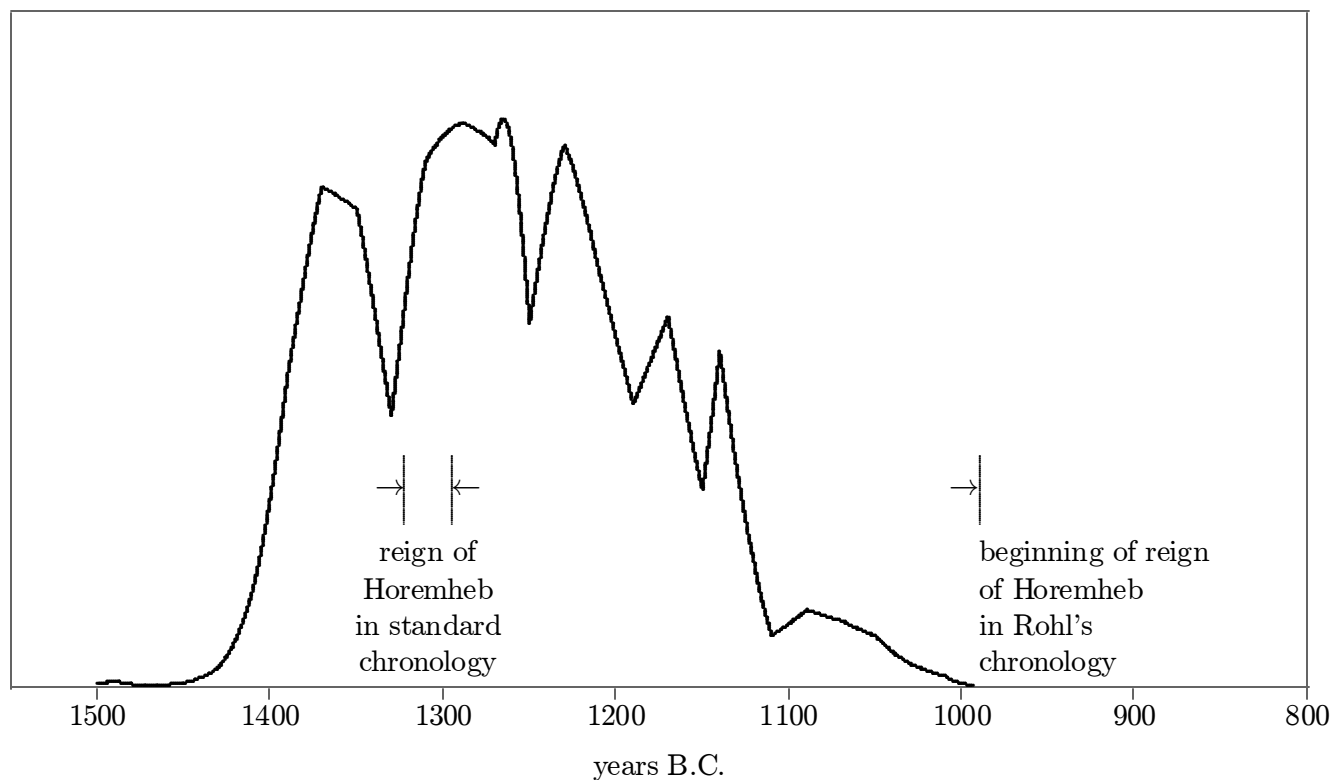


Figure 3: Probability curve (from CALIB 3.0.3) for the date of a straw sample from Horemheb's tomb as determined using radiocarbon dating. The higher the curve, the more probable it is that the straw grew at that date. The reign of Horemheb is shown between vertical lines for the standard chronology, and the beginning of the reign of Horemheb is shown for Rohl's chronology. The probability that the straw grew (and hence that Horemheb's tomb was constructed) anywhere during the dates which Rohl's chronology specifies for Horemheb is seen to be essentially zero.

corroborates the standard chronology and testifies against Rohl's chronology.

Experience has shown that it is a little dangerous to rely on just a single sample for such determinations. Unexpected things can happen. For example, cases have been documented where two samples have accidentally been switched, either when they were collected or later in the laboratory. So prudence calls for another, independent, check.

For this purpose I have used a sample which is described as follows:<sup>21</sup>

Chopped straw from mud-plaster from E end of S wall of First Court of Tomb of Horemheb. Wall was surfaced with limestone blocks decorated with reliefs depict-

ing scenes in career of tomb owner; plaster must be contemporary with building of tomb.

The radiocarbon date for this sample was measured to be  $3032 \pm 57$  radiocarbon years. Figure 3 shows the output of CALIB 3.0.3 for this sample. Once again the standard chronology is corroborated, and Rohl's new chronology is contradicted.

It is possible to confirm these results many times over using additional samples. For example, a number of samples from the tombs of officials closely related to the reign of Ramesses II have been dated.<sup>22</sup> These all tell the same story as the samples I have shown above. Radiocarbon unequivocally says that Rohl's chronology is false.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Burleigh and Keith Matthews, "British Museum Natural Radiocarbon Measurements XIII," *Radiocarbon*, 24.2 (1982): 161; sample BM-1370.

<sup>22</sup>Ingrid U. Olsson and M. Farid A. F. El-Daoushy, "Radiocarbon Variations Determined on Egyptian Samples from Dra Abu El-Naga," *Radiocarbon Dating*, ed. Rainer Berger and Hans E. Suess (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 601-612.

## Conclusion

I have discussed my findings relative to *Pharaohs and Kings* in some detail here, not because I think *Pharaohs and Kings* is especially deserving of discussion, but only because it is fresh off the press and is, therefore, the most current illustration of matters we have recently discussed in *The Biblical Chronologist* regarding pseudo-harmonization schemes.<sup>23</sup> *Pharaohs and Kings* is not unique; there are many similar pseudo-harmonization schemes, all of which are indefensible from a chronological perspective.

The abundance of such schemes can seem very confusing and discouraging to the lay person. They can easily lead one to despair of ever getting to the truth about history. But the existence of counterfeits only serves to accentuate the value of that which is being imitated. Press on. Pseudo-harmonizations are not that hard to spot once you have studied two or three of them. They share a disrespect for objective chronological data—either Biblical, secular historical, or physical (such as radiocarbon). (Indeed they must do so, for correct chronology is the death-knell of all pseudo-harmonizations.) They also generally share a showy display of historical and archaeological data or other such apparently confirming evidence. But their procedure is to give precedence to such data without proper regard to chronology, and then to concoct their own “chronology” to suit their “historical reconstruction”. Finally, quite often the inventors of pseudo-harmonization schemes display little or no ability in handling chronological data. Learn to look for these symptoms and you will save yourself much headache and confusion.

Chronology is the backbone of history. I cannot emphasize too strongly that it is imperative to get the chronology of history right if one hopes to understand history correctly. This is tacitly shown by the Bible’s own careful provision of chronological data accompanying its narrative of the earth’s earliest ages. The only way we can hope to understand the Bible’s history of these early ages correctly is by adhering to the Bible’s own chronology of that history. Furthermore, the only way we can hope to correctly understand extra-Biblical data

bearing on the Biblical account of earth history is by getting their chronology right. And all of this demands that chronological data of all types be held in high esteem, and that they be given precedence over all other factors in our attempts to reconstruct and comprehend history.

David Rohl, like many before him, has not followed this imperative. In inevitable consequence, *Pharaohs and Kings* contributes nothing of truth to the quest to properly understand Biblical history relative to extra-Biblical data. ◊

## Readers Write

### More on Imhotep

*In the Volume 2, Number 3 issue of The Biblical Chronologist I published two letters from readers dealing with the matter of whether the Egyptian vizier named Imhotep might be the same person as the Biblical Joseph. The first letter was from Mrs. Beverly Neises. She listed several apparent difficulties with the identification. She noted that Egyptian historical sources record that Imhotep’s father was an architect, which Jacob was not, and that Imhotep constructed sanctuaries of stone for the pagan gods of Egypt, which she felt was inconsistent with the character of Joseph which is revealed in the Bible. The second letter was from Mr. Thomas Godfrey in support of the identification. He pointed out a striking phonetic similarity between the Egyptian name, Imhotep, and the Hebrew name, Joseph.*

*Mr. Godfrey wrote me with a number of comments on Mrs. Neises’ letter, after reading it in the Volume 2, Number 3 issue. I forwarded his letter, with his permission, to Mrs. Neises for her further comments. Both letters are published below.*

*The principal limitation which emerges from the two letters is that the Egyptian historical sources which tell us about Imhotep and his parentage date very much later than when Imhotep actually lived. The monument on which the claim that Imhotep’s father was an architect is found was built nearly two and a half thousand years after the time of Imhotep, for example. This raises obvious concerns regarding the historical accuracy of this inscription.*

*The two letters raise many other interesting*

<sup>23</sup>Gerald E. Aardsma, “Biblical Chronology 101,” *The Biblical Chronologist* 2.3 (May/June 1996): 9–10.

*points as well, so I have chosen to publish them below in only slightly abridged form.*

Dear Dr. Aardsma,

We can all agree that no one has proven, beyond any shadow of doubt, that Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel, is the same man as Imhotep, the vizier of Pharaoh Djoser, but I have not yet seen any evidence against the identification strong enough to rule out that possibility. The contrary evidence Mrs. Neises presented appears very weak to me, but perhaps it will prove to be stronger than I realize.

Although Fakhry (1961: 4) does state as a fact that the father of Imhotep was an architect, the only basis for this claim seems to be the monument erected by Khnum-ib-re in the Wadi Hammamat (Hurry, 1928: 193; Fakhry, 1961: 24-26) and mentioned by Mrs. Neises. This single testimony might merit our full confidence if erected during or near the time of Imhotep by a witness in a position to know the truth. As it is, however, we have ample justification for skepticism about its accuracy. Since practically every ancestor of Khnum-ib-re listed on the monument is said to be an architect, Khnum-ib-re was evidently intent on advertising his credentials and heritage. Yet the difference between the date of about 500 B.C. attributed to the monument and the date of the birth of Imhotep (Hurry, 1928: 4) indicates that the average gap between the twenty-five men listed was slightly more than 100 years, so we must conclude the list was at least incomplete if not largely legendary or fictitious. Can we even be certain that the names listed represent only father-son relationships? Might they belong to several different lineages?

It is probable, of course, that Khnum-ib-re and his contemporaries did have access to genealogical records or traditions that have since been lost. If it had been common knowledge in their day [i.e., in about 500 B.C.] that Israel was the real father of Imhotep, rather than establishing the reputation of its builder [i.e., Khnum-ib-re] as a great architect, the monument would have proved only that he was a great liar, so I think we can eliminate such a possibility. We are left with only two other alternatives, assuming the list was intended as a single, patrilineal lineage: 1. Khnum-ib-re

might have been mistaken about Imhotep, innocently relying on faulty records or traditions, or 2. he might have been right, actually having access to accurate, 2500-year-old information proving that Kanofer was the father of Imhotep. We may never be sure in this life which alternative is correct. What we really need is such a record dated to about the time of Imhotep. This same conclusion applies to the suggestion in Hurry (1928: 196-97) that the name of Imhotep's mother (Khreduonkh) is recorded in a fragmentary document dated to the fourteenth century B.C.

Hurry (1928: 4-5) says, "we know nothing of [Imhotep's] early history, nor is there any record of his appearance in the flesh." Nevertheless, Hurry cites a suburb of Memphis as his place of birth and even specifies his birthday and names both his parents. As explained above, however, Hurry accepted very scanty and unreliable evidence as authoritative, at least in his introductory biographical sketch of Imhotep, because that was the only relevant information available. Unfortunately, encyclopedias used Hurry as their authority, and now the unsuspecting public is left with the impression that nothing could be more certain.

If Imhotep is Joseph, we should probably not expect to find public monuments or other Egyptian documents revealing the true story of his ethnicity, parentage, or rise to power. There was probably a deliberate attempt to suppress this information. Genesis 43:32 informs us that "Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians" and Genesis 46:34 adds "all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians". We know from Genesis that the pharaoh who promoted Joseph took immediate steps to make him appear more Egyptian. Besides the ring, robes, gold chain, and fine chariot provided as necessary signs of his new office, the pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name and wife (Genesis 41:42-45), apparently desiring to conceal as much as possible Joseph's past life as a Hebrew shepherd, slave, and convict. Joseph succeeded so well in shedding his Hebrew identity that not even his own brothers were able to recognize him.

Now what about the objection that Joseph would not have built pyramids and other structures dedicated to pagan gods? If the pharaoh had asked him to construct a building, would Joseph

have declined on religious grounds, if he knew that the edifice would be dedicated to a pagan god? The Bible does not answer this question directly, but we do have some reason to suppose that he would have served the king in this way regardless. Perhaps his attitude was similar to that of Naaman, who asked permission to bow down with his master in the temple of Rimmon, in spite of his personal allegiance to the one true God (2 Kings 5:17–18). Apparently, God does approve those who “honor the king,” even if it be a pagan king (1 Peter 2:13–17).

We do know that Joseph accepted the Egyptian wife, though she was the daughter of a priest and probably a pagan herself (Genesis 41:50). Further evidence that Joseph saw his mission to be “the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20), rather than a crusade to overthrow the Egyptian gods, was his consent to honor the pharaoh’s regular allotment to the Egyptian priests at the height of the famine (Genesis 47:22).

Speaking of the famine, there is the legend of the seven-year famine “inscribed on a granite rock” near Aswan and dated to about 325 B.C. (Hurry, 1928: 8; Montet, 1964: 106). According to the legend, Imhotep, the son of Ptah [an Egyptian god], revealed to Zoser that the famine might come to an end if only he would appease the god Khnum. Montet goes on to cite a French authority, G. Maspero, who “considered it to be a pious lie, the purpose of which was to remind the king of the needs of the temple of Khnum.” Unlike the monument of similar antiquity that Mrs. Neises mentioned, we have a reliable account (in Genesis) of a seven-year famine that offers some hope of separating fact from fiction in this case. I find it fascinating that this legend makes no mention of the seven years of plenty, because Joseph predicted that those years would be forgotten (Genesis 41:31).

The final point that Mrs. Neises made in her letter was that one title of Imhotep in particular was inconsistent with what we would expect if he were the godly Joseph: “High Priest of Heliopolis, city of the sun [god]” (Fakhry 1961: 24). But if the city of San Francisco elected a Protestant mayor, would we expect him to rename the place to avoid having a title that sounded so Catholic? For that matter, how many Christians continue to honor pagan

deities when they name the days of the week? I see this title of Imhotep as rather supportive of identification with Joseph, who may very well have acquired this title from his father-in-law, priest of On, which is Heliopolis (Genesis 41:45,50). If we must conclude that Imhotep discharged his priestly duties any differently from what we would expect from Joseph, then I believe we need more information than just this title.

The story of Daniel and his three Hebrew friends may also throw some light on this point, since their careers were somewhat similar to Joseph’s. They also received new names to replace their Hebrew names, but unlike Joseph, they apparently continued to be called by those names, even though each one, except Meshach, apparently referred to some pagan deity. Daniel’s new name, for instance, honored Bel, the chief god of Babylon (*Peloubet’s Bible Dictionary*). How many Christians today can even recall the Hebrew names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

Mrs. Neises cited a claim by Montet that “Imhotep constructed sanctuaries of stone for the gods and goddesses of Egypt” (Montet, 1964: 189). But Montet mentions only “stelae found in the subterranean chambers” as the basis for his claim. He assigned no date to these stelae, and he admitted some doubt concerning the correctness of their interpretation. Thus, before we conclude that Imhotep actually worshipped Egyptian gods, perhaps we should insist on clearer and more explicit evidence involving datable records. And if, in fact, he laid plans for buildings later used for heathen worship, this in itself is hardly an adequate basis for branding him as a pagan. He might have been obligated by the pharaoh to supervise their construction, but unable to dictate the use to which they would eventually be put. Perhaps some buildings were only ascribed to him after his death, to make them appear more prestigious.

Mrs. Neises also mentioned an inscription that claimed that Imhotep had planned a temple to the goddess Hathor (Tompkins, 1971: 168). But the Tompkins passage says the inscription reads, “... built according to the plans of Imhotep, son of Ptah.” Once again, this source fails to provide us with the dates we need to use the evidence with confidence, but if the inscription itself really says that Imhotep was the son of [the Egyptian god]

Ptah, we can rest assured that the official who dictated its wording was ill prepared to tell us the true religious affiliation of the historical Imhotep, who was deified as the son of Ptah many centuries after his death.

In conclusion, it appears that we are still unable to rule out the identification of Imhotep with Joseph. One day in heaven, if not through earthy digging and research, we may learn enough to settle the question forever, and when that day comes, I am confident that the Genesis record will be vindicated, regardless of whether Imhotep is, in fact, Joseph.

Thomas James Godfrey  
Blacksburg, VA

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Dear Dr. Aardsma,

Thank you for sending Mr. Godfrey's welcome response to my letter. He made some very good points. I was especially pleased to see how well he articulated the circumstances surrounding the Khnum-ib-re and Zoser famine inscriptions. I didn't have time to cover any of that, and could never have done so as well as he.

I didn't know about the fourteenth century B.C. document naming Imhotep's mother, Khreduonkh, but it captures my attention. We all bring different backgrounds and emphases to the study of Bible chronology. Mine just now has to be from the genealogical perspective. In building a family tree, two pieces of documentary proof are required when establishing each link in the chain. It is significant, from the genealogical perspective, that two separate records exist establishing the parentage of Imhotep.

Evidently, the Egyptians placed some importance on preserving the lineages of royal figures and notable citizens. Heinrich Brugsch-Bey was able to reconstruct large family trees for noblemen of Egypt.

Mr. Godfrey appropriately raises the question of how reliable the Imhotep documents are, but acknowledges that we cannot disprove them. That is my thinking exactly. It is my understanding that historical records are accepted by genealogists unless proven wrong. Since these records do exist, we have to contend with them. I view the Imhotep documents no differently than I would any other proof texts encountered in genealogical research. It could be that God allowed these records to survive for our benefit, if Joseph really was not Imhotep.

I appreciated Mr. Godfrey's explanation of how Imhotep's buildings (if actually designed by Joseph) could later have been converted to pagan temples. He makes a good point, and that is something I could accept if confirmed. Whereas I do agree that Joseph would have been respectful of the Egyptians in their religious beliefs, I still cannot conceive of him knowingly contributing to the construction of their pagan temples.

God's purpose was to reveal Himself, as the only God, to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Joseph was His chosen vessel—the man for the hour. Joseph would not only have confused the message, but defeated God's entire purpose if he later allowed himself to become a tool in the Egyptians' hands for building monuments to their own gods and goddesses. Joseph had already been tried in the crucible, and he was ready to be sent as God's perfect messenger. I believe we can be emphatic when we say, if Imhotep was the architect of any of these structures, he could never have been Joseph.

Building a pagan temple would have been no small offense to God, as we see in the example of Solomon. The consequences of his actions were devastating to the nation Israel. Given Solomon's excesses, one can almost see how that happened, but we have an entirely different picture of Joseph. Unlike Solomon, the spotlight is on Joseph's exemplary character from beginning to end. In every test, he remained true to the Lord God. If we determine that he erected monuments or temples to idols, we are contradicting everything that is re-

vealed about this man in the Scriptures. It seems to me that we need to be careful about writing in anything that isn't there. We dare not attach this to his reputation, if it wasn't so—if we have the wrong man.

Mr. Godfrey suggests that Joseph might have had no choice if under orders from Pharaoh. Perhaps, but this pharaoh doesn't sound like an autocratic ruler who would have required it of Joseph. He was a generous and goodly king, indebted to Joseph. Pharaoh recognized that Joseph was indwelt by the Spirit of God, and he considered none wiser than this man (Genesis 41:38-39). It is unlikely he would have pressed any issue against Joseph's conscience.

Mr. Godfrey's example of Naaman was good, but Naaman's circumstances were a little different than Joseph's. Pharaoh had given Joseph all the king's power, save the throne itself (Genesis 41:40). Joseph made the decisions, and everyone answered to him (Genesis 41:44). It hardly sounds like a situation where he was forced to compromise his beliefs.

I was very interested in Mr. Godfrey's thinking that Pharaoh may have concealed Joseph's true ethnicity and parentage from the Egyptian people. I really wonder if that was the case. When Jacob died, Pharaoh sent all his servants, the elders of his house, all the elders of the land of Egypt, chariots and horsemen to the land of Canaan for his burial. When the Canaanites saw this tremendous entourage, they commented that this was "a grievous mourning to the Egyptians" (Genesis 50:7,9,11). There wasn't a person in that company who wouldn't have known they were going up to bury Joseph's father.

Joseph's true identity was known from the start, by servants as well as people in high places—beginning with Potiphar. Everyone in the king's court knew he had been brought out of the dungeon. Human nature being what it is, that news would have spread like wildfire. An attempt to keep people from telling the truth about his origin would have only maximized their temptation to tell. Joseph was tremendously popular—a hero of his day. It was too great of a story to keep quiet.

When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he kissed them "and wept upon them... And the fame thereof was heard in Pharaoh's house, say-

ing, Joseph's brethren are come" (Genesis 45:15-16). With emphasis on the word "fame", one can only conclude that Joseph's background was common knowledge among the Egyptians. Joseph's brothers had been given the public office of "rulers over [Pharaoh's] cattle" (Genesis 47:6), and everyone in that district would have known who they were. If the servants knew, and the officials in the king's court knew, it is a sure bet that everyone in between knew as well.

I may be wrong about Imhotep, but I must point out that in order to make this identification there are a lot of records that have to be explained away—the names of both his parents, the place of his birth, and problems with his resume. That may be an insurmountable task. As long as questions remain, however, it warrants further research. I hope others are on the case, and I will do my part to see if I can find documents of proof, not legend, concerning Imhotep's accomplishments. Perhaps God will ultimately make it plain by bringing additional documents to light which clearly reveal the truth.

Mrs. Beverly J. Neises  
Rainier, OR

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