

Book Review

David Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings*, published in the UK under the title *A Test of Time*, Random House, 1995.

When I began studying the Bible in my late teens, I developed at the same time a parallel interest in ancient history, specifically the history of those nations which had dealings with Israel throughout the biblical period. I was particularly fascinated by ancient Egypt and its civilization, which stretched from the earliest times right up to the time of the Roman conquest.

I read all the books I could find, thinking that I would soon discover evidence which would substantiate the miraculous events described in the Bible. I was quickly disillusioned. I did not find what I was looking for. There was a complete lack of any correspondence between the biblical account of Israel in Egypt, for example, and what I was reading in the history books. The disparity was so great that many skeptics used it as a weapon with which to attack the Bible and claim that it was completely false. This did not shake my faith in the Scriptures but it did create for me a puzzle, which I felt I needed to resolve.

When I arrived at Bible college, I discovered that one of the professors of history had considered this question and had produced a radical solution to the problem. His thesis was simply that the conventional chronology, which underpinned all the history books, was incorrect by several hundred years. Kings who were believed by historians to have reigned at a particular time actually reigned several hundred years later. He claimed that many of the Egyptian dynasties were actually parallel with one another rather than consecutive. If true this would shorten the history of Egypt considerably.

This scheme was partly based on the work of Immanuel Velikovsky, a brilliant but controversial figure who in a series of books had reconstructed the history of the ancient world from the time of the Exodus up to the Persian conquest of Egypt. Beginning with the Exodus Velikovsky documents a series of amazing parallels to the biblical accounts, stretching through the whole period of Old Testament history and including such events as Joshua's long day and the visit of the Queen of Sheba.

The only real difficulty with this is that neither Velikovsky nor the Bible college professor were experts in archaeology or ancient history and this viewpoint continued to be disparaged by the scholarly community. I nevertheless

continued to cling to it in the hope that one day some scholars actually working the field would deal with this question.

My hopes were finally realized with the publication of *Pharaohs and Kings* by David Rohl. Subtitled *Volume 1: The Bible — From Myth to History*, this book is a serious attempt by a competent scholar working in the field of Egyptology to deal with the apparent lack of correspondence between the Bible and history. The foreword was written by Professor Robert Bianchi, a leading American Egyptologist who also took part in the TV series which accompanied the book.

Rohl contends that the conventional chronology of Egypt is incorrect by about 300 years and sets out to demonstrate this by several archaeological examples. Part one of the book is entitled “Conundrums of the Pharaohs” and here Rohl deals with what he calls the major “Anomalies of Egyptian Chronology.” Space forbids a detailed account of each of these, but Rohl contends that they all support his thesis.

Having established what he calls his “new chronology,” Rohl then begins to deal with the Bible history in parts three and four. Part three is given over to the period of the united monarchy in Israel. He commences his study with the account of the sacking of Jerusalem in the time of Rehoboam by a pharaoh who is called Shishak in the Bible. There is an apparent equivalence between this name and that of Pharaoh Shoshenk but Rohl believes this to be mistaken. He believes that it is another name for Ramses II, one of the most famous of all Egyptian monarchs. This man is commonly believed to have reigned over Egypt in the days of Moses, and those who have seen the motion picture *The Ten Commandments* will remember that he was portrayed in the film as the pharaoh who oppressed the Israelites. The result of the new chronology is to move him forward in time by several hundred years.

The Bible records that Israel enjoyed a period of unequalled prosperity during the reign of King Solomon but Rohl points out that this is definitely not reflected in conventional archaeology, which places this period during the Iron Age. The new chronology places this period during the Late Bronze Age and enables Rohl to find evidence of the construction of the Millo recorded in I Kings 9:15 and the palace which Solomon built for Pharaoh’s daughter mentioned in II Chronicles 8:11.

A thorough study of the Amarna letters follows. These were written in the time of Pharaoh Akhenaten and give a detailed picture of conditions in Palestine during his reign. It has always been difficult to fit these letters in with biblical history on the conventional scheme but in the new chronology, the correspondence is linked with the time of King Saul and the early days of David.

The fourth part of the book moves further back in time with a study of the days of Moses and Joseph and Joshua. The pharaoh who made Joseph his vizier is identified as Amenemhat III. Here again the new chronology remarkably illuminates the Bible. In what is probably the most interesting section of the book

we find evidence of Moses and Joseph and the destruction of the walls of Jericho, of which conventional archaeology knows nothing.

This book is crammed full of detailed historical and archaeological examples and will not therefore appeal to those who dislike such things. But for those who do *Pharaohs and Kings* is a richly rewarding book which will help to confirm our conviction of the essential trustworthiness of the Bible. There are many charts and abundant photographs throughout the book, including a striking reconstruction of an ancient statue which Rohl believes is the patriarch Joseph, complete with his coat of many colors.

It is important to point out that Rohl is not a biblical fundamentalist. He admits that he has problems with the plague of the firstborn, for example. But he takes what seems to me to be the common sense view that the narratives of the Old Testament can be relied upon as historical evidence. Not all scholars will agree with this of course, but Rohl presents the most serious challenge to date to the belief that the Bible cannot be relied upon for any sound historical information.

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