

The Place of the Exodus in Egyptian History: Comments

Anne Habermehl, Independent Scholar.

Abstract

Where the Exodus is located in secular history is tied inextricably to the wide divergence between the biblical and Egyptian timelines. Placing the Exodus at the end of the Old Kingdom of Egypt fits with the biblical narrative, with Egyptian history, and with the Conquest that followed 40 years later. How to deal with correlating this secular placement of the Exodus with the biblical date varies among scholars, as is shown here.

Keywords: Biblical chronology, Early Dynastic, Egyptian chronology, Egyptian history, Exodus, Exodus pharaoh, Ipuwer Papyrus, Old Kingdom, overlapping dynasties, timeline synchronization

Introduction

It is with interest that I see Porter (2022) and Osgood (2022) address the very important topic of where to position the Exodus in the secular Egyptian history. Their placement of the Exodus at the end of the Old Kingdom, approximately at the end of Dynasty VI, is a stance with which I concur.

The Differing Methods

Both Porter and Osgood date the Exodus at about 2150BC on the Egyptian timeline, 700 years earlier than the widely accepted biblical date of 1450BC. But how they deal with this divergence of the two timelines is quite different.

Porter (2022) waves aside the Egyptian king-lists as “unreliable” (no proof of this is offered), and instead prefers to use information from “inscriptions, papyri and tomb paintings, etc.” These sources could be less solid than they appear, however, because of the well-known propensity of the Egyptian pharaohs to glorify themselves. He also appeals to stratigraphical (layer) sequences by archaeologists but gives no reasons why this should prove anything about the lengths of pharaohs’ reigns. He then discusses in some considerable detail the period from the end of the Old Kingdom to 609BC; this latter date is when Pharaoh Necho kills Josiah (2 Kings 23:29), approximately the date when the two timelines merge. He shortens this period with assumptions about the lengths of the pharaohs’ reigns, a methodology that I find unconvincing. He admits (I give him credit for this) that he hasn’t been able to shorten this interval enough, as his date for the Exodus works out to 1560BC, taking roughly 600 years out of the Egyptian timeline instead of 700.

Porter (2022) then goes back through the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods (Dynasties I–VI),

allowing 540 years through unproven assumptions, such as an average of 15 years per reign. The secular timeline gives 840 years to this period (see Shaw 2003, 481–483). Porter therefore removes a total of $840 - 540 = 300$ years from these two periods. His total reduction in the Egyptian timeline from the first dynasty to merger at about 600BC is $600 + 300$ years = 900 years.

On the other hand, Osgood (2022) defends the king-lists. He shortens the time in the Early Dynastic, Old Kingdom, and Middle Kingdom periods by subscribing to the Courville (1971) scheme of overlapping of dynasties (see fig. 1 in Osgood 2022). By doing this, he reduces the Egyptian timeline by 1,400 years in one fell swoop. Then he takes out a further 250 years in the Third Intermediate Period, for an overall reduction of 1,650 years.

The result is a wide difference in the amount of time Porter and Osgood have removed from the historical Egyptian timeline (3000–600BC) by their respective methods.

We can calculate how many years we are looking to subtract from the Egyptian timeline between Abraham and 600BC to make it overall the same length as the biblical timeline. If we put Abraham’s Egyptian visit at around 3000BC secular (beginning of Dynasty I), we have a period of $3,000 - 600 = 2,400$ secular years between Abraham and the merger. On the biblical timeline, Abraham visited Egypt at about 1900BC (counting a 215-year sojourn), giving us $1,900 - 600 = 1,300$ years between Abraham and the merger at 600BC. The difference between the two is therefore $2,400 - 1,300 = 1,100$ years that need to be taken out of the Egyptian timeline, however we choose to do it. This figure can be adjusted by where we put Abraham on the Egyptian timeline and how many years the Egyptian sojourn lasted; these are not agreed upon by everyone.¹

¹ Porter chooses 430 years for the sojourn in Egypt. But he also puts Abraham back in the pre-dynastic times, somewhat before Dynasty I. These two factors would more or less even each other out in this calculation.

Concurrent (Overlapping) Dynasties: Valid or Not?

Courville's assumptions leading to his drastic rearrangement of dynasties include believing that famines under different pharaohs must have occurred at the same time; to support this, he cites Brugsch-Bey (Brugsch-Bey 1881, 305) as saying that famines were rare in Egypt in those days (Courville 1971, vol. 1, 133). He is on shaky ground in assuming this, as the definition of "rare" is rather vague, and these ancient famines might actually not have happened at the same time in Egyptian history as supposed.

Courville's overlapping of the second dynasty with the third one is an example where we may doubt his famine theory. There is solid reason to believe that the Third Dynasty consecutively followed the second one, because the tomb of the last pharaoh of the Second Dynasty, Khasekhemwy, was sealed by Djoser, the first pharaoh of the Third Dynasty (Barta 2020, 337).

However, I concur with Osgood (2022) and Courville (1971) that Dynasties VI and XII must have run concurrently. My basis for believing this is that Egypt is claimed to have collapsed twice in the same way, at the end of both of these dynasties, according to historians. The mathematical probability of the same series of events of these collapses happening twice in Egyptian history runs close to zero. Porter claims that it is impossible for these two dynasties to have run concurrently but does not give reasons to support his statement. I show more detail on how this could have worked out in my paper on Egyptian chronology (Habermehl 2013).

The Ipuwer Papyrus

This ancient papyrus describing chaos in Egypt is claimed by Porter (2022) to refer to events at the end of Dynasty VI; he says that most historians believe this. However, various scholars claim that the papyrus refers to the end of Dynasty XII (see references for this in Habermehl 2018). The inability of scholars to agree on this point would seem to support these two dynasties ending at the same time. The chaotic conditions described in the papyrus fit the expected after-effects of the ten plagues that preceded the Exodus.

Pharaoh of the Exodus

Porter (2022) points to a son of the long-reigning Pepi II of Dynasty VI as the pharaoh of the Exodus, Merenre Nemtyemsaf II. If, however, as Osgood and I maintain, Dynasty XII was ruling in the north as the dominant dynasty (while the Sixth Dynasty was reigning in the south, subservient to

the twelfth reigning in the north), we would look for the pharaoh of the Exodus somewhere at or after the end of the Twelfth Dynasty. I believe that this was Amenemhat IV, the seventh and penultimate king of Dynasty XII (for a more detailed discussion on this, see Habermehl 2013). Osgood is somewhat open on choosing a pharaoh, but considers that it could possibly have been Sebekhotep II of the Thirteenth Dynasty (Osgood 2015, 25–28).²

Readers may well have seen many other pharaohs named for this honor; my own list of various claimed candidates runs to about two dozen and is probably not complete. Because the Exodus pharaoh is not named in the Bible, we are left to make our pick based on our arguments. Porter, Osgood, and I are proof of this.

Concluding Comments

Placing the Exodus on the Egyptian timeline gives us an important marker for correlation of the biblical and secular timelines. It also tells us when in history to look for the Conquest (that started 40 years later, after the wandering of the Children of Israel in the wilderness). That, in turn, gives us dates for the fall of Jericho and for other events such as the overthrow of Ai and Hazor.

Above all, in recognizing that the Egyptian and biblical timelines are offset by a considerable number of years we are no longer serving the purposes of archaeologists who claim that the Bible is erroneous because they do not find events in history where they think they should be. This makes timeline considerations important to the whole subject of biblical apologetics.

References

- Barta, Miroslav. 2020. "Egypt's Old Kingdom: A View From Within." In *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East: Volume 1: From the Beginnings to Old Kingdom Egypt and the Dynasty of Akkad*. Edited by Karen Radner, Nadine Moeller, and D.T. Potts, 316–396. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brugsch-Bey, Heinrich Karl. 1881. *A History of Egypt Under the Pharaohs*, Vol. 1. 2nd ed. Translated from the German by Philip Smith. London, United Kingdom: John Murray.
- Courville, Donovan A. 1971. *The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications: A Critical Examination of the Chronological Relationships between Israel and the Contemporary Peoples of Antiquity*. 2 Vols. Loma Linda, California: Challenge Books.
- Habermehl, Anne. 2013. "Revising the Egyptian Chronology: Joseph as Imhotep, and Amenemhat IV as Pharaoh of the Exodus." In *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Creationism*. Edited by Mark Horstemeyer. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Creation Science Fellowship.

² John Osgood generously sent me copies of this and his other books in his series on correlating the secular timeline with the biblical one.

- Habermehl, Anne. 2018. "The Ipuwer Papyrus and the Exodus." In *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Creationism*. Edited by John H. Whitmore, 1–6. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Creation Science Fellowship.
- Osgood, A. John. M. 2015. *"Egypt, Israel and the Exodus: The Evidence is Real!"* Bunjorgen, Queensland, Australia: Self-published, production by Steve Cardno.
- Osgood, A. John M. 2022. "The Place of the Exodus in Egyptian History: Comments." *Answers Research Journal* 15 (March 2): 21–23. <https://answersresearchjournal.org/ancient-egypt/place-of-exodus-egyptian-history-comments/>.
- Porter, Robert M. 2022. "The Place of the Exodus in Egyptian History." *Answers Research Journal* 15 (February 16): 1–9. <https://answersresearchjournal.org/ancient-egypt/place-of-exodus-egyptian-history/>.
- Shaw, Ian. 2003. "Chronology." In *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Edited by Ian Shaw. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.