

## Difficulties with Identifying the Pharaoh in Genesis 40-47

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While not doubting the figure of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 has some substantial basis in fact, I find it somewhat disturbing that some scholars seem to take various hypotheses as established fact<sup>1</sup>. Certain texts of today dealing with Biblical archaeology show authentic-looking timelines which plot the (literal) lifespans of the Patriarchs, based on a single verse in Genesis, alongside the vastly better attested chronology of the ancient world.

The Hyksos hypothesis for Joseph, chronologically placing him in the Second Intermediate Period, was first proposed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While still quite plausible, it remains devoid of any firm evidence whatsoever<sup>2</sup>.

The later hypothesis, by Battenfield<sup>3</sup>, seems to have captured many adherents, albeit again without any firm evidence (beyond the postulated parallel). I will direct the remainder of my comments towards this more recent theory.

The known evidence concerning Senusret III, proposed as Joseph's Pharaoh by Battenfield, generally works against the hypothesis. Unprecedentedly belligerent and warlike, Senusret III's campaigns against Nubia were very brutal<sup>4</sup>, and there is good evidence that he personally led a military onslaught against Shechem<sup>5</sup>, the traditional home of the tribe of Joseph. His general attitude to Syria / Palestine can probably be concluded from his "execration" bowl texts, whereby he ceremonially cursed some 20 countries and 30 princes of the area<sup>6</sup>. Given this evidence against foreigners in general, it seems to me unlikely such a man would appoint a Semitic vizier. In any case Senusret III appointed three viziers<sup>7</sup>, not a single, "supreme" official.

Furthermore, Battenfield's main thrust, that Senusret III dismantled the power structure of the hitherto-troublesome Nomarchs, finds little support

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Andersen, Feet 14.

<sup>2</sup> Private correspondence from Prof. D.B. Redford, March 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Battenfield, Consideration.

<sup>4</sup> Callender, Kingdom 166.

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, Senusret 259.

<sup>6</sup> Posener, Syria 541.

<sup>7</sup> Shaw, Senusret 259.

in firm evidence. Another, more recent, school of thought suggests that the Nomarchs' demise was a long process, starting generations before Senusret III, and only reaching a conclusion in his time<sup>8</sup>. Not only that, but the alleged "parallel" between the wealthy Nomarchs of history, and the farmers of the Joseph narrative (seemingly of humble means, to have lost everything after three years of famine) seems tenuous indeed.

While very doubtful as Joseph's Pharaoh, such a prominent king as Senusret III may well have been recorded in Sacred Scripture, quite possibly as the "oppressor" in Exodus 1. The swelling Asiatic population of Egypt by his reign<sup>9</sup> is consistent with Pharaoh's concern in Exodus that Hebrews would displace the native Egyptians; his many aggressive campaigns also support such a parallel.

### Summary

The historicity of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 is reconsidered. A critical view of the notion that Joseph lived during the reign of Senusret III, popular in some circles, is found to be lacking credibility, particularly in the light of more recent Egyptological opinion.

### Zusammenfassung

Die Historizität Josefs in Genesis 37-50 wird neu hinterfragt. Ein kritischer Blick auf die Feststellung, dass Josef während der Regierungszeit Senusret III. gelebt hätte, wie in manchen Kreisen vertreten wird, entbehrt - insbesondere auf der Basis neuerer ägyptologischer Hypothesen - der Glaubwürdigkeit,

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<sup>8</sup> Callender, Kingdom 167.175.

<sup>9</sup> Callender, Kingdom 166.