

SHORT CRITIQUE

BOOK: David Rohl, *A Test of Time* (London: Century Random House, 1995)

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This book contains a lot of useful data, charts, photographs, and time-charts. It is useful only in the right hands. Great care and discrimination needs to be exercised in using it.

On the positive side, he accepts the dates of the Hebrew kings put forward by Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Number of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983; 1st ed. 1951; 2nd ed. 1963).

POSITIVE ASPECTS

On the positive side he accepts a 15th century date for the Exodus from Egypt. (This contrasts with Ken Kitchen's c. 1350 BC date, and the 1280 BC date by others.) Rohl made the common mistake of misreading 1 Kings 6:1 as 480 complete years from the 4th year of Solomon back to the year of the Exodus. In fact, the Scripture states that it was "in the 480th year", which is only 479 complete years. So the date of the Exodus is 1446 BC, and not 1447 BC as he has it. Due to this simple error, he likewise puts the date of Moses's birth in 1527 BC, when the correct date is 1526 BC.

On the positive side he correctly noted that the OT History has been updated and the text bears witness to this in the refrain that something still exists 'to this day'. Note that in Judges 18:30 we are told that the Danites created their own distinctive priesthood and that it existed "till the day of the removal of *the people* of the land". This removal occurred in 723 BC, consequently this notice must have been inserted into the Hebrew text some time after that date.

Rohl puts forward a good case that the mention of 'Ramesses' in Exod 1:1-7 and Gen 47:11 has replaced 'Avaris'. Note that Abraham was said to have pursued his enemies as far as 'Dan', when the city only got this name in the Judges Period (Judg 18:30). It is clear that the city was called Laish in Abraham's day. These editorial updatings are recognised by Hebrew scholars as potential traps for the unwary and the ignorant. Fortunately, D. Rohl has not been trapped as so many have been who have assumed that the Israelites built the two cities of Ramesses and Pithom in the time of Ramesses. The editor has, helpfully, replaced the unfamiliar names of these cities with the more familiar names by which they were known centuries later.

It has been the presence of the name 'Ramesses' in Exodus 1:11 that has misled many chronologists of the Bible to place the Exodus in the time of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC). This is a case where the literal reading of the Hebrew text can (and did) result in a serious error in reconstructing the biblical chronology.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS

On the negative side, Rohl does not hold the Hebrew text to be the inspired Word of God, and so he dismisses its statement that the Hebrews were in Egypt for 430 years. He prefers to follow the Greek translation (LXX) number that they were "430 years in Egypt and Canaan". In practice this reduces their time in Egypt to 215 years. The consequence of this departure from the Hebrew text is that he puts the birth of Joseph in 1662 BC, whereas I have placed it in 1915 BC, this is 253 years later than I have placed him. This, of course, will affect his Egyptian chronology, because he believes he can identify the Pharaoh under whom Joseph ruled Egypt. This departure from the inspired Hebrew text is a serious error on his part.

Again, on the negative side, Rohl claims to be an Egyptian expert, but I did not find that he engaged with Egyptian scholars (except Ken Kitchen). If a scholar is going to put forward a grand new scheme of chronology, he needs to convince the reader that he is not just being awkward in choosing a different variant spelling of an Egyptian name (of which there are countless examples) to force through a connection with Joseph and juggling some artefacts that look as though they

might belong to a 17th century date BC for Joseph. I did not find any undisputed evidence that would lead me to believe that K. Kitchen and other Egyptologists have ignored some factual data. In every instance Rohl chooses to re-interpret the same data to suit his New Chronology. But it is always his *interpretation*, not any factual data, that forces him to shift the pharaohs around. I am not an Egyptologist, so I will leave the Egyptologists to sort out the *interpretations* between themselves.

Again, on the negative side, Rohl claims that the biblical 'Shishak' is the same person as Ramesses II, and it was this pharaoh, he claims, who came to the aid of the Israelite king Jehoahaz (814–798 BC). Unfortunately, for Rohl, the name of this 'saviour' pharaoh is not stated in the Hebrew text (2 Kgs 13:1-7). He has assumed it must be Shishak because he has given him the dates 823–803 BC in his repositioning of the Egyptian pharaohs. Shishak is followed by Osorkon I in 803 BC in his New Chronology.

In contrast, 1 Kings 14:25-26/ 2 Chron 12:2-9, places Shishak in the 5th year of Rehoboam. This year is 927-926 BC. Consequently, Rohl has placed Shishak a full century later than the Hebrew chronology.

Rohl gets round this problem by the observation that the Hebrew text states that Shishak invaded Judah as far as Jerusalem, and that there is no mention of this in Shishak's very detailed itinerary on the Bubastite Portal at Karnak. In reply, it should be noted that Rohl has assumed that this inscription records the *complete* history of Shishak's contacts with Israel/Judah, and that he made only one incursion into Israel. How do we know that he made just one incursion? Israel was an easy target. It is safer to assume that the inspired Word of God is correct in its account of Shishak's invasion and consequently we must place Shishak as a contemporary of Rehoboam, who reigned from 931 to 914 BC. Rohl has no pharaoh called Shishak in his New Chronology who would answer to the biblical Shishak at this point in Hebrew history. This is a serious defect in his reconstruction of a new chronology of the Egyptian pharaohs. The Hebrew text and its secure chronology is the standard by which to assess all other competing chronologies in neighbouring states.

Another weakness in his New Chronology is his admission that if his Egyptian chronology is correct then the standard chronology of the Assyrian kings is seriously wrong. This is a serious allegation. He admits that he is not an Assyrian scholar, but he makes the bold claim that because he has discovered a new chronology for Egypt then Assyrian scholars must re-examine the foundations on which they have constructed their chronology of Assyria/Babylon. This is fair enough if the Assyrian data is as incomplete as the Egyptian data is, for the early dynasties. However, we have many copies of the Assyrian king lists, the eponym lists, the Synchronistic Chronicle, and many other sources. Intense scrutiny of these varied sources, plus the synchronisms with Hebrew kings and the Egyptian pharaohs, have put its fixed chronology virtually on the same pedestal of accuracy as the Hebrew kings.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Rohl is fighting two battles on two fronts. He is attempting to rewrite Egyptian history to reflect his New Chronology, and he is attempting to rewrite Assyrian history to agree with his new Egyptian history. These are mammoth tasks. If he is successful, then he alone is right and all other Egyptian and Assyrian scholars are wrong.

It is always possible to discover new facts and find new interpretations and thus make a significant contribution in one small area of a larger subject, but to rewrite the entire histories of two mighty nations who have left considerable evidence of their past, is unlikely in one who is ignorant of one of these mighty nations, as Rohl acknowledges to be with respect to Assyria. It is for this reason that Rohl must fight it out with reputable Egyptologists and prove to their satisfaction that he has a case to make for redating the Egyptian pharaohs. Until he can do this, we would be wise to leave his book on our shelves as 'pending verification'.

From a Hebrew perspective, however, the major stumbling-block to Rohl's scheme is his inability to identify the Shishak who existed in 927/6 BC. The name Shishak, or Shoshe(n)q, is not unusual, as seven pharaohs have this name. In the standard Egyptian chronology, as presented by Egyptologists, there is a Shoshenq I (945–924 BC) who is contemporary with Rehoboam in 927/6 BC. Rohl may claim that this Shoshenq has been placed there because the Hebrew text

places a Shosheq/Shishak in that year. However, Ken Kitchen has taken 664 BC as the anchor date for his Egyptian chronology and worked backward from that date, and he found that Shoshenq I naturally slots in at this point in history without any manipulation of the figures or of the pharaohs. If there has been no manipulation on the part of the scholarly community of Egyptologists for the past century, then this should be regarded as the consensus chronology.

There are many 'problems' within the secure chronology of the Hebrew kings, but no one would exploit any of these outstanding problems to overthrow its chronology or rewrite its history. It is for this reason that I would not accept the drastic rearrangement of the Egyptian pharaohs that David Rohl is proposing if it does not have the endorsement of the majority of the Egyptian community of scholars. Rohl may be another Edwin Thiele in the making. Time will tell, as it did in Thiele's case. But I have my doubts, because this work lacks clarity, which characterised Thiele's presentation of his case, and won over biblical scholars.

END OF CRITIQUE