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David Rohl's Revised Egyptian Chronology: A View from Palestine

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David Rohl purports to have produced a better correlation between the findings of archaeology and the Bible by revising Egyptian chronology. Rohl, however, cannot so easily be brushed aside...

In his book *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (1995a; it was first published in England as *A Test of Time: The Bible - From Myth to History* [1995b]), David Rohl purports to have produced a better correlation between the findings of archaeology and the Bible by revising Egyptian chronology. One is tempted to dismiss Rohl as simply another crackpot and get on with more important issues. Rohl, however, cannot so easily be brushed aside. As opposed to most who attempt to revise ancient history, Rohl has some scholarly training - he has studied Egyptology and ancient history at University College, London. Moreover, the lay public, largely as the result of a three-part video series based on his book, have become enamored with his supposed Biblical correlations.

Rohl describes the current state of affairs in Biblical archaeology as follows:

...archaeological excavations in Egypt and the Levant, ongoing for the best part of the last two centuries, have produced no tangible evidence to demonstrate the historical veracity of the early biblical narratives. Direct material support for the traditional history of the Israelite nation, as handed down in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, is virtually non-existent (7).

This statement is, of course, grossly exaggerated and inaccurate, as even a cursory review of the many books on archaeology and the Bible will reveal. By making such a statement, Rohl has set up a straw man which he can now proceed to knock down by means of his new chronology. In actual fact, however, the cure is worse than the sickness, as the new chronology produces no correlations whatsoever!

Rohl attempts to lower Egyptian chronology by several hundred years for the period before 664 B.C. The sacking of Thebes by Ashurbanipal in 664 B.C. is accepted as a fixed date by Rohl and becomes the starting point for his revised chronology (119). He accomplished this by shortening the 20th Dynasty and overlapping the 21st and 22nd Dynasties (144, 384). Several scholars have critiqued the Egyptological aspects of his ideas

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(Bennett 1996; Brissaud 1996; Kitchen 1996: xlii-xlvi; van Haarlem 1997), but no one has evaluated the impact of his theory on Palestinian archaeology and the resulting correlations, or lack thereof, with Biblical history.



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Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria. David Rohl's chronology uses Assyrian King Ashurbanipal's sacking of Thebes in 664 BC as a fixed date and is a starting point of his chronology. While several scholars have examined his chronology on the basis of evidence from Egypt, little evaluation of his theory on Palestinian archaeology has been published.

A revised Egyptian chronology would directly affect the dating of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Palestine since the dating of those periods is dependent upon synchronisms with Egyptian history. Biblical chronology, on the other hand, remains unchanged since it is derived from synchronisms with Assyria in the Divided Kingdom period and then calculated backwards using the internal chronological data of the Bible.

Thus, according to Rohl's scheme, the Conquest occurred in the MB IIB period, the Amarna period (Late Bronze IIA) is contemporary with the United Monarchy, making Labayu of the Amarna Letters one and the same as Saul (205-19). Late Bronze IIB is contemporary with the early Divided Monarchy, with Ramesses II being the Shishak of

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the Bible (149-70, 175). The Iron Age I, traditionally ca. 1200-1000 B.C., is squeezed into a mere 30 years between 820 and 790 B.C. covering the reigns of Joash and Amaziah (Judah) and Jehoahaz and Jehoash (Israel) (175).

THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

Regarding the date of the Conquest, Rohl vacillates between the early date (ca. 1410 B.C.) and the late date (ca. 1210 B.C.) as it suits his purposes.

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An Early Conquest

Rohl claims that his revised chronology will solve the "problem" of the Conquest (306-17). In his search for archaeological evidence he uses a date of 1410 B.C. for the Conquest. This would fall in the middle of the MB IIB period according to Rohl's scheme. The MB IIB period is generally thought to extend from the mid-13th Dynasty (cf. 311) to the mid-15th Dynasty, or ca. 1540-1240 in the revised chronology (ca. 1750-1615 in the standard chronology). The Israelites, Rohl says, "were the carriers of the Middle Bronze Age culture of the central hill country" (318).

There is not the slightest hint in the archaeological record for this reconstruction. The MB IIB period was one of great prosperity. There is no evidence of a discontinuity or widespread destructions in the middle of the period. If the Conquest occurred at that time, then the nomadic Israelites peacefully took over the large MB IIB city-states and continued the Canaanite culture uninterrupted for the next 200 years. This would have entailed the design, construction, and maintenance of large urban centers throughout Canaan, including the building of massive fortification systems and temples at many sites. Such a situation is contrary to the Bible and Rohl's own statement,

The Israelites were essentially pastoralists until the United Monarchy period rather than city dwellers (170).

In addition, the recent nomads would have possessed an advanced knowledge of the technology of metallurgy and pottery manufacture. They also would have had international relations with the Hyksos rulers of Egypt (Dever 1987). This is a highly unlikely scenario. The Bible depicts the Israelites during the time of the Judges following the Conquest as subservient to the surrounding nations and living in tents (Jgs 20:8; 1 Sm 4:10, 13:2). Moreover, they did not worship in local temples made of stone and mud bricks, but in a temporary Tabernacle set up at a centralized religious center at Shiloh (Jos 18:1; 1 Sm 1:1-3).

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Rohl tries to make a case that the final Bronze Age city at Jericho was destroyed part way through the MB IIB period (311). This cannot be, however, because there are late MB IIB, MB IIC (Kenyon 1993: 680; Bienkowski 1989: 172-74) and LB I (Wood 1990) phases of the Bronze Age city as attested by the pottery. Similarly, Rohl connects the destruction of Hazor XVI with the Conquest (315-16), while it is well-known that this destruction occurred at the end of MB IIC (Ben-Tor 1993: 606), not midway through MB IIB.

A Late Conquest

Rohl many times uses a late date for the Conquest (ca. 1210 B.C.) in order to show the lack of archaeological correlation and thus demonstrate the need for a revised Egyptian chronology (306). Again, he is setting up a straw man. Clearly, no evidence will be found to support a Conquest in the late 13th century B.C. since the event occurred 200 years earlier in the late 15th century B.C. according to the chronological notations given in the Bible. Using the conventional chronology there is very good evidence to support the Biblical account of the Conquest (Wood 1990; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; 1999d; 2000a; 2000b; Forthcoming).

Frank Yurco has made a case for identifying the relief on the "Ashkelon Wall" at Karnak as a pictorial representation of Merneptah's campaign to Canaan ca. 1210 B.C. as recorded in the Merneptah Stela (Yurco 1986). The relief depicts the Israelite leader using a chariot. Rohl claims that conventional chronology will not work here since the Israelites had just arrived in the land in ca. 1210 B.C. and therefore would not have had time to develop the technology of chariot warfare (171). If the Biblical date for the Conquest of ca. 1410 B.C. is followed, however, the Israelites were already in the land for 200 years by the time of Merneptah, allowing more than enough time to develop chariot warfare.

In fact, the Bible itself indicates that the Israelites had chariots by the time of Merneptah's campaign. Shortly before this, in ca. 1230 B.C., Israel engaged in a battle against "900 iron chariots," necessitating that they themselves have chariots (Jdgs 4). The battle was fought in open country at the Kishon River, and the Israelite commander Barak "pursued the chariots" indicating that Barak had his own chariot.

Rohl uses a late date for the Conquest when discussing the Amarna Letters (200). He raises the issue that if the references to the Apiru in the letters (mid-14th century B.C. by conventional chronology) are to the Hebrews, something is wrong with conventional chronology since the Israelites did not arrive in the land until the late 13th century! Again, if one utilizes the Biblical date for the Conquest, all is well since the Amarna Letters would come from the early Judges period (cf. Wood 1997).

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The Tell el-Amarna Letters are clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform script, the archive of correspondence between Pharaoh Ahkenaton and foreign kings and princes. Many of these tablets are messages from kings of Canaanite cities, such as Gezer, Ashkelon and Shechem, pictured here. Rohl's chronology makes Labayu, king of Shechem during the Amarna period, one and the same as Saul of Gibeah, Israel's first king. There is not one iota of similarity in the careers of these two individuals.

LATE BRONZE IIA

Those Pesky Philistines

The Philistines are scarcely mentioned by Rohl. And for good reason - they utterly destroy his reconstruction. According to the revised chronology, the United Monarchy

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corresponds to the LB IIA period. The first two kings of the United Monarchy, Saul and David, were very much involved with fighting against the Philistines. But the Philistines did not arrive in Canaan until the reign of Ramesses III at the beginning of the Iron Age (Wood 1991), ca. 800 B.C. by Rohl's reckoning. So we are left with a situation where Saul and David are fighting an enemy who does not appear in the historical or archaeological record until 300 years later!

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A Philistine Soldier as depicted in a relief at Medinet Habu, Egypt. One of the Sea People groups who came to Canaan's coast from the west, the Philistines were identified by their distinctive headbands and 'feathered' (maybe horsehair?) helmets. Arriving en masse during the reign of Ramesses III, at the beginning of the Iron Age, they were major enemies of the first two kings of Israelite monarchy, Saul and David. They completely destroy Rohl's chronology, so he hardly mentions them.

The Destruction of Shiloh

Rohl advocates dating the destruction of the fortified Middle Bronze phase at Shiloh to the LB IIA period and connecting it to the Philistine destruction implied in 1 Samuel 4 and Jeremiah 7:12, 14 and 26:6, 9 (319). But this cannot be. First, no LB IIA pottery has been found in the destruction level to suggest it could be dated to that time period (Finkelstein 1993: 1367). Second, as was pointed out above, evidence for the appearance of the Philistines does not occur until the beginning of the Iron Age over a century later.

The destruction of Shiloh in the first half of the 11th century B.C. using the standard chronology very nicely fits the Philistine destruction implied in the Bible.

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Archaeological evidence for the destruction of Shiloh indicates a well-fortified city was destroyed around the time of the conquest. A later destruction of the site also occurred in the first half of the 11th century BC, the time the Bible indicates the Philistines destroyed the city. Rohl tries to make the earlier Middle Bronze destruction fit the later Philistine destruction of the site. Neither archaeology or history allows such a correlation.

The Amarna Letters

With the Rohl chronology, the Amarna period is contemporary with the United Monarchy (195-231). The political landscape described in the Amarna Letters, however, is much different than that during the United Monarchy. In the Amarna period, Canaan was dominated by many independent city-states in vassalage to Egypt, along with the troublesome Apiru. Palestine in the United Monarchy period, with the exception of Philistia, was politically united under one king, with the chief adversary during the reigns of Saul and David being the Philistines.

According to Rohl's correlation, Labayu, king of Shechem in the Amarna period, is one and the same as Saul of the Bible (205-19). There is not one iota of similarity in the careers of these two individuals. Several examples will suffice. Saul's capital was at Gibeah (1 Sm

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10:26), as opposed to Shechem, the capital of Labayu. Gibeah is located at either Tell el-Ful or Geba (Arnold 1992). In either case, there was no occupation in the LB IIA period to match Rohl's dating of Saul to this time frame. Labayu was an Egyptian vassal. Nowhere in the Bible does it suggest that Saul was an Egyptian vassal. Labayu was taken captive to be escorted to Egypt for his rowdy behavior. He managed to extricate himself from the predicament by bribing his captors. The Bible records no such thing for Saul. Labayu eventually died at the hands of his fellow vassals (Campbell 1965: 198-200), whereas Saul died on Mt. Gilboa fighting the Philistines (1 Sm 31).

The men of David fought the men of Ish-Bosheth, son of Saul, at the pool of Gibeon (2 Sm 2:12-17). That pool has been excavated and it has been determined that it was built in the Iron Age I, not the LB IIA period as required by Rohl's reckoning (Pritchard 1961: 22-23). Rohl finds the names of the Biblical figures Jesse, David, Joab, Ishbaal, and Baanah in Amarna Letter 256 (222, 228-29). This letter was written to Yanhamu, an Egyptian commissioner in Gaza. There is no hint in the Bible that David was in vassalage to Egypt or had any dealings with the Egyptians. Moreover, Gaza was not under the control of the Egyptians in David's day, but rather the Philistines and later the Israelites (2 Sm 8:1).

The Middle Building at Jericho

Concerning occupation at Jericho following the Conquest, Rohl makes the following statement:

...the next time we hear mention of Jericho after Joshua's destruction of the town is during the reign of David (313).

This is simply incorrect. The next mention of Jericho following Joshua's destruction is in Judges 3 where we are told that Eglon, king of Moab, took possession of the "City of Palms" and built a palace there. The City of Palms, of course, is none other than Jericho (Dt 34:3; 2 Chr 28:15). Rohl makes a connection between the LB IIA "Middle Building" at Jericho, excavated by John Garstang in 1933, and David's seclusion of the Israelite delegation at Jericho recorded in 2 Samuel 10:5.

The Bible does not tell us what, if anything, was at Jericho in David's day. Garstang's Middle Building, on the other hand, exactly fits the description of Eglon's palace in Judges 3 using conventional chronology (Garstang 1941a; 1941b; 1948: 175-80). It was an isolated palatial structure with no corresponding town. There was evidence of wealth (expensive imported pottery), and administrative activities (an inscribed clay tablet). The Middle Building was constructed toward the end of the 14th century B.C. by conventional chronology, which matches the time period of the Judges 3 account according to Biblical chronology. It was occupied for only a short period of time and then abandoned,

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paralleling the Biblical description of an 18 year oppression by Eglon and the subsequent rout of the Moabites by Ehud and the Israelites.



The "Middle Building" was excavated in 1933 by John Garstang on Jericho's southeastern slope. A palace like structure (28 x 47 ft.), it was an isolated building with evidence of wealth and administrative activity. Its date and finds fit very well with Moabite king Eglon's palace (Judges 3:12-25). Rohl completely misses Eglon's occupation of Jericho in his reconstruction and tries to relate the Middle Building to the time of David.

LATE BRONZE IIB

Jericho

Rohl dates the next phase of occupation at Jericho following the Middle Building to the LB IIB period (314). He then equates this phase to the rebuilding of Jericho by Hiel of Bethel (1 Kgs 16:34). Rohl is once again incorrect in his dating. The next occupational phase at Jericho following the Middle Building dates to the Iron I period, not LB IIB (M. and H. Weippert 1976). There is no evidence for occupation at Jericho in the LB IIB period.

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The Merneptah Stela

Rohl's discussion of the Merneptah Stela (164-70) evades one important detail which undermines his reconstruction and his chronology. The Merneptah Stela records a campaign into Canaan within the first four years of Merneptah's reign, ca. 1210 B.C. according to conventional Egyptian chronology and ca. 867 B.C. by Rohl's chronology. In this record is the first extra-Biblical reference to the nation of Israel: "Israel is wasted and its seed is not" (Hoffmeier 1997: 28).

The name Israel is written with the determinative for people, distinctive from the other names in the inscription that are written with the determinative for territory. This indicates that the Israelites were not a settled people at this time, but were pastoralists living in tents (Hoffmeier 1997:29-30). Standard chronology would place the text in the middle of the Judges period. According to the Bible, as was pointed out above, the Israelites were living in tents at this time. Rohl's chronology, on the other hand, would date the

text to the divided kingdom period when the Israelites were highly urbanized, many of them living in fortified cities.

The Merneptah Stela (sometimes called the Israel Stela) is a 7 ft 6 in (228 cm) inscribed stone slab found in his tomb, honoring Pharaoh Merneptah. A son of Ramesses II, Merneptah followed him on the throne in about 1212 BC. Dated to the fifth year of his reign, it celebrated Merneptah's victory over the Libyans. At the end of the monument, as a final note of praise to the king, is mentioned an earlier victory over forces in Canaan. Here he mentions defeating Israel, written with the determinative for people not territory. This is the earliest reference to Israel in any known non-Biblical document and indicates they were not viewed as a settled nation, but unsettled pastoralists still living in tents. Rohl's chronology dates the Merneptah Stela to 867 BC, a time when archaeology indicates the Israelites were highly urbanized and living in fortified cities.

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THE REIGN OF SOLOMON

Rohl sets up another straw man by stating that the sparse archaeological remains from the tenth century B.C. are incompatible with the wealth of Solomon's reign described in the Bible (173-75). Finely built gates and related architecture have been found at Gezer, Megiddo and Hazor and associated with 1 Kings 9:15. Rohl dismisses this evidence, however, claiming:

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Monumental structures once attributed to the building activities of Solomon in the cities of Megiddo, Gezer and Hazor have been shown over the years to date from various archaeological periods spanning centuries (34).

This is a minority opinion of only a few scholars. The attempt to redate this material has been soundly refuted by Bill Dever (1986: 24-30; 1990), John Holladay (1990), and others (for a summary, see Merling and Younker 1994). Dever has brought together the evidence for Solomon's reign and shown it to be a period of exceptional prosperity (1982).

Rohl laments the fact that "no fine artifacts adorned with semi-precious stones and inlays, no gold, silver or ivory" (174) from Solomon's time have been found. This wealth, of course, was stored at Jerusalem. Because Jerusalem has been continuously occupied and rebuilt since the time of Solomon, no architecture from Solomon's time has been found here, let alone gold and jewels.

By making such a statement Rohl appears to be woefully ignorant of the archaeological process. Should we really expect to find such treasures? Would they be left by the ancients to be found by archaeologists thousands of years later? The answer is obvious. Rarely do valuables go unnoticed for centuries or millennia before being found. The most likely possibility of finding valuables from antiquity would be in unlooted tombs. A number of tombs have been found within the limits of Solomonic Jerusalem, including two monumental tombs that may be those of David and Solomon, but they were all robbed out long ago. Jerusalem, where Solomon's wealth was stored, was pillaged by the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians. Kenneth Kitchen believes there is evidence that the bulk of Solomon's treasure was taken to Egypt (1989).

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The finely built gates at Gezer, Megiddo and Hazor are dated to the time of Solomon and fit very well with the Biblical statement, “Here is the account of the forced labor King Solomon conscripted to build the Lord’s temple, his own palace, the supporting terraces, the wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer” (1 Kgs 9:15). Rohl says evidence for Solomon’s wealth and power during the tenth century BC is sparse.

DIVIDED MONARCHY

Rohl's explanation for the sudden increase in settlements in the Iron Age I period is that they

...are a direct result of Aramaean military sorties into the territory of Israel during the reigns of Jehu and Jehoahaz. The population increase in the central hill country is thus the result of a refugee movement from the outlying areas of the kingdom into the heartland of Israel where protection was at hand (308).

There are several problems with this reconstruction. First, it is not at all clear that an increase in small agricultural villages in the Iron Age I period indicates an increase in population. It is more likely that it signals a change in lifestyle from semi-nomadism to sedentarism, brought about by social-economic conditions. Secondly, there is no evidence for a movement from outlying areas to the heartland. All areas experienced an increase in settlements in the Iron Age I period. Thirdly, there would be no more protection in the heartland than in the outlying areas since none of the settlements were fortified.

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CONCLUSION

It is abundantly clear that, from a Palestinian perspective, Rohl's hypothesis is quite unworkable. Rather than enhancing the connections between archaeology and the Bible, his new chronology would destroy the many strong correlations that exist when the standard chronology is followed.

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