

## THE SPHINX STELE OF THUTMOSE IV AND THE DATE OF THE EXODUS

Charles F. Aling\*

Defenders of the early date of the exodus (ca. 1445 B.C.) have long sought Egyptian inscriptional evidence of the deaths of Egypt's firstborn sons as described in Exod 12:29 ff. Invariably such searches culminate in references to the Sphinx Stele of Thutmose IV,<sup>1</sup> the son of the pharaoh of the exodus, Amenhotep II. In this famous stele, set up between the forepaws of the great sphinx at Giza in year one of the reign of Thutmose IV, the young king recounts an incident that occurred some years earlier during the reign of his father Amenhotep II. While the young prince Thutmose rested after hunting in the Giza area, the god Harmakhis Kheper-Re-Atum appeared to him in a dream and promised him the throne if he would clear away the sand that had partially covered the sphinx. The obvious implication is that Thutmose did not expect to inherit the crown of Egypt and that he had one or more older brothers with prior claim to Egypt's throne. It has become the common practice of conservative scholars to cite the stele as proof that an older son of Amenhotep II died in the plague of the firstborn.<sup>2</sup>

Before we accept the Sphinx Stele as evidence of the Biblical plague, two questions must be answered: (1) How trustworthy is the stele itself? (2) Was Thutmose IV old enough before the exodus to hunt and have dreams such as the one recounted on the stele?

Regarding the authenticity of the stele, most experts are agreed that in its present version it is a late document, probably dating from Dynasty XXI at the earliest.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, extremely probable that although the present Sphinx Stele was inscribed in or after the eleventh century B.C. it is a faithful restoration of a substantially identical text commissioned by Thutmose IV.<sup>4</sup> We may therefore accept the stele's contents as authentic.

The second question deserves deeper investigation. Our consideration of the age of the prince at the time of the exodus must begin with a study of the chronology of the reign of Thutmose IV. Since the highest known date from the monu-

\*Charles Aling is professor of history and Biblical archaeology at Tennessee Temple Schools, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

<sup>1</sup>For the hieroglyphic text see K. Sethe and H. W. Helck, *Urkunden des Aegyptischen Altertums* (Berlin, 1927-1961) 1539 ff. For translation and bibliography see J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (New York, 1906), 2. par. 810-815.

<sup>2</sup>See M. F. Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1954) 142-143; G. L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, 1964) 218; and most recently L. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, 1970) 128.

<sup>3</sup>J. H. Breasted, *Ancient*, 2. par. 810 n. b.

<sup>4</sup>So J. Wilson in *ANET* (third edition; Princeton, 1969) 449.

ments is year eight,<sup>5</sup> and since Manetho, the Egyptian priest and chronographer of the Hellenistic period, gives Thutmose a reign of about nine years,<sup>6</sup> we may certainly assign him eight or perhaps nine years.<sup>7</sup> The year of his accession is less easy to fix. Scholarly estimates range from 1425 at the earliest to 1401 at the latest.<sup>8</sup> Most modern authorities tend, however, to gravitate toward the higher date.

The mummy of Thutmose IV was found in his tomb, number 35 in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. The estimates of the pharaoh's age at the time of his death vary from twenty-five to thirty-three years of age.<sup>9</sup> If we accept an average figure for the king's age at death such as twenty-nine, Thutmose IV was about twenty at his accession. Even utilizing the high-age estimate he was in his middle twenties when his father died and he assumed the pharaonic throne.

The effect of the above information on the use of the Sphinx Stele of Thutmose IV as evidence for the death of the firstborn is enormous. If we choose the highest date for the start of the reign (1425 B.C.) and the highest estimate for the king's age at his accession (ca. twenty-five years old), Thutmose IV was born *at the earliest* in 1450 B.C., only three to five years before the exodus. If any less extreme dates or ages are chosen it is conceivable that the young king was not even born at the time of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. In order for the Sphinx Stele to be evidence for the death of the firstborn, Thutmose would have to have been first of all alive before the exodus, which is by no means a historical certainty.

Secondly, he would have to have been old enough to realize he was not the heir to the throne, as well as be mature enough to hunt. This seems highly unlikely, since the prince was *at most* five years old at the time of the exodus. The events described on the Sphinx Stele should in all probability be dated some years after the exodus, and therefore the stele is definitely not evidence for the death of the Egyptian firstborn. It only demonstrates that Thutmose still had, despite the events connected with the exodus, one or more living older brothers in the late years of his father's reign.

Turning in conclusion to the brothers of Thutmose, is there any historical evi-

<sup>5</sup>This comes from the Konosso Stele of Thutmose IV; cf. K. Sethe and H. W. Helck, *Urkunden*, 1545.

<sup>6</sup>W. G. Waddell, *Manetho* (Cambridge, 1940) 101, 109, 113, 115-117.

<sup>7</sup>Recent arguments for a longer reign based on the fact that Thutmose IV celebrated a jubilee remain unconvincing. While it is true that Egyptian kings normally celebrated jubilees only after reigning thirty years, Akhenaten, the grandson of Thutmose IV, is known to have reigned only eighteen years and yet celebrated a jubilee. It is best not to exceed the highest date known from the monuments, which in this case is year eight.

<sup>8</sup>See the chart at the back of E. Hornung, *Untersuchungen zur Chronologie und Geschichte des Neuen Reiches* (Wiesbaden, 1964).

<sup>9</sup>E. Thomas, *The Royal Necropolis of Thebes* (Princeton, 1966) 240, and G. E. Smith, "Report on the Physical Characters," *Annales du service des antiquités de l'Égypte* 4 (1903) 112-115. A more recent estimate by Baer and Krogman, presented at recent meetings of the American Research Center in Egypt, places the king's age at thirty-five to forty with the latter being the more probable. Unfortunately the results of this recent investigation must be questioned, since they do not always fit the known inscriptional material. For example, the great warrior Thutmose I was said to have been nineteen at his death, and Ramses II, who reigned sixty-seven years, was said to be sixty to sixty-five at his death. It is best to trust the traditional estimates.

dence that the young prince had older brothers and, if there is, can their deaths be dated with any precision? The Sphinx Stele allows us to assume that Thutmose had older brothers, and several known facts regarding them point to their having predeceased their younger brother. Most obviously, Thutmose and not one of his brothers became pharaoh following the death of Amenhotep II. Since the throne normally passed to the eldest surviving son of the previous king in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt, Thutmose must have held that position at the time of his father's death. But there is also specific inscriptional evidence that Thutmose was the eldest son for some time before Amenhotep died. In Tomb 64 in the Theban necropolis, that of a tutor of the royal children of Thutmose IV, the father of the tomb owner (who served in the same capacity as his son but in the reign of the previous king, Amenhotep II) boasts of having been the tutor of the "King's Eldest Son of His Body, Thutmose."<sup>10</sup>

Several older brothers of Thutmose have in fact been known to Egyptologists for some time. In their list of princes of Dynasties XVIII and XIX, Brunton and Engelbach included no less than five sons of Amenhotep II.<sup>11</sup> Two of these may be dismissed immediately as mistakes. Usersatet held the title "King's Son," but it is now known that this was in his case the standard abbreviation of the title "King's Son of Kush" or "Viceroy of Nubia,"<sup>12</sup> so Usersatet was not a member of the royal family at all so far as we know. Re, called a "King's Son" by Brunton and Engelbach, was not really a king's son of any kind. His inscription at Sehel does not include the title "King's Son," as some scholars have thought.<sup>13</sup> This leaves three sons of Amenhotep II who were known to Brunton and Engelbach: Thutmose the future king, Khaemwaset, and Webensenu.

Khaemwaset held a responsible semi-military post and reached marriageable age. On the island of Sehel he has left two graffiti<sup>14</sup> that call him "King's Son" and the "Commander of the Stables" of Amenhotep II.<sup>15</sup> There is also a statue in the Vatican that mentions his wife.<sup>16</sup> Since no other king but Amenhotep II is named on his monuments there is no reason to assume that Khaemwaset survived into the reign of his brother, Thutmose IV.

<sup>10</sup>K. Sethe and H. W. Helck, *Urkunden*, 1572. D. B. Redford, "The Coregency of Tuthmosis III and Amenophis II," *JEA* 51 (1965) 115, cites a possible family feud between the sons of Amenhotep II and theorizes that Thutmose IV may never have been the eldest son of his father at all. But there is no proof for this.

<sup>11</sup>G. Brunton and R. Engelbach, *Gurob* (London, 1927), plate LI.

<sup>12</sup>See G. Reisner, "The Viceroys of Ethiopia," *JEA* 6 (1920) 32. Although the full elaboration of the viceroys' title "King's Son of Kush" was not used as yet in the time of Amenhotep II, Usersatet's additional title "Overseer of Southern Lands" makes his position certain.

<sup>13</sup>P. E. Newberry, "The Sons of Tuthmosis IV," *JEA* 14 (1928) 85.

<sup>14</sup>H. Gauthier, *Le Livre des rois d'Égypte* (Cairo, 1907-1917), 2. 288; and for the most complete of the two texts J. de Morgan et al., *Catalogue des monuments et inscriptions de l'Égypte antique* (Vienna, 1894), 1. 102, no. 228.

<sup>15</sup>For the title "Commander of the Stables," which is a semi-military rank, see A. R. Schulman, *Military Rank, Title, and Organization in the Egyptian New Kingdom* (Berlin, 1964) 51-53.

<sup>16</sup>K. A. Wiedemann, *Aegyptische Geschichte* (Gottha, 1884) 376.

It is also certain that a second "King's Son," Webensenu, did not outlive his father. He is known only from an *ushabti* and two canopic jars from the tomb of his father Amenhotep II,<sup>17</sup> which shows that he died before that king. He was granted a burial in the royal tomb, a practice that was never followed after the king himself had died and the tomb had been sealed. Webensenu held the titles "King's Son of His Body" and "Overseer of Horses." The latter was a high military title and indicates that Webensenu was old enough before his own death to hold a high military post, as was his brother Khaemwaset.

The mention of a "King's Son and Sem Priest Amenhotep" in British Museum Papyrus 10056,<sup>18</sup> which dates from the last third of the reign of Amenhotep II, allows us to add another son to our list. The fact that he was a "Sem Priest" implies that he was a Memphite religious official and probably high priest of Ptah, a very responsible position.<sup>19</sup> To hold such a post Amenhotep must have reached a reasonably mature age. The date of the papyrus in which he is mentioned is year twenty of Amenhotep II, and this lends credence to the view that the prince had passed the younger years of his childhood. He was still alive five years before the death of his father and was in all likelihood born during the first few years of his father's reign or possibly before Amenhotep's own father, Thutmose III, died.

Placing the princes in order from the oldest to the youngest and ascertaining the dates of their deaths is no easy task. In summary, the known facts are these: (1) Thutmose IV was not the oldest but became the oldest sometime late in his father's reign. (2) Thutmose, about twenty or twenty-five years old at his accession, must have been born very early in the reign of Amenhotep II. (3) Amenhotep was also born at the start of his father's reign and survived at least down to year twenty. (4) Khaemwaset held military office and reached marriageable age but died before his father. (5) Webensenu held high military office and died before his father.

From the known facts outlined above a hypothetical reconstruction of the male descendants of Amenhotep II may be made. Webensenu may have been the firstborn son of Amenhotep II since he was granted burial in the royal tomb, an honor not given to any of his brothers. It is reasonable to see in this prince the firstborn son killed before the exodus, since he evidently never reached marriageable age. Khaemwaset was probably the second son of his father. He followed in the general career pattern established by his brother but evidently outlived him, since he married. This was perhaps the prince destined to succeed to the pharaonic throne when the events described on the Sphinx Stele of Thutmose IV occurred. Khaemwaset's death in the last years of Amenhotep II presumably opened the position of "King's Eldest Son" to the third brother, the future king Thutmose. Amenhotep was in all likelihood the youngest of the four brothers; his only dated text is the papyrus in the British Museum from year twenty of Amenhotep II. Whether this youngest prince lived on into the reign of his brother Thutmose is uncertain.

We have seen that the Sphinx Stele cannot be regarded as direct proof of the

<sup>17</sup>H. Gauthier, *Livre*, 289-290.

<sup>18</sup>D. B. Redford, "Coregency," 107 ff.

<sup>19</sup>The title "Sem Priest" was a standard addition to that of high priest of Ptah at Memphis.

death of the firstborn at the time of the exodus. We have, however, also tried to bring to light Egyptian evidence hitherto unknown to Biblical scholars not specializing in Egyptology that supports the early date of the exodus. Thutmose IV had several brothers who may have been the pharaoh's firstborn son who was killed by the angel of the Lord. Precisely which elder brother of Thutmose was killed at that time will probably never be known beyond doubt, but Egyptian inscriptions leave ample room for the truth of the Scriptural narrative without the questionable use of the Sphinx Stele of Thutmose IV.