

The Blood of the Canaanites

The first chapter of the Book of Abraham contains a short detail about the ancestry of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt: “Now this king of Egypt was a descendant from the loins of Ham, and was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth. From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land” (Abr. 1:21–22). Although he was a righteous man who “judged his people wisely and justly all his days” (v. 26), Pharaoh could not lay claim to any priesthood authority because of his ancestry (v. 27). This detail in the text about the king of Egypt being “a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites” may appear odd at first glance but might make some historical sense in a specific way for Abraham’s time and circumstances.

The Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty ruled a unified Egypt for about 200 years from circa 1990 to circa 1800 BC. However, at the end of the Twelfth Dynasty, control over Egypt was split between the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Dynasties.¹ The Thirteenth Dynasty rulers were native Egyptians and generally continued carrying out the policies of the Twelfth Dynasty. However, scholars have determined from their Semitic names that the Fourteenth Dynasty rulers were likely not native Egyptians, but rather were probably natives of Syria-Palestine (Canaan).² “[This] dynasty came into being when the Canaanite population in the [Nile] Delta proclaimed its own ruler . . . after having gradually seceded

1. Gae Callender, “The Middle Kingdom Renaissance (c.2055–1650 BC),” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 172.

2. K. S. B. Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, c. 1800–1550 B.C.* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 1997), 94, 99–101.

from the rest of Egypt during the late Twelfth Dynasty.”³ It could thus be that Abraham had in mind the Asiatic or Semitic kings of the Fourteenth Dynasty with his comment that the “king of Egypt . . . was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites.”

This, in turn, might help us narrow down a general range of dates for Abraham’s life. According to the biblical account, Abraham lived to be 175 years old (Gen. 25:7–8). If this figure is taken at face value, and if as a young man Abraham lived toward the end of the Twelfth Dynasty, perhaps during the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhat III (ca. 1860–1814 BC),⁴ this would afford enough time to accommodate either the early (ca. 1800 BC) or late (ca. 1730 BC) date for the commencement of the Fourteenth Dynasty of Canaanite pharaohs.⁵

Admittedly, the biblical age of Abraham seems difficult to believe. Adjusting Abraham’s lifespan to something more reasonable, such as his nineties,⁶ would still put him in generally the right chronological window but would narrow that window by a few decades and would favor the earlier over the later origin for the Fourteenth Dynasty. There are still large gaps in the archaeological record for this period, and so establishing an incontrovertible chronology for Abraham’s life based on information from the Book of Abraham is not much more feasible beyond this.

3. Ryholt, *Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*, 5.

4. As argued by John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 101.

5. The chronology of the Fourteenth Dynasty remains disputed because of “the brutal truth . . . that there is no reliable anchor point for Egyptian history before the New Kingdom [ca. 1550–1069 BC].” As such, “the chronological position of the Fourteenth Dynasty . . . has been a key problem in” reconstructing the history of the end of the Middle Kingdom and the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period. Harco Willems, “The First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom,” in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd, 2 vols. (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1:81, 99. While most Egyptologists accept a late date for the beginning of the Fourteenth Dynasty, Ryholt has argued vigorously for an early date. See the opposing arguments in Ryholt, *Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*; Daphna Ben-Tor, Susan J. Allen, and James P. Allen, “Review: Seals and Kings,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 315 (1999): 47–74. While Ryholt’s position remains the minority view among Egyptologists, his theory is nonetheless a viable interpretation of the scarce archaeological evidence that survives for this period.

6. Ancient people surviving to this old age is rare but attested. Pharaoh Ramesses II (ca. 1300–1210 BC) lived to his nineties, for instance. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips; Mississauga, Can.: Benben Publications, 1982), 206–7.

“Whether one dates the arrival of the Fourteenth Dynasty toward the beginning or the end of the Thirteenth Dynasty, there would have been a dynastic change during Abraham’s life, with rulers of a different dynasty in Egypt at the time of his visit than had been in charge during his attempted sacrifice.”⁷ Not only were these rulers indeed “partakers of the blood of the Canaanites” as mentioned in the Book of Abraham,⁸ but they may have even had a friendly disposition toward Abraham on account of their shared Semitic ancestry. This, in turn, might account for why Abraham was granted royal privileges, such as the opportunity to teach Pharaoh and his court astronomy (Facsimile 3). Even with a number of remaining uncertainties that should temper our conclusions, small textual details such as those at Abraham 1:21–22 might help us better narrow down a plausible historical timeline for Abraham and situate the Book of Abraham in a plausible ancient context.

Further Reading

Gee, John. “The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 97–105. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.

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7. John Gee, “Shulem, One of the King’s Principal Waiters,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 385.

8. In fact, some modern Egyptologists today still refer to the Fourteenth Dynasty kings as “Canaanites,” including Ryholt, *Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*, 5.