

Ancient History in Chaos— Velikovsky's Chronological Reconstruction

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The promulgation and reception of the late Dr Immanuel Velikovsky's theories constitute one of the most fascinating episodes in the history of ideas. He made revolutionary proposals about the recent history of the solar system, celestial mechanics, and palaeontology, from 1950 onwards; the immoral and irrational response by leading members of the scientific establishment (whom David Stove described in this connection as a 'despotic and irresponsible mafia'¹) has been well documented². But Velikovsky himself set most store by his historical reconstruction. Three volumes have appeared so far, *Ages in Chaos*, *Ramses II and his Time*, and *Peoples of the Sea*³. Further material, on the Assyrian Empire and the so-called 'Dark Age' of Greece, is still to be published.

I would like in what follows to say something about Velikovsky's historical reconstruction, and why, in my opinion, for all the firmly-established assumptions which it overturns, it ought to be taken seriously.

It was the difficulties about dating the Exodus, which are well-known to Old Testament scholars, which provided Velikovsky with his initial hint. It has been generally agreed that this event occurred at some time during the 'New Kingdom' of Egypt, dated from 1573 B.C.; the difficulty is in establishing precisely when. Not only is there no reference to the Exodus in any known Egyptian document, but the very state of Egypt, under strong Pharaohs, and with Palestine under its control, seems to render the course of events described by the Bible impossible. The result of all this is that a range of dates from the sixteenth century right down to the twelfth has been suggested for the Exodus by modern scholars.

In the spring of 1940, it struck Velikovsky that the fact that the Exodus seemed to have occurred during a natural upheaval might give a clue to the link between Israelite and Egyptian histories, if an Egyptian document could be found which seemed to refer to similar events. In the Papyrus Ipuwer, which is in the University of Leyden, he found what he was looking for. The contents of this papyrus have an oddly familiar ring to those who know their Old Testament. 'Plague is throughout the land. Blood is everywhere... The river is

blood ... Gates, columns and walls are consumed by fire... Cattle moan... The land is not light'. Here indeed were closer correspondences with the Biblical narrative than Velikovsky ever expected. The papyrus also refers to 'a foreign tribe from abroad' which 'has come to Egypt'. Now the Amu or Hyksos were invaders who ruled Egypt during the period between the Middle and New Kingdoms⁴. Literary considerations would put the original of which the papyrus is a copy some time during the Middle Kingdom; and would thus fit the view that it dates from the end of the Middle Kingdom and the very beginning of the Hyksos period⁵.

Now the Exodus is almost universally agreed among scholars to have occurred at some time during the New Kingdom; but the hypothesis which clearly suggests itself at this point is that it coincided with the end of the Middle Kingdom. Between the Middle and the New Kingdom Egypt was dominated by the Hyksos. How long did the Hyksos period last? On this matter, divergences among scholarly opinions have been perfectly astonishing. According to Manetho, an Egyptian of the third century B.C., the period lasted 511 years. But in standard modern works the period is drastically reduced. This reduction is based on modern astronomical calculations which put the end of the Twelfth Dynasty at around 1780, and the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty and the New Kingdom at 1573. This leaves only two hundred years for the Thirteenth Dynasty and the three dynasties of the Hyksos; and since some of the Thirteenth Dynasty Pharaohs lived quite a long time, at most a century is left for the Hyksos.

Such an account of the matter was championed by Eduard Meyer, and it remains the conventional view. But Flinders Petrie, stressing the great cultural changes which had taken place in the meantime, believed that another period of 1460 years must have elapsed, leaving a yawning gap of 1660 years between the end of the Twelfth and the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty. What these schemes have in common is the date 1573 for the inauguration of the New Kingdom, and the fact that they are based on astronomical calculations supposed to be applicable to Egyptian chronology. The divergence between them—about 100 and about 1500 years for the Hyksos period—is striking enough, especially when one reflects that the chronology established for Egypt has been used as the basis for that of most of the ancient world⁶. H.R. Hall pointed out that, if only one could disregard the involved astronomical calculations on which both the short and the long chronology depended, not more than four or five centuries would be needed between the Twelfth and Eighteenth Dynasties⁷; which fits well with Manetho's figure.

To hold that the Exodus took place at the end of the Middle Kingdom is to be committed to the very drastic view that the accepted chronology for Egypt is some five and a half centuries too early.

However, Velikovsky has shown that, if one carries through the hypothesis into later Egyptian and Israelite history, the correlations continue to be impressive and very detailed. Thus we have an Israelite account of the expulsion of the Hyksos (1 Samuel xv), and reports from the Egyptian point of view about the visit to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba (Hatshepsut), and of the plunder of the Jerusalem temple in the reign of Rehoboam by the succeeding Pharaoh (Thutmose III); the Egyptian and Israelite versions of the incidents tally in matters of quite small detail⁸. The el-Amarna letters turn out to include specimens of King Ahab's correspondence⁹.

Ramses II and Nebuchadnezzar turn out to be contemporaries, for all that on the conventional view they are separated in time by about seven centuries. The so-called 'forgotten empire' of the 'Hittites' supposed to have been discovered in the nineteenth century—no ancient writer knew anything about it—is just the empire of the Babylonians¹⁰; the sources agree on the order and length of all the episodes of the war between Babylonia and Egypt, and cross-checking yields a precision impossible with many periods much closer to us¹¹. What has always been referred to as the 'Nineteenth' Egyptian Dynasty, of Seti the Great, Ramses II, and Merneptah, turns out to be identical with the 'Twenty-Sixth Dynasty' of Psammetich, Necho and Apries (Hophra)—the latter known to us from the Bible and from Greek authors, but scarcely at all, significantly, from surviving Egyptian monuments. Merneptah-Hophrama'e, often supposed to be the Pharaoh of the Exodus, becomes the Pharaoh Hophra who was contemporary with Judah's exile in Babylon. His violent end, prophesied rather darkly in the book of Jeremiah (xliv 30) and recounted in some detail by Herodotus, finds confirmation when the mummy of Merneptah is examined¹². The 'Hittite' Mursilis and his son Hattusilis are none other than Nabopalassar and Nebuchadnezzar; a puzzle about the succession of these kings is resolved when the 'Hittite' material is taken into account¹³.

The coincidences continue in to the next period. The 'Peoples of the Sea' who attacked Egypt under Ramses III, of the 'Twentieth' Dynasty and supposedly of the twelfth century, turn out not to be 'paleo-Greeks' of whom nothing else is known, but common or garden Greeks of the fourth century¹⁴. Greek letters turn up on tiles of Ramses III, giving rise to a rash of explanations, as ingenious as they are implausible, by archaeologists¹⁵. The 'Peleset' or 'Pereset' are not Philistines, but Persians¹⁶. The allegedly twelfth-century Egyptian and the fourth-century Greek material confirm and amplify one another¹⁷, not only on the broad outlines of the conflict—e.g., the fact that the Greeks changed sides¹⁸—, but on such matters of detail as the particularities of Persian headgear¹⁹ and of Greek military footwear²⁰. There are extant Egyptian reactions to the invasion of their country by

Cambyses²¹, and records of the visit to the oracle of Amon by Alexander the Great²². And so on, and so on²³.

It seems at first sight a crushing objection to Velikovsky's 'revised' chronology that the chronologies for Mycenae, Crete and Ugarit all confirm the one accepted for Egypt; until one realises that the chronologies for all these places have been determined precisely by reference to Egypt. As one author wrote: 'A system of relative chronology can be established by excavation in any country that has been long inhabited, but it is left hanging in the air until linked up with Egypt, whether directly or indirectly through a third region'.²⁴ Thus to appeal to such correlations in support of the received Egyptian chronology is about as much use, to use an analogy of Wittgenstein's, as looking at a second copy of the morning paper in order to check whether what the first one said was true.

Velikovsky and his disciples have written at length of the strange hypotheses, assumptions and disputes to which the conventional chronology has driven archaeologists. On the other hand, the revised chronology explains and resolves what are from the conventional point of view an enormous number of coincidences and anomalies, of which there is space here to mention just a few. Peculiarities of language and style in the books of Amos and Hosea are closely, but apparently quite anachronistically, paralleled at Ugarit²⁵; scarabs of Thutmose III are discovered time and again in the 'wrong' strata in Israel (which is explained, forsooth, by postulating an Israelite fad for preserving scarabs half a millennium in age)²⁶; whole 'earlier' archaeological strata are found on top of whole 'later' ones in Asia Minor (millions of tons of clay must have been transported during the Persian period, 'a procedure ... highly extravagant of labour', as one excavator remarked)²⁷; archaeologists and epigraphists wrangle over whether material from Syria is to be dated to the thirteenth century or to the eighth²⁸; radiocarbon analysis of pollen at a site in Greece seems to demonstrate that there was more olive cultivation in the 'dark age' than in Mycenaean times²⁹. Above all, countries in the Near East which have been dated by reference to Egypt all seem to have undergone such a 'dark age' of some five and a half centuries when nothing happened.

It would be useful to have a point to point rebuttal of Velikovsky's claims by defenders of the conventional scheme; and a demonstration that the revised chronology generates more and worse anomalies. It is easy to think of findings that really would tell heavily against Velikovsky—a sufficient number of scarabs at the 'right' level in Israel, or archaeological discoveries in Greece, Turkey or Syria which would involve his theory in more elaborate convolutions than the conventional one. It is however not useful in this connection to adduce 'facts' which are actually based on the very assumptions which

Velikovsky questions. Appeal to authority is useless for the same reason. Arguments based on premisses of the form 'Reputable scholars have agreed for many years ...' are about as relevant to this issue as the statement by the Bellman in Lewis Carroll, 'What I tell you three times is true'.

In the establishment of the conventional chronology, what appears to have happened, on Velikovsky's account, is this³⁰. A number of hypotheses, each of them dubious, and considerably more so when taken together, yield precise dates for events in the history of Egypt, and through it for that of other parts of the ancient world. Since these were the only dates available when they were first proposed, they were seized upon, their consequences were copiously elaborated, and their hypothetical nature was forgotten³¹. By the time that one of the underlying assumptions had been shown to be false, and another to be probably mistaken³², so enormous an historical structure had been mounted on them that it did not occur to anyone to question them, or at least no one could face the consequences of doing so.

However, during the last few years, there has been increasing respect for Velikovsky's views among the ancient historians. R.H. Pfeiffer, the well-known Old Testament scholar, encouraged Velikovsky in his work from the very first, and used to recommend *Ages in Chaos* to his students as providing a well-argued chronology which was radically discrepant with the conventional one. W.F. Albright, whose initial reaction was extremely cool, referred towards the end of his life to Velikovsky's 'brilliant hypothesis'. Elias Rivkin declared that what really ought to be learned from his work was the hazardous nature of all proposed ancient chronologies³³.

What seems fundamentally at issue here is a general point of method, which applies as much in investigations of ancient history as elsewhere. Suppose a hypothesis X has been accepted in a speciality for many decades or even centuries, and a great deal has been built upon it; but it leads to numerous anomalies and paradoxes. Suppose then another hypothesis Y is proposed, which resolves all or most of the paradoxes, and gives rise to few or none in its turn. Then, whatever the prestige of the champions of X, there is good reason for preferring Y, or at least for regarding it as a serious option. If it be asked why the anomalies in this case were not attended to earlier, the answer appears to be that each one was looked at in isolation, and special explanations, even when far-fetched, did not thus seem too implausible; what Velikovsky has done is to bring out the cumulative effect of the anomalies. In conclusion, if Velikovsky has not established rather a strong case for his revised chronology, I do not know what would amount to such a case.

- 1 *Immanuel Velikovsky Reconsidered*, by the Editors of *Pensee* (New York 1976), 11, 5.
2 *The Velikovsky Affair*, ed. A. de Grazia (London 1966).
3 London 1953, 1978 and 1977 respectively. I shall refer to these as AC, RT and PS
in the following notes.
4 AC v; *Exodus* ix, 3, 23—4 and x, 22.
5 AC 49—50.
6 AC 76.
7 *Ibid.*
8 AC 77—8, 86—9; chapters III and IV.
9 AC chapters VI, VII and VIII.
10 RT ix.
11 RT 53—5, 59.
12 RT x—xi, 204.
13 RT 99, 133—4, 137—8.
14 PS 55. C.T. Selman remarked on the ‘resemblance’ of Ramses III’s ‘peoples of
the sea’ to the Greeks.
15 PS 6—9.
16 PS 33—4.
17 PS 47—52. In the Papyrus Harris, Ramses III actually refers to a place called
‘Atika’, which H. Breasted, the recognised authority on ancient Egypt, calls ‘an
uncertain region, which is probably in the Sinai peninsula’ (PS 66).
18 PS 45—7.
19 PS 33.
20 PS 59.
21 PS 110—17.
22 PS 163—176.
23 PS 135.
24 O.G.S. Crawford, *Man and his Past* (London 1921), 72; quoted Velikovsky,
‘Astronomy and Chronology’ (*Pensee. Immanuel Velikovsky Reconsidered*
(IVR in subsequent references) IV (1973), 38).
25 Velikovsky, ‘A reply to Stiebing’, IVR VI (1973), 40. For similar light on Amos
as thrown by the Ugarit material, see Peter C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old*
Testament (Grand Rapids 1983), 71—4.
26 Velikovsky, ‘Scarabs’ (IVR VI, 42—5).
27 RT, 154—5. The excavator was R.S. Young.
28 RT 65—8, 72, 80.
29 Israel M. Isaacson, ‘Carbon 14 dates and Velikovsky’s Revision of Ancient
History’, IVR IV, 30—31.
30 See the Appendix to *Peoples of the Sea*. For a very damaging criticism of the
basis for the received chronology which is quite independent of Velikovsky, see
R.D. Long, ‘A Re-Examination of the Sothic Chronology of Egypt’ (*Orientalia*, 1974).
31 The matter is well expressed by Long: ‘Unfortunately probationary conclusions
have gradually gained unqualified acceptance while the controversial evidence on
which the conclusions were based has been relegated to total obscurity’ (art. cit., 261—2).
32 PS 226—8, 230—31. Cf. Long, art. cit., 270.
33 For these and other favourable notices of Velikovsky’s historical work, see ‘A
Revised Chronology for the Ancient Near East’ (pamphlet issued by the Society
for Interdisciplinary Studies, 1977).