

The Amarna Tablets

I. Discovery:

- A. In 1887, a peasant woman was digging in the ruins of Tell el-amarna in Egypt discovered some clay tablets. She had been digging there to use the dust of ancient buildings to fertilize her garden. How many of these tablets she had previously *pulverized and grown into leeks and cucumbers and melons will never be known*.¹
- B. The woman sold her interest in this discovery for 10 piastres (I have no idea how much that is, but it just doesn't sound like much at all). The first attempts to sell these tablets to European scholars resulted in silence or accusations of forgery, so that the tablets were taken to Luxor to be sold to tourists (it is unclear whether or not this is still the woman who is trying to sell them). Many of these were destroyed while in transit. Finally, the British Museum purchased most of them, with smaller museums buying a few as a lot.
- C. Additional excavations began in 1891 and was carried out intermittently and by various groups until 1937. That and subsequent discoveries turned up a total of 400 documents (350 were from the first find)² on clay tablets which shed a great deal of light on the 14th century B.C. in Palestine and Syria.
- D. The tablets themselves are clay tablets, varying from 2X2.5 inches to 3.5X9 inches. Writing is found on the front and the back; and, occasionally, on the sides.

II. The city Tell el-amarna:

- A. Tell el-amarna is a misnomer. The name is built upon the name of the village El-Till and the name El-Amarna. Whereas *tell* means *hill* in Arabic and often refers to stratified cultures embedded in the earth, that is not its meaning here. Prior to this, its name was Akhet Aton.
- B. What I did not follow in ZPEB, and was not mentioned anywhere else is that (1) Tell el-amarna is called the *city of Akh-en-aton*; (2) that its ancient name was Akhet Aton (Egyptian for *horizon of Aton*); and (3) Akh-en-aton was possibly the pharaoh in Egypt during the time of the exodus. It sounds as though this ancient city was named after the pharaoh in Egypt—possibly the pharaoh of the exodus. What is most confusing is that my other three sources, Durant, Douglas and the Bible Almanac, make no mention of this either to present it or refute it. Douglas tells us that Tell-el-amarna was the capital of Egypt under Amenophis IV (Akhenaten), circa 1361–1345 B.C.³ According to Douglas, *Amenophis IV proclaimed the sole worship of Aten, changed his own name to Akhenaten, and moved to his own newly created capital-city in Middle Egypt (Akhet-Aten, the modern Tell el-Amarna)*.⁴ Apparently, Amenophis and Amenhotep are the same name.
- C. The city itself *was built on a long, narrow strip of desert parallel to the river*. The land which was next to the Nile and could be cultivated was not built upon, but was between the capital and the Nile. This did not waste the good farm land, yet kept the city reasonably close to the necessary water supply. There were three long streets which ran the length of the city, parallel to the Nile; and a large number of shorter east-west streets. Apparently, the city limits itself were reserved for temple sites, royal gardens and the homes

¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. IV; p. 2925.

² There seems to be some disagreement as to the number of tablets; some sources give the total number of tablets as being 350.

³ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 1241 (the different spellings conform to the different sources). ZPEB lists him as 1372–1354 B.C., but allows for the margin of error to be about a decade; Vol. 2, p. 231.

⁴ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; pp. 342–343.

of the officials. *Then the lesser needs and people crowded into the intervening spaces, thus giving the city a somewhat disorganized character. Akhet Aton was hurriedly built mostly of mud brick that was frequently covered with luxurious decoration.*⁵

- III. The pharaoh was Amenophis IV or Amenhotep IV who changed his name to Akhet Aton. As has been mentioned, his reign began somewhere between 1372 and 1361 B.C. and ended 1354–1345 B.C. *Amarna art is best known for its grotesque exaggeration of the human physique* and we find this in the representations of this king. His neck is too long, his chin is strongly v-shaped, he has a very fat butt and limbs with spindly ankles. ZPEB said that this is what one would expect to find in a *brutal political caricature*. This was not confined only to the king, but other people were similarly distorted. There appear to be two phrases of art in Amarna, the first being the extreme distortion herein described and the second wherein the figures were still distorted, but the exaggerations were toned down so that the features appeared to be more effeminate or weak rather than grotesque.⁶
- IV. The religion of that time appears monotheistic, however the true nature is that other gods had usurped certain authorities which should have been reserved for their god Aton. That is the short version, the longer version being found in ZPEB, vol. 5, pp. 618–619.
- V. Dates: With our traditions of Moses handing over the reigns of power to Joshua around 1400 B.C., I first thought that this throws everything off by about fifty years. By the content of the letters and the historical prelude, I would place the letters being written primarily during Israel's stay in the desert. However, what the dates given only refer to this particular city and when pharaoh Amenophis IV reigned. The letters were written prior to that. Our problem is that one source indicated that the bulk of these letters were written to Amenophis III and Amenophis IV, which would still place them in the time period between 1408–1354 B.C. Most of the sources which I examined placed the bulk of these letters as occurring prior to the invasion of the land by Israel.
- VI. Historical background:
 - A. The Egyptians seemed to have, sometime prior to the Israelite invasion of the Land of Promise, quite a foothold in this area. They had several puppet governments throughout Canaan, but they had lost their control, guidance and influence, evidently, for the reason of Egyptian military endeavors in the north. *The land of Canaan gradually fell into a disconnected group of petty, quarreling city-states. These quarrelsome tendencies peaked in the fourteenth century, the so-called Amarna Age.*⁷ *Egypt's hold on Syria-Palestine slackened somewhat. The petty princes there were free to fight each other in pursuit of personal ambition, denouncing each other to the pharaoh and seeking military aid from him to further their own designs.*⁸
 - B. Abdi-ashirta and his son Aziru were apparently two political leaders in southern Syria. Douglas says that although *protesting their loyalty to their Egyptian overlords, [they] were in reality increasing their own domains with the connivance of the Hittites of N Syria and thus preparing the way for the eventual conquest of all Syria by Suppiluliuma.*⁹ Suppiluliuma was an Hittite king who became the overlord over several northern Syrian states. In reading the preceding quote, I did not follow exactly who they are protesting to and concerning what. Are people of the area of Syria accusing them of loyalty to Egypt and they are protesting that? They might be feigning loyalty to Egypt and entreating Egypt to come to their aide. Or are they attempting to break ties with Egypt? How do the Hittites figure into all this? The Bible Almanac is a bit clearer on this. The ruling princes of Canaan were being invaded so they wrote many letters to Egypt asking for help. Although the ruling princes really had no interest in Egypt except to use her, they feigned loyalty to Egypt in hopes of getting some assistance. One wrote: *The Habiru are plundering all the lands of the king. If no troops come in this very year, then all the lands of the king are*

⁵ Quoted and paraphrased from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 5, pp. 615–616. The description given in this encyclopedia is fascinating and well worth reading.

⁶ Quoted or paraphrased from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; ©1976; Vol. 5, p. 617. For those who like ancient history, this article in ZPEB was particularly interesting and well-written.

⁷ *The Bible Almanac*, J.I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, William White, Jr.; ©1980 Thomas Nelson Publishers; p. 100.

⁸ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 343.

⁹ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.67.

lost.¹⁰ It appears as though Egypt, for all intents and purposes, largely ignored these letters. My guess is that they were still recovering from the devastation laid upon them during the exodus.

- C. The Mitanni empire was to be found in northern Mesopotamia and it flourished in 1500–1340 B.C. The leaders were apparently Indo-Iranians, although their people appeared to be Hurrian. Their influence and control extended to Mesopotamia, southeast Asia Minor, all of northern Syria and a large portion of southern Syria. They were also a very significant minority in the Land of Promise near the time of the Israelite invasion. The Hittites attacked the Mitanni empire and was originally turned back because of the help of the Egyptians. However, under Akhen-aton, Egypt ignored them. The result was that Egypt's influence retreated to southern Palestine as the Hittites and the Assyrians divided up the Mitanni empire.
- D. The result of the retreating influence of Egypt was that you would have often two factions arising in any given city in Palestine—those who proclaimed themselves to be loyal to Egypt and those who were rebels (who were influence by the Hittites). It was these who claimed to be loyal to Egypt who wrote the Amarna letters. As has been noted, some of these probably were loyal to Egypt, but the majority of them were self-serving and simply wanted greater control over their area. It was assumed that Egypt would assist them and crush the rebellion. As they say, politics makes strange bedfellows.
- E. The term *Habiru*, although quite similar to *Hebrew*, was not an ethnic or political term, but a sociological one. *It signified landless people of almost any sort, usually semi-nomads who sold their services to city dwellers in times of peace, but who threatened their stability when the cities became weak.*¹¹ In fact, not only is the term *Habiru* is found all over western Asia clear back to the end of the third millennium B.C., but the Israelites did not begin to use the term *Hebrew* until much later; they called themselves *children of Israel*.¹²
- VII. Medium: these letters were written in Babylonia diplomatic cuneiform on clay tablets. This appeared to be a *universal* business or diplomatic language often used in the ancient world.
- VIII. Content:
- A. *The frank personal despatches from Asiatic kings to the pharaohs Amenhotep III and Akhenaten give a vivid picture of the intrigues and inter-city strife which followed the weakening of Egyptian control shortly before the Israelites entered the land.*¹³
- B. *The Amarna letters are dreary reading, full of adulation, argument, entreaty and complaint.*¹⁴ One particular example came from Burraburiash II of Karduniash, in Mesopotamia, who complained to Amenhotep III that he sent him a crappy gift (only two manehs of gold).
- C. What appears to be the bulk of the content of these letters is appeals from the princes or kings of Canaan to Pharaoh Amenhotep III (1410–1377 B.C.) to help them in fighting the invaders known as the Habiru. It is possible that this is a reference to the Hebrews or to a general wave of invasions which included the Hebrews. Apparently, *Habiru* simply meant *nomadic invaders*. If the exodus took place in 1446 B.C. (or, thereabouts), with forty years spent in the desert, then the timing of the appeal of the Amarna letters would indicate that the Habiru refers to the Israelites.¹⁵ According to Will Durant, it is probable, but not certain, that the *Habiru* mentioned in the Amarna letters refers to the Hebrews.¹⁶ What appears to be the case is that the bulk of these letters were written during the exodus and the forty years the Israelites cooled their heels in the desert and during the beginning invasion of Canaan by the Israelites. The term *Habiru* likely did not target the Jews specifically, but included them as their attack on Canaan began.

¹⁰ Amarna letter quoted in *The Bible Almanac*, J.I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, William White, Jr.; ©1980 Thomas Nelson Publishers; p. 100.

¹¹ *The Bible Almanac*, J.I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, William White, Jr.; ©1980 Thomas Nelson Publishers; p. 101.

¹² For the primary theories as to who the Habiri were, see *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. 4; p. 2928.

¹³ This quote and the bulk of the material for this came from *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; pp.67–68.

¹⁴ *The Story of Civilization; Volume I Our Oriental Heritage*; Will Durant; MJF Books; ©1963; p. 223.

¹⁵ There are two dates given for the exodus of Israel from Egypt; the early date (1446 B.C.) and the late date (1275 B.C.). Most scholars hold to the former and a discussion of this can be found in the book of Exodus.

¹⁶ *The Story of Civilization; Volume I Our Oriental Heritage*; Will Durant; MJF Books; ©1963; p. 300.

- D. Rib-Addi of Byblos *wrote fifty-three letters to the Egyptian court...[he describes] the uncertainty and chaos which followed his unanswered pleas for military assistance. He report[ed] the capture by Aziru of an adjacent town, where the Egyptian resident had been slain, and the attack on Byblos from which he was forced to flee.*¹⁷
- E. There was a Laba'ya of Shechem who continued to increase his hold over the central hills by being in league with the semi-nomadic Habiru. His letters apparently indicated that he was innocent of this self-serving behavior (EA.254). When Laba'ya threatened the city of Megiddo, its ruler, Biridiya, sent letters to Egypt begging for help.
- F. Abdi-hepa, a ruler in Jerusalem, wrote several letters complaining that Miliku of Gezer and others are involved in raiding parties. He indicates that it should be expected of Gezer, Lachish, and Ashkelon to provide the Egyptian garrison with food, since they have plenty. He also says that he was robbed by Egyptian troops and warns that his tribute and slaves which he is sending to Egypt may not arrive (EA.287). *His letter might be a ruse to avoid sending any gifts, for in another letter Shuwardata of Hebron warns the pharaoh that Abdi-hepa of Jerusalem is a rogue.*¹⁸
- IX. Conclusion: these letters are invaluable aides to our understanding the turmoil and the political intrigue and the general brown-nosing which existed in the land of Canaan when the Israelites began their invasion.

¹⁷ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 67.

¹⁸ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 67; (EA.280).