



Short Look: Did Pharoah Die in the Red Sea?

It's not as clear as some think!

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His Watery Death Is a Common Tradition Among Those Who Accept the Exodus account

- **However, well before Jesus, Jewish thought was divided. These early scholars knew their Hebrew Scriptures and history better than we, yet had no definitive answer.**
- **Jewish Midrash (exegetical) writings take both positions, although the story about the surviving Pharaoh traveling to Nineveh, becoming king there and repenting when Jonah arrived seems beyond credibility, not to mention impossible chronology.**
- **Most historic Christianity affirmed his death in the Red Sea. In more recent decades, many have focused on the army's destruction and do not insist the Pharaoh died with them.**
- **Martin Luther held to Pharaoh's death in the Red Sea. In his rightly discredited *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), he writes: "Moses was unable to reform the Pharaoh by means of plagues, miracles, pleas, or threats; he had to let him drown in the sea." But the Book of Christian Concord does not mention the event, so no confessional position is established for Missouri Synod and other confessional Lutheran bodies.**
- **Our current LSB baptismal rite (p. 268) preserves Luther's flood prayer of 1521 that affirms this death.**

A Favorite Passage: “Glory over Pharaoh”

- Exodus 14:17-18 **And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”**
- **The reasoning goes that since God got glory over the chariots and horsemen by their death, then the Pharaoh died with them in order for God to get glory also over him.**
- **But a careful look at the use of the word in the Old Testament shows that death is not necessary for God to gain glory over or through a man, so this reasoning is not as sound as it may seem.**

Here's More Verses Thought to Show He Died

- Exodus 14:17-18, 23-30. Yet note that Pharaoh is with the pursuing army in verses 17-18 but conspicuously absent in verses 20-31. More on similar passages later.
- **17 And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. 18 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”** 19 Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, 20 coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. 21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. 22 And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. 23 **The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.** 24 And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, 25 clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians.” 26 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.” 27 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. 28 **The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.** 29 But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. 30 Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

To emphasize:

- **23 The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.**

Note, Pharaoh is not specified. While the possessive is applied to the horses, chariots, and horsemen, he is not included at any point as entering the Red Sea. The “Egyptians” did, but Pharaoh is omitted.

- **28 The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.**

Again, Pharaoh is not specified, only his military forces. His host that entered the sea died, but Pharaoh remains apart from them.

Psalm 136:15 seems the strongest verse to support Pharaoh's death in the Red Sea

(v. 13-15)

**...to him who divided the Red Sea in two,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and made Israel pass through the midst of it,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,
for his steadfast love endures forever;**

But does this “overthrow” require Pharaoh's own death, when as we will see, multiple verses reinforce the death of the army but never include Pharaoh among the dying? Further, in verses 17-20 of this psalm, kings killed are named. Notably, the Pharaoh is not included, although perhaps the list only includes those after the Red Sea incident.

Notice that the text below strongly suggests that not all the army went into the sea.

- Exodus 14:27-28 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.
- “...OF all the host... that had followed... not one of them remained”. This is often interpreted to mean that all the army followed and drowned, including Pharaoh. But grammatically more clearly, it would mean that only the portion of the army that followed into the sea drowned, whatever the size of the loss. Either way, Pharaoh is not named among them, which is a curious omission.
- Notice also, of “all the host that followed ...*them*” (Israel), not “that had followed *him*” (Pharaoh). Again, curious wording if Pharaoh had perished.

Exodus Chapter 15 Does Not Name Pharaoh Among the Dead Kings

- **Miriam's Song of Moses (v. 4-5) Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.**
- **Moses' narrative text (v. 19) For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea.**
- **As in Chapter 14, the Pharaoh is not named among those drowned. Only his army and officers and the horses which all belonged to Pharaoh. The flow of words would allow the inclusion of his death in a natural, logical, and smooth grammatic construction, yet it is absent.**



He's Not Listed as Dead in Psalm 135:9-11

...who in your midst, O Egypt, sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants; who struck down many nations and killed mighty kings, Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan,...

Note that Pharaoh is included among those who saw the signs of God's plague, but not included among the kings who were struck down, even in the same sentence.

Verses That May Show He Didn't Drown

- Deuteronomy 11:2-4 **And consider today (since I am not speaking to your children who have not known or seen it), consider the discipline of the Lord your God, his greatness, his mighty hand and his outstretched arm, 3 his signs and his deeds that he did in Egypt to Pharaoh the king of Egypt and to all his land, 4 and what he did to the army of Egypt, to their horses and to their chariots, how he made the water of the Red Sea flow over them as they pursued after you, and how the Lord has destroyed them to this day,...**
- Notice that the Pharaoh is specifically included with those who experienced the plagues on the land and then conspicuously omitted in what was done to the army of Egypt. The Hebrew *waw* connective/consecutive, translated as “and,” may also serve as a divider between two distinct concepts.
- In sound Lutheran exegetic practice, this may be a more clear verse we could use to interpret less clear ones.

Jethro's Words in Exodus 18:8-10

Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. Jethro said, "Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians."

In the first sentence, Pharaoh is distinct from the Egyptians in what God had done to each. The term "Egyptians" seems to indicate the pursuing army, much as we found in Ex. 14:23. The text places a distinction between the hand of the Egyptians and the hand of Pharaoh. This would be a cumbersome way to describe an event that also took Pharaoh's life.

4 More verses that group Pharaoh with the people who suffered the plagues, but not the army

Deuteronomy 7:18 “...you shall not be afraid of them but you shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt,...”

Deuteronomy 29:2-3 “You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders.”

Deuteronomy 34:11 ...none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, ...

Nehemiah 9:9-10 “And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land,...” (v. 11) And you divided the Red Sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the see on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters.

*** Note also, that Pharaoh suffered with “all” the land and “all” the people, neither of which are fully true to the Red Sea event and only true in the Ten Plagues and even their aftermath.**

It seems to me that there is considerable more weight of Bible text to separate Pharoah's fate from the portion of the Egyptian Army that entered the Red Sea than to insist that he died with them.

I find biblical reasons to believe that the Pharaoh of the Exodus, whoever he was, did not drown in the Red Sea.

Accordingly, his survival was not only possible, but probable.

I accordingly find no reason to reject a first-born king as a possible Pharaoh of the Exodus as some Christian researchers choose.