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The Chief Accountant of the Pyramid*

THE NAME OF THE PHARAOH and his praises are carved on the walls of the Great Pyramid. From this people can draw the obvious conclusion that the Pharaoh had this edifice built. However, people can also draw another obvious conclusion: that before the name of the Pharaoh and his praises were carved, the construction of the Pyramid had already been completed. But how long beforehand? A few months? A few years? A few centuries? Or a few millennia? If anyone were to claim that the Pyramid existed 20,000 years before the Pharaoh, there would be nothing to refute this claim except that the name of the Pharaoh is carved on it; yet this very proof would be evidence that at the time the name was being carved, this completed edifice already existed. How long had it existed? Historians cannot answer this question, nor can structural engineers. The former have no documents regarding the construction of the Pyramid, the latter have no instruments that could help trace its age. Their sophisticated instruments can neither reveal how long the Pyramid has been around, nor how much longer it will last. However, these instruments do provide evidence of the Pyramid's long passage in the direction of the past and the future.

By observing the parameter of the Pyramid itself and the area around it, structural engineers have been able to estimate the maximum number of men it might have required to build the Pyramid and, with the maximum number of men, the minimum amount of time it might have taken to complete it. This minimum amount of time came to several hundred years.

However, during the time of the Caliph this inscription was found on

* "Ihrām kā Mīr Muḥāsib" appeared in the author's collection *Ṭā'ūs Čaman kī Mainā* (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1997), 30–34.

one of its stone slabs: "We had it built in six months; let's see anyone destroy it in six months."

This was bound to infuriate the Caliph. Laborers were brought in and they began brandishing pickaxes along one side of the structure. The only thing this managed to accomplish was that the tips of their axes broke and sparks flew from the stones, nothing more. The Caliph grew more irate. He had the stones of the Pyramid heated with fire and when they were glowing hot he had them doused with cold vinegar. The stones crackled and thin, narrow fissures appeared which were then assaulted with fresh pickaxes causing small pieces of stone to break off. The Caliph was satisfied and went back to his capital. He left orders that the work should continue for six months, day and night, nonstop.

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As the sixth month was drawing to a close, the Caliph along with his nobles again stood facing the Pyramid. He was disappointed to see that during all that time the stones had only been completely removed from an area that amounted to the size of a small wall. Behind this area, a stone vessel was found in a small vault. The vessel was presented to the Caliph and, when he had the contents emptied, out came precious stones and gold jewelry of an ancient style. Then it was noticed that the vessel also had a carved inscription which was read out loud at the Caliph's command: "So you could not demolish it. Take the remuneration for your labor and depart."

While the Caliph was standing in front of the vault, the cone-shaped shadow of the Pyramid stretched out behind him some distance into the desert. He turned around and, moving slowly, reached the spot where the shadow came to an end. He advanced a little further and stopped. Now his shadow could also be seen on the ground. Looking only at the shadows in the sunlight of the desert, it seemed as if the Caliph was standing at the top of the Pyramid, but there was no one at the top. The Caliph went back and stood in front of the vault again. Now he had an order issued that a complete account of the expenses of that six-month enterprise be made and presented to him. And he had one other order issued, that the precise value of the treasure removed from the vessel should be determined.

It is widely known that the value of the treasure was exactly the same as the amount expended in opening the vault of the Pyramid. And there should be no surprise that such a thing became widely known. Nor should there be any surprise that it became widely known even before

the calculations were completed. What is surprising is that during this whole affair the Chief Accountant, who was responsible for these two calculations, was entirely forgotten.

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It was well known that the Chief Accountant kept track of everything in the Caliph's kingdom down to the last grain of sand. Bundles of account sheets would be placed in front of him and in one glance he would know their totals. It was even said that errors in addition and subtraction would leap off the page on their own and show themselves to him. There should be no surprise, therefore, that most people were more afraid of the Caliph's Chief Accountant than of the Caliph himself. The people of the capital used to say to one another—sometimes to poke fun and sometimes in order to instill fear—that the space for emotions in the Chief Accountant's heart and the space for thoughts in his mind were filled with numbers. And this fact—or rather what this fact suggested—was not far from being correct, at least until the night of that account.

That night the records of both accounts were spread out in front of him and in one glance he knew that both accounts were approximately equal. Nevertheless he felt that every single entry in both accounts needed to be examined closely. His diligent subordinates had recorded everything with great care. Nothing extra was added, nor was anything omitted, in any entry whatsoever. He first took out the record sheet of the treasure from the vessel to calculate the total, but when he started writing the amount his pen faltered and he sensed that he had made a mistake somewhere in his calculations. He added the numbers up again and found that the total was now quite a bit different. However, he again felt that he had made a mistake and he redid the calculations yet again, and again found a different total. Finally, he put that sheet aside and turned to the account of the expenses incurred opening the vault, but it felt as if he was just trying to confirm a suspicion he had. And, in fact, the same situation repeated itself with that account. Now two accounts and six or seven or even more tallies lay in front of him. Feeling confused, he simply set aside the accounts and went outside. Something was bothering him, some question was trying to reach him, but it couldn't find its way through the crush of numbers.

While he was standing outside in the moonlight, his feet started to feel numb and the palms of his hands began to tingle. Only then did he sense that the deluge of numbers was slowly receding into the distance. And these receding numbers appeared like groups of people to him. He

saw them moving off—two and two, hand in hand. Their total was following behind, but he couldn't tell whether it was four or something else. After this last group had passed he went inside. There he placed one account on top of the other and wondered whether they would both yield the same total. Then he started wondering whether he himself wanted the totals to be the same or different? And then, what the Caliph would want? Suddenly it occurred to him that *this* was the question that was trying to find its way through the crush of numbers: what would the Caliph want?

He passed the remainder of the night wondering what the Caliph would want.

Toward morning he fell asleep. He dreamed that the Caliph and the Pharaoh were going toward the end of the Pyramid's shadow hand in hand, but there was no one at the top. In his dream he realized that he was dreaming and he let his eyes open.

The daylight was fading when he burned both accounts, saddled the mule of one of his slaves, put on that slave's clothing and set off. In the bazaars carefree people were strolling in small groups, holding hands. That day there was only one subject of conversation in the city. People were telling each other that not one iota of difference was found between the amount spent on opening the vault and the value of the treasure in the vessel, and that the calculation was done by the Chief Accountant, who even kept track of every grain of sand in the Caliph's kingdom.

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The Chief Accountant had left his house with no intention of ever returning. He spurred on the mule and, leaving the bazaars behind, lost himself in the desert where grains of sand fly like sparks and the Pyramid casts its cone-shaped shadow on the ground. □

—Translated by Jane Shum and Mubammad Umar Memon