

AVARIS AND THE LAND OF GOSHEN

By John Keyser

That is not the name of the book written by Manfred Bietak published in 1996 by the British Museum Press. Bietak has been excavating at Tell el-Daba in the north-east corner of the Delta and has called his book Avaris the Capital of the Hyksos, and anyone who is interested in Biblical Archaeology should read it.

Bietak does not tie his finds in with biblical history because he does not adopt a reduced chronology that would synchronise the two records, though he does come up with a reduced chronology that has worried the traditionalists. His dates are in between the extreme revision and the usual dates, near enough to bring the two histories quite close together.

To get the picture let us review the Biblical record and then compare it with the excavations.

Biblical Record

According to Biblical chronology Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt about 1682 BC (Genesis 39:1,2). In 1669 BC Joseph was elevated to rule the country under Pharaoh (Gen 41). Nine years later Jacob and his family came to Egypt, (Gen 47:9), and some of his members were appointed to prominent positions in the government (Gen 47:6). The Israelites were located in the Land of Goshen and they "grew and multiplied exceedingly" (Gen 47:27).

Some time after Joseph's death in 1589 BC, (Gen 50:26), the Israelites continued to multiply, "and the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). This alarmed the then reigning pharaoh who conscripted them into slavery. "They set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh supply cities, Pithom and Ramses" (Ex 1:11).

In 1525 BC Moses was born and adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh. Forty years later Moses showed his allegiance to his own people by murdering an Egyptian who was mistreating an Israelite, and was obliged to flee (Ex 2). Another forty years later he returned to lead the Israelites out of bondage to the Promised Land. There followed the ten plagues, the destruction of the Egyptian army, (Ex 14:26), and the death of Pharaoh (Psalm 136:5). This happened in 1445 BC (1 Kings 6:1).

Chronological Problem

These events cannot be satisfactorily synchronized with the traditionally held dates of Egyptian history. The 18th dynasty is supposed to have ruled from 1567-1320 BC and was the most powerful, most affluent dynasty that ever ruled the land of Egypt. There is no record of mass slavery during this dynasty and no trace of a disaster the magnitude of the ten recorded plagues or the loss of the powerful army they had.

Some have argued that the Egyptians did not record their losses, and that is correct, but the 18th dynasty is also the best recorded dynasty that ever ruled in Egypt.

Every king is known and both monuments and papyri provide a clear picture of the history of the dynasty. If there was an Exodus during this dynasty there should be some indication of it, but there isn't. Either the biblical record is wrong, or grossly exaggerated, or there is something wrong with Egyptian chronology.

Growing Unease

Of late there has been a growing uneasiness about the dates of Egyptian history.

Several prominent scholars have questioned the validity of the usually held dates. If these misgivings are well founded and the dates are reduced to lower the dates of the dynasties by some 300 years (200 years by Bietak's revision) this would bring the 12th dynasty down to the time of the Biblical events and thus provide compelling evidence for a synchronism.

Joseph would have been promoted under Sesostris I who is known to have had a vizier whose powers were similar to those granted to Joseph. The slavery would be under Sesostris III, a nasty looking character who would have been quite capable of such cruelty. Moses would have been born at the beginning of the reign of his son Amenemhet III whose daughter, Sebeknefrure, had no children. She would have been the princess who adopted Moses to be the heir but when Moses fled she had to assume the throne. When she died the dynasty ended and was succeeded by the 13th dynasty.

Moses returned to confront Neferhotep I whose body has never been found. The Ipuwer Papyrus describes the utter desolation of the land at this time. When the Egyptian army was destroyed the Hyksos were able to occupy the country and fill the vacuum, establishing their capital at Avaris. They ruled until the beginning of the 18th dynasty whose early kings expelled the Hyksos and established Egypt's most glorious era of power and opulence.

Archaeological Evidence

Now compare this with the archaeological evidence as presented by Bietak in his splendid book.

Tell el-Daba is not an impressive tell. It is not very high above the surrounding countryside and the site has been extensively used for farming. It is, however, very extensive and embraces some 250 hectares. There are some low mounds which Bietak calls "turtle backs", on which were some settlements. One of these settlements "resembles the famous Kabun settlement... near the entrance to the Faiyum" (Avaris the Hyksos Capital, page 5). Kahun was where Petrie found evidence of many Semitic slaves who were involved in building the pyramids of the 12th dynasty.

History Of Avaris

Avaris was founded by Amenemhet I, the first king of dynasty 12 (p. 5). It adjoins the Land of Goshen and it is not surprising that "the archaeological and anthropological evidence indicates that the settlers were not Egyptians but people from nearby Canaan, albeit highly Egyptianised" (p.5). "Cooking pots of Syro-Palestinian Middle Bronze I (MBI) type show that there was contact with nomads" (p. 9).

Bietak did not identify these settlers with the Israelites because even his lowered chronology was not low enough for that, but it does sound as though some of the Israelites were still on the land while others had moved into the city.

There is a slight problem with this synchronism. Bietak claims this early Canaanite settlement was during the time of Amenemhet I. If this conclusion is correct then the initial Israelite occupation would have to be moved back to a slightly earlier time slot.

On the other hand, Bietak did not find Amenemhet's name there. He is simply going by pottery styles which are not always 100% reliable. By the revision Sesostris II was the Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites and Bietak says that "Senusret III [an alternative spelling of Sesostris] took an interest in this town and together with other administrative reforms introduced a more rigorous

policy towards settlements in the eastern Delta" (p.10). He does not elaborate on this "more rigorous policy" but it seems to fit the harsh measures introduced by the Pharaoh of the oppression.

The author says that there use "an enormous expansion of settlement during the late 12th and early 13th Dynasties" (p. 10). This would be consistent with the record that "the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew" (Exodus 1:13).

Evidence Of Foreigners

These settlers did not adopt Egyptian burial customs. As at Kabun the graves were attached to their houses, "a burial custom foreign to Egypt and obviously derived from the Syro-Palestinian Middle Bronze Age culture"(p. 10). "An important feature of both series was the burial of pairs of donkeys and sheep and goats within the entrance pits. The burial of donkeys in front of tombs was an ancient custom originating in Mesopotamia in the third millennium and spreading from there to Syria... It seems therefore that the custom of donkey burials in association with tombs came from northern Syria to Egypt" (p. 25).

Because Bietak has not adopted the revised chronology he has trouble explaining the presence in Egypt in such large numbers of these people from Canaan. He asks, "What exactly was the role of these Asiatic settlers in the north-eastern Nile Delta?" (p. 14). He suggests that they might have been mercenaries, but is more logical to identify them with the Israelites who had migrated to the Land of Goshen with Jacob.

Most significant was the end of this era during the 13th Dynasty. "While the palace was being expanded and refurbished, activity suddenly stopped. In the courtyard pots of paint, a plumb bob and other instruments were simply dropped on the floor. The doors of the palace were closed up by brickwork and the palace was abandoned" (p. 29).

Similar Story At Kahun

This was also the story at Kahun as described by Dr Rosalie David in her book, *The Pyramid Builders of Ancient Egypt*. "It is apparent that the completion of the king's pyramid was not the reason why Kahun's inhabitants eventually deserted the town, abandoning their tools and other possessions in the shops and houses" (p. 195). "There are different opinions of how this first period of occupation at Kahun drew to a close... The quantity, range and type of articles of everyday use which were left behind in the houses may indeed suggest that the departure was sudden and unpremeditated" (p. 199).

That sounds very much like the Exodus when the Israelites abandoned their homes and occupations and marched out of Egypt. It was not only the Israelites who disappeared. There was a crisis at Avaris. "Tombs found in excavation areas F/I and A/II, areas which are more than 500 metres apart from each other, were obviously emergency graves. Some of them are merely pits into which bodies were thrown. Most were without offerings. We think the evidence suggests that an epidemic swept through the town. It may have been the bubonic plague" (p. 35). There was of course no evidence for an epidemic.

It would be more logical to see it as the result of the devastating plagues that hit Egypt. In the final plague "the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon" (Ex 12:29).

The Ipuwer Papyrus says, "Nay but men are few. He that lays his brother in the ground is everywhere". (Quoted from *The Ancient Egyptians*, a source book of their writings, pages 94-101).

Invasion Of The Hyksos

During the 13th dynasty the Hyksos swarmed into Egypt. Bietak wrote, "The sudden increase of Middle Bronze Age types from stratum G/4 to stratum G/1-3 is surely very significant, suggesting an influx of new elements from the Levant into Egypt" (p. 55). They made Avaris their capital and built massive fortifications. "The site commanded the river and during the Hyksos Period was fortified with a buttressed wall (originally 6.2 m wide at the base, later enlarged to nearly 8.50 m)" (p 63)

The length of the Hyksos occupation is a matter of debate. Most scholars today allocate only about 150 years but that is not based on historical or archaeological evidence. It is simply to accommodate the hypothetical Sothic Cycle.

Manetho ascribes to them 474 years though some translations tally up to more than that. Courville and Velikovsky place them between the Exodus and King Saul of Israel, a period of 394 years.

Whatever the time span, the end of the Hyksos barbaric rule came when Ahmosis, the first king of the 18th Dynasty attacked Avaris and drove them out of the country.

Bietak wrote, "The latest stratum of the Middle Bronze Age settlement at Tell el-Daba suggests that the town was abandoned. For the most part the settlement appears to have simply ceased. It is possible that the report of Flavius Josephus that the siege of Avaris was lengthy and that the Canaanites were eventually able to negotiate a safe retreat into southern Palestine had some truth in it" (p. 67).