

THE BIBLICAL CITY OF RAMSES

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Perhaps the most perplexing problem facing the advocates of an early exodus (fifteenth century B.C.) is the series of references in the sojourn and exodus narratives to a land (as in Gen 47:11) and to a city (as in Exod 1:11) of Ramses. The difficulty is chronological: If, as is commonly assumed, the land and city were named after King Ramses II (1290-1223 B.C.), how could the name be used centuries earlier? If the start of the sojourn is to be dated to the Middle Kingdom period of Egyptian history¹ (ca. 1876 B.C.), and if the exodus took place in the 1440s,² it would stand to reason that no city or land could yet have been named after Ramses II. What solutions to this problem are available, short of abandoning an early date for the exodus? It is the purpose of this paper to examine several of the more popular proposed solutions to this obstacle in the light of the Egyptological evidence. We will confine our discussion mainly to the city of Ramses, but our conclusions may be applied to the land of Ramses as well.

Let it be said at the outset that the location of the delta capital of Ramses II, the commonly accepted Biblical city of Ramses, has recently been established beyond serious doubt.³ In contrast to an older theory that located Per-Ramses ("House of Ramses") at Tanis in the northeastern delta, it can now be shown that Ramses II's northern residence was situated in the Khatana-Qantir Tell el-Daba region to the south of Tanis.

Among conservative American defenders of the early exodus, two explanations of the seemingly anachronistic mentions of Ramses have been suggested. The first, originated and elaborated by John Rea⁴ and accepted by G. L. Archer⁵ and Leon Wood,⁶ denies that the name Ramses was derived from Ramses II and states that it was in fact far older, probably going back to Hyksos times (seven-

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¹See J. R. Battenfield, "A Consideration of the Identity of the Pharaoh of Genesis 47," *JETS* 15 (1972) 77-85.

²See the basic arguments of M. F. Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: 1954), chap. 12, and G. L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: 1964), 212 ff.; or, more recently, see the relevant chapters of C. F. Aling, *Egypt and Bible History* (Grand Rapids: 1981).

³For a detailed discussion with all the evidence included see M. Bietak, *Tell el-Daba* (Vienna: 1975), 2. 179-220; in English see M. Bietak, *Avaris and Piramesse* (Oxford: 1979).

⁴J. Rea, "The Time of the Oppression and the Exodus," *Grace Journal* 2 (1961) 5-14.

⁵Archer, *Survey* 207-208.

⁶L. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: 1970) 93 ff.

teenth century B.C.). Thus if the bondage began in Hyksos times, the term Ramses would not be an anachronism. The second view, advocated most recently by the late M. F. Unger,⁷ simply regards the references to Ramses in the Penta-teuch as updatings of place-names by Hebrew scribes working perhaps in the thirteenth or twelfth centuries B.C. Both of these views must be closely studied. We shall begin with the thesis of Rea.

Rea seeks to show that the city of Ramses was not named after Ramses II but was called Ramses by the Hyksos, an Asiatic group who seized control of the Nile delta ca. 1650 B.C. during the time of weakness between Egypt's Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom periods. In order to prove this, Rea attempts to show connections between the Nineteenth Dynasty (of which Ramses II was a member) and the earlier Hyksos. If such a connection existed, the Nineteenth Dynasty could have used the name because the Hyksos used it, and it need not have anything to do with Ramses II at all. Rea bases his thesis on three main arguments:⁸ the contents of the 400-Year Stele of Ramses II, alleged veneration of the god Re by the Hyksos, and use of Ramses as a personal name earlier than Dynasty XIX.

I. THE SO-CALLED 400-YEAR STELE

The stele in question was inscribed during the reign of Ramses II (at least in the form in which it is preserved) at the city of Ramses⁹ to commemorate an event that had taken place some years earlier, before Ramses' father Seti I became pharaoh. Seti, while serving as vizier under the late Eighteenth-Dynasty king Horemhab (ca. 1331-1304 B.C.), came to Per-Ramses to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the establishing of the Set cult in the city.

Rea,¹⁰ following Albright, believes that this stele indicates that the Nineteenth-Dynasty rulers were connected in some way, perhaps genealogically, with the Hyksos. After all, both the Nineteenth-Dynasty kings and the Hyksos venerated the generally unpopular god Set. Further, a date four hundred years earlier than the reign of Horemhab would seemingly place the inauguration of the Set cult in Per-Ramses at the start of Hyksos rule in the Nile delta.

But does the 400-Year Stele really show any connection between Dynasty XIX and the Hyksos? It should be noted that there is no mention of the Hyksos anywhere on the stele;¹¹ the emphasis is on the god Set. While it is true that the Hyksos greatly venerated Set,¹² whom they probably equated with one of their own native Asiatic deities, it is also a fact that the cult of this deity was popular with

⁷Unger, *Archaeology* 149-150.

⁸Rea, "Time" 10.

⁹A translation may be found in *ANET* 252-253. The deity represented on the stele is labelled "Set of Ramses," thus proving that it originally came from the city of Ramses.

¹⁰Rea, "Time" 10.

¹¹Nor are they favorably mentioned in any other Ramesside inscriptions.

¹²Cf. J. Van Seters, *The Hyksos* (New Haven: 1966) 173 ff.

Egyptians in the eastern delta before the Hyksos rose to power.¹³ In the Pyramid Texts Set is twice associated with the town of Henty, which is thought to have been in the delta. Of more certain nature is Set's inclusion in the Ennead of gods worshipped at Heliopolis near modern Cairo, just south of the delta.¹⁴ Ramesside interest in Set may indeed show connections with the eastern delta, but it need not indicate any connection with the Hyksos.

Manfred Bietak, following R. Stadelmann,¹⁵ postulates a reason for the erection of the 400-Year Stele honoring Set by Ramses II: Since the Nineteenth Dynasty had a nonroyal origin (its first two kings, Ramses I and Seti I, had been viziers at the end of Dynasty XVIII), legitimacy had to be proven through religious propaganda. The 400-Year Stele provided that propaganda by showing a special relationship between the dynastic founders and the god Set. A further purpose was also served by elevating Set to greater prominence. For many years Egypt's kings had sought a way to weaken a rival institution, the high priesthood of Amon.¹⁶ The extreme solution of Akhenaten, the abolition of the worship of Amon, had failed. But here was a new possibility, a subtle shift of royal support to another deity in the north, away from Thebes and its priests.¹⁷

Finally, there is a serious chronological obstacle in the way of linking the Nineteenth Dynasty with the Hyksos kings on the basis of the 400-Year Stele. If we count back four hundred years from the original events commemorated by the stele sometime in the reign of Horemhab (1331-1304 B.C.), the result is a date ca. 1731-1704 B.C., which is several decades earlier than the rise of the Hyksos to power. That the four-hundredth anniversary celebrated by the erection of the stele has little or nothing to do with the Hyksos is also indicated by several monuments of an ephemeral pre-Hyksos Fourteenth-Dynasty king named Nehesy. This delta prince's titles include the epithet "Beloved of Set," and it was he (or some previous ruler in his dynasty) who established the Set cult at Avaris (which was an earlier name for Per-Ramses, as we shall see below). The first reference to Set as "Lord of Avaris" comes not from Hyksos monuments but from an inscription on a colossal statue of King Nehesy found at Moqdam.¹⁸ It is significant that this statue was usurped later by Merneptah, the son and successor of Ramses II.¹⁹ It seems clear that the connection shown by the 400-Year Stele was not between Dynasty XIX and the Hyksos but rather between Dynasty XIX and the last native Egyptian rulers before the Hyksos rose to power.

¹³Ibid., 100 ff. See also below.

¹⁴Ibid., 100. See the chart of these nine deities in A. Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London: 1907) 27.

¹⁵Bietak, *Tell el-Daba*, 2. 185.

¹⁶See C. F. Aling, *A Prosopographical Study of the Reigns of Thutmose IV and Amenhotep III* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Minnesota: 1976) 233 ff.

¹⁷S. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (New York: c. 1969) 183 ff.

¹⁸For bibliography and discussion on all of this see Bietak, *Tell el-Daba*, 2. 186; Van Seters, *Hyksos* 100-103.

¹⁹Bietak, *Tell el-Daba*, 2. 186.

There is further evidence against connecting Dynasty XIX with the Hyksos. The ancient Egyptians compiled several king lists that have been at least partially preserved down to the present. Three of these date from the Nineteenth Dynasty:²⁰ the Turin Canon of Kings, the Table of Sakkara, and the Table of Abydos.

The first, the Turin Canon, was originally a long papyrus written in the hieratic script listing Egypt's kings from earliest times to the Nineteenth Dynasty. Unfortunately it has survived only in tattered fragments. One observation pertinent to our problem may be made, however: The Hyksos kings were included in the list, for some of them remain in the surviving fragments.

The second and third lists were not papyrus records but were display inscriptions. The Table of Sakkara was inscribed on the wall of a Memphite tomb, and the Table of Abydos was prominently displayed on an interior wall of Seti I's great temple to Osiris at Abydos. In both cases it is important to note that (1) these lists were meant for some kind of public consumption, however limited that may have been, and (2) they both deleted any reference to the Hyksos kings. These Asiatic rulers, like Akhenaten and his immediate successors, were detested and were considered unworthy of inclusion in king lists inscribed in visible places. We thus see from these two lists what the Nineteenth-Dynasty kings thought of the Hyksos. Their inclusion in the Turin Canon is perfectly understandable, since that document was not displayed for all to see but was evidently part of a collection of temple records, where accuracy and completeness were more important than pious indignation. If Seti I or Ramses II were related to the Hyksos and were publicly proclaiming the fact in the 400-Year Stele as Rea would have us believe, it is difficult to understand their exclusion from the public king lists of the Nineteenth Dynasty.

II. ALLEGED HYKSOS VENERATION OF RE

After seeking to connect the Nineteenth Dynasty with the Hyksos on the basis of the 400-Year Stele, Rea attempts to show that since the god Re's name can be found as a part of Hyksos royal names the term Ramses as a place-name might also reflect Hyksos practice.²¹ It is true that Re's name appears in Hyksos royal names.²² But this does not prove any special veneration for Re, but simply an attempt by the Hyksos to find acceptance and legitimacy, as Van Seters has suggested.²³ The selection of names for their propaganda value was a practice not unknown in ancient Egypt.

Regarding Hyksos religious beliefs, there is little proof of any special favor for Re among the Hyksos. They probably did not suppress the worship of the Heliopolitan solar deity (as was once thought by Egyptologists²⁴), but neither is there any concrete evidence that Re received special favor. Set was in fact the major

²⁰A. H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: 1961) 47 ff.

²¹Rea, "Time" 10.

²²See the list in Gardiner, *Egypt* 443.

²³Van Seters, *Hyksos* 172.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 173.

god of the Hyksos kings rather than Re. The compounding of royal names with that of Re has less to do with religion than with politics. There is no reason to look for places named after Re on the basis of the Hyksos throne names.

III. EARLY USE OF THE PERSONAL NAME RAMSES

Conservative Biblical scholars holding Rea's position have made much of the occurrence of Ramses as a personal name before it was popularized as a royal name in Dynasties XIX and XX.²⁵ Their point has been that the Biblical city need not have taken its name from a king named Ramses but could have been named after some private individual. While the name did not become popular until the days of Ramses II and later, occasional examples are known from earlier periods. A very prominent figure in the late Eighteenth Dynasty was Ramose (or Ramses), vizier under Amenhotep III and Akhenaten. Another Ramses is known from approximately Hyksos times,²⁶ and a still earlier Ramses is mentioned on a stele of a man named Ibi-aa, probably of Twelfth-Dynasty date.²⁷ But do these early examples of the proper name Ramses have any bearing on the name of the Biblical city?

On the basis of what we know of the naming of Egyptian cities in general, it is extremely doubtful that scattered examples of Ramses as a personal name are at all relevant to the question of the city of Ramses. The Egyptians named cities after gods, kings, cult objects, and sacred places, but not after nonroyal personages. But we should examine all the known towns and cities of ancient Egypt that had the word Ramses as a part of their names to see if any were named for someone other than a king.

A. H. Gardiner in 1918 published a thorough study on the delta residence of the Ramesside kings, Per-Ramses.²⁸ While his conclusions as to the location of Per-Ramses must now be modified in the light of recent archaeological findings, Gardiner's gathering of all known literary references to all towns bearing the name Ramses is still extremely valuable. From his list of cities we can learn several things.

It is very clear that the most important Egyptian city called Ramses, more fully "Per-Ramses Mery Amon," translated "The house of Ramses, beloved of Amon," was named after King Ramses II.²⁹ This is indicated first by the epithet Mery Amon, which was an integral part of the nomen of Ramses II. Just as Ramses III's nomen was "Ramses, Ruler of Heliopolis," Ramses II's was "Ramses, Beloved of Amon." Second, this conclusion is supported by the fact that in virtually all references to the city that are at all contemporary with the Biblical account the name Ramses or the whole phrase "Ramses, Beloved of

²⁵See for example Wood, *Survey* 94 n. 46, and especially G. L. Archer, "An Eighteenth Dynasty Rameses," *JETS* 17 (1974) 49-50.

²⁶H. Ranke, *Die Aegyptische Personennamen* (Glückstadt: 1935), 1. 218, no. 3.

²⁷H. M. Stewart, *Egyptian Stelae, Reliefs, and Paintings From the Petrie Collection* (Warminster: 1979), 2. 26, no. 110.

²⁸A. H. Gardiner, "The Delta Residence of the Ramessides," *JEA* 5 (1918) 127 ff.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 136.

Amon" is written in a cartouche or ring. Such enclosure of personal names was reserved for gods and kings. In this case, because of the frequent epithet Mery Amon, it is certain that King Ramses II is meant rather than a deity. Thus if Biblical Ramses is Per-Ramses we have no choice but to conclude that the city was named after Ramses II of Dynasty XIX. But before we examine this possibility and its implications we must consider other cities in Gardiner's list that had the name Ramses incorporated in their names.

There were a number of temples in all parts of Egypt that incorporated the name Ramses. None could be Biblical Ramses, for the Bible states that the Hebrews lived in a land of Ramses, not in a temple by that name, and that they labored at a "store city" of Ramses and not at a temple. Also these temples, like the great delta capital Per-Ramses, were named after kings—in some cases Ramses II, in others the later Ramses III.³⁰

A delta village near Naucratis, attested in late texts and still known today as Ramsis, was known as *hwt nt r^c-mss*, translated "House (or temple) of Ramses."³¹ The word *hwt* would normally lead us to expect a king's name to follow, and this supposition is borne out by the fact that one textual reference gives a fuller variant of the name of this place: "House of Ramses, Beloved of Amon."³² This and the late date of the references to this town prove that it too was named after Ramses II. Nor was it an older city renamed by Ramses II; that all references to it are quite late shows that it was a foundation dating from the reign of that king. Thus it was not the Biblical city (which must have been in existence earlier) but was rather a late and insignificant place of similar name.

Three towns in Nubia were named Ramses: Derr, Amara and Abu Simbel.³³ In all three cases the name Ramses was taken from Ramses II, for cartouches normally enclose the word Ramses. Often the phrase "Beloved of Amon" is also present. Again it is not possible that any of these places was the Biblical city, for that place of servitude was most certainly in the delta and not in Nubia.

Several settlements were named after the Twentieth-Dynasty ruler Ramses III.³⁴ These places can be dismissed immediately as possibilities, for they are all too late and too small.

We are forced to conclude with Gardiner that the Biblical city and the famous delta capital Per-Ramses were one and the same. Only the great capital was large and important enough to need vast quantities of slave labor, and only it was located in the right part of Egypt for the Hebrew bondage. As Gardiner has said, "Either Raamses-Rameses of the Bible is the residence city of the Ramessides . . . or else it is a town unknown to the Egyptian monuments, the existence of which is merely postulated."³⁵ That such an important place would have left no trace in

³⁰Ibid., pp. 129 ff.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 131.

³³Ibid., pp. 133-134.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 134-135.

³⁵Ibid., p. 261.

the vast corpus of preserved Egyptian literature is all but impossible.

IV. THE EARLY HISTORY OF PER-RAMSES

Assuming that Biblical Ramses was Per-Ramses, the delta capital of Ramses II, and that this city received the name "House of Ramses" from Ramses II, what are we to conclude about the Hebrew bondage there during the Eighteenth Dynasty and under the Hyksos? It is known that Ramses II did not found a new city on virgin soil when he established his capital at Per-Ramses. He merely revived an old city, renamed it, and inaugurated massive construction works there. Per-Ramses, as is shown by the 400-Year Stele, existed long before Dynasty XIX, even before the rise to power of the Hyksos. Archaeological work at the site by recent Austrian excavators confirms this conclusion. Habitation at Tell el-Daba extended back into Dynasty XIII,³⁶ and finds from Dynasty XII are also known from the general area.³⁷ Before Ramses II, however, Per-Ramses was known by another name, Egyptian *ḥwt wꜣrt*, anglicized as Avaris.

The evidence that Avaris and Per-Ramses were located at the same site is fairly conclusive. Space does not permit us to discuss all the indications,³⁸ but the following are a few of the most important points: (1) Tanis, the capital of the Twenty-First-Dynasty kings, contains a great number of stone monuments brought there from Avaris and Per-Ramses. It stands to reason that these objects were plundered from the same place.³⁹ (2) Egyptian literary references to Avaris and Per-Ramses describe an identical geographical setting. Both cities, for example, lay in the fourteenth nome or district of Lower Egypt; both were situated near Egypt's northeastern frontier; both were situated on the east bank of one of the branches of the Nile; and both were located in grape-raising country.⁴⁰ (3) Both Avaris and Per-Ramses had a temple to the same god, Set. In the Nineteenth Dynasty, temples to Amon, Ptah and Re were built at the delta capital as well, but worship of Set remained prominent. It is extremely significant that Merneptah, the son and successor of Ramses II, indiscriminately spoke of himself on several statues from this area as either "Beloved of Set, Lord of Avaris," or "Beloved of Set of Merneptah." Avaris and a place called Merneptah are thus equated, and Merneptah is certainly another name for Per-Ramses.⁴¹ Thus Avaris and its god Set must be equated with Ramses and its deity Set. (4) A conclusive piece of evidence for equating the two cities is a Twentieth-Dynasty text now in Moscow that refers to a "Temple of Amon of Ramses, great of victories, at the harbor of Avaris."⁴² "Ramses, great of victories" is Per-Ramses, and it is here

³⁶Bietak, *Avaris* 236-237.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 232 ff.

³⁸For a complete discussion see Bietak, *Tell el-Daba*, 2. 189-212.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 189 ff. See also Bietak, *Avaris* 281-282.

⁴¹Gardiner, "Delta" 255.

⁴²Bietak, *Avaris* 282.

being equated with Avaris. Evidently the harbor region of the city had retained the older name of the full city.

It is important to remember too that Avaris-Ramses was not the only Egyptian town given a new name by Ramses II. Amara in Nubia was called Khnum-waset originally but was renamed Per-Ramses Mery Amon by Ramses II.⁴³

V. CONCLUSION

If the name Per-Ramses did not originate with the Hyksos but was given to Avaris by Ramses II when he made that old city his delta residence, a conclusion that seems certain in the light of the extant evidence, what solution to the anachronism remains? The only viable answer is the thesis of Unger⁴⁴ that the term Ramses replaced Avaris as a scribal updating of the place-name. Such a change would presumably have been made sometime between the thirteenth and eleventh centuries B.C. to facilitate the understanding of the Hebrew people. Outside of professional scribal circles in Israel the name Avaris or its Hebrew equivalent would not be remembered. Thus updating of the place-name to reflect current terminology would have increased understanding of the Pentateuch.

Unger's suggestion that a place-name has been updated in the Pentateuch is in no way radical. Another OT example of this kind of technical change is known. In Gen 14:14 Abraham is said to have pursued the enemy coalition of kings to a city called Dan. But from Josh 19:47 and Judg 18:29 we learn that the early name of the city was Laish or Leshem, and that only after the conquest (half a millennium later than Abraham, and also some time after the death of Moses) was it given the name Dan. Both passages specifically state that Laish was named Dan after Dan the son of Jacob, thus precluding the possibility that the name Dan was used for this city in Mosaic times or earlier. The view of Wood,⁴⁵ that the Dan of Gen 14:14 may not be the same place mentioned in Joshua and Judges, is not convincing. Wood's alternative site, the Dan-Jaan of 2 Sam 24:6, may well be the same Dan mentioned in Joshua and Judges. And even if it is not, in all probability it too received its name in honor of Jacob's son. That a city called Dan existed in David's day is by no means proof that it was already occupied and named Dan in the time of Abraham.

In summary, we have attempted to point out the weaknesses in Rea's thesis that the Biblical city of Ramses received its name earlier than the reign of Ramses II and merely continued to use the name coincidentally in the Nineteenth Dynasty. We showed that although the 400-Year Stele does demonstrate a connection between the Nineteenth Dynasty and earlier Egyptian rulers it does not prove a relationship between the Ramesside kings and the Hyksos. Further, Rea's contention that the Hyksos showed special favor for the god Re is not supported by any evidence. Nor does use of Ramses as a personal name before Dynasty XIX prove anything about the city, for it is clear that Per-Ramses of the Egyptian monu-

⁴³B. Porter and R. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings* (Oxford: 1927-1964), 7. 157.

⁴⁴Unger, *Archaeology* 149-150.

⁴⁵Wood, *Survey* 53.

ments and papyri was named after King Ramses II.

The best solution to the problem of the Biblical references to the land and city of Ramses within the framework of an early exodus seems to be, on the basis of the known evidence from ancient Egypt, to accept Unger's view. The original references to Ramses in the Pentateuch did not include the term Ramses but read "Avaris" or something similar. Only after Avaris had gone out of general use did Hebrew scribes substitute the new name, Ramses, for the localities in question.