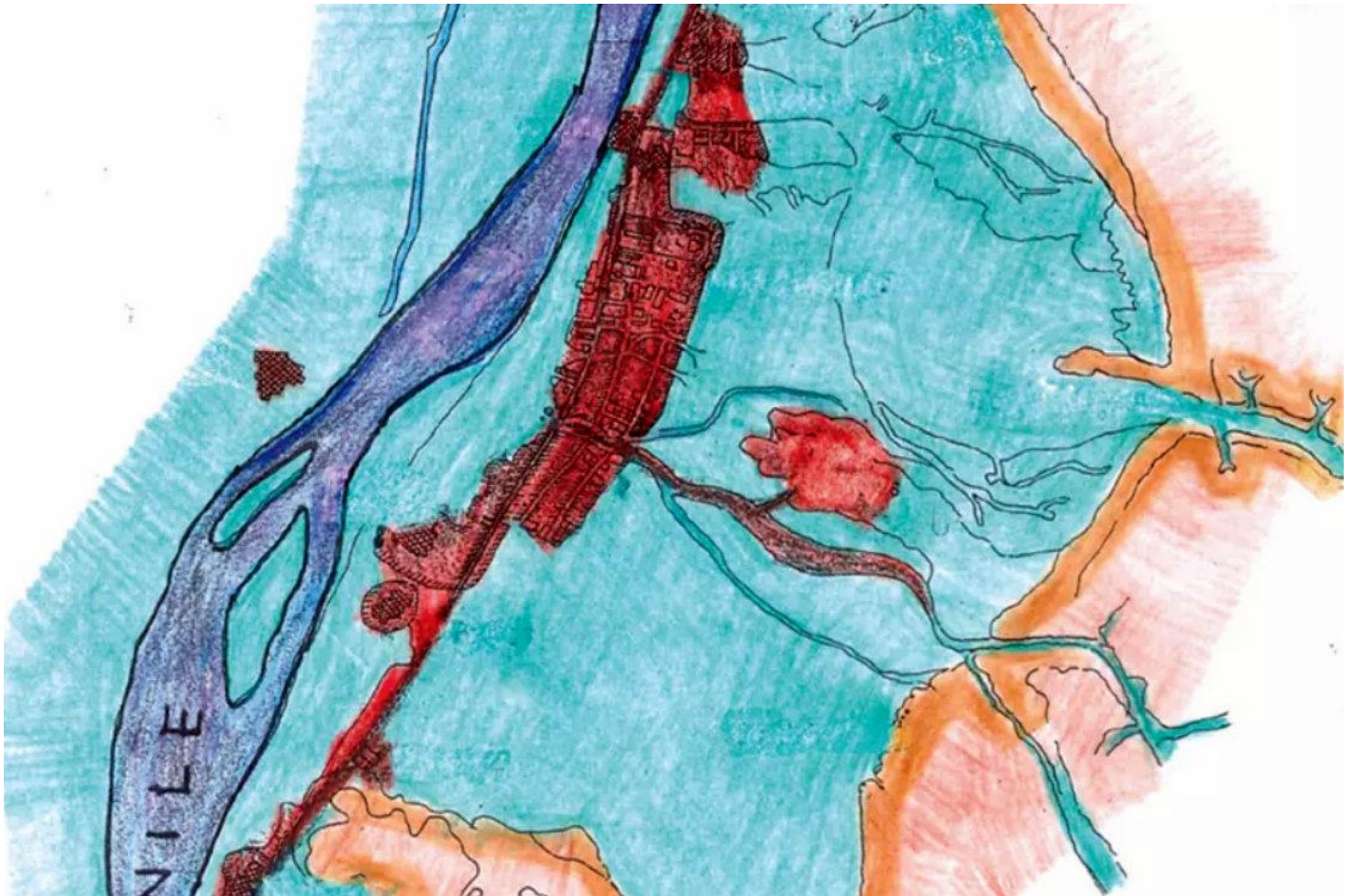


WHO WAS THE PHARAOH OF THE EXODUS?

There is nothing in the Egyptian records linking Ramesses to the Exodus, and indeed nothing at all in the records about the Israelites and their slavery.

BY STEPHEN GABRIEL ROSENBERG



Drawing the City of Akhetaten. (photo credit: STEPHAN ROSENBERG)

The recent film *Exodus, Gods and Kings* had Ramesses the Great as the step-brother of Moses and the pharaoh of the Exodus. But there is nothing in the Egyptian records linking Ramesses to the Exodus, and indeed nothing at all in the records about the Israelites and their slavery, nothing about their escape into the Sinai after the plagues, nothing about the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea – nothing. So it is embarrassing for archaeologists to be asked who the pharaoh of the Exodus was. But it is a question that comes up every year before Passover, when we Jews celebrate our escape from Egyptian slavery into freedom.

We can ask it again this year and try to find an answer more accurate than that of this year's film or of the older films *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956) and *The Prince of Egypt* (1998).

To find it, we must look at the Egyptian records in another way and take up a vital clue in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 1 verse 14, where it says that the Egyptians made the lives of the Children of Israel "bitter with hard service in mortar and in brick...."

Later we learn that the Israelites had to make mudbricks without even having the necessary straw given to them.

In other words, the Children of Israel were unskilled or semi-skilled makers of, and workers in, mudbrick. They could well have made millions of bricks out of the Nile mud, but then, what is it that they built with them? They did not build the pyramids, or any temples or palaces as these were all built with stone. And the peasants' houses, which were made of mudbrick, were built by the fellahin themselves. So what project needed millions of bricks and thousands of mudbrick-layers? The Bible tells us that there were six hundred thousand Israelite adult males at the Exodus, but even if there were only 6,000 or 600, what project needed so many mudbrick-layers? There was indeed only one project that we know of that was so large and built in mudbrick, and that was the city of Akhetaten, which was later called el-Amarna.

You may not have heard of Akhetaten but you may well have heard of the man who ordered it: Akhenaten, the heretic Pharaoh who believed in just one god, the Aten, the disc of the sun, and who tried to convert the whole of Egypt to his monotheistic ideas and religion. He set aside and downgraded the other temples and their priests and built his new city to demonstrate the new religion to the people and to promote and reinforce his ideas.

So he had to build it quickly, and indeed it was built, according to Egyptian records, within two years by many slaves and the Egyptian army, and it was constructed in mudbrick for speed. It was this great project that was most likely built by the Israelites, under the direction of taskmasters from the Egyptian army, who were both cruel and pressing because it had to be done so quickly. We have a plan of it; it was built for perhaps 20,000 people and all in two years.

But Akhenaten and his ideas were not popular. He did wonderful things and even gave women rights to worship and own property, but the people disliked his innovations and the priests hated him, and when he died just 16 years after building the city, it fell apart. Everyone wanted to leave Akhetaten (the name meant The Horizon of the Aten) and they left with all its treasures; the mudbrick city fell into disuse and disrepair.

Another pharaoh had to take the throne, and although Akhenaten had had two sons they both died at birth.

But he had six living daughters, and so it was his son-in-law Tutankhaten, later called Tutankhamun, who had the difficult task of restoring everything to the old order. He did this while the city and the country were in turmoil and disarray, while the people were leaving Akhetaten and going back to the old religion and priests, and to their old haunts and cities. His health gave out under the pressure and in about 1325 BCE Tutankhamun was forcibly succeeded by his tough general Horemheb, who could well have found it desirable to pursue the escaping Israelites to the Red Sea. But that is not recorded.

Tutankhamun had had a hard time restoring the old order, but when he died he left behind the wonderful treasures of his life, as uncovered by Howard Carter in 1922 in his tomb back in the Valley of the Kings. But there was one treasure that was not in his tomb: there was no battle-shrine.

It was the rule for each Pharaoh to have a movable battle-shrine, which he could take with him to the field of battle to consult his deity during the action. We know that Ramesses the Great had one at the battle of Kadesh, as it is shown on his inscriptions at his temple at Abu Simbel, and we can presume that Tutankhamun had one, but it was not in his tomb. Why not? Because the Israelites had stolen it when they escaped from the city of Akhetaten. They realized they would need such a movable temple for their trek back to Canaan and they stole it when they left. Like everything else of Tutankhamun's it was made of the most precious and beautiful materials and the Israelites altered it to become their Mishkan, as reworked by Bezalel and Oholiab to the instructions of Moses. But it was basically the same as the Egyptian prototype, for the standard Egyptian battle-shrine consisted of two rooms in a courtyard, with a smaller inner room for the deity, and a larger outer room where the priests worshiped the god, shaped of two bird-like cherubs on an ark, and so it is depicted at the temple of Ramesses at Abu Simbel.

We now have from Egyptian records all the three elements necessary for the Exodus. A very large mudbrick project built by slaves, a period of turmoil and chaos, like that of the 10 plagues (like the slaying of the firstborn, pharaoh had only a dead son) when the slaves could escape, and thirdly, a basis for the Mishkan, which the Israelites needed in the arid desert, where they had no materials to create such a luxurious building.

The time of the escape would have been about 1330 BCE, as King Tut reigned from about 1334 to 1325 BCE.

That date fits in well with two fixed dates given in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). It says that the Children of Israel were in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40), which would place their entry in about 1760 BCE, which corresponds in time to the entry of the Hyksos from Syria, with whom the ancient historian Josephus links the Israelites. And, according to the Book of Kings 6:1, the Temple of Solomon was built 480 years, which means 12 biblical generations, after the Exodus.

But in actual years that is better counted as 360 years, or 30 years per generation, rather than 40, and that would place the Temple at about 970 BCE, quite contemporary to when most scholars place it, at around 950 BCE.

The date of the Exodus at about 1330 BCE also fits in well with the fall of the walls of Jericho, which its British excavator Kathleen Kenyon placed during the fourteenth century BCE.

The Egyptian records do not mention the Exodus, but from their literature it can be deduced that the heretic Pharaoh Akhenaten was the pharaoh of the Oppression and his young son-in-law Tutankhamun, the pharaoh of the Exodus.

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