

We know for a fact, from both textual and archaeological evidence, that the rulers of Egypt were, indeed, called “Pharaohs”. We also know for a fact that they wore royal rings which were their seals. Meaning, other members of the ruling house and its administration wore those seals when they stamped documents in the name of Pharaoh. Furthermore, we know what these seals looked like and what they had inscribed on them. Basically, they attested to the divinity of Pharaoh. They established his divinity by claiming that he was a son of god i.e., the son of this or that particular god. So, for example, Rameses means the “son” of the sun god “Ra”.



So it seems that the Biblical narrative, whereby the ring is placed on Joseph’s finger, is consistent with history and archaeology, in the sense that such rulers did wear royal rings of authority.

But if such a ring was placed on Joseph’s finger it would have created an immediate theological problem for Joseph. After all, he was a monotheist. Monotheism is, by definition, exclusive. It does not allow for the celebration of

other gods. Put simply, wearing the ring attesting to the divinity of Pharaoh would have been a huge problem for Joseph. It would be tantamount to idolatry.

So what do you do if you are Joseph? You either quit your job or you have another ring designed that is, monotheistically speaking, “kosher”.

Among the Egyptians, the purpose of the ring was to deify Pharaoh, but for Joseph the purpose of any ring would have been to celebrate God. More than this, pharaohs denied their earthly fathers and celebrated their heavenly “fathers”. In contrast, Joseph would have wanted to celebrate his earthly father i.e., Jacob, by



proclaiming Jacob’s exalted status as the chosen one of God. Put simply, Egyptian pharaohs celebrated themselves as sons of god, Joseph would have celebrated himself as the son of a human chosen by the one and true God.

Is there any tradition in the Biblical or rabbinic literature treating Jacob in this “chosen one of God” way?

In fact there is. In Genesis 49:24 it refers to God as “the Mighty One of Jacob”. In the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sota 36b.) the rabbis slightly shift the emphasis when referring specifically to Joseph. There, they called Joseph’s father, “the Mighty One, Jacob”. In other words, the Biblical tradition refers to Jacob in near divine terms and declares that he is God’s chosen one. In Genesis 47:10, it is Jacob that blesses Pharaoh and not the other way around. This idea is encapsulated in a formula that is still repeated everyday in the Jewish prayer service. It’s a quote from Psalms 135:4. The formula is “God selected Jacob as his Own, Israel as His treasure”. In Hebrew – and this is very, very important – the first part of the formula is stated this way; “Yakob (i.e., Jacob) Bahar (i.e., He chose)”. In other words, if you were the Biblical Joseph, you would not declare yourself to be a “son of God”, but a son of Jacob who is “chosen by God”. You would then have only one formula available to you: “Yakob Bahar”.

In Egyptian inscription practices, when you were running out of space and you had the same letter ending one word and beginning another, you could save space by writing that letter once. Given the minimal space available on a ring, what we would expect to find on Joseph’s royal ring is the term “Yakob Har” with

the “b” serving as the last letter in “Yakob” and the first letter in “Bahar”. The “a’s” and the “o” wouldn’t be there because Hebrew doesn’t have vowels, only consonants. So, to sum up, the Book of Genesis says that when Joseph was raised to Pharaoh-like status, Pharaoh put a royal signet ring on his hand. The Biblical and rabbinic texts give us a formula for what that ring might state: “Ykb Hr”.

The first century Jewish historian Josephus says that, at the time of Joseph, there was a Semitic people called “Hyksos” ruling Egypt’s Nile Delta. He identifies the Hyksos with the Israelites. For over four decades, Professor Manfred Bietak has been digging at Avaris. It is there that he found a statue that may very well be linked to Joseph. The question is; has Professor Bietak found any royal signet rings? And the answer is, yes! What is inscribed on them: “Ykb Hr”!

Hasn’t anyone noticed? I mean, after all, this is the only time that the name of the Israelite patriarch is inscribed on an Egyptian royal scarab. Well, in fact, scholars have noticed but they have chosen to dismiss the find. “Jacob,” they say, even though they have no evidence for this, was probably a common Canaanite name. “Hr”, they say, is probably a reference to a mountain (in Hebrew, “Har” means mountain). Since Canaanites worshipped the god Ba’al on mountain tops, they say, the ring probably refers to some Canaanite ruler who was into Ba’al. But this is, obviously, pure fantasy. The ring doesn’t mention Canaanites or Ba’al. Rather, it has inscribed on it exactly what we would expect the royal ring of Joseph to state: “Ykb Hr”!

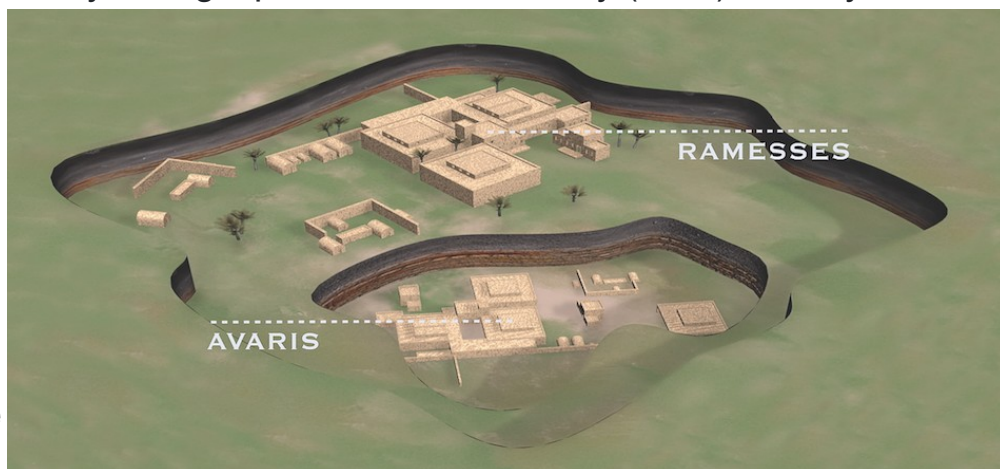
Professor Bietak has found nine rings with Jacob’s name on them. They were probably worn by Joseph and his court officials. Here we have perfect synchronicity between the Biblical text and Egyptian archaeology. Joseph’s royal ring has been found in a 3700 year old archaeological haystack!

The find was uncovered from the ancient city of Avaris, modern Tell el-Daba, in Egypt’s northeast Nile delta. Excavations by the Austrian Archaeological Institute of Cairo at the site were conducted for several years in the 60s and then from 1975 onward until today. Manfred Bietak was the director of the digs from 1966 – 2009. In 1979 his team discovered an intriguing little cylinder seal on the floor level of the Middle Kingdom palace.

Seals were very common in the ancient world and were typically used to press into clay or some other soft substance to put an owners stamp on commercial and legal documents or products, and for tamper-proofing whatever was inside a container. Seals were often worn around the neck or as rings by officials or their representatives. They could bear a single image (as would be the case with a ring) that would require only a single push into the soft clay (bulla), or they could be in the form of a small cylinder that would be rolled on the clay to impress a longer sequence of images.

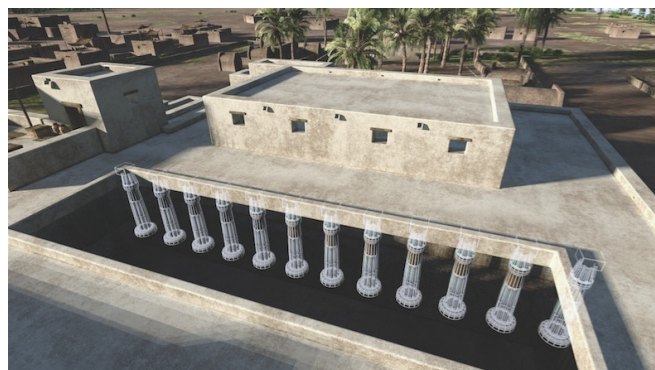
The fact that this seal was discovered in association with the Middle Kingdom palace is significant, because

this was the period when Jacob, Joseph and the first generation of Israelites lived in Egypt. This was before their exodus from that land under the leadership of Moses.



Avaris existed at the same location (at its southern edge) as the city of Ramesses, mentioned in the Bible as the place the the family of Jacob settled, where they built store houses, and from where they later departed in the Exodus. However, Avaris existed several centuries earlier than when the city named Ramesses after Pharaoh Ramesses II would come into being during the New Kingdom.

The settlement of Avaris initially developed late in the Middle Kingdom's 12th Dynasty as a town of Asiatic (Semites from the area of Syria/Canaan) that was allowed by the Egyptians, since there were no fortifications built around it. The culture of the population was seen to match the Canaan/Syria area in multiple ways, such as the architecture, pottery, and burial positions used by the settlers. The site also fits the Bible's Exodus account because it quickly grew to one of the largest cities in the world of its day, before falling on hard times and partially evacuating at a time when Egypt's power collapsed. Stunningly, at this point the former superpower of Egypt lacked the



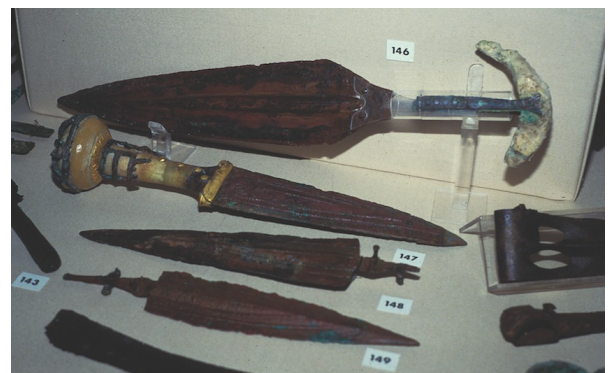
ability to defend itself, resulting in an occupation by the foreign Hyksos rulers from the north.

Evidence matching the career of Joseph at Avaris includes a palace built in an Egyptian style, but belonging to a Semitic official. This fits the rewarding of Joseph by Pharaoh in return for saving Egypt from the ravages of a 7-year famine. Pharaoh raised him to second in command over Egypt and gave him other rewards. The construction of the palace has been dated to either very late in the 12th Dynasty or early in the 13th Dynasty. In Rohl's system, this would put it late in Joseph's life.

The palace had other interesting aspects; it initially contained 12 pillars at its entrance and had 12 primary tombs behind it. These fit the 12 sons of Jacob (who was also named Israel) who were the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. The primary tomb of the Semitic official was in the shape of pyramid, something unique at this time for a foreigner – again fitting the great rewards and honor given by Pharaoh to Joseph.



Two of the 12 prominent graves in the palace garden contained ornate bronze belts and bronze daggers. This match the Bible's description of the family of Jacob being one of the most wealthy and powerful clans in Canaan before coming to Egypt. The daggers also hearken to the incident in Genesis 34 when Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi took their swords and killed the men of Shechem in revenge for the defilement of Dinah. This prompted Jacob to bless them as follows:



Simeon and Levi are brothers; **weapons of violence are their swords.**

Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company.

For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel!

I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel. – Genesis 49:5-7 (ESV)

In a shrine in front of the pyramid tomb, the remains of a colossal statue of the Semitic ruler were found – and he was depicted as wearing a multi-color coat. The bones of the person buried here were found to be missing. This again fits the promise made by Joseph’s family that they would take his bones with them when they left Egypt to return to the Promised Land.

A Reinterpretation of the Seal

Linking the early phase at Avaris to the Israelites is not accepted by most scholars because it is thought to be too early (600 years prior) before the time of Pharaoh Ramesses II, when most date the Exodus. Examining an impression made by the seal, Manfred Bietak recorded this interpretation in his book on Avaris, “Impression from the cylinder seal depicting the north Syrian weather-god ...” (see citation under the image at the head of this article).

In 1984, Edith Porada, a specialist in cylinder seals, published a 4-page paper* on this seal from Avaris. Her conclusions were similar to those of Bietak, calling the human figure “a Syrian weather god.” The most likely candidates in a mainstream view would be Ba’al or the Canaanite god El.

*(Porada, Edith. “The Cylinder Seal from Tell El-Dab’a.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 88, no. 4 (1984): 485-88. doi:10.2307/504736.)

