

Zerah the Kushite: A New Proposal Regarding His Identity*

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The authors present a new proposal regarding the identity of King Asa's adversary Zerah the Kushite (2 Chron. 14:9-15). While the latter remains a mystery within the conventional scheme (no military campaign is attested during the reign of the contemporary Pharaoh Osorkon I), this situation appears to be decidedly different if Asa's reign coincided with the late Ramesside period, as would be the case in the Centuries of Darkness (CoD) model.

Although the main focus in this volume is on King Solomon's reign and the identity of Pharaoh Shishak, we would like to deal here with a subsequent 'Egyptian' campaign against Judah reported by the Chronicler (2 Chron. 14:9-15). He relates that one Zerah the Kushite (MT *kwšy*; LXX *ho aithiops*) invaded Judah sometime between Years 10 and 15 of King Asa's reign (c. 900-895 BC).^[1] The identity of this Zerah remains one of the great puzzles of biblical scholarship. Zerah allegedly invaded southern Judah with a 'myriad army' including three hundred chariots (2 Chron. 14:9).^[2] Nevertheless, Asa is said to have trounced the invaders at Mareshah in the valley of Zephathah and pursued them to Gerar, where he defeated them again and plundered the nearby towns:

Zerah the Cushite marched against them with a vast army and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. Asa went out to meet him, and they

took up battle positions in the Valley of Zephathah near Mareshah ... Yahweh struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah. The Cushites fled, and Asa and his army pursued them as far as Gerar. Such a great number of Cushites fell that they could not recover, they were crushed before Yahweh and his forces. The men of Judah carried off a large amount of plunder. They destroyed all the villages around Gerar, for the terror of Yahweh had fallen upon them ... (NIV - 2 Chron. 14:9-10, 12-14)

Although the incident is absent from the shorter description of Asa's long reign (c. 910-869 BC) in 1 Kings 15:9-24^[3], several intriguing elements in the Chronicler's story merit close scrutiny: e.g. the *precise* location of the battle field near Mareshah, only some 5 kms northeast of Lachish, one of Judah's most important military fortresses, and Asa's destruction and plundering of *Gerar* and its environs – a site which otherwise plays no role after the Patriarchal period in the biblical narratives.^[4]

A retrospective reference (2 Chron. 16:8-9) also includes Libyans as well as Cushites (Nubians) in the invading force: 'Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen?'

* Our thanks to BICANE member Michael Schoen for prompting us to re-examine the Zerah question in the context of Ramesses IV's reign and to John Bimson, Juan Tebes and Robert Porter for reading drafts and providing corrections and comments.

[1] i.e. according to the chronology of Thiele 1983, 217. More recent (and reliable) versions of the chronology of the Divided Monarchy differ only slightly – see e.g. Galil (1996, 26-27) who places Asa's years 10-15 only one year earlier to 901-896.

[2] The Hebrew text reads here *'lp 'lpym*, a 'thousand thousands' or literally one million. The expression should surely be understood as a hyperbole in the sense of 'a vast army' (so the NIV above) or simply 'innumerable' or 'a myriad army' (so Kitchen, 2003, 10), as such a vast army is unattested especially in pre-Persian times. Indeed, the Chronicler's use of numerical hyperbole is generally accepted, not merely for troop numbers. On this for instance Tuell 2012, 6-7. Yet, the mention of three hundred chariots does seem possible when it is compared with the 1200 chariots in Shishak's army. Kitchen considers the latter number to be feasible in comparison with the 3000 chariots employed by Ramesses II at the battle of Kadesh (Kitchen, 1996, § 253, 295). But see the recent criticisms of these numbers by Sagrillo 2012, 433-435.

[3] 1 Kgs. 15:23 does, however, refer most generally to other achievements of Asa, that could be found in the 'Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah'. The Book of Kings shows particular interest in the affairs of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and therefore deals in its discussion of Asa's reign merely with the latter's conflict with Baasha of Israel and his alliance with king Ben-Hadad of Aram-Damascus (1 Kgs. 15:18-22).

[4] For a discussion of the archaeology of the site during the patriarchal period see van der Veen and Zerbst 2013: chapter 4.3, 131 and 135. Also see Meyers 1965, 85. Although the text does not specifically say so, the Chronicler does seem to imply that the towns attacked by Asa's forces were dependent on *Gerar*, where the Egyptian army would have had its military base. This conclusion was also reached by Sadler (2005, 127).

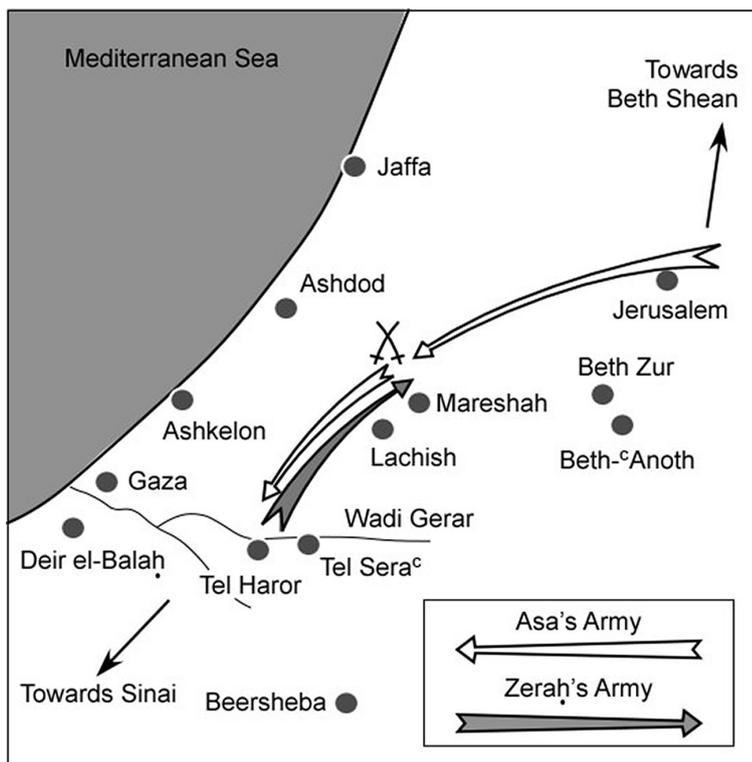


Figure 1. Movements of Judahite and Egyptian armies, during Asa's repulse of Zerah, c. 895 BC.

These passages have long caused consternation to biblical scholars, producing too many hypotheses to discuss here in detail. Suffice to say that extreme positions have rejected the story entirely or (to explain the presence of a Kushite army in southern Palestine) have attempted to identify Zerah's homeland with a virtually unattested region called Kuschan in northwestern Arabia (Hab. 3:7). The doubtful idea of an Arabian Kush is particularly unconvincing in this case – as it would fail to account for the Libyans among the invading army. Rather, the prevailing interpretation of the story (providing one accepts its basic historicity) is that the only explanation for the composition of Zerah's army is that he had arrived from Egypt (see e.g. Kitchen 2003, 11).

The standard Egyptian chronology would place the Zerah episode in the reign of Osorkon I, second ruler of the 22nd Dynasty and the son and successor of Shoshenq I. While earlier scholars (e.g. Hall 1927, 439 & n. 2) attempted to force a philological match and identify Zerah with Osorkon I himself, the idea has long fallen out of favour. As explained by Kitchen (1996, 309):

There is no question of identifying Osorkon with Zerah as sometimes done: the name differs entirely. Osorkon is a king and of Libyan origin, whereas Zerah is not called king and is a Nubian. By 897 B.C., Osorkon I was already an old man, and so he may well have sent a general of Nubian extraction to lead a force into Palestine, emulating his father's exploit, bring home some fresh booty, and dismantle the military build-up of Asa. However, Zerah proved no match for the Judean king, and

so we have no trace of a triumphal relief of Osorkon to adorn the new temple walls of Egypt.

Nevertheless a placement of the Zerah episode in the reign of Osorkon I, while not impossible, remains *entirely* hypothetical. As put by Chavalas and Adamthwaite (1999, 90):

... there is the lack of any historical evidence for a venture into Canaan by this pharaoh, either personally or by proxy. While we would not expect a defeat to be recorded, such a major incursion with a force of three hundred chariots plus a host of infantry would surely have had some successes deserving of record other than the encounter with Asa. But there is no indication of such at all. Thus the identity of Zerah remains a mystery.

A further puzzle is raised by the very name Zerah which though applied to an evidently Egyptian invader appears to be West Semitic.^[5] It is otherwise known for a son of Tamar and twin of Pharez (Gen. 38:30; 46:12; 1 Chron.

2:4), a grandson of Levi (1 Chron. 6:6, 26), a son of Simeon (Num. 26:12; 1 Chron. 4:24) and an Edomite chief (Gen. 26: 13, 17, 33; 1 Chron. 1:37, 44). Noting these other instances, Schulman (1996, 715) argued that the epithet *ha Kushi* applied to the general Zerah was not an ethnicon, but a descriptive name indicating darkness of appearance: 'If I am correct in this, it may very well have been the case that Zerah was indeed a Semite in Egyptian service rather than a Nubian with a Semitic name.' This can hardly be the case, however, as the same explanation surely could be extended to the Kushite troops he led, who must be 'Ethiopians'.

A revised placement for 'Zerah'

Within the conventional chronological framework the Zerah episode remains an intractable problem. There is thus good reason to re-examine it from a different perspective, using the framework argued in *Centuries of Darkness*. In this model (James *et al.* 1991, 257, 385-386; see further the papers by Bimson, James and Kokkinos in this volume) the biblical 'Shishak' was Ramesses III, second ruler of the 20th Dynasty, whose abbreviated 'popular' name was 'Ses[u]' (see van der Veen in this volume). The invasion of Zerah is almost a pendant to the Shishak episode. In both cases a large Egyptian force

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of chariots and infantry, including Ethiopian and Libyan troops, attempted to cow Judah – the difference being that where king Rehoboam failed in repelling the invaders, Asa succeeded. At this point Egyptian control over southern Palestine appears to have collapsed: the Bible records no further Egyptian military activity in Palestine for more than two centuries – until the controversial references to ‘Tirhakah king of Kush’ (2 Kgs. 19:9; Isaiah 37:9) bringing troops from Nubia and Egypt to stop the advance of Sennacherib in southern Palestine, c. 700 BC (see Morkot & James in prep.).^[6]

If the Shishak invasion in Year 5 of Rehoboam was equivalent to Year 11 or 12 of Ramesses III (as argued in James *et al.* 1991, 385-386), when would the Zerah episode have fallen in Egyptian terms? Chronicles records that there was peace in the land for the first ten years of Asa’s reign; also that some of the livestock captured after the defeat of Zerah were sacrificed in his year 15 (2 Chron. 14:1; 15:11). This places the Zerah episode in a fairly narrow window, between the years 11 and 14 of Asa. With 12 years for the remainder of Rehoboam’s reign and 3 for Abijah, the invasion of Zerah would thus have fallen 26-29 years after that of Shishak. A calculation on the Egyptian side (20-21 years for the remainder of the reign of Ramesses III plus 7 years for his successor Ramesses IV) results in 27-28 years.^[7] It would follow that the Zerah episode occurred in the final years of Ramesses IV. The Zerah episode clearly indicates that the Egyptian hegemony over Palestine, begun under Shishak, was terminated. Similarly, Ramesses IV is the last New Kingdom pharaoh to be seriously represented in Palestine after the reign of Ramesses III (in agreement with Zwickel 2012). Does the archaeological and textual evidence similarly suggest that the 20th-dynasty domination over Palestine underwent a major setback under Ramesses IV?

Ramesses IV in the Levant

Finkelstein has claimed that the Egyptian empire in Palestine continued until the reign of Ramesses VI, but

[6] From an extra-biblical source (the records of Shalmaneser III of Assyria), we know that Egypt contributed a force of 1000 soldiers towards the coalition organised by Ahab of Israel and Hadad-ezer of Damascus to face the Assyrians at the battle of Qarqar in 853 BC. Assuming the accuracy of the detailed figures given in the Assyrian records, the Egyptian contribution of 1000 infantry (compared to the 20,000 troops of Hadad-ezer or the 2000 chariots and 10,000 infantry of Ahab) represented a merely ‘token’ force, presumably to show support for its alliance with Israel (see n. 10 below). The presence of the small Egyptian force at Qarqar hardly demonstrates that it had recovered its hegemony over Syro-Palestine. For a translation of Shalmaneser’s account of Qarqar see Younger 2003, 261-264; for discussion of the troop numbers, etc. see Kitchen 1996, 295, n. 288, 325.

[7] For the relative dates of both Ramesses III and IV see for instance von Beckerath 1997, 106.

the evidence is highly equivocal. He sees the cartouche of Ramesses V at the mining site of Timna in the southern Negev as evidence that the Egyptians must still have had ‘firm control over the international highway in northern Sinai’ (Finkelstein 2000, 162). Kitchen (2003, 536, n. 180) notes that this is ‘wrong’, as we know from the records of Ramesses III that the Egyptians could approach this mining area by sea (see also Weinstein 1992, 147). There are some significant finds of Ramesses IV from the Jezreel valley area (see below), but beyond these Finkelstein (1996, 171-172) is only able to cite the statue-base of Ramesses VI found at Megiddo. These isolated finds lead him to a curious conclusion regarding the scope of the 20th-dynasty empire (Finkelstein 1995, 216):

In the first half of the 12th century the direct Egyptian domination shrank to the southern coastal plain and the Shephelah, with the territory extending as far north as the Ashkelon-Lachish line. In this area (as well as in the Jezreel valley), the Egyptian administration survived until the reign of Ramesses VI, that is until ca. 1130 B.C.E.

Thus Finkelstein does not see the area of 20th-dynasty Egyptian rule as continuous, the Jezreel valley forming a disconnected enclave of Egyptian authority. How the Egyptians would have accessed the Jezreel valley for the extended period envisaged by Finkelstein is not explained. The statue base is also a highly unreliable piece of evidence, as it was found out of context. As Weinstein (1992, 147; cf. Kitchen 2003, 143) has stressed, as:

... the timing and circumstances of its arrival at Megiddo are unknown, it is prudent not to assign too much significance to this item as a historical indicator for the end of the empire throughout the southern Levant... Whatever the case, this object should not be considered the critical dating piece for the collapse of the Egyptian empire in Palestine.

The Megiddo statue might have been a prestige gift to a local ruler. As an analogy, statues of Shoshenq I and Osorkon I were received at Byblos and dutifully reinscribed by its kings (see conveniently James *et al.* 1991a, 248-249; Pl. 16; and van der Veen in this volume). But they are not taken as evidence that there was an early 22nd-dynasty ‘empire’ incorporating Phoenicia, only as indications of ‘political and commercial alliance’ (Kitchen 1986, 292, 308-309).

By contrast with Ramesses VI, the evidence for Ramesses IV is plentiful. No less than eleven scarabs of Ramesses IV have been identified from Palestine, at sites including Jerusalem and Beth-Shean (Brandl 2004, 58-60, 63; Brandl 2012, 380-382). At Delhamiya near Beth-Shean a sculptural fragment bearing his name was found, though admittedly this was a surface find (Leclant 1982, 485; Kitchen 2003, 143) and we have no idea how and when it arrived at the site. Nevertheless the evidence for Ramesses IV’s activity at Beth-Shean itself is much more clear. In

particular Porter (2008, 247) has shown that some plaques used as foundation deposits belong to Ramesses IV rather than Ramesses I:

... in view of the fact that Ramesses IV was the only Ramesses who normally used the cartouche on the plaques, the most likely conclusion is that he is the one named on them. And, since his plaques are much too late to have been deposited in the Level VII temple, they must have been foundation deposits for the Level VI temple... Some parts of Level VI were probably built under Ramesses III, as generally accepted, and his statue would have come from somewhere in that level, but not of course originally from the Level VI temple if that was not built until the time of Ramesses IV.^[8]

If Ramesses IV had enough influence at Beth-Shean to build there, he must (as generally assumed) have maintained the Egyptian garrison that was present in the reign of Ramesses III^[9]. The Egyptian military presence at Beth-Shean in the early 20th Dynasty was surely only sustainable by alliance with local rulers. This was the conclusion of Bietak (1993, esp. 302) who, from the distribution of 20th-dynasty finds in Palestine, argued that its control over the Jezreel valley area ‘can only be explained as a consequence of the cooperation of the Canaanite city-states’; these would have been just as wary of the Philistines and their allies as were the Egyptians. The Beth-Shean garrison under Ramesses III/IV thus seems to reflect a ‘protectorate’ of a local kingdom. Bietak also suggests that communication with the Jezreel Valley was carried out through a port such as Tell Abu Hawam, perhaps by treaty with the Sherden allegedly settled at Acco. However, Bietak admits that such an arrangement ‘could not have lasted very long’, while the idea that the Sherden were settled at Acco is groundless (Gilboa 2012, 47, n. 2). While not ruling out communication by sea, it would seem much more likely that the Egyptians (at least under Ramesses III) reached the northern hill country via subject territory in the Shephelah.

The situation can be considerably clarified by the *Centuries of Darkness* model in which Ramesses III is identified as Shishak. Shishak was the patron of Jeroboam, founder of the northern dynasty, giving him refuge in Egypt when he had fled from Solomon (1 Kgs. 11:40); in the Septuagint version (3 Kgs. 12:24e) Shishak cemented the alliance by marrying Jeroboam to his sister-in-law Ano. Jeroboam’s declaration of independence (from Jerusalem) for the ten northern tribes was doubtless done with Egyptian

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[9] For references see conveniently Weinstein 2012, 168-169; for some discussion see James 2010, 69-70.

encouragement and protection. The presence of an Egyptian garrison at Beth-Shean in Israel during the early 20th Dynasty is thus explained. It is safe to assume that the Egyptian alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel was maintained after the death of Ramesses III.^[10] (After the separation of Judah and Israel into independent states they were almost constantly at odds, until the time of Jehoshaphat some six decades later.) With regard to the southern kingdom, Shishak not only took tribute from Judah (the temple and palace treasures) but seized the fortified cities of Rehoboam which lay largely in the Shephelah (see Bimson in this volume). Whether some were subsequently garrisoned by the Egyptians is unknown, but under Shishak/Ramesses III it is clear that communications with the northern kingdom (and Beth-Shean) and beyond could have been maintained by a land route, via the Shephelah.

How long the 20th-dynasty garrison at Beth-Shean was maintained after the death of Ramesses III is hard to say; but the archaeological/epigraphic evidence does not allow us to date its end any later than the reign of Ramesses IV. During the reigns of Ramesses III and Ramesses IV the garrison at Beth-Shean would have needed periodic reinforcement: or, at the very least, orders and supplies would have to be regularly dispatched. Such convoys would have been guarded by troops, marching through or near to potentially hostile territory, including that of the Philistines. Expeditions like this would amount to ‘mini-campaigns’ and seem to be reflected in the records of Ramesses IV, who described himself thus on his great rock stela at Wadi Hammamat (Year 3):

A brave Sovereign who destroys the foreign lands
and who rounds up the Asiatics in their (own)
valleys. (tr. Peden 1994a, 93)

Is this merely a stock pharaonic claim, with no historical meaning? As the habitat of enemies, valleys (*inwt*) frequently appear in Egyptian texts from the 18th Dynasty onwards. Spalinger (1982, 52) notes that this reflects the very different kinds of terrain (as compared to the Nile river-land) that the Egyptians encountered once their authority began to expand into both Nubia and Palestine, after the repulse of the Hyksos. Spalinger (1982, 52-55) also provides a list of instances (from military records of various kinds) where ‘valleys’ occur, but none has the exact formulation of the Wadi Hammamat text – *ḥfꜥ3mw m n3y.w inw(t)* – in which the Pharaoh seizes or ‘rounds

[10] Indeed, it seems to have continued right down to its fall: Assyrian records attest to a small contingent of Egyptians joining Ahab and others at the battle of Qarqar against Assyria (see n. 6 above); the appeal c. 725 BC by Hoshea, last king of Israel, to ‘Pharaoh So’ (2 Kgs. 17:4), probably an Osorkon (see below in main text) – and most likely Osorkon III (see Morkot & James 2009, 41; Morkot & James in this volume) – shows that the ‘old alliance’ was not forgotten. For the equation of Osorkon III with a Pharaoh Osorkon depicted on blocks recently discovered at Tanis, see Porter 2011, 111.

up' (*ḥf*^c) Asiatics in their valleys. Even if the expression is formulaic this is far from meaning that there was no real campaign involved. As noted above, control over Beth-Shean must have required at least some occasional shows of force in Palestine, and it is not doubted that Ramesses IV still had a measure of control over the region – as echoed in his claim (on another stela from Wadi Hammamat, dated to Year 2) that Amun had made Reṭenu (Syro-Palestine) tributary to him (Peden 1994a, 87).

Assuming the valleys in question represent the routes to Beth-Shean, it would appear that Ramesses IV's expeditionary forces were not only relieving the garrison but taking captives *en route*. The identity of these captives may be evident from elsewhere on the Year 3 Wadi Hammamat stela – the list of staff and workmen sent to do quarrying includes this interesting entry: 'Apiru of the Troops of Anuit (*nwt*)' (tr. Peden 1994a, 97). As the only foreigners included in the list (apart from Madjoi troops from Nubia), it seems reasonable to suggest that these Apiru might have been the very Asiatics that Ramesses IV had rounded up in the valleys of southern Palestine. Skirting over here the highly controversial relationship between the Apiru/Ḥabiru and the Hebrews, it must be admitted that some of the Apiru at least were Hebrews while the valleys through which Ramesses IV sent his troops would indeed have been populated by Hebrews. (Even within the conventional chronology, most models would allow that Israelites/Hebrews were present in the land by this stage.)^[11]

Translating this scenario into the very early 9th century BC, shows of military force in Palestine by Ramesses IV's troops, and the rounding up of likely 'Hebrew' captives, would surely have been taken by Asa as a *casus belli*. Whatever the case, it is clear that Asa aimed to secure Judah's independence first by fortifying his cities and building his army (2 Chron. 14: 5-7), and second by blocking Egyptian progress further north by encountering Zerah at Mareshah in the valley of Zephatah. It is noteworthy that valleys are stressed in both accounts. Even though information from the Egyptian side is extremely limited (as would be expected if a military defeat was involved), when augmented by the archaeological evidence a good match is provided with the biblical account. If the biblical Shishak was Ramesses III, the Zerah episode must have taken place in the reign of Ramesses IV. The army of Zerah was routed and the Egyptian domination of Judah established by Shishak was finished; while from the reign of Ramesses IV, who claimed military operations in Palestine, comes the last evidence of the 20th-dynasty empire in Palestine beyond Sinai, the Arabah and southern

[11] If the Anuit (*nwt*), rather Anut, from where these Apiru came was the biblical Beth-'Anoth near Beth Zur (Joshua 15:59), it would appear that Ramesses IV's armies had penetrated deep into southern Judah by his Year 3 – such incursions would then finally develop into a major clash with Asa's forces towards the end of Ramesses IV's reign.

Philistia. (See further, below, regarding the inscriptional evidence for Egyptian 'overseers of northern lands').

The biblical account relates that Asa's army pursued the Nubians as far as Gerar and that they sacked the towns in its vicinity. This would fit the archaeological evidence from the northern Negev near the Wadi Gerar (Nahal Gerar) rather well – for the time of Ramesses IV (i.e. mid 20th Dynasty). It remains uncertain with which archaeological site biblical Gerar should be identified, but two major candidates have been proposed: namely Tel Haror (accepted by most scholars) and Tel Sera^c. In this context, it does not matter much which of two was ancient Gerar, as Chronicles relates that the anger of Asa's forces befell all the towns in the Gerar neighbourhood, i.e. all the sites in the Wadi Gerar region. Both Tel Haror and Tel Sera^c were heavily influenced by Egyptian culture during the relevant period and were destroyed by fire at the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age transition. Tel Haror (Tell Abu Hureireh) is located in the western Negev (some 25 km west of Beersheba) on the northern bank of the Wadi Gerar.^[12] The site was inhabited during the Late Bronze IIB period (i.e. Stratum 3, attested in Areas B and K). It contained a rich repertory of Egyptian cups and bowls, as well as Cypriot and Mycenaean IIIB imports and locally manufactured wares. A very damaged ostrakon with a hieratic inscription was also found referring to a toponym (no longer decipherable) with a foreign land determinative. This stratum ended in a heavy conflagration. Although Tel Sera^c (Tell esh-Sharia^h), which also lies on the northern bank of the Wadi Gerar (some 20 km northwest of Beersheba)^[13], has frequently been equated with biblical Ziklag, its identification is far from certain, and Gerar may still be considered to be a viable candidate, or else it may have been one of the sites in the Gerar region plundered by Asa's men. Both sites, strongly egyptianised and presumably under Egyptian control until their destruction, would have made prime targets for Asa's reprisals.

With respect to the composition of Zerah's army, the revised placement also makes much better sense than the conventional dating to the reign of Osorkon I. As noted above, Kitchen assumes that Zerah was a general of Nubian extraction, but that does not explain his largely Kushite army. As Ash (1999, 127, n. 2) notes there is little evidence of any contact between Egypt and Nubia in the early 22nd Dynasty. Sagrillo (2012, 446) remarked with

[12] For a summary of the excavations at and the finds from this site see: Oren 1993a, 582 and Oren *et al.* 1986, 57-87; Higginbotham 2000, 102-3.

[13] For a summary of the excavation at this site see Oren 1993b, 1330-1; Oren 1982, 155-166. On the pottery also see Higginbotham 2000, 103. For the large repository of Egyptian-type vessels from Tel Sera^c Stratum X (19th Dynasty) and especially IX (early 20th Dynasty), see Martin 2011, 221-229, with Plates 51-62. Martin argues that the zenith of Egyptian presence at Tel Sera^c can be clearly dated to the early 20th Dynasty. This period ended with a massive conflagration either late in the reign of Ramesses III or soon after.

respect to Osorkon's predecessor Shoshenq I (allegedly the biblical Shishak) that:

The biblical reference to Kushites (...) in the army of Šišaq is problematic as the contemporary Egyptian historical record lacks evidence for direct, sustained relations between Egypt and Nubia. Indeed, the existence of direct relations between Egypt and regions south of the First Cataract at Aswan are almost impossible to demonstrate on the basis of available archaeological and textual evidence.

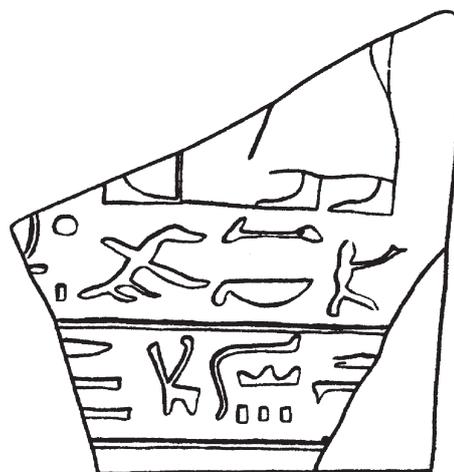
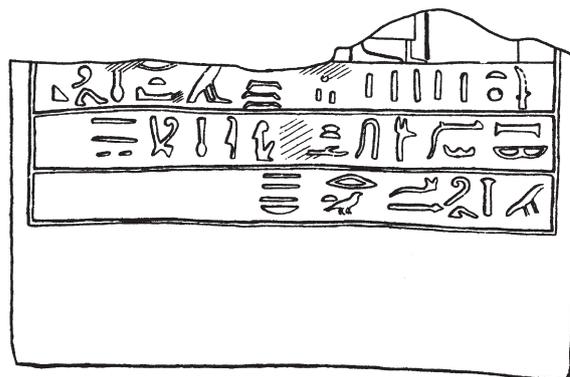
This problem is alleviated in the *Centuries of Darkness* model. Nubia remained firmly under Egyptian control in the reign of Ramesses IV: we can safely assume his employment of Nubian troops, such as the Madjoi mentioned on the Wadi Hammamat inscription (see above). The same is of course true of the employment of Libyan (Meshwesh and Libu) mercenaries, who are referred to in multiple inscriptions from the reign of Ramesses III (for instance on the Rhetorical Stela from chapel C at Medinet Habu and in the famous Papyrus Harris I which was composed under Ramesses IV).^[14]

Userḥau, 'overseer of northern lands'

The biblical account of the repulse of Zerah's army by Asa king of Judah provides a good match with the collapse of Egyptian power under Ramesses IV. The archaeological evidence suggests that the 20th-dynasty empire as such extended no later than the reign of Ramesses IV. Confirming this, it appears that under that pharaoh we also find the last textual evidence of a New Kingdom official definitely attested with the title 'overseer of (northern) lands' – one Userḥau. The resemblance of his name to that of Zerah prompts further investigation.

The highest Egyptian official in charge of Syro-Palestine was the 'overseer of the northern foreign lands' (*imj-r3 ḥ3s.wt mḥt.wt*). Hirsch discusses in detail all the attested overseers from the reign of Thutmose III down to the reign of Ramesses IV when, according to her, Egyptian sovereignty over the area finally came to an end (Hirsch 2006, 117-199; see also Zwickel 2012, 600). She argues that all the holders of the office started their careers in the Egyptian army, frequently bearing in addition military titles such as 'commander of troops', 'charioteer of Pharaoh', etc. Some of them also had been overseers of the Madjoi (Nubian troops) as for instance a certain Sethnakht, who served in this capacity during the reign of Ramesses II (Hirsch 2006, 145-146). A Thutmose (the father of Ramessesuserkhepesh the commander at Beth-Shean) and a Usermaatrenakht both served as northern overseers during the early 20th Dynasty, and one other official, a certain Userḥau, seems to have served in this position under Ramesses IV. He is attested on a fragmentary

sandstone stela (Sinai 294 – Hikade 2001, 185, No. 76) at the Hathor Temple of Serabit el-Khadim.



Figures 2a-b. Stela fragments (Sinai 294 and 297) from Serabit el-Khadim which have been attributed to the overseer of the foreign (northern) lands Userḥau by E. Hirsch. (Line-drawings after E. Hirsch 2006; courtesy of A. Klug, Mainz University).

In a second but even more damaged stela inscription, it is probably Userḥau that is referred to where the same combination of titles, 'overseer of troops' and 'overseer of the foreign lands of the Lord of the two Lands' is given (Sinai 297 – Hikade 2001, 181, No. 64). Based on the combination of titles as well as on the place where the stelae fragments were uncovered (i.e. in Sinai), Hirsch feels safe to assume that Userḥau could well have been the last overseer of the *northern* foreign lands before Egypt finally lost control over the Levant. Although the name of the ruling monarch is not attested on these fragmentary inscriptions, the same year and month given in both (Year 5, second month of Shomu) make it relatively certain that this was the expedition known from the 5th year of Pharaoh Ramesses IV. Both Hirsch (2006) and Hikade (2001) date Userḥau's period of office to Ramesses IV's reign, as this Pharaoh is referred to in association with the same date on other stelae from Serabit el-Khadim, e.g. those of the Army Scribe Panefer (Sinai 276), as well as in the inscriptions of Sendjehuti and Sobekhotep (see e.g. Hikade 2001, 183-

[14] For references and discussion see Snape 2012, 418-419.

185). Peden (1994b, 28, n. 3) has also pointed out that a certain orthographic peculiarity confirms the attribution of the fragmentary stelae relating to Userḥau to the reign of Ramesses IV:

Not all the stelae recording this expedition carry Ramesses IV's name, but we may confidently assign them to the same venture thanks to the peculiar writing of the word 3bd, "month". These stelae (with the exception of that of the army scribe Panufer) have a small circle beneath the 3bd sign, an orthography apparently unique to this group.

Inscription Sinai 294 adds that Userḥau was 'on a very great expedition to all the lands' (Hirsch 2006, 150). It is difficult to say what this expedition was about; it may simply have involved the main concerns described in the Serabit el-Khadim inscriptions – to develop the nearby Turquoise mines and to 'build the Mansion of Millions of Years of Ramesses IV in the temple of Hathor, Lady of Turquoise' (Peden 1994b, 29). But perhaps Userḥau, and the professional soldiers (Peden 1994b, 30) who had come with him as attendant workmen, were also sent on a greater mission in order to subdue rebellion in Palestine. Until further evidence is found, we will not be able to tell for sure.

Even so, Hirsch feels relatively certain in concluding that:

'...in all probability Userchou was already no longer able to completely control the region [Palestine], as only some enclaves remained in Egyptian possession, which were also lost soon after.'^[15] Such an assessment of the failure of Egyptian control during Userḥau's period of office seems to match Zeraḥ's unsuccessful campaign in Judah rather well.

Could Userḥau, then, be the same as biblical Zeraḥ? Is the Hebrew name an acceptable transmission of the Egyptian? The omission of the initial 'U' is not an obstacle as it follows a pattern found with other Egyptian names in Hebrew (Muchiki 1999, 8). For instance, the name of Pharaoh So (2 Kgs. 17:4) is taken by several scholars as an abbreviated form of *w(3)s(3)rkn(i)* (Muchiki 1999, 218; Kitchen 1996, 342 n. 551, 374). The first character is also dropped in the Akkadian rendering of the name as Šilkanni (see conveniently Kitchen 1996, 376, n. 756). The same appears to be the case with the Septuagint rendering Sēkōr (as a variant spelling of So), which in all probability is a Greek spelling of the name Osorkon through metathesis, probably derived from an older Hebrew source.^[16] Similarly *W3ḥ-ib-R^c*, the nomen of Pharaoh Apries, is

rendered Ḥophrah in Jeremiah 44:30.^[17] Although the Septuagint renders this Pharaoh's name as Ouaphre (in accordance with the Manethonian version Ouaphris) and the Vulgate as Ephree – and despite its preservation in Akkadian *Uḥ-pa-ra* (Weidner-Chronicle 21122) and in the Aramaic onomasticon as *whpr^c*^[18] – the Massoretic Text quite obviously drops the opening consonant.

In terms of the comparison of the two names, the omission of the initial 'U' in Zeraḥ thus presents no problem. Otherwise, both Userḥau and Zeraḥ are comprised of a sibilant, an *r* and a laryngal. While Egyptian *ḥ* is indeed represented correctly by Hebrew *ḥ*, Egyptian *s* most naturally would have been represented by a Hebrew *s* (samek) or, as in a few cases, by Hebrew *śin* (Muchiki 1999, 315). Hebrew *zayin* does not normally represent any Egyptian consonant (Muchiki 1999, 318), except in Egyptian loanwords that entered the West Semitic dialects by the end of the 3rd millennium BC. What to make therefore of the *zayin* in Zeraḥ? It is possible that the author of Chronicles consciously chose to replace 's' by 'z' to create a name that was not only familiar to him and his readership, but also to bring out more forcefully its very connotation.^[19] For the Hebrew name Zeraḥ virtually holds the *same meaning* as Userḥau in Egyptian. While the first element User means 'the great or rich one' (Hannig 2001, 215), the second element *ḥ^c* (Gardiner N 28 = 'hill of sunrise') can be translated as 'the rising' or 'appearance' of the sun (Hannig 2001, 586).^[20]

Zeraḥ also translates 'sunrise' or 'dawn', cf. the related Hebrew verb *zārah* means 'shining' or 'appearing' of the sun (cf. Isa. 60:3; Ps. 104: 22; Jon. 4:8).^[21] As it stands,

[17] The biblical authors always referred to Pharaohs by their nomens, e.g. in the case of Apries by his nomen *W3ḥ-ib-R^c* rather than his prenomen *H^{cc}-ib-R^c* – see Theis 2012, 679-685; also Muchiki 1999, 211.

[18] Muchiki 1999, 76, 320 with references.

[19] This could explain also the lack of a semi-vowel after *ḥ* in Hebrew. On the other hand, the omission of such a letter is totally in keeping with other Egyptian names found in the West Semitic (e.g. Phoenician, Aramaic) onomasticon, e.g. *'mnh* < Egyptian *imn-nḥ* (*w*); *hrmḥr* < Egyptian *hr-m(3)^c-ḥr(w)*; *ḥstmḥ* < Egyptian *ḥ(3)s(3)-t(3)-mḥ(w)* see Muchiki 1999, 15, 85, 160, etc.

[20] Bill Manley (pers. comm. Jan. 2014) has suggested a possible alternative reading: 'With respect to the name Userkhau, an alternative meaning would be "the powerful one (wsr) has appeared", in which *ḥa'u* is a verb form (stative) not a substantive. This may be the more likely translation insofar as it makes no claims about the dignity of the possessor of the name, i.e. the man is not "powerful of appearances" but – as you seem to suggest – the activity of an unnamed deity is proclaimed (wsr would be periphrastic as it is in the royal name Senwosret). Typically, the verb *ḥa'i* is used of appearances by the sun and by the king.'

[21] Selman 1997, 1147; Garsiel 1987, 121: for *zrh* ... 'means the rising or shining of the sun'.

[15] For references and discussion see Snape 2012, 418-419.

[16] Compare the Manethonian forms Osorcho and Osochor, where the 'O' is preserved. For a detailed discussion of these names see also Theis 2012, 686, n. 32.

Zerah is a hypocoristicon, lacking the theophoric element (cf. for instance Yehozarah, ‘Yahweh appears, shines’). The post-exilic author of Chronicles is well-known for his midrashic interpretative approach, as well as his insertion of material not found in the Books of Samuel and Kings (Beentjes 2008, 6-7). The name Zerah therefore both visibly reflects the original name and brings out its very meaning. But the author may have had more in mind. As midrashic name puns are commonplace in the Hebrew Bible (on this see also van der Veen in this volume), the author may have preferred to bring out the meaning of the name of the Cushite commander more forcefully in order to underline his overall theological concept of Yahweh’s military assistance offered to all those who seek his presence (as is the case with Asa), but who causes destruction to those who trust in their own strength.^[22] In other words, the ‘rising (sun)light’ Zerah would be imminently extinguished by Yahweh’s terror.

Concluding remarks

The new proposals offered here incidentally answer the serious objections that have been raised to the historicity of the Zerah episode: the composition of his army (Nubians and Libyans) and the apparently Semitic nature of his name. Only the vast number of his troops might seem fanciful: but hyperbole in ancient accounts in exaggerating the strength of defeated enemies is hardly exceptional.

Otherwise the identification of circumstances suitable for the Zerah episode provides a good test for the efficacy of the *Centuries of Darkness* model, and in particular the identification of Ramesses III with Shishak. If the model is correct we would expect to find evidence that under his successor Ramesses IV some military activity continued in Palestine but that nevertheless the 20th-dynasty empire collapsed. Both these conditions are fulfilled by the literary and archaeological evidence. As an extraordinary bonus, an Egyptian general and overseer of the northern lands can be identified whose name, Userḥau, may not only be echoed in that of Zerah, but also has the same meaning.

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[22] Beentjes 2008, 11-12, 183. Also see Sadler 2005, 128; Meyers 1965, 85.

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