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SOLOMON, SHISHAK AND CONTROVERSIES OF ANCIENT CHRONOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER JAMES

Damqātum is happy to publish an interview we made with British historian Peter James, one of the proponents of the controversial *Centuries of Darkness* (CoD) or ultra-low chronology for the ancient Near Eastern world. The excuse is the recent publication of the multi-authored book *Solomon and Shishak*, edited by James and Dutch colleague Peter van der Veen (2015).

(1) Q: *Before getting into the book “Solomon and Shishak” and its main chronological debates, we would like to know about your initial steps in ancient history. How did you begin your studies? Why were you interested in the chronology of the ancient world?*

Like many others, my initial interest in ancient history began with a teenage fascination with Greek myth. I was extraordinarily lucky that my local library in Wimbledon then had a complete set of the Loeb Classical Library so I could self-educate. I was especially intrigued by legendary events such as the Trojan War, and wanted to find out whether it actually happened, and also when. I also came across the works of Immanuel Velikovsky, who raised the important issue of the (Iron Age) “Dark Ages” in the ancient Mediterranean. Usually characterised as a “crank,” he did ask many of the right questions – though his answers were far too extreme, involving an incredible 500-800 years lowering of Egyptian chronology. Many of my present colleagues also read Velikovsky in their youth; but as we went through our university studies, we realised the manifest problems with his work (a crucial one being his cavalier attitude towards stratigraphy). We also found that Velikovsky had a number of eminent predecessors including the British classical scholar Cecil Torr who in 1896 argued for a lowering of the start of the Egyptian New Kingdom by some 200 years. His arguments found favour with Jens Lieblein, the founding father of Norwegian Egyptology – who argued from the evidence of Egyptian genealogies as well as Anatolian archaeology for a considerable lowering of New Kingdom dates. They and other scholars were fighting a rearguard (and ultimately unsuccessful) action against the very high chronologies being developed by Petrie and other Egyptologists.

(2) Q: *Although you and your colleagues have published a lot about ancient chronology, there’s no doubt that the book*

“Centuries of Darkness” (James 1991) was and still is your major contribution on the subject. How was the book conceived?

When I was undertaking postgraduate research in the early history of the Philistines at UCL in 1985 I met the other authors: starting with Nikos Kokkinos (now a senior expert on Herodian matters and Hellenistic chronography), Nick Thorpe (now Head of the Department of Archaeology at Winchester University) and John Frankish (a Minoan archaeologist who later moved into medicine). Hearing some of them arguing about dating methods in the lobby of the Institute of Archaeology I joined in and we started an informal discussion group, the Ancient Chronology Forum. We published a short pamphlet setting out the synchronisms throughout Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures both in terms of trade (largely pottery) and links from texts between Late Bronze Age dynasties from the Hittites to Mesopotamia. All roads ultimately led to Egypt.

As a multidisciplinary team, we continued collecting the widespread anomalies that resulted from reliance on the conventional Egyptian chronology and assembled them in a lengthy monograph entitled “Bronze to Iron Age Chronology in the Old World: Time for a Reassessment?” We published it in a self-founded journal *Studies in Ancient Chronology*, intended to be the first of a series – though we only managed to publish a first volume. Still, it proved to be immensely useful, not only as an effective first draft of *Centuries of Darkness*, but also to network our ideas. Copies were sent out to numerous experts on chronology, largely in the UK, and responses were encouraging, particularly from Colin Renfrew, Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge. In the meantime I had attended a lecture by Egyptologist Robert Morkot, when he expressed amazement at the conventional picture of the post New Kingdom “dark age” in Nubia, according to which abandoned settlements were repopulated centuries later by people with

the same pottery and culture. Naturally I invited Robert for a drink after the lecture. With an Egyptologist on board the team was ready to write *CoD* and we approached the publisher Jonathan Cape, who had had success with one of Renfrew's books. By an extraordinary coincidence all the authors (and even our Cape editor) lived in the same area of south London, which made regular editorial meetings (and arguments!) easy to organise. Colin (now Lord Renfrew) kindly wrote a foreword in which he stated that "a chronological revolution is on its way," even though he suspected that it might result in higher dates than the lower ones we were recommending.

(3) Q: *CoD* caused a major polemic at its time, and is still regarded as a controversial book. What are the main hypotheses of the book? Why were they so provocative?

It is indeed still regarded as a controversial book. On publication (1991) it received much praise, but in equal amount there were savage criticisms. It was easy to tar us with the Velikovskian brush. Otherwise we have been accused as being both biblical fundamentalists and minimalists! The critics were people who – in our view – clearly did not understand the mechanics of ancient chronology. Some of the kneejerk reactions to the book were ill-informed to the point of being amusing; we proudly added the worst to the website we developed for the book – <http://www.centuries.co.uk>.

The main hypothesis of *CoD* is that Egyptian New Kingdom dates should be lowered by some 250 years and that the chronology of the subsequent Third Intermediate Period should be telescoped. This goes hand in hand with a lowering of related chronologies throughout the Mediterranean, Aegean, the Levant, Nubia, Mesopotamia and Iran – and the shortening (or closing) of the unlikely "dark ages" in each of those regions.



Peter James, main author of *Centuries of Darkness*.

As to why these arguments were so provocative I would identify three factors:

First, "academic lag" – the simple reluctance of some academics to re-examine the long held views they had been teaching for decades and common enough when a paradigm shift is proposed.

Second, we were attacking numerous sacred cows, such as "Sothic dating," which still provides the backbone of the standard Egyptian chronology. It relies on retrocalculations based on some poorly recorded hieroglyphic references to the appearances of Sirius (Sothis) and became widely accepted from the 19th century onwards as a solution to chronology – it had the aura of being scientific as astronomy was involved. I learnt as long ago as 1978 from the late great Archie Roy, Professor of Astronomy at Glasgow University, that Sothic dating has no real basis in astronomy but is actually based on a *calendrical theory*. Allegedly the Egyptian year (as it was short of the solar year by a quarter of a day) slowly shifted against the seasons, with relevant agricultural festivals only returning to match reality every 1460 years. I could probably count on one hand the number of Egyptologists who have actually understood the theory. Those who do have developed elaborate theories involving the Egyptians having up to three calendars running concurrently! They all overlook the obvious point that the Egyptians (like many Near Eastern cultures) may simply have corrected their calendar to stop it slipping against the seasons.

Third, the model proposed in *CoD* challenged the standard view that the Iron IIA gateways at Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer were the work of King Solomon. Following Kathleen Kenyon we argued that these should be downdated to the time of the Omride dynasty (an idea famously taken up by Israel Finkelstein with no credit given either to us or Kenyon). Instead we proposed that a real archaeological reflection of the United Kingdom could be found towards the end of the Late Bronze Age. Again, this allowed us to be characterised as "fundamentalists," particularly as this was the time when the "minimalist" schools at Copenhagen and Sheffield universities were on the rise.

(4) Q: *How do you feel about CoD twenty-five years after its publication? Do you think its original postulates still stand? Would you change anything about it?*

Though of course I have had my doubts – short of a time machine it is hard to "prove" anything in remote history! – I have continued to feel increasingly confident about the model proposed in *CoD*. Objections raised against it have simply dissolved under closer scrutiny.

Naturally after 25 years there are many small things we would like to change, from matters of emphasis to some detailed points. Through lack of space (and time) I did not set out clearly enough how Mesopotamian chronology only needs to

be reduced by some 125 years in order to enable a lowering of Egyptian chronology by some 250 years. The reason being is that most of the alleged synchronisms between Egypt and Kassite Babylonia (14th-13th centuries BC) are demonstrably false. The matter was taken up and better explained by Pierce Furlong in his PhD thesis, published as *Aspects of Ancient Near Eastern Chronology (c. 1600–700 BC)* (Furlong 2010). On more detailed points, we no longer feel that the sequence of tombs at Tanis justifies an overlap between the 21st and 22nd Dynasties of the length we suggested in the book – genealogical evidence only requires a shorter overlap for the *CoD* model to work. Regarding biblical archaeology, we suggested some attractive onomastic links between the ostraca from Lachish II and the time of Nehemiah (mid 5th-century BC). Peter van der Veen has given me reasons to doubt the case and revert, reluctantly, to the standard date of 587 BC for the destruction, with Nebuchadnezzar as the culprit. That does not mean that all is well with the conventional dating of the strata from Lachish, vitally important as a type-site for ancient Judah. The assumption that Lachish III was destroyed by Sennacherib in 701 BC is easily challenged: Lachish IV is much more likely to have been the city he conquered, as per his famous reliefs of the siege. Still, these are all small points of improvement. The basic model still stands.

(5) Q: *Now that you mention Peter van der Veen, co-editor of Solomon and Shishak, I have to ask you about how the book was conceived. These are the proceedings of a colloquium held at Cambridge, right? Is it the first to be held?*

We had previously held two meetings: one in Berlin (2006), the second at Cambridge University (2008), where the acronym BICANE (“Bronze to Iron Age Chronology in the Ancient Near East”) was decided on. Although the group remains an informal one, the organisers agreed on a steering committee (P. James, Dr Peter van der Veen, Dr John Bimson, Prof. Uwe Zerbst and Dr Robert Morkot). The suggestion arose that we began work on an edited volume covering the whole range of Dark Age problems throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, Near East and northeastern Africa. Peter van der Veen and I decided against such an encyclopaedic project – it would have taken years and would essentially have been a massive update on *Centuries of Darkness*.

We decided it was better to focus future colloquia and publications on one area at a time. The questions surrounding Solomon and Shishak were and still are a very hot topic – central not only to biblical archaeology but to the wider questions of chronology, in particular that of Egypt. Hence our colloquium held in Cambridge in 2011, with the proceedings published in 2015 as *Solomon and Shishak*.

(6) Q: *What do you consider are the most important topics discussed in “Solomon and Shishak” and how do they contri-*

bute to our knowledge about the history of ancient Israel and Egypt?

The two most important topics are the alleged “dead-reckoning” of Egyptian chronology back through the Third Intermediate Period, and the closely related issue of the identity of the Egyptian king Shishak – who, according to the Old Testament, engineered the downfall of Solomon’s empire c. 925 BC. In my contribution with Robert Morkot (along with that from Ad Thijs) we argued from calculations based on the best authenticated reign-lengths of the pharaohs – together with genealogical and art-historical evidence – that Shoshenq I should be placed in the mid-late 9th century BC and therefore could not be Shishak. Rather, as we suggested in *CoD* (as discussed in detail in one of van der Veen’s contributions) the name “Shishak” could be based on an attested abbreviation, *Sysu*, for the name of Ramesses III.

Returning to the question of our precursors, we discovered (only recently) that Jens Lieblein had suggested as early as 1863 that Ramesses III (rather than Shoshenq I) was the “Shishak” of the Old Testament – a key synchronism proposed in *CoD*. He later moved away from this specific identification, but continued to argue for a significant lowering of Egyptian New Kingdom dates, on the basis of his thorough analysis of the genealogical information then available. Sparing too much detail, many recent epigraphic discoveries would have encouraged him further – such as those that show that there was an overlap in reigns between Takeloth II and Shoshenq III, and that the High Priest of Amun Osorkon did indeed take the throne as Osorkon III.

Sorting out these questions is vital, not only to “biblical archaeology” but ultimately that of the whole Near East and Mediterranean. If Egyptian New Kingdom chronology can be lowered by some 250 years then the Dark Age problems in these regions can be resolved.

With respect to ancient Israel and Egypt, the dispute between the minimalist and maximalist interpretations of the biblical account of Solomon’s reign has continued to the point of tedium and effectively reached a deadlock. We would see the disagreement here over historical matters as due to both sides working with a faulty chronology.

Unfortunately the debate has even taken on political implications, which I should really avoid as they are so sensitive, though too obvious to escape any mention. (I hasten to add that the following remarks are entirely my own and not the responsibility of the authors of *CoD* or any members of BICANE). But, roughly speaking, interpretation of the biblical text has fallen into two camps regarding the biblical text: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem school which favours a more literal interpretation (that Solomon had a mini-empire based at a capital in Jerusalem) and the Tel Aviv University school (led by Finkelstein) which tends towards a minimalist one which would see the United Monarchy of David and Solomon as a

minor chiefdom. The weakness of the standard literalist interpretation – and conversely strength of the minimalist – is that there is little archaeology for a rich and powerful Solomonic kingdom at Jerusalem in Iron Age IIA. The Tel Aviv school would undermine claims of a “Solomonic empire,” while the maximalist school would allow that such a dominion did exist. Of course, one should not employ ancient texts as a charter for territorial claims.

If we allow that Solomonic archaeology should actually be sought at the end of the Late Bronze Age (and the cusp with the early Iron Age), the entire picture changes. We find monumental building work at Jerusalem and – as Peter van der Veen’s ongoing survey work has shown – an array of Egyptian or Egyptianising objects towards the north of the city, many of which can be dated to the 19th Dynasty. Here, as well, Solomon is said to have built a palace for his Egyptian wife, the daughter of Pharaoh with whom he made an “affinity.”

I have gone further and suggested that we can identify Solomonic archaeology at sites like Lachish and Megiddo, where the extraordinary cache of LBA ivories was found. Re-examining the biblical account it is clear that Solomon did not – as some passages might suggest – directly rule an empire from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates: other kingdoms existed such as those at Damascus, those in Philistia and the powerful mini-empire of Hiram of Tyre. Why then the discrepancy between the biblical accounts? I have argued that we need to distinguish between *de facto* and *de jure* control of the region, and that Solomon, at a time of political recession in Egypt was granted the unique privilege of becoming the viceroy of all the lands that the Egyptians thought they had legal rights to – up to their traditional boundary at the Euphrates River. The alleged differences between the two biblical versions then melt away. In Egyptian legal terms Solomon would have had rights to all those lands: but only “on papyrus,” as it were. I leave the reader here to consider the irony of Solomon having been an Egyptian vassal – reinforcing the point that ancient texts (Hebrew, Egyptian or otherwise) cannot be allowed to influence modern ideas of territorial boundaries.

(7) Q: *An obvious difference with CoD is that in this book not everyone agrees with the short chronology you support, and actually some scholars are overtly against it. How were the dynamics in this regard, both in the colloquium and in the editing of the book?*

Our aim was that the colloquium would reflect a wide variety of opinions on the questions in hand. We wanted an open debate, and are pleased that we had this both at the colloquium itself and in the printed proceedings. For example we invited Troy Sagrillo, who argued for the conventional position regarding Shishak = Shoshenq I, to add an appendix to his paper where he could respond to Peter van der Veen’s criticisms. Likewise, while I do not agree with Ad Thijs’ reliance on

“astronomical” dates, we were very glad to include his work in the proceedings. Peter and I wanted to encourage a serious dialogue with a whole spectrum of views and I hope we have succeeded in that.

(8) Q: *To finish, do you expect any major archaeological or epigraphic discovery that will settle the matter of chronology for good? Or should we expect a slow building-up of evidence throughout the years as we’ve had until now?*

Perhaps the best question of all and the most difficult to answer! Because of the limited accessibility of key sites, we can never reasonably expect the original Temple at Jerusalem to be excavated or, for that matter, Tyre where there would have certainly been a considerable archive in the Bronze Age. (The El Amarna letters said that the palace at Tyre was greater than that at Ugarit!). So the “dream ticket,” for example, of finding LBA cuneiform correspondence between Solomon and Hiram, or between them and Egypt or the Hittites may never be realised. So, for the moment, I think we do have to rely on a “slow building-up of evidence” as you put it, but I think that has already been considerable. It continues to build up with endless small finds in Babylonian, Hittite and Levantine epigraphy which do not fit the standard model and are treated as piecemeal problems – in the context of a much wider revision of chronology these can be resolved. Over the years an increasing number of scholars have taken a similar open-minded position to ours: such as Pierce Furlong whose revision of Mesopotamian chronology (which allows a lowering of Egyptian chronology by some 200 years) has been very encouraging. Perhaps the bottom line in answer to this question is that more specialists need to be made aware of the issues (both old and new) that we have raised and actually address them. So I am especially grateful to *Damqātum* for the opportunity to air these matters to a wider audience ■

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