

## Osarseph and Exodus: Literary Reflections in an Egyptian Mirror

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### **Abstract**

*The story of Osarseph, preserved by Josephus and attributed by him to an Egyptian priest named Manetho, tells of the struggles between a rebellious Egyptian priest named Osarseph and a Pharaoh Amenhotep and his son "Ramesses also called Sethos". Osarseph, according to the story, seized control of Egypt for thirteen years, instituted a reign of terror, and destroyed Egypt's religious institutions. The pharaoh fled from Egypt and hid his son away for safety. Later, the son returned and expelled Osarseph from Egypt. This Osarseph, says Manetho, was Moses, the biblical hero.*

*Most Egyptologists and biblical scholars who study this report easily recognize that it tells of events during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten, but they uniformly reject the identification of Moses with Osarseph. By concentrating solely on the passage identifying these two figures as one and the same, however, I submit that scholars have overlooked many additional passages that have literary parallels in the biblical Exodus account, but which switch the role of villain and hero.*

*In this paper I will look at some of these parallel events and show that Manetho's story of Osarseph and the bible's story of Moses and the Exodus draw upon many of the same Egyptian literary themes. Among the issues examined are the hiding of the infant from the cruel ruler, the return of the infant later on to challenge the cruel ruler, the "seeing of god", leprosy, and the city where the slaves worked. The paper will argue that the Exodus occurred during the coregency of Ramesses I and Sethos, and that the confrontation between Moses/Osarseph and "Ramesses also known as Sethos" arose out of a struggle for possession of the throne at the death of Pharaoh Horemheb. The Manetho and biblical stories each represent an attempt to identify the hero with the god Horus and the villain with the god Set.*

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The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in his *Against Apion*, records a story about an Egyptian priest named Osarseph who leads a revolution against a pharaoh named Amenophis, takes control of Egypt for thirteen years, commits horrendous religious abuses, and is eventually driven out of Egypt by the pharaoh and his son. Josephus attributed the story to a third century BC Egyptian priest named Manetho, who had written a history of his native country. Most scholars familiar with this story have easily recognized that the Osarseph story provides a disguised account of the events surrounding Pharaoh Akhenaten and his monotheistic religious revolution. What makes this story controversial, though, is that, according to Josephus, Manetho said that Osarseph was Moses and that his followers were a collection of diseased Egyptians.

Josephus also quotes a second Egyptian historian, named Chaeremon, a contemporary of his, who tells of the same set of events but with enough variations in the story to suggest that he relied on a source different than Manetho's. Chaeremon, too, identifies the rebel leader with

Moses, but gives him the Egyptian name of Tisathen. However, he also says that Moses had a co-revolutionary leader named Peteseeph, and identifies this Peteseeph with Joseph, an identification possibly based on the similar pronunciation of the two names.

Almost all biblical scholars and Egyptologists reject the idea of a connection between Moses and Akhenaten, and the two Egyptian stories are simply dismissed as false. Since the portions of the story identifying Moses with Osarseph or Tisathen consist of a single sentence easily removable from the larger account, many scholars have suggested that the insertion resulted from either a forged addition to the original Manetho or a hateful anti-Jewish slur. Others have suggested that Manetho relied on a source from Egyptian records but that the source was erroneous.

The concentration of attack on this one reference has, I believe, prevented scholars from stepping back and looking at the two stories as a whole and comparing them to the biblical account of the Exodus. In this paper, I want to examine both stories and show that together they present the same story-line as the biblical account of the Exodus, and that both the biblical and Egyptian stories utilize a common Egyptian literary motif, which draws upon the Egyptian political myths concerning the struggles of Horus and Set for the Egyptian throne. I also suggest that the Egyptian and biblical stories are describing the same set of political events from a different political point of view.

Let me begin with a summary of the two stories.

### **The Manetho Story**

The main players in the Manetho story are the pharaoh Amenophis, his son "Sethos, also known as Ramesses", and Osarseph, a priest from the city of Heliopolis, known as On in the bible. Amenophis is the Greek transliteration for Amenhotep, the original throne name of both Akhenaten and his father.

According to Josephus, Amenophis had a desire to see the gods and he communicated this desire to a famous seer. The wise man told Amenophis that he could accomplish his goals if he purged Egypt of all the lepers and polluted people. Delighted with this news, the king rounded up all such people, to the number of about 80,000, among whom were several priests afflicted with leprosy, but, strangely, instead of having them leave Egypt, he enslaved them in the stone quarries, segregating them from the rest of the Egyptians. When the seer learned what Amenophis had done, he feared that the pharaoh's actions would bring a violent retaliation from the gods and predicted that the polluted people would join with allies and they would take control of Egypt for 13 years.

(As a side note, one should recall that Moses, too, desired to see God, and his actions also seem to have had some connection to leprosy and disease. In the one instance, after asking to see God directly, his face changed in such a way that it frightened the people and he had to wear a veil, a form of cover identified in Leviticus 13:45 with leprosy. In the other instance, in the presence of the burning bush, the hand of Moses turned leprous.)

After a long period of misery the slaves petitioned the king, asking permission to move to the abandoned city of Avaris, the former capital of the Hyksos kings. There they laid plans for a

revolt and elected Osarseph, a Heliopolitan priest, to be their leader. His first orders were not to worship the Egyptians gods and to kill off the sacred animals held in reverence by the Egyptians. He then fortified the walls of Avaris and prepared for war against Amenophis. Next, he sent an ambassador to the exiled Hyksos leaders and formed a military alliance. The Hyksos sent 200,000 soldiers to join with Osarseph's people.

When Amenophis learned of the coming invasion he remembered the seer's prediction that Egypt would suffer for thirteen years at the hands of its enemies. He arranged protection for the sacred animals and icons and then hid his five-year-old son, "Sethos, also called Ramesses" with a friend – and I note parenthetically, that "Sethos, also called Ramesses" is the name that Josephus uses for the pharaoh's son.

After making these security arrangements, Amenophis assembled an army of 300,000 of Egypt's finest soldiers and marched against the Osarseph-Hyksos alliance. But at the last moment, he had a sudden fear that his actions would be construed as an attack on the gods and, rather than engage the enemy, he pulled back his troops and withdrew to Memphis. There he gathered the sacred animals and withdrew his forces to Ethiopia, where the king gave him land and protection.

Osarseph ruled the land for 13 years, instituting a reign of terror. He burned cities, mutilated sacred images, killed the sacred animals and had his followers eat the sacred beasts. At some point during Osarseph's reign, according to Josephus, the usurper changed his name to Moses.

At the end of the prophesied time period, Amenophis and his son (now confusingly named Rampses—that is, with a letter "p" inserted into the middle of his name) advanced from Ethiopia with a large army and drove the enemy deep into Syria, killing many of them along the way. And so the story concludes.

### **Chaeremon's Version**

The Chaeremon version of this story contains some interesting variations. He also refers to the pharaoh as Amenophis but identifies the son only as Ramesses, omitting the Sethos portion of the child's name. In Chaeremon, however, there are two rebel leaders, one named Peteseeph, whom he identifies as Joseph, the Hebrew Patriarch, and the other named Tisathen, whom he identifies as Moses.

In the beginning of this story, Amenophis does not desire to see the gods. Instead, he had a vision in his sleep of the goddess Isis, who reproached him for the destruction of her temple during a war. Worried by his dream, Amenophis seeks advice, and a sacred scribe tells him that if he purges Egypt of the contaminated people, he would no longer have to be alarmed.

The king rounded up 250,000 such people and ordered them out of the country. Tisathen and Peteseeph led the polluted ones to the Egyptian border, but when they got there they found an exiled Egyptian army of 380,000 soldiers belonging to Pharaoh Amenophis. The two forces joined together and marched against the pharaoh. Not to put too fine a point on this, but Chaeremon's claim here is that Moses was aided by an army belonging to Akhenaten.

Here, too, Amenophis fled to Ethiopia but in this account he left behind his pregnant wife, who hid in a cave and gave birth to the child Ramesses. At some undefined time in the future, when

Ramesses has achieved “manhood,” he drove the Jews from Egypt into Syria—“Jews” is the word used by Josephus—and brought his father home from Ethiopia.

### **The Two Stories Compared**

It is quite apparent that both stories are about the same set of events, but the differences between them suggest more than one source for the account.

In Manetho, Amenophis desires to see the gods; in Chaeremon he has a vision of deity. In both stories, though, in response to the pharaoh’s concern, a seer advises him to round up the lepers and polluted ones and banish them from Egypt. In Manetho, Amenophis disobeys the advice and gathers the polluted ones together in the stone quarries; in Chaeremon, Amenophis takes the advice and banishes them.

In both stories the polluted ones rebel against the pharaoh. But, in Manetho, they send for and ally with the Hyksos; in Chaeremon, they meet an exiled Egyptian army and join with them. In Manetho, there are 80,000 rebels and 200,000 Hyksos allies; in Chaeremon there are 250,000 rebels and 380,000 Egyptian allies

In Manetho, the child is five years old when his father flees Egypt, at which time the youth is hidden with a friend. The child is 18 years old when he returns and drives Osarseph out; In Chaeremon, Ramesses is an infant at the beginning of the rebellion and born in secret, hidden away by his mother. He returns as an adult of unspecified age at the time of his victory.

### **Biblical Comparisons**

Let us now compare the Osarseph/Peteseeph rebellions with the biblical account of the Exodus. Plot-wise, the Egyptian story has the following structure:

1. A pharaoh fears that a large group of people living in Egypt represent a threat to the throne;
2. He vacillates between letting them leave the country and enslaving them;
3. He also vacillates between confronting them militarily and retreating;
4. He orders them enslaved;
5. After a period of enslavement, they ask permission to journey to another location of special interest to them;
6. A god is to punish the Egyptians for the pharaoh’s act of enslavement;
7. The slaves rise up against the pharaoh and bring great devastation to the land;
8. A cruel ruler comes to the throne and oppresses the people;
9. A child is hidden away from the cruel ruler;
10. The child is raised in the pharaoh’s household;
11. When the child reaches adulthood, he liberates his people from oppression;
12. The former slaves are chased out of Egypt by the pharaoh.

With just one slight plot twist, this story-line is almost identical to that of the biblical Exodus. In the Egyptian account, the child-liberator is the future pharaoh and the cruel tyrant is the slave leader. Therefore, in the Egyptian story the child is hidden away after the slave revolt while in the

biblical story the child is hidden away before the slave revolt. In most other respects, however, the biblical and Egyptian stories are virtually identical.

In both accounts, the pharaoh fears a particular group of Egyptian residents; he enslaves the people whom he fears; the slaves are isolated from the rest of the country; the slaves initially ask to go only to a different location; the pharaoh vacillates between a hard line and retreat; a god punishes Egypt for the act of enslavement; the slave leader causes great devastation to befall Egypt; and the slaves are chased out of Egypt by the pharaoh.

There are also some interesting factual coincidences in the Egyptian and biblical accounts. The most significant concerns the city of Avaris. In the bible, the Hebrew slaves are assigned to the city of Raamses which scholars generally equate with the Egyptian city of Pi-Ramesses. This Egyptian city received that name during the reign of Ramesses II. But, the original city name was Avaris. So, in both the Egyptian and biblical accounts, the slaves are identified with the same city. Interestingly, neither Josephus nor Manetho seem to be aware of this coincidence.

In the Manetho account, the slaves number about 80,000. In the Book of Numbers, the Joseph tribes total about 85,000 members. In the Chaeremon account, the combined forces of Osarseph's army number 630,000 soldiers. Compare that with the claim in Exodus 12:37-38 of the Exodus group consisting of 600,000 males plus a mixed multitude.

There is also the matter of Heliopolis. That city has a close religious link to pharaoh Akhenaten, who worshipped Re-Herakhty, the chief deity of that city. Biblical Israel also has a close religious link to Heliopolis because Joseph, upon becoming Prime Minister of Egypt, married the daughter of Heliopolis's chief priest.

### **Horus and Set**

The several plot parallels and factual coincidences in the Egyptian and biblical stories suggest a common literary source, but there is still this difficult matter of the role reversal between the pharaoh and the slave leader. To explain this anomaly, we must first examine the chief political myth of Egyptian life.

According to the Egyptians, the god Osiris and his wife Isis ruled over Egypt in a golden age. Osiris and Isis were brother and sister as well as husband and wife. They also had a brother named Set, and a son named Horus. Set wanted to be king so he assassinated Osiris and seized the throne. But the infant Horus was the legitimate heir and Isis, fearful that Set would kill her son, hid him away for safety. When Horus grew to adulthood, he returned to avenge his father. Defeating Set in battle, he assumed the throne and banished Set to the desert wilderness. In the Egyptian mind, all legitimate kings represent the god Horus in a human aspect.

This myth is ancient, its basic structure possibly derived from events surrounding the unification of Egypt at the beginning of the First Dynasty by Horus worshippers. In the Second Dynasty, political conflict between Horus and Set worshippers again reappears, with at least one king adopting the name Set instead of Horus, and another adopting the combined name of Horus and Set. And between the Twelfth and Eighteenth Dynasties, when the Asian Hyksos kings

dominated Egypt, the Hyksos chose Set as their chief deity while the rebellious native Egyptian royal line continued to identify with Horus.

The political events defining Horus and Set also overlapped in the area of nature mythology, with Set on the one hand being identified with the evil serpent that devoured the sun at the end of each day, and on the other as the mighty warrior that defended the sun against the evil serpent.

Despite the murder of Osiris, a Set cult remained active in Egypt, and, the deity retained a relatively positive image down into the Nineteenth Dynasty. As late as the post-Exodus Twentieth Dynasty, we find an Egyptian story known as *The Contendings of Horus and Set*, in which Horus and Set sue each other for the right to rule Egypt, with Re-Herakhty, king of the gods, favoring Set over Horus. The favorable image of Set in New Kingdom times can be seen from the fact that two Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs were named Sethos after him and Ramesses I and Ramesses II closely identified with the city of Avaris, which had been dedicated to Set.

With the expulsion of the Hyksos kings, myth and history combined to form a literary iconography, one that is reflected in both the Osarseph and Exodus stories. Set is the cruel usurper who is subsequently driven into the wilderness; Isis is the mother who hides her child from the cruel ruler; Horus is the child who returns as an adult to defeat the usurper and regain the throne.

### **Amenophis and Sethos**

The bible indicates that the pharaoh confronted by Moses had just taken the throne, but it does not identify the pharaoh or his predecessor. In the Osarseph story, the pharaoh who confronted the Moses character was named "Sethos, also called Ramesses." I suggest that the name "Sethos, also called Ramesses" is a confused description of the very brief coregency between Ramesses I and his son/successor Sethos I.

This identification is somewhat problematic though, because the father is identified as Amenophis, who is either Akhenaten or Akhenaten's father. Akhenaten came to the throne 59 years before Sethos I, and several other pharaohs ruled in between. But, if we look at Josephus's somewhat confused rendition of what is represented as Manetho's Eighteenth Dynasty chronology, with several pharaoh's out of chronological sequence, we find the unusual sequence of Ramesses I, Amenophis, and Sethos I, with Sethos I being identified as "Sethos, also called Ramesses." The Amenophis in that sequence, placed in the middle of the coregency between Ramesses I and Sethos I, is obviously Akhenaten, because he is given a reign of 19 years, the combined length of reign for Akhenaten and his coregent. Strangely, Josephus totally ignores this chronological sequence, alleging that the Amenophis in his story is a fictitious king invented by Manetho.

### **The Literary Model for Exodus**

If I am correct in placing Osarseph's rebellion during the coregency of Ramesses I and Sethos I, then we can place both the Osarseph story and the biblical Exodus story within the literary and political framework of the struggle between Horus and Set.

Ramesses I was the successor to Horemheb. Like Horemheb, he served originally as a general in the army and had no royal blood. His total reign lasted about two years, part as coregent with Horemheb and part as coregent with Sethos I.

The bible makes Moses an adopted member of the royal household. If the pharaoh of confrontation is either Ramesses I or Sethos I, Moses would have had an arguable claim to the Egyptian throne. He was a member of the preceding royal house and neither Ramesses I nor Sethos I had any royal blood ties.

The confrontation between Moses and the Pharaoh, then, was a confrontation over the right of succession to the royal throne, Moses claiming a tie to the royal blood line and “Ramesses, also called Sethos” claiming the legitimate right of succession. Such a conflict would certainly generate an intense propaganda war for the support of the powers that be.

Each side attempted to identify itself with Horus and the challenger with Set. Consequently, each side is identified with the royal child hidden by his mother from a cruel oppressor, and the challenger is depicted as the illegal usurper.

At the same time, the literary model is placed against a background of actual political events growing out of the religious/political feuds between Pharaoh Akhenaten and the Theban establishment.

At first, Akhenaten brought about a hated religious heresy. When he died, a counter-revolution occurred. Under Pharaoh Horemheb, an intense political persecution of Akhenaten's followers took place. When Horemheb died, Osarseph/Moses returned to Egypt, led his oppressed followers in rebellion, and challenged Horemheb's successor for the right to rule. Civil war loomed in the background. Osarseph/Moses lost the political contest and left Egypt with his followers. Each of the disputants depicted the Exodus of Osarseph as a victory over the rival, claiming to have caused great damage to the enemy forces. For a parallel, one might think of Ramesses II falsely boasting about how he single-handedly drove the Hittites into the Orontes and drowned the enemy.

Consistent with the Egyptian desire to suppress all public record of Akhenaten's existence, no monument recorded the Pharaoh's victory over his political rival. But non-public versions of the story survived in Egyptian records.

Scribes in both camps framed the historical events within Egyptian literary formats and produced parallel accounts, each portraying their own hero as child-liberator and depicting their rival as the usurping villain. Like backward writing, if we hold both texts up to an Egyptian literary mirror, we can see the true history reflected back at us.

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